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December 1999

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### Recommended Citation

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<http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis1999/219>

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# Phenomenological Aspects of Churchman's Hegelian Inquiring System

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## Introduction

In the past decade or so as organisations have become intensively technologically based, it is becoming increasingly apparent that technological change alone does not guarantee success for an organisation. Courtney et al (1997) and Croasdell et al (1998) have suggested that Churchman's models of Inquiring Systems are crucial for the design of effective learning in organisations. A clear feature of Inquiring Systems is their revival of the necessity for seeing organisations in terms of learning sub-systems. The learning sub-system, if it is a learning sub-system within an Inquiring System, is the learning culture that the organisation creates and fosters for itself. The development of a culture is a fragile creation. One of the central points of Inquiring Systems is the distinct recognition that technology alone cannot succeed in dominating a learning culture; the culture would simply disintegrate. In varying degrees then, any attempted technological domination would fragment and inhibit the development of a learning culture. It is rather the case that technology needs to be integrated into the organisational learning culture. The design possibilities within such a learning culture are "an enormous liberation of the intellectual spirit" (Churchman, 1971, p 13). The alternative - and perhaps to some, not so obvious on the surface - in a technology dominated environment, is the stifling of intellectual spirit. More specifically, in C. West Churchman's work, we find an explication of five learning cultures or five archetypal models. This paper is concerned with the Hegelian Inquiring System. In G.W.F. Hegel's published works we find many of the intellectual seeds which, for example, Heidegger, as one recognised and celebrated example of a phenomenologist, sought out and incorporated into his (Heidegger's) phenomenology.

This paper does not explore the groundwork connection between Hegel and Heidegger to any great extent. However it is concerned with examining some of the phenomenological aspects within the Hegelian Inquiring System which have been explored by Churchman himself, and to what extent such aspects can be extended.

## Hegelian Organisations

The essence of the Hegelian Inquiring System within an organisation is the development, or better, the emergence, of the idea of the synthesis of Hegelian "objectivity" as an outcome of the organisation members' various perspectives. As Churchman says (Churchman, 1971, p149),

Kant seemed to have thought that objectivity occurs when the experience is shaped into a "general object", i.e., gains its form and intelligibility from space, time, and the categories. But even this shaping of experience is not enough ... We also need to design into the inquirer an ability to see the "same" object from different points of view ... we need to develop the additional idea of an "object" as a collection of interconnected observations in which each observer can examine how another observer views the world. The "objectivity" of experience is to be based on some kind of interconnection of observers.

The upshot of the above passage is that there needs to be a synthesis of "different points of view". In other words, there needs to be a perspective on the perspective that others bring to bear upon an object, in this case, an organisation or, at the very least elements within an organisation. It is the perspective of a perspective, or the development of the observation of individual observations that leads to the emergence of an Hegelian learning culture. The more it is a genuine synthesis, the more the learning culture becomes an Hegelian Inquiring System. But it is clear, at least to phenomenologists, and transparently clear to Hegel, that objectivity cannot emerge by itself. There needs to be a "subject" and that subject needs to be reconciled AS an object. In the forty five page "Preface: On Scientific Cognition" to Hegel's work *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Hegel, 1977, p 37) we find such a clear recognition when Hegel speaks of speculative thinking:

Speculative [*begreifendes*] thinking behaves in a different way. Since the Notion is the subject's own Self, which represents itself as the *coming-to-be of the object*, it is not a passive Subject inertly supporting the Accidents: it is, on the contrary, the Self-moving Notion which takes its determinations back into itself. In this movement the passive Subject itself perishes; it enters into the differences and the content, and constitutes the determinateness, i.e. the differentiated content and its movement, instead of remaining inertly over against it. The solid ground which argumentation has in the passive Subject is therefore shaken, and only this movement itself becomes the object.

Churchman also recognised the need to reconcile the subject with the object, hence indicating Churchman's recognition of a phenomenological perspective. This is clear in the following passage, (Churchman 1971, p 158),

Suppose we say, as Hegel did, that the process by which one mind observes another is self-reflection (or self-consciousness), recognising that this old-fashioned term is both practical and common in its meaning here. Managerial control in a firm is a self-conscious process. ... Suppose we call the mind that is being observed the "subject" and the observing mind the "observer"? The inquiring system that we shall examine is the "observer-of-the-subject".

In other words, Churchman clearly recognises the need for a - phenomenological - subject-as-object approach. For Churchman, the observation of the objectivity of the observed is referred to as the "subject", and the subject, who is observing, is referred to as the "observer". It is of no consequence that Churchman calls what is normally referred to as an object, "the subject", while referring to the subject observer as "observer". This is so because in the final analysis the subjectivity of the observer and the objectivity of what is being observed (the Churchmanian, "subject") is reconciled in what Churchman refers to as the "observer-of-the-subject". It is profoundly clear that Churchman (Churchman, 1971, p 158) recognised the implications of such a reconciliation when he says, "That a subject is having an objective experience is a subjective experience of the observing mind... Self-reflection is a necessary condition for objectivity, but not a sufficient one." In other words it is always a subject-as-object experience, but not object-as-subject. This is very much a phenomenological stance. In his analysis of the Hegelian Inquiring System Churchman also recognised the limitations of being either purely an objectivist or purely a subjectivist. The classic example he

sights for "objectivism" is the British Empiricist, but Churchman reserves the most trenchant criticism for the "subjectivists" encapsulated in his dry comment: "Subjectivism is a very weak philosophy with very strong implications" (Churchman, 1971, p 152). Indeed either a purely objectivist or purely subjectivist stance has severe limitations as phenomenology well recognises.

## Mechanistic Objectivity

Churchman clearly recognises the mechanist's misconstruction of objectivity. To the mechanist (or reductionist) sentences that describe an object are somehow construed as its essence! Or, for example, the relationships that arise in relation to a sales product of an organisation (who buys it; where it is sold; how best to market it) in some way defines that product. Or, opinions that describe an object somehow are taken to constitute that object. Furthermore, quantitative measures of performance, once set in place become a way of defining (more than) the performance of an organisation employee. In all of these cases, there is no sense of the Self interacting with that object; any so-called interaction is always via another self or pseudo-self. The Self interaction is not so much indirect, but rather by degree absent, and hence alienated. Of course there will be degrees of alienation, but the extent of the absence of Self interaction with an object will be the extent of the alienation. It should be noted that all of these quantitative factors are important if not crucial to fact gathering for an organisation, but they are only facts; they are only a collection of discrete pieces of information, none of which collectively can account for the essence of what is being considered. It is the relationship of the Self to the object that brings out that full essential potential. Accordingly mechanists are alienated from the true contribution of an object. In other words in a managerial setting dominated by mechanistic considerations, there is a great limitation placed on the potential expansiveness of an object, whether that object be a product, an employee, an event or a relationship of any kind. The mechanist is dominated by the fact, simply because s/he has no sense of the true relationship between subject and object. Churchman sums up this position as follows (Churchman, 1971, p 160),

He [the mechanist] may wish ever so ardently that men love their fellow men, but when the facts reveal that men hate each other instead, then the inquirer must bow to the authority of fact. In this mechanist relationship man becomes the slave of the master who is information.

Accordingly it is easy to see why humans are dominated by technology, this is simply because they have no learning culture out of which to make judgements for themselves and for others in order to make a

perspectival placement of technology. In the Hegelian Inquiring System, humans can place technology into perspective because the learning culture of the dialectical reconciliation of subject and object is fostered, encouraged and explored for all its potential.

### **The Organisational Teleological Potential of the Hegelian Inquiring System**

Churchman makes the point (Churchman, 1971, p 163) that “the teleological approach to information in keeping with the dialectical approach of an Hegelian Inquiring System – emphasizes purpose (means and ends)”. But Churchman goes on to say that the teleological basis of information policy fails to solve the problem of authority, and rather, as he says, postulates a new question as to whether the master (the organisational management) can be trusted. I think this is to take too literal an interpretation of Hegel’s master slave dialectic. A more thoroughgoing phenomenological appreciation of Hegel’s work would suggest that the question of trust is always implicit in a culture of learning; see the “Semco Experience”, (Sembler, 1994). It is implicit because the trust is shared by the members as a collective recognition and respect for each other’s dedication to their various specialties of learning within the organisation. Churchman lays the foundation for my previous comment in his section “The Subject As a Manager” (note the use of the hermeneutic “As”) in the statement “.. if it is the subject after all who uses teleological considerations to appoint the master observer-of-the-subject, then the alienation seems to disappear” (Churchman, 1971, pp 163, 164). As we enter the new millenium we are rapidly moving into collectives of specialists. The question is, will those collectives be formed into cohesive groups as communities, or will they fragment and lose the potential for being a culture of learning? In the Hegelian Inquiring System a culture of learning synthesises its contribution to the organisation out of the opposition of conflicting ideas within the group of specialists. The literal question of who is the manager ceases to be of importance, because the function of the manager under an Hegelian Inquiring System is to monitor the contribution of the group. The manager thus functions as the synthesiser. Hence, the question of authority is purely the – and the necessarily welcomed – authority of the subject-matter of the specialists. It is also interesting to note that the notion of the dialectic in Churchman’s Hegelian Inquiring System should not be taken literally, especially in the rational or logical sense of two opposing forces reconciling themselves together. One needs to appreciate the non-logical side of Hegel’s dialectic (non-logical does not mean illogical). Churchman himself – in part – recognised this in a comment he directed to his own work on Hegel’s Inquiring System, that is found in a later work Churchman published entitled *Thought and Wisdom*. Churchman said (Churchman, 1982, p 61):

I’ve found that the design of such conversations [between thought and wisdom] has been very helpful to me in learning about an area of concern, much more helpful than the dialectical conversations I designed earlier [in *The Design of Inquiring Systems*] which turned out to be too rational.

### **Summary**

Effective learning in an organisation has been explored from the perspective of a learning culture (see also Haynes, (Haynes, 1999), in relation to the notion and the perspective of an organisational culture). This paper has argued that the nature of a learning culture finds its expression in the Hegelian Inquiring System as articulated by C. West Churchman. By digging deeper into the Hegelian contribution we find phenomenological aspects which provide for a more fuller articulation of the nature of a learning culture. It is recommended that in order to cope with the explosion of specialists as we rapidly move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is critical for organisations to become effective learning organisations and accordingly understand and nurture their own learning cultures.

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