Reflections on *Images of Organization* and Its Implications for Organization and Environment

Gareth Morgan

*Organization Environment* 2011 24: 459 originally published online 6 January 2012

DOI: 10.1177/1086026611434274

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://oae.sagepub.com/content/24/4/459
Reflections on *Images of Organization* and Its Implications for Organization and Environment

Gareth Morgan

**Keywords**
epistemology, language, paradigm, metaphor, metonymy, theory development, scientific inquiry, deconstruction, reflective understanding, framing, reframing, critical thinking, paradox, mechanistic models, living organism, organizational theory, instruments of domination, anthropocentrism

**Introduction**

In developing this feature, we asked Gareth Morgan to reflect on his classic book, *Images of Organization* (1986), a work known for its innovative framework for understanding and using metaphors in organizational studies. We asked him to comment on whether, adding up what has been written in the last 25 years, effective use has been made of the framework. As our exchange unfolded, the invitation to write this piece developed into a series of more detailed questions that embraced the origin, aims, and intentions of *Images of Organization* as a contribution to organizational studies and its particular relevance for the issues addressed by *Organization and Environment* scholars. These questions are now reflected in the overall structure of his article.

—Linda Forbes and John Jermier, CCFW Guest Editors

**What was the genesis of the project leading to *Images of Organization***?

The genesis of *Images of Organization* (1986) rests in the work that I wrote with Gibson Burrell (*Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, 1979), which sought to put the development of organization theory in a philosophical and sociological context. The core thesis of that work was that all theories of organization (and all social theory in general) have implicit core assumptions about the nature of the social world. Following Kuhn (1962/1970), we characterized these underlying assumptions as “paradigms” (in the sense of worldviews or alternative realities) and mapped social theory and organizational analysis as a domain of competing paradigms based on conflicting meta-theoretical assumptions about the nature of social science and of society. In our view, the conflicts in the underlying worldviews were generating conflicting theories that

---

1York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

**Corresponding Author:**
Gareth Morgan, Schulich School of Business, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3
Email: gmorgan@schulich.yorku.ca
could not be understood or reconciled without understanding the implicit (and often hidden) assumptions on which they were based.  

*Sociological Paradigms* was very successful in opening discussion across several disciplines about the contributions of different paradigms and the need for a more pluralistic and open view of organizational theory and research. It also succeeded in providing important legitimization of nontraditional methods of research characteristic of what we called the Interpretive, Radical Humanist, and Radical Structuralist paradigms, alongside the dominant Functionalist paradigm.\(^1\)

However, as with all controversial work the book also attracted its fair share of critics. Some were upset that we took such a strong stand on the mutually exclusive nature of our paradigms and that the views from one paradigm tended to exclude those of another, creating opposing kinds of theory and research. Others mistakenly saw our work as just providing a classificatory device, as opposed to the deep challenge to fundamental assumptions that we intended. Gibson and I defended our work in a spirited way, and we were gratified by the book’s acceptance and growing impact. But one challenge, voiced casually to me while writing the book by a colleague waiting for a coffee in the Faculty Lounge at Lancaster University, lingered on. “Gareth,” he asked, “how can my work be in one of your paradigms if I don’t even know what the paradigms are?”

This comment was clearly intended as one of critique. And it was one for which I did not have an immediate answer. My first inclination was to consider it as merely an attempt to dismiss what *Sociological Paradigms* was seeking to do. It just lingered as a background concern. But, the more I took it seriously, “Yes,” I thought, “How can one be developing social theories, or theories of organization, without really knowing the fundamental assumptions on which one’s theories are based?”

The moment of insight came quite randomly as a result of an invitation to take up a visiting faculty position at Penn State University—an invitation with one major requirement: that in addition to some graduate-level teaching, I would also teach a core undergraduate management course. This created a huge personal dilemma. I wanted to accept the invitation. But I had absolutely no idea how I could teach a conventional undergraduate management course while being true to the principles of *Sociological Paradigms*. Then it hit me. I could teach organization theory through metaphor, illustrating a range of different theories by presenting them as metaphors, each of which had both strengths and weaknesses.

The idea truly came as an intuitive flash of insight. There was no specific mention of metaphor in *Sociological Paradigms*. But in our analysis of systems theory, much had been made of the distinction between closed (mechanical) and open (organismic) systems, as was common in the sociological and organizational literature of the time.\(^2\) The focus was on how these theories were shaped by models and analogies that reinforced an equilibrium or homeostatic (“steady state”) view of the world. The book also suggested that there was no reason to be confined by these analogies and that fundamental systems principles could be challenged and extended by adopting new models. For example, we offered a diagram (Figure 1) illustrating how new or emerging system analogies (morphogenic, factional, and catastrophic) could be used to develop systems theories that saw change and transformation as a primary driving force. But it had never struck me that these analogies were really metaphors, accompanied by all the strengths and weaknesses of metaphor. I just saw them as offering different ways of model building.

In retrospect, this seems strange. But I had always regarded an analogy as just a way of drawing simple comparisons between two phenomena. In the context of the arguments being developed in *Sociological Paradigms*, the concept was just used to point out how factional and catastrophic systems models could help systems theory break free of the Functionalist paradigm, towards the Radical Structuralist one.

The Penn State opportunity put all this work into a new frame: If theories at the most fundamental level were just metaphors, with all the limitations of metaphor, then metaphor could help explain the detailed structure of organization theory and other disciplines. I had an answer to my
colleague’s question. In implicitly or explicitly selecting a metaphor as a basis for theorizing one would also be implicitly locking into the assumptions on which the metaphor was based. Hence, in using a particular metaphor, consciously or unconsciously, one could also end up adopting the assumptions of an underlying sociological paradigm.

I felt I had to immediately test this hypothesis, and within a couple of hours of the Penn State telephone call, I found myself in the management section of Lancaster University’s library, checking virtually every book on the shelves to see if the ideas they presented were shaped by a dominant metaphor. Three hours later I was absolutely convinced, and very excited. This very crude and instinctive act of hypothesis testing convinced me that in developing management theory we are just developing the implications of a favoured metaphor. My academic career was now on a completely new trajectory, investigating the role of metaphor in a systematic way. Within a couple of years of intensive research, I had configured and taught my Penn State undergraduate course through metaphor, wrote an article for *Administrative Science Quarterly* on the links between paradigms, metaphors, and puzzle solving in organization theory (Morgan, 1980); developed some of the implications of the ideas for approaches to research (Morgan 1983; Morgan & Smircich, 1980); and begun work on a series of projects that led to *Images of Organization* (1986).

**Whose work inspired and ultimately most influenced your thinking as you developed your framework for understanding metaphor?**

That’s an interesting question because all my work on metaphor became a completely emergent project shaped by the original problem-solving insight that “all theories are metaphors.” If I look for the specific roots, they are definitely located in the work, conversations, and friendship with Gibson Burrell leading to our “relativist” view of social science as an enterprise driven by conflicting sets of assumptions. The *Sociological Paradigms* work was a real “game changer” for us. It was impossible to see or engage in social research as before, and our roles as academics were fundamentally changed.

What’s interesting, in retrospect, is that there was no obvious single way forward. Basically, Gibson and I were both fairly fresh academics trying to find our feet in the social sciences. Neither of us had a single significant academic publication to our name, nor had we completed a PhD when we wrote *Sociological Paradigms*. The whole project was driven by a desire to decode what was happening in the social sciences in the 1970s as a process of self-education. Basically,
we wanted to clarify the major debates and where we fit in. As a former accountant, I was very
dependent on Gibson in introducing me to the sociological literature as we launched on what
became a major journey of discovery. The culture of our host Department at Lancaster (Behaviour
in Organizations), and friendship and conversations with our colleagues Bob Cooper, Colin
Brown, and Frank Blackler, were also important, as was the open leadership of Department Head
Sylvia Shimmin, who gave us all a huge amount of freedom to innovate as we wished. We were
truly working in a culture where the pursuit of new knowledge was a driving force for us all,
regardless of the career and other risks involved.

In terms of a very precise source of inspiration that put me on the metaphor track, in retro-
spect, I think I found it in Buckley’s (1967) critique of systems theory and the distinctions he
drew between mechanistic and organismic models as opposed to his morphogenetic (structure
elaborating) alternative. It catalyzed the possibilities for systems theory that Gibson and I cap-
tured in Figure 1, and this was the image that came to my mind in response to the Penn State
telephone call. The insight quickly drove me to investigate existing writings on metaphor, and
I soon found the work of Black (1962), Brown (1977), Cassirer (1946), Hesse (1966), Lakoff
and Johnson (1980), Mueller (1871), Ortony (1979), Pepper (1942), Schon (1963), and others
cited in Morgan (1980).

But, to be perfectly honest, I just “ran with the idea” of theory as metaphor without too much
regard for the formal details presented in the literature. I am very much an idea-driven person,
and I am inclined to plunge into issues on instinct, take them as far as I can, and then look to see
what others have said about the same issue. I primarily use the literature to pay homage to work
that has already been done, to test and refine emerging theory, and to ensure that I am not just
“reinventing the wheel.” I am greatly in favour of this approach to theory building and research,
since if one grounds one’s work too heavily in what already exists, it is difficult to escape from
the status quo. This style of discovery was definitely the driver behind the work that Gibson and
I did in writing Sociological Paradigms and is, I believe, one of the main factors leading to my
specific approach to metaphor and why I was able to add a novel dimension to what has obvi-
ously been a very well-worked concept in the fields of literature, linguistics, philosophy, com-
munication, and postmodernism.

I see my primary contribution as resting in how I have focused on the interrelationship
between the insight and distortion embedded in the use of metaphor (more crudely put as the
interplay between what is “true” and “false”) and the epistemological, ideological, and political
implications that flow from this (Figure 2). The approach, in short, emphasizes how we are
always trying to understand the world through images, ideas, theories, and concepts that are
simultaneously both insightful and distorting. Other writers and philosophers have got to this
conclusion through other means, for example, Heisenberg’s (1958) work on the uncertainty
principle and Rorty’s (1979) work on the impossibility of foundational truth. My journey,
expressed most fully in the writing of Images of Organization, just took the paradoxical nature
of metaphor to a logical conclusion, creating a dialectic between the strengths and limitations
of different metaphorical perspectives to advocate ways of seeing, thinking, and acting that can
create a broader, more creative, and more critical mode of understanding organizations than is
usually the case.3

Can you tell us more about your
view of metaphor and how it works?

The essence is captured in Figure 2. At its simplest level, metaphor operates as an implicit or
explicit process that asserts “A is B,” for example, “the man is a lion,” “the organization is a
machine.” In the process, one point of reference is used to understand the other. For example,
we look for and see the machine-like aspects of the organization or the lion-like aspects of the
man. In so doing, we generate partial “truths”—insights that may resonate and produce genuine understanding but, if taken literally or to an extreme, are patently distorting and false. The man is not a lion; the organization is not a machine. This is what I call the paradox of metaphor.

I see this process as fundamental to human knowing and experience as we carry over one element of life to understand and cope with another, typically using what we know to negotiate and understand the unknown. As I have described at length elsewhere (Morgan, 1996), the “crossing over” that underlies metaphor as ontological—a primal cognitive process that, in part, defines our very nature as human beings. This ontological process results in metaphors (note the “s”)—as images or words that are used to evoke and capture meaning. When we are talking about metaphors, we are in the domain of epistemology—dealing with constructs through which we are attempting to know and negotiate the world. I believe that the distinction between the ontological and epistemological aspects of metaphor is crucial, because it highlights that while our metaphors (the content of our knowledge and discourse) may be the subject of choice, the process of metaphor is not.

As illustrated in Images of Organization, I believe that metaphor is the process that drives theory construction and science, generating metaphors that create theories and associated research that always have inherent strengths and limitations because of the creative insights and distortions that characterize the very nature of the metaphorical process. The book makes its point by exploring eight generative metaphors, viewing organizations as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, processes of change and transformation, and instruments of domination. As I note in the book, the choice of metaphors is intended to illustrate a range of possibilities for organizational theorizing and is by no means exhaustive. The aim was to present a treatise on “theory as metaphor” that shows the inherent incompleteness of any particular point of view. Every metaphor is presented as a framework that generates both strengths and limitations, with the juxtaposition of different metaphors being used to show how the limitations of one particular metaphor may be addressed by the strengths of others. As stated in Images, “Think ‘structure’ and you’ll see structure. Think ‘culture’ and you’ll see all kinds of cultural dimensions. Think ‘politics’ and you’ll find politics. Think in terms of system patterns and loops, and you’ll find a whole range of them” (Morgan, 1997, p. 349; Morgan, 2006, p. 339).
In this way, the book plays on the paradox of metaphor to challenge our ways of thinking in the hope of extending horizons of understanding—in how we understand organizations as theorists/managers/practitioners; in terms of how theory and research are constructed; and in terms of the implications of these ideas for how we act and shape organizations and organizational life in practice.

Through the juxtaposition of images the aim is to create an experience for readers that throws them back on themselves and their modes of understanding as they are enticed by the insights of a metaphor, only to find that these insights may be in conflict and challenged by what they read next. In this way, I have sought to create a form of “constructive deconstruction,” challenging thinking in a way that encourages one to go beyond the confines of one’s favoured point of view to explore others. By showing how any given theory is just generating partial insights that are in essence an oversimplification of what is being studied, it seeks to advance the cause of a more open and reflective approach to social science. By creating a kind of dialectic between the insights of competing points of view, it sets the basis for a broader and more integrated approach.5

While this is the basic aim and message of the book, interpretations and reactions vary, according to how different people relate to the whole idea of metaphor. For example, managers may just see metaphor as an abstract or fluffy concept of no direct relevance to their immediate work; theorists and researchers may see it as belonging to art and literature rather than science. These reactions have motivated me to think further about the metaphorical process and how it can be communicated.

The essence of my current view is captured schematically in Figure 3, which illustrates how metaphorical concepts can end up being seen as real “nonmetaphorical” ways of thinking about the world. In Section (A) of Figure 3, I have illustrated how metaphor can create a domain of understanding (as illustrated earlier in Figure 2 and related discussion—for example, the organization is a machine). The image, if it resonates, gets us thinking about the ways in which the organization is like a machine to tie down its specific (machine-like) characteristics. These are illustrated in Section (B) in Figure 3. For example, the mechanical view may lead us to see the organization as a structure of interrelated parts, as having inputs that are converted into outputs, as employing people that become cogs in wheels, that the organization can be designed and run for efficiency and evaluated in terms of efficient performance, and so on. In other words, the metaphor generates detailed elements of a machine theory of organization.

This process of tying down the details is fundamental for the operation of metaphor—otherwise we would have an image without any intrinsic or detailed meaning (if, indeed, one can imagine such a situation). The concretization or “tying down” of the metaphor is, in fact, what is described in linguistics and literature as “metonymy”—a process whereby the names of elements or parts of a phenomenon can be used to represent the whole.6 As a result of this process, we may now arrive at a stage where the concepts stand as concepts in their own right as the generative metaphor gets lost from view (see Section [C] of Figure 3). The focus now is exclusively on “metonymical elements” that may be viewed as literal representations of the phenomena to which they are applied, for example, as managers and organizational theorists focus on the structuring of organization, the clear definition of roles, concerns for efficiency, etc.

Figure 3 thus captures the links between metaphor and what is often seen as concrete, literal thinking and is important for understanding the generative process that underlies detailed theory and research, which often inhabits Section (C) of Figure 3, without understanding what has gone before (i.e., in Sections [A] and [B]). This results in an overly reductive approach to both organizational research and management practice and to science generally. For example, if one ignores the metaphorical genesis of the concepts one is using, one can get locked into the details, ignore the bias that the underlying metaphor may have generated, and miss other potentials, for example, from other metaphors that have been eliminated from view.
We are now clearly back to the epistemological aspects of metaphor discussed earlier and the importance of obtaining a reflective understanding of the process in which one is engaged—whether as a manager, theorist, or detailed researcher.7

Images of Organization is a book about organization theory, and also offers a specific diagnostic scheme for the analysis of organizations? Which do you think has made the most important contribution to organization studies, and did you foresee something in writing the book that is greater than what has been accomplished to date?

This is an important question and one that I’ve reflected on a great deal. In order to write Images I had to make a specific decision on what I wanted to achieve and faced two main options with
distinctive messages for the future development of organization studies. One option was to write a book on organization theory, specifically addressed to organization theorists and other social scientists. The other was to pursue the practical implications in the hope of also engaging a practitioner audience. I decided to combine both, using the majority of chapters to address organization theorists, concluding with two chapters that mobilized the insights of the book into a diagnostic method for reading and shaping organizational life. In order to achieve this aim, I framed the whole book within the context of a specific metaphor—the idea that one can “read” organization as if it were a kind of living text. I made this decision because I had already devoted so much work to the theory of organizations and felt that I could shift the grounds of my arguments and open new possibilities by speaking more directly to practitioners and educators of practitioners, albeit at a fairly theoretical level. The first unpublished draft of *Images* did in fact focus on the research and epistemological aspects of my ideas. It was only later that I decided to make the shift towards a more diagnostic, practice-oriented view.

In terms of impact, the practical educational implications of the work have clearly taken hold, especially through the work of educators and organizational consultants who are interested in helping people grasp richer understandings of organizations and organizational problems. The value of *Images of Organization* from this perspective is as an educational tool that helps one tap into different dimensions of organizations and to act with an appreciation of these in mind. The specific method for “reading organization” (illustrated through the Multicom Case in a preliminary form in the 1986 edition, and refined in subsequent editions) highlights how one can develop a “diagnostic reading” embracing multiple perspectives that then can be integrated through a “critical evaluation” with specific aims in mind. As such, it has been seen and used as a tool for developing skills in creative framing and reframing, ways of seeing, and as a form of critical thinking that can explore the multidimensional and often paradoxical nature of organizational life.

The book has also had an impact on organization theory, encouraging theorists and researchers to become more aware of their favoured metaphors and to explore the possibilities of finding new ones (e.g., Alvesson, 1993; Cornelissen, 2005; Cornelissen, Oswick, Christensen, & Phillips, 2008; Grant, 2004; Grant & Oswick, 1996; Oswick & Grant, 1996; Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002; Tsoukas 1991, 1993). The approach has also been applied to the analysis of specific aspects of organization and management, for example, on strategy (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2005), on managing projects (Winter, 2009), on leadership (Avesson & Spicer, 2011). But the area in which I think it is possible to go a lot further rests in pursuing the epistemological implications of metaphor captured in Figure 3.

For example, if we explicitly pursue the idea that the ultimate challenge of metaphor to scientific investigation is to recognize how our concepts are grasping at very limited aspects of the realities we are trying to understand, this could open the way to a very different approach. What if we took really seriously the points made in Note 3 that

metaphors provide partial insights; that different metaphors can produce conflicting insights; that in elevating one insight others are downplayed; that a way of seeing becomes a way of not seeing; and that any attempt to understand the complex nature of organizations (as with any other complex subject) always requires an open and pluralistic approach based on the interplay of multiple perspectives?

What if we actively sought to tackle the limitations of an abstracted “metonymical science,” as captured in Level (C) of Figure 3?

This would require a much more reflective and self-critical approach to scientific inquiry. It would lead us to deal with the complexity of what we are studying by actively recognizing the
limits and downsides of our concepts rather than just settling for the insights. This would immediately take us into better recognition of multidimensionality and help us anticipate and deal with potentially negative implications of our point of view. Of course, this requires a degree of reflexivity and self-deconstruction of one’s approach that is not encouraged by the existing institutional research system. Interestingly though, the openness and self-critique required here is perfectly consistent with the logic of science advocated by Popper (1958), with its emphasis on the role of refutation as the main driver of scientific knowledge. I also feel that we are going to see shifts in this direction as the current structure of science, thought, and understanding is transformed by the new forms of consciousness and communication accompanying widespread use of digital media. The shift may be generational and take a while to realize, but I feel that it is sure to come.

I was not able to articulate this challenge in *Images of Organization* in the way I have above. But I believe it is one of the major implications of my work and an area where there is something greater to be accomplished than has been achieved to date.

**What do you think of the critiques that have been made of your work (e.g., scientism, anti-relativism, anti-postmodernism) and have any of your positions changed?**

One of the interesting things about the critique is that it has come from lots of different directions. The advocates of traditional positivist (metonymical) science see my use of metaphor as too intangible and relativistic. Radical critics who wish to champion a particular metaphor or point of view (e.g., that organizations are ultimately class-based phenomena best understood as instruments of domination) also critique the relativism from an ideological as opposed to science-based perspective. Postmodernists often see the deconstruction embedded in my multidimensional methodology as being undermined by the way I seek to put “Humpty Dumpty together again” in the form an integrated diagnostic method. Others critique the emphasis I place on “reading” organization as opposed to the authorship role through which organizations are brought into being and continuously shaped and reshaped.

I have sought to learn from them all and to incorporate the merits of their arguments as far as possible. But ultimately I have to stand on the fundamentals of my point of view. As noted above, I operate on the premise that ontologically, organizations are multidimensional, socially constructed realities where different aspects can coexist in complementary, conflicting, hence paradoxical ways. Consistent with this, I adopt a relativist view of epistemology that is open to multiple ways of engaging the fundamental complexity, recognizing that the different views can be combined, integrated, or used dialectically for a multiple of different ends. The process can create multiple forms of perspective-based knowledge that is always context based, in the sense that it is a direct product of the mode of engagement embedded in the perspective and objectives that the would-be knower brings to the phenomenon of study. Because of the complex, paradoxical nature of organizations, I side with Bohr’s (1958) view that the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth. Hence, my view of knowledge and research is essentially pluralistic and open to multiple approaches to overcome the oversimplification of narrow views.

Obviously, this context-based view of knowledge obliges us to recognize that power relations have a major influence on the process, for example, in the sense that we do not always act in circumstances of our own choosing and that the knowledge we desire or produce may not always resonate with the dominant interests shaping the broader context and be discouraged or denied. Hence, the knowledge-generating process is both open and constrained and at times can become completely distorted. It is this concern about power relations that perhaps makes many of my
critics most uncomfortable with the position taken in *Images of Organization*, that is, that in advocating a pluralist use of metaphor, I am ignoring this important contextual factor. My response: what is the alternative, since any editing of the knowledge-creating process or advocacy of specific metaphorical views leads directly into the realm of ideology?

That, in a nutshell, is my fundamental position, and how I would seek to answer my critics in relation to the overall message of *Images of Organization*.

**One interpretation of your work is that you are calling for new liberating metaphors as a basis of research? Is this accurate?**

The call for new metaphors was definitely a force driving the writing of *Images of Organization*, particularly the 1986 edition, when mainstream organization theory was very much in the hold of mechanical and organismic thinking. One of my definite aims was to help break the bounds of existing thinking and open inquiry to more radical metaphors, such as those captured in the chapters on psychic prisons, instruments of domination, and the image of transformation and change. Since 1986, interest in and the exploration of metaphor across many disciplines has grown at a rapid pace, and it’s interesting to reflect on some of the patterns here. While there have been many important developments, I don’t think it is a good idea to celebrate the search for new metaphors as an end in itself.

When we are talking about the exploration of new metaphors in theory development, it is important to distinguish between *generative* “root metaphors” that can broaden and deepen understanding of the phenomena we are investigating and create important new problem-solving ideas, as opposed to more *surface* or *decorative metaphors* that just embellish communication. Or, to put the point more directly, innovative theory building and problem solving does not just rest in finding a cute new metaphor, and many of the critics of the use of metaphor in social research are correct in criticizing the superficiality and diversion that this can create. Effective use of metaphor in theory building and problem solving should always create new value for the user and ultimately be judged in these terms.

Hence, in *Images of Organization* I focused on unfolding the implications of eight generative metaphors, each of which led to the development of ideas and concepts that could often be developed as metaphors in their own right. For example, when you start to explore organizations as organisms you quickly get into thinking about life cycles, health, birth and death, species, population growth and survival rates, evolution, ecologies and subecologies, and hosts of other organic images and ideas. When you view organizations as brains, you find yourself thinking about information processing systems, learning capacities and disabilities, right and left brain intelligence, holographic capacity distribution, and a host of images that can take brain-like thinking beyond the spongy mass of material that comprises an actual brain. When you start to explore organizations as political systems you quickly get into images of autocracy and democracy, Machiavellianism, gender, racial and social power imbalances, images of exploiting and exploited groups, subtle or crude power plays, and so on. The point is that the generative metaphor opens up a whole range of potential discourse with lots of concrete implications that can truly bring attention to core aspects of the phenomenon being studied, and open important new horizons for understanding and action.

Decorative or surface metaphor does not do this. The metaphor may help you see some parallels with the phenomenon being studied, but the process will not really take you anywhere in terms of creating deeper insight and value. Of course, one can’t always know from the start whether a metaphor is going to prove truly valuable and one often has to try and see. The important point is to have an investigative and critical attitude that encourages one to pursue the
implications of the metaphor and to recognize if it isn’t really taking you anywhere. This involves a judgment call, and is an art rather than a science. I have illustrated this approach to metaphor in my book *Imaginzation: New Mindsets for Seeing, Organizing and Managing* (1993), written as a sequel to *Images of Organization* to illustrate the role that metaphor can play in detailed management practice and problem solving. It shows how metaphor can be used in an emergent, spontaneous way, and how unlikely metaphors that on the surface do not seem to be very serious ones can have major implications. My discussion of how I have used the “spider plant” metaphor to help executives think about processes of organizational decentralization provides a case in point.

So the call for new metaphors is an interesting one and has to be approached with both a creative and critical attitude. Interestingly, I do not think it is just a question of sitting down and coming up with new ideas. Generative metaphor often emerges quite naturally if one tries to really investigate and understand the nature of the issues that one is dealing with and wrestle with problems of real concern. In other words, metaphorical theory often emerges from critical reflection on practice as a way of capturing or communicating key issues in a new way.

A recent example of this is found in Roger Martin’s (2011) view that the problems associated with the runaway nature of senior executive rewards (which in the current context of criticism relating to corporate greed, the widening gaps between rich and poor, and the growing reward discrepancies between senior and lower levels of organizations is of growing concern), can be critically understood and remedied through lessons drawn from the National Football League (NFL). His metaphorical argument distinguishes between rewards for *actual* results and rewards for *expected* results. The former requires real performance on the field of play and for which players and coaches receive rich rewards. The latter rests in the domain of Las Vegas and the betting scene, and from which members of the NFL are deliberately excluded through antibetting rules. Carrying the metaphor to corporate life it raises the question: why reward CEOs and other senior executives for Las Vegas–style expectations (e.g., through stock options and other rewards where the value is affected by share price on the stock exchange that their actions can directly impact) as opposed to the real value that they and their organizations deliver on the field of play. It is a brilliant new problem-solving metaphor for thinking about an important social issue and has the ability to challenge and change the bounds of current thinking about executive pay and, in the process, provide possible new methods of compensation based on real achievements. It will, of course, be interesting to see if it is adopted in practice given the power structures that have allowed the problem to arise in the first place. Either way, it is a great illustration of the power of a generative metaphor, and how new metaphor can emerge quite naturally from tackling important issues as one connects one domain of experience with another, in this case executive boardrooms, Las Vegas and professional football.

**What are your personal criteria for evaluating a metaphor?**

I have to frame my answer to this question by returning to the distinction I made earlier between metaphor as the medium through which we create insights and metaphors (with the “s”) that generate the content of thinking. The question here relates primarily to how we judge the power of the latter.

One line of potential evaluation is to reflect on what may be called the “truth value” of a particular metaphor in terms of the degree to which it informs or corresponds with the phenomenon to which it is applied. My personal view is that this is fraught with difficulty, because the use and meaning of a metaphor is ultimately in the mind and interpretation of the user, and to generate any real evocation or power the image underlying the metaphor must be significantly different...
from the phenomenon to which it is applied. Hence, there are real problems in thinking about the “truth,” correctness, or accuracy of a metaphor in any literal or absolute sense.

Hence, I prefer to think about the evaluation of metaphors in terms of the value of the general and specific insights that are generated, and the value of what the metaphor allows one to do. Insight, value, and action potentials are the key evaluative elements for me.

Of course, the value across all these dimensions will vary according to the aims and objectives of the person using the metaphor, and the very same metaphor may create positive value and outcomes for some, while creating negative value and outcomes for others. There thus seem to be no absolute criteria for judgment that can be unequivocally applied. Metaphor, in the most basic sense, provides a mode of engagement through which we shape our relationship with our world, and ultimately has to be judged in terms of its practical impacts. Does a metaphor generate valuable insights that allow us to understand what’s happening in a more informed way? Does it help us to act more appropriately or effectively in terms of what we are seeking to do? What practical downsides does the use of the metaphor produce? Interestingly, these are similar questions that one would ask in evaluating some form of technology, and I think this is where my view of metaphor takes us. Images and concepts of all kinds are a form of cognitive technology that directly shapes our relations with the world, guiding how we think and act, hence the practical impacts/consequences of those actions.

What forces keep or maintain a metaphor in a dominant position in a field?

This is a subject worthy of detailed study, but my hunch is that it is an issue of power, in two senses: the power that metaphors (as a form of cognitive technology) create for their users in terms of what they allow them to do and the role played by institutional power in encouraging or discouraging the use of particular metaphors. For example, a lot of the fads and fashions in management are driven by the rise of different metaphors promising to tackle specific problems or general issues of concern, and remain current so long as they seem to provide a relevant way of thinking and/or deliver practical results.

Take, for example, the rise of the reengineering movement that served the purpose of leaders seeking to restructure their organizations in the late 1980s and 1990s, but which commands little direct public attention now. In an academic context, we see the same rise and fall phenomenon, often driven by a demand for novelty, and I imagine that a systematic study of the popularity of different metaphors would take us into different forms of institutional power embedded in gatekeeping roles and the structuring of publishing, research funding, and the tenure and promotion system. But ultimately these are empirical questions, worthy of systematic research.

Are there any additional “generative metaphors” that you wish you had covered in writing Images of Organization?

In writing a book like Images, it is impossible to cover everything relating to one’s topic, and I am often asked if I can fill the gaps. I have resisted this and only produced two really significant updates (Morgan, 1997, 1998). But in both I decided to stick with my original eight metaphors because part of the objective of the book was to demonstrate the role of metaphor in organization theory with an invitation to readers to explore metaphors of their own. This has proved an effective strategy in creating new opportunities for instructors and organizational consultants who wish to use Images as a platform for getting their students or their colleagues to think beyond the confines of the book to embrace new perspectives, for example, as an exercise in creative and critical thinking. In other words, the incompleteness can be seen as a means of opening inquiry rather than seeking to close it around a fixed framework.
The other consideration relating to retention of the original structure related to the extent to which the original eight metaphors—because they are broad and generative in nature—have been able to incorporate, or at least provide an umbrella for addressing many of the recent developments in the field of organization and social theory.

Take, for example, how four prominent developments—the rise of social networking, the image of organizations as psychopaths, the rise of a stakeholder perspective, and the emergence of many aspects of the theory of chaos and complexity—can be seen as being consistent with four of my original metaphors, that is, of the brain, psychic prison, political system, and flux and transformation. One can argue that at least three of these developments are worthy of chapters of their own. But isn’t social networking using digital media an extension of our information processing brains? Isn’t the psychopathic metaphor another illustration of how our institutional frameworks can imprison us in unconscious patterns capable of producing great harm? Isn’t the stakeholder approach another way of exploring the relations between the interests, conflict, and power that lie at the heart of political analysis.

The fundamental point: yes, we can see organizations as networks, psychopaths, and stakeholder domains and treat these images as generative metaphors on their own account, and write excellent books on each topic, as many have already done. But for my own purposes I am happy to see them as very important theories and perspectives consistent with my original metaphors. This can be viewed as an arbitrary decision, as it is—in my case driven by a very pragmatic concern to limit the number of distinct chapters in my book in a way that’s illustrative rather than exhaustive and absolutely complete.

However, that said and done, there are also several metaphors that are not addressed by Images that certainly have a strong case for inclusion. For example, there’s the metaphor of organizations as economic systems—which embraces the whole field of economics, the theory of the firm, and agency theory. We could also make the case for discussing organizations as legal systems in their own right, or at least as an important aspect of the economic model. There’s also a case to be made for viewing organizations through the lenses of gender and race, and for including the generative metaphor of organizations as text and discourse. The last seems a particularly obvious choice since I chose to frame the whole argument presented in Images around the process of “reading organization.”

But, if I had a single choice, the metaphor that I most wish that I had included would be one based on communications theorist Marshall McLuhan’s view that all forms of technology are best understood as extensions of human senses and that “the medium is the message.” More specifically, the metaphor would explore “Organizations as Media” with a particular focus on the transformations created in the wake of phonetic literacy and the rise of new electronic media, particularly the digital forms that are currently unfolding. I believe this metaphor will put the history of formal organizations in new perspective and raise some interesting questions and challenges on how we can expect new organizational forms and associated economic systems to unfold in the years ahead.

To elaborate, the basic argument would build on the work of McLuhan and the anthropologists, historians, and literary scholars on which his ideas draw, to explore the links between the interconnected rise of the phonetic alphabet, abstraction, individualism, deductive logic, reductive science, mechanization, and the general rise of formal organizations supported by phonetic literacy and writing as primarily a Western phenomenon. If McLuhan’s ideas are correct, we are already in the midst of a major revolution that will completely transform the nature of contemporary organizations and how they operate. Of course, the first effects are already well known since they are already being experienced. But the interesting thing from a McLuhan perspective is that the transformation and challenges raised will not just be about technology but about the nature of consciousness and human interconnection itself. Crudely put, just as we can see the bureaucratic model as an extension of the written word, and see electronic media as creating new
forms of literacy that are facilitating new forms of thinking, acting, connecting, and organizing, we can expect our organizations and the broader economic system of which they are part to be transformed in the most fundamental ways. I am only able to hint at the possibilities here, but I am confident that anyone interested in pursuing this line of inquiry will be richly rewarded. It is also my belief, as suggested in my discussion on the role of metaphor and the dominance of metonymical science, that our concept of science and modes of knowledge creation will also undergo major transformation as electronic media continue to extend our collective brain at a global level in the way that McLuhan so clearly envisaged.

We have here, a generative metaphor that can put the mechanistic era and our emerging future in a completely new perspective. In my view, it has the potential to provide a deep structural explanation of social life that may prove as powerful as that offered to the late 19th and 20th century by the work of Marx, but with a focus on a different generative logic of change.

**What about metaphors of organizations and the natural environment? How can the exploratory aspects of metaphor offer insight into this relatively new, but critically important area in organizational studies?**

I think the key here is to focus on metaphors that specifically address the relationship between organizations and the natural environment. Clearly we have a problem. The jury doesn’t even need to leave the room—the natural environment is definitely not a winner in terms of organization–environment relations, at least as far as history to date is concerned. The metaphors of “organizations as instruments of domination” and, if one wishes to be charitable and attribute negative effects to unintended consequences, “organizations as psychic prisons,” clearly have a role to play here in highlighting the exploitative and destructive aspects. They provide general frames for thinking about the problems that can also be approached by exploring the limitations and hidden downsides of some of the conventional organizational metaphors, most notably those of machine and organism. If one wants to be really comprehensive about the issue, I am sure it is possible to write as broad a work as *Images of Organization* on the topic—there are so many interesting aspects to organization–environment relations.

But, for immediate purposes, let’s take a closer look at some detailed metaphors that can help us think about specific problems and challenges. Take, for example, the image/ideology of “development” or “progress” that’s used to justify so many negative organizational and social impacts on the natural environment. The idea of progress is associated with the view that humans are on a pedestal as part of “the ascent of man,” which is associated with various interpretations of the theory of evolution on the one hand, or with the creationist view that humans are on a pedestal in the broader order of things through a creative act of God who has made man in his own image, or as creationist critics would assert, because of the reverse. Either way, this image creates an over-assertive relationship between “man as figure” and “nature as ground” in which the importance of human acts take precedence over the interests and well-being of nature as a whole. Nature becomes a resource to be used for human ends, with modern organizations a primary instrument for achieving desired goals.

Many of the problems here have been clearly addressed in the work of Stephen Jay Gould (1996), which shows us that the very idea of the ascent of man as a symbol of progress represents a distortion of the total evolutionary picture where relatively few species have become part of a runaway pattern against the context of a much larger context or ground, which has remained largely unchanged, and on which the so-called higher forms ultimately depend.

Gould also points out that use of images of evolution to explain and justify human progress has another distorting effect because whereas evolution in the natural world has taken place over
many millions of years, creating an amazing pattern of *mutual* adaptation, human social evolution is accelerating at a much faster pace in the course of decades, and in the process, destroying many aspects of the contextual pattern on which it ultimately depends. The point is that the differences in time scale of natural and social evolution are completely different and make the use of simple evolutionary metaphors of progress extremely problematic. The “inconvenient truth” is that we are in very dangerous territory indeed. As far as the social world is concerned, as Gould notes, we are in a situation akin to “Lamarckian development” based on the acquisition of inherited characteristics as human innovations build on one another and rapidly become building blocks for runaway patterns, resulting in so many of the problems we are currently experiencing, both socially and environmentally. For example, as I write the news is that global population has just passed the 7 billion mark and growing rapidly, producing huge challenges for the years ahead.

The basic message that I am making here is that we can produce many important insights and action opportunities by addressing *the limitations of existing metaphors* relating to social evolution and progress; we don’t necessarily have to look for new ones!

I have addressed some of the fundamental issues here in *Images of Organization* under the umbrella of the flux and transformation metaphor, for example, through my discussion of autopoiesis and related “logics of change.” Specifically, the contrasts I drew between the logics of “egocentrism” and “systemic wisdom,” and between the “survival of the fittest” as opposed to the “survival of the fitting,” directly speak to the distortions and pathologies created when humans have an overassertive relationship with the broader environment. Egocentric interactions with the natural environment through narcissistic processes and projections that “edit out” inconvenient aspects of the broader context, create the greatest environmental disruption and harm. Many recent environmental catastrophes illustrate this in practice. Consider, for example, BP’s deep-sea drilling activities in the Gulf of Mexico and the associated environmental catastrophe. BP’s over-assertion of corporate interests, reinforced by its associated risk management evaluation decisions, effectively “edited” and downgraded the importance of potential impacts on other stakeholders, such as the Gulf shrimp industry, other fishermen, the tourist industry, general social context, wildlife, and other aspects of the natural environment. It provides a classic illustration of the egocentric view in practice and the rationale for the alternative ecocentric paradigm advocated by Catton and Dunlap (1978, 1980) and other environmentalists.

These and other problems between organization and environment can also be explored through dozens of different exploratory and problem-solving metaphors that systematically focus on the flaws and downsides of progress through variations on a domination and exploitation theme. Interestingly, many of these are already in play in response to the crises and problems that have emerged over the years. For example, stakeholder metaphors provide a means of exploring patterns of interest and exploitation; ecological metaphors highlight the importance of self-regenerating life cycles; images of “cradle to cradle” technology and production processes can help give life-cycle models an especially evocative turn; images of the triple bottom line, especially in highlighting cases of excessive externalization of social and environmental costs, can provide a way of accounting for organizational activities in a broader frame; and so on.

Taking another tack, we can pursue diverse metaphors of runaway growth, cancer, greed, parasites that destroy their hosts, the impact of invasive species (a particularly resonant metaphor for studying the impact of modern organizations in undeveloped parts of the world), and other social and organic metaphors that explicitly seek to understand imbalanced or pathological patterns of development. Or let’s go to the movies and see *Avatar* in 3D to experience a modern commentary on environmental degradation that speaks directly to how many resource extraction industries are destroying the natural and social environment in an irreparable way.

Or consider the metaphor that views modern organizations as psychopaths (Bakan, 2004)—that is, as institutions that pursue private gain while rendering public pain. Bakan’s work here
provides a particularly powerful way of studying how self-interest at the expense of the broader social and natural environment has actually been built into the fabric and functioning of modern organizations through the legal concept of limited liability. In other words, if one wanted to create a method for developing organizations that are systematically motivated to put the individual interests of “the part” ahead of “the whole,” one could not have a more effective approach. It will be interesting to see how the debate around this issue evolves in the public attack on corporate and other forms of greed stemming from the 2007-2008 financial, economic, and global debt restructuring crises, and the “99% versus the 1%” social movement to which it has given rise.

In summary, the challenge ahead as far as the use of new metaphor is concerned seems to rest in finding images and ideas that will have real power in constraining and reversing the overassertive relationship between organizations and their broader context. Anything that asserts the priority and privilege of a single individual or institution at the expense of the collective or broader ground enhances the “survival of the fittest” as opposed to the “survival of the fitting.” In the process it undermines the mosaic-like fabric and interconnectedness that the best in ecological thinking has shown to be so central to the nature of life.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. I spent several years pursuing this line of inquiry, seeking to legitimize and create more scope for nontraditional research in several publications—Discussed in Note 3.
2. See the discussion on Systems Theory in Burrell and Morgan (1979, pp. 57-68).
3. To provide a little more background on this, the story of *Images of Organization* has a lot of different strands. In addition to what I have said above, it is important to understand how all the different projects that I was working on were interconnected. For example, the importance of the links between *Sociological Paradigms* and *Images of Organization* can’t be overemphasized. The latter would not have been possible without the former because all my work from 1979 to 1986 was driven by a desire to unfold the implications of what Gibson Burrell and I had started in *Sociological Paradigms*. My most important publications in this intervening period were (a) my *Administrative Science Quarterly* article “Paradigms, Metaphors and Puzzle Solving in Organization Theory” (Morgan, 1980), which sketched the initial links that I saw between paradigms and metaphors and which was written primarily to introduce and legitimize the ideas in *Sociological Paradigms* for a North American audience; (b) the article I wrote with Linda Smircich, “The Case for Qualitative Research” (Morgan & Smircich, 1980), which provided the rationale for nontraditional research methods using the ontological, epistemological, and methodological framework created in *Sociological Paradigms*; and (c) *Beyond Method* (Morgan, 1983), which presented research as a process of engagement and conversation with the subject of study that’s driven and shaped by the frame of reference and assumptions of the researcher. The fundamental aim of *Beyond Method* was (a) to provide a methodological companion to *Sociological Paradigms* (the 21 research strategies presented in the book take the reader on a circular tour around the paradigms) and (b) to outline my emerging view of epistemology and how researcher and researched are locked into a loop of interaction where research realizes the perspective of the researcher and what he or she is looking for. In other words, in research we “meet ourselves”—not just the subject of study! My ideas on metaphor had a major influence on the *Beyond Method* volume, but, for the sake of simplification, were kept in the background—because I wanted the focus to be on the logics of social research, the choice of method, and how all research is ultimately driven and shaped
by the assumptions and perspectives of the researcher, not just the phenomenon researched. Images of Organization extended and applied these views using metaphor as a focus for understanding the socially constructed nature of organization theory. For example, the view that metaphors provide partial insights; that different metaphors can produce conflicting insights; that in elevating one insight others are downplayed; that a way of seeing becomes a way of not seeing; and that any attempt to understand the complex nature of organizations (as with any other complex subject) always requires an open and pluralistic approach based on the interplay of multiple perspectives are common integrating themes.

4. A word of caution is necessary here. We have to tread carefully on this issue as the concept of metaphor has itself become a metaphor (taken from language, literature, poetry, etc.) and through which we are now trying to understand ourselves (see Morgan, 1996, pp. 233-235). In time, the physical experiments of neuroscientists may provide another way of informing us on this issue as they study dynamics of the human brain. Note, also, that the representation of metaphor in Figure 2 is also metaphorical in the sense that the concept of metaphor is presented spatially through overlapping circles.

5. The implications here are fully explored in Beyond Method (1983), which, as noted in Note 3, develops my epistemological position, viewing research as a mode of engagement that encourages reflective forms of scientific conversation.

6. For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Morgan (1996, pp. 228-233).

7. This discussion leads us directly into a long-standing critique of modern science and modern thinking, generally in terms of the excessive reductionism (or oversimplification) that stems from excessive attention to (metonymic) concepts alone at the expense of seeing and understanding the larger picture. The harsh fact is that much of science (and everyday thought) oversimplifies. The process can lead to major insights and breakthroughs (such as the way an understanding of bacteria set the basis for antibiotics), but which can also have major negative effects (the evolution of stronger bacteria, now commonly described as “super-bugs”). Metaphor warns us of the inherent problems by inviting us to see the limitations of one’s viewpoint, that is, what’s being lost from view. Or, put slightly differently, in dealing with any complex phenomenon we have to realize that there is always a danger that the ontological complexity of the phenomenon itself is going to get oversimplified because of metonymical reductions and that the phenomenon will “often push back.” To take another example, switching to the realm of organization theory and practice consider the implications of the metonymical concept of “organization structure” and how an excessive focus on mechanical structuring can create organizational rigidities; an inability to cope with changing circumstances; a backlash from employees who consciously or unconsciously resent being treated as “cogs in wheels;” political dynamics associated with the hierarchical mechanistic structure; and so on. The context in which the concept is used “pushes back”!

8. The emphasis in institutionalized research, for example, through the structure of research funding, journals, and university tenure systems (with minority exceptions), reinforces the need for abstracted concept development and testing and the discovery of evidence based “truth,” that is, the metonymical mode of study illustrated in Level (C) of Figure 3.

9. My argument here is rooted in the work of Marshall McLuhan (1964) and the idea that the whole institution of science with its emphasis and its concern for fixed perspectives and fragmented literal truths is a product of the printed word and the fragmentation and mechanization of consciousness that it brings. As we shift further from a world dominated by print and associated linear modes of thought into the more relativistic and fluid environment now rapidly unfolding, this is very likely to change. In the meantime, more exploration of multiple views, listening, and active inquiry as opposed to excessive metonymical reduction will help greatly—even if only as a frame through which we begin to see and evaluate the results of existing metonymical research.

10. For example, see the 1997 and 2006 editions of Images of Organization and the Executive Edition of 1998. The issue of “authoring” is also explored in Morgan (1993).
11. One of the aims in exploring these metaphors was to give concrete ways of thinking about organizations through the lens of the Radical Humanist and Radical Structuralist paradigms explored in Burrell and Morgan (1979).

12. For example, see the review and discussion presented in the introductory article for this feature by John Jermier and Linda Forbes.

13. In line with my explanation of metaphor presented earlier in relation to Figure 3, it is important to note that the elaboration of a generative metaphor can take place through metonymical reduction or through the generation of related images that can become generative metaphors in themselves.


15. Martin’s argument and the implications of his metaphor goes well beyond what I am summarizing here and is worth exploring in much more detail.

16. This, of course, does not mean the metaphor has disappeared or has ceased to have a major influence—because the implications of the metaphor now inhabit the domain of Section (C) in Figure 3 in the business process reengineering concepts built into common management and consulting practice.

17. Regarding the fourth: important aspects of the theory of chaos and complexity was anticipated in part in the original 1986 edition through a discussion of complex systems as “loops not lines” shaped by patterns of mutual causality. It has been given more explicit treatment in subsequent editions as a logical extension of the chapter on Organizations as Flux and Transformation.


19. A case can also be made for treating institutional theory as a frame in its own right. But this can also be seen as fusing elements of population ecology, cultural, and political metaphors and discussed under any of these umbrellas. A clear case can also be made for treating gender and race as frames for thinking about fundamental aspects of organization, as opposed to subsuming them under the umbrellas of cultural, political, psychic prison, and instrument of domination metaphors. All these issues relate to the incompleteness point made earlier. There are dozens of metaphors that could have been developed in *Images of Organization* in their own right. We also have here a perfect illustration of why I extended the invitation to explore new metaphors, and how I see the role incompleteness can play in raising issues and opening debate on the nature and significance of any specific theoretical/metaphorical approach.

20. The classic works here are McLuhan (1962, 1964) and McLuhan and McLuhan (2011). Unfortunately, McLuhan’s ideas are difficult to untangle because of his aphoristic nonlinear writing style and the unconventional ways in which he seeks to communicate his ideas. The lack of clarity has often led people to view his work as just a form of technological determinism. But, there is more to it than this. He is really speaking about how we shape technological forms that then, invisibly, shape us; he is addressing the hidden power of technology at a contextual level, not just its surface manifestations or unfolding effects. There are fundamental insights to be drawn from the above sources and from the work of his interpreters. See, for example, Logan (2004, 2010).

21. I am deliberately using the word “man” instead of human here to reflect common usage in this discourse, for example, in the sense of man versus (mother) nature. No unintended gender bias intended.

22. This assertion of the elevated status of the human being, hence of formal organizations as extensions of humans, can be explained, at least in part, by the ideas of McLuhan (1964) in terms of how the sense of individualism that occupies centre stage in popularized stories of human evolution is associated with the rise of phonetic literacy and the printed word. It is no accident, for example, that the assertion of the interests of humans against nature has developed most fully as a Western phenomenon and continues at an accelerated pace as the East now follows the Western industrial model. The work of Gregory Bateson (1972, 1979) is also very important here, especially for his approach to understanding contexts.
and what he calls “the pathology of conscious purpose” and its systemic disruptions (for a comprehensive discussion of Bateson’s work, see Harries-Jones, 1995). In organization-environment studies, the work of Catton and Dunlap (1978, 1980) drew early attention to these issues in their call for a new ecocentric paradigm as opposed to the dominant anthropocentric one (see Jermier, 2008, for an overview of the issues here, and Shrivastava’s (1994) important article on neglect of the environment in organization studies).

23. Legal liability was of course introduced in a much simpler context, where its effects were much more limited. Now, with the rise of gigantic global organizations, or even of small organizations that are capable of having dramatic negative effects on the social and natural environment, the very concept of limited liability is extremely problematic.

24. Interestingly, the image of “99%:1%” itself provides a powerful metaphor for capturing key aspects of our times, and is likely worth exploring in many dimensions—just as the popular “80:20 rule” has created an understanding of a wide range of socioeconomic phenomena.

References


**Bio**

Gareth Morgan is Distinguished Research Professor at the Schulich School of Business, York University, Toronto. He has written extensively on organization theory and practice and the philosophy and method of social research. He has a special interest in complexity science and its implications for entrepreneurship, leadership and management in a turbulent world; for the last ten years has been actively engaged on action projects investigating the implications of digital technology for education, research and publishing.