

## **A new lease for life?**

### **The return of vitalism in management and organization studies**

Weik, Elke

*Published in:*  
European Management Journal

*DOI:*  
10.1016/j.emj.2021.11.007

*Publication date:*  
2022

*Document version:*  
Final published version

*Document license:*  
CC BY

*Citation for pulished version (APA):*  
Weik, E. (2022). A new lease for life? The return of vitalism in management and organization studies. *European Management Journal*, 40(1), 2-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2021.11.007>

Go to publication entry in University of Southern Denmark's Research Portal

#### **Terms of use**

This work is brought to you by the University of Southern Denmark.  
Unless otherwise specified it has been shared according to the terms for self-archiving.  
If no other license is stated, these terms apply:

- You may download this work for personal use only.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying this open access version

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details and we will investigate your claim.  
Please direct all enquiries to [puresupport@bib.sdu.dk](mailto:puresupport@bib.sdu.dk)



## A new lease for life? The return of vitalism in management and organization studies

Elke Weik

Department of Business & Management, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Life  
Lebensphilosophie  
Romanticism  
Concern  
Vitalism  
Neuroecosociality  
Vulnerability  
Pathos  
Affect

### ABSTRACT

This paper starts from a growing interest in the concept of concern, lived experience or “inhabiting” as part of the so-called “affective turn”. My main argument is that the notion of concern cannot be thought or understood without the concept of life. The concept of life, however, is somewhat of a taboo topic in the social sciences. I hold, nevertheless, that in order to reflect on their assumptions and to define concern for their own studies, scholars need to think about life and make a choice regarding the various approaches that can be taken. I therefore present and compare four vitalist approaches: romanticism and Lebensphilosophie, vitalism as ethos and pathos, neuroecosociality as well as vitalism as becoming.

Human concern has become a matter of academic concern. While most management and organization scholars have been satisfied with exploring and harnessing rational action for many decades, the turn of the millennium has seen a growing unrest and dissatisfaction with the concept. The “beyond rational action” takes two fundamentally different forms: One is the practitioner insight that rational action within a rational–bureaucratic organization has reached its limits and productivity can only be enhanced by tapping into employees’ emotional resources. The other is the insight shared by many non-practitioners that the previous focus on rational efficiency and maximization has created a work-and-life-world that is dissatisfying if not downright toxic. This paper speaks to the latter.

My motivation for exploring the relationship between concern and life has sprung from my own interest in the topic (Weik, 2012, 2017, 2019) as well as from a growing number of papers on concern, value and affect in my home turf of organizational institutionalism (e.g., Creed et al., 2020; Lok et al., 2017; Voronov & Weber, 2020). This paper does not, however, want to contribute insights to organizational institutionalism in particular, but speak to a broader community of management and organizational scholars interested in the topic of concern.

My argument can be roughly sketched in four tenets. First, I hold that employing the concept of concern as a central concept in their framework requires authors to adopt a vitalist perspective. This is something that, second, has been viewed with considerable suspicion during the last seven decades. This is probably the reason why, third, most authors

avoid any mention of “life”. This, however, is, fourth, unsatisfactory from an epistemic as well as reflexive point of view.

Let me elaborate on these points in the following manner: I will first introduce the contemporary discussion of concern a bit more by sketching its development since the turn of the millennium and by providing some examples of arguments relating to concern. I will also discuss the conceptual relationship between life and concern, thus presenting the more complex version of my principal argument that the concept of concern as it is used in most (but not all) arguments requires the adoption of a vitalist perspective.

I will, second, discuss in more detail the spectre of Social Darwinism that has been haunting vitalist approaches in the social sciences since the horrors created by German Nazism. I will, however, argue that vitalism is possible to pursue without relapsing into Social Darwinism. A central part of that argument will be provided by the discussion of three strands of current vitalist thinking and their historical ancestors in the main body of the paper.

This discussion of the strands will, moreover, show how life can be discussed with very different emphases leading to different arguments and also to different ethical and political stances in contemporary academia. The latter is, I think, of ever growing importance in an age where biopolitics and governmentality (Foucault, 2000) reign supreme.

E-mail address: [ew@sam.sdu.dk](mailto:ew@sam.sdu.dk).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2021.11.007>

Received 12 November 2021; Accepted 25 November 2021

Available online 30 November 2021

0263-2373/© 2021 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Concern, affect and life

I have already indicated that concern and affect have become visible topics in organizational institutionalism, the field that I know most about. An increasing number of authors study how institutions do not just influence the way we *think* about our world, but how we *feel* about it. Feelings and emotions, values and valuations, or the “inhabiting” of institutions play an increasingly important role in scholars’ understanding of how people relate to institutions. One main aim of this move to criticise the predominantly cognitivist, and often even rationalist, attitude characterising organizational institutionalism in the last two decades by complementing or replacing it with institutionalism’s own version of the affective turn.

The concept of concern constitutes a central feature of this turn. In organizational institutionalism, for example, Lok et al. (2017, p. 592) promote an understanding of institutional processes as “lived” (this will be of interest in a moment), that is, as “animated by persons with emotions, social bonds and commitments, by persons to whom institutional arrangements matter” (Sayer, 2011). Similarly, Creed et al. (2020, p. 1) seek to understand how people are motivated to participate in institutions with the help of two constructs: “a person’s embodied world of concern and a community’s shared world of concern”.

Organizational institutionalism is, however, a relative latecomer to the affective turn. Elsewhere in management and organization studies, authors have already for some time discussed, for example, identification, power and subjectivation (Kenny, 2012; Thompson & Willmott, 2016), the influence of atmospheres (Jørgensen & Holt, 2019) or affect at, and in, work (Fotaki, 2014). Often the authors seek to pursue an *anti-cognitivist* line of inquiry emphasizing pre-reflexivity, the role of the body and/or its relation to the environment and to social others (Fotaki et al., 2017).

In these analyses, the human ability to be affected by the world is closely linked to, or even co-constitutes, human concern. As human beings try to thrive in the world – this is their concern – they need to perceive and evaluate which situations are good for them and which are not. Perception and evaluation, however, are largely based on the human capacity to be affected by the world. Therefore, affect plays a central role in these processes.

The ability to evaluate which situations are good or bad for their well-being rests with living organisms, as concepts like well-being, thriving or surviving depend on the maintenance of life functions. Concern, in other words, cannot be explained without recourse to life. This is the central presupposition of my argument.

This presupposition has two caveats. The first is a rather strong tradition in Heideggerian philosophy that uses the word “concern” as a translation of Heidegger’s central term “Sorge”. I will provide the philosophical argument in a footnote<sup>1</sup>; suffice it here to say that Heidegger’s “concern” does not operate with an empirical subject, which makes it difficult to apply in empirical science. This, in turn, does not constitute a problem for philosophers or philosophically oriented social scientists, but does so for the large remainder of scholars working empirically.

The second caveat relates to the fact that many scholars employing

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger portrays human existence as being constituted by concern (*Sorge*). This concern also characterises the manner in which human existence relates to the world and to fellow human beings (*In-der-Welt-Sein* and *Mit-Sein*). The problem, however, is that Heidegger does not understand *Dasein* (human existence) as an individual, a person or an empirical subject. Heidegger, in fact, explicitly criticises Dilthey and Bergson for their “personalism” which he considers indebted to a metaphysics he seeks to overcome in his conception of *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1977). In §10 of “Being and Time”, which is aptly titled “The delimitation of an analysis of *Dasein* against anthropology, psychology and biology”, Heidegger states that the unity of the person differs in its constitution from a natural thing.

the term are solely interested in its ethical connotations. “Concern” here translates into “care” for oneself and for others. This borderline is more difficult to walk, as it often meanders between normative and factual statements, with the normative, again, being of the non-empirical sort. I would, nevertheless, hold that as far as factual statements and assumptions are concerned, these scholars need to take recourse to the notion of life. This becomes even more important for those who, like Andrew Sayer (2011), argue that as a consequence of the focus on concern, we should actually collapse the distinction between fact and value.

## 2. Is life dead?

Many social scientists recoil at the mention of life as a concept or explanation. They immediately conjure images of Social Darwinism, a theory used to explain and justify anything from capitalist oppression (“survival of the fittest”) to physical annihilation of persons defined as “weak” or genetically “impure” (eugenics<sup>2</sup>). Even a less emotionally charged reaction often uses the term “vitalism” in a derogatory fashion implying that believing in an obscure life force indicates a lack of intellectual rigor, anti-scientific attitudes and plain superstition (Greco, 2005). In the same vein, others see it defending untenable positions, such as the idea that people’s biology determines social outcomes and processes, that free will and social construction are just hormonal or genetic epiphenomena, or that certain power structures and regimes of oppression are natural and therefore justified (Rose, 2013).

While I, of course, share the critique of Social Darwinism and sociobiology, I am not entirely sure whether our abstention from the study of life and from the study of the moral implications of that study has not contributed to the rise of some rather disturbing contemporary discourses in the fields of genetics and reproductive science, to name just the most prominent. More importantly, as I have pointed out in the introduction, a good deal of our everyday experience and sensemaking seems to rest on “life-like” features like concern, valuations and affects. If we want to study them, we may not be able to let life rest in the obscurity we have banished it to 75 years ago. The obvious question is then: How do we study life?

The field of study most people immediately think of when the term “life” is mentioned in the social sciences is sociobiology. By the same token, it is a field of study that most social scientists regard as just barely above Social Darwinism. Rather counter-intuitively, however, sociobiology (or biosociology) may have put a rather substantial nail in the coffin of life. Understanding human nature as a product of biological evolution and as resting on a physiological fundament of genes, hormones, neurons, etc. has become rather popular outside the discipline of sociology and management and organization studies. This is probably unsurprising given the recent accumulation of knowledge and expansion of instruments and general capturing of the popular imagination by genetics and neuroscience. Mainstream sociology, from this perspective, is in fact accused of “biophobia” and of wilfully ignoring scientific evidence in the interest of leftist-liberal politics (Freese et al., 2003). From leadership theories based on evolutionary psychology (Vreja et al., 2016) to neuromarketing (Zurawicki, 2010) and business ethics (Fredrick, 2000), from the understanding of gender differences (Krefting, 2000) and sex roles (Bushardt et al., 1991) to altruism and self-interest (Clarkson, 2014; Nielsen, 1994), sociobiology offers a number of explanations directly speaking to fields and topics in management and organization studies. Indeed, Nielsen regards the sociology of emotions,

<sup>2</sup> As I am writing this sentence, I am aware that it has become far more ambiguous that it would have been 20 years ago. With the advance of the life sciences, a “new genetics” has arisen that seeks not to eliminate the weak, but produce the strong. I cannot discuss in this paper which, if any, difference this makes in ethical and political terms. It underscores, however, my point about the need for the social sciences to get involved in these discussions.

which formed the point of departure for my paper, to be “ripe for an evolutionary takeover” (Nielsen, 1994, p. 290).

Sociobiology, however, does not talk about “life” in a conceptual manner. In fact, it talks about everything but life: genes, reproduction, neurons, evolution, organisms and species, and so on, avoiding any use or definition of the term “life” itself. I will therefore disregard sociobiology in my subsequent argument.

What I will continue to explore are theoretical and disciplinary strands that actually talk about life. These strands differ considerably in their understanding of life, their argumentative strategies and their attitude towards the modern life sciences. Different benefits can therefore be reaped by subscribing to them. I would, however, hold that their arguments in toto make a convincing case for a revival of the study of life.

In what follows, I will discuss four strands of thinking about life that have emerged in part from my reading of the literature and in part from distinctions given by others (Duarte, 2021; Greco, 2021; Lash, 2006b; Osborne, 2016; Rose, 2013). The historical one, featuring Romanticism and *Lebensphilosophie*, focuses on a life force as the source of creativity and variety as well as on human lived experience; the second, vitalism as ethos and pathos, on the vulnerability of life; the third, neuro-ecosociality, on sociality as a medium and outcome of life and, finally, vitalism as becoming on the creativity and self-actualization of life. I will then compare and contrast them in the final section of the paper.

### 3. Romanticism and *Lebensphilosophie*

The school of thought with the longest tradition is Romanticism. It reaches right back to the moment when the term “biology” was coined (in 1802) – and indeed acted as its godparent. While modern readers immediately think of poets when Romanticism is mentioned, there is indeed a strong scientific interest woven into Romantic thought. Not only have the writers of the Romantic period been in constant correspondence with the leading scientists of their time, but also have often conducted their own scientific studies and experiments, as in the case of Goethe (Bortoft, 2013; Naydler, 1996; Weik, 2017). We can, in fact, identify a good number of authors from both sides of the Great Divide that sought to ally science with the arts in what today is often referred to by its German term “Naturphilosophie” (Duarte, 2021; Richards, 2002). Life was the permanent focus of this group of authors. It was a concept used to denounce rationalism and intellectualism – in the natural sciences, in philosophy and in the arts – in favour of the lived experience, the body and feeling (Duarte, 2021).

One of the fundamental conundrums discussed during the period had been triggered by studies of embryos in the late 17th century (Richards, 2002). In these, it had become clear that plants, animals and humans developed from seeds, and that these seeds, though looking identical, produced a wide variety of individuals. How did the seed “know” how to develop? Was the final form of the individual already determined in the seed? Where were any laws of development that would allow to predict the individual outcome? Why did not all individuals of one species look the same? It was, moreover, clear that this development from seed to a mature form was unique to living organisms. The question was whether it, as a natural process, still followed the laws of Newtonian physics, or whether there was a realm of “life science” that differed from physics.

Over the course of the 18th century, two camps formed (Kuhn, 1987; Richards, 2002). The preformationists argued that the mature individual form was already encapsulated in the seed. In contrast, the epigeneticists argued that the seed was qualitatively transformed into something new. This qualitative transformation was called “Bildung” in German. The word is today mostly translated as education, but in the 18th century, its primary denotation was formation. The force driving the formation of the organism was called “Bildungstrieb” or “formative drive”. Others referred to it as “Lebenstrieb” (life drive). It not only powered the epigenesis of the organism, but also its reproduction and repair during maturity.

This drive was clearly not mechanic, but something that created novelty. It was not, or only partly, bound by the necessity of physical laws, but had a certain amount of freedom in the creation of the individual. It was in this sense much closer to the creative work of a poet or artist than to the reliable output of a machine. This insight opened the door for input from artists, poets and philosophers into a budding field of science – which is exactly what Romantic science embodies. According to this science, life is a force that imprints itself on raw, dull matter. It has an aim, which is to reach maturity, to fulfil itself. Like every artist does (and every human being should), all in living nature strive for self-actualization. In order to understand this process, we must not focus on the individual parts, the analytical units, but must see the whole before studying the parts.

Goethe, for example, argued against the type of mathematical abstraction so successfully applied by Newton or the type of natural classification proposed by Linnaeus (Jensen, 2011). The main thrust of his critique was two-fold: First, this new kind of natural science abandoned the empirical manifoldness of nature to create reductionist hypotheses and laws. It abstracted unduly, and most of all it ignored the change and dynamics inherent in any living organism by subjecting it to static classifications and relations. Second, the new science categorically separated the human observer from the (now dead) object, an object that could be manipulated at will and without concern for its own interests or vulnerabilities. To Goethe, in contrast, nature was nothing if not alive, and to ignore this fact was to misunderstand the phenomenon completely.

After the demise of *Naturphilosophie* these understandings, though never entirely abandoned,<sup>3</sup> were revived at the turn of the last century and fed into the nascent discipline of sociology by authors like Dilthey and Simmel. Bergson’s contribution, more elegant and literary, also captured the popular imagination. The label “*Lebensphilosophie*” is somewhat imprecise, as many authors did not self-identify as philosophers of life and/or had very different approaches towards the matter. It is often what they stood against that united them rather than what they stood for. In the “against”, we find the same opponents as in Romantic *Naturphilosophie*: rationalism, intellectualism, mechanism and scientism (Röd, 2002).

All three authors stand for rather different perspectives within the *Lebensphilosophie*. While Dilthey wanted to establish a methodology for the humanities and social sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) vis-à-vis the natural sciences, Bergson wanted to explore the metaphysical meaning of life (Röd, 2002). Simmel sought to bring both traditions, Dilthey’s and Bergson’s, sociology and philosophy, together. I will now briefly discuss them in turn.

Dilthey subscribed to the Romantic conviction that life was a fundamental fact permeating all of nature and irreducible to mechanistic laws. He treated it as all-encompassing, always already there and impossible not to presuppose (*unhintergebar*). The latter implied that it could not be conceptualised as that would require thinking to “go behind” life. It could only be understood in itself and from itself.

The conceptualizations that the positivist-empirical sciences offered were therefore insufficient. “In the veins of the knowing subject that Locke, Hume and Kant have construed runs not real blood but the watered-down juice of reason as pure thinking” (Dilthey, cited in Wirkus, 1996, my translation). Fortunately, human beings were nevertheless well equipped to understand life due the fact that they are alive (dynamic, temporal and creative) as well. It is our lived experience that allows us to grasp life; vice versa, it is life that forms the causal connection between ourselves and our environment as they shape each other (Rodi, 1998).

Dilthey was to lay the foundations of modern hermeneutics and

<sup>3</sup> There is an ongoing debate over the indebtedness of Charles Darwin to the Romantic tradition with some authors emphasizing the break (Lenoir, 1987; Wenzel, 1983), others the continuity of thinking (Brady, 1984; Richards, 2002).

interpretive science on this concept of lived experience, which is the English translation of the German “Erlebnis” or “erleben” (in which the word “Leben” is still visible). Lived experience stands in contrast to (just) experience (German *Erfahrung* or *erfahren*), which is traditionally understood as based on sense perception and structured by the Kantian categories of space, time, etc. (Lash, 2006a). Whereas *Erfahrung* is therefore predominantly physical and cognitive, *Erleben* is aesthetic and metaphysical, perhaps closer to the English “intuition”.

Five thoughts follow from Dilthey’s understanding of life: First, since life is ever-changing, we cannot use the methods of the natural sciences that seek to subsume individual cases under general laws. In their positivist reductionism, they “maim” (*verstümmeln*) the world. Second, as we and our world are alive, we can use this structural similarity to understand it. This is the justification of *Verstehen* as method. In this manner, we, third, also understand ourselves: “Human beings only understand themselves through history, never through introspection” (Dilthey, cited in Wirkus, 1996, my translation). Our understanding of the world and of other people is, fourth, always temporary and particular. It is the more comprehensive and easier to achieve the more similar the people are to us, and the more difficult and prone to error the more different they are to us. People that share lives and experiences construe, fifth, shared rules and beliefs that manifest themselves as an “objective spirit” (*objektiver Geist*) (Röd, 2002). This is nothing metaphysical, but a feature emerging from shared practice. We can understand the objective spirit that permeates the religion, art and everyday life of a particular culture in the same manner as we can understand an individual spirit, viz. through *Verstehen*.

While Dilthey was adamant to stick to empirical knowledge, Bergson was interested in the metaphysics of life as the source of becoming and temporality (Röd, 2002). His main gripe with the natural sciences was that they reduced qualitative to quantitative change, for example, a change in taste to the relative number of certain molecules in a mixture. Like the Romantics, he was convinced that a mathematical science of quantities based on quality-less atoms could account for neither creativity nor freedom. On the other hand, he also felt that teleological explanations should be discarded. Evolution, to him, was determined neither by mechanistic nor by teleological causes, but driven by a creative impulse: the *élan vital* (Linstead, 2014). This *élan vital* infused matter, which otherwise is an extended, spatialized affair, with indeterminacy, freedom and variation (Bergson, 1911).

Bergson also paid considerable attention to the temporality and dynamics of life. In fact, his ideas on the nature of becoming and on “durée” (pure duration) make him one of the most prominent process philosophers. He was convinced that the natural sciences had educated us to see everything in terms of quantity and three- or four-dimensional space, and that this prevented us from experiencing pure duration and becoming (Bergson, 1911). In this manner, he created a duality between matter, homogeneity, spatiality and being on one hand, and life, heterogeneity, temporality and becoming on the other hand (Chia & King, 1998; Mutch, 2016; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Simmel, as the third *Lebensphilosoph* I am going to present, used Bergson’s duality, but transformed it into an opposition between life and form, in particular forms of culture (Simmel, 1916, 1918). Life, to him, was still the ultimate creative force behind all empirical manifoldness (Gerhardt, 1971; Pyyhtinen, 2012). It was inexhaustible and therefore never fully captured in representation (his concept of *Mehr-als-Leben*, trans. More-than-life).

It was, moreover and against Bergson, not pure process, but a flow with an individual at the centre. As life imprinted itself on matter, it created a unique individual that could not be subjected to generic (mechanic) laws and principles. Rather, there was a continuous life stream made up of successive individuals.

We grasp life through lived experience, but, as our concepts are abstract and static, we always miss important parts of it. This forms the source of what Simmel called the “tragedy of culture” (*Tragödie der Geisteskultur*). It unfolds as the living mind creates objectifications in

order to capture life and these objectifications sooner or later stifle, break and mangle the variety and novelty of life (Simmel, 1918).

#### 4. Vitalism in the 21st century

Two developments changed the face of vitalism from the 18th to the 21st century. The first was that its major opponent, the mechanistic paradigm of Newtonian physics, gave way to a science of complexity and indeterminacy (Prigogine & Stengers, 2018). The second was that, due to advances in technology, culture and nature moved ever closer together. From artificial intelligence to genetically modified crops, from trademarks on seeds and organisms to lifestyle drugs and enhancers, from understanding human genetics as a mere “coding” to the discovery of the plasticity of the brain, culture and nature have in many instances become indistinguishable. Post-humanism conceives of persons as assemblages or systems that do not constitute a natural unit, but instead an ever-moving system of nodes. Individuality, as Haraway (1991, p. 212) notes, has become a “strategic defence problem” rather than a taken for granted point of departure. In the eyes of its proponents, this gives vitalism new purchase.

In this section, I will present three versions of this new vitalism: vitalism as ethos and pathos, neuroecosociality and strong process theory. I have chosen them because I believe that they capture the major commonalities and differences in new vitalism. That said, the distinctions between the three are neither categorical nor exhaustive. I should also note that not all authors self-identify as vitalists.

My classification has been influenced by Duarte’s (2021) and Lash’s (2006b) discussions of new vitalism. Both authors stress the theory’s focus on flux, movement and becoming, on self-organization and self-causation, the pre-eminence of the whole, on complexity and non-linearity, on affect and value as well as on a monism regarding nature and culture. The intellectual heritage of these ideas should have become clear in my above discussion of romanticism and *Lebensphilosophie*.

##### 4.1. Vitalism as ethos and pathos

The first version indeed rejects vitalism as a positive scientific theory. The idea that life is a special property or force that biology has failed to discover or that constitutes an exception to the laws of physics is considered obsolete. If vitalism is to have its place in science, it is not for what it says, but for what it does, as Greco (2005) suggests. Vitalism in this sense is an ethos rather than a positive theory (Greco, 2021).

The “what is does” refers to the continuous challenging of the biological sciences not to adopt mechanistic explanations and not to assume that they have put life in its box and solved the riddle forever. Vitalism, according to Canguilhem (2008), the major proponent of this version, refers to something that continuously changes of itself and in response to its environment. This is the reason why vitalism keeps reappearing in the history of the natural sciences, as an expression of “life’s permanent distrust of the mechanization of life” (Canguilhem, 2008). Life, in a word, is always new and therefore its characterization can never be definitive. As a result, the ethos of vitalism is one of duty, of being a representative of life rather than its representation (Greco, 2021).

Vitalism as ethos understands the relation between human beings and nature as the co-constitutive relation between the organism and its milieu. Rejecting quasi-mechanical theories of organisms adapting to their milieu, vitalism characterises this relation as the organism selecting parts of the world as *significant*, which then form its milieu. In this selection process, the organism is driven by valuations of the kind “good/bad for me”. The organism adapts its milieu to its needs, just as its needs co-evolve with the milieu. There is an element of struggle between organism and milieu, but this element is only pronounced in the sick organism; a healthy organism is able to cope with its milieu. The organism therefore is always a significant being, or “the being of an organism is its meaning”, as Canguilhem (2008, p. 114) puts it.

Knowledge forms a major part in the organism's relationship with its milieu and can sometimes even become a weapon in its struggle with its milieu.<sup>4</sup> It therefore – contra the Romantics – does not separate humans from nature, but is born of that very relationship. Life, as Osborne (2016, p. 189) formulates, “anticipates problems of knowledge because to be alive is to pose problems in relation to one's environment”. It forms in this sense the “critical background property of the very possibility of knowledge, technique, experience and normativity” (2016, p. 189).

Like knowledge, normativity is inseparably linked to the living organism and its relation to the environment, as “good/bad for me” forms a central way of interpretation of the environment. Life in this sense defines what is good or normal, though it may not always conform to the norms thus generated itself. What it does, however, is to impose itself on the world, build its own milieu and “radiate” from its centre to the world outside. Life, though inescapably relational and co-constituted, is also ruthlessly self-centred as an organism.

Both knowledge and normativity, however, also contain a second aspect that is central for vitalism and that leads us to the understanding of vitalism as pathos, for to know implies to be able to err, and to be healthy (good, normal) implies to be able to be sick. According to Osborne (2016), it is exactly its pathological capacities that make life unique and original. Machines do not fall sick, nor do they make errors of judgment; only living organisms can do that. It is precisely the qualities we are least pleased about that are foundational for our way of life.

It follows that life, value and meaning should not be seen as exceptions to the laws of physics. Rather Canguilhem proposes an inversion of the classical hierarchy of the natural sciences in which biology is the fundamental science, and physics is the science of things with very little life in them. The universe is an organism with nested levels of parts and wholes, active and creative, with concerned organisms investing their environment with meaning and signalling to each other. This is, to Canguilhem, the basic fact into which physics has to fit. Mechanism is a conveniently reductive hypothesis for a very specific and limited set of processes located in the *milieu* of organisms. It lacks, and can afford to lack, the otherwise universal fact of *experiencing* one's milieu and the other organisms within it.

Vitalism as ethos and pathos distinguishes itself from a generic process vitalism, as described below in the third variant. Its emphasis is not on a permanent cosmic becoming, but on the delimited domain of the organism and its selective normativity. In this manner it is rather sceptical or deflationary in comparison with the affirmative, even “celebratory” vitalism we will encounter in the third variant (Osborne, 2016).

#### 4.2. Neuroecosociality

Nikolas Rose and colleagues (Rose, 2013; Rose et al., 2021) take up Canguilhem's ethical stance and push it further, moving from critique to cooperation with the life sciences. They agree that a vitalism in the social sciences must challenge the life sciences, but they do so less with regard to life itself, but with regard to the reductionist understanding of the social that permeates the life sciences. If the human brain and other parts of the body indeed form and respond to social triggers and conditions, as many biological and neurophysical studies show, then social scientists must raise their voices to inform the life sciences of what the social is. They must steer natural scientists away from the notion that human beings are puppets characterised by demographic attributes towards the idea that each of them inhabits a world of complex individual and shared experience. They must move them from social interaction in dyads to a complex fabric of groups, organizations and institutions. They must introduce conventions, norms and traditions into a science based

on animal experiments and “fight or flee”. They must talk about meaning, culture and history. They must, on the empirical plane, conduct studies on the social impact of scientific interventions. They must, in a word, “open up the black box of ‘environment’” (Rose et al., 2021, p. 1) and infuse it with sociological knowledge.

The authors coin the term “Neuroecosociality” to indicate that it is neurological, ecological and social pathways together that shape human life. This is important for two reasons. The first is to improve the actual theories describing the co-constitution of the individual organism and its social environment. If there is co-constitution, the traditional division of labour between the two realms of science no longer works, for this division was built on the assumption that there was first a human organism (→ biology) who having completed its formation started to interact with other humans (→ sociology). If, as we know now, the social already influences the formation and if, more importantly, the formation of brain and body continue throughout a human life, then this division of labour no longer works. In order to understand their own subject matter, biologists have to understand sociology – and vice versa, sociologists will have to complement their philosophical ideas concerning the body with some up to date biological insight.

The second reason for bringing sociological knowledge into biology is a political one. Since the biological–neurophysical understanding of what it is to be human currently informs public imagination and policy making, it is almost a matter of self-defence for the social sciences to add their perspectives. Otherwise, as Rose (2013) fears, they run the risk of being side-lined and rendered irrelevant to public discourse.

The difference of Rose's research programme to what I have above described as sociobiology is the relative weight of the natural and social sciences. In Rose's programme, they are equal partners bringing in their own models and theories whereas in sociobiology the social sciences function as providers of variables in biological research programmes.

Rose, however, also distinguishes his approach from other approaches based on the sociology of the body in emphasizing a biological, as opposed to a philosophical, conception of the body. To him, the body is not an idea or a mode of existence, but an organism comprising neurons, hormones, proteins and all the other very tangible components; components that, we as social scientists must admit, other disciplines are much more knowledgeable about. Therefore, he holds, we cannot meaningfully talk about the human body, its materiality or its affects without taking this “other” knowledge into account. Doing so not only would be epistemically disingenuous, but also more importantly would blind us to important problems in society and the economy, of which the economic exploitation of body and health is only the tip of the iceberg.

He suggests therefore working together with the life sciences to explore the neurobiological conditions of sociality, and vice versa their conditioning through sociality; to understand how the ecological niches humans create for themselves (e.g. cities or workplaces) make them ill; or how poverty, stress, poor housing, trauma, etc. are experienced rather than just physiologically registered. Such studies could also give us insight into what our ecological niches afford, what kinds of needs they create, and how we can develop them and develop us. This would, as indicated above, enable the social sciences to have a say in the epistemic change concerning our relationship to the human that is currently solely driven by the life sciences. Vitalism in this sense is also a permanent inquiry into the conditions of truth regimes about life (Rose, 2013).

This joint work with biologists, however, is unlikely to be harmonious, and Rose is the first to admit that. Given the financial situation in many universities, it is effectively asking social scientists to dine with the people standing on the very fingernails they are holding on to their jobs with. There are also considerable, and predictable, differences in ontology, epistemology and anthropology. There is, however, little choice unless we want to give up shaping popular imagination, self-knowledge and ultimately the governing of life itself.

<sup>4</sup> There is a link to Dewey and American Pragmatism here (Basile & Röd, 2014) that I cannot explore further within the scope of this article.

### 4.3. Vitalism as becoming

A third version of contemporary vitalism stresses the idea of vitality as a self-organizing, creative and continuous process at the basis of the universe. This version is less concerned with biological organisms and even less with homo sapiens, but considers vitality as a metaphysical force permeating all reality (Fraser et al., 2005).

This version is arguably the most philosophically oriented with an illustrious genealogy comprising among others Nietzsche, Bergson, Whitehead, Foucault<sup>5</sup> and Deleuze. The common denominator is an understanding of life as a becoming, that is, a dynamic process that is self-organizing and is therefore only partly subject to external triggers and forces, but maintains a “will” or “trajectory” of its own. Life is, furthermore, creative and full of potentials that can be actualised (or not) in line with that particular trajectory. Of the three, it is also the one most widely discussed and adapted in management and organization studies, often under the label “strong process theory” (among many others, Hernes, 2014; Helin et al., 2014; Weik, 2011; Chia & Langley, 2004; Langley & Tsoukas, 2017).

This conception implies, on one hand, a rejection not only of mechanism, but also of human mastery or complete manipulation. It implies, moreover, a sort of pan-psychism (or pan-theism or pan-spiritism), as the motor of the fundamental creative process as well as of all its filial processes is clearly non-material. Authors do diverge on the question of whether the trajectory in a process is a “push or pull affair”, that is, if the process moves on a certain trajectory because it moves towards a goal (the classic entelechy or finalism) or if it evolves in a more contingent manner, for example, through struggles (Lash, 2006b). What is clear, however, is that the course the process takes remains, at least to a certain extent, indeterminate to an external observer.

The fact that there is nothing outside of process – Dilthey’s *Unhintergebarkeit* – is captured by the term “immanence” (Chia & King, 1998; Olma & Koukouzelis, 2007). Process is conceptualised as ontologically prior to any form of being (e.g. persons, objects). Instead, they become products or outcomes, temporarily stabilised “confluences”, of processes. As such, this kind of vitalism also has rather prominent relational or relativistic features.

## 5. Synopsis

I have argued for a continuous trend of ideas from the 18th-century romanticism via the Lebensphilosophie of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the new vitalism of the 21st century.

Starting in the 18th century, one recurring motif is the rejection of mechanism, reductionism, rationalism and intellectualism that are perceived to dominate the natural sciences, in particular physics. This critique is powered by a belief in life as a creative, self-actualizing, valuating, dynamic force that is fundamental, permeating all of nature, irreducible, non-representable and impossible not to presuppose (*unhintergebar*). It infuses what is otherwise dead matter with variation, indeterminacy and freedom and is the source and motor of all creativity, novelty and becoming. It struggles against the constrictions of form, which is predominantly conceived as objectified cultural or structural human creations. It is therefore also only partly subject to human intervention and mastery.

According to the authors, our prime access to understanding life is our own aliveness, and especially our immediate feeling, perception and understanding of life through non-rational faculties like affect, imagination and intuition.

This broad set of theorizing resurfaces in contemporary debate in the strands I have portrayed above, with each of them focussing on particular aspects and rejecting certain others (see also Fig. 1). Let me stress once again that I conceive of them as clusters rather than as sharply

delineated groups.

The perspective understanding vitalism as ethos and pathos retains, as the only one among the three, the organismic aspect of the old vitalism. Human beings are conceptualised as biological organisms in a milieu. Like all organisms, they have constructed this milieu through normativity and signification and are therefore prone to error and pathologies. This *conditio humana* is something the life sciences do not take into account, at least not when it comes to their own practices. Vitalists therefore need to act as constant advocates of life and its pathological qualities vis-à-vis the life sciences, and also with regard to wider audiences. They also need to act as constant reminders that while life can be defined locally and temporarily, it can never be grasped and defined once and for all, but is perpetually changing and developing.

Neuroecosociality retains the humanist, or at least human-centred, notion of vitalism in focussing on human beings, human life and human sociality. It is based on a collaboration with the life sciences and is interested in generating positive (though not positivist) knowledge regarding the interplay of biological and social forces shaping human life. Like in the first perspective, albeit with a less organismic outlook, neuroecosociality understands human beings as shaping, and being shaped by, their milieu and as capable of neurological, ecological and social development throughout their lives. I consider it political because of its interest in biopolitics and truth regimes.

Vitalism as becoming, finally, represents a decidedly non-humanist, metaphysical or cosmological take on life. Life here is a particular form of process and *as process* is already creative, novel, self-actualizing and indeterminate. Vitalism in this form is directed not just against the natural sciences, but also against all approaches based on “beings”, that is, static and permanent entities. The romantic idea of life now becomes the generic model of what constitutes reality.

### 5.1. Revisiting concern

What does this mean for the conception of concern? Both the ethos/pathos and the neuroecosociality perspective would agree, I think, that concern does not just describe our ability to be affected by our environment, but an active role in shaping this environment through actions, knowledge and sensemaking structures. Since this is a co-constitution of organism and milieu, however, we also need to be aware of how our environment shapes us. In terms of future development, we therefore need to understand the affordances and limits our environment presents us with, as we need to understand our capacity to grow (or wither) in response to our environment. It should be clear from the previous discussion that this is about more than buying ergonomic chairs to prevent back pain. It could be about urban spaces that reduce crime, stress, isolation and sickness. Or about forms of work and consumption that allow people and their environments to grow. Or ...

To this, the ethos/pathos perspective adds the concept of human vulnerability as a source of communal relations with other people and the world at large. If individual human beings are prone to illness and stupidity, it is (only) the community with others that will allow them to survive and flourish. To note, this is not the same as a social contract born of rational self-interestedness, that is, the idea that I can use others to my own ends. The ethos/pathos perspective explicitly rejects such grand plans of mastery, manipulation and control on the basis of human fallibility. Life prevents us from carrying out grand plans, be it because illness or stupidity intervene along the way or be it because life in its permanent creativity and exigency throws new and unexpected things at us. Leadership theory, and management theory more broadly, would have to scale their claims and aspirations back drastically to make room for vulnerability, stupidity and surprise, but they might be the more useful for it.

While sharing the idea of co-constitution, neuroecosociality, in contrast, is less interested in pathologies and more in the shaping of the “overall” concept of what it means to be human, or, to phrase it more politically, in the truth regimes governing what we understand humans

<sup>5</sup> Canguilhem was the doctoral supervisor of Foucault’s.

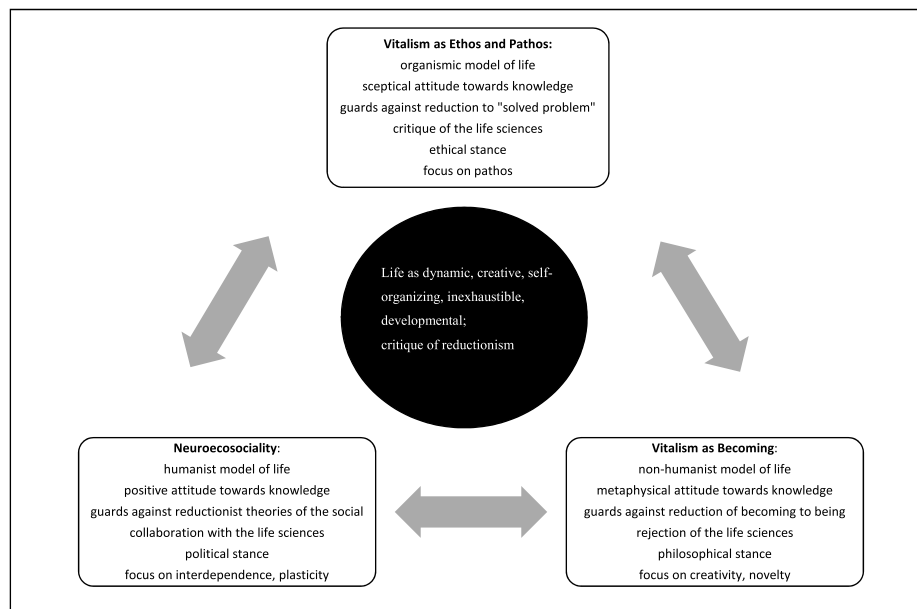


Fig. 1. The triad of new vitalism.

to be. As lay people integrate academic ideas about them into their everyday knowledge (a.k.a. Giddens's concept of double hermeneutics), those scholars who can speak to popular imagination can actually to a certain extent shape human concern.

Concern is, finally, most difficult to find and define in vitalism as becoming, as this strand takes the living organism not as its starting point, but as one example of a more fundamental process. The continuity of the living organism is, first and foremost, a continuity of a creative process and not the result of a socio-biological interaction. The “normativity of the living organism” (Osborne, 2016, p. 185) is downplayed, which renders the link between living organism-valuation-concern that I have described in the first part of the paper far less visible. Instead, we find an emphasis on self-trajectories of processes, which in turn direct attention to the temporal extension of the process across past, present and future. With regard to concern, it is past decisions and valuations that influence present (and future) valuations as the process forms a temporal identity (see, for example, Schultz & Hernes, 2013).

As with any topic in management and organization studies, concern and vulnerability are not completely uncharted terrain, and forays have been undertaken that could be followed and extended. To name but a few: Creed et al. (2020) have discussed how concern and vulnerability induce people to participate in social institutions. Fineman (2008) has explicitly put the vulnerable subject at the centre of her work arguing that only by focussing on human vulnerability can we design realistic and effective institutions and policies. Work on workplace spirituality offers a way into vulnerability through its link with religion, traditionally the discipline most concerned with the frailty and limits of the “human condition”. Ideas about human interaction with the environment could also be taken further with the help of post-humanist conceptions like “affordance” or “agencement”, though they would need a more pronounced biological angle. Both concepts point to the active role of the environment and also to the co-constitution of this active role with human agency and sensemaking, as I have discussed above. Foucault's thoughts on biopower and microphysics provide a conceptual lever on the relationship between the human body and its societal uses, but have up to now been discussed with little regard for human physiology. In a similar vein, Wolkowitz (2002) points to the usage of the concept of “body work” as a potential biological/physiological approach to work and employment that goes beyond contemporary discussions of psychology (e.g. emotional labour) or self-discipline and subjectivation.

## 6. Conclusion

I hope to have shown how the concepts of life and concern are interwoven in a logical as well as a historical sense. This implies that writing about concern requires us to take a stance on the question of life and on vitalism as its most prominent academic representative. I have repeatedly pointed out above that I do not consider my discussion of contemporary vitalist theories exhaustive although I would hold that I have covered the basic trends. Nor do I demand that every scholar writing about concern must become a vitalist.

What I want to guard against is the easy way out – talk about the fashionable (“concern”, “affect”) without devoting some thought to the unfashionable (“life”, “biology”), or worse, to use the convenient darkness of academic taboo to revert to some reductionist, mechanistic strawman representing life and what the life sciences know about it.

Epistemics aside, I want to point to ways in which the social sciences can regain some of their sway over the public imagination, for their own sake, and also for better, more informed political decision-making. Life, experience, care and concern are topics that have the ability to touch people, so we should not leave their definition and use to the natural sciences.

I will readily admit that philosophy is closer to my heart than are the life sciences, and I guess many of my fellow management and organization scholars share this sentiment. It is, however, a sentiment. For those who want to study affect and concern – and this is, after all, a choice – there is no academically honest way to ignore the question of life and what the life sciences have to say about it. This does not imply embracing it in toto, but it implies taking a well-informed, non-reductionist stance on the issue.

## References

- Basile, P., & Röd, W. (2014). *Die Philosophie des ausgehenden 19. und des 20. Jahrhunderts. Pragmatismus und analytische Philosophie*. München: C.H. Beck.
- Bergson, H. (1911). *Creative evolution*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Bortoft, H. (2013). *The wholeness of nature*. Edinburgh: Floris Books.
- Brady, R. H. (1984). The causal dimension of Goethe's morphology. *Journal of Social and Biological Structures*, 7, 325–344.
- Bushardt, S. C., Fretwell, C., & Holdnak, B. (1991). The mentor/protege relationship: A biological perspective. *Human Relations*, 44, 619–639.
- Canguilhem, G. (2008). *Knowledge of life*. Fordham University Press.
- Chia, R., & King, I. (1998). *The organizational structuring of novelty* (Vol. 5, pp. 461–478). Organization.



- Chia, R., & Langley, A. (2004). The first organization studies summer workshop: Theorizing process in organizational research (call for papers). *Organization Studies*, 25, 1486.
- Clarkson, G. P. (2014). Twenty-first century employment relationships: The case for an altruistic model. *Human Resource Management*, 53, 253–269.
- Creed, W. D., Hudson, B. A., Okhuysen, G. A., & Smith-Crowe, K. (2020). *A place in the world: Vulnerability, wellbeing, and the ubiquitous evaluation that animates participation in institutional processes*. online: Academy of Management Review.
- Duarte, L. F. (2021). The vitality of vitalism in contemporary anthropology: Longing for an ever green tree of life. *Anthropological Theory*, 21(2), 131–153.
- Fineman, M. A. (2008). The vulnerable subject: Anchoring equality in the human condition. *Yale JI & Feminism*, 20, 1.
- Fotaki, M. (2014). *The psychosocial and organization studies: Affect at work*. Springer.
- Fotaki, M., Kenny, K., & Vachhani, S. J. (2017). Thinking critically about affect in organization studies: Why it matters. *Organization*, 24, 3–17.
- Foucault, M. (2000). *Ethics*. London: Penguin.
- Fraser, M., Kember, S., & Lury, C. (2005). *Inventive life: Approaches to the new vitalism* (Vol. 22, pp. 1–14).
- Frederick, W. C. (2000). Notes for a third millennial manifesto: Renewal and redefinition in business ethics. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 159–167.
- Freese, J., Li, J.-C. A., & Wade, L. D. (2003). The potential relevances of biology to social inquiry. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 233–256.
- Gerhardt, U. (1971). Immanenz und Widerspruch: Die philosophischen Grundlagen der Soziologie Georg Simmels und ihr Verhältnis zur Lebensphilosophie Wilhelm Diltheys. *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung*, 25, 276–292.
- Greco, M. (2005). On the vitality of vitalism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22, 15–27.
- Greco, M. (2021). Vitalism now – a problematic. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 38, 47–69.
- Haraway, D. (1991). The biopolitics of postmodern bodies: Determinations of self in immune system discourse. In D. Haraway (Ed.), *Simians, cyborgs, and women. The reinvention of nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Heidegger, M. (1977). *Sein und Zeit*. Frankfurt/Main: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Helin, J., Hernes, T., Hjorth, D., & Holt, R. (2014). *The oxford handbook of process philosophy and organization studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hernes, T. (2014). *A process theory of organization*. Oxford: Oup.
- Jensen, A. K. (2011). *Johann wolfgang von Goethe. Internet Encyclopedia of philosophy*.
- Jørgensen, L., & Holt, R. (2019). Organization, atmosphere, and digital technologies: Designing sensory order. *Organization*, 26, 673–695.
- Kenny, K. (2012). ‘Someone big and important’: Identification and affect in an international development organization. *Organization Studies*, 33, 1175–1193.
- Krefting, L. (2000). Reconsidering essentialism. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 9, 186–192.
- Kuhn, D. (1987). Goethe’s relationship to the theories of development of his time. *Goethe and the sciences: A reappraisal*. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Langley, A., & Tsoukas, H. (2017). *The Sage handbook of process organization studies*. Sage.
- Lash, S. (2006a). *Experience. Theory, Culture & Society*, 23, 335–341.
- Lash, S. (2006b). Life (vitalism). *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23, 323–329.
- Lenoir, T. (1987). The eternal laws of form: Morphotypes and the conditions of existence in goethe’s biological thought. In F. Amrine, F. Zucker, & H. Wheeler (Eds.), *Goethe and the sciences: A reappraisal*. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Linstead, S. (2014). Henri Bergson. In J. Helin, T. Hernes, D. Hjorth, & R. Holt (Eds.), *The oxford handbook of process philosophy and organization studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lok, J., Creed, W. E. D., Dejorjy, R., & Voronov, M. (2017). Living institutions: Bringing emotions into organizational institutionalism. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. Lawrence, & R. Meyer (Eds.), *The sage handbook of organizational institutionalism*. London: Sage.
- Mutch, A. (2016). The limits of process: On (re) reading Henri Bergson. *Organization*, 23, 825–839.
- Naydler, J. (1996). *Goethe on science. An anthology of goethe’s scientific writings*. Edinburgh: Floris Books.
- Nielsen, F. (1994). Sociobiology and sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 20, 267–303.
- Olma, S., & Koukoulis, K. (2007). Introduction: Life’s (re-) emergences. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24, 1–17.
- Osborne, T. (2016). Vitalism as pathos. *Biosemiotics*, 9, 185–205.
- Prigogine, I., & Stengers, I. (2018). *Order out of chaos: Man’s new dialogue with nature*. Verso Books.
- Pyyhtinen, O. (2012). Life, death and individuation: Simmel on the problem of life itself. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29, 78–100.
- Richards, R. (2002). *The romantic conception of life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Röd, W. (2002). Die Lebensphilosophie. In R. Thurnher, W. Röd, & H. Schmidinger (Eds.), *Geschichte der philosophie. Die Philosophie des ausgehenden 19. Und des 20. Jahrhunderts*. München: C. H. Beck.
- Rodi, F. (1998). Wilhelm Dilthey. Der Strukturzusammenhang des Lebens. In M. Fleischer, & J. Hennigfeld (Eds.), *Philosophen des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Rose, N. (2013). The human sciences in a biological age. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30, 3–34.
- Rose, N., Birk, R., & Manning, N. (2021). Towards neuroecosociality: Mental health in adversity. *Theory, Culture & Society*.
- Sayer, A. (2011). *Why things matter to people*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press.
- Schultz, M., & Hernes, T. (2013). A temporal perspective on organizational identity. *Organization Science*, 24, 1–21.
- Simmel, G. (1916). *Kant und Goethe*. Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag.
- Simmel, G. (1918). *Lebensanschauung*. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.
- Thompson, M., & Willmott, H. (2016). The social potency of affect: Identification and power in the immanent structuring of practice. *Human Relations*, 69, 483–506.
- Tsoukas, H., & Chia, R. (2002). On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change. *Organization Science*, 13, 567–582.
- Voronov, M., & Weber, K. (2020). People, actors, and the humanizing of institutional theory. *Journal of Management Studies*, 57, 873–884.
- Vreja, L. O., Balan, S., & Bosca, L. C. (2016). An evolutionary perspective on toxic leadership. *Management and Economics Review*, 1, 217–228.
- Weik, E. (2011). In deep waters: Process theory between Scylla and charybdis. *Organization*, 18, 655–672.
- Weik, E. (2012). Introducing “the creativity of action” into institutionalist theory. *M@nagement*, 15, 564–581.
- Weik, E. (2017). Goethe and the study of life: A comparison with husserl and Simmel. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 50, 335–357.
- Weik, E. (2019). Value, affect and beauty: The weird sisters of institutionalist theory. A ritualist perspective. *European Management Journal*, 37, 233–243.
- Wenzel, M. (1983). Goethes Morphologie in ihrer Beziehung um darwinistischen Entwicklungsdenken. *Medizinhistorisches Journal*, 18, 52–68.
- Wirkus, B. (1996). *Deutsche Sozialphilosophie in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft. Jahrhunderts.
- Wolkowitz, C. (2002). The social relations of body work. *Work, Employment and Society*, 16, 497–510.
- Zurawicki, L. (2010). *Neuromarketing: Exploring the brain of the consumer*. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg.