Reflect or Defend? Project Management as an Existential Response to Organisational Crisis

Bradley Rolfe

Abstract

Utilising Richard Rorty's criticism of epistemology, this paper will demonstrate the manner in which traditional project management attempts to apply a reductive and limited range of quasi-scientific techniques to problems that continually defy such reduction. The argument will be made that project management is better considered as an existential response to organisational crisis rather than the systemic application of principles to achieve pre-determined objectives. Within the range of an existential response, two kinds of response are proposed: the reflective or defensive (Segal 1999). Rorty's edifying hermeneutic is offered as an example of a reflective response to organisational crisis and argues that the notion of the interpretation of competing language games better serves project management practice than the application of one over-arching meta-narrative as embodied in the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK 2000)[1].

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1   PMBOK. 2000. *A guide to the project management body of knowledge* 2000 ed. Newtown Square, Pennsylvania: Project Management Institute.

Introduction

THE RECENT CRISIS IN THE world financial markets is a reminder that our response to such events cannot remain unexamined. The difficulty arises, however, when the principles that underpin the process of the examination itself are also questioned. On what ground then, does the examination stand?

This paper will make the argument that project management is the current dominant paradigm for an organisational[2] response to crisis in a modern management setting. It will contend that as such a response, it remains trapped in a paradigm of instrumental reason that severely limits the range of such response. Through the application of a pre-existing set of axioms, guidelines and processes, the typical organisation seeks to eliminate the vagaries of Machiavelli's 'fortuna' for a project management approach predicated on the scientific meta-narrative of 'cause and effect'[3] This paper will propose instead that project management can be better understood as an *existential response* to the crisis's that an organisation experiences. Appropriating Segal[4], it will be argued that there are two forms such a response can take; a defensive response that seeks the application of one overarching meta-narrative or, a reflective philosophical response.

This paper will begin with the assumption that organisational responses to crisis are currently dominated by defensive responses, embodied in the application of such frameworks as the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) and Prince-2. It will argue instead for a reconsideration of project management practice as the process of an edifying hermeneutic.

The first section of this paper will outline current trends in the relationship of project management theory to practice, and make the argument for consideration of project management practice as an existential response to organisational crisis rather than the application of apodictic knowledge. The second section of this paper will outline the notion of defensive and reflective existential responses to crisis as outlined by Segal[5] argue for the relevance of its application in an organisational setting. The third section of this paper will situate the notion of the defensive response to organisational crisis in a broader historical context via Richard Rorty's[6] of Enlightenment epistemology, arguing for an understanding of project management 'knowledge' as a grouping of historically situated metaphors rather than universal truth. The fourth and final section will

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2   I am not oblivious to the reification of 'organisation' as it used here and throughout the paper. There is not the space to discuss the implications of the term organisation or its existence or non-existence etc. When it is used, it is done so with the general sense that it means "those people in the company charged with responding to a crisis." In doing so it is hoped to conform to Rorty's distinction between 'responsible' and 'irresponsible' reification (Rorty, Richard, 1979, *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press).

3   POMBOK, 2000, p. 74.

4   Segal, S., 1999, "The existential conditions of explicitness: a Heideggerian perspective". In *Studies in Continuing Education* 21 (1), pp. 73-89.

5   Segal, S., 1999, op. cit.

6   Rorty, R. 1979, op. cit.

outline an alternative to the defensive response in the form of the reflective practice of an edifying hermeneutic as outlined by Richard Rorty. It will argue that Rorty's reading of Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology provides the basis for a conception of project management as a response to crisis in an organisational setting that eschews defensive and limiting notions of apodictic truth for one that allows for the play of competing 'truths' in a turbulent and changing world.

The Theory and Practice of Project Management

The traditional view of project management can be typified as "the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements"[7]. In an organisational sense, projects are initiated for the purpose of meeting the goals of the organisation. In this top-down approach, senior management develop a strategic vision for the organisation, which is then devolved into an increasingly smaller series of work packages (e.g. program of work, project, stream, activity, task) the completion of which then adds up to the realisation of the planned corporate objectives[8]. The 'breaking-up' of the project into these small chunks provides the opportunity for the measurement of the allocated work in terms of time, cost, specification and scope, and allows for the study of project management in an objective way, with instrumental reason as the appropriate tool for its study [9]. The critical assumption in this model is that, once established theoretically in the plan and then divided into discretionary units in such forms as schedules and work breakdown structures, the defined objects of the project will recombine to deliver the strategic vision as originally conceived[10]. This traditional view of project management in the literature has been challenged, however, in recent years. From the general area of critical management studies, a range of authors have sought to re-interpret the project along different axes, bringing to bear the philosophical and sociological insights of

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7   Schwalbe, K., 2007, *Information technology project management*. Fifth Edition ed. Boston: Thomson Course Technology

8   Schwalbe, op. cit. 2007; Turner, J. R., 1999, *The handbook of project-based management*. 2nd ed. London: McGraw-Hill.; Kerzner, H., 2001, *Project management: a systems approach to planning, scheduling, and controlling* 7th ed. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.; Hartley, S., 2003, *Project management: a competency-based approach*. Frenchs Forest, New South Wales: Pearson Prentice Hall.; Meredith, J. R. & Mantel, S. J. jr,, 2000, *Project management: a managerial approach*. 4th ed. New York, John Wiley & Sons.

9   Cicmil, S., 2006, "Understanding project management practice through interpretative and critical research perspectives", *Project management journal* 37 (2), pp. 27-37.

10   Hartley, S., 2009. *Project management: principles, processes and practice*. 2nd ed. Frenchs Forest, New South Wales: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Foucault, Habermas, Latour and others, on the problem of project management[11]. Whilst the richness of the sources available to these writers have served to drive a plurality of perspectives, what they all tend to share is a distrust of apodictic forms of knowledge as the basis of project management practice.

Continuing in this tradition, this paper argues that, if one considers the project not as an ordered transition from 'state A' to 'state B' in a specified time and cost in line with preconceived strategic objectives, but rather as a response to a threat to the organisation's survival, the inadequacy of the apodictic model become apparent. Threats to a company's survival may take many forms; the loss of market share to a competitor, the potential of a hostile takeover or, a new technology that renders obsolete an existing product. These and other such threats abound in the contemporary corporate environment today [12]. Considered as such, the projects created to 'deal' with such threats are better articulated, not as rationally conceived and instrumentally executed extensions of managerial profit-seeking, but rather as existential responses to a significant disruption, one so severe as to challenge the integrity of the organisation itself. Such disruptions are typically not anticipated by the organisations engulfed by them (if they were they would not be considered a crisis) so when it happens it is rarely the case that the response conforms to any pre-existing strategy or can be easily aligned with any pre-existing objective. Projects are created, in these moments, not to "create a new product or service"[13] but to deal with the five uncertainties identified by Bruno Latour, those being the uncertainties of; "group formation, agency, objects, matters of fact versus states of affairs and, epistemology."[14]. In other words, the organisation is not attempting to answer questions but is rather, in existential terms, 'in' question[15].

Adopting the attitude of project management practice as an existential response to organisational existence, opens up the possibility of a practice of project management that is not predicated on the limitations of a reductive, scientific model[16] By allowing the play of a different kind of perspective in the project management environment, project managers can be better equipped to confront the randomness and contingency that underpins their

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11   Cicmil, S., & Hodgson, D., 2006, "Making projects critical: an introduction". In *Making projects critical*, edited by D. Hodgson & S. Cicmil. Hampshire, Palgrave; Linehan, C., & Kavanagh, D, 2006, "From project ontologies to communities of virtue". In *Making projects critical*, edited by D. Hodgson & S. Cicmil. Hampshire, Palgrave; Lindgren, M. & Packendorff,, J., 2006, "Projects and prisons". In *Making projects critical*, edited by D. Hodgson & S. Cicmil. Hampshire, Palgrave; Marshall, N., 2006, "Understanding power in project settings". In *Making projects critical*, edited by D. Hodgson & S. Cicmil. Hampshire, Palgrave.

12   Pinto, J. K., 2007, *Project management: achieving competitive advantage* Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, Pearson Prentice Hall.

13   PMBOK , 2000, op. cit. p. 4.

14   Smith, C., 2006, "A tale of an evolving project: failed science or serial reinterpretation. In *Making projects critical*, edited by D. Hodgson & S. Cicmil. Hampshire, Palgrave, p. 172.

15   Segal, S.,2004, *Business Feel: From the Science of Management to the Philosophy of Leadership*. Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan.

16   Smith, C., 2006, op. cit.

day-to-day activities. This is not to say that project managers, as a group, do not already confront that reality, or do not recognise the contingency of their work. In interviews with 57 IT-based project managers, noted that:

> "One common characteristic encountered was an unflinching realism about the challenges of IT projects. For example, senior projects managers understand that their project teams are rarely on a well-defined journey where time, schedule and scope can be controlled tightly, where the milestones are fixed and clearly marked. Rather, they are on an expedition. Along the way, the unexpected happens and plans are challenged, if not destroyed"[17].

The idea of the project as an expedition highlights the paradox of the project management techniques used to provide 'control'. Tsoukas and Mylonopoulos, for example, observed that "the fantasy of a positive and comprehensive knowledge sustained, and was sustained by, the fantasy of controlling the world." [18] Project management techniques are likewise sustained by the fantasy of controlling the world, and the guidelines, processes and procedures of the project are predicated on their lack of variability once established. Deviations are viewed as aberrations to a process and, once identified, such aberrations are in need of immediate correction in order for the project to 're-conform' to the original stated model. This is, as one author puts it, "the regulation of results through the alteration of activities"[19] The idea of an 'expedition' as outlined above though, provides a different metaphor for the consideration of a project. In an expedition, plans are certainly laid, supplies obtained, and hopes no doubt entertained for what will be discovered, but the idea of banishing a discovery because it did not conform to the original expectation is nonsensical. The point of the journey is the discovery.

Despite these observations of the contingent aspect of project management, the idea of milestones "fixed and clearly marked" remains a fairly dominant one in the project management literature. A broad review of some major project management texts of the last 10 years highlights the focus on rigorous and well established plans as necessary for the purposes of 'control'[20]. All of these texts however, still generally acknowledge that such control is at best ephemeral, and attempting to achieve such control via purely mechanistic approaches is doomed to failure. As one author put it:

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17 Reich, B. H., Sauer, Ch., & Siew Yong We, 2006, "Innovative practices for IT projects". *Informations systems management* 25, pp. 266-72, p. 266.

18 Tsoukas, H. & Mylonopoulos, N., 2004, "Knowledge construction and creation in organisations". *British journal of management* 15, pp.1-8, p.3.

19 Meredith, J. R. & Mantel, S.J. jr., 2000, op. cit. p.464.

20 Lewis, J.P., 1999, *The project manager's desk reference: a comprehensive guide to project planning, scheduling, evaluation and systems*. New York: Mcgraw-Hill.; Meredith & Mantel, S.J., op. cit.,2000; Hartley, S., 2003, *Project management: a competency-based approach*. Frenchs Forest, New South Wales, Pearson Prentice Hall; Turner, J. R., 1999, *The handbook of project-based management*. 2nd ed. London: McGraw-Hill.; Schwalbe, 2007, op. cit.

"Beginning in the 1990's, most project managers and top management realised that project management is *a process of constant communication and negotiation* about project objectives and stakeholder expectations. This view assumes that changes happen throughout the project lifecycle and recognises that *changes are often beneficial* to some projects" [21]

If we take this quote as atypical, it appears that contained within the body of contemporary, traditional project management literature there is the recognition that project management in theory is not at all what it is like in practice. If project management is a "process of constant communication and negotiation" then the paradox is that the literature places far less emphasis on the analysis of those communications than they do on the structural aspects of time, cost and specification. If, like an expedition, the uniqueness and complexity of a project will ensure that projects encounter variance, then these variances will be a constituent part of the project rather than an aberration. In such an environment, the communicative aspects of project management and the meaning of those communications become the dominant themes:

"Precisely because projects have an element of uniqueness, and because the complexity leads to emergent properties, alternative perspectives are needed to help project managers make sense of this complexity and to equip them to deal with emergent problems and crises and the need to manage meaning within the project network" [22].

That there is discordance between project management theory and project management practice seems obvious. What is less obvious is why this discordance exists and indeed, seems to have been tolerated for so long. Many of the traditional texts quoted above were written by practicing project managers, all of whom acknowledge throughout their work the need for realistic appraisal of the techniques as they apply to the situation. This seems to imply an attitude of either the "technique works until the technique doesn't work" or "all bets are off" yet there is little in the way of what kind of language could be used in the moment when reality intrudes on the carefully laid plans and "all bets are off". At the point where the existing language of project management fails and the articulation of 'best practice' in textbooks, training courses, and company guidelines are no longer adequate to inform the next step, what kind of language can be used to make sense of the situation? The following sections argue that by reconceptualising project management as an existential response to organisational crisis we can offer a "richer explanandum"[23] for these moments of crisis and an urgent re-articulation for the project managers confronted by them.

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21   Schwalbe, 2007, op. cit. p. 165, my italics.

22   Ivory, Chr., Alderman, N., McLoughlin, I., & Vaughan, R., 2006, "Sense-making as a process within complex projects". In *Making projects critical*, edited by D. Hodgson & S. Cicmil. Hampshire, Palgrave, p. 319.

23   Prasad, A.& Mir, R., 2002, "Digging deep for meaning: a critical hermeneutic analysis of CEO letters to shareholders in the oil industry". *The Journal of Business Communication* 39 (1), pp. 92-116.

Defensive and Reflexive Existential Responses

The central issue of this section is that the organisational turbulence experienced by most companies at some point serves to make explicit the practices by which companies operate. During periods of relative stability, when well-worn practices produce well-worn results, there is rarely the need for examination of our methods. A crisis, however, can precipitate the kind of introspection that brings such practices sharply into focus[24]. The nature of this explicitness is not that of a well-framed question that only requires suitable logical analysis to produce a result. It is rather, an explicitness shrouded in anxiety, an anxiety produced when one is not even sure the questions being asked are the right ones, or whether there is even a way of forming a question that would make sense. As Heidegger puts it: "That in the face of which one has anxiety is characterised by the fact that what threatens is *nowhere*... it is so close that it is oppressive and stifle's one's breath, and yet it is nowhere."[25]

Project management operates in such conditions of anxiety. In the face of serious disruptions to our normal way of practicing, when the future is not just uncertain but unknown, projects are conceived of as the vehicle by which normalcy will be returned, albeit in new and currently unrecognisable forms. As Segal (1999) discerns however, the disruptions to our everyday way of doing things present us not only with the opportunity for reflection on our practices, but also the opportunity for defensiveness. Drawing on Segal's interpretation of Martin Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology, this section will attempt to show that contemporary project management can draw on two kinds of response in the way it deals with organisational crisis. Whilst both are characterised as an existential response to disruption, the form of each response is radically different.

Segal begins his outline of "the existential conditions of explicitness" by asking the question: "at what point in our practices do we decide to examine our practices?" [26] Whilst it is generally understood that insight into one's own practices can increase our effectiveness in those practices[27] it is less understood as to how that 'insight' is to be achieved. The thesis offered is that serious disruptions to our practices are necessary in order to make them explicit, that without such disruptions we remain embedded in what Heidegger calls our "average everyday" way of doing things. We 'intuit', but we do not typically acknowledge the fundamental paradigms, axioms and premises that guide the way we do things in this average everydayness. It is only when our average everyday way of doing things no longer produce the outcomes we envisage, that we are suddenly confronted by our practices in their 'explicitness'(Segal 1999).

For organisations, such moments of explicitness come when the survival of the organisation itself is challenged. If the practices utilised by the organisation serve as the mechanism by which the organisation seeks to ensure its continuity, then a threat to that

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24   Watson, T. J., 1994b. *In search of management: culture, chaos and control in managerial work*. London. Routledge.

25   Heidegger, M., 1996, *Being and time*. Translated by J. Stambaugh. Albany: SUNY Press., p. 231.

26   Segal, 1999, op. cit. p. 4.

27   Mintzberg, H., 1975, "The Manager's Job: Folklore and Fact". In *Harvard Business Review* (July-August).

continuity is a challenge to the construct of the practices themselves[28] In this sense, even 'profit-making' can be seen as simply one kind of response to a threat to an organisations continued existence, a response undertaken within the constraints of a particular 'market-driven' paradigm, rather than the *raison d'être* of the organisation itself. Recent events have served to highlight this point, throwing even the previously taken-for-granted notions of *laissez faire* capitalism into sharp relief. It is within this kind of disruption that an organisation is offered the opportunity to "develop an explicit appreciation of their paradigm and practice." [29]

Whilst Segal outlines several forms of Heideggerian disruption, a disturbance in the way we use a particular piece of equipment to achieve a particular thing is the most 'elementary'. In the way we normally use equipment we are unconcerned with the context within which the equipment is an object of use for us. In this manner, the people engaged in projects can find themselves trapped within the "rational cage" of the project, remaining highly committed to whatever objectives are outlined within it and utilising all the tools and procedures that are a constituent part of it, yet not see themselves as in any way prisoners in that cage[30]. If we consider the tools and procedures of project management practice as equipment in the Heideggerian sense, it is when the equipment fails to perform its function and the tools and procedures no longer deliver the results we expect, that we become attuned to the equipment *as* equipment. As Segal puts it: "Disturbance or rupture transforms our attunement from a concern with objects in a context to the context in which things are situated. Rupture is the generative condition of an attunement which is turned back on its own way of being attuned to the world." [31]

What has been made explicit is not something that can be captured in the traditional project framework of a 'problem definition', for the very meaning of the terms used to frame that definition have now been challenged. The "habituated terms of reference" that we used can no longer be relied on and we have entered "a space of inarticulateness"[32]. In Fernando Flores terms, our old world has been destroyed but the new world has not yet disclosed itself to us[33]. In this inarticulate space between the old world and the new, in the moment of attunement or concern towards our practices, two forms of explicitness become available to us. The first, and Segal argues more dominant, is that of defensiveness. In this attitude the response to the critical incidents or dilemmas we are confronted by do not take on a form of 'reflection' but can be more easily characterised as 'avoidance', 'fleeing' or Heidegger's notion of 'inauthenticity' [34]

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28   Watson, T.,1994a, "Towards a managerially relevant but non-managerialist organisation theory". In *Towards a new theory of organisations*, edited by M. Parker & J. Hassard. London. Routledge.

29   Segal, 1999, op. cit. p. 78.

30   Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006, op. cit. p. 126.

31   Segal, 1999, op. cit. p.85.

32   Segal, 1999, op. cit. p. 78.

33   Segal, S., 2004, *Business Feel: From the Science of Management to the Philosophy of Leadership*. Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan.

34   Segal, 1999, op. cit. p. 87.

An 'inauthentic' response to an existential crisis is one in which the everyday practices of the organisation have been made explicit but the rupture fails to transforms explicitness into a questioning. As Segal observes:

> "Defensive forms of explicitness involve a tension or contradiction, for they involve making something that was habitually taken for granted explicit but they fail to question that which was made explicit. By idealisation of that which has been made explicit, they conceal that which is taken for granted in the idealised. They are thus caught in a tension between *revealing* and *concealing*." [35]

By failing to question that which has been made explicit, the organisation fails to reveal the 'new world' that may have been disclosed. Instead, an organisation typically seeks to conceal that which has been uncovered. This concealing can take many forms. A topical example is the tendency of financial institutions and political chiefs to label the recent financial crisis an "economic tsunami"[36]. The comfort of this "idealisation" as Segal puts it, is that it invokes 'natural forces' against which an organisation or government is helpless to do other than continue on their current course until the wave has passed. A similar, if less evocative idealisation is the tendency in the project management responses to crisis to idealise the principles of project management and to see the tools and procedures of its practice as more than just tools, but as representations of nature itself. Trapped within the framework of apodictic knowledge, project management remains confronted by the same tsunami, and can do little more to accept its failure as not a failure of the tool, but a failure of application. Such failure, it can be argued, then has the benefit of requiring more and more extensive extrapolations of the knowledge-base of project management to improve the application, all the while leaving the fundamental axioms that underpin the field unchallenged.

Defensiveness and the Search for Apodictic Knowledge

This section will outline Richard Rorty's critique of apodictic knowledge and seek to characterise it, in the context of project management, as a form of defensive response to existential crisis. Rorty's critique is drawn predominantly from his major work "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" (1979). Rorty establishes in his critique that our idea of 'knowledge' is not an a-historical and a-temporal framework for the abstracted and universal understanding of our world, but is rather the product of our history, society and culture. As such, he sees the certainty of our apodictic truths as actually chosen, and chosen from a

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35   Segal, 1999, op. cit. p. 87, my italics.

36   "Look out for the tsunami, says Costello", reported by Jessica Irvine and Peter Hartcher in the Sydney Morning Herald, October 26th 2007, and also "Fahour answers call by Rudd" – Ahmed Fahour [former head of National Australia Bank] states "I don't want to get old and think I didn't do something to help with the economic tsunami we're facing" reported by Richard Gluyas in The Australian, February 21st-22nd 2009.

range of metaphors that have their roots in the western philosophical tradition. By tracing the development of these metaphors in our language, Rorty demonstrates the contingent aspect of our 'truth making' and its central claim on our understanding of the world. This section attempts to relate Rorty's critique to the sphere of project management by considering it a specific instance of an epistemological framework that has its basis in these same metaphorical roots.

Rorty begins his challenge with the claim that philosophy is primarily concerned with general theories of representation; what we can, at bottom, know and not know. This 'foundationalist' attitude was threatened, however, by the schism developing in the 20th century between the exponents of the natural sciences and its critics. This break was typified by the work of Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey, who in their early work tried and failed to provide a single context within which all philosophical thought could take place. Instead, Rorty argues, they 'set aside' the possibility of epistemology and metaphysics as separate studies for a revolutionary approach that was inclusive of broader aspects of human activity. This revolution is a specific challenge to the systematic disciplines of the Descartes, Locke, Kantian tradition which attempts to place all knowledge within a framework understandable *a priori*. Traditional philosophy's fundamental paradigm, according to Rorty, is that of the mind as a mirror, and the representations we collect in our mind are thus more or less accurate reflections of our reality. Traditional philosophical frameworks, therefore, fail to understand that our concept of an accurately describable and therefore completely knowable reality is a metaphor constituted within a historical and social tradition [37].

The key claim to this section is that project management has inherited the Descartes, Kantian and Locke side of the schism described by Rorty, when it could have been better served by inheriting that of Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey. Why project management has inherited this tradition can be reflected on in Rorty's argument that there has been since Greek times a desire to 'found' philosophy on something irrefutable. From the 17th Century on, that founding 'first' philosophy became epistemology. The ancient tradition of 'grounding' knowledge is built on the distinctions between the contingent facts of the senses and necessary truths of the intellect and an overwhelming desire to seek justification of what we know i.e. there is an irreducible *cause* to what we know rather than just varying degrees of certainty about which we can reason. The implication of Rorty's position is that project management is situated within a tradition of which the justification of knowledge simply happens to be a part.

Progressing his point, Rorty sees the modern attitude towards knowledge, not as a natural 'given' arrived at through the power of logical reflection, but as a series of philosophical and historical 'mistakes'. For example, he sees Locke as making the mistake of confusing justification with a causal relationship when he predicated concept on intuition, and then Kant making a further mistake when he first (correctly) synthesised intuition and concept, but then predicated that synthesis on a 'mind'. The twentieth century picture

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37   Rorty, 1979, op. cit. pp. 3-13.

of what Rorty calls 'privileged representation' is based therefore on a historically developed and dominating metaphor (stemming originally from the Greeks) of requiring our beliefs to be consubstantial with the object of belief. All discussion since on the nature of knowledge has taken place within the constraint of that metaphor [38]. Rorty characterises a mode of inquiry contained within an abstracted and universalised notion of language as an 'impure' philosophy and sees it as a continuation of the epistemological tradition of Kant which sought to establish a "permanent a-historical framework for enquiry"[39]. 'Pure' philosophy, on the other hand, is that as undertaken by Wittgenstein in attempting to provide a clear picture of linguistic terms such as 'truth' and meaning'. The 'pure' approach denies that there is, within language, two distinct elements; the descriptive framework and the things described. Writers such as Davidson have argued that language is not about the analysis of individual terms within a framework, but the understanding of the relations between those terms (i.e. no further analysis can be undertaken on the expression "snow is white" except to understand the context of its utterance[40]. Rorty therefore rejects the pervasive belief that science, courtesy of Enlightenment philosophy, has provided us with any language-independent objective reality. He points to Quine's essay "Two Dogma's of Empiricism" (1951) where Quine maintained that there could be no 'neutral observation language' separating analytic statements of fact from synthetic statements of belief. The 'impure' response to this problem was to continue the search for the 'common referent' in scientific theories to preserve the epistemological status of language. The purpose of this search was to relate linguistic terms to the objective reality it described in such a way that there could be no variation in the meaning of those terms. The reality was that 'meaning invariance' (as Paul Feyerabend called it) did not exist and no suitable analysis could be undertaken of 'meaning' in the Kantian a-historical sense[41] Rorty observes that the attack on objective truth begun by Quine and continued by Kuhn and Feyerabend highlighted the distinction between two broad perspectives on the nature of our reality and our attempts to understand it. The idealist position is that there is no objective truth outside of the frameworks with which we describe them. The realist position is that because we cannot describe a thing in theory-neutral terms, it is wrong to infer that there are no theory-neutral things. Rorty's position is simply to deny the relevance of the debate between those points of view. He asks: "what would we lose if we had no a-historical theory-independent notion of truth?"[42]. Rorty's answer to his own question is: very little of philosophical importance because "most of what passes for discussion of 'truth' in philosophy books is, in fact, about justification" [43]. That project management remains in the thrall of the metaphor of 'privileged representation' can be seen in the

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38   Rorty, ibid. pp. 155-64.
39   Rorty, ibid. p. 257.
40   Rorty, ibid. pp. 257-66.
41   Rorty, ibid. pp. 266-73.
42   Rorty, ibid. p. 281.
43   Rorty, ibid. p. 282.

reification of a body of knowledge that seeks to describe *a priori* the specific activities necessary to deliver any stated objective (PMBOK 2000). The language of this statement is typically framed independently of any specific scenario, and as such is presented a-historically and a-temporally. Reference is frequently made in project management literature to specific instantiations of this language, in the form of case studies or 'war stories', etc, but is generally done so within a context of an over-arching meta-narrative that remains immune to the indeterminacy of the local and situated [44]. Case studies may provide descriptions of a project in practice, but do so within a linguistic framework that imposes upon the project the parameters of 'success and failure', 'correct' and 'incorrect' procedure and ultimately, 'good' and 'bad' project management. Project case studies, in this sense, serve to function as allegorical morality tales, highlighting the dangers of ignoring the 'good' and the 'true' within an overarching project framework[45]. In this way, project management universalises itself into a language capable of being laid across any scenario and in doing so conforms to Segal's notion of a defensive response to existential crisis.

Project Management as Reflection and Edification

This section will combine the argument from the first section, that project management can be better considered as an existential response to organisational crisis, with Segal's suggested response to Heideggerian disruption from the second section; that of a reflective philosophical approach to moments of organisational crisis. This section will argue for consideration of project management practice in such moments as a hermeneutic process of edification and will offer the outline of such a process from the third part of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

In developing his approach, Rorty notes that existentialist thinkers such as Gadamer, Heidegger and Sartre have challenged attempts to ground objective knowledge by casting it as only one possible approach among a variety available to us. They all criticise the grounding of knowledge in the noumenal as an attempt to justify the unjustifiable by assuming our present descriptions are an accurate mirror of a reality rather than mere phenomena. Rorty continues in this tradition, not by denying science or its representational metaphors a place in our society, but rather by denying it a privileged place in our discourse[46]. The difficulty with this position, as Holroyd observes, is that:

> "Contemporary culture holds the physical world and its tangible objects in high regard. This respect is based on a *culturally situated awareness* of empirical science

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44   Thomas, J., 2006, "Problematizing project management". In *Making projects critical*, edited by D. Hodgson & S. Cicmil. Hampshire, Palgrave.

45   Smith, Ch., 2006, "A tale of an evolving project: failed science or serial reinterpretation" .In *Making projects critical*, edited by D. Hodgson & S. Cicmil. Hampshire, Palgrave.

46   Rorty, ibid. p. 357-65

and the way that it has earned a reputation for delivering important objective truths" [47].

Whilst it is important not to 'devalue' the contribution of the natural sciences to human science research, it is also important to recognise that this method alone is inadequate to describe all facets of the human experience, let alone provide an understanding of it [48]. That we can adopt such an approach comes with the recognition, as noted by Holroyd, that our respect for science is "culturally situated" rather than an intrinsically given relationship to reality. Whilst scientific discourse has provided the basis for extraordinary advances in such areas as physiology, biology, physics and chemistry, that same discourse, when applied to the human aspects of our activities have not been so successful[49]. Whilst initially an edifying philosophy of hermeneutics might appear dangerous to science because it has the potential to relativise it, if used correctly it can actually support scientific endeavour by demonstrating more fully how science is a part of this world rather than separate from it [50]

Developing this position, Rorty refers to the arguments of Thomas Kuhn who in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" (1996), challenged the privileged position of scientific knowledge by observing that scientific theories are not neutral but 'value-laden' and scientists bring their own social and historical context to bear on their inquiry. Kuhn's theories drew heavy attention, not from the scientific community (as one would suppose) but from the area of traditional analytic philosophy (Rorty 1979). Their key criticism was that it would seem impossible for science to have produced anything if all theories were 'subjective'. Kuhn pointed out that his critics invariably confused the 'subjectivity' of his theory with 'personal judgement' rather than as merely opposed to objectivity. Ironically, what was typically considered 'subjective' by his critics was that which others of similar minds thought irrelevant to the debate. Kuhn highlighted the point that the 'objective' nature of science is actually arrived at through subjective agreement to what is considered 'objective'(Rorty 1979). Rorty notes that Kuhn's position does not preclude science from achieving anything useful, and nor does the fact that science achieves useful things preclude Kuhn's position. As Rorty puts it, that science is a 'value-based enterprise' and still produces results, should not surprise us any more than how people with values 'could produce bombs' [51]. Rorty (and Kuhn's) position is frequently interpreted as an attack on

47 Holroyd, A. & McManus, E., 2007, "Interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology: clarifying understanding". In *The indo-pacific journal of phenomenology* 7 (2), pp. 1-12., p. 1, my italics.

48 Holroyd, 2007, op. cit.

49 Benner, P. & Wrubel, J., 1989, "On what it is to be a person". In *The primacy of caring*. New York, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

50   Eger, M., 1993, "Hermeneutics as an approach to science: Part I". In *Science and Education* 2, pp 1-29.

51 Rorty, 1979, op. cit. p. 341.

scientific principles and the possibility of knowledge[52]. The main thrust of the opposition to his thinking (and there is not the space to do it all justice here) is that he is, at bottom, denying the existence of 'reality' and thus stands accused of a certain kind of idealism. If, however, we consider Rorty's position on epistemology as concerned with *finding out* and on hermeneutics as concerned with *making*, the direction of his argument becomes clearer. Quoting Sartre, Rorty observes that that man is simply different from atoms and inkwells. The language we use to describe the things we find is not that useful to describe the things we make. Rorty recognises that the world would continue to be even if man and hermeneutics disappeared and this distinguishes it from the idealist position. A simple way of putting it is that epistemology studies nature or the familiar and hermeneutics studies the spirit or unfamiliar. Whilst acknowledging the possibility that physicalist notions may one day predict human behaviour, Rorty disputes that this would even then provide science a privileged place in our discourse. Knowing the next move is not the same as knowing its meaning[53].

Rorty's distinction between epistemology and hermeneutics leads to a consideration of epistemology as the methodology when the discourse is normal and hermeneutics when the discourse is abnormal [54]. In periods of revolution or abnormal discourse, Rorty maintains that what matters is dialogue or hermeneutics. In terms of the arguments already outlined, project management can be viewed as a operating in terms of an abnormal discourse, one in which the organisations 'average everyday way of being' has been disrupted and the practices with which the organisation operates have been made 'explicit'. In Heideggerian terms, the organisation is now 'aware of its awareness' and, no longer absorbed in the routine way of doing things, it is confronted by that explicitness (Segal 1999). At this point, organisations may choose to adopt a defensive posture, 'idealising' the response (as described in section 3) or adopt a reflective attitude.

It is important to understand what is meant by a 'reflective response' in this sense. Reflection could be construed as merely 'stepping back' from an existing practice that is failing for the purpose of examining and, ultimately, improving it. Whilst well intentioned, and clearly not without benefit, this is not what existential reflection requires, and is not what is meant when Rorty speaks of adopting an edifying hermeneutic. Normal, epistemological discourse occurs within a certain paradigm in which the standards of evaluation (and therefore reason) are already known. To examine a practice from within the paradigm of that practice is to submit to the initial conditions or axioms from which that practice generated its entire discourse. In such

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52   Putnam, H.,2000, "Richard Rorty on reality and justification". In *Richard Rorty and his critics*, edited by R. B. Brandon. Malden, Blackwell; Thompson, S., 2001, "Richard Rorty on truth, justification and justice". In *Richard Rorty - critical dialogues*, edited by M. Festenstein & S. Thompson. Cambridge, Polity ; Steib, J. A., 2005, "Rorty on realism and constructivism". *Metaphilosophy* 36 (3), pp 272-94.

53   Rorty, op. cit. pp. 343-56.

54   Baert, P., 2004, "Pragmatism as a philosophy of the social sciences". In *European journal of social theory* 7 (3), pp. 355-69.

an examination "everybody agrees on how to evaluate everything everybody else says" because

> "there is agreed upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it"[55]

By contrast, in a time of organisational crisis what is in question is the paradigm itself and the axioms that would serve to underpin the structure of any rationale argument. The common ground that underpins rationale debate has disappeared because, in Kuhnian terms, a revolution is occurring and the discourse within which things are understood is changing to something not yet understood. In such circumstances, when the actual premises that form the basis of our rational framework are challenged, examining our practices by using existing premises is, literally, a nonsense. For what is actually sensible or non-sensible is now up for debate [56]

In a time of revolutionary or abnormal discourse, there are a multitude of discourses clamouring for dominance, not of which can yet lay claim to it. To attempt to do so through the application of a single meta-discourse that brings all others into line is what traditional project management techniques are predicated on. As discussed however, the privilege of what Rorty (1979) calls "Nature's Own Vocabulary", and to which the project management vocabulary adheres, is itself a collection of metaphors, all of which are now caught in the same maelstrom engulfing the other discourses of the organisation. Hermeneutic enquiry grants one vocabulary no more, or less, privilege than any other in the organisation. Even in times of relatively 'normal' discourse, where there are no existential threats to the organisation, organisations will still have innumerable specialist languages in play, each encompassing their own notions of truth and their own criteria for success or failure. Hermeneutic debate occurs *between* these paradigms, where to seek a common standard of ground would actually be *irrational*[57].

That debate can occur at all between paradigms with differing standards of right and wrong, good and bad etc, is possible because such paradigms are not completely incommensurable. "All discourse", as Rorty puts it, "is parasitic upon normal discourse" (Rorty 1979) and we can train ourselves to communicate between paradigms because the specialist languages used to generate them have their basis in everyday language games[58].

The mistake, and it is a mistake typical of project management practice, is to consider

55   Rorty, 1979, op. cit. p. 320.

56   Rorty, ibid. pp 15-22.

57   Arnold, S. J., Fischer, E., 1994, "Hermeneutics and Consumer Research". *Journal of Consumer Research* 21 (June), pp.55-69.

58   Hassard, J.,1990, "An alternative to paradigm incommensurability in organisation theory". In *The theory and philosophy of organisations: critical issues and new perspectives* edited by J. Hassard and D. Pym. London, Routledge, p. 230.

a lack of complete *incommensurability* between discourses as implying the possibility of complete *commensurability*. Commensurability offers the possibility of the complete reduction of our discourses to one meta-discourse in which all arguments can be encompassed. For example, research into the ALSTOM Transport high-speed tilting train project in the United Kingdom observed the tendency of project management practitioners to try and 'conquer' discourse with their own meta-narrative. Once the project plan was created and distributed to the stakeholders, all discourse was undertaken within that framework, effectively marginalising any 'discordant voices'. The researchers suggested instead the need for "mechanisms for bringing stakeholders together to share discourses and to ensure that they are exposed to the central discourses that define the meaning of the project for the client and other key players."[59] Implicit in this suggestion is that there are central discourses out of which other discourses grow, but those other discourses are not reducible to that central discourse. In Rorty's view:

> "Hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which pre-supposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts. This hope is not a hope for the discovery of antecedently existing common ground, but *simply* hope for agreement, or at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement"[60].

Systematic philosophers are interested in inquiring into nature and uncovering its 'truths' for the purpose of grounding all possible debate in their paradigm and avoiding incommensurability. The edifying philosopher, on the other hand, seeks to keep the debate open through dialogue, not seek to close it with answers. Edification is not a case of increasingly accurate representation of what *is* but rather the possibility of what *could be*. An example of this kind of thinking in project management practice can be seen in the project initiated to build critical infrastructure works to support the Sydney Olympics in 2000. Utilising the insights of Alfred Shutz (1967) and his idea of "future perfect thinking", the researchers into the project noted that due to the immense ambiguity and uncertainty of the project, traditional techniques of detailed, agreed-in-advance specifications were not going to be suitable[61]. Instead, all members of the project were encouraged to consider a "future perfect" in which the project was completed and then imagine the steps necessary to complete it. One of the principle methods of implementing future perfect thinking in the project was through the notion of "strange conversations". Strange conversations were ones in which the "agenda, process and outcomes were unclear" and the purpose of the conversation was to "elicit the everyday grounds of routine actions". Whilst initially the conversations could

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59   Ivory et al., 2006, op. cit. p. 331.
60   Rorty, 1979, op. cit. p.318
61   Clegg, S. R., Pitsis, T.S., Marozzeky, M. & Rura-Polley, T., 2006, "Making the future perfect: constructing the Olympic dream". In *Making projects critical*, edited by D. Hodgson & S. Cicmil. Hampshire, Palgrave, p. 280

create tension as the "premises from which each of the two sides came were so different", they ultimately helped to develop creative solutions for the project[62]

The notion of a strange conversation serves to highlight one of the principle activities of project management within the context of an edifying hermeneutic: the opening up of creative possibility within the project space through continual dialogue. This contrasts sharply with the traditional view of conversation which seeks to 'answer' questions and close down dialogue through the application of a single, 'correct' linguistic framework. In elaborating on conversation as the basis of an edifying hermeneutic Rorty (1979) offers that:

> "To see keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately" (p.378)

If one were to replace the word "philosophy" in this quote with "project management", it would not be far from a suitable starting point for project management practice. It would be a mistake, however, to think that such a project management practice of edification can itself be described in systemic terms, for that would be to reduce it to the very commensurability that hermeneutics seeks to avoid. The attempt to find a 'science of reflection' (such as that offered by Husserlian phenomenology) is to try and reduce hermeneutics to traditional inquiry, when rather it is that out of which inquiry emerges. Science, epistemology, naturalism etc are paradigmatic. They are normal discourse in which objective truths are legitimately sought. Hermeneutics is a reactive, abnormal discourse *about* the paradigms and cannot be reduced to one of them (Rorty 1979:379-89).

Rorty therefore forcefully denies that hermeneutic enquiry can be considered as the successor discipline to epistemology. That problem is simply to get distracted by the insistent need of academic philosophy to categorise[63] The problem for the edifying philosopher and/ or project manager is that they must participate in systemic debate without taking a particular position (which is the general relativistic problem). Rorty for his part thought that philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Heidegger avoided such problems by simply saying things without saying them *about* things (1979:365-72). Project managers could attempt much the same by relinquishing the preoccupation for the epistemological certainty of the project schedule for the creative uncertainty of the conversation. This is, as already noted, not to imply that epistemology has no place in the consideration of the philosopher or that the techniques of traditional project management have no place in project management practice. Rorty contends that "nothing is so valuable for the hermeneutic enquirer into an exotic culture as the discovery of an epistemology written within that culture." (1979:346) Project management has, like any other specialist discipline, a language with its own fundamental premises and axioms. These basic principles serve a valuable purpose in providing a

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62   Clegg et al., 2006, op. cit. pp. 280-1.
63   Malachowski, 2002, op. cit. pp. 56-62.

cohesive framework within which a practitioner can situate themselves, but should be seen as the basis of a particular kind of reasoning, rather than the framework within which all reasoning has to take place.

Conclusion

It has been the argument of this paper that project management, in its conception as an organisation's existential response to crisis, is operating *as a matter of course* in a mode of abnormal discourse. Whilst it may bring to bear on specific problems within the range of its undertakings the techniques and procedures that currently constitute its own specialist language, the fundamental characteristic of its paradigm is that *it cannot afford to be contained by a particular paradigm*. Project management as a response to existential crisis serves the function of negotiating existing ways of thinking for the purpose of allowing new ways of thinking to emerge. To fall back on an existing paradigm when that paradigm's basic premises are no longer valid is to conform to what Segal has termed a "defensive response" to existential crisis[64] .

Though the project management practices an organisation embraces may have been made explicit by the rupture of crisis, to idealise them as a vocabulary of natural science is to retreat from the opportunity that such rupture offers. Whilst the language of natural science continues to offer extraordinary insight into our physical world, its application in the area of the human sciences has not been as successful. Rorty (1979) observes that the problems in the human world continually resist the notion of reducibility and repeatedly refuse to conform to the elegance of the structures and designs that epistemological theories can produce, arguing instead that:

> "If we see knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scientists or philosophers, but rather as a right, by current standards, to believe, then we are well on the way to seeing conversation as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood" (p.389).

If, as Rorty contends, there are no epistemological or ontological foundations to our knowledge and the languages we converse in carry within them all the presuppositions we take as 'given', then the appropriate theoretical position to adopt is simply one that can best account for itself and the phenomena it deals with[65]. Such a position acknowledges its own indebtedness to the theoretical underpinnings of its discipline, but allows that the certainty of its apodictic truths are far from certain. That project managers actually recognise the

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64   Segal, 1999, op. cit.

65   Clegg, S. & Hardy. C., 1997, Relativity without relativism: reflexivity in post-paradigm organisation studies". *British journal of management* 8 (Special issue), pp 5-17, p. 13.

contingency of these truths can be seen in the more humorous depictions of their own practice: "project management is the art of creating the illusion that any outcome is the result of a series of pre-determined, deliberate acts when, in fact, it was dumb luck"[66] or "project management is the art of staggering as gracefully as possible between crises"[67]. What was offered in this paper is a perspective on project management practice that takes these observations seriously. Within such a perspective, the primary skill and "distinguishing feature of project managers" is not the application of instrumental reason (though still necessary), but "the ability to operate effectively, and to individually and collectively maintain their sense of self and their defences against uncertainty"[68]. Forsaking the illusory safety of the pre-determined, deliberate act for the recognition of the 'fortuna' presents project managers with the possibility, not necessarily to stagger, but perhaps to soar from one crisis to the next.

Bradley Rolfe has over 15 years experience as a Project Manager, and continues to work full-time delivering projects in the Australian IT industry. He combines this with his academic interests, having graduated with a post-graduate certificate in Project Management from the University of Technology and an MBA from the Macquarie Graduate School of Management, both in Sydney. He is currently working towards his PhD in Management at Macquarie University, focusing on the philosophy of practice and the creation of the working self through narrative structure.

Email: brad_rolfe@hotmail.com

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66   Kerzner, 1989, op. cit.
67   Carmichael, 2004, op. cit. p. xi.
68   Cicmil, 2006, op. cit. p.35.