A HEIDEGGERIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CARE AND TECHNIQUE IN MANAGEMENT, NURSING AND LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between care and technique in management from the perspective of Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology as elaborated by Benner and Wrubel in their work: The Primacy of Caring: Stress and Coping in Health and Illness (1989). In this work they compare the role of technique and caring in nursing from a Heideggerian perspective claiming that in effective nursing care underpins technique, is the basis for noticing problems and for setting up coping options for responding to problems. Based on the views of Henry Mintzberg this paper shows how the function of care as being the basis for noting and setting up coping options is essential to management and thus that caring needs to underpin technique in developing effective management practices.

Keywords: Heidegger, care, technique, managing, worry, resolve

There is a basis for comparing the way of being of nurses and managers than can help to highlight the importance of a Heideggerian notion of care for management as a practice. This is a comparison that emerges out of a work on nursing by Benner and Wrubel (1989) where they compare a technically based approach to a caring approach to nursing. Their book is written from the perspective of Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology as developed in Being and Time (1985). While not wanting to undermine or underestimate the value of technique to nursing, they do not want to reduce nursing to a technique, arguing that science of nursing needs to be underpinned by an appreciation of nursing as a form of caring anchored in practical coping. On Heideggerian grounds, they maintain that an instrumentalist approach that does not recognise the caring and practical coping underpinning of nursing, leads to lack of nursing effectiveness and that excellence or good nursing practice is grounded in caring.

In this paper I would like to apply this approach to management. While it is the case that management may, like nursing rely on techniques, to reduce management to a set of techniques is to render it ineffective. Managers need to develop the practice of caring in order to be effective in their work. For, as will be demonstrated in this paper, in terms of their Heideggerian perspective, Benner and Wrubel maintain, it is caring that sets up what counts as coping effectively in a situation. Caring enables
nurses or manager to notice what needs to be done as well as to set up the set of coping options that are needed to deal with the situation in ways that either contain or open up new possibilities in the situation. Knowledge of technique (or theory for that matter) on its own neither sets up what counts as a concern, problem or issue to be dealt with nor does it disclose how to cope with this issue. Once an issue has been identified through care-full attunement, it may be that a manager may choose a specific technique or “tool” (or theoretical frame) to cope with the situation. But neither the caring attunement nor the concerned coping are technical issues. They are, from Benner and Wrubel’s Heideggerian perspective, competencies for effectiveness and excellence in being a professional.

As Henry Mintzberg (2004) claims it is the kind of competence implied in practical coping that is essential to management but is not an issue addressed in the education of managers at business schools. Mintzberg claims that, influenced by MBA education, management has been reduced to a calculative and disengaged analytic activity which precludes managers from developing the art of appreciating how to notice (2004:39) a problem let alone cope effectively with it. While he does stress the importance of engaged leadership (2004:79), he does not develop the dimension of engagement that will enable a manager to notice what problems are worth focusing on. Benner and Wrubel argue that it is the notion of a caring attunement that enables a nurse or manager to notice a problem and that nursing and management education ought to be concerned with the development not only of technique but of a caring attunement.

There is actually a synergy between Benner and Wruble’s view of nursing on the one hand and Mintzberg’s view of management on the other. In this paper I will set them into dialogue with each other in a way that allows me to bring out the significance of Benner and Wrubel’s Heideggerian analysis of care as practical coping for management. For while Mintzberg does identity the fact that managers are not taught the art of noticing a problem, he does not offer a framework within which to develop the art of noticing and developing effective ways of coping with the problem.

In terms of the Heideggerian perspective of Wrubel and Benner as set out in their work The Primacy of caring: Stress and Coping in Health and Illness (1989) I will be arguing that the Heideggerian
concept of caring is the basis of noticing and that management is not primarily a technical activity but a way of coping centred in the activity of caring. The specific claim that I want to make is not for more or less caring managers as though caring is something external to management in a way that can be added or subtracted from it. Rather, I wish to argue that just as caring is part of the way of being of nursing, so caring is part of the phenomenon or way of being of management – so much so that to speak about a “caring manager” amounts to a redundancy or tautology. For to speak about a caring manager, is to speak about a caring carer. To use an old fashioned metaphysical language, caring is essential to the definition of the phenomenon of management. We cannot speak about management without speaking about caring.

Mintzberg’s book Managers: Not MBA’s (2004) is a critique of the one dimensional nature of most management education. Mintzberg maintains that while management schools emphasise the development of problem solving analysis and skills, they do not give much attention to learning how to identify problems in the first place. In the classroom, the problem is given in advance by the teacher or lecturer. The student then sets about solving the already formulated problem. However, Mintzberg maintains that in the messiness of the everyday reality of management experience, problems do not present themselves as already formulated. Rather in everyday reality, a manager often needs to become attuned to the fact that there is a problem before they can even begin to formulate what the problem is, let alone begin to solve it.

For Mintzberg identifying problems is not only a concern with management education. It is also a problem with management practice. For he maintains that a calculative style of management practice is based on principles of detachment and disengagement from a situation or context. In the disengagement of detachment, calculative managers apply methods that are insensitive to the nuances of context. Only that which shows up in terms of the method is deemed to count as a problem worthy of being analysed and strategized. Anything that does not show up in terms of the method is not worthy of being considered. Generally this means that anything that does not show up as being measurable is not worth considering in a calculative style of analysis – in fact is not available to be considered. He gives Robert Strange McNamara’s method of strategic analysis during the Vietnam
War as an example of a manager who because of his style of calculative management could not even begin to identify major dimensions of problems in the Vietnam War. Only that which could be processed by his calculative style of analysis could count as information worthy of being considered. Anything that was not measureable, anything that was, in management terms “soft” was seen as irrelevant and thus not worth taking into account in developing a strategy for the Vietnam War. According to Mintzberg, the United States of America paid a heavy price for McNamara’s detached and disengaged style of management by calculative method.

Mintzberg is clear in pointing out that he is using the case of McNamara as an example of a practice that is widespread in strategic management, namely the practice of reducing strategic management to a method that is abstracted from the experience to which it is providing direction, that regardless of the specificity and context of the experience applies a one size fits all method of strategic “analysis” to the experience and that only that which fits in with the frame of the method is considered as useful information for processing and consideration.

In opposition to the dominance of this calculative style of management, Mintzberg suggests that managers need to be attuned through a background of engagement in situations, that it is through being engaged in situations that managers experience the importance of dimensions of context such as mood and morale, threats and opportunities and that these contextual factors are central to identify, dealing with and reflecting on one’s way of dealing with a problem. Although not taken from Mintzberg an interesting example of this is Field Marshal Rommel’s comments on his practice of strategic management during the Second World War. As he says, he needed to develop what he called eine “fingerspitzengefühl,” a feeling in his finger tips for the enemy as the basis upon which to identify the problem and develop his strategies to deal with the problem.

What Mintzberg fails to clarify is that dimension of engagement which enables a manager to identify and clarify a problem such that it can be solved or worked on. It is at this point that I would like to turn to Benner and Wrubel’s Heideggerian notion of care. Care is, from their perspective central to engagement. But more specifically, as I shall elaborate, it is care that attunes a manager to a concern.
It is care that sets the alarm bells ringing such that a manager begins to notice that there is a problem that needs to be clarified and defined as an essential part of problem solving or active coping. As they put it: “Caring places the person in a situation in such a way that certain things show up as relevant.” (1989: 4) For them caring is the basis of noticing. They give the example of a mother with a new born baby: “A common place example is a mother’s awareness that her baby is crying. It is an everyday occurrence for someone other than the mother, to comment, ‘Is the baby crying? I didn’t hear anything.’” (1989: 87)

Because the mother is situated within the concern, she hears the baby crying whereas someone who has nothing at stake in the baby does even notice it is crying and thus does not notice that there is a problem to be dealt with. The implication of their statement is that someone who does not care does not notice and that noticing is always in relation to what we care about. Indeed they say that everyone has the “equivalent of many crying babies.” Everyone has concerns through which the world is revealed to them and through which they notice a problem that needs to be worked upon. Through care and concern “signs that are insignificant to others are filled with significance for us.” (1989: 87)

For Benner and Wrubel such caring is not itself a technique or method of calibration or calculation but is, following the work of Heidegger, a fundamental way of being human. Caring is the fundamental way in which the human being is attuned to the world. As Heidegger says: “We do not choose this term (care) because Da-sein (or the human being) is initially economical and practical … but because because the being of Da-sein is to be made visible as care.” Continuing, Heidegger maintains that the human being “has priority as care.” (1985: 53-54)

In order to clarify the relationship between technique and care in nursing, Wrubel and Benner again use the example of a mother and her relationship to techniques of mothering. They claim that it is not good enough for a mother to have learnt skills of effective mothering without this being underpinned by care: “Parenting techniques do not work unless a basic level of attachment and caring exists. In fact, parenting techniques are not even useful or possible unless the parent is already engaged in the parenting situation through caring.”
Turning their example into a principle Benner and Wrubel state that “In the best nursing practice, science sand technology are tools for caring.” (1985: 372) This point seems to have been forgotten in much management and management education that focus on techniques as an end in themselves. Techniques are useful when they are situated in a context of care. Rather than a blind or indiscriminate application of technique – as was the case with Mintzberg’s disengaged and detached strategic manager -- it is the context of caring that determines which techniques are appropriate in which situation. Once we care, we can discern which technique to apply – or for that matter what method of strategic analysis to apply.

Central to care from the Heideggerian perspective of Benner and Wrubel is that the human being is characterised as a being for whom things “matter.” (1989:1) “Mattering” is one of the bases for the distinction between human beings and machines in Heidegger’s thought. Things do not matter for machines. While it is the case that things do not matter for a computer or any other machine, there is no none mattering human being. What matters may differ from human to human – and from profession to profession and level of management to level of management -- but humans are always in some state of being concerned or having things matter.

As Benner and Wrubel notice and indeed as Max van Manen, the phenomenological educator, before them claimed, one of the dominant moods of mattering and care is a sense of stress or worry. It is in the mood of concern of worrying that the alarm bells go off such that concerns are noticed and worked with. Once again in the context of the relationship between parent and child Van Manen expresses the relationship between care and worry by saying that: “worry is the active ingredient of parental attentiveness.” Indeed he goes onto maintain that “Worry—rather than duty or obligation—keeps us in touch with the one for whom we care. Worry is the spiritual glue that keeps the mother or father affixed to the life of their child.” (2002:266)

An example of the power of worry in being attentive in an organisational context is given by Andrew Grove in his reflections on his own leadership style in which he says that it was his sense of worry that keeps him attentive to problems, threats and opportunities arising in work based situations: “I
worry about products getting screwed up, and I worry about products getting introduced prematurely. I worry about factories not performing well, and I worry about having too many factories. I worry about hiring the right people, and I worry about morale slacking off. …” (1996:3)

Why is worry so important? For Grove, it is his sense of worry that allows him to be constantly scanning his environment to see what is occurring: “It is fear that makes me scan … searching for problems: news of disgruntled customers, potential slippage’s … Simply put, fear can be the opposite of complacency. Complacency often afflicts precisely those who have been the most successful.” (1996: 118)

Of course not all worry is productive. It can be paralysing. Too much worry, as Freud and other psychotherapists can tell us, leads to a numbing of our attunement. This point is reiterated by Grove who says that an environment of excessive and uncontrolled fear will “cut off the flow of bad news from the periphery.” And as we have seen too little worry leads to complacency.

But he who knows how to worry correctly is alive to that which is taken for granted in the complacency of routine. To be able to worry appropriately is a virtue and a sign of practical intelligence. As Kierkegaard puts it: “Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate.” (1980) For who ever has learnt to be anxious in the right way is not bogged down by threats but always sees possibilities in them.

Grove believes that it is his ability to worry appropriately that allows him to see beyond the conventions of the day. It is worry that allows him to be attuned to new possibilities for Intel. For worry shakes him out of the complacency of conventions and encourages a reflective relationship to the situation we are in: “‘If we fear that someday, any day, some development somewhere in our environment will change the rules of the game, our associates will sense and share that dread. They will be on the lookout. They will constantly be scanning their radar screens.” (1996:117)

For Benner and Wrubel care is not only central to noticing a problem or concern, it is also central to coping with the problem or concern. As they claim, it is care that suggests the coping options that are available in any particular situation. As they say, “caring is the essential requisite for all coping.”
(1989: 2) Central to enabling the proactive coping options to emerge out of care is a willingness on the part of the nurse to listen to the worry that they are experiencing. Too often a refusal or unwillingness to listen to the worry cuts a person off from a situation in ways that do not set up coping options but perpetuate and even intensify a sense of panic that underpinned the concern in the first place. Furthermore this worry is always situated rather than detached. It is a mood experienced by the nurse in situation.

Benner and Wrubel give the example of a nurse by the name of Mary learning a caring practice and then using this caring practice to not only act effectively but to contain and open up new possibilities for dealing proactively with a highly explosive interpersonal situation. Mary found herself in a situation in which she was preparing a patient for chemotherapy and radiotherapy by giving him clear and detailed technical instructions but in a highly detached and disengaged way. The patient feels this and says to her: “You are doing an OK job Mary, but I can tell that every time you walk in the door you are walking out.” (1989: 14)

The feedback from the patient shocked Mary. However, rather than reacting to and blaming the “messenger,” the patient for being rude, she listened to the way in which she was shocked and was able and willing to perceive and realise that she was not emotionally and existentially present in the situation. By staying with her sense of shock, she was willing to realise that she was not “being there” in a way that enabled her to be effective in her nursing practice. On its own this opened up a new way of being with her patients for Mary; one in which she was open to them as more than patients, as people. It also opened up for her a way dealing with patients as people rather than as “bodies.”

What she learnt through this experience was the power of being present in a situation so much so that it became a proactive way of coping in other situations. In order to demonstrate the power of this new found coping skill Mary gives an example of a situation in which another patient who was in a highly aroused emotional state was causing a sense of panic in the ward. In their panic the nurses were not willing to listen to or hear the concerns that the patient was expressing through his yelling. And so the more they panicked the worse the situation became. However, rather, than succumbing to panic, like
the other nursing staff, Mary was able to listen to the concerns that were at the heart of the patients agitation in such a way that they could turn together to deal with what was agitating him: “He was yelling that he wanted everything packed up. I felt a panic among the staff. It was a very disruptive outburst, and sometimes it is hard to say what is really going on. It was apparent to me that he wanted to communicate. I went into his room and he yelled at me: ‘Are you listening?’ I said yes pretty calmly, and he began crying softly and talking. He knew I was listening.” (1989:15) Once the patient felt that he had Mary’s attention they worked together on the best way of dealing with his situation.

Because of what she learnt in the first situation, Benner and Wrubel point out that in the face of the tension and uncertainty of this second situation Mary felt that she “no longer need[ed] to run away.” (1989: 15) Mary was able to stay calm in a worrying and uncertain situation – one which she experienced as “a very disruptive outburst.” It is in the Heideggerian terms of Benner and Wrubel, the very willingness to listen in moments in which we feel under threat that is central to effective coping. The way in which we are able to “dwell” (1971) in the tension of pressure opens up the coping opportunities in the situation. Rather than reacting to the yelling of the patient, Mary was able to listen to the meaning being expressed when being yelled at. This was in spite of the fact that at times she felt the uncertainty of being able to “say what is really going on.” (1989:15) Through being able to dwell in the uncertainty of the stressful situation, she was able to hear the patient’s concerns expressed in his yelling. And the patient felt that his concerns were being heard.

By being able to stay with the stress of an event, coping options for that event disclosed themselves for Mary. As Benner and Wrubel put it: “Relationships, things, events, and projects do not show up as stressful unless they matter. If the person does not care, an event cannot be stressful. But the nature of caring is such that it also sets up what coping options are available and acceptable to the person.” (1989: 1)

It is worry that reveals a situation as mattering and it is worry that reveals the coping options in a situation. This is a point that Heidegger makes explicitly in quoting the poetry of Holderlin: “But where danger is, grows The saving power also.” (27:1954) What Heidegger is saying is that the
coping options – the saving power – reveal themselves in being able to stay with uncertainty, stress or anxiety of a situation with which we are concerned. It is important to note that Heidegger’s interpretation of Holderlin is claiming that the danger needs to be apprehended as the danger. This means being able to embrace or “dwell” (1971) in the danger rather than reacting to the danger. To embrace the danger means to allow it in a way that one is not dominated by it but can turn it into an opportunity for insight. It is a moment of “dwelling” in the “eye of the storm.” This is an important point in psychotherapy in general; providing a “dwelling” space for a client or patient to bring the anxiety, panic or depression to the surface in such a way as to work with the meaning of the phenomenon such that new possibilities for living are opened up for the patient or client. In the same way Mary was able to stay with panic in the situation such that it opened her up to the anguish of the patient in a way that they could deal with it together.

Heidegger calls the willingness to stay with rather than react to the danger “resolve.” (1985: 277) In a paradoxical sense Heideggerian resolve is the power of powerlessness in a situation of danger or stress. Mary cannot control the situation just as she pleases. Neither she nor the nurses can instruct the patient to calm down or simply put him in his place. They need to – and Mary does indeed – let go of controlling the patient in order to cope effectively with the situation. She needs to experience the power of being able to let go of being in charge of the situation in order to listen to being yelled at such that she can cope proactively in the situation. Her coping options are opened up by allowing herself to be yelled at. Her authority, vision, direction in the situation emerges out of being able to embrace her powerlessness to have direct control over the situation. Through resolve she is able to enable the situation to be coped with.

In his leadership practice at Intel, Andrew Grove expresses the paradox of resolve in another way; by saying that a manager needs to learn to know when to allow chaos to reign and when to rein chaos in. Allowing chaos in requires the power of powerlessness; the power, in the face of uncertainty, to let things go so that new possibilities begin to emerge. Once these new possibilities have begun to emerge, the leader then needs to provide direction in the situation: “Much as management has been devoted to making and keeping order in the company, at times of [fundamental change] they must
become more tolerant of the new and the different. Only stepping out of the old ruts will bring new insights. The operating phrase should be: ‘Let chaos reign!’ Not that chaos is good in general. … But the old order won’t give way to the new without a phase of experimentation and chaos in between.” (1996:130)

It is worth repeating that for Grove being able to withstand anxiety is central to both noticing what is at stake and opening new options for coping in the situation. The psychoanalyst, Frank Barron, offers another angle on the way in which coping options emerge out of allowing worrying to occur in stressful situations: “The truly creative individual stands ready to abandon old classifications and to acknowledge that life … is rich with possibilities. To him, disorder offers the potentiality of order. … The creative individual not only respects the [unknown] in himself, but courts it as the most promising source of novelty. … They have more contact than most people do with the life of the … imagination. … The self is strongest when it can regress (admit primitive fantasies, naïve ideas, tabooed impulses into consciousness and behaviour), and yet return to a high degree of rationality and self-criticism. … The strong self realises that it can afford to allow regression, because it is secure in the knowledge that it can correct itself.” (1958:163)

According to Barron creative people have the resolve to be able to let go of their anxieties and stay or dwell within the unknown. They are not afraid to be unable for times to not “manage” or pigeon hole their emotions. Indeed, they are strong enough to let go of managing them; not as an end in itself but for the sake of a qualitatively different form of being in touch or attuned. By allowing confusion to reign, they can see new possibilities. Grove espouses the same belief. As we have seen, he talks about managers being able to allow chaos to reign in times of crisis and that allowing chaos to reign in times of crisis allows for the emergence of new possibilities.

According to Benner and Wrubel, caring resolve is a human competence “required for expert human practice.” It is linked to expertise in human practice because it allows for both effectiveness and excellence in performance. The case of Mary demonstrates how being able to stay in the uncertainty of a stressful situation allows not only for noticing or presence of mind but for effective coping with
the situation. She managed the people and the situation in the ward very effectively on the basis of her
care for the situation. In a more general way, Andrew Grove in his book *Only The Paranoid Survive*
demonstrates how excellence is achieved by being able to cope, to open up new ways of doing things
by dealing with the anxiety of dwelling in what he calls the “valley of death.” For as he describes in
his latter book, it was by being able to absorb the possibility of Intel’s demise that he opened up new
products and practices for Intel.

In this way management is more than a calculative or technique based activity. It is an activity
underpinned by a caring attunement, an attunement that is able to notice the alarm bells ringing in a
situation, to embrace the uncertainty in those alarm bells and to generate possibilities for action that
enable effective coping with those alarm bells. It is through caring attunement that the relevant
techniques for coping with a situation are determined in the first place. The blind application of
techniques or methods gives rise not only to what Mintzberg calls the “rule of the tool” but to a
contextual insensitivity and to a lack of presence in situation. In order to enable managers to
developing the competencies of noticing and developing coping options, learning of techniques and
methods for management need to be situated within the context of developing a caring attunement.

Furthermore seeing caring as essential to management, places ethics at the heart of management. For
from the Heideggerian perspective, what we care about reveals what we value. Our values emerge not
through rational debate about what is right or wrong but about understanding what matters to us. By
understanding what matters to us, we understand what we value. And so this Heideggerian framework
offers us access to our values through an appreciation of our attunement. Furthermore, as already
noted for van Manen, caring is essential to ethical attunement – it precedes and makes duty and
obligation possible. Duty and obligation are both underpinned by a way of being concerned. This
point is reinforced by Benner and Wrubel who claim that caring is the basis of moral ethical practices
such as altruism. (1989: 367) No matter what one’s ethics or morality happen to be, caring is the
existential attunement underpinning an ethical way of being.
Bibliography


