Toward a Theory of an Ontology of Possibility in Organizational Settings

Drawing from the Elusive Essence of and the Sense of Expansiveness in Phelpsian Agency, Less Hierarchical Organizing, and Caring Relationality

Lauri Pietinalho
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Lauri Pietinalho

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Abstract

With "an ontology of possibility," I point to the mode of engagement that people come to embody when oriented toward an opening future and opening of future from the present, engaging with and exploring beyond the boundaries of established social construction. It is a mode that is inherently involved in entrepreneurial (or any) novelty but also in true collaboration where members do not resort to zero-sum optimization among themselves. I take up the term from Lawrence and Maitlis (2012), who employed it to describe a "belief system" cultivated in caring groups, which "emphasizes the socially constructed nature of both past and present and thus facilitates action and an appreciation of its limits" (p. 641). I hold that the implied mode of engagement is more fundamental and implicitly present in a range of organizational phenomena and theories than what the originating work or organizational scholarship typically considers.

The compiling part of the dissertation works toward a way to perceive the organizational premises of an ontology of possibility in organizational settings. It achieves this by articulating and then building on the experiential structure of an ontology of possibility. I begin by elaborating how an ontology of possibility and "caring relationality" that fosters it both involve enduring "not-yet knowing" and embracing of social risk in an uncannily way that is irreducible and elusive to cognitive choice, even beliefs alone. Consequently, without what I denote as "feeds" for a "sense of expansiveness" beyond a caring group, an ontology of possibility within erodes. I explicate archetypal relations of an organization with its environment that enable such external feeds. Finally, the thesis contends that, internally, which is often a more relevant dimension for members of larger organizations with less direct access to outside feeds, an ontology of possibility and caring relationality are not fostered by any particular set of organizational values or structures but by their unfolding toward also embracing contradictory tenets.

The thesis contributes by maturing our conception of an ontology of possibility and developing a perspective on novelty and relations in organizational life that conjoins a phenomenological and an impersonal organizational level of inquiry. The dissertation consists of the compiling theory development about an ontology of possibility and four contributing essays. The first and second essay hypothesize on the role of organizational evolution and values, respectively, in Edmund Phelps' theory of economic dynamism. The third and fourth essays report a multiyear qualitative study on less hierarchical organizing, depicting how, per se, contradicting practices might uphold certain open-endedness in organizational tenets. The compiling theory builds on and elaborates ideas and findings in the four essays into an emergent layer of argumentation and vocabulary beyond the domains of the individual essays.

Keywords An ontology of possibility, caring relationality, sense of expansiveness
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**Tiivistelmä**
"Mahdollisuuden ontologia" (an ontology or possibility) viittaa siihen inhimillisen kokemuksen ja hämhotuksen tilaan, jossa suuntaudumme nykyhetken ympäristöömme vallitsevan todellisuuden avautuvuuden jatkuvan mahdollisuuden näkökulmasta. Tämä siis eroautoksena tilasta, jossa ensisijaisessa laskelmoimme omaa tai muiden tulevaa asemaa vakiintuneiden käsitysten viitteistöissä. Tällainen määrittelemättömäät kohtu uskaltavuuksen suuntautuneisuus on oleellisesti läsnä toiminnassa joka tavalla tai toisella laajentaa käsitystämme ympäristön linalaisuuksista, eli ”muuttaa maailmaa” enemmän tai vähemmän, niillä tavalla annalta tiukasti rajaamaan massassa rakentavassa yhteistyössä. Huolimatta tämän sisäisen kokemuksellisen ulottuvuuden keskeisyystä lukuisissa organisaatioissa ja organisatorisiminimiissä ilmiöissä, tutkimus hyvin harvoin ottaa sitä lähtökohdakseen.

Väitöskirjan yhteenvetävä osuus hahmottelee organisaatioita linalaisuuksia mahdollisuuden ontologialle organisaatioympäristöissä. Perustan hahmotuksen mahdollisuuden ontologian fenomenologisen rakenteen tarkastelulle. Totean rakenteen sisältävän "vielä-tietämättömyyden" sietämistä ja laskelmoimatonta sosiaalisen riskin hyväksymistä tavalla, joka ei ole kokemuksellisesti kognition täysin tavoittavissa. Seuraten relationaalisuusrelationaalisto (kuten Shotter, 2010; Gergen, 2009), avaan, kuinka tällainen suuntautuneisuus on sidoksissa "väliittävän yhteydellisyden" (caring relationality) kanssa. Teen huomion mahdollisuuden ontologian ja tällaisen yhteydellisyyden jaettua sisäisestä rakenteesta. Tästä johtuen, huolimatta väliltävyyden tai uskaltavuuden (esim. kulttuurisista tai henkilökohtaisista) myönteisistä lähtökohdista, kyvykkyyssuuntautua mahdollisuuden ontologian kautta organisaatioissa latistuu ilman ulkopuolisia ”syötteitä ” (feeds) ”laajentuvuuden kokemukselle” (a sense of expansiveness). Esitän näiden selkiöjen pohjalta ensin kolme arkkiityyppejä organisaation suhteelle sen ympäristön kanssa, joissa tällaiset ulkopuoliset syötteet ovat mahdollisia. Toiseksi hahmottelen kuinka suuremmissa organisaatioissa, joissa suora yhteys ulkopuolisiin syötteisiin usein ohenee, sisäisesti syötteet juontuvat itse organisaatiokontekstin avautuvuudesta ja kvalitatiivisesta laajentuvuudesta.


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I want to start this section by mentioning some of the people whose expressions of belief in me (partly long) before working on this dissertation have had, I have come to consider, an implicit but pivotal impact on, well, me and this dissertation. I am not sure whether this work is a testament to their confidence, but I figured it would be a proper place for coming to recognize them. Thank you, Otto Donner, Prof. Juha-Antti Lamberg, and Jyrki Vainionpää.

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New York City, December 2021
Lauri Pietinalho
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List of Contributing Essays

This doctoral dissertation consists of a compiling theorizing part and of the following essays that contributed to the compiling theorizing.


Author’s Contribution

Lauri Pietinalho is the sole author of the compiling part of this dissertation.

**Essay 1**: Lauri Pietinalho is the sole author. He developed and explicated the theoretical contributions and wrote the essay.

**Essay 2**: Lauri Pietinalho is the sole author. He developed and explicated the theoretical contributions and wrote the essay.

**Essay 3**: Lauri Pietinalho is the sole author. He conducted data collection, developed the theoretical contributions, conducted data analyses, and wrote the essay. Data collected for essay 4 was also utilized in the article.

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Compiling Part:
Toward a Theory of an Ontology of Possibility in Organizational Settings
1. Introduction

The focal phenomenon of this dissertation is the human mode of engagement where we are oriented toward an opening future and opening of future from the present, in contrast to excessively controlling what lies ahead, ruminating in past mistakes or misfortunes, or idly fantasizing of detached worlds. That is, the mode where we conceive the landscape before us as unfolding and involving a potential to be responsive to our actions (Bloch, 1995; Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012). It is the mode, more conceptually speaking, where we are able to engage with and beyond the boundaries of prevailing social construction (Gergen, 2009a; Shotter, 2010): instead of being preoccupied with optimizing our position in an existing order, we endure the social and epistemological strain involved in opening and being exposed to the new; where we emerge as able to see and reframe challenges in the present through humble perceptiveness and daring effort (Spinosa, Flores, & Dreyfus, 1997). “Changing the world” (Bloch, 1995) by “liberating action” toward more “complex ends” (Dewey, 1917). Applying a term from Lawrence and Maitlis (2012), I refer to this mode of engagement as “an ontology of possibility.”

An ontology of possibility is rare yet elemental in the human condition (cf. Bloch, 1995). Enabling members to embrace such a mode of engagement is also essential in what contemporary organizations are hoped to exhibit: It would seem fair to claim that an ontology of possibility, as shortly described above, is necessarily present in any true innovation and novelty (Spinosa et al., 1997). Also, more mundanely, the extent to which participants can engage with the world and each other through such an orientation is the extent to which they can collaborate in the full sense of the word. That is, an ontology of possibility is indicated if we take collaboration to involve “not only means but also ends” (Adler & Heckscher, 2018: 106), not just coordination of externally set tasks or tactical cooperation. Such collaboration requires participants to embrace an orientation toward an opening future and stepping beyond conceiving their situation as zero-sum among the collaborators.

This dissertation, explicitly its “compiling part,” builds toward a new way to consider the organizational premises for an ontology of possibility in organizational settings. Somewhat unconventionally, rather than (just) summarizing the four essays, the compiling part achieves the compilation through an emergent layer of theorizing that builds on, applies, and in some ways illuminates the phenomena studied in the individual papers.
I arrive at assuming the essentially phenomenological perception of organizational life from three seemingly separate starting points. First, the original motivation for the dissertation is the work of Edmund Phelps, the Nobel laureate in economics, who I find to portray true innovation and consequent dynamism of the economy as fundamentally based on people embracing the kind of mode of engagement described here as an ontology of possibility (Phelps, 2013, 2018). For Phelps, experiencing the use of our imagination, growing in encountering challenges, and voyaging into the unknown are innate for humans but contingent on broader circumstances. The contributing essays 1 and 2 are written in the context of the Phelpsian thesis of “Mass Flourishing” (2013) and discuss the logic for how organizational evolution and dynamics of values affect operating from such drives. Second, empirical research on “less hierarchical organizing” (Heckscher, 1994; Lee & Edmondson, 2017) in essays 3 and 4 contributes to and motivates central elements of the emerging theory. These essays qualitatively study practices upholding paradoxes of authority in less hierarchical organizing in three case companies. When studying the organizations, it struck me how certain open-endedness in the logic of organizing might upkep a sense of expansiveness that, as I argue in this compiling theory, is relevant in organizational premises for embracing an ontology of possibility. Finally, my theorizing expands particularly on the relational theorists’ view that the immediate premises of an ontology of possibility are in experiences of care (Gergen, 2009b; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003). Appropriately, I take up the central label from Thomas B. Lawrence and Sally Maitlis who argued that an ethic of care in work teams might beget “an ontology of possibility”—“a belief system that emphasizes the socially constructed nature of both past and present and, thus, facilitates action and an appreciation of its limits” (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012: 641).

Traditionally, beyond individual visionaries (e.g., Follett, 1942; Lewin, 1944; McGregor, 1960; Roethlisberger, 1977), a person’s “mode of engagement” has been a kind of nontheme in organizational thought. Under rationalistic assumptions, individuals were considered to strive for what an organization extrinsically incentivizes, including to “invent new things” or “cooperate,” with better or worse competencies to do so. Social structures were mainly theorized as unchangeable by the people within them. In the past few decades, in contrast, the more experiential and subtle human phenomena involving engagement and the quality of relationality have become widely conceived as decisive in and for organizational life. Indeed, positive organizational researchers have emerged to consider the kind of psychological and social conditions that foster, e.g., creativity, agency, and learning (e.g., Kahn, 1990; Edmondson, 2003; Spreitzer et al., 2005; Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012; Barrick et al., 2015). Entrepreneurship and strategy scholars have started to ask about the socially interwoven and the not necessarily entirely cognitively explainable sources of strategic novelty (e.g., Felin, Kauffman, Koppl, & Longo, 2014; Felin & Zenger, 2009). Sociologists of institutions are predominantly interested in how agents can change the structures they are embedded in (e.g., Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009; Nilsson, 2015; Välikangas & Carlsen, 2020).
While sharing a phenomenal context with these notable domains, this compiling theory sits somewhat on their sidelines. My work associates, for example, with positive organizational scholarship by expediently drawing from it, but does not attempt to contest or directly contribute to it using its own logic. Instead, I am drawn by and draw from the experientially elusive essence of an ontology of possibility (perhaps not unlike Roethlisberger, 1977). To create, to collaborate, to care, all require a certain leap of faith, certain trust in the unknown, in an undefined expansiveness of reality, that is intuitively palpable for all but that we rarely consider when conceptualizing such phenomena.

The dissertation develops a perspective on human agency and relations in organizational life that links the phenomenological and an organizational level of inquiry. My theorizing builds on a view that both an ontology of possibility and the kind of caring relationality that fosters it can be manifested and driven by but largely escape or transcend any certain acts, behaviors, resources, or sequences of events. I conceive the sources of an ontology of possibility as sort of orthogonal and undergirding to such externally observable substantive or processual facets—as occurring through them rather than by them. Building on this elaboration of an experiential structure of an ontology of possibility and of its entwining with relationality, the thesis comes to consider organizational premises of an ontology of possibility in two ways. On the one hand, I theorize on the foundational flows between “an organization” and its external environment in terms of enabling an ontology of possibility within. On the other hand, I offer a lens to the role of the internal dynamics of the “organizational level”—the abstract that we conceive as the whole of which our efforts are a part of, but that is beyond our immediate tangible intersubjective relations (Weick, 1995). I consider that the arguments of the thesis are rather agnostic to the conceptualized form of organizing of a whole (attempting some ‘integration’ of efforts, though; March & Simon, 1958), be it a hierarchy of bureaucrats, a network of agents, or a community of collaborators.

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1 The thesis can also be seen to be a part of a nascent and scattered group of writings taking such elusive (rather than “hard” cognitive) experientiality as a starting (or at least a pivotal) point for theorizing on organizational phenomena (e.g., Carlsen, Hagen, & Mortensen, 2012; Nilsson, 2019; Thomas, Sugiyama, Rochford, Stephens, & Kanov, 2018; Weick, 2019).

2 Overall, an implied view of “theory of organization” of the thesis loosely falls to the ‘process’ perspective (Langley & Tsoukas, 2016; Weick, 1979). Most centrally because the thesis is motivated by conceiving a representational ontology as insufficient in explaining the premises of “an ontology of possibility” in organizational settings. However, the thesis does not come to hold either entity or process as categorically primary. Different parts of the work also lean toward different ends of the spectrum of a ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ process view (Bakken & Hernes, 2006). The experiential level described comes close to a ‘strong’ process view. The focal experiential phenomenon is a sense of a process, the thesis conceives relationality and experienced flows as elemental, and it draws in part from Henri Bergson (one of the originals of process ontology), but the theorizing here also clearly maintains a role for the individual and their agency beyond a mere experiencer and a derivative of the flows. For the organizational level, my analysis is rather ‘entitative’ (Chia, 1999); I focus on external and internal flows and so abstract a threshold between “an organization” and its environment.
In this compiling part, I work bottom-up toward an organizational logic of the premises of an ontology of possibility in organizational settings (Figure 1).

Following the introduction, chapter 2 of this compiling part lays out the premises for the organizational arguments by elaborating an individual’s experience of an ontology of possibility as a mode of engagement toward “the world.” Building on theorists considering the experiential structure of engaging with the boundaries of established social construction (particularly Bloch, 1995; Shotter, 2010; Spinosa et al., 1997), I conclude that such an engagement unavoidably involves enduring “not-yet knowing” and embracing social “risk” in an uncalculated way that is irreducible and ultimately unreachable to cognitive choice or certain behaviors alone. Specifically, I consider how, in an ontology of possibility, we are implicitly oriented toward and motivated by the expansiveness itself rather than by a prospected position of us or others in such an expansion.

In chapter 3, following relational scholars (Gergen, 2009b; Kenttä, 2020), particularly theorists of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003), and relationally oriented psychologists (Benjamin, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Seligman, 2017), I outline how an individual’s propensity to engage with the world through an ontology of possibility is fostered in “caring relationality.” That is, in experiences of human connection where “the particulars of the material dependencies of the human condition and human value irrespective of those dependencies, are paradoxically and often tacitly, sensed as equally embraced and accepted” (quoting essay 1). Notably, such caring relationality does not follow from any certain form of relationship (like with a parent or a partner), act, or a scale of acts, but from any “carer’s” grounded psychological extension and exposure of self in an act toward us. Caring relationality in the sense in which I develop the notion here is “a silent expression of trust on deductively unpredictable potentials in the other and in what unfolds” (essay 1). Such expressions are ultimately irreducible and unreachable to cognitive choice or certain behaviors alone. I conclude, in
other words, that someone embracing an ontology of possibility toward us fosters our propensity for an ontology of possibility (both toward the world and others). Articulating this relational premise of an ontology of possibility, though, only moves the organizational premises from one elusive source to the next. To advance from this circular reference, in chapter 3.2, I separate a propensity to engage in an ontology of possibility and the feeds for such engagement in lived life. Specifically, I argue that regardless of one’s faculties, an ontology of possibility ultimately also requires experiencing realized expansiveness in oneself as a result of being cared for, in one’s actions of creation or caring, or in one’s relevant surroundings.

Chapter 4 finally contemplates on the organizational premises of an ontology of possibility in organizational settings. I take the notions developed in the preceding chapters as the basis for this theorizing. First, chapter 4.1 separates between the intersubjective level and “the organization” by considering the limits of an ontology of possibility within groups of concrete “enduring relationships” in organizational settings (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012). I use Weick’s (1995) notion of “intersubjective” for such level to emphasize the categorical difference between actual human relations and the organizational setting beyond such relations (cf. also Noddings, 2003). I argue that regardless of the group’s propensity to positive relational dynamics, orienting through an ontology of possibility within the group ultimately becomes gradually more challenging and eventually is bound to flatten without external “feeds.” Consequently, I argue that for an organization to foster an ontology of possibility (and/or caring relationality) with some consistency, its relationship with “the world” needs to permit such feeds. Chapter 4.2 describes such relationships through three archetypes: the logic of school/hospital, experiencing the expansiveness of the cared-for; the logic of apprenticeship/measured turnover, experiencing the expansiveness of new members; and the logic of institutional entrepreneurship, experiencing the expansiveness of the world. Finally, chapter 4.3 considers manifestation of sensed expansiveness internal to an organization. Generally, in larger organizations, rather than an immediate experiencing of the outside world, external feeds are often mediated by “the organizational level” or translated into the expansiveness of the “relevant surroundings” (that is, of “the organization”). Feeds manifest as changes in the landscape of possibility that the organizational level restricts or enables for the intersubjective level. Essentially, I argue that instead of any given tenet of organizing, structure or set of values, our experiences of organizational cultivation of an ontology of possibility are ultimately engendered by a sense of expansiveness in those tenets. This happens, for example, when a cultural dogma of “caring” expands toward accepting rationalistic and universalistic justifications, or vice versa. I conclude by offering a perspective on “less hierarchical organizing” as sustaining a sense of unfolding in the organizational level through enduring upholding of contradictory tenets of organizing.
2. Elaborating the Experiential Structure of an Ontology of Possibility

I employ the term “an ontology of possibility” to point toward an inner mode of engagement where one comes to implicitly trust in the expansive nature of reality and so being able to attentively act on the edge and explore beyond a prevailing social construction. In this chapter, I aim at explicating this mode and what it entails. First, in chapter 2.1, I articulate a view of the experiential structure of an ontology of possibility toward the world, utilizing and building on insights of a handful of scholars that I consider having been writing of the phenomenon, directly or in essence. Then, in chapter 2.2, I argue that this kind of engagement with the world palpably involves an internal effort and motivation that are elusive to mere cognitive choice—an aspect that later forms a foundation for the organizational arguments. At the end of the section, in chapter 2.3, I briefly contrast an ontology of possibility to some related notions of human motivation and internal orientation to further contextualize the phenomenon and the concept.

2.1 An ontology of possibility toward the world

Many scholars can be seen to have been fascinated with the internal orientation referred here as an ontology of possibility. I adopt the label of “an ontology of possibility” from Lawrence and Maitlis (2012). However, I consider that the mode of engagement that they essentially point to is more profound and nuanced (and elusive) than what their paper had a chance to contemplate. In elaborating the internal orientation in an ontology of possibility, I utilize particularly the perceptiveness of Ernst Bloch’s *Principle of Hope* (1995), John Shotter’s presentation of “social construction on the edge” (2010), Edmund Phelps’ conception of human agency that fuels true innovation (2013), and Charles Spinosa’s, Fernando Flores’, and Hubert L. Dreyfus’ depiction of entrepreneurs’ “skill of cultural innovation” as they “disclose new worlds” (1997). I also draw from selected pragmatists (Bergson, 1946; Dewey, 1917). While these accounts did not employ the wording “an ontology of possibility,” I write as if they did.

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3 “An ontology of possibility” is not to be confused with “the ontology of possibilities” in metaphysics (e.g., Borghini and Williams, 2008). Although, incidentally, what Borghini and Williams propose in their “dispositional theory of possibility”, is manifested in the mode of being of an ontology of possibility as considered here.
Essentially, what these accounts (and I) aim to depict, I find, is a mode of engagement where we, rather than acting along, come to act on and create beyond prevailing social construction. With “prevailing” or “established” social construction, I refer to collectively constructed senses of how the world works, what is and what is meaningful in it, how we and others relate to it and to each other, what is to be appreciated and what rejected. An ontology of possibility is a mode of engagement, a relationship with reality that is open to and capable of expanding such conceptions (and reality), freeing experience toward “more complex ends” (Dewey, 1917). I express an ontology of possibility in reference to prevailing social construction as it is the central point of reference and of departure for an ontology of possibility.⁴

There are two interdependent elements that best characterize and outline the contents of the experience of the mode of engagement that I refer here as an ontology of possibility:

1. Experiencing and conceiving the present as unfolding from the point of prevailing social construction.
2. Acting on the edge of that unfolding by enduring “not-yet knowing” and leaning toward “what is becoming.”

In a way, the former is a manifestation of an ontology of possibility in a static inspection. However, as will be detailed below, the former alone is superficial and not possible without the latter in lived life, and hence, an ontology of possibility ultimately entails both.

In an ontology of possibility, we experience and conceive the present and the world around us as unfolding, instead of us being fixated with manifestations, confines, or rewards of an established social reality. Lawrence and Maitlis point toward this, for example, by describing how an ontology of possibility “emphasizes the socially constructed nature of both past and present” (p. 641). In a similar way, John Shotter spoke about recognizing that “our relations to our surroundings are not just simply relations of a causal kind, or of a systematic, logical, or rational kind either, but are living, dynamic relations (Shotter, 2010: 8, italics in original). Moreover, borrowing the words of Kenneth Gergen, Lawrence and Maitlis depict an ontology of possibility as involving a sense that “the

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⁴ Social construction is a broadly and somewhat loosely used term. In my sense of it, I loosely follow Kenneth Gergen (2009a) and John Shotter (2010). “[W]hat we take to be the world importantly depends on how we approach it, and how we approach it depends on the social relationships we are a part of” (Gergen, 2009a: 2). I follow social constructionists in conceiving that our senses of things and particularly their meanings are to a significant degree formed through relations with and to others, particularly when it comes to moving such senses of others (i.e., “acting on and creating beyond prevailing social construction”). Our meanings become meanings in the context of meanings of others; even for the lone wolf the few interactions with other humans (or at least other living creatures) dominate most meanings. However, my study here is not a “social constructionist” study, as per primarily advocating the related worldview. Instead, this framing of social processes and meanings is essential in appreciating the (hardships of the) internal orientation of an ontology of possibility. What we come to work on, what we pay attention to, and how we relate to one another begin in the context of prevailing social construction. To engage in an ontology of possibility is to come to act on the edge, against, and beyond such prevailing conceptions of what is or can be, and an ontology of possibility is what then comes to change such conceptions.
world in which [one] works provides a ‘vast spectrum of possibility, an endless invitation to innovation’” (Gergen, 2009a: 5, quoted in Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012: 653, italics added).

Particularly pragmatist philosophers can be seen as describing and being fascinated with this (first) aspect of the experience denoted here as an ontology of possibility, where the mind stretches beyond the prevailing construction of reality to unshackle action from its confines. For example, John Dewey purports:

[T]he function of mind is to project new and more complex ends—to free experience from routine and from caprice. Not the use of thought to accomplish purposes already given either in the mechanism of the body or in that of the existent state of society, but the use of intelligence to liberate and liberalize action... (Dewey, 1917)

Quite similarly, calling it a “philosophical intuition,” Henri Bergson describes (by referring to the daemon of Socrates in this excerpt) how the mind, in such a mode, looks beyond established paradigms:

Faced with currently accepted ideas, theses which seemed evident, affirmations which had up to that time passed as scientific, [the daemon] whispers into the philosopher’s ear the word: Impossible! Impossible, even though the facts and the reasons appeared to invite you to think it possible and real and certain. Impossible, because a certain experience, confused perhaps but decisive, speaks to you through my voice, because it is incompatible with the facts cited and the reasons given, and because hence these facts must have been badly observed, these reasonings false. (Bergson, 1946: 129, italics in original)

In an ontology of possibility, we sense “possibility” through opening of reality, rather than as prospecting a heightened likelihood of some concrete outcomes, which are, conceptually, within the frame of prevailing construction of our social reality. I consider that Lawrence and Maitlis point toward this aspect with the notion of “transcendent hope” (Marcel, 1962). Referring to Douglas Ezzy (2000), they define it as “not oriented to achieving a goal” but, rather, a ‘mode of experiencing... [that] embraces uncertainty and finitude, celebrating surprise, play, novelty and mystery” (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2012: 653, quoting Ezzy, 2000: 607). An ontology of possibility appears in “polyphonic future-oriented stories” that reject the superiority of standard universal paths (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012: 650). However, here, I consider that sharpening of the internal experience of “not orienting to achieving a goal” is needed. Specifically, rather than necessarily involving haziness of the imagined “more complex ends”, the “celebration of surprise” transpires from not fixing or abstracting a certain external benefit or value (which would, by definition, be within the context of the current construction) for the unfolding. It is the mode where the vision of a general direction of the future can be strong, but the intrigue of the opening is not in what that opening then would mean to something or someone. Moreover, a “celebration of surprise” can only be experienced as a side product of venturing
and working on something, not as a conscious goal for one’s actions. I will discuss this in more detail in the passages on the elusiveness of effort and motivation in an ontology of possibility.

Furthermore, consequently, an ontology of possibility is not detached fantasizing. Instead, the notion points to the mode where we are oriented toward an opening future but from the present, acknowledging our context and situation. Maitlis and Lawrence (2012) purported how, while stretching toward opening possibilities, an ontology of possibility facilitates an appreciation of the limits of action. For Dewey too, such expanse that arches realities, instead of abandoning one for the other, seemed to be the heart of the mind’s (optimal) function. That is, while the mind’s foremost concern would be “with the as-yet-unrealized”, it would still visit “the established” and “the realized” as “conditions of the realization of possibilities” (Dewey, 1917: 29). It is a mode where we acknowledge the challenges in a present moment but do not concentrate on “fixing” what is “broken”, where we conceive the connection between our challenges and wider conditions but do not avoid our responsibility for our situation or blame others for it (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012).

This is also a point that Ernst Bloch explicitly made (in analyzing the constitution of what he referred to as “hope”). Generally, Bloch saw humans as oriented toward the future of the “Not-Yet-Conscious” rather than the past of the “No-Longer-Conscious”. In this context, the first and perhaps most central analytical separation Bloch made in his opus magnum is the difference between two kinds of such orientations: “Everybody’s life is pervaded by daydreams: one part is just stale, even enervating escapism, even booty for swindlers, but another part is provocative, is not content just to accept the bad which exists, does not accept renunciation” (Bloch, 1995: 3). The latter, of course, is what I have discussed here as an ontology of possibility, an orientation he describes, for example, as follows:

Thinking means venturing beyond. But in such a way that what already exists is not kept under or skated over. Not in its deprivation, let alone in moving out of it. Not in the causes of deprivation, let alone in the first signs of the change which is ripening within it. That is why real venturing beyond never goes into the mere vacuum of an In-Front-of-Us, merely fanatically, merely visualizing abstractions. Instead, it grasps the New as something that is mediated in what exists and is in motion, although to be revealed the New demands the most extreme effort of will. (p.4)

Consequently, when we engage with the world through an ontology of possibility, we uphold, among other possible wordings for it, a paradox between knowing and not knowing. Or, inspired by Dewey and Bloch, we could say, “not-yet
knowing”. When describing humans pushing the boundaries of an institutionalized conception of reality, theorists typically first underscore the separation from rationalist reasoning (considered here broadly as any close-ended contemplation) and from cognitive efforts to force an answer or meet a certain goal, as those, by definition, confine us in a prevailing framing. In the Heideggerian phenomenology-inspired treatise, Spinosa and colleagues (1997) describe how, in the activity of “historical disclosing” of worlds (i.e., in an ontology of possibility), we are decisively sensitive to disharmonies that are usually “passed over by both common sense and theory” (p. 24). For Bloch, “contemplative knowledge [is] by definition solely knowledge of what can be contemplated, namely of the past, and it bends an arch of closed form-contents out of Becomeness over Unbecome” (1995: 6). Similarly, John Shotter describes problems that we solve through reasoning, where we might “see” the answer. For such, he argues that:

Seeing [an answer means seeing] it in relation to a pre-defined ideal and discounting all its small departures from that ideal. But to discount the often small departures from what is already well-known to us, is often to discount what makes it the unique situation it is, thus to discount what we really need to attend to if we are in fact to come to know our way about within it. (Shotter, 2010: 5, italics in original)

Similarly, Edmund Phelps portrays human engagement that takes place beyond calculation as the source of actual innovation and resultant dynamism. For Phelps, as Saarinen and Kenttä put it, “[t]he dynamism of knowledge is insufficient to deliver the dynamism of the real economy” (2011: p. 6). Instead, “[i]n any real-life economy, actors—not in a theoretical model in which everything in the present and the future in known—the actors may sense or entertain opportunities and dangers about which there is little or no public knowledge” (Phelps, 2013: 59). In the Phelpsian view, “innovativeness that moves the world and renews ways of doing things requires novelty that cannot be forced by just adding more effort nor “driven by the keen observations, fortunate sightings, experienced judgments” (Phelps, 2017: 17)” (essay 1).

In this way, an ontology of possibility is not about abandoning what we know and selecting something new to know but about subjecting ourselves to the possibility of seeing what we know from a new perspective. In an ontology of possibility, we resist assuming a standard framing but remain sensitive to the situations that we are embedded in by having the willingness to expose ourselves (and our ideas) to the living complexities, ambiguities, and competing priorities involved. Shotter described this challenge and mode of engagement primarily as a difficulty of the will, where the focus is not on solving a (predefined) problem but going in and “resolving on a line of action” (2010: 4, italics in original). Bloch, likewise, after detaching the mode from rationalistic close-ended contemplation, comes back by underlining how “hope [an ontology of possibility] is not taken only as emotion, as the opposite of fear...but more essentially as a

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6 Again, abandoning what we know, as like what might happen when adopting a utopian monist ideal is, in many ways, the opposite of an ontology of possibility (slightly more on this at the end of the chapter).
directing act of a cognitive kind” (Bloch, 1995: 12, italics in original). That is, not devoid of reasoning but reasoning in reference to the multitude of the moral and material particulars of the unfolding situation, including one’s own moral groundings, emotional evaluations and philosopher’s intuition (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014).

Finally, as these theorists would say, such engaging with and enduring “not-yet knowing” necessarily involves acting, engaging in moving of and moving with what unfolds. “The work of [an ontology of possibility] requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong” (Bloch, 1995: 3). For Lawrence and Maitlis (2012), an ontology of possibility comprises a sense of potency and of agency—“motivated striving to engage with and influence his or her environment” (p. 652). An ontology of possibility is not just about sensing the situation and disharmonies in it but also about having the courage to act on those senses. Spinosa et al. (1997) quote George Gilder in considering “[t]he entrepreneur prevails not by understanding an existing situation in all its complex particulars, but by creating a new situation which other must try to comprehend” (Gilder, 1992). In this way, in the language of Spinosa and colleagues, “the entrepreneur” is someone who manifests both the virtues of humility, giving, and commitment and the ability to “manage an enterprise”. While we must orient ourselves in certain ways of care before acting to engage in the right mind (Heidegger, 1962; Shotter, 2010), if our “philosopher’s intuitions” are left alone to just theorize on potential new openings in the world, they necessarily become detached from it. The crux of an ontology of possibility is in engaging with our living surroundings so that it transforms and expands them, by which an ontology of possibility simultaneously manifests and is informed by. Such are actions that are “located in time and place”, where emotion joins thought (Gilligan, 2014), theory joins practice (Bloch, 1995), where we put ourselves out there.

In essay 1, I describe this mode in the vocabulary of Edmund Phelps (denoting it “Phelpsian agency”), who saw it both as central to human flourishing and as the core engine of economic dynamism and true innovation:

Phelps concludes that people have an innate drive for creation, self-expression, and exploration, and being able to experience that drive is elemental for good life. Humans flourish not due to a state of fortune but in the vivid experience of crafting one’s way in and with the world. Whereas he sees that “[r]ecieving income may lead to flourishing but is not itself a form of flourishing”, ultimately “[t]he good life requires the intellectual growth that comes from actively engaging the world and the moral growth that comes from creating and exploring in the face of great uncertainty” (Phelps, 2013: xi)...In their optimal mode, humans exercise and expand their talents, capacities, and knowledge. They prefer to encounter and solve problems to stay put in guaranteed safety and comfort. They not only settle for problems and situations that come their way but also distinctly seek new challenges and problems to solve. (Essay 1)
2.2 The elusive internal effort and motivation in an ontology of possibility

Courage is the only virtue you cannot fake. If I were to describe the perfect virtuous act, it would be to take an uncomfortable position, one penalized by the common discourse. (Taleb, 2018: 188)

The works I have referred above for depicting an ontology of possibility take the momentous step from the rationalist image of human engagement and agency to a more holistic conception involving emotion, embodiment, presence, morals, and messiness. However, they are somewhat shy, I find, on the most intriguing aspect of an ontology of possibility—the inherently elusive nature of the experience of the involved effort and motivation.

Engaging with one’s surroundings through an ontology of possibility is not, per se, “rewarding.” It requires conscious (and continuous) choosing but is ultimately unattainable just by our desire to do so. Already for the first part of the described orientation (in chapter 2.1), we cannot simply decide to conceive and experience our environment as unfolding or filled with possibility. Similarly, though even more palpably, we cannot just force ourselves to throw ourselves “into what is becoming” (Bloch, 1995). If we do, we are concerned with the \textit{throwing}, an image of our own orientation, not with “what is becoming”. It is often intuitively (yet not always cognitively) obvious to us whether someone “throws” themselves out of desperation, out of a want to show others, because they are detached from reality—or embodying an ontology of possibility.

Embracing an ontology of possibility involves a considerable but indistinct internal effort. Along with a sporadic thrill of conceiving potential openings, an ontology of possibility constitutes predominantly of enduring the strain involved in not-yet knowing. “The entrepreneur must learn...practical humility because she must learn to inhabit a \textit{different domain from that of ordinary life}. The entrepreneur needs ‘a willingness to accept failure, learn from it, and \textit{act boldly in the shadows of doubt}’” (Spinosa et al., 1997: 44, quoting also George Gilder, 1992, italics added). Perhaps even more intensely, acting in an ontology of possibility involves \textit{embracing a social “risk”} involved in pushing beyond an established order of how things work, what is desirable, and what would make one desirable or even accepted (or sometimes even just safe). As Gergen put it, “There is no ‘thinking outside the box’ without risking banishment from the box” (Gergen, 2009b: 210).

Specifically, the elusiveness of this internal effort arises from the fact that, in an ontology of possibility, we embrace such “risk” and endure related ambiguity without abstracting and conceptualizing a clear reward for the effort. By a reward, I mean a secondary outcome from a pursued direction itself. Otherwise, the effort is, by definition, not oriented toward an \textit{opening} future. This is where my depiction differs from Lawrence and Maitlis (2012). They concentrate on the sense of possibility in “who we want to be and what we want to do” (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012: 653). I consider that such an experience of self-confidence might precede or be intertwined with an ontology of possibility. However, in a
more careful review, the motivation to engage with social construction is necessarily external to what we conceive for ourselves. The clearer the reward from what we do is in our minds (overtly or covertly for ourselves), be it status, avoidance of shame, or even just feeling good because we are doing something good for others, the less we are able to engage with the “yet-to-be-realized”. Instead, for the part that we are engaging through an ontology of possibility, we are indirectly propelled by the opening and expansiveness itself, rather than a position we or others would have in or because of that opening.7 (“Indirectly” as when we are directly motivated by seeking such expansiveness, we actually seek certain manifestations of it, and are ultimately preoccupied with what we want to experience.)

The kind of risk taking that is at the heart of an ontology of possibility is entirely different from what is typically associated with “risk.” To the extent that our actions and risk taking are “calculative”, we are not, by definition, embracing a social risk, as we always calculate in the context of our (or someone’s) social position (broadly defined). The word “embrace” attempts to grasp how, when we engage with our surroundings through an ontology of possibility, we do not merely accept the risk of being rejected, as we would when evaluating the risk against the potential yield of an investment. Nor do we suppress social expectations by convincing us how those expectations are not important, as then we continue to be primed by such expectations. Neither do we escape the pressure by isolating ourselves from others, as the creation of any new reality is meaningful only in the context of an existing reality.

However, operating from an ontology of possibility, while a distinct mode, is often intertwined with other kinds of risk taking and orientations in the hurly burly of lived life. Most entrepreneurial endeavors (broadly speaking) integrally also involve calculating the risk of “investments” and prospecting the best line of action toward certain close-ended ends (also, notably, not all entrepreneurial endeavors involve any ontology of possibility). Additionally, embodying an ontology of possibility and arousing “new kinds of responses” in others (Shotter, 2010) is itself often seamlessly tangled with accruing admiration, power, or a reputation as a wise person, which categorically pulls away from an ontology of possibility. However, the point here is that the new arises from the part of our engagement where we come to trust the yet-to-be-realized in this way, rather than work for our direct or indirect “success.” It is when the calculatedness takes primacy that we no longer operate from an ontology of possibility. (However,

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7 This difference is poignantly described, for example, in numerous works of popular fiction. The blockbuster, Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade, makes it with the contrast between the characters Henry, the father of Indiana, and Elsa. Both are passionate researchers of the Holy Grail and join forces (with Indiana) in an expedition for finding it. In the climax scene, against the guidance of a Grail knight, Elsa attempts to take the Grail out of its chamber shouting “we have got it, it’s ours, Indy, yours and mine!” As a result, the ground splits open beneath her, and she plunges to her peril. After Indiana and Henry race safety outside of the collapsing chambers, they have the following exchange:

Henry: “Elsa never truly believed in the Grail. She thought she’d found a prize.”
Indiana: “What did you find, Dad?”
Henry: “Me?... Illumination.”
we might still be working to secure a certain future that our earlier orientation set in motion."

As an expression of this elusive internal effort and motivation, when we have been engaging with the world or others through an ontology of possibility and try to describe what our motivation was for the involved actions and risk-taking, we tend at first to search for words. We might then conceptualize being driven by a keen interest toward the matter in question, or a “want to grow or learn”, perhaps. However, those reasons are never quite accurate and always retrospective.

It is also probably warranted to note here explicitly that an ontology of possibility is not engaged out of losing one’s mind or resignation from consequences of one’s actions. However, there is an element of that in all originality. As Adam Grant wrote in his book on nonconformists, “When we use the logic of consequence, we can always find reasons not to take risks” (Grant, 2017: 154). When one brakes social construction toward an unexpected expansion in an explicit and substantial way, while one’s voice would “join thought and emotion” in a coherent act (Gilligan, 2014), one might experience it almost as if detached from the situation and its concrete consequences. For instance, Grant recapped the story of Jackie Robinson, a courageous Black American army lieutenant who, already in 1944, times of deep segregation, refused to sit at the back of an army bus. While being shouted at and threatened with a court martial by the driver (where Robinson was also convicted), Robison described how, “I told him hotly that I couldn’t care less about him causing me trouble” (Grant, 2017: 153).

Consequently, an ontology of possibility is not something that people are or have but a relationship with reality they can ephemerally come to live through. For this reason, our collective memory is punctuated with figures that seem(ed) to embody an ontology of possibility particularly consistently. With the risk of sounding oversimplifying, I am inclined to point toward Christ, Socrates, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela; or the likes of Henry Ford and Steve Jobs in business, or Katalin Kariko in science, out of the narratives I am aware of. However, while such names represent embodying an ontology of possibility most visible to others, “we all exhibit such skills here and there in our lives” (Spinosa et al., 1997: 45). Centrally, I consider that the extent of internal effort is not represented in the scale of the “objective” outcomes. Whether an act emerges from an ontology of possibility is not visible in a detached analysis of the act. Challenging established conceptions or patterns of behavior from one’s perspective involves throwing oneself into the yet-to-be-realized, regardless of the outwardly “extent” of the throwing. An ontology of possibility does not require a righteous person (nor make one such, per se). Spinosa and colleagues (1997: 44) quote Gilder (1992) on this point: “Entrepreneurs can be pompous and vain where it doesn’t count; but in their own enterprise, the first law is to listen. They must be meek enough—and shrewd enough—to endure the humbling eclipse of self that comes in the process of profound learning from others.”

Here, I depart from the works of Spinosa et al. and Shotter. Along with Shotter (2010), I applied Shotter’s and Tsoukas’ (2014) work in associating Aristotle’s phronesis, ‘practical wisdom’, to the deliberate side of an ontology of possibility.
The holistic and embodied engagement with reality described as phronesis, practical wisdom, shares central qualities with an ontology of possibility. Namely, engaging with situations by seeing and appreciating their uniqueness and responding through holistic judgment. Shotter and Tsoukas emphasize phronesis as a moral virtue, \textit{a character trait} “that dispose agents to act \textit{habitually} in particular ways” (p. 233, italics added). Similarly, Spinosa and colleagues underline the learnable \textit{skills} that disclosing of new worlds entails—sensing and holding disharmonies and changing disclosive spaces based on those disharmonies—and how “both skills are displayed in daily life as human beings are functioning at their best” (Spinosa et al., 1997: 22). Centrally, in my delineation of an ontology of possibility, while a \textit{propensity} for such engagement would seem to differ between people and evolve for individuals, an ontology of possibility is something we can never engage in effortlessly or just habitually. Only the degree of complexity of the “more complex ends” might be considered different for different people in different times. We might become more accustomed with the effort involved, but it is never without effort. And even that effort changes shape eventually, as the customary effort only takes us to an already known place. A habitual engagement of virtuous individuals is likely to delight, amaze, or even stimulate introspection in others. However, reaching for new complex ends arises from the part of us and our engagement that is personally embedded and exposed to the world we are opening. When we have not experienced an effort—say, a bored guru enumerating truths on how to live or a consultant reciting a set of industry best practices—we are likely too detached from a relevant reality to expand it for and \textit{with} others. Expansion requires the effort of bringing the messages, the caring and creation, into the language and on to the skin of the receiver and thus exposing ourselves. Even if the information received in a habitual manner would be meaningful for a listener is such an occasion, priming of an ontology of possibility would then rather come down to the engagement in which the listener receives the messages, than to the engagement in which the messages were delivered.

2.3 \textbf{An ontology of possibility in the context of some related constructs}

To further elucidate and contextualize the focal experiential phenomenon discussed here, I deliberate on how “an ontology of possibility” relates to some established adjacent notions of human engagement, motivation, and internal orientation toward the world. Specifically, these are: “prospecting” (Seligman et al., 2016), “intrinsic motivation” (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2017). I also more shortly consider “agency” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), “institutional agency” (e.g., Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009) and “hope” in organizations (Ludema, Wilmot, & Srivastva, 1997). The passages below are mainly written with those in mind who have some knowledge of these literatures (i.e., I do not make a full account of them here), to locate “an ontology of possibility” in the phenomena the accounts describe.
First, I am particularly inclined to consider an ontology of possibility in the context of recent psychological thought on the orientation of the mind, as such might be a perspective from which the arguments here would sometimes be reflected on. I take the topical book by Martin Seligman and his multidisciplinary group of colleagues (Seligman et al., 2016), *Homo Prospectus*, to represent the forefront of such thought. The book marks the foundations for a new paradigm in psychology that perceives the human mind as primarily oriented toward the future (through the means of prospecting), rather than the past or present. Together with Kahneman (2011), the account can be seen to move cognitive psychology in terms of inquiries into the realm of internal experience (where an ontology of possibility also occurs). The authors write:

To be effective, prospection requires a motivational system that can give present motivational force to imagined future benefits and costs, and this prospective motivation is what is distinctive about desire: It is not a mere urge, conditioned drive, or magnetic attraction to something immediately tempting, but rather an ability to be moved by images of possibilities we create—to want to take an action because we like the idea of what that action might yield, even if that is remote in time or novel in character. (Seligman et al. 2016: 20)

The internal processes described fit *almost* entirely to what might occur in an ontology of possibility. However, there is one decisive difference: it is with what the “imagined future benefits and costs” are referring to. Benefits and costs for what or whom? In contrast to an ontology of possibility, in the book, the prospecting human is succumbed in the mode where he is trying to optimize *his* fate, or even more so, to manage the perception of others of him\(^8\). He might be hopeful and try out something he has not done before, but with a rather clear potential benefit in mind (like catching a fish in partly unfamiliar circumstances). Seligman and colleagues’ thesis (2016) is extremely nuanced and perceptive in its description and grasp of the moral and practical contemplations that we so often internally engage in. However, they precisely describe an engagement with the world, through “an ontology of actuality” (as Lawrence and Maitlis (2012) would put it), be it prospected and extrapolated, but clearly based on working within a prevailing social order of things. As noted, such is what most of us mostly do; we are not mainly engaged through an ontology of possibility since it is difficult and fleeting.

However, prospecting, in the sense the authors describe, might often *precede* orienting through an ontology of possibility, since orienting toward the world or toward the other through an ontology of possibility requires a sense of a balanced background (Shotter, 2010). The authors describe:

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\(^8\) The fisherman in their narratives often prospects how he might avoid being a disappointment and instead bring unexpected joy to his family.
Contemplating an underhanded act elicits prospective guilt over one’s action and prospective shame at the possibility of being caught; deciding between spending time with a friend in the hospital and fishing down at the lake sends one through a succession of feelings of projected discomfort, pleasure, regret, guilt, pride, ingratitude, and more, which remind us of the many values at stake in relationships in the longer run. Our ability, then, to empathically simulate emotions that are responses to imagined possible or future acts or outcomes is vital in keeping us in touch with things that matter. (Seligman et al., 2016: 25)

A sense of confidence in one’s standing so that the acts of throwing oneself to the other and toward an unfolding future do not arise from explicit or implicit self-sacrifice. Getting to such a frame of mind, often requires deliberate cognitive reflection (Kahneman, 2011) of one’s moral compasses and relative resources in the situation (Kenttä, 2020; Noddings, 2003).

Second, my conception of the mode of engagement in an ontology of possibility, particularly the conditions that support it, leans on Richard Ryan’s and Edward Deci’s (2000, 2017) self-determination theory. As one of its core tenets, self-determination theory lays out a spectrum of motivation categories based on the sense of locus of behavioral regulation. Extrinsic regulation ranges from fully external of mere compliance to orders, to what is called “integrated regulation” where per se external goals appear as synthesized with the self. Finally, acts that we do purely from “interest, enjoyment and satisfaction” are considered based on intrinsic motivation. However, while capturing many parts of it, an ontology of possibility seems to ultimately sit slightly on the side of the described spectrum. In the theory, intrinsic motivation is defined as:

[T]he inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn...[the] natural inclination toward assimilation, mastery, spontaneous interest, and exploration that is so essential to cognitive and social development and that represents a principal source of enjoyment and vitality throughout life. (Ryan & Deci, 2000: 70)

The alternative next to intrinsic motivation, the most experientially internal of the extrinsic motivations “integrated regulation,” is described as:

Integration occurs when identified regulations are fully assimilated to the self, which means they have been evaluated and brought into congruence with one’s other values and needs. Actions characterized by integrated motivation share many qualities with intrinsic motivation, although they are still considered extrinsic because they are done to attain separable outcomes rather than for their inherent enjoyment. (Ryan & Deci, 2000: 73)

Therefore, perhaps put bluntly, in the framing of self-determination theory, an activity is either eudaemonic (intrinsic), or its value has been conceptualized and integrated for something else. However, as described above, motivational
experience in an ontology of possibility is neither. The locus of an ontology of possibility arises from within but is experienced almost external to oneself, almost like a composed compulsion. It is the sense of “I just know I have to be doing this”. Absent even of the thought of “I know it is the right thing to do”, which is conceptualizing the orientation through a prevalent value system and one's position in it.

More specifically, firstly, the first part of the definition of intrinsic motivation partly fits an ontology of possibility—orienting toward novelty and challenge—but less so for the latter parts. In an ontology of possibility, we are not motivated by gaining mastery at something or even at the joy of “challenging ourselves”. Secondly, the most notable difference is that “intrinsic motivation” is clearly associated with enjoyable experiences, particularly of having competence in the activity, even with a sense of flow, as in games with a constant feedback of success (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005). Or specifically, with a sense of acting within an “optimal” range of challenge (Ryan & Deci, 2000). (This definition is of course self-fulfilling; if one does something without external regulation, it must be easy enough for them.) In contrast, engaging with the world through an ontology of possibility involves endurance of hardship and challenge rather than enjoyment of the activity itself (e.g., the example of Mandela). It involves enduring moments of being completely lost yet venturing on. The basis of an ontology of possibility could be seen in integration of external regulations in the sense of “evaluating and bringing into congruence with one’s values”, or owning one’s actions, is entailed in an ontology of possibility. However, the experienced locus of regulation in an ontology of possibility is categorically not external in the sense that it would entail following values or goals set by others or for others.

Third, another notable and well-known construct in psychology that should be considered here, as also suggested by a pre-examiner of this thesis, is that of a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Yeager, 2019). The research domain that Carol Dweck and her colleagues and students have pursued since the late 1980s concentrates on beliefs that people have of the nature of human malleability, and how those beliefs impact behavior. Specifically, whether people believe that intellectual abilities are something that can be developed or not, and how such beliefs then influence their learning and performance. The domain divides mindsets and their consequences into two: People believing that abilities are more of less given have a “fixed mindset”. Hence, according to the theory, they concentrate on demonstrating and defending an image of being smart and competent, avoiding challenge and mistakes, and thus performing and learning more poorly. In contrast, some have a “growth mindset”, believing that intelligence can be developed. Therefore, they thrive in and seek out the hard processes of learning and “succeed” in life.

As attempts to make sense of the world, the notions of “an ontology of possibility” and “a growth mindset” consider an entwined group of human phenomena, but from different ontological angles and levels of abstraction. The theory of mindsets concentrates on individual psychology and spotlights the cognitive
layer of beliefs. “People with the growth mindset know that it takes time for potential to flower.” (Dweck, 2017, italics added). The domain, I find, particularly reflects a person’s relationship with themselves (and with others as a derivative of those cognitive models); whether I believe that my intellect and abilities can be developed, whether I can learn something I do not yet know or master. An ontology of possibility, as I have attempted to explicate here, regards a more general and less conscious relationship with and orientation toward reality; where one experiences it as unfolding, expanding, and with a potential to be responsive to one’s actions; a relationship of which the premise is relational rather than primarily building on top of acquired attributes.

In “practice”, an ontology of possibility would be fueled in the effort or events that lead to becoming to grasp or deepen a growth mindset (amid a fixed mindset). However, a growth mindset, as a cognitive belief of the nature of one’s abilities, does not necessarily involve an ontology of possibility. Specifically, in the light of the theorizing here, a sense of expansiveness related to cognitively learning something (which is the main vantage point of the domain) is ultimately not a corollary of what is learned, but of what is learned in the context of preceding conceptions of the world; of the event or process of learning itself. Merely holding, e.g., the conception that “reality is expansive” or “the brain is malleable”, would not, over time, fuel an ontology of possibility. However, incidentally, the act of someone wholeheartedly making the effort to speak in your language about something they believe to be meaningful to you (perhaps involving “caring relationality”), as the researchers of the domain seemed to have done, might9.

Furthermore, an ontology of possibility would appear together with a growth mindset, but the phenomena would also have separate manifestations. For the former, an ontology of possibility would especially seem to be underlying some of the facets of that Dweck associates with a growth mindset (particularly outside of the more stringently focused psychological research papers) but that are kind of beyond the central notion of cognitive beliefs (on whether the brain is malleable or not). Dweck sees how the phenomenon keenly involves trusting the unknown (future); “[I]n the growth mindset, you don’t always need confidence…Actually, sometimes you plunge into something because you’re not good at it” (Dweck, 2017), and being cavalier about one’s image in social settings: “they [people with a growth mindset] worry less about looking smart and they put more energy into learning (Dweck, 2016). This is where an ontology of possibility is clearly present in a growth mindset.

Fourth, an ontology of possibility is closely intertwined with agency. In fact, I refer to an ontology of possibility as “Phelpsian agency” in essay 1. In the organizational literature, the most established conception for “what is agency?” is that by Emirbayer and Mische (1998): “[t]he temporally constructed engagement by actors...which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both
reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations” (p. 970). This is also what Lawrence and Maitlis (2012) referred to in their depiction of an ontology of possibility. Emirbayer and Mische describe how agency is informed by past habits and imagined future possibilities, which are conceptualized as “within the contingencies of the moment” in phronesis-filled considerations and actions. This established notion of “agency” particularly involves the more cognitive aspects of the kind of engagement an ontology of possibility appears as. From the point of view of “an ontology of possibility”, the descriptions of such “agency” depict the ways an ontology of possibility manifests as a construction of thought and action. From the point of view of “agency”, with “an ontology of possibility”, I am trying to capture the phenomenon that fuels the “agency” (i.e., engagement that “transforms those structures”).

Fifth, as a specific literature on agency in organizational studies, the thesis could have perhaps been written in the context of “institutional agency” (or maybe also within its neighbor “institutional work”) (e.g., Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Smets & Jarzabowski, 2013; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Authors in the domain(s) are interested in a very similar contextual phenomenon as my treatise; that is, how people embedded in social structures can come to change such structures. The literature has focused particularly on explaining how the paradox becomes solved (like suggesting that institutions necessarily create contradictions within, which engender change agents; Seo, 2002), and conceptualizing the kinds of (predominantly cognitive) practices and approaches which agents employ in enacting change (like phronesis-driven practical-evaluative judgment in the moment; Smets & Jarzabowski, 2013). The relationship of the constructs here is very similar to the one with Emirbayer’s and Mische’s (1998) agency (above); an ontology of possibility is interwoven in institutional agency when it plays out as institutional agency (that changes those structures). While, e.g., practical-evaluative judgment is what institutional agents would employ, an ontology of possibility is what would undergird and fuel the experience of such actors when they (come to) push against institutional grain. Notably, very recently, this literature has recently taken a turn toward embracing the more experiential and (what I would call) elusive aspects of institutions and institutional agency that more come to conceive kinds of underlying elements of “an ontology of possibility” (Nilsson, 2015; Välikangas & Carlsen, 2020). I consider this turn a bit in the discussion section.

Sixth, out of all the related constructs, this thesis could have perhaps most readily been written under the rubric of “hope in organizations” (Carlsen, Hagen, & Mortensen, 2012; Ludema et al., 1997). The intuitive experiential level that comes to mind when someone mentions “hope” is quite similar. Bloch, who I refer to a lot, also wrote about the Principle of Hope (1995). Perhaps the main reason I do not make hope the central construct is that its primary connotation is nonetheless ultimately misleading for the purpose, both in common language and in literature. For the former, hope also involves modes of passiveness and detachment. For the latter, Carlsen and colleagues capture the following point: “[T]here has been a tendency in much hope research to reduce hope to notions
of individual goal-attainment. This treatment of hope threatens to confound the phenomenon with self-efficacy and optimism, downplays its relational dimension, neglects the open-ended qualities of experiencing in hope...” (2012: p. 288). However, in their own book chapter, Carlsen and colleagues (2012) developed the notion of hope in organizations toward a phenomenological concept. Their vision entails very similar elements as what I discuss here as an ontology of possibility. In their vision, hope includes “an expectation of opening-up to unknown possibilities and unarticulated horizons of expectations”, “is relationally construed”, “maybe inherited from previous experience”, and “accommodates both potentially positive outcomes and negative elements of despair, doubt, conflict and loss” (2012: p. 299). The clearest difference of this conception of hope to my theorizing of an ontology of possibility is the stronger exclusion of “attainment of specified outcomes and purposes” and related emphasis of social construction and acting, and most notably, the construing of the sense of expansiveness as a feed for an ontology of possibility (discussed in the following chapter).
3. Relational Premises of an Ontology of Possibility and the Need for External Feeds

3.1 Caring relationality (an ontology of possibility toward the other) as fostering a propensity for an ontology of possibility

An ontology of possibility toward the world integrally involves a sense that there is space for us and our explorations, a silent trust in the emerging nature of reality. It arises from a living relationship with oneself and the world leaving us with a sense that our “value” is not fully dependent on “our position” within a social order, while we are, nonetheless, not resigned from such an order but experience a drive to engender change from within it. So where does such a relationship with the world and ourselves originate? There certainly is a hint of the divine in our spells of an ontology of possibility. However, from the point of view that some logic informs the appearance of an ontology of possibility, the most interesting notions come from scholars embracing a relational conception of humans.

In general, the domains of psychology share the idea that people’s vitality, their ability to relate to the world with agency and through curiosity, to be inspired and strive to learn (and to care for others), are fostered in caring relations (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Benjamin, 2017; Bowlby, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2017). Caring is an orientation toward the other where one is attentive to the holistic well-being and growth of the other, to the fulfillment of the other’s potential (Gilligan, 1982; Liedtka, 1996; Noddings, 2003). Caring for and being cared for are primary in the human condition and experience—“some degree of which each of us has been dependent upon for our continued existence” (Noddings, 2003: 48). Developmental psychologists perceive that the abilities to think, reflect, and sense objective reality, are established through caring relationships rather than in personal discoveries (Seligman, 2017).

Two of the perhaps least contested propositions of contemporary relational scholars and care theorists make are that, first, the experience of caring occurs within concrete relationships in practice. We cannot care for or be cared for in theory or just because we would like it to be so. Second, this caring is not present or relevant only in certain categories of intimate relationships. Of course, it is
more significant and enduring (or at least, it should be), for example, in the relationship of parent to child, yet the same meaningful quality in such profound interactions is also the defining quality of other relations.

I focus here what I denote as “caring relationality”, instead of, e.g., caring relations. That is, I point toward the palpable yet elusive experience of human connection, the quality of felt connection that transcends particular settings, acts, or forms of relationship through which it occurs. In essay 1, I contemplate the experience of caring relationality (in abstract terms):

...caring relationality unfolds in an experience of a connection with another in which the particulars of the material dependencies of the human condition and human value irrespective of those dependencies, are paradoxically and often tacitly, sensed as equally embraced and accepted. Carol Gilligan portrayed such connections that foster one’s “voice” as containing keen expectations for the other, while the value of the other is not dependent on the fulfillment of those expectations (Gilligan, 1982). In self-determination theory, curiosity, agency, and learning are cultivated in relationality that allow for ambiguity and autonomy in what materially unfolds without fear of losing the sense of relatedness but where the things that do unfold are also regarded (Ryan & Deci, 2017). (Essay 1)

In its simplest (and most foundational; Shotter, 2010) form, caring relationality appears as an “affirmation” of the other in interaction (Gergen, 2009b; Gilligan, 1982; Seligman, 2017; Shotter, 2010). Rather than rejecting or dismissing the other and their viewpoint, they are welcomed, acknowledged, and accounted for. As Gergen articulates:

At the moment of speaking, you become the midwife of my meaning...There are two major forms of supplement now possible, one that will affirm or invest the utterance with meaning, and the other that denies or empties it of significance... Affirmation identifies the speaker as a worthy participant in the relationship” (Gergen 2009b, 167, italics in original).

Gergen considers that such an affirmation “may be as simple as a nod of the head, a smile, or an agreeable sound” (Gergen 2009b, 167), one that is hard to trace exactly. In its more significant manifestations, caring can entail acts of compassion, hearing and comforting the other during their struggles, maintaining a safe space for them to heal (Kahn, 2001; Lilius, Kanov, Dutton, Worline, & Maitlis, 2011). It can involve helping to construct a more actionable reality for them, filled with potential and less concentrated on the determinativeness of past mistakes (Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012). More profoundly, caring can imply “leaping-in” to take responsibility from the other in their time of need (Heidegger, 1962; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015). In this way, Peter Kenttä defined the essence of such caring interaction as acknowledging the other as or elevating the other into a creator and contributor in a relevant situation or matter for them (Kenttä, 2020).
Particularly, I want to point toward a certain aspect of such caring relationality, perhaps a somewhat different aspect than what psychology often focuses on, that I consider playing a role in cultivation of an ontology of possibility. Given that a propensity for an ontology of possibility is a silent confidence in the expansive potential of existence, it is conceivable how it becomes particularly fostered through caring extensions toward us that in an extent or in a way are not required by an established convention either societally or between particular people. Notably, this does not undermine the meaning of an elementary level of predictability in the formation of a “basic trust” toward others (e.g., Bowlby, 1980). But a (hypothetical) “flat” environment of care or “psychological safety” is ultimately not fostering an ontology of possibility per se in the sense described here. Instead, it is the kind of extensions toward the us that, by trusting in our potentials in an unprecedented way for no calculated reason, open a new reality for us. This can be, for example, when a mother, after phrenetic consideration, decides to trust her daughter to stay out later than usual for a special event. Or, perhaps even more so, when a teacher helps a troubled teenager condemned as hopeless by other teachers but in whom she sees a suppressed force of life (a theme of several Hollywood movies). Or as a more subtle example, Prof. Esa Saarinen sometimes refers to an anecdote in his lectures on how, when he was a beginning writer and had just published the book “Punk academy”, the towering philosopher G.H. von Wright (the successor of Wittgenstein at Cambridge), whom he only casually knew, invited him to discuss the book. Saarinen describes the attentive presence of the academic, and how he showed interest, respect, and warmth toward the young Saarinen during their brief chat, for no apparent reason or functional aim for him. Essentially describing what I denote here as fostering a propensity for an ontology of possibility, Saarinen concludes: “I still consider, that because of this encounter, still 40 years later, I am somehow more prepared to meet the cold outside.” In a way, the more unexpected (though not unneeded) the extension by someone is in terms of trusting the potentials of an expansion in the other, the greater its potential to expand the experience of the world and of themselves for the other.

From the perspective of the overall chain of argumentation of the organizational thesis, a central point of this chapter is that an ontology of possibility toward the world and such caring relationality that fosters it, stem from the “same” elusive source. In essence, our propensity for orienting through an ontology of possibility toward the world and our propensity for caring relationality (i.e., an ontology of possibility toward another) are both fostered by the experiences where someone has embraced an ontology of possibility toward to us.\(^\text{10}\) There are several ways to see this commonality:

First, both caring relationality and an ontology of possibility entail a profound intentional effort where the actor stretches between a humble inquiry in the particulars of prevalent reality and the “yet-to-be-realized”. In such an act, the carer

\(^{10}\) An ontology of possibility toward the world and toward the other are essentially the same phenomenon in Shottier’s (2010) depictions of the spontaneous, living, bodily, and expressive dance of anticipation and opening responses between a doer and those who witness the doing.
exhibits “engrossment” and “motivational displacement” (Noddings, 2003). It is a deep (although potentially only fleeting in time) effort of conceiving the particulars of the situation of the other, a will to make a difference for them on their terms: “understanding and accepting uncertainty and working to foster growth, however that person might understand it and however it might evolve” (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012: 647). In Heidegger’s terms, the caregiver “leaps-in” and “leaps-ahead” of the cared-for (Heidegger, 1962), exposing themselves to “hidden and unintended consequences” (Glover and Philbin, 2017). Meanwhile, the caregiver binds themselves to the present and their own integrity. Rather than simply performing everything the other desires, caring emerges from carrying the burden of balancing the limits of reality, requiring deep personal consideration and practical wisdom. Consequently, actual caring is not self-sacrificing (Gilligan, 1982). Our conception of reality does not broaden through experiences where someone makes a sacrifice for us, since the world of the caregiver was zero-sum in such an act. Hence, similarly to an ontology of possibility, caring relationality necessitates a sound sense of a “background” (Shotter, 2010) and grounding in the state of the present, from which one willingly extends toward the other. In his “being-and-time style” monograph, Peter Kenttä conceptualized participants in interactions as existing in an ego state of Child, Parent, or Adult (following Berne, 1961). The caregiver operates from the ego state of Parent when needed but assumes the coequal state of Adult with respect to the other when asymmetrical acts of caring are no longer necessary. That is, the caregiver avoids enforcing their role of Adult or collapsing into Child, utilizing their own “moral compasses” instead (Kenttä, 2020).

Second, the internal locus of the related effort and motivation in both caring relationality and an ontology of possibility stem from a similar, experientially primary, yet elusive root. We are unable to orient toward an opening future just by our want to do so, as we are unable to care just by our want to care. Both involve an equally unreserved and balanced extension to the “yet-to-be-realized” amid the absence of conceptualized reward. The caregiver embraces the paradox where they trust deductively unpredictable potentials in the other and in what unfolds, precisely, through an orientation toward an expanding future (Heidegger, 1962); that is, by embracing an ontology of possibility toward the other. It involves enduring the “not-yet-knowing” and accepting the social and emotional risk of the caregiver not responding to one’s care, personally or generally.

Caring extensions, in this sense, are never just a routine, but involve a profound yet elusive effort to hold oneself open and exposed. Extending oneself to relate caringly is an irreducible human experience in that its only motive is the undefined extension per se (Gilligan, 1982). Noddings describes the elusive essence of caring in various ways; for example, by elaborating how what matters to the cared-for is the “attitude” of the caregiver:

To the cared-for no act in his behalf is quite as important or influential as the attitude of the one-caring. A major act done grudgingly may be accepted gra-
ciously on the surface but resented deeply inwardly, whereas a small act performed generously may be accepted nonchalantly but appreciated inwardly. (Noddings, 2003: 19-20)

We are sensitive to whether someone’s gesture is “genuine” (Gilligan, 2014; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014), even if we do not conceptualize or notice it. If it is evident later that someone’s kindness was intertwined with an ulterior motive, the meaning of the act changes dramatically. However, the same applies for more subtle incoherencies—when our caring is driven, for example, by an external demand to care, by a wish to appear caring for fear of losing the other that impedes actually seeing the other, or by an internal pattern of needing to be a rescuer (just to name a few). We might even experience a strong internal desire to help someone yet be unable to correctly engage in caring relationality or become immediately discouraged when the assumed response is absent (Noddings, 2003).

Third, the experiential structures of caring relationality and an ontology of possibility toward the world meet, I find, also in the similar obscurity yet palpability of the “object” of our orientation. John Shotter asked: “how we can ’enter into’ their [the other’s] world in a way which acknowledges and respects their otherness, and which allows them to express themselves to us in their own terms?” (Shotter, 2010: p. 23, italics in original). The answer is unreachable through cognition alone. In answering this question, Shotter and others conceptualize that (in caring relationality) we are ultimately not oriented toward the other but to the intersubjective in-between. Jessica Benjamin took this notion the furthest in her idea of the “third.” Akin to an ontology of possibility toward the world, in caring relationality, we are oriented toward the “third,” not “from us,” nor “for the other.” We are not performing the acts because of ourselves, nor are we ultimately performing the acts because of the other either. In the experience and engagement of a caring extension, the “because” dissolves (just as in an ontology of possibility). In a Sartrean fashion, it dissolves because, when caring transpires, our motivation is not toward anything, since the third is not a thing at all. Before or afterward, we might conceptualize the reasons for our caring and they might emerge as noble and moral, but such reasons are absent during caring relationality.

These notions lead to the main consequence of the chapter in terms of the organizational argument of the thesis. A propensity for an ontology of possibility is profoundly intertwined with experiences of caring relations, but so is a propensity of engaging in caring relationality. “To be cared for is essential for the capacity to be caring” (Gaylin, 1979: 63). The experiential source of caring relationality that fosters an ontology of possibility is the same source of an ontology of possibility itself.\(^{11}\) Therefore, while caring relations are a conduit and keeper of an ontology of possibility, they alone do not ultimately explain an ontology of possibility in organizational settings.

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\(^{11}\) Whether someone’s propensity for an ontology of possibility is inclined more toward other people (caring) or toward a direct creation, or both, likely depends on the particulars of the experienced relationality, lived situations, and inborn personality, with which I am not engaging in this study.
3.2 Sensing of an externally initiated or an external response of expansiveness as a feed for an ontology of possibility

We discussed above how our propensity, a kind of internal inclination, for engaging through an ontology of possibility is fostered in experiences of human connection where someone extends themselves, allowing us space to grow in unprescribed ways. In this chapter, as a critical step in analytically separating the relational and organizational levels, I distinguish between one’s propensity, and then what “feeds” such an engagement in lived life. (This separation is partly arbitrary, as most “feeds” are likely to also cultivate one’s “propensity,” but conceptualizing the need for feeds is an essential analytical component here.)

As described, the experience of engaging through an ontology of possibility (toward the world and/or another) integrally entails the part that is, in itself, not “rewarding” but concerns intimately enduring a social and epistemological strain; “to be revealed the New demands the most extreme effort of will” (Bloch, 1995: 4). As established earlier, within an ontology of possibility we are implicitly oriented toward expansiveness itself. The propensity, then, refers to our capacity to engage through an ontology of possibility and to remain sensitive and open to the world while there is no expansive response to our actions; and to do so without losing a sense of self or becoming resentful. The stronger our propensity, the more we might even appreciate the times when we lack the vigor to “resolve on a line of action” (Shotter, 2010). Such endurance appears as maintaining course through bad weather on an expedition, or just maintaining integrity in isolation, or remaining sensitive to the other and avoiding forcing our view of caring, even when the other does not clearly accept and receive it (Noddings, 2003; Gilligan, 1982).

However, regardless of our resilience, we are not able to endlessly engage with the limits of social construction if there never is a response. If there never is a response, eventually, we retreat to securing and calculating our efforts and engagements within an existing construction, or just resent or despair, requiring an “external” response or intervention to gather our coherence.

Here, I offer the conceptualization that continuing engagement through an ontology of possibility requires, is fed by, sensing the emergence of expansiveness. In my use of the term, “a sense of expansiveness” indicates an experience of reality unfolding towards being deeper, more complex and more living; a reframing that allows encompassing seemingly conflicting aspects, creating unspecified new space for experience and thought. “A sense of expansiveness” precisely does not refer to “expansion” in the positivist or objectivist sense of quantitative or arithmetic growth of “the same”, but to a sense of qualitative emergence. Importantly, given that an ontology of possibility regards conceiving and experiencing the world as “only just unfolding” (i.e., expanding), it seems like a circular reference to say that sensing expansiveness feeds an ontology of possibility. However, simultaneously, it is evident that there are times and situations in the lives of individuals, groups, and societies when it requires less to envision “the landscape before us” as changing and expanding. The subtle but decisive difference is that in an ontology of possibility, in enduring “the social and epis-
temological strain involved in unveiling the new”, we experience, in an indefinable manner, to be carrying the sense (of expansiveness) in us as venturing into the unknown and plowing through hardship. While being nourished by a sense of expansiveness, in contrast, the locus and initiation of that sense is experienced as external and surprising to us. (These aspects are not irrelevant, of course. The more prone to an ontology of possibility we are, or more fed in the past, the more sensitive we are to sensing expansiveness in our environment.)

While a categorization could be made from different angles and in different granularities, I gather that feeds for an ontology of possibility can be viewed as experiencing an expansiveness in...

1. …oneself in received caring extensions
2. …the other following one’s acts of caring
3. …"the world" following one’s acts of creating
4. …one’s relevant surroundings

Experiencing such expansiveness is the aspect of an ontology of possibility in which we then “flourish” and “thrive.” The four sources, or “feeds”, are rather dissimilar, but I consider their unification under one rubric to be warranted, given that we are somewhat agnostic as to the source of expansiveness. Any of them increase the likelihood of us experiencing existence as expanding generally, which is prone to facilitate experiencing other sources of expansiveness. The sources are of the same make; in the abstract, it is the expansiveness within the expansiveness of something that we experience. However, such an experience requires the emergence or expansiveness of something as its medium, and not just something but something meaningful and relevant enough to cause us to perceive it, yet that something is, ultimately, irrelevant. It is, then, in circumstances that do not support experiencing the expansiveness of any type where we are prone to struggle to relate to reality through an ontology of possibility and others through caring but continue securing, optimizing, and planning our efforts and engagements with others.12

The four categories are not explicit but overlap and mix with each other and with other experiences in lived life. The first three are more potent in their intimacy. I identify those as “slow-release” (for the lack of a more sophisticated term), meaning that the sense of such experiences can keep us grounded, trusting in the generally unfolding nature of existence long after a particular instance of creation or caring. In fact, in addition to the first, two and three will likely also develop a general propensity of an ontology of possibility. However, as happens in the flux of life, the feeds from such experiences also ultimately wear off and the recall of the essence of their glow fades. In one and four, the sense of expansiveness appears as externally originating, in two and three there is an external response to our engagement of an ontology of possibility.

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12On a personal level, it is likely that we eventually require a variation of feeds related to creation and to caring for others to, in fact, the feeds to continue functioning as feeds for an ontology of possibility. Ultimately, an ontology of possibility in one (caring or creating) is likely prone to engender an urge to live through the other.
I want to briefly elaborate on the types of feeds. The first two are different “sides” of the same “exchange.” Receiving and accepting caring extensions by others, beyond fostering the basic faculties for an ontology of possibility, often nourishes our own engagement. In receiving someone’s caring, we experience the expansiveness of *ourselves*. Being cared for, we are met in a way that is relevant for us yet perhaps more than we have voiced or conceived; we are met by someone’s unlikely kindness and embrace. It is in the few evocative words from a friend in which they extend to us in our struggle that reframe a lurking despair in pushing to the unknown with our writing project. Noddings described the experience of caring as a transformation that adds “something” to us:

> When the attitude of the one-caring bespeaks caring, the cared-for glows, grows stronger, and feels not so much that he has been given something as that something has been *added* to him. And this "something" may be hard to specify. Indeed, for the one-caring and the cared-for in a relationship of genuine caring, there is no felt need on either part to specify what sort of transformation has taken place. (Noddings, 2003: 20, italics added)

The locus of caring relationality when it actually unfolds— when caring “is received and completed” (Nodding, 2003: 37)—exists in the intersubjective, as noted. The experience of caring as articulated in the preceding excerpt from Noddings is thus inseparable from the experience of the cared-for. Similarly, for Shotter, the core of living rests in such a deeply intertwined expression that he called “chiasmically-organized”; where what I do opens doors for you to pass through; where it is kind of a fallacy to consider the parts as separate (Shotter, 2010). Accordingly, in essence, the expansiveness in the cared-for is similarly experienced by the caregiver (when actual caring relationality succeeds). Notably, it is not the experience of someone we helped coming to thank us, since that instantiates their effort to extend toward us. Instead, what is referred to here is experiencing how the other is enabled to be more in their lives in some way; how the other is enabled to embrace an ontology of possibility. For example, when someone we have a caring relationship with, such as our child or an employee, learns something we did not teach them or builds something we had not thought of. Such experiences linger with us, feed us with a calm trust in life, as Noddings describes.

The third source refers to the experience of expansiveness in creating, particularly in conceiving the expansiveness of people, events, and other creations as they respond and interact with our creation.\(^\text{13}\) That is, to see how “the world” (in some scale) expands as per what we are or have been creating. This is especially the kind of experience that Phelps identifies as an integral part of a good life, of *flourishing* (Phelps, 2013). For Phelps, flourishing comes not just from engag-

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\(^{13}\)This experience mirrors the structure (as described) of an ontology of possibility. It comprises the segment where we experience being able to create (rather than simply try to create) via our work desks and the segment where we experience those creations emerge into the world (“A hermit’s innovation is not an innovation”; Phelps, 2013: 285). I concentrate on the latter, as it ultimately also feeds the first part. Moreover, the latter segment is sometimes difficult to separate from an interaction in caring relationality.
ing in exploration but also from the sporadic manifestations of those explorations; for example, “a merchant’s satisfaction at seeing ‘his ship come in’” (Phelps, Bojilov, Hoon, & Zoega, 2020: 9). This source is also clearly present in psychology in terms of how experienced competence within one’s acts is central for maintaining intrinsic motivation during the act (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, here I am not referring to the “flow” states in games or other theaters of immediate dopamine response. Instead, the sense that fuels an ontology of possibility’s procession through this feed is the experience of the world expanding by what is and has been engendering through us.

Notably, such experiences (of the third feed) are highly potent but also somewhat insidious for an ontology of possibility. The sensations are intimately entangled with the sense of being something more than others or “gaining” something for us, which as noted, are prone to steer away from an ontology of possibility. To separate the two: An ontology of possibility is fed by experiencing emergence in the world that we could be inspired by, even if it was not us working on it. That is the part of the experience where we are almost like an observer of our creative work, humbly thankful for being able to partake in it. It is the experience where Phelps’ merchant would gaze at the harbor in marvel and conceive “now there are these enormous ships in this port that can bring and take goods to distant lands, whilst before nothing like it was possible”. Gilder (1992) implies this subtle but crucial point by considering how the entrepreneur must maintain giving, humility, and commitment to be able to continually listen to their unfolding environment (as extensively referred by Spinosa et al. 1997).

This experience of expansiveness invigorates us and soothes nervousness in our relationship with the world, making us more confident about an expansive nature of reality. By contrast, the segment of our creating engagement with the world that makes us more self-confident is what steers us away from an ontology of possibility toward efforts to master the existing.

Finally, the fourth feed is “experiencing the expansiveness of relevant surroundings.” While the other types emerge from very personal embedded experiences and acts, this one refers to the expansiveness of surroundings that we are part of but that we typically experience as observers rather than participants or influencers. It is different also in sense that while the other three replenish our own propensity, expansiveness of relevant surroundings makes it less challenging to engage in an ontology of possibility. Ernst Bloch referred to this kind of sense of expansiveness when he suggests that “[f]unction and content of hope” are experienced particularly during “times of change,” times of “rising societies,” and, on a personal level, in “youth” (Bloch, 1995: 4). Analogously, in his descriptions of societally prevalent innovative agency, Phelps concentrated on an era of economic “dynamism,” when modern economies emerged during the mid to late nineteenth century in the U.S. and U.K. Relatedly, Philip Selznick described how “especially in its early stages, [modernism] is marked by an enlargement of individual autonomy, competence, and self-assertion” (Selznick, 1992: 8). Notably, “times of change” do not develop one’s internal propensity of orienting through an ontology of possibility—people might not be moved by any rate of observed expansiveness—yet such times plainly make an ontology of
possibility less effortful, less intense, and more “allowed” via an expanding social construction when conventions and values open more broadly. Accordingly, the fourth feed also entails being inspired by the creations of others whom we do not connect with personally (e.g., an artist’s painting). This, of course, requires the sensitivity to notice the creations of others, but an abundance of creations significantly influences it. A similar cross-appropriation (Spinosa et al., 1997) of ideas also comprises part of Phelps’ societal thesis: when existing innovations fuel the innovations of others, a dynamic economy develops into “an imaginarium” (Phelps, 2017).

Moreover, as Bloch denotes with his reference to “youth,” this sense of the expansiveness of relevant surroundings (the fourth feed) can also be just personal. In adolescence, the world relevant to us expands rather naturally. Or when we “change the scenery”, as we first move to a big city. However, there are two caveats in this. First, because an ontology of possibility is fueled by a sense of expansiveness, it is different from any “default” liveliness of our surroundings; like, say, inhabiting New York City (outside of a pandemic). Regardless of the “degree” of liveliness, when “static,” we tend to experience any liveliness as routine or alternatively parse out our own stable segment of that surrounding. Instead, it is rather a change in a level of liveliness (either way), or a change in the kinds of liveliness in our relevant environment that might feed an ontology of possibility in us, not any certain “degree.” Second, an ontology of possibility cannot be pursued directly, even amid a change of scenery. If we move to the city with a plan to find expansiveness, there is a good chance we will only encounter more intensive versions of our old conceptions and tendencies.

3.3 A note about the role of internal practice in an ontology of possibility

In an insightful pre-examination of this work, Professor Teerikangas raised a question about the role of attunement with self, of being in the present moment, and of related internal and personal practice in an ontology of possibility that are, rather categorically, not present in my theorizing. Referring, for example, to “intuiting” (Sinclair, 2020), mindfulness and the Eastern Zen-literature, “the intuitive source of knowing” (Teerikangas & Välikangas, 2014), and “Precencing” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013), she rightfully asked: “How is the ontology of possibility connected to theorizing on and experiencing the present moment”, “What is the role of the self, therein?”, “Where does the ontology of possibility arise from?”, “Can one not practice the ontology of possibility?”

Essentially, personally priming to an ontology of possibility is a silent counterpart of an ontology of possibility in this thesis. Without any active personal reflection, an ontology of possibility would be an (almost) empty construct; we would remain rather immediately tied with those external currents and feeds of expansiveness in our environment (though the “slow-release feeds” might have a longer decay without much deliberative internal effort too). It is through the internal part (while not sufficient on its own) that we come to endure deficiencies in such feeds, deficiencies that are necessarily a part of working on the edge
and against the grain of social construction. Coming to such senses of an ontology of possibility might involve deep personal discovery and meditation, perhaps periods of isolation. The experience of an ontology of possibility is also truly “personal” (to the extent of kind of melting the conceptualized self), and about becoming not driven by views of others (as others). Specifically, experientially an ontology of possibility arises from, or even is that sense of connection with “self” and with the world, and their simultaneous unity and polarity in the present, as many of the noted references would describe. Moreover, in this way, despite a generally relational ontology of this thesis, I conceive the experiencer to be the individual (even as our experiencing would be relationally linked).

However, I have omitted theorizing on this internal dimension and concentrated on the relational aspects and feeds as sources of an ontology of possibility essentially because the lead aim of this thesis is theorizing on organizational premises of an ontology of possibility in organizational settings.

Individuals with their personal work, priming, and discoveries certainly feed into the appearance of an ontology of possibility for themselves (obviously) and for those influenced by them. A wave of an ontology of possibility in a social context might be commenced by the expansiveness that starts (from the perspective of that context) from personal discoveries of someone. But it is ultimately a mystery when and why any particular individual is able to (or fails to) engage with life through an ontology of possibility. There is no specific practice that will always lead us to seeing the world as expansive, since that expansion is different each time. Hence, inquiring into the logic of appearance of an ontology of possibility in organizational settings by such personal discoveries does not bring the logic of organizational premises very far. The opposite is true, however. The relational environment and feeds around an individual are likely to influence the aptitude of arriving at and invigorating such personal work (we also are unlikely to start to inquire ourselves or connect with the present without any influence from someone else in some way).

Furthermore, however, through isolated internal practice, I believe, one can come to the experience of the present as unfolding, as was the first part of the description of the experiential structure of an ontology of possibility. In isolation, we might even stay in a sense that seems like experiencing the present as unfolding. But, in isolation, such practice (as certain practice) eventually grows stale. Despite a fortitude of our internal sense of connectedness with self, the world, and the present, such a connectedness is put to test, or rather “becomes real” by the second part of the definition: “Acting on the edge of that unfolding by enduring “not-yet knowing” and leaning toward ‘what is becoming.’” Acting in the world, working on social construction, unavoidably integrally involves and is influenced by relationality with others in full force. Coming back to such practice, to our inner and physical places of silence to connect with the present, is meaningful and often required to again find an orientation to an ontology of possibility. But it is only in concrete relation to and with the living reality around us in which that orientation ultimately finds meaning.
4. “An Organization” and a Sense of Expansiveness

This chapter, utilizing the outlook developed thus far, moves to consider the organizational premises of an ontology of possibility in organizational settings. The earlier chapters studied the elusive essence of an ontology of possibility, its relational premises, and the eventual need for external feeds of a sense of expansiveness. Their central implication is that it is useful to consider the organizational premises for an ontology of possibility through how “an organization” relates to and mediates such feeds.

First, to enable theorizing on the organizational premises, chapter 4.1 theorizes on the limits of an ontology of possibility on an intersubjective level, which thus founds the role of “an organization” beyond. Then, I provide two consequent arguments, or rather two complementary perspectives. Chapter 4.2 regards the relationship of an organization with its surroundings and feeds external to an organization, which I identify as ultimately determinative for an ontology of possibility and caring relations within. Chapter 4.3 provides a perspective on the internal logic on the relationship of organizational culture and structures and feeds of a sense of expansiveness for the intersubjective level.14

4.1 The limits of an ontology of possibility on an “intersubjective level” in organizational settings

To facilitate an inquiry into the organizational premises of an ontology of possibility within organizational settings, I draw an analytical border between an immediate social context—where particulars of the other can be mutually acknowledged in human warmth—and the “organizational level” beyond such a context, with which an individual does not have a personal reciprocal relationship. I refer to the social context as an “intersubjective level”, utilizing a term by Weick (1995). Weick distinguished the person-to-person level (“intersubjective”) from the structural level (“generic subjectivity”) in organizations. He articulated how

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14 To keep track of the implied theory of organization: 4.2 abstracts a threshold between “an organization” and its environment but the organization as determined by the process flows from the environment. The analysis can thus be seen to be ‘entitative’ (Chia, 1999). Conceptually, a threshold of an organizational setting and its environment would be defined by the relative interdependencies and integration of efforts within vs. without. Chapter 4.3 also implies a relevant organization as a separable entity but largely defined by the flows from outside and by their derivative internal “processes of change” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).
the person-to-person level is distinct from that which represents the organizational level beyond: “[t]he intersubjective takes place in direct communication between persons, largely unmediated by structural mechanisms such as rules, habits and routines” (Bakken & Hernes, 2006: 1606, italics added). Noddings (2003) also separated actual human connections where we might be “caring for” the other, from “caring about” people, ideas, or things that we do not have a personal relationship with. Lawrence and Maitlis made a similar separation and theorized on caring practices among groups of “concrete enduring relationships” (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012). Notably, drawing this border between an immediate social context and the rest of an organization is, of course, arbitrary. However, enduring this simplification allows for putting the stick on the ground and start the theorizing from somewhere.

As can be concluded from the discussion about relational premises, the most relevant unit of analysis when studying the manifestation of an ontology of possibility in organizational setting is an immediate intersubjective group of concrete relationships—e.g., a work team. Conceiving of new worlds and attaining the courage to act toward such worlds, are often better regarded as something that a group engages in, rather than something that individuals alone do. When a group forms new perceptions together that challenge constructed realities outside of the group (e.g., Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012), individuals do not need to have as strong personal faculties and feeds for an ontology of possibility, as the group can “embody” those together. Moreover, engaging in and upkeeping an ontology of possibility in conceiving “more complex ends” benefits from active crossbreeding of ideas and experiences and cocreation (Gergen, 2009b). Or as Shotter puts it:

...people as much 'act into' a set of future possibilities as 'out of' a set of past actualities, and in doing so, find their actions influenced just as much by the actions of the others around them as by their own interests or desires. Thus, in joint activity of this kind...novel possibilities for action are created beyond those available to any individual acting alone. Hence the aim of bringing different people... into contact with each other is an important one: for there is always a possibility that, due to their differences, they might be able to fulfill in each other what singly they lack. (Shotter, 2010: 27)

Both caring relationality and an ontology of possibility toward the world tend to entail virtuous cycles within groups. Namely, as established, engaging in caring relationality potentially fosters the receiver’s propensity of engaging in caring relationality, while the relational connection progressively feeds the capacity of both parties to do so. Thus, caring can exhibit multipliers within a group, because when some are “fed,” they have a greater capacity to engage caringly with others. In an example of this self-reinforcing group dynamic, Kahn (1993, 2001) famously described “holding environments” within organizations. A central manifestation of such environments are groups in which people experience that they are allowed to be vulnerable with others when needed, since others typically engage caringly with the one experiencing anxiety. The efforts of engaging in caring do not overwhelm any individual and the awareness of its possibility
expands the space for everyone’s actions even when they are not suffering. People with the experience and faculties to be open in giving care are also likely to be more competent in receiving care: “[t]he extent to which caregivers are emotionally ‘held’ within their own organizations is related to their abilities to ‘hold’ others similarly” (Kahn, 1993: 540). The same applies in the converse. If one’s immediate social environment involves passive or active resistance to engaging through an ontology of possibility or relating caringly to others (lacking a “response;” actively increasing the social cost of trying by isolating or deriding, for example), one would require notable personal faculties and personal “feeds” from elsewhere to keep engaging in these ways within the organizational setting (notably, certain individuals are sometimes able to change these dynamics in individual contexts, at least for a while).

But the main point of this chapter is that orienting through an ontology of possibility and caring relationality within an intersubjective group ultimately requires feeds from outside the group; feeds beyond those (no matter how) caring relations. Let’s make a small thought experiment. Let’s imagine an “optimal” group is formed, consisting of highly “skilled practitioners” (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Kahn, 2001) with favorable histories of relational and other experiences resulting in deep faculties for an ontology of possibility and caring, practical wisdom (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014), competencies in positive relational practices, and a sublime match of personalities. Then, in order to understand the role of the “organizational level” for an ontology of possibility within the group, let’s assume the group also isolates itself from the world and the organization around it. At first, relationships within the group would likely deepen rapidly. They would experience caring for and being cared for and being seen in a new expansive light, feeding their engagements in further caring and an ontology of possibility. They would act as feeds (for a sense of expansiveness) for each other. They might experience some conflict and then learn to transform those into constructive situations of healing (Kahn, 2001), developing an atmosphere of “psychological safety” (Edmondson, 1999). They would probably cultivate a culture of “respectful engagement” (Carmeli, Dutton, & Hardin, 2015), “affirming” (Gergen, 2009b) each other as co-equal “adults” (Kenttä, 2020) in a “civilized dialogue” (Heckscher, 1994; Raelin, 2016). They would likely engage in co-creation (Gergen, 2009b) and true collaboration (Adler & Heckscher, 2018; Raelin, 2016), developing caring narrative practices constructing “polyphonic future-oriented stories” (Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012: 650), collectively striving for more complex ends.

Eventually, however, and this is the main point in this example of theoretical isolated group (no setting is ultimately fully isolated), they would run out of ways to meet each other from new perspectives that let them be seen in an expansive light. Ultimately, a shared social construction of reality, perhaps sophisticated and intricate, becomes established within an isolated group. Regardless of the depth of customs of caring, civilized attentiveness, or psychological safety, to the extent that those occur within what is to be expected, are not expansive and opening, per se. Caring relationality unfolds in the extensions toward the other that are not just repetition of some pattern of care but that open ourselves
also to ourselves in some way. When the convention is to relate attentively and respectfully, it becomes less effortful to do so. However, it would also slowly grow less “impactful,” more flat, less able to orient us toward the “yet-to-be-realized” (Dewey, 1917). Notably, caring in a group, per se, does not necessarily dilute—in our example it would probably even remain deep and meaningful. But our ability to reach out toward others and appreciate them in truly new expansive ways slowly depletes without access to other feeds of expansiveness.

In theory (say, in the Sartrean theory), we humans are “always” able and free to consider our situation however we please. No setting is ever actually static; only within our perception of it. Individual practice can lead to opening minds, perception, and relying on intuitive sources of knowing (e.g., Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013; Teerikangas & Välikangas, 2014). For Bergson (1946), the last line of defense against routinized environments are artists and philosophers who would be endlessly able to detach things from their institutionalized uses. However, the point here is that in the group of our thought experiment, in any event, it ultimately becomes gradually more difficult and arduous to prime through and act on such opening and discovery toward others and the world within groups without (the mentioned) external feeds. The group, or individuals in it, might be highly evolved, holding an idea of the world as filled with potential for emergence, but in isolation, the idea renders to just an idea.

In sum, while the dynamics on the intersubjective level in organizational settings are through what an ontology of possibility is fostered (or is not), the intersubjective level is ultimately dependent on the feeds of a sense of expansiveness outside of it. This need points us to the role of the organizational level in an ontology of possibility.

### 4.2 External foundations: Organizational archetypes with feeds of a sense of expansiveness

I will first consider potential feeds from the outside world to the organization. Essentially, to transpire as a context for an ontology of possibility and caring relationality, “the organization” would ultimately need to engage in endeavors with the world that entail a potential for the mentioned external feeds of a sense of expansiveness. While the reality of organizations is complex and messy, I find it useful to conceive such external feeds through three symbolic “archetypes”. It is perhaps easiest to reflect on these archetypes through imagining that the isolated caring intersubjective group of the previous chapter is the whole organization and assume that they end their isolation and begin to engage with the world. There obviously is a two-way causal relationship here: the initial mode of engagement of any intersubjective group (faculties for caring relationality and an ontology of possibility) is likely to deeply influence the kind of an enterprise they form.

Notably, this is not to say that any organization identifying with an archetype would automatically transpire as a context of an ontology of possibility and caring. There are infinite ways to disrupt such feeds. But in any event, it ultimately
requires the presence of at least one of these logics to have any consistent “ac-
cess” to feeds of a sense of expansiveness from the outside world to the organi-
ization.

The types represent different relationships with the surrounding world that
involve possible sources for a sense of expansiveness:

1. The logic of “School/Hospital”
2. The logic of “Apprenticeship/Measured turnover”
3. The logic of “Institutional entrepreneurship”

The types are not mutually exclusive but point to different logics for possible
e external feeds. The first two are kind of evident based on the preceding theoriz-
ing. First, with the organizational logic of “School/Hospital”, I essentially refer
to caregiving organizations. Such are, as Kahn depicted, organizations that “re-
volve around administering or ministering to clients in ways that enable their
ongoing growth and healing” (e.g., Kahn, 1993: 539). In the level of abstraction
relevant here, also schools would be accounted under this logic. In this archet-
type, a continued ontology of possibility and caring within the organization can
be fed by the members’ integral chance to experience the expansiveness of those
being cared for (patients, students), following members’ acts of caring (refer-
cencing feed number two from chapter 3.2). Again, schools and hospitals, most
evidently, do not necessarily (or even likely) form into sites of caring and an
ontology of possibility, but they have the fundamental possibility for it.

Second, a related logic for a possible feed from the outside is that of an “Ap-
prenticeship/Measured turnover”. In this logic, the internally exhausting ont-
tology of possibility (discussed in previous chapter) is invigorated by the joining
of new members. Expansiveness of the new members followed by caring relating
by the old members has the basic potential to rejuvenate a potential for an on-
tology of possibility and actual caring for both (feeds one and two). Joining a
caring established social context can create a sense of expansiveness, which, in
turn, feeds those within. This source is obviously similar the logic of school by
its repeating chances to experience caring and growth of others, but different in
terms of the new people joining as new members (of mutual relationality) and
of by their growth toward being “teachers” themselves. In our theoretical exam-
ple of the caring group, this logic is likely to require a somewhat modulated in-
take of new associates so that caring conventions are not dramatically disrupted
(yet allowing the essence of such conventions to be fueled by the growth of new
members). This is, again, not to say that all organizations of apprenticeship
would necessarily foster an ontology of possibility. In practice, such, for exam-
ple, often also scold new members to conformism. Consequently, this logic is
likely to be more limited in its endurance for providing feeds.

The first two are such that those can be maintained over time, in theory, just
accounting for the internal structure of the sources. As the people who are cared
for change, it can enable a continuum of the feed. However, many other chal-
lenges of institutionalization are likely to occur in such setups, that are outside
of the scope of the study here (where the point is to point toward to the underlying potential of feeds).

The third is the logic of “Institutional entrepreneurship”. That is, where the group is engaged in “changing the world” (Bloch, 1995) in a way that involves a potential to experience the expansiveness of the world in their acts of creating (feed number three). Notably, with this, I do not split organizations to categorically represent either entrepreneurship or institutional entrepreneurship. Rather, the latter refers to the part of (any) entrepreneurial engagement that actually opens and expands the prevailing social construction, by “liberating and liberalizing action.” Following the earlier theorizing, a way to portray the difference between the two is that the change that arises from engaging in institutional entrepreneurship (vs. the change that is produced in engaging in “just” entrepreneurship) is the part that we would be vitalized by even if we were not involved in creating the change. The difference is not in the seeming radicality or even the extent of disruption for incumbents, but whether the endeavor expands rather than narrows the sense of established social construction. (Even revolutions often only engender new kings, not more expansive institutions.)

Notably, many startups internally stimulate this kind of a sense of expansiveness at first. When people (customers) start to react to what the startup team has done instead of the project just being on a drawing board; when the number of subscribers starts to soar on the screen; when people do things on the company’s platform the founders had not envisioned. It is only a bit later in an evolutionary pattern of startups when what new the group is doing necessarily takes up a decisive role in the durability of this feed (“sensing expansiveness of the world following their acts of creating”). Essentially, this happens when successful startups evolve to a phase where their “concept” has proved successful, and the emphasis moves to replicating and strengthening the concept. Now, motivation in any endeavor splits between the loose categories of “wanting to show our/my enterprise can grow to be the biggest making me/us the smartest” and “provoking a particular change in the behavior of fellow humans”15. But if the latter is not innately experienced as a change that “makes a difference” that the members would be vitalized by even if they were not involved with it (i.e., institutional entrepreneurship) this feed is likely to dissolve. This is not to say that the startup erodes, often quite the opposite—such seemingly new is apt to induce buzz, perhaps even new leaders of new industries, while not requiring true social risks and only deepening established structures. But it is to say that engaging through an ontology of possibility and caring relationality within the organizations becomes more dependent on chance, individual aptitudes, and feeds from other contexts of life than the organizational setting.

15 This is where the scholars arguing for the power of having a purpose for one’s company enter (e.g., Adler & Heckscher, 2018; Henderson, 2020).
4.3 Internal manifestation of feeds: The organizational level as an unfolding context

This chapter considers the sense of expansiveness and internal dynamics of an organization. In the previous chapter, I hypothesized on archetypal organizational relationships with the surrounding world that involve a potential for feeds for an ontology of possibility. In larger organizations, the external feeds often become catalyzed or at least mediated by the organizational level. The abstract organizational level itself often appears as the main theatre for the tangible intersubjective level. Essentially, beyond the direct feeds from outside world, the organizational level can appear as an expanding “relevant surrounding” (feed number four), feeding an ontology of possibility for its members (transiently, at least). Notably, any such sense of expansiveness to occur within organizations can be seen to require some external feeds from archetypal organizational relations or just from transient and random sources (say, a new people-oriented CEO is elected and engages broadly in caring discussions). However, in this chapter I do not evaluate the original outside feed, as I consider that the dynamics of this internal expansiveness and unfolding are agnostic to such sources.

Specifically, I consider the organizational level and sense of expansiveness in terms of organizational culture and structure. The essential argument is the same in both, which follows rather directly from the earlier deliberations. Centrally, an ontology of possibility and caring relationality are fostered in the experience of having space for situational consideration without a sense of jeopardizing one’s inherent human value. However, we perceive such a space only through expansiveness of such a space. Any specific “degree” of social or structural “possibility” in isolation is meaningless. Consequently, I propose a lens that, instead of any certain doctrine of organizing, structure, or set of values, our experiences of organizational cultivation of an ontology of possibility and/or caring relationality are rather a result of unfolding and expansiveness in such doctrines.

4.3.1 Organizational culture and a sense of expansiveness

I consider organizational culture as the shared “sets of values and beliefs”, particularly “regarding the nature of work relationships and meaning of work” prevalent in an organization, manifested, e.g., in “displays” and “practices” (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012: 654-5). In our exposures to organizations, some “cultures” have felt better and others worse in terms of supporting caring relations and our potential for orientation through an ontology of possibility. That is, how people have treated us and what kinds of values and underlying assumptions seem to have been guiding judgments. Consequently, many scholars have described the attributes of organizational cultures that would seem to support caring relations (Kahn, 1993; Liedtka, 1996), and so, cultivate an ontology of possibility in intersubjective groups (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012). These have included, for instance, a shared belief that “people’s humanity should be displayed rather than concealed” (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012: 654), a norm of noticing and responding to suffering of others through compassion (Lilius, Worline, Dutton,
Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011), a tendency of leaders acknowledging “the ‘wholeness’ of organizational members, and including their emotions and vulnerabilities” (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012: 655).

As noted, the main conclusion here is somewhat simple. The crux of the role of organizational culture for fostering an ontology of possibility and caring relations on an intersubjective level is rather in the expansion of a culture than in any specific attributes, values, or manifestations of a culture (though, such might well be through which a sense of expansiveness is experienced). Specifically, an ontology of possibility is fostered in an expansion toward widening plurality (the converse, then, occurs in a cultural folding toward narrower monism).

Let’s first consider the premises of the latter part of the argument; the lens through which cultural attributes, values, or manifestations rather appear as conduits than sources of fostering an ontology of possibility. Mats Alvesson (2012) described an organizational culture as “the setting” in which the meaning of things that poorly fit explicit structures are negotiated on “a general organizational level”. For example, “[i]s the manager clearly a superior figure, someone you are supposed to have deep respect for, or is s/he more like first among equals?” (Alvesson, 2012: 4). A culture guides how one is to behave, react to the other, what to believe. It influences, for example, initial trust among organizational members who have not met. However, culture, which is impersonal in and of itself, is unable to engender or eradicate caring relationality on the intersubjective level in real relations.

In fact, as developed earlier, caring relationality and an ontology of possibility can be seen categorically as extensions beyond what is “included” in a culture. “Culture is...central in governing the understanding of behavior, social events, institutions and processes. Culture is the setting in which these phenomena become comprehensible and meaningful” (Alvesson, 2012: 4). That is, essentially, culture is the prevailing social construction against which an ontology of possibility, by definition, occurs. An extension in caring relationality is toward the unique particulars of the other beyond the culturally shared meanings. It is precisely in becoming to understand the other in the aspects that are outside of the generally accepted meanings that has a potential to make space for them. Relatedly, regardless of how “elevated” the established habits, norms, and beliefs of a social context are, those are per se impotent in guiding the internal engagement toward an ontology of possibility or to the extension in caring relationality. Even cultures that would teach to appreciate all living, for example, can, per se, only bring us to the concept and perhaps certain manifestations of appreciating all living. I contemplate this particularly in essay 1:

[W]hile the inherent concern of the mind is the “as-yet-unrealized”, it cannot be directed toward such orientation by labels (values), of what is “moral, religious, aesthetic”, even if those labels would be considered to be of the highest order, like “Will of God, or Kultur” (Dewey, 1917).
...no cultural appreciations or norms can lead us to the intrinsic engagement involved in [an ontology of possibility], nor in the accepting and embracing such orientation in others, per se. [An ontology of possibility] is specifically exploration beyond what is known to be appreciated. (Essay 1)

Specifically, given how we defined the elusive nature of an ontology of possibility and caring relationality, the more explicitly a culture expects members to be manifesting such (as) behaviors, the more difficult those actually become. This point builds partly on David Sidorsky’s work on value plurality in society (present in essay 1). He theorized how “the competing values that are required in the achievement of a Good Society cannot be compatible with a preconceived monistic blueprint for the best society” (Sidorsky, 2013: 4).

When imposed as a harmonious model of behavior, the manifestations of care are similarly disposed to become an introjected source of extrinsic value, driven by a need or an obligation to appear as someone who cares (or can give space for exploration). With an external locus of motivation, care is prone to become self-sacrificing or false. This notion is one of main points of Carol Gilligan (1982, 2014), concerning the unbalanced societal imposition of the ideal of care for women: “…labor of caring has been the special obligation and unpaid labor of women...bound internally and externally by obligations to care without complaint, on pain of becoming a bad woman: unfeminine, ungenerous, uncaring” (Gilligan, 2003: 157). While caring relationality is inherently and profoundly an altruistic and intuitive mode of relating, it is demoralized and derailed if others (or the other) assume such altruism (Benjamin, 2017). (Essay 1)

This is not to say that cultural habits of care or of exploration would necessarily be demoralizing or not able to manifest care or exploration, but that what feeds the essence of such habits is not ultimately the cultural habit itself (e.g., given how the internal orientation through which such habits are engaged is often considered decisive for the habit). Caring relationality and an ontology of possibility can be upheld through cultural attributes but require people experiencing the mentioned feeds (in chapter 3) to transcend such attributes while performing them.

As for the former part of the argument: the perspective I offer here is that the way an organizational culture “itself” can be seen to feed, to engender space for an ontology of possibility, is rather in an expansion of the “in-betweens” of cultural values. That is, the in-betweens of established habits or judgments, experienced as expansiveness of “relevant surroundings”. There are basically two modalities for such an experience. Firstly, personal. When moving from organization A to organization B, we might experience expansiveness if we come from a narrower cultural dogma to an environment with a broader capacity to plurality of justifications. More is possible here, more diverse judgments are allowed, there is more social room to act and experiment (we might also experience displacement and fear, if we are very indoctrinated by our previous environment). Such a change can involve also the more personal expansiveness of experiencing
caring relationality, as considered in the logic of Apprenticeship. Notably, in such personal experiences of changing scenery, also opposite *monistic* dogmas that answer precisely to the aspects forbidden in one’s previous dogma, can engender a personal sense of expansiveness (but only for a short while, like joining a sect of some set of harmonious values that first seem to offer clear answers).

Secondly, an organizational culture might engender a sense of expansiveness when it evolves internally. When liberating values spring in the context of a prevalent dogma without fully abandoning the perception of reality involved in the dogma, it begets previously unseen space for consideration. Such changes are typically a result of internal institutional entrepreneurship by some (by definition, by “leaders”). For example, this might occur when an organizational culture of valuing individualistic achievement, rational justifications, and harsh competitiveness comes to incorporate considerations of care and humanistic justifications. Or more poignantly perhaps, for a monistic “culture of caring”, caring relationality and an ontology of possibility might rather be liberated by coming to allow considering also more individualistic justifications, by not always needing to form a consensus on initiatives, by more universalistic instead of particularistic reasoning, by keeping record of who did what for more equitable sharing of extrinsic rewards and tolls.

Notably, however, a sense of plurality, the sense of space for consideration in the in-betweens, unfolds specifically from such an expanding toward more plurality. I contemplate the logic in essay 1 in the context of societal values:

...a sense of space between imposed values in a social context does not ultimately result from a plurality of values, which, as static is largely an empty construct. When a sphere of considered aspects, even if originally mutually contradicting, would remain “constant”, concern starts to have “known ends” and becomes mechanical “no matter what the scope of the performed end” (Dewey, 1917). Instead, a sense of space for agency can be seen to arise in expanding of values toward wider and more complex plurality. An expansion occurs through a rise of new opposing values that are initially inexplicable and incompatible for a prevailing dogma, having the potential to prime an uncharted space between the prevailing dogma and the new values. (Essay 1)

### 4.3.2 Organizational structure and a sense of expansiveness

The relationship of organizational structures and an ontology of possibility (or rather some of its manifestations like “agency” or “employee engagement,” as the orientation itself is seldom considered in its full ambiguity) is often considered quite straightforward. Orienting through and cultivating an ontology of possibility and caring in intersubjective relations requires a sense of autonomy; space for one’s own consideration. Consequently, for example, the feminist organizational scholars that Lawrence and Maitlis (2012) refer to clearly reject “traditional bureaucracy as a structure within which care can easily be enacted” (p. 654) particularly because of the involved inclination for controlling and depersonalization. The idea is rather pervasive that the *more* “hierarchical” structures are, the *less* those permit caring and an ontology of possibility. Instead,
considering structures that would foster care (and thus enacting practices for cultivating an ontology of possibility), scholars suggest creating a “network of connections” that emphasize relations over positions (Liedtka, 1996), where “members can coordinate across multiple, diverse relational networks to provide access to different kind of resources to those in need” (Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012: 654).

However, based on the theorizing earlier, the relationship of organizational structure as an enabler (or disabler) of caring relationality and orienting through an ontology of possibility is more complex. Specifically, the locus of the relationship between structure and an ontology of possibility is not in a certain degree of, for example, centralization/decentralization, but in a movement toward an expanding possibility (a sense of expansiveness). There are two simple and one more nuanced argument to be made on this. Firstly, we do not perceive any “absolute” level of autonomy. We do not sense the extended possibilities of life from not living in a box if we have never lived in a box. Secondly, as long as an intersubjective level exists in an organization (i.e., that members are able to communicate amongst themselves directly, which kind of a requirement to be an organization), any structure of organizing per se does not engender or impede caring relationality nor an ontology of possibility (cf. Weick’s (1995) notion of the intersubjective).

Thirdly, it is not merely in movement toward “more autonomy” that unfolds as a sense of expansiveness of possibility in organizations. Also Lawrence and Maitlis shortly refer to this point, but avoid going deeper into it: balancing in structures between what “permit[s] autonomous action but also enable[s] integration” (p. 654) is inevitable. One the one hand, the organizational structures as per coordinating efforts limits our autonomy to work as we would want to, particularly our ability to expand the limits of our efforts (cf. Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). The structures might also limit our access to experiencing any realized expansiveness of the world or of the other (cf. Grant, 2007). We might consider that our role in accomplishments of the organization as a whole is not relevant, lacking a sense of possibility to influence the direction of the whole (cf. Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001). On the other hand, structures of the organization proliferate our practical possibilities in creation and caring. The impact our work might have to the world can be decisively more momentous because we are a part of a whole that works toward a unitary direction. To actually induce any kind of a change in prevailing institutional establishment often requires a coordinated effort of many souls. Similarly, even in person-to-person caring, working within an organizational apparatus often allows to access and utilize significantly broader and more complex resources in caring for patients or pupils as is possible alone (e.g., Molterer et al., 2020).

Consequently, it is always situational which kind of a change of structures will engender a sense of expansiveness and more space for agency in an intersubjective group’s “relevant environment”. Such experiences can follow from “opposite” changes in terms of structures, e.g., both from centralization and decentralization. That is, a sense of expansiveness can arise from i) attaining more
autonomy to do and experience the results of one’s work, ii) attaining more organizational resources to do one’s work, iii) the work of the whole organization attaining more coherence and so becoming more impactful in the world, or iv) having more say in the direction of the organization. The extent of “absolute” hierarchy at any given time is not meaningful, but whether the direction of change is toward “liberating action for more complex ends” (the Dewey reference) or toward deepening/narrowing of prevailing dogma.

4.3.3 “Less hierarchical organizing” as upholding of an unfolding context

A plethora of organizational scholarship has come to consider “less hierarchical organizing” (Child & McGrath, 2001; Courpasson, 2000; Felin & Powell, 2016; Foss, 2003; Heckscher, 1994; Martela, 2019). That is, radical modifications to and alternatives for hierarchical bureaucracy to ease top-down control and to increase autonomy and engagement. The literary contributions do not form a uniform paradigm, but those have contemplated on organizing that would be, e.g., postbureaucratic, flexible, decentralized, self-managing, communal, or non-hierarchical. In the more mainstream, the motivation, or the “dependent variable” for such attempts is rarely care (let alone “an ontology of possibility”), but instead some more hard-sounding outcome like innovativeness, adaptiveness, or ambidexterity. However, the phenomenon that most of such studies, or managers in the respective organizations essentially mean by “less hierarchical” (or variations of the term) is a kind of spirited collaborative organizing where members would autonomously, keenly, yet purposefully work together for the benefit of the whole\textsuperscript{16}. In other words, organizations and organizing that would foster caring relationality among members and an ontology of possibility in a concerted fashion.

A lot of the perspective in this thesis on the experienced organizational unfolding has been indirectly informed by my investigations to less hierarchical organizing (in essays 3 and 4). However, perhaps more directly (yet not with those words), the studies tease out a kind of an additional modality for “the organization as an unfolding context”. That is, a way in which organizations might sustain (or at least prolong) a sense of an unfolding context through a somewhat deliberative upholding of inharmonious tenets of organizing.

In the studied companies, such upholding was attempted specifically between centralized and decentralized authority. The three software consultancies hosted an underlying formal hierarchy. A flat hierarchy where most employees were formally equal, but clearly a hierarchy rather than a principled democracy (although some issues received a vote) or a worker-owned cooperative: decisive ownership was in the hands of a group of founders, a CEO alongside a management team were ultimately responsible for the fate of the companies and so could formally have a final say on any matter if so wished. However, the formal leaders, while unable to officially share their ultimate responsibility, went to ex-

\textsuperscript{16} This perhaps excludes studies considering self-organizing predominantly as bringing the logic of markets into organizations (e.g., Zenger, 2002)
ceptional lengths in attempting to share both authority and a sense of responsibility for the whole. However, nowhere was it defined what were the scopes of authority for employees, or for the managers.

Essay 3 depicts how practices had formed in the companies for mostly agreeable but often also contentious dialogue on the appropriate authority of members in a given situation or decision. I conceptualized the dynamic as attempts to situationalize authority for both formal managers and employees. The members of the companies were sensitive and vocal about whether some use of authority was not “warranted”. Be it an employee singlehandedly driving a commonly impactful matter without consulting others or repetitively flying to expensive extraneous trainings. Or a top manager overruling employee decisions and violating their autonomy without a “credible” general or particular justification. The collective conventions were constantly contending unnecessary centralization or decentralization of authority, both on the spot and in terms of formation of structures that would secure such authority. That is, unnecessary from the perceived and negotiated balance of autonomy of individuals and the benefit of the whole. In such a dynamic, formal managerial authority could be seen as last line of defense against “unnecessary” use of informal authority, and vice versa.

The basic idea of upholding paradoxical organizational features rather than trying to blend or dissolve them was first conceived and conceptualized by Karen Ashcraft (2001) as “organized dissonance”. She described a feminist bureaucracy where centralization/decentralization and equality/inequality manifested as dialectics rather than oxymorons. Adler and Heckscher (2006, 2018) describe fairly similar paradoxes in “value-rational collaborative communities,” but with less emphasis on emotion or deliberate upholding of particularly structural paradox. Considering such a dynamic from the lens of an ontology of possibility described in this thesis emphasizes the perhaps underlying essence of the dynamic. It is precisely this active organizational work for enduring evading of dogma (even of “evading dogma”) that can be seen to feed the experience of such organizing. That is, a sense of expansiveness from a continuous internal unfolding of the organizational level.
Here, I attempt distilling the claims of the thesis. In the attempt, I come to voice some implied and paraphrase some of the made arguments. The chain of statements is partly self-explanatory, but partly requires reading of the above.

Setting the stage:

I An ontology of possibility toward “the world” or toward another is the mode of engagement where one comes to implicitly trust in the expansive nature of reality and attentively act on the edge and explore beyond a prevailing social construction.

II The mode is inaccessible for a conscious choice or a want alone, involving, by definition, enduring “not-yet-knowing” and embracing indeterminate social “risk.”

III A propensity for engaging in an ontology of possibility (i.e., endurance of engaging through an ontology of possibility without a responsive expansion of felt reality) is fostered in received caring relationality (an ontology of possibility toward another). That is, in human connections of unexpected elevating affirmation, involving an experience of an expanding space for us and our explorations and the absence of a sense of jeopardizing our inherent human value or of triviality of the explorations.

Foundational arguments:

IV Regardless of the extent of one’s propensity, one is not able to endlessly engage with the limits of social construction (with “the world” or toward others in caring relationality) if there never is a response of expansiveness, but either retreat to or retreat from an existing construction.

V Continuing engagement through an ontology of possibility is fed by sensing an external response of expansiveness or externally initiated expansiveness. The types of feeds are sensing expansiveness in (1) oneself in received caring extensions, (2) the other following one’s acts of caring, (3) “the world” following one’s acts of creating, (4) one’s relevant surroundings. The first three are more enduring and intimate feeds replenishing a propensity for an ontology of possibility, while the last is a real time experience reducing the need for a propensity in engaging in an ontology of possibility.
Derivative arguments for the organizational premises of an ontology of possibility in organizational settings:

I  A space for an ontology of possibility in organizational settings appears (or does not appear) most palpably on the intersubjective level, where caring relationality, feeds (1) and (2), can form virtuous feedback loops (or where such feeds are most potently impeded).

II However, regardless of favorable propensities of individuals and initial positive feedback loops, ultimately it becomes more difficult and arduous to engage in caring relationality within an intersubjective level without (the organizational level enabling) feeds from beyond.

III Organizational premises for an ontology of possibility are ultimately in how the “organizational level” enables or conduits feeds from outside for a sense of expansiveness.

   a. The organizational level can enable the feed of sensing expansiveness of the other following acts of caring (2) from outside of the organization if what the organization does, in fact, expands those it serves.

   b. The organizational level can enable the feed of sensing expansiveness of “the world” following acts of creating (3) if what the organization does, in fact, expands “the world”.

   c. The organizational level can prolong feeds of caring relationality (1 and 2) within an internal intersubjective level by the joining of new members (at least for a while).

   d. The organizational level can itself appear as an expanding relevant surrounding (4) for the intersubjective level when the tenets of organizing (e.g., cultural, or structural) are expanding toward embracing wider and more complex plurality (rather than narrowing toward a more monistic dogma). However, this expansiveness is also commenced by external feeds (random or systematic).

IV The feeds are manifested through events and configurations, but the feed (a sense of expansiveness) ultimately is in the experienced space engendered, not in the specific events and configurations.
6. Discussion

The thesis presented above adopts and develops a perspective on human engagement and relations in organizational life that connects an experiential/phenomenological and an abstract organizational level of inquiry.

The quality of the engagement of individuals and of the relationality between them has become central in many disciplines of organizational scholarship. This includes particularly positive organizational studies, where psychological states and qualities of relations are often the primary interest. But also more unlikely strands of management literature (like, strategy and entrepreneurship) are becoming to consider those as central in premises of strategic and entrepreneurial novelty (e.g., Felin et al., 2014). Given the established ways to make an argument in organizational studies and related psychology, however, there is an inclination to consider such profound qualities of human experience as substances that kind of compound and link to each other rather arithmetically. Most typically, studies look at the presence of certain attributes, practices, or resources as explanations for behaviors and outcomes. In contrast, this thesis takes the viewpoint that the essence of our experience and mode of engagement unfold through such attributes or resources rather than because of some specific attributes. An ontology of possibility toward others or toward the wider social reality is not something that we can merely choose to embrace or that would mechanically follow from being influenced by certain attributes.

Essentially, this thesis moves the perspective of inquiry from such “middle” toward both “edges” of layers of abstraction. What I mean by this is that, on the one hand, instead of considering individual behaviors, cognitive approaches, or outcome-like psychological states, my perspective here concerns “a step deeper”, the experiential structure of our engagement with our surroundings, regards to which we are partly also just passengers. On the other hand, instead of considering specific practices or resources in organizations, my perspective here concerns “a step higher” and I link the dynamics of the wider (impersonal) organizational level to the experiential level.

In working toward linking such experiential layer with the abstracted organizational dimension, the thesis comes to give names and theorize on the individual elements in a progression of suggestions. First, the thesis elaborates our conception of what an ontology of possibility is (Bloch, 1995; Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012). I point out the elusive locus of the experience of conceiving “socially constructed nature of both past and present” (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012: 641) and bring this elusive nature front and center of theorizing. I find that such nature
of an ontology of possibility (though, in their own terms) is at least implicitly present in the works of Ernst Bloch (1995), John Shotter (2010), Jessica Benjamin (2017) and Nel Noddings (2003, to some extent), but it is often missing in the definite argumentation style of organizational scholarship. In this elaboration, I outline how the elusive essence appears particularly in the ambiguous motivational orientation involved in working on the boundaries of social construction, containing enduring “not-yet-knowing” and embracing social risk while not conceptualizing a derivative reward for the effort. I outline how this aspect in the relationship of humans with future and with social construction, relates to but is (interestingly) distinct from many related constructs.

Second, I make a point about the unison of the phenomenological structures of an ontology of possibility toward the world and of caring relationality. Building on seldom explicitly considered aspects in the work of theorists of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003), the thesis elaborates how caring relationality involves moving beyond the boundary of prevailing norms in the social context or within the relationship while not conceptualizing a reward or a secondary outcome for such an extension. Specifically, I attest that this structure of such extensions of self is similar to the experiential structure of engaging in social construction toward the world more generally. I offer the idea that trust in a principally expansive nature of reality is fostered by unprecedented reaches toward us that expand reality for us.

Third, the thesis suggests considering a sense of expansiveness as a “feed” for an ontology of possibility. Essentially, with the construct I propose that our ability to relate caringly and/or to explore beyond prevailing social construction is nourished actively (and deeply) by our acts of care or creation, and passively by the realization of qualitative expansiveness in our relevant social environment. This notion of feeds is the critical element that connects the impersonal organizational dimension with the elusive experiential structure of engaging in an ontology of possibility. The thesis sketches that it is such a sense of expansiveness that then contextually manifests in and through people’s behaviors, practices, or related resources that we predominantly experience. And hence, the liberation and connection experienced through particular behaviors, practices or resources, often becomes confused with them.

The compiling theory makes some contributions to more specific areas of organizational literature.

First, the processual/experiential lens to organization life advanced in this compiling theory has potential to illuminate the essence of “less hierarchical organizing” (Lee & Edmondson, 2017), which, indeed, seems a bit frustrating for current scholarship. The thesis might also bring Ashcraft’s (2001) original insights of organized dissonance from characterizing specifically “feminist” organizing to manifesting the essence of the attempts to organize less hierarchically generally. There is an interesting circularity in the related debate on less hierarchical organizations, which might be explained by a misfit of the “independent variable”. Namely, hierarchy. More specifically, the frustration arises,
I find, from a need to find, and somehow proof, the existence of a design where organizing would be less hierarchical but still effectively integrating efforts (some scholars have investigated the search for a structure, but the focus is still on if the answer works; cf. Clement & Puranam, 2018).

The discussion seems to have a quite established overall pattern. Periodically accounts appear that attempt to communicate how less hierarchical organizations might “work”. Such often explain how low bureaucratic controls are enabled by cultivating a community of trust and dialogue, which is, in turn, enabled by low bureaucratic controls. Concentrating on the better angles of human nature the accounts describe how members collaborate and align their actions by being active in acknowledging their interdependence in working toward a shared purpose (Adler, 2001; Felin, 2015; Heckscher, 1994; Martela, 2019; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979); how formal managers (who often exist in those accounts) and non-managers all work as coequals and real authority depends on the relevance of their contribution for the situation at hand.

Then there are the keenly interested but skeptically toned accounts that point out that such utopias are a bit too good to be true. On the one hand, sociologists emphasize that managers with formal authority would be compelled to create soft means of control, a “moral obedience” in the members (Courpasson, 2000; Courpasson & Dany, 2003), which, in the articles, seems to reveal how actual low hierarchies thus do not exist. On the other hand, more technocratic accounts, attempting to solve the conundrum of autonomy and integration through formal design, point out how particularly managerial authority would need to be held in check for any autonomy of employees to actually be true. Hence they propose that systems would need to be put in place to formalize decentralization of authority (Foss, 2003; Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Stea, Foss, & Foss, 2015).

Notable scholars from outside the discussion have also countered less hierarchical organizing as a fallacy, because humans are naturally driven toward hierarchies (Pfeffer, 2013). Others remind of the famous study of Barker (1993); if there are no formal hierarchies, “concerted control” appears to suffocate initiative and joy. Ultimately, as noted, some authors have explicitly landed on the notion that regardless of the type of an organization, “hierarchy” remains: “whenever in common types of organizations formal hierarchy decreases, informal hierarchy increases” (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011). In other words, there is no way to explain what the literature effectively means by “less hierarchical” (a kind of spirited collaborative organizing where members would autonomously, keenly, yet purposefully work together for the benefit of the whole) by considering a static organizational design. Therefore, a statically perceived degree of hierarchy might not be the right unit of analysis for the aspired phenomenon.

The lens of an ontology of possibility developed here, which essentially accompanies most of the modes of engagement that the literature aspires for, changes the independent variable from a static hierarchy to the experience of unfolding of the organizational context. The perspective implies that it might be useful to consider the essence of less hierarchical organizing rather through the facility of an organization to visit and apply centralization when useful without developing
into a dogma. The implied core of less hierarchical organizing arises not from any design of “flat hierarchy” but rather from an avoidance of dogmas (or “form traps”; Nilsson, 2015) and continuously correct between centralized and decentralized authority, for which a presence of both is needed.

Second, the thesis offers a new lens for one of the main propositions of the literature on care and ethic of care in organizations (Kahn, 1993; Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Liedtka, 1996). Namely, as a general notion, the literature maintains that moving toward more manifestations of care, more personal engagement and acknowledging the needs of the cared-for more deeply is always the route to caring relating. For example, Liedtka underlined how “it is only in the process of personally engaging with the particular other that we gain the specialized knowledge of their context, history, and needs that permits us to fully care for them on their terms, rather than ours.” (Liedtka, 1996, referring to Benhabib, 1992). However, the lens considered in this thesis reframes the underlying logic in its most simplistic form. It can also be, depending on the situation, that more universalistic justifications or relating might to open up an ontology of possibility and caring relationality. Notably, while deliberating the consequences and precedents of an ethic or practices of care, the paradigm unwittingly almost always comes to consider a change toward an ethic of care in the context of the current of dogma of hierarchical bureaucracy / ethic of judgment. Incidentally, also Lawrence and Maitlis (2012) word an ethic of care in organizations through enacting an ethic of care. When concern over particulars of the involved people becomes enacted within the established culturally competitive realities of business world, an experience of expansiveness can surely be considerable given the decades of moving toward more monist and ultimately counter-intuitively limited dogmas of rationalism (e.g., Ghoshal, 2005; and essay 1). However, within a context of dogmatic values of caring and showing care, enacting more caring practices and ways to acknowledge of particulars, would likely translate to less open space for actual caring relationality.

Third, I am inclined to see the thesis as a contribution and a part of a nascent “field” that takes the elusive not fully definable essence of human experiencing and engagement as central in their theorizing on organizations. There are several scattered articles that embrace such a lens. I want to mention Weik (2019), who juxtaposed her thesis to a rational-cognitive bias in the field and theorized on endurance of institutions based on their aesthetic experienced qualities. And Carlsen et al. (2012) who outlined hope in organizations as “a future oriented and emotive quality of experiencing that interacts with other organizational processes and is contextually and situationally shaped.” Explicitly to my point, Nilsson (2015) synthesized positive organizational scholarship and institutional theory into an experiential argument on institutional agency. Whereas the institutional theory has considered legitimacy largely as driven by the level of visible behaviors and manifestation, Nilsson made the central contribution of separating between such symbolic legitimacy and experiential legitimacy (that is, the difference between, e.g., whether someone was allowed to talk or whether they were actually listened to). Nilsson beautifully worded the elusive essence of the experience and corresponding manifestations:
It is easy to turn experiential values into abstractions: smiles mean friendliness, voting procedures mean participation, nondiscrimination policies mean inclusiveness. But the actual experiences of friendliness, participation, and inclusiveness are more elusive and must be evaluated in their own right if the goal is to create and maintain robust experiential patterns. (Nilsson, 2015: p. 376)

In terms of the overall lens of linking the experiential and organizational levels, my thesis lands perhaps closest to the recent paper by Thomas et al. (2018) on “experiential organizing”. Building on Nilsson’s (2015) work, the underlying crux of their theorizing is in the difference between practice of care and collaboration and the experiential essence of care and collaboration (i.e., what I describe here, e.g., as the difference between care and caring relationality). They suggest how organizations might avoid succumbing to a form trap (i.e., “dogma” in the language of my thesis) by attentively balancing tensions between relational and bureaucratic goals with symbolically and experientially oriented work.

I consider that the contributions of my thesis to this “field” might be twofold. First, I investigate the structure of such elusive experientiality. Specifically, I explicate how an ontology of possibility as a mode of engagement is fueled by experiencing (the similarly) elusive expansiveness in one’s acts or surroundings. Second, I utilize that structure in linking the experiential level to the impersonal organizational level (with the notion of feeds of a sense of expansiveness).

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It is customary to ponder about the limitations, future research directions, and practical implications of one’s work at the end of a dissertation. Accordingly, the individual contributing essays discuss their relationship with their respective domains in this way where applicable. However, I am uncertain of giving the treatment in the usual spirit for this compiling part. Notably, this is not because it would be useless or that there would not be limitations (or potential for future research, I hope). In fact, the argumentation is ripe with limitations, particularly from the perspective of the many individual domains the work borrows from but cannot claim belonging to.17

Assessing limitations and future research helps to clear an argument from noise by pinching residual imperfections outside of the work to close the argument. However, my intention here is kind of opposite—to rather leave the argument open as a lens that might or might not benefit the reader. The work does not dispute the results of any of the related domains, but rather hopes to sketch toward a somewhat generic complementary logic, or toward an alternative lens, for how and why organizational settings ultimately unfold as sites for an ontology of possibility and caring relationality. And as for the internal inconsistencies

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17 To quote Scott Shapiro: “I love doing interdisciplinary scholarship because it’s fun to fail at multiple disciplines.”
or relevant unaddressed scholarship, I have tried to patch what I discovered before printing this out. I am sure there are many more to be found later.

As for the practical implications, the thesis deals with an underlying logic of many sought-after phenomena in organizations, namely, the kind of internal experiential engagement that undergirds true collaboration and innovation. However, direct implications are scant, almost by virtue of the thesis itself. Specifically, I argue that such positive consequences do not ultimately arise from mastering certain practices or the presence of specific structures or resources. That is, the “good” we sense in whatever situation is not in the facets of the situation. Notably, we are much more aware of the importance of psychological safety, a sense of community, and compassionate relating in organizations than just a decade ago, with consultants training managers on related practices and interventions. While coming to understand such knowledge or taking up related practices might be by what we come to experience a space to relate to each other and our surroundings through an ontology of possibility, it is not the practice (or particularly any certain practice), per se, but coming to the practice in the context of not having the practice that engenders the experienced space. The thesis would so encourage searching for alternative angles, but not by forgetting one’s roots or jumping to ready-made templates or harmonious organizing systems of management or community gurus. Eventually, however, most categorically, the thesis implies that no internal practices will ultimately help if what the organization does, does not authentically serve its environment.
An ontology of possibility is a uniting underlying phenomenon (though not a concept) across the essays. In this chapter, I summarize the enclosed essays first in their own terms, and then by outlining their relationship with the compiling theory. In the following, passages in quotations are from the essay in question in the paragraph, if not indicated otherwise.

Essays 1 and 2: Phelpsian agency and caring relationality

Essays 1 and 2 are written in the context of and as a contribution to Edmund Phelps’ theory of “mass flourishing.” They both contain important prototypes, if you will, for many of the notions in this compiling theory, but in (partly) different vocabulary and emphases.

For the past few decades, the work of Edmund Phelps, Nobel laureate in economics, has concentrated on building a theory around economic dynamism, indigenous innovation, and, what he calls, a mass flourishing economy (e.g., Phelps, 2013, 2017, 2018; Phelps et al., 2020). While Phelps considers the logic of a market economy from multiple angles, the core of his thesis is in its ontological perspective. The lens of Phelps’ analysis of the economy is human experiencing (Saarinen & Kenttä, 2011). The work is based on a pragmatist inquiry to the experience of human agency (that I refer as “Phelpsian agency”) as well as a historical analysis of Western modern economies from 1820s (in Britain) to 1960s (in America) as a theatre of such an agency. The central theoretical claim of Phelps’ work is that when such an agency “was supported by what Phelps considers the “modern values” of individualism, self-expression, and vitality, the values unleashed human originality that both engendered and was nourished by grassroots economic dynamism and innovation.” (Essay 1).

Phelps’ theory leaves its audience with a plea for regaining “dynamism of old” (Phelps, 2018: p. 10). Phelps and his colleagues argue that the period of economic dynamism in the West and ubiquity of Phelpsian agency in economic life faded together with modernism around 1960s-70s. The theory portrays the erosion of dynamism as caused by an unfortunate loss of modern values due to a rising preference of safety and comfort.

Essentially both essays 1 and 2 theorize on more general logics involved in the erosion of Phelpsian agency within the economic organizational life that is much
more linked to the dynamics of economic life itself. Methodologically both essays are conceptual, based on multidisciplinary theoretical synthesizing brought into the context of Phelps’ theory.

Essay 2, which is earlier in the research project, attempts two things in the concise space that the Journal of Economic Issues provided. Firstly, leaning on organizational psychology (Grant, 2007, 2008) and self-determination theory (Martela & Ryan, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000), it outlines the separation between human flourishing in experiencing “exploring the new” (that is the center of Phelps’ thesis) and flourishing in experiencing “enabling others to explore the new”. I link the two by employing the vocabulary of institutions: “Exploration of the new requires experiencing such support from existing institutions that allows for departures of individual motivation from those existing institutions. Without developing sufficient social and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) through exposure to conditions that support basic psychological needs (in current or previous contexts), new heights are unlikely to be explored outside of the known.” Secondly, the essay presents a sketch for an evolutionary pattern of bureaucratic hierarchical organizations in enabling experiencing the two types of flourishing. Essentially, exploring the new is naturally experienced at first and then in a diminishing manner along establishment. For the other type of flourishing, I attest how the organizing dogma involves a tendency to disrupt experiencing enabling others to explore the new: “Those with power are distanced from experiencing the impact of the institution on beneficiaries, structurally leading to priming through extrinsic motivations and vested interests. This leads to the need to further control those on the frontline who could experience the impact, which inhibits flourishing on their part as well.” The essay concludes by attempting to contribute to Phelps’ work by offering this tendency (of the increasingly more omnipresent organizational form of 1900s) as a contributing explanation for the erosion of dynamism along the century.

Despite its somewhat of a rudimentary form, essay 2 contains many proto-ideas of the compiling theory. The essay employs the concept of “institutions” in some such sense that I label here as prevailing social construction, and “human flourishing” in capturing a lot of what I describe as engaging through an ontology of possibility (while I later made a clear difference between the two; flourishing is part of an ontology of possibility, but the mode of engagement of ontology of possibility is also largely not flourishing). Specifically, the essay entails the Shotterian notion (without referring to John Shotter, though) that exploration of the new requires relational support and particularly grounding in existing institutions/social construction (rather than just imagining something wholly separated from shared construction). Moreover, it also implicitly involves the consideration of the need for feeds outside of an organization (in exploring the new or in enabling others to explore the new) for flourishing to occur in organizations.

Essay 1 starts with a more holistic outline and summary of Phelps’ work on economic dynamism and mass flourishing. I then theorize on two relevant issues for the theory. First, based on relationally and organizationally oriented strands of psychology (e.g., Gergen, 2009b; Kenttä, 2020; Lawrence & Maitlis,
2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2017), I further develop the point on how Phelpsonian agency is profoundly intertwined with “caring relationality”. Then, following Phelps’s level of inquiry, I discuss and theorize on the role and logic of imposed values in the prevalence of caring relationality in social contexts, which I assume to be central in the systemic prevalence of Phelpsonian agency. I conclude, leaning on particularly on David Sidorsky (Sidorsky, 2013) and John Dewey (Dewey, 1917), that given how living Phelpsonian agency (and caring relationality) are ultimately not abstract cognitive preferences but profound psychological extensions of self, rather than being enabled directly by specific values, I argue that their prevalence should rather be seen as facilitated by the uncharted space that is engendered in between a dominant value dogma and the rising of its initially inexplicable ‘opposite’.

The essay traces three central implications/contributions that this theorizing entails for the Phelpsonian theory. First, straightforwardly, I suggest that the dynamism of modern economies in the Phelpsonian theory should rather be “attributed to the liberation that individualism brought in the context of traditional communal values and social structures, than to ideals of individualism in isolation.” Second, subsequently, I argue that the fading of dynamism is rather attributed to the conquering of the values of modernism in the economy. The end of modernism is explicitly defined as the dissolution of traditional community structures and values and as “an overtake by a fragmented but omnipresent economic life”. In Sidorsky’s terms, the values of economic organizing became monist, starting and ending with self-interested rationalism. Finally, I discuss how attempts to introduce alternatives and expand values of economic life has been difficult, often either remaining subject to the prevailing dogma or creating an isolated (monistic) opposite to it. However, the ‘spirit of dynamism’ is likely to only arise from an expansion in the idea of the economic organizing that stretches the space where choices can be made based on situational consideration instead of dogma either way. Ultimately, I make the point that the emerging consciousness of environmental and social crises might finally have the momentum to begin morphing the prevailing dogma.

Essay 1 outlines central themes of this compiling part. It develops the argumentation on the relational premise of an ontology of possibility (“Phelpsonian agency” in the essay), including a hint of the elusive essence of both modes of engagement, which is central in the overall theorizing. Furthermore, it sketches the central notion of the experience of (cultural) values through their expansiveness and liberation, rather than their “absolute” content.

**Essays 3 and 4: Less hierarchical organizing**

Essays 3 and 4 are based on a research project that focused on “less hierarchical organizing.” This refers to firms that entail some form of underlying formal managerial hierarchy while attempting to disseminate practical authority also on organizational issues (such as work design, resource allocation, and strategy) (Heckscher, 1994; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). The project qualitatively studied three software development consultancies that could be seen to represent a
“new breed of organizations where traditional superior-subordinate relationships have been significantly modified or eschewed entirely” (Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019: 1).

The project started with a round of data gathering in 2015-16 with Olli Salo, on which essay 4 is based. This round involved 31 formal interviews, collection of publicly available and selected company internal archival data, and some observation in internal meetings. I continued the project with more data collection in the same companies in 2018. This included 40 more interviews and, most centrally, logs and notes of noteworthy debates on internal discussion channels. Essay 3 is based on the compiled dataset.

The main scholarly context of both essays is the nascent literature on less hierarchical organizing. The phenomena that unfold in the conceptual paradox of attempting to decentralize authority on company-level issues while retaining some formal hierarchies, have been discussed from a number of perspectives. These include, among others, organizational form (e.g., postbureacratic, hybrid forms, communal), organization design (decentralization, decision-making procedures), and leadership (e.g., shared, collective, distributed). The literature articulating the central facet of this phenomenon has gained more coherence during the years of the research effort, particularly after the review paper by Lee and Edmondson (2017). Essays 3 and 4 are essentially also making an effort to gather the scattered literature under some central characteristics of the phenomenon.

In essay 4, which is the first attempt to grasp a version of an essence of the phenomenon, we discuss less hierarchical organizing with the term “firm-level collaborative organizing.” Our objective in essay 4 is broad and perhaps naïve, i.e., to “understand the organizing 'blueprint' that permitted these companies to operate in the absence of traditional managerial control.” (It was also slightly inaccurate since the companies obviously also had managerial control). We note how “postbureacratic models insightfully inform principles for organization-level collaborative organizing, like decentralized, flexible structures, institutionalized dialog, and information transparency (Child & McGrath, 2001; Heckscher, 1994; Reed, 2011). However, these models have rarely concentrated on the pragmatics of building and sustaining such forms.” Consequently, our main research question is

How does collaborative organizing work in practice, and how is it sustained at the firm level? More specifically, as we note that “[s]cholars have principally encouraged keeping use of formal authority outside of collaboratively operating contexts (e.g., Manz & Sims, 1987), and considered the two to be ultimately incompatible (Heckscher, 1994; Reed, 2011)”, we also set out to investigate How does firm-level collaborative organizing coexist with asymmetrical power and responsibility over a firm?

We present our findings as a constellation of practices that, we suggest, enabled employees’ firm-wide collaboration and coordination in the case companies. We categorize the practices under four labels: fluid coordination, emergent direction, community cultivation, and context and culture curation. The main theoretical consideration that unfolds from the collection of practices is that the operative and strategic freedoms that employees enjoyed from the absence of
bureaucratic managerial supervision were coupled with stabilizing practices of personal empowerment and cultural control. For the second research question, our treatment remains superficial, but we were able to gather some viewpoints. We explain the role of asymmetrical power through three notions (without too much elaboration): giving power away at first and intervening later “if needed” (which is, as a retroactive disclaimer, exactly what many organization design scholars explicitly consider as diluting any empowerment), having to earn legitimacy for decisions in a collective dialog, and functioning as a guardian for employees’ autonomy.

Essay 3 takes the research project further and concentrates more explicitly on organizational balancing of managerial and employee discretion when the line between the two is ambiguous. Specifically, the paper asks “How organizational regulation of the relationship between managerial and employee discretion occurs as companies attempt to organize less hierarchically?” The essay identifies three literature streams that effectively deal with the regulation of discretion in such less hierarchical contexts: i) organizational design researchers who focus on formal mechanisms that delegate and prevent managerial intervention in employee discretion (Dobrajska, Billinger, & Karim, 2015; Foss, 2003; Klapper & Reitzig, 2018; Stea et al., 2015), ii) sociologists who discuss the need of (the remaining) formal managers to devise soft political strategies to induce ethics of compliance (Courpasson & Dany, 2003; Courpasson, Dany, & Clegg, 2012), and iii) scholars of collaborative communities who describe collective dialogical processes that (according to the theories) would naturally render authority across ranks dependent on contributions to shared purposes (Adler & Heckscher, 2018; Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher, 2008; Heckscher, 1994). I argue that all of them individually “either consider the relationship through underlying domination by formal managers and overlook the role of collective social processes or vice versa.” The paper juxtaposes this with the claim that “[o]perating less hierarchically so that organizational outcomes are neither devoid of nor limited to managerial efforts imposes a degree of ambiguity in and ongoing regulating (Weick, 1979) of whose authority matters and when,” which the existing viewpoints thus seem to circumvent.

The paper responds to this gap by exploring practices related to regulating the ambiguous relationship between managerial and employee discretion. I approach the phenomenon through practice theory (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Langley et al., 2019) (though quite superficially, as my AMJ reviewers commented). I find that the members enact the regulation of discretion particularly through three modes: autonomous regulation, which refers to employees’ attempts to proactively balance one’s own autonomy and common interests and seek to involve others who are impacted or otherwise relevant for the decision. Then, managers conduct similar considerations in attempting balancing facilitating and directing in their relationship with employees. That is, managers are often reluctant to consider employing their managerial authority, but occasionally they also do. And then, these interventions and initiatives are often met with the social rejection of assumed authority. That is, members often collectively scrutinize and reject (managerial but also peer) actions that seem to come from
a unilateral motive. Moreover, members explicitly also repel actions that in-
volved emblems of positional authority, considering that not challenging such
actions could make it easier to employ unilateral managerial discretion in the
future.

Essay 3 advances our understanding of how organizations that attempt to or-
ganize less hierarchically and to decentralize authority on organizational issues
(Adler & Heckscher, 2018; Lee & Edmondson, 2017) come to enact and regulate
open-endedness in the relationship between managerial and employee discre-
tion. Particularly, the paper suggests that such regulation is not conducted by
any one party but appears as an emergent organizational process to maintain an
openness of the relationship.

The research project on less hierarchical organizing fed centrally into the sug-
gestions on the internal manifestation of feeds in the compiling theory on on-
tology of possibility. Essays 3 and 4 specifically circle around the elusiveness
and necessary (yet ultimately unattainable) avoidance of dogma involved in less
hierarchical organizing; “a central premise...was that the elements were not per-
formed doctrinally (e.g., avoiding extrinsic motivators did not mean forcing
equal pay) but, rather, applied with continuously heedful practical judgment”
(essay 4). Essay 3, in particular, depicts how organizations might uphold a cer-
tain “sense of unfolding” of the organizational context through practices that do
not dissolve the ambiguity in authority relations but rather hold the dichotomies
alive for continued balancing.
References


References


References


