Should Environmental Concern Pay Off? A Heideggerian Perspective

Mollie Painter-Morland
Nottingham Trent University, UK

René ten Bos
Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands

Abstract
Organizations often motivate their environmental efforts by arguing that ‘good ethics is good business’. Though instrumental arguments of this nature put environmental concerns firmly on the corporate agenda, it comes at a price. Such reasoning relies on age-old fact-value distinctions, from which perspective rational subjects must gather the facts on how to treat the environment as a useful object. According to this logic, means-to-an-end relationships are the primary motivation for all action. Drawing on the insights of Martin Heidegger, we show how the preoccupation with gathering facts to justify environmental initiatives on the basis of 'efficiency' impoverishes our thinking about what is essential to our existence. Heidegger’s thinking allows us to appreciate how our belonging to a particular ethos orientates us in the world in meaningful ways. We therefore advocate an approach to organizational environmentalism that goes beyond ‘the business case’, without appealing to abstract normative principles. This approach also provides new perspectives on what notions such as ‘ecological citizenship’ may entail.

Keywords
CSR, ecological citizenship, environment, ethics, Heidegger, relationality

Introduction
In this article we challenge the field of organization studies to consider whether it is appropriate to ‘do the right thing’ predominantly because it ‘pays’ to do so. This seems to be a cross-cutting issue within various fields such as business ethics, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and sustainability, which is vigorously debated from a number of distinct, but interrelated perspectives. We
believe that organization studies can benefit from evaluating the arguments that have emerged. More importantly, moving beyond the divide between normative or instrumental perspectives may offer organization theorists the opportunity to seek an alternative approach to environmentalism. In what follows, we critique the instrumental views that now predominate, yet we do not reach after the overtly normative alternative. Instead, we believe notions such as ‘ecological citizenship’ should be infused with an understanding of our embeddedness within and belonging to our environment – an insight that has distinct implications for organization studies.

Within the field of business ethics, scholars have debated whether a normative approach to stakeholder theory should replace, supplement, or converge with an instrumental approach (Donaldson, 1999; Freeman, 1999; Jones & Wicks, 1999). CSR scholars articulated the limitations of an instrumental approach, and reiterated the need for a normative approach (McWilliams & Siegel, 2000; Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Orlitsky, Schmidt, & Rynes, 2003; Perrini, Russo, Tencati, & Vurro, 2009; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Though the instrumental benefit of some courses of action can indeed be a source of normative justification, instrumentalist motivations as such do not seem to carry enough ‘moral weight’. In fact, it ‘begs the deeper question of why those outcomes themselves are to be sought’ (Margolis & Walsh, 2003, p. 283). A further question relates to the way in which instrumental orientations make rigorous moral questioning impossible. Critics of corporate sustainability discourses have for instance highlighted the way in which ‘the business case’ for sustainability has replaced the moral imperatives inherent in sustainable development (Banerjee, 2003; Lo & Sheu, 2007).

This article’s contribution lies at the interface of these long-standing debates. We analyze instrumentalist attempts at providing assurances that environmentally friendly practices will eventually ‘pay off’ in terms of financial gains (Arnold, 2008), our ultimate survival as a human species (Newton, 2003), or the organization’s image as a good citizen or political agent (Crane, Matten, & Moon, 2004; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). We also explore attempts at procuring stronger forms of ‘normative justification’ for environmentalism. Some have argued that corporations have certain social contract duties (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994), while others have made appeals to deontological principles (Hoffman, 2000; Roulet & Shymko, 2012). We consider these possibilities, and conclude that even these normative arguments have their limitations, the roots of which lie in the epistemological assumptions that they share with instrumentalist approaches.

Environmentalist advocacy is particularly well-suited to illustrate the problems that emerge from the epistemological assumptions informing ethical discourse. We hope to show that it implicitly relies on three distinct, though related assumptions. Some forms of advocacy are predicated on an implicit distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘values’. Others separate the ‘subject’ of actions, in this case corporations, from the ‘object’ of action, in this case the ‘environment’. Another prominent trend is to insist that some principles are ‘ends-in-themselves’ (Bowie, 1999) and as such distinct from ‘means’. In order to get beyond the limitations that these approaches present, we will draw on Heidegger who offers, we argue, not only a way of framing a critique of these approaches, but also gestures towards an alternative. Our choice to bring in Heidegger is perhaps surprising, since he has always resisted articulating a formalized ethics (Heidegger, 1977 [1947], p. 231; see also: Reedy & Learmonth, 2011, p. 120) and he has, perhaps notoriously, eschewed talking about values (Heidegger, 1984, p. 102). If we do nonetheless insist on some sort of normativity in Heidegger’s work, it is related to what Harman (2010, p. 10) has referred to as his ‘ruthless critique’ of a way of thinking that renders the world into mere ‘stuff’, mere ‘instrument’, or mere ‘present-at-hand’ (Vorhandenes). This instrumental way of thinking, we will see, undergirds not only environmental advocacy, but also business ethics and, indeed, organization studies as such. A Heideggerian critique of these strategies then allows us to explore possible alternatives. In the last part of the article
we argue that in order to evade epistemological pitfalls, something more profound than morality might be required. Heidegger’s insights, both in terms of what it warns against, and what it gestures towards, allow us to go beyond the business case, towards modes of living and organizing that enable responsible living and working.

An Epistemological Typology of Environmentalist Advocacy

*Narrow instrumentalism as predicated on the ‘fact’ versus ‘value’ distinction*

Environmental advocacy is often based on the general contention that ‘good ethics is good business’. Such instrumental reasoning is evident in the rationale that corporate executives, like Joanna Yarrow, the IKEA head of sustainability in Great-Britain, offer for the large sums of money their corporations spent on sustainability initiatives (Griffith, 2013). She makes it clear that it should not be seen as the logical outcome of some noble mission: ‘It’s a considerable investment but we’re not just doing it out of altruism, there’s a strong business case there as well.’ This instrumental point of view is echoed in academic scholarship. In recent years, many business ethicists and sustainability advocates have been preoccupied with establishing the relationship between an organization’s social and environmental concerns (also referred to as ‘non-financial performance’) and its financial performance. Freeman, Pierce, and Dodd (2000) argue that the business model that most corporations work with can and should be rethought considerably if businesses want to maintain long-term viability and profitability. However, a definitive relationship between ‘non-financial’ and ‘financial’ performance is yet to be demonstrated. As Paine (2000, p. 319) observed more than a decade ago, the relationship between ethics and economics has been highly variable, to say the least. Her conclusion still holds true. In more recent publications, the ambiguous relationship between ‘sustainable’ business practices and financial performance has been underscored as well (Becchetti & Ciciretti, 2009; De Schutter, 2008; Valor, 2008). In spite of all these doubts, there are still many scholars who argue for a positive relationship between the two (Allouche & Larocche, 2005; Lo & Sheu, 2007; Margolis & Walsh, 2000; Orlitsky et al., 2003; Tsoutsoura, 2004; Verschoor, 1999, 2004, 2005; Waddock & Graves, 1999). McWilliams and Siegel (2000), however, raise questions regarding the methodology of scholars who find a positive correlation. Another problem is that some lingering questions remain about the validity and the diversity of measures used to assess social performance. Margolis and Walsh’s (2003) conclusion was that the relationship between corporate sustainability and corporate financial performance remains complex, ambiguous and nuanced. They also claim that there is no uniform understanding among researchers about what constitutes ‘financial results’.

There have, however, been attempts to show how various aspects of a company’s value are influenced by sustainability-related performance. Here we think, for example, of the so-called MVA (Market Value Added) scores of corporations. Research done by Verschoor (1999, p. 411) has indicated that companies with an explicit commitment to sustainability have better MVA scores than those without such commitments. We also think of Arnold (2008) who has attempted to link a company’s performance in the area of sustainability to other important drivers of company value such as sales growth or reduced tax rates. Though one may find it encouraging that much of the literature (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Godfrey, Merrill, & Hansen, 2009) indicates that there is some sort of positive relationship between ‘sustainability’ and ‘business’, all of the studies mentioned here are underpinned by a belief that the ‘facts’ will show us what is of ‘value’.

Though some believe that the ‘facts’ of the business case converge with the moral case (Donaldson, 1999), others are more skeptical regarding the very idea that there are values hidden behind these facts. Indeed, this has led to the concern that ‘sustainability’ discourses might be
morally vacuous (Banerjee, 2002, 2003, 2008; Harvey, 1996). Could it be, for example, that the focus on ‘facts’ is just a device to cloak certain corporate ideologies? Banerjee has claimed that the discourse on ‘sustainable development’ has been hijacked by the more general term ‘sustainability’, which according to him still places a distinct emphasis on the well-being of the corporation:

Corporate discourses on sustainability produce an elision that displaces the focus from global planetary sustainability to sustaining the corporation through ‘growth opportunities’. (Banerjee, 2008, p. 66)

Scherer and Palazzo (2007, p. 1100) are also critical of the positivist assumptions that inform CSR research. Since this research is focused on establishing the ‘factual’ value of CSR, it lacks ethical justification, and effectively makes itself available as an ideological tool. Even in this criticism, however, the very distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘values’ remains uncontested. The preoccupation with this distinction lies at the heart of what Freeman (1984) calls the ‘separation thesis’, i.e. the idea that discourses about business can be separated from ethical discourses. Freeman (1984, p. 234) rightly insists that we need to abandon the idea that something like value-free ‘facts’ exist, because if we do, the need to bridge the normative and the descriptive with all sorts of sophisticated arguments also disappears. The question, however, remains whether a rejection of the separation thesis provides sufficient grounds for the idea that business organizations have moral duties (Roulet & Shymko, 2012). To answer this question, we have to investigate the role they play in society.

**Corporations as ethical ‘subjects’ caring for the environment as ‘object’**

Margolis and Walsh (2003) draw our attention to the complexity of the challenge that business organizations face when they assume responsibility for alleviating human suffering and procuring human flourishing. Because business organizations are still in essence defined as a nexus of contracts, they have to deal with a number of conflicting duties: meeting shareholders’ expectations of profit and alleviating the world’s suffering do not necessarily sit comfortably together. Business leaders are always vulnerable to the charge that they misallocate shareholders’ resources when they address social, environmental or other ethical concerns. Margolis and Walsh (2003, p. 290) argue for a normative approach, both in a social-scientific (outcomes-based) sense and in a philosophical (principle-based) sense. They are therefore implicitly perpetuating the ‘fact-versus-value’ distinction. In addition, they cast ‘corporations’ as the ‘subject’ or ‘agent’ of responsible action. The basic argument is that the duty of business organizations to alleviate suffering and to procure human flourishing offers a stronger moral rationale, which would allow companies to go beyond seeking the ‘business case’. At face value, this attempt to ground business conduct in something other than mere financial utility is admirable. But one could also argue that corporations play these roles simply because it is in their interest to do so, for example, because they are legally bound, or want to exploit the advantages of the commons. Just like individual citizens, corporations take part in the commons for protection, social services and other advantages, most important of which is their license to operate. As Scherer and Palazzo (2011, p. 907) point out, corporations have to find new ways to maintain their license to operate in the face of the changing institutional context of global governance, which has led to the erosion of the frameworks of law and moral custom. In the process, however, new expectations emerged regarding corporations environmental responsibilities, leading to conceptual frameworks such as NCE, or ‘new corporate environmentalism’ (Jermier, Forbes, Benn, & Orsato, 2006).

Crane, Matten, and Moon (2008, p. 372) point out that much of the contemporary discourse about ecological citizenship is clearly shaped by the enlightenment project of political rights and liberalism. Corporations have also played an important role in spreading these Western notions of
liberal citizenship rights globally. In the process, however, an understanding of ecological citizenship that valorizes spatial and community connectedness to a specific physical place, has been lost. Corporations have supplanted local conceptions of communal property rights with individualist ones, meanwhile destroying the ecological connectedness of local communities (Crane, Matten, & Moon, 2008, p. 378). Crane, Matten, and Moon (2008, p. 376) also explore understanding ecological citizenship as a non-territorial obligation. Business organizations are thereby compelled to acknowledge and embrace new non-territorial obligations that are based on a ‘citizenship of strangers’. Such obligations are not fixed, but are based on the concrete material impact of corporations, i.e. their ecological ‘footprint’.

Though Crane, Matten, and Moon (2008) attempt to get us beyond technical calculations, and even redress the ‘distancing’ that characterize corporations’ relationship to the environment, ecological citizenship may paradoxically lead us back to it. The notion of ecological citizenship, in other words, might be preoccupied with a desire to quantify the impact of business organizations on the environment, to negotiate its costs, and to provide compensation whenever that is due – all of which serves to maintain an arms-length relation towards the environment. Instead of establishing a connectedness between corporations and the environment, it maintains the idea that corporations are acting ‘subjects’, who have particular obligations towards the environment as an ‘object’. Not fulfilling these obligations will finally have repercussions for them.

Environmentalists therefore tend to advocate strict regulations, environmental legislation and liability structures, which will legally oblige corporations to take the ‘environment’ into consideration (Newton, 2003, 2005). Here again, however, we see the underlying logic of a subject (‘the corporation’) considering an object (‘the environment’). Moreover, the fixation on rights and obligations can and often does lead to meaningless compliance (Painter-Morland, 2008). The consulting professions are especially guilty of advocating risk-aversion as a form of moral minimalism when advising their clients (Hoffman, 2000; Wei, 2003). Business ethicist Norman Bowie has even argued that, as far as environmentalism is concerned, legality is morality (Hoffman, 2014). His argument is based on the belief that the law reflects the moral minimum required of business organizations with respect to environmental considerations. Many scholars argue that business organizations implement ethics and compliance programs primarily in reaction to demands made by external stakeholders or regulatory regimes (Weaver, Trevino, & Cochran, 1999, p. 539).

Within a new world order, however, legal liability is not the last word on corporate responsibility. As Scherer and Palazzo (2011, p. 912) convincingly argue, the scope of CSR has expanded from strict liability to social connectedness. Within this context, the debate on corporate complicity has highlighted the need for a forward-looking concern for finding solutions rather than a retrospective preoccupation with identifying the guilty party. Though this may seem an encouraging development, we still see that social connectedness is defined in terms of complicity, which brings corporations to consider it a ‘strategic necessity’ and a ‘leadership challenge’ (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011, p. 914). Whether argued from the perspective of liability or complicity, instrumental motivations persist. Implicit in this attitude is the assumption that business organizations are agents, whose actions with respect to a non-human ‘object’ (the so-called environment) has to be carefully monitored and controlled to avoid damage to both the organization and its ‘objects’.

Implicit ‘means-end’ reasoning within environmentalist advocacy

Hoffman (2014) argues that a merely legalistic approach to ‘the environment’ cannot foster true moral concern. He sees this as a kind of bleak moral minimalism, which is unable to provide adequate guidance when ‘environmental’ considerations conflict with ‘human interest’. The underlying moral dilemmas can be extremely difficult to adjudicate. Hoffman (2014, p. 524) illustrates this
point with a case in which the protection of an old forest and a rare species of owl living in it comes at the price of many loggers’ jobs and other benefits for society. The problem in this and other cases is that it is impossible to weigh up the value of incommensurable goods, or decide between equally rational principles. It is a dilemma that cannot be solved by instrumental reasoning, because the various outcomes are incompatible. It is for this reason that Hoffman prefers to appeal to principles rather than rely on some form of legal or economic instrumentalism. Environmentalists who adopt this strategy usually attempt to formulate some sort of metaphysical justification for the supposed ‘inalienable rights’ of ‘the environment’.

However, Jones, Parker, and ten Bos (2005, pp. 42–43) question the use of principled argumentation in business ethics. They argue that business is concerned with technical matters and that it is inappropriate to apply, for example, Kantian moral principles to this domain. When this is done (e.g. Bowie, 1999), morality is rendered technical – something to which Kant would certainly have objected. The distinction commonly made between Kant’s deontological approach and more outcomes-based approaches is also disputed by Jones et al. (2005, p. 44). They argue that Kant’s deontological proposals are not indifferent to outcomes inasmuch as they are implicitly predicated on certain rationally conceived ideal end-states. These rational end-states do not reflect some sort of timeless, universal consensus but are essentially based on the situated Enlightenment worldview of 18th century European men.

Universal principles, be they Kantian or Rawlsian, are derived from what Scherer and Palazzo (2007) call ‘monological reasoning’. This occurs when a specific theorist assumes consent to a hypothetical agreement because it is in his or her rational interest to do so. Rawlsian justice-principles, for instance, are supposed to be formulated in an unbiased way. However, they are ultimately formulated to produce certain rationally conceived ideal end-states, to which universal consensus is simply assumed. The point is that ‘justice as fairness’ principles only resonate inasmuch as they serve to produce or perpetuate the ideal end-states to which particular situated individuals and groups implicitly subscribe.

Environmentalists often appeal to the notion of ‘rights’ in their advocacy. According to Thiele (1995, p. 171) these appeals are usually couched in either ‘biocentric’ or ‘sociocentric’ terms. Biocentrists argue that the ‘natural environment’ should enjoy the same rights as human beings. Thiele argues that this approach renders the ‘natural world’ identical to the so-called ‘human world’. It cannot accommodate ways of being that do not correspond to the way humans experience and make sense of the world (Westra, 1985, p. 341). In the process, human values are imposed on the ‘nonhuman environment’ in ways that make it impossible for it to exist in any other terms (see also: Taylor, 1986). Biocentrists are guided by the imperative to actualize and secure an ideal end-state for all of the phenomenal world based on the situated values of its proponents. Despite its appeals to rights-based principles, it remains firmly entrenched in its implicit commitment to particular ends.

Sociocentrists argue that a higher, more enlightened form of anthropocentrism would allow us to see that human interests are actually aligned with ecological health. According to Thiele (1995), they ascribe a unique and privileged status to human life in the biosphere. The basic gist of their argument is that it is necessary to take care of ‘the environment’ in order to secure the survival and well-being of our species. The instrumental logic that guides this form of environmental advocacy is apparent: human survival on this planet is the ultimate ‘end’ for certain attitudes and behaviors. If human dignity is a universal principle, it is because it is backed up by a vision of this ideal end-state.

This brings us to conclude that even when environmentalists opt for more principled approaches to ‘nature’, it remains difficult to evade the problematic assumptions that they share with instrumentalism. Though its proponents claim to avoid thinking about ‘ends’ and ‘means’, they fail to escape
the underlying structuring logic. It seems that even in this sophisticated, principle-based form environmentalist advocacy, one cannot shake off the idea that anything worth doing must be directed at serving man’s own ends. Whether it is in the interest of profit, political efficiency, leisure or survival, all thought seems inevitably to be directed towards solving mankind’s problems. Our analysis of principled arguments shows that though principled advocates would like to believe that they steer clear of any considerations of ‘ends’, it remains implicit in their arguments. We may do far better to abandon the strict distinction between means and end once and for all. It is in this regard that Heidegger’s perspectives could be helpful.

The Epistemological Ecologies of Situated Environmentalist Advocacy: A Heideggerian Perspective

Thinking outside of the instrumental world picture

In an essay entitled: ‘What is called thinking?’, Heidegger (1959, p. 13) writes the following:

‘And yet – perhaps mankind has already for many ages and until now acted too much and thought too little.’

Here, Heidegger criticizes Marx who famously argued that philosophers have only interpreted the world whereas the point is that one has to change it. Heidegger is in disagreement with this. He argues that mankind’s proclivity to action often displaces sustained reflection. However, he also argues that thinking is a more fundamental form of action than action itself. Thinking acts, he argues, while it thinks. This casts an entirely different light on the well-entrenched distinctions between thought and action or theory and practice that undergird the instrumentalist ways of thinking we want to take issue with. According to Heidegger, action necessarily involves thought and vice versa. However, he has a specific kind of thinking in mind, namely the thinking of ‘essences’ – and it is exactly this kind of thinking that has become marginalized in our world, even though it has not been rendered entirely impossible. An ‘essence’, for Heidegger (1977 [1947], p. 30), is what lasts or endures over time. Thinking involves the consideration of these essences. To understand what Heidegger is hinting at, we will briefly discuss his views on technology and science for it is especially in these areas that we can see how the door to instrumentalism is opened.

In his essay, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, he takes up the task of thinking the essence of technology. On the one hand, technology allows human beings to accomplish their tasks more efficiently, and as such, it undoubtedly serves certain instrumental purposes. The problem is not necessarily our instrumental deployment of technologies, but rather the fact that we tend to think about them in a purely instrumental way. The use of our technologies inadvertently seduces us to frame the world in instrumental terms. As a consequence, we come to see the world around us as a ‘standing-reserve’ for human use (Heidegger, 1977 [1947], p. 20). The ‘essences’ of the various environmental phenomena with which we continually interact (including our technologies) are thus effectively concealed from us. To put it somewhat differently, by dint of these technologies we are prone to represent the world in such a way as to ignore its essences and to see it as an instrument. The point here is very profound. It is not merely a problem that comes with technology, it is actually a problem with the idea of representation as such. Heidegger emphatically warns against the dominance of a scientific representation or, more accurately, a scientific world picture (Weltbild):

World-picture essentially means not a picture of the world, but the world conceived as picture. Beings as a whole are now taken in such a way that they are in being first and only insofar as they are presented
So, the problem Heidegger alerts us to is the very fact that for us human beings the world has become a picture. We cannot help but represent (vor-stellen) the world as an object ‘out there’ that we can enjoy, protect, or plunder. According to Heidegger, the ancient Greeks and medieval scholars did not have a world picture (even though they did have worldviews). To picture the world is essentially a modern phenomenon. Contemporary discussions about ‘the environment’ – including what companies are supposed to do with respect to it – are basically just about different worldviews. They do not address the deeper issue of our world picture. These days, we moralize endlessly about the environment, but we mostly fail to consider or question the way we present the world to ourselves. On the deeper level of the world picture, there is no difference between hard-nosed business managers who see the environment as a source of profit and those who see the environment as something in need of protection. This dominant way of representing the world encompasses all comforting distinctions – including those between so-called ‘facts’ and ‘values’, ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, ‘means’ and ‘ends’. Despite the considerable differences between the three types of environmentalist advocacy discussed in the previous section, they are all ultimately traceable to the same world picture. Nowhere do we encounter in them signs of a readiness to abandon the privileged position of a ‘subject’ organizing the world of ‘objects’ around itself to conform to its own ideal ends. And this is, as we will soon see, where the shoe really pinches.

Going beyond what is correct or is ‘efficient’

Our scientific world picture leads us to consider the world in instrumental terms. Heidegger (1977 [1947], p. 6) translates the Latin word instruere into German with ‘einrichten’, literally ‘in’ + ‘to direct’ (‘to orient’, ‘to aim’). Instruere therefore means to make or manufacture something in such a way that it is fit or appropriate to achieve a goal. A power plant with its turbines and generators is a technical instrument created by human beings in order to achieve a particular goal. From this perspective, it is a means to an end. If such an instrument is capable of achieving this goal, it functions efficiently. At face value, nothing seems to be wrong here: technology is an instrument that allows us to achieve goals.

However, Heidegger finds the willingness to move as swiftly as possible to the achievement of a particular goal ‘uncanny’ (unheimlich). He argues that technology, insofar as it functions efficiently and effectively, is ‘uncannily correct’ (Heidegger, 1977 [1947], p. 7). A power plant does its work. So does a computer, a knife, or a screwdriver. But is this ‘work’ the only thing that matters? Is the instrumental nature of all these things all that can be said? And what if we replace the power plant, the computer, the knife, and the screwdriver by ‘the organization’? Is the fact that it ‘works’, or that it is efficient, all that matters? Would this not be a highly uncanny observation?

Instrumental thought, Heidegger argues, rushes from opportunity to opportunity. It is always in action, as Heidegger repeatedly points out. It is always looking for ways to make ‘things’, including organizations, work better. The real uncanniness is that instrumental thinking will only engender more and more of itself. Our critique echoes the concerns that some of the most famous management gurus expressed about the dominance of instrumentality. This becomes quite clear, for example, when one thinks of the wide-spread obsession with efficiency. This term – efficiency – is by no means the neutral term that people like Herbert Simon had in mind a long time ago. For example, Mintzberg warned against efficiency for a variety of reasons. For example, costs can be
measured more easily than benefits and this seduces managers to think economically, which is why
they are more prone to cost-cutting than to, let us say, product innovation (Mintzberg, 1982,
p. 103). Social benefits, Mintzberg adds, are much more difficult to claim than economic benefits
and this again produces certain baleful tendencies, in fact, the neglect of non-economic benefits.
Others have claimed that efficiency measures in organizations are always at the expense of job
security or, indeed, the environment (Cobley, 2009).

If we have to continually ask the ‘payoff’ question, Heidegger would point out, we limit both
how we can see ourselves and the ways we can be-in-the-world. Underlying this pervasive instru-
mentalist orientation is a longing for arrangement (Einrichtung) and an unrelenting goal orienta-
tion (Richtung). Only when things are ‘correctly’ (einggerichtet) can and will we be able to justify
action. Heidegger criticizes the tendency of instrumental thought to prove (beweisen) the correct-
ness of this or that. He proposes that we ‘show’ or ‘point to’ (weisen) things instead of trying to
‘prove’ them. To ‘show’ something (instead of rationally distancing oneself from it so that it
becomes a distinct object with its own set of ends and affordances) allows it to be present in a dif-
ferent, non-instrumental way. Such an experience can provoke a more ‘affective’ attunement to the
world (McNeill, 2006, pp. xviii, 2). But it is not easy to simply ‘show’ things in this Heideggerian
sense. It is far easier to demonstrate or prove (beweisen) things. ‘Showing’ (weisen), Heidegger
tells us, is relatively rare. The reason for this is simple: what is being shown is also what constantly
withdraws itself from us. This is not to suggest that it hides itself, but that it is somehow in retreat.

Take as a hypothetical example the argument that since public parks are incapable of sustaining
themselves financially, they need to be closed down everywhere in Europe. Parks are expensive in
terms of upkeep and difficult to patrol when it comes to the prevention of societal evils such as
violent crime and drug-abuse. As such they have proven not to be able to meet the demands of
instrumentalism. However, our relationship to parks defies the rational imperatives of instrumen-
tality, because we cannot account for the effect that being in a park has on each of us. The particu-
larity of each of our experiences resists incorporation into a generalized picture of the world and
the comparative assessment of outcomes.

**Being in the world**

Instead of offering us a string of principles as an ethics, Heidegger reminds us to stay close to our
‘essence’. The essence of human existence (Dasein) lies in its capacity to allow things to reveal
themselves in surprising ways. This is why we lose the capacity to ask new questions and find dif-
ferent answers. As Holt and Mueller (2011, p. 80) argue, in relation to our capacities to evaluate the
moral responsibility of tobacco companies, we lose the capacity to be surprised, as we are essen-
tially always looking for answers that fit our world picture, that is, along deeply entrenched instru-
mental lines. Instead, what is required is that our dispositional familiarity with things and events be
interrupted (Holt & Mueller, 2011, p. 81).

Heidegger’s later writings offer us various concepts through which to gauge how we as human
beings can maintain our most proper relationship to the world, and as such, stay close to our
essence, while allowing things in the world to also reveal their most proper essence. He (1977
[1947], p. 193) believed that philosophical thought should revolve around our relationship towards
Being. To think is to recognize how we relate to ‘Being’ and how it relates to us. However, when
thinking becomes technical, devoted to structuring the world and everything in it into a series of
rationally directed means and ends, thinking itself ends up as a mere means. Rejecting this instru-
mental logic, Heidegger sets out to consider what it means for us to be in the world. He argues that
as human beings, we are most fundamentally defined by our being-in-the world (Dasein). This
means that our identity is thoroughly bound up with the world in which we exist. We have
no independent existence from the world in which we participate. We are thoroughly and compre-
prehensively imbricated in it. To remain in this kind of relationship, some of the pitfalls of instrumen-
tal reasoning must be avoided.

For example, the instrumental arguments typically employed in environmentalist advocacy per-
petuate the impression that we enjoy an independent agency with respect to the world (Malpas,
2006, p. 325). They do not allow us to experience the world as anything other than as a place pas-
sively waiting for our interventions. According to Malpas (2006, 2007), Heidegger develops a
‘topological’ (topos = place) understanding of the world, which emphasizes relationality and inter-
connectivity. As he sees it, nothing stands ‘by itself cut-off and one-sided’. The world is described
as the place where everything (man, god, earth and heaven – the ‘Fourfold’ or ‘Geviert’) exists in
a complex state of mutual imbrication. From Heidegger’s perspective, ‘the world’ is not everything
that is the case, as Wittgenstein once had it (Malpas, 2007, p. 132). It is the place where everything
comes together and unites. This insight has been echoed by ecological thinkers such as Morton
(2012), who emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms.

Amidst this interconnectedness, Heidegger calls for Gelassenheit – an attitude sustained by
an abiding recognition of the finitude of knowing (Heidegger, 1958, p. 22). This, he believes
(1958, p. 22) allows people and things to be present in their own terms, instead of forcing them
to conform to the dictates of preconceived ideas or priorities. Thiele (1995) describes Gelassenheit
as a ‘letting-be’, a disposition that facilitates the disclosure of the world. This is not a passive
attitude, but one that welcomes and accepts the world as it is encountered. An attitude of
‘Gelassenheit’ creates the conditions necessary for a non-instrumental encounter with the world.
It allows us to draw close to the world without making it an object of our own preoccupations
(Heidegger, 1959, pp. 69–70). However, instrumentality dominates the world picture to such an
extent that everything that happens already has its logic inscribed in it. Everything is outlined by
the laws of utility and if it is not, we mostly fail to recognize it at all. In a crucial passage,
Heidegger (2003 [1938], p. 94) points out that the world picture has ultimately led us to believe
that our lives should be privileged as ‘subjectum’ and therefore become the central point of all
our relations (Bezugsmitte).

In the case of Gelassenheit, ‘lassen’ means quite a few things: letting, concerning oneself with
something (sich einlassen mit Etwas), waiting, guarding, looking after, herding, calling, to be in
accordance with something (entsprechen), and so on. It is a concept, one might argue, that invites
us to develop discourses and practices that remain constantly attuned and receptive to singular
instances of concrete life as well as to the various situated relationships that sustain them.
Gelassenheit is not the same as indifference. It seeks to sustain conditions that allow things to be
revealed. Heidegger recommends rigorous meditation, careful articulation and a frugality with
words in this regard (Heidegger, 1977 [1947], p. 241). He also recommends ‘besinnliches
Denken’. This is a kind of unrushed, subdued and contemplative thinking that is nonetheless very
disciplined, active, and difficult. In practical terms, Gelassenheit requires an ongoing awareness
of our belonging to and in the world, and of our ongoing effects, which cannot always be put into
words or figures. Sometimes, the effect we have is best personally experienced, either visually or
physically. Most of us are completely unaware of how much waste we generate on a daily basis.
We buy, consume, and throw the trash away. We are keen to protect our property, but do not feel
any attachment to our waste (even though we paid for this too). Imagine the visual effect if one is
required to keep all the trash one generates in the corner of one’s office. Collecting every single
piece of paper, packaging, food waste, over a few days, would reveal the sheer extent of what we
waste, discard, and forget. We may have to be visually and physically reminded that it is ours:
since we bought it, used it, it belongs to us. The convenience of tossing it in a bin often allows one
too easily to forget this.
Beyond normativity: ethos as relationality

Chia and Holt (2009, p. 644) distinguish between a so-called ‘dwelling’ and ‘building’ mode in our relationship with the world. In the ‘building’ mode, we place ourselves in the position of observers and manipulators of objects in the world. Objects are purposefully arranged and employed in pursuit of defined goals. In the ‘dwelling’ mode, however, we simply participate in a particular kind of ‘ethos’. Heidegger describes this as ‘having an abode’ (Heidegger, 1977 [1947], p. 233). An ‘abode’ is a space in which an implicit kind of normativity emerges. It is not a normativity based on deontological principles or utilitarian concerns. It is concerned instead with how we come to be at home in the world, with how we get situated in it, and how we sustain our relationships with it. It is not relativist or situational either, let alone instrumentalist. Intuitions and coping mechanisms that persist over time play an important role, which is not to suggest that change is precluded. A willingness to accept change allows adjustments to be made that make relational sense. This relationality functions as an alternative to abstract or instrumentalist ethics (Ladkin, 2006, p. 87; Painter-Morland, 2006, p. 95; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012).

This insight has prompted scholars in organization studies to question ingrained understandings of ‘strategy’, ‘management’ and ‘leadership’. Chia and Holt (2006, p. 640), for example, argue that human beings are immersed in relationships in and with the world, and function quite well without deliberate, conscious strategic or instrumental thinking. People thrive on non-deliberate, relationally constituted patterns and habits, which allow purposive and practical coping with the vicissitudes of life. This form of everyday coping may be supplemented by instrumental thinking when the network of relationships that people rely on for orientation and impetus break down. However, this is not necessarily always the case. Relational disruptions may also precipitate more Besinnlichkeit or reflexive awareness. Such awareness only occurs if we are resolute in the moment of surprise, anxiety and powerlessness and understand that well-honed strategies and arguments may fail us (Segal, 2010, p. 385).

The kind of thinking that emerges within the Heideggerian ethos does not rush, does not calculate, does not plan. As such, it evades the world picture that encapsulates us. It is neither theoretical nor practical (Heidegger, 1977 [1947], p. 236). It is a kind of thinking that instrumentalism sweeps under the carpet, even though it is never completely absent. As Bakken, Holt, and Zundel (2013, p. 18) explain, this ‘involves an ethos, a certain comportment of action that is beyond choice and decision’, and as such, it is much more delicate than balancing and calculating contradictory interests and concerns. It is precisely the fact that we are bound up, in time and space, with the world we live in, that we exist at all and have any capacity for action. In this sense, an understanding of environment as what ‘surrounds’ us as a kind of ‘outside’ is called into question. As such, environmentalist advocates’ insistence that we respect and protect something called ‘nature’ makes little sense. As we have seen, to assign ‘value’ to something robs it of its worth. However, an altogether different response may become possible if we accept the finitude of our human condition. Reedy and Learmonth (2011, p. 121) go so far as to argue that Heidegger’s ethics of finitude offers us the possibility of resisting our instrumental embeddedness in organizations. They believe that it is possible to disrupt our mundane complacency in organizational life and refuse the choices that it permits (Reedy, 2008, p. 64).

Heidegger calls on us to resist the instrumental orientation that separate us from our world and invites us instead to draw close to the singular contingencies and unique dynamics of life in all its concrete varieties. To ‘de-distance’ ourselves from our intimate relationship with the world, allows us to feel at home in it, but this ‘feeling at home’, is always laced with the uncanny. If there is a Heideggerian ethics, as Krell (1993 [1977], p. 215) points out, it is about articulating the way we dwell in the world rather than about the reification of moral truth within the realm of inalienable
rights, social contracts or deontological duties. As we pointed out above, we should remain cognizant of the original meaning of the word *ethos*, i.e. ‘dwelling-place’, ‘abode’, or ‘home’. Ethics, for Heidegger, is about allowing singularly unique things to exist and thrive in their own terms. That is, to recognize and appreciate them, as they are, instead of forcing them to conform to some generalized representation or instrumental principle that serves our needs and desires. Our moral sensibilities should be allowed to emerge out of the various ways in which we ‘dwell in the world’. In some of the organization studies literature, it has been argued that we ought to replace instrumental thinking with relational thinking, and an instrumental orientation with an ecological orientation (Chia & Holt, 2009, p. 134). Thinking about our relationship with the world in terms of a relational ecology, rather than as one of detached instrumentality, may offer a better way forward. The point that we make here is that only such an ethos, an ethos of dwelling in Being, allows us to accept our relationally constituted place in the world. However, to sustain this orientation in our daily lives, it needs to become second nature. *Gelassenheit*, if it is to truly change anything, must become part of normal life.

‘Being in the world’ would imply that our technological expertise and our financial means are reduced to their proper dimensions. After all, the projects that we devote our knowledge and resources to are expressions of the kind of existence that we ultimately hope for in and for the world. What and how we consume says something about it too. It is up to every one of us then to abandon the attitude of mastery that we have grown accustomed to, in order to allow for mutuality in our dealings with beings and objects in the world.

In order to be open to that which may show itself we have to relinquish our distanced objectivity and experiment with what Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 257) call a ‘co-contamination of affects’. This does not only apply to relationships with other human beings, but also with other animate and inanimate objects, systems and processes that make up the world. The study of various kinds of ecologies that are emerging through the interactions between human beings and other entities are instructive in this regard. Consider, for instance, Parikka’s (2011) description of the complex ecological relationality that characterize human interaction with media cultures (Iveson, 2013). He compares this to the emergent swarming behavior observed in the insect world, and argues that this phenomenon represents more than an analogical tool for representing our own relationality. It allows us to ask more profound ontological questions about the affects we share with animals and the emergent effects of the technologies we use (see also: Bennett, 2010).

**Organizational Implications**

What does this alternative ethos entail for organizational environmental efforts? In the first place, environmental discourses should avoid the predominance of what Heidegger refers to as a ‘world-picture’. This would mean less of a preoccupation with facts and figures that make the ‘business case for environmentalism’. This point has been thoroughly supported in recent literature (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). Yet, many critiques of instrumentalism do not push through to questioning the basic assumption that ‘only that which can be measured can be valued’. The tendency to measure dominates corporate life in ways that make an alternative relationship between various types of beings impossible to envisage. From a Heideggerian perspective, organizations will therefore be less concerned with quantifying environmental impact and more concerned with building the relationships or avoiding the destruction of relationships that cause the ‘impact’ in the first place. In this regard, Crane et al.’s (2008) call for a new understanding of ecological citizenship is important. But such an ecological citizenship would involve going beyond establishing certain environmental extra-territorial ‘rights’, which have to be protected. Rights-discourses will not help us to re-establish our connectedness to the world. Instead, what is required is to de-distance ourselves from nature,
and as such, from ourselves as embodied beings amongst other embodied beings, either animate or inanimate. The question is whether re-localizing ‘ecological citizenship’ is the only other option here. As Crane et al. (2008, p. 382) rightly points out, large corporations are difficult to locate in terms of a meaningful community. What is also true these days is that much of what counts as ‘organization’ or ‘work’ takes place outside corporate headquarters and office buildings. It is precisely in these non-corporate places where embracing the embeddedness of people in their environments may become possible in new and interesting ways. Actively engaging in the multiple worlds outside corporate offices may make us more capable of envisaging something outside the world picture that pervades our ways of thinking. By thinking more carefully about how spaces, relationships and tasks are configured, all organizations can potentially support and nurture individuals’ particular ecological citizenship.

Organizational decision-makers may also, for instance, benefit from avoiding the conclusion that what works, or is legally expedient, is necessarily true. The mere fact of asking how the environment can sustain growth already implies a means-to-end relationship, and even if this means-end relationship can be shown to be efficient, this does not make it true, or right. It would instead entail entertaining the possibility that not everyone would be preoccupied with growth, or with property rights, and that no compensation can be offered for the loss of a certain way of life, or for the ethos that a certain place allows. It would mean being open to the possibility that some communities may opt for another set of relationships within their environment. Maybe these relationships will have to be discursively negotiated on an ongoing basis, as Scherer and Palazzo’s suggest (2007). From a Heideggerian perspective, however, we would propose that abstract understandings of a ‘corporate democracy’ should be replaced with an emphasis on our dwelling-in-the-world. From our perspective, proposals regarding engaging NGOs, international institutions, workers, companies, consumers in decentralized deliberation (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, p. 1112) will only succeed if these various groups can speak from their embeddedness within practices and natural environments.

Although the ethos that Heidegger describes does not offer us a clear normative alternative (precisely not), it does articulate the kind of conditions within which relational responsiveness emerges. Such an ethos cannot be prescribed with reference to a set of principles or democratic structures, but you do know it when you see it. Therefore, it can be revealed when one pays close attention to practices. Organizations will do better to study the processes of organizing around environmentalism that is always already going on in business of various sizes and shapes. Instead of teaching students the standard cases of exceptional sustainability management systems in large corporations, we may do better to study the emergence of alternative forms of organizing, which allow for new forms of sociality and environmental responsiveness to emerge. Some of these insights may already be hinted at in reflections on how entrepreneurs hesitantly respond to ambiguous possibilities that reveal themselves to them in their engagement with the world (Popp & Holt, 2013, p. 55). In fact, as has been argued in the case of many small and medium-sized enterprise discourses, something like CSR may itself be a misnomer. Studying how indigenous communities live within their environments without any notion of articulated environmentalism may offer more valuable perspectives. In this way, we may see that the term ‘sustainability’ could offer us an alternative way of being in the world.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we hoped to go beyond the ‘business case’ for environmental responsibility, and to offer an alternative that does not slip back into a meaningless abstract adherence to principles or rights. In doing so, we have hopefully avoided being either too impractical or too pedantic. The
point of our reflections about payoff arguments and its underlying instrumentalism is not that we should radically jettison both. The point is rather that we should challenge the hegemony of instrumentalism and its related world picture. Instrumentalism that proliferates up to the point of eclipsing all other possibilities of thinking and being should be resisted. Our analysis of environmentalist advocacy reveals the persistence of some problematic distinctions between ‘facts’ and ‘values’, ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, ‘ends’ and ‘means’. Such distinctions make it very difficult to experience ourselves as embedded in the world.

The challenge that faces us is to get over our preoccupation with supplementing facts with values, or procuring their alignment. Moving beyond the dominant world picture made up of facts and values and means-end relationships, requires an attunement to the world in which we are embedded and which shirks these distinctions. This challenges us not to discover in every new ‘environmental controversy’ simply another example of what we have already made up our minds about. It is up to us to recognize, not only the ways in which such cases conform to our existing beliefs and priorities, but also all the myriad ways in which they are different and unique. In this regard, our analysis hopes to move beyond assigning corporations the position of ‘bad guys’, as Scherer and Palazzo (2007, p. 1103) believe ‘postmodern’ CSR discourses tend to do. We believe that the power and influence that organizations possess can assist or destroy our capacity for dwelling in the world, and as such, organization theory should carefully consider which practices may require nurturing and protection.

We have argued that a consideration of the appropriate response towards environmental concerns is embedded in a particular ethos. Dwelling in the kind of ethos that Heidegger describes would take us beyond seeing the world as a resource to be used for our own purposes. Such an ethos, of course, flies in the face of conventional payoff argumentation. As such, adopting a Heideggerian perspective may rob us of some of our most common justifications for action or inaction. We would no longer be able to invoke clear-cut cost-benefit analyses, nor would we be able to easily stake our claims on supposedly indisputable ‘universal principles’. Instead, we will have to encounter ourselves as always already both subject and object, at the very same time. This kind of thinking embeds us in the world and in relations, not just with humans, but with the animate and inanimate entities that shape and sustain us. Heidegger helps us to understand the importance of fostering the kind of embedded relationships that make moral responsiveness possible. In this way, our contribution is focused on identifying some important conditions for the emergence of normativity, rather than on articulating a fixed normative position. In fact, something more profound than morality is indeed called for, and this profundity depends upon how we organize our lives and work.

One important step towards this is to reflect on our own ingenuity. Studying our use of technology beyond the goal of efficiency can allow us to rediscover those aspects of techne that in and of itself allow us another way of being-in-the-world. In what we create, in our use of technology, in our construction of obligations and rights, things are continuously revealed, and concealed. For scholars and students of business and management, it means less of a preoccupation with efficient management and a keener understanding and sensitivity for the world we are creating. What we make and how we manage and calculate shapes our possibilities of being in the world. It has the capacity to make us more than we were before, but unfortunately also less. We would do well to remind ourselves and our students of the blind-spots this creates, but also of the truths it reveals. This kind of insight tends to emerge through participation in the world rather than through lectures, and requires a broader range of experiences. In this way, the Heideggerian insights that we explored in this article further the critique of the positivist assumptions and utilitarian objectivism that plague management education (Painter-Morland, 2015). A closer relationship between the arts and humanities and management education, and for active engagement with the world while studying management, seems the very least that is required (Guillet de Monthoux, 2012).
It would be important to extend Scherer and Palazzo’s (2011) insistence on ‘social connectedness’ to also include an embeddedness within the natural environment. The problem with deliberative democracy as a response to the normative vacuity of instrumental thinking is that it may exclude those aspects of our existence that have no voice at the stakeholder table, yet enable our existence in important ways. What is therefore important, is to hear its voice in climate change, in the destruction of biodiversity, and in the ever-more prevalent natural disasters that we suffer. If we are to be ‘ecological citizens’, it is not because we are powerful rational ‘agents’, who live at a detached distance from our environment and operate according to principles or rational calculations. Instead, every individual is a node in a dense relational network, open to experiencing its trembling.

If ‘environmental concern’ becomes a situated response that continually shapes and forms our decisions and actions, in an intuitive rather than strictly cerebral way, no principled or instrumental argument is necessary. We believe that a re-establishment of the intimate relationship between communities and an ecological territory is indeed needed, but that it cannot necessarily be procured in the way Crane et al. (2008, p. 375) suggest. The globalized nature of our reality complicates such a ‘reterritorialization’.

Sometimes this may require exploring options outside of our habituated comfort-zones. Many are already engaged in finding alternative ways to organize commercial activity and to harness new ways of relationality. It is in these ‘experiments’ that we should find our inspiration, and sometimes, also disillusionment. The literature on public entrepreneurship (Popp & Holt, 2013), green innovation and alternative, post-growth economies offer rich material for those interested in drawing on Heidegger for interpretative inspiration. In each case, these different ways of being in the world both reveal, and conceal who we are becoming, and as such are worthy of our careful attention. The main challenge for scholars of organization studies and management, is to explore the ways in which our being-in-the-world are habituated responses by which our ‘environment’ has become us. We would therefore do well to reflect on the ways in which our habits and relational patterns within organizations shape and form our proclivities. The study of organizational cultures as the ethos which shapes the being of those who dwell in them, have become a topic of interest of many corporations, precisely because they want to guide their employees towards certain goals. This ‘goal-directedness’ should be balanced by the kind of Gelassenheit that celebrates care and hesitation alongside efficiency. Taking care requires, above all other things, an acceptance of incompleteness of our knowledge, our insight, and our control. From a Heideggerian perspective, environmentalism is not directed at pursuing certain principles as objects, nor is it about finding good reasons to do the right thing. Instead, it involves a process that requires engagement, relationality, and openness as conditions for the emergence of new ways to flourish.

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Note

1. For the purposes of this article, we engage with environmental argumentation as a subset of the broader debate on corporate sustainability. ‘Sustainability’, has become an umbrella term for ESGE, i.e. environmental, social, governance and ethics issues, and is replacing CSR as the central term in corporate discourses. This conceptual development in and of itself displays the prevalence of instrumental thinking.

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**Author biographies**

**Mollie Painter-Morland** (PhD) is Professor of Ethics and Organisation at Nottingham Business School. She serves as Editor-in-Chief of Springer’s Issues in Business Ethics series, and as the Africa Director of ABIS (The Academy of Business in Society). She authored a number of books, most recently *Business Ethics and Continental Philosophy* with René ten Bos (Cambridge University Press, 2011). Her specific research interests include: European philosophy and ethics, leadership and gender, ethics in the media and communication industries, and integrated reporting.

**René ten Bos** is Professor of Philosophy at the Department of Management Sciences, Radboud University, The Netherlands. He is also Honorary Professor at the University of St Andrews, UK. He is the author of multiple books, most recently *Stilte, geste, stem* (2011); *Bedrijfsethiek: Filosofische perspectieven*, with Mollie Painter-Morland (2013); and *Water* (2014), all with Boom Press.