Managerial and Philosophical Intuition in the Thinking of Bergson and Mintzberg

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Within the Configuration school the management author Henry Mintzberg contributed a strong criticism of a normative conception of strategic planning, arguing that this is too narrow. The philosopher Henri Bergson embraced the totality of life as a creative evolution which transcends the fullness of a preconceived idea. While Mintzberg attempts to rethink the concept of strategy and Bergson to renew philosophical thought, together they share a vision of a changing and unpredictable world that enables them to discover — above and beyond the systematic data they are able to assemble — another mode of knowledge formed by intuition. Intuition holds a central place in the work of both thinkers, invigorating Mintzberg’s work on strategy and Bergson’s thought on metaphysics through a grasp of the substantiality of change. In this paper, we explore the implications of the concept of intuition for their ideas, then discuss some of its limitations, before investigating its possible applications for management research.

‘Such thinking must not only be informed by the moving details of action, but be driven by the very presence of that action.’
Henry Mintzberg, The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning

‘No matter how I imagine in detail what is going to happen to me, still how inadequate, how abstract and stilted is the thing I have imagined in comparison to what actually happens! The realization brings with it an unforeseeable nothing which changes everything.’
Henri Bergson, The Creative Mind

1 Translator’s note: The quotations in the article are taken from published sources, except when the English-language original could not be located. In these instances, an original translation has been provided. The references in the text and in the bibliography are to the works consulted by the author.
Intuition has always been problematic in the field of management science. For a long time it was even ignored, being ill-adapted to the scientific method, occurring without fact or even before the fact.\(^2\)

Moreover, intuition poses problems for other disciplines as well, for example philosophy and psychology. It was ostracized by the cognitive sciences as completely as it was by management science, and for a similar reason. Traditionally associated with classical rationalism, cognition is seen as an analytic, deductive, sequential process.\(^3\) This is not true of intuition.

A further problem lies among researchers in the field as to what meaning to ascribe to the notion\(^4\). To formulate it like Jung,\(^5\) intuition is a psychological function which transmits, often unconsciously, perceptions of relations and conditions. Not at all magical, mystical or paranormal, intuition\(^6\) has immediacy; this makes it all the more difficult to clarify.\(^7\) Intuition can be described as a faculty of the brain operating from the right hemisphere and involving both physical and mental levels; sources of intuition can be both conscious and unconscious but are in no way associated with rational thinking or quantitative analysis.\(^8\) Dane and Pratt\(^9\) note that intuitions are ‘affectively charged judgments that arise through rapid, nonconscious, and holistic associations’. For Leybourne and Sadler-Smith,\(^10\) who do not entirely reject the notion of ‘sixth sense’ in order to retain its impenetrable quality in an organizational and decision-making context, intuition is the result of a person’s past experiences and emotions; it is a sort of recognition, though accumulated knowledge and expertise do play a role. Behling and Eckel\(^11\) recognize multiple levels of intuition and identify six clusters: paranormal power, personality trait, unconscious process, set of actions, distilled experience, and a residual category.

We emphasized above that intuition has received scant attention from management research. In particular, intuition seems virtually ignored in the field of strategy where, in the words of Dane and Pratt\(^12\), a rational approach ‘takes the lion’s share’. From the outset,

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\(^3\) Claire Peugeot-Petitmengin L’Intuition : un autre mode de cognition, Congrès Européen de Systémique 1996.
\(^4\) See Katharine Winifred Wild Intuition, Cambridge University Press 1938 for a selection of meanings proposed by philosophers, psychologists and phenomenologists.
\(^5\) Carl Jung Psychological types Harcourt 1924
\(^7\) (James, 1950).
\(^12\) Erik Dane, Michael G. Pratt, ibid.