

6-7-2008

TOWARD A LOGIC OF EMERGENCE IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP (SUMMARY)

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Recommended Citation

Schindehutte, Minet (2008) "TOWARD A LOGIC OF EMERGENCE IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP (SUMMARY)," *Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research*: Vol. 28: Iss. 16, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalknowledge.babson.edu/fer/vol28/iss16/7>

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SUMMARY

TOWARD A LOGIC OF EMERGENCE IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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Principal Topic

The impetus for this inquiry comes from increased attention to emergence in the entrepreneurship literature (Lichtenstein, et al., 2007) accompanied by the ontological turn in social theory. It is argued that assumptions regarding structure, agency and causality are under-determined in philosophical approaches such as positivism, interpretivism, social realism and social constructivism (e.g., McMullen and Shepherd, 2006). Specifically, the current dominant perspective in entrepreneurship views the opportunity as an ontologically stable, self-contained and decontextualized entity that is subject to the logic of determinism (an object-based understanding of causality) (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). In this view transitions from one stage to the next have a distinct beginning- and end-point along a fixed trajectory in a means-ends framework (Casson, 1982) that evolves according to a pre-established final goal (causation) or emergent final goal (effectuation) (Sarasvathy, 2001).

Method/Key Propositions

This study enacts a philosophy of entrepreneurship inspired by Gilles Deleuze (1994) using the theoretical lens of complexity science to develop an alternative to the object-based logic of fully determined processes – a “logic of emergence” that emphasizes “becoming rather than being” and “process rather than state.” An emergentist understanding of causality is fundamentally different in that no discrete origin, end-point or trajectory exists in a rational sense. Inclusion of chance (the unknown) at each bifurcation in the causal mechanics renders it an integral operator within the process, not an external factor (DeLanda 1997). Thus ontological assumptions are rooted in indeterminacy. Emergent phenomena are irreducible, novel, unpredictable, unexplainable, and develop temporally from antecedent entities (McKelvey, 2004). A Deleuzian ontology offers a non-teleological approach (Bonta and Protevi, 2004) in which contingent interactions involved in difference-driven morphogenetic processes (which we label “actuation”) give rise to structure. A set of five propositions accounts for the spatio-temporal dynamics that are hidden beneath observable structural qualities of the entrepreneurial opportunity. The advantages of the proposed shift in logic are illustrated by viewing determinist agent implementation (effectuation) and emergentist (actuation) perspectives on causality, agency and structure side-by-side.

Implications

Theorizing in entrepreneurship could benefit from the notion of “becoming opportunity” rather than opportunity discovery, creation or recognition (Sarasvathy, 2003). Removing artificial binary dualities confirms effectuation’s relevance in opportunity exploitation, while highlighting actuation’s ongoing role in energizing and creating movement in the economy.

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