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Transduction and entrepreneurship: A biophilosophical image of the entrepreneur

Alexander Styhre*

Department of Technology Management and Economics, Division of Project Management, Chalmers University of Technology,
Vera Sandbergs Allé 8, SE-412 96 Gothenburg, Sweden

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Summary

The concept of the entrepreneur is problematic because by definition it aims to capture what is on the move and in a process of continuous change. This paper examines the concepts of entrepreneurship and the entrepreneur from the perspective of the French philosopher Simondon's concept of *transduction*. Transduction denotes the individuation of the subject on the basis of productive relationships between the individual and the environment. Simondon speaks of the ontogenesis of metastable transductive unities, that is, an individuation which is transient and temporal and based on the continuous exchange of information with the environment. A biophilosophical image of entrepreneurship provides good opportunities for conceiving of entrepreneurship as something that is always already multiple, diverse, and distributed, recursively being constituted within specific settings and milieus. The work of Thomas Alva Edison and Louis Pasteur is used as empirical examples of how Simondon's framework can influence entrepreneurship theory and research.

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Introduction

Life can be consciously comprehended only as an ongoing event, and not as Being *qua* a given.

Bakhtin (1993, p. 56)

Our nature consists in movement; absolute rest is death.

Pascal (1966, p. 211)

In a seminal paper, Astley (1985, p. 510) argues: "Theoretical activity, rather than information-gathering, drives scientific progress". The ability to conceive of and

formulate new and thought-provoking theoretical frameworks enables new perspectives and new vision. Weick (1989) speaks of such theoretical pursuits in terms of "disciplined imagination". In the call for paper to the special issue in Scandinavian Journal of Management, contributors are invited to "recontextualize" and "recreate entrepreneurship", to disentangle the concepts of the entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial from the burden of its conventional associations and affiliations, be they political, analytical, ideological, or epistemological. Following this generous invitation, this paper is an attempt at such disciplined imagination with regard to the image of entrepreneurship and the entrepreneur. Rather than conceiving of entrepreneurship as that which is simply located to one or a number of individuals, and examined in terms of

*Tel.: +46 31 772 44 28; fax: +46 708 40 54 99.

E-mail address: Alexander.Styhre@chalmers.se

his or her traits and styles of operating, entrepreneurship is discussed as a process of what French philosopher Simondon (1964/1992) calls *transduction*, i.e. a process in which the individual “individuates” and achieves a state of temporal *metastability*. The concept of transduction is a biological metaphor anchored in a discourse that Ansell Pearson (1999) refers to as *bio-philosophy*, that is, philosophy addressing matters pertaining to biology, the life sciences, medicine, and other disciplines examining and exploring organisms and forms of life (Burwick & Douglass, 1992; Grosz, 2004; Lash, 2006; Rabinow, 1999). A biophilosophical framework accommodates research that asks questions such as “what is life?”, “how can organisms evolve over time?”, “what is the ultimate matter of organisms?”. Important contributors to the field of biophilosophy include Aristotle, Lucretius, Bergson (1975, 1998) Alfred North Whitehead, Teilhard de Chardin ([1955], 1965), as well as more recent thinkers such as Deleuze and Guattari (1998), Haraway (1997), Grosz (2004), Keller (2000), and DeLanda (1992, 2002). Simondon (1964/1992) speaks of organic systems, i.e. biological organisms, as entities that are neither static nor enclosed, but are fundamentally open to the future and in a state of becoming; organisms—a concept here, which is worth emphasizing, not conceived of in terms of what has been called *biologism*, the belief that brute materiality unconditionally determines various organic and social conditions—are then in a state of continuous movement and transformation and are thus in the process of being actualized. Rewriting entrepreneurship as a social practice and theoretical category implies conceiving of new images of entrepreneurship (Hjorth, 2003). The concept of transduction, emphasizing the process of individuating as the recursive interaction between individual and environment, enables a process-based and dynamic image of entrepreneurship which moves outside of the conventional popular image of an extraordinary individual orchestrating new forms of creative destruction. The objective of this paper is to point at the use and value of a biophilosophical analytical framework in entrepreneurship research. In doing so, the concept of transduction proposed by Simondon (1964/1992) is playing a central role as a concept enabling an understanding of the inherently dynamic nature of entrepreneurial activity.

This paper is structured as follows: First, the concept of entrepreneurship is discussed. Second, the concept of “open-world ontologies”, as suggested by Tsoukas (2005), and the tradition of vitalist thinking are introduced. Third, the bio-philosophical thinking of Simondon (1964/1992) is presented. Fourth, entrepreneurship is examined as a transductive process, illustrated by the work of Thomas Alva Edison and Louis Pasteur. Finally, some implications for entrepreneurship research are discussed.

Images of the entrepreneur

The *locus classicus* for the concept of entrepreneurship and the entrepreneur is Schumpeter's (1939, p. 100) groundbreaking work in economics. In *Business Cycles* (published in 1939), Schumpeter (1939, p. 100) offers two central definitions: “For actions which consists of carrying out innovations we reserve the term Enterprise; the individuals

who carry them out we call Entrepreneurs”. References to Schumpeter's (1939, p. 100) *oeuvre* constitute the staple diet of the entrepreneurship discourse; especially the idea of “creative destruction”, that of the entrepreneur being an irresistible force overturning the predominant social order and its beliefs, has captured the imagination of equally popular management writers and more seasoned entrepreneurship researchers. In the contemporary discourse on entrepreneurship, the entrepreneur is a sacred figure, a social actor who carries within the potential to make new world orders appear (McCarthy, 2000; Ogbor, 2000; Sørensen, 2008). Each and every one of us might be a Bill Gates, an Ingvar Kamprad or a Richard Branson *in potentia*. Politicians cherish the entrepreneur as a promising solution to unemployment concerns and a potential contributor to economic growth, and they do so for good reasons—Aldrich (2005, p. 451) reports that, of the 11.2 million new jobs created in the USA between 1992 and 1996, about 70% were created by new organizations. Yet, as Armstrong (2001, p. 534) contends, “[t]he figure of the entrepreneur serves as a *deus ex machina* within enterprise ideology”.

It is outside the scope of this paper to review the diverse and multifaceted entrepreneurship literature (for an overview, see Aldrich, 2005; Cooper, 2003; Hjorth, Johannison, & Stayaert, 2003), but some attempts to point to the breadth of the literature may be permitted. Commentators regularly emphasize the diversity of the field (Acs & Audretsch, 2003; Aldrich, 2005; Gartner, 2004; Hjorth & Stayaert, 2004); the academic literature on entrepreneurship is broad and includes a variety of perspectives and knowledge interests. Today, many business schools have chaired professorships in entrepreneurship and run entrepreneurship education programmes. A long list of journals including the *American Journal of Small Business* (renamed *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* in 1988), the *Journal of Business Venturing*, the *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, and *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* all publish research into entrepreneurship and address theoretical matters. Concepts like strategic entrepreneurship (Hitt, Ireland, Camp, & Sexton, 2001), institutional entrepreneurship (Garud, Jain, & Kumaraswamy, 2002), cultural entrepreneurship (Loundsbury & Glynn, 2001), and social entrepreneurship are used to capture the many forms and institutional settings wherein entrepreneurial activities take place. More recently, new theoretical orientations such as feminist theory (Jonsson Ahl, 2002; Petterson, 2004), narrative and discourse analyses (Hjorth & Stayaert, 2004; O'Connor, 2004; Pitt, 1998), and poststructuralist thinking (Hjorth, 2003; Jones & Spicer, 2005) have been invoked in entrepreneurship research. Some entrepreneurship researchers call for a more integrated and coherent theoretical perspective or for research agendas, while others (e.g. Hjorth, 2003; Stayaert & Hjorth, 2003) welcome a diverse and broad field of research. On the whole, the research into entrepreneurship is just as diverse, multifaceted, and multidisciplinary as any other field in organization theory. Entrepreneurship discourse addresses a number of epistemological and ontological concerns which it shares with a biophilosophical framework. First, the constitution of the entrepreneur, or the entrepreneurial firm or region, is a problem concerning the establishment

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