

Philosophy as a Base for Management: An Aristotelian Integrative Proposal

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Current theories of management have difficulty overcoming certain problems and limitations related to some features of the field itself: multiplicity, multidisciplinaryity, fragmentation, presence or lack of paradigms, self-referentiality, and ethnocentrism. This paper first reviews these issues broadly. Then, it emphasises the preponderance of the scientific method and the exclusion of philosophy as theoretical foundations for management. It proposes taking philosophy as the science to provide the foundations of management. It explains how philosophy - especially philosophy that has its roots in Aristotelian thought - can be of help to management through four different functions: admirative, globalising, political, and critical. In this way, Aristotelian philosophy is shown to be a superior basis for solving the present problems in management theory and a fruitful option for integrating ethics in organisational and management theories.

Introduction¹

On the threshold of the 21st century, with the history of thought in management close to its first centenary, attempts to review and systematise this field of knowledge are becoming increasingly common. This paper is to be situated in this context. It aims to explore methodological aspects that may help improve theories of organisation and management.

A study of the sciences that have been considered as bases for organisational theories shows the absence of proposals that hint at philosophy. However, we think that philosophy meets all the requirements of this role. We offer in this paper a programmatic proposal that tries to justify this claim. Its content is necessarily theoretical, since our goal is to justify from a methodological point of view the advantages of philosophy beside other sciences. We plan in future to develop our proposal by spelling out other more practical implications.

We start by analysing, albeit in a very schematic fashion, certain basic problems and limitations of organisational and management theories. Specifically, we refer to certain features of modern theories: their multiplicity, multidisciplinaryity, fragmentation, lack of paradigm, self-referentiality, and ethnocentrism. Second, we analyse why philosophy has been so little considered in management. Finally, we study how philosophy, and the Aristotelian approach in particular, may assist in the theoretical elaboration of management by helping to address its current problems and limitations.

Some Conceptual Problems in Management Theories

One feature that is immediately apparent upon reviewing the literature is the *multiplicity* of organisational theories. This multiplicity appears both in the subject of study and the approach taken, and in the method used and the results obtained.²

The multiplicity of theories proposed is correlated by *multidisciplinaryity*, that is, the variety of underlying disciplines on which the different theories have been built. Although multidisciplinaryity can be

¹ The authors wish to thank Elisabet Garriga for her assistance in the documentation work for writing this article. A first draft of this article was submitted to The Second World Congress of Business, Economics, and Ethics (São Paulo, July 19-23, 2000)

² M J Hatch *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* New York; Oxford University Press (1994)

considered as an integral and defining feature of management,³ we have no way of integrating the different perspectives adopted by different disciplines on the same issues. Discussing this multidisciplinaryity, March has pointed out two methodological approaches that have become consolidated over time.⁴ On the one hand is an *intellectual openness*, that is, a relative ease in spanning different disciplines and subjects of study. On the other hand we have a *continuity of ideas*, as it is possible to see in the succession of theories a certain intellectual itinerary that marks the transition from one to another. It can be said that the process displays an evolution towards more humanistic sciences,⁵ and also towards more qualitative aspects of the study of organisations.

At the core of this multidisciplinaryity is an epistemological discussion on the purpose of management and the most appropriate method for academic inquiry in the field.⁶ Knights and Willmott argue in favor of going beyond multiplicity towards a genuine interdisciplinarity, stating that it is a requirement both of management practice itself and of academic study.⁷

Another problem is *fragmentation*. For knowledge to advance, a multidisciplinary inquiry is not sufficient; it is also necessary to integrate viewpoints.⁸ However, rather than integration what one observes nowadays is a marked fragmentation.⁹ As Knights and Willmott point out, the current approaches resemble more a 'mechanistic pooling' than a 'systematic colonisation'.¹⁰

One of the key points in the debate on the epistemological and methodological issues of business management is the issue of the *multiplicity of paradigms*. According to Pfeffer, further progress in theory has been hampered by the absence of an underlying paradigm.¹¹ This author lists three consequences of this lack of paradigm: the emphasis on models and economic logic; the focus on specific aspects, at the micro level, neglecting the relationship between organisations and society; and the attention to matters of minor importance, which, although leading to apparently brilliant work, does not bear on the discipline's core interests.

Given the impossibility of developing a more unified theory of the field, Pfeffer proposes at least pursuing advancement through the study of phenomena that are relevant for the organisation. However, in his opinion, not even this is being achieved; on the contrary, theories end up becoming themselves the subject of debate, increasingly losing contact with the real problems that gave rise to their appearance.

This in turn gives rise to the problem of *self-referentiality*. Zald points out that this evolution towards self-referentiality has become apparent particularly in the latest symbolical-interpretative trends.¹² Porter says that self-referentiality may be the cause of two disjunctions that have become obvious in all theories: on the one hand, the divergence between what is taught about these theories and what is actually studied, and, on the other hand, the divergence between business management theories and

³ R Berman Brown 'You Cannot Expect Rationality from a Pregnant Man: Reflections on Multi-disciplinaryity in Management Research' *British Journal of Management* 8 (1997) pp 23. 'The most satisfying and interesting characteristic of our field here in the mid-1990s is precisely that it is the province of a number of disciplines and does not belong exclusively to any single one, or even two, of them', L W Porter 'Forty Years of Organizational Studies: Reflections from a micro Perspective' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41 (1996) p 26

⁴ J G March 'Continuity and Change in Theories of Organizational Action' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41 (1996) pp 278-287

⁵ M N Zald 'More Fragmentation? Unfinished Business in Linking the Social Sciences and the Humanities' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41 (1996) pp 251-261

⁶ R Berman Brown op cit 1997

⁷ D Knights and H Willmott 'The Hype and Hope of Interdisciplinary Management Studies' *British Journal of Management* 8 (1997) pp 9-22

⁸ D Knights and H Willmott op cit 1997

⁹ M N Zald op cit 1996; L W Porter op cit 1996

¹⁰ D Knights and H Willmott op cit 1997

¹¹ J Pfeffer *New Directions for Organization Theory* New York; Oxford University Press (1997)

¹² M N Zald op cit 1996

their practice in real life.¹³ Weick proposes dropping those 'heavy tools that make researchers move more slowly and with less agility and make them more susceptible to being overrun,'¹⁴ but acknowledges that this action becomes more difficult 'when it is confused with dropping or keeping group ties.'¹⁵

A final feature is *ethnocentrism*. Hickson has pointed out the marked ethnocentric character of the different organisational theories, which are focused primarily within the North American tradition. Although there are comparative studies on ways of managing and organisational forms between different sociocultural environments, most of them are invariably viewed through the Anglo-Saxon cultural prism.¹⁶

Philosophy and Management and Organisational Theories

The problems mentioned above hint at a neglect of philosophy and, particularly, of metaphysics and philosophy of man. However, at the basis of any organisational theory, there are certain anthropological assumptions that condition both the conceptual argument and the concrete applications of that theory. Hence the need to explicitly state these assumptions and analyse their contributions to management and their limitations.

Actually, a concern for the model of the individual has been present since the birth of organisational theory, at least in many of the most significant authors. Chester Barnard, in *The Functions of the Executive*, raises the need to adequately define the philosophical anthropology employed by each theory.¹⁷ Likewise, Simon maintains that nothing is more fundamental than defining the vision of the nature of the human being whose behavior is being studied.¹⁸ Recently, Ghosal, Barlett & Moran have called for a review of the 'deeply unrealistic, pessimistic assumptions about the nature of individuals and corporations that underlie current management doctrine and that, in practice, cause managers to undermine their own worth.'¹⁹

Although, as Zald has pointed out, there has recently been a gradual approximation to the humanistic sciences,²⁰ in our opinion, this has not reached the point – except perhaps for rare exceptions – of formulating an organisational theory based on the guiding science *par excellence*, philosophy, and, in particular, those branches of philosophy that center on the study of man and his action, that is, philosophical anthropology and ethics. Let us take, for example, the case of ethics. When lists have been drawn up of the issues of business ethics that deserve most attention,²¹ as a general rule, only practical aspects are mentioned, without including issues related to the ethical foundation of management. In our opinion, criticism of management theories from a philosophical viewpoint is not only legitimate,²² but may also be helpful in overcoming some of the limitations listed in the previous section.

¹³ 'During much of the past 40-year period, and especially in the early years, there often seemed to be a disconnection between these two realms. One researched in the field or in the lab, and then one taught in the classroom. It was as if these were two separate tasks held together only by a professor's job description (...) Another interface that still continues to need attention is that between scholar and practitioner. The challenge here is to develop that interaction for the benefit of the advancement of knowledge in the field of organization studies, without at the same time being co-opted by the immediate needs of the practitioner', L W Porter op cit 1996, pp 267-268

¹⁴ K E Weick 'Drop your tools: An Allegory for Organizational Studies' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41 (1996) p 311

¹⁵ *ibid* p 312

¹⁶ D J Hickson 'The ASQ Years Then and Now through the Eyes of a Euro-Brit' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41 (1996) pp 217-228

¹⁷ C I Barnard *The Functions of the Executive* Cambridge MA; Harvard University Press (1938)

¹⁸ H A Simon *Administrative Behavior* 3 ed New York; The Free Press (1975)

¹⁹ S Ghosal, Ch A Barlett and P Moran 'A new Manifesto for Management' *Sloan Management Review* Spring (1999) p 10. The authors mention Michael Porter's theory of strategy and Oliver Williamson's transaction-cost economics as examples of theories that have tightened the squeeze on managers and companies

²⁰ M N Zald op cit 1996

²¹ A C Michalos 'Issues for Business Ethics in the Nineties and Beyond' *Journal of Business Ethics* 16 (1996) pp 219-230; G Enderle 'A Worldwide Survey of Business Ethics in the 1990s' *Journal of Business Ethics* 16 (1996) pp 1475-1483

²² R Calori 'Essai: Philosophizing on Strategic Management Models' *Organization Studies* 19 (1998) pp 281-306

To support our proposal, we will mention a number of considerations by John Paul II in his encyclical letter *Fides et ratio*, on the relationship between faith and reason.²³ This reference seems particularly appropriate to us not only on the grounds of the Supreme Pontiff's moral authority but also because of the depth of his theological and philosophical thought.

A first consideration we would like to highlight is the distinction made by the Pope between philosophy as an attitude and as a system of thought. **Philosophy is, first of all, the attitude of the man who wonders about the meaning of life.** Aristotle opens his *Metaphysics* by stating that 'all men wish to know by nature'. Along the same lines, John Paul II asserts that the desire for truth is part of human nature itself.²⁴ This attitude is different from the fact that the answers given by man to these questions are grouped in different systems of thought. John Paul II warns that 'no historical form of philosophy can legitimately claim to embrace the totality of truth, nor to be the complete explanation of the human being'.²⁵ However, he also argues that 'it is possible to discern a core of philosophical insight within the history of thought as a whole' and that being 'shared in some measure by all, this knowledge should serve as a kind of reference-point for the different philosophical schools'.²⁶

A second consideration we would like to draw attention towards is John Paul II's assessment of modern philosophy. Without denying the positive results achieved by modern culture, which has contributed to various spheres of knowledge, one should not overlook the limitations and conditions it has imposed on reason, by believing it incapable of lifting 'its gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being'.²⁷ Modern culture, the Pope concludes, has changed the very role of philosophy: from universal knowledge, it has been gradually reduced to just one of many fields of knowledge, or it has even been ascribed a purely marginal role. The philosophical attitude has been replaced by other forms of rationality that 'are directed not towards the contemplation of truth and the search for the ultimate goal and meaning of life; but instead, as 'instrumental reason', they are directed - actually or potentially - towards the promotion of utilitarian ends, towards enjoyment or power'.²⁸

Modern rationalism has taken on various forms and it has been used in different ways by management theories. In recent years, an attempt has been made to go beyond the modern tradition that has accompanied science in general, and management theory in particular. The deconstructionist movement, as a paradigm of the postmodern mentality, is now starting to be used in organisational theories.²⁹ The postmodern vision seeks to go beyond the limits of the scientific method by highlighting the non-rational elements of human conduct. There have also been authors who have proposed a return to classical philosophy, which would mean returning to Aristotelian practical rationality as opposed to enlightened rationality. This vindication of Aristotelian principles has been given both from the field of philosophy³⁰ and also from management.³¹

²³ John Paul II Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio* on the Relationship between Faith and Reason (1998)

²⁴ *ibid* n 3

²⁵ *ibid* n 51

²⁶ *ibid* n 4

²⁷ *ibid* n 5

²⁸ *ibid* n 47

²⁹ C Perrow *Complex Organizations* New York; McGraw-Hill (1972); P Selznick 'Institutionalism 'Old' and 'New' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41 (1996) pp 270-277

³⁰ Among many other authors, A MacIntyre *After Virtue* Notre Dame; University of Notre Dame Press (1984); L Polo *Ética* Madrid; Unión Editorial (1996)

³¹ 'Why Aristotle? For two reasons. First, because...for those who want to develop alternatives to scientific rationalism, returning to some pre-modern themes and looking at them in a new light may be a source of inspiration and a catalyst for imaginative reconceptualization, Aristotle's thinking is significantly different from the hitherto dominant mechanistic orthodoxy in the social sciences to make it both challenging and inspiring. Second, revisiting Aristotle makes sense because Aristotle wrote about certain issues which continue to concern us, even today', H Tsoukas and S Cummings 'Marginalization and Recovery: The Emergence of Aristotelian Themes' *Organization Studies* 18 (1997) pp 665-683. Among the authors that have proposed an Aristotelian perspective, see R C Solomon *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business* New York; Oxford University Press (1992); T V Morris *If Aristotle run General Motors* New York: Henry Holt and Co. (1997); C Llano *El postmodernismo en la empresa* México; McGraw-Hill (1994); C Llano *Dilemas éticos de la empresa contemporánea* México; Fondo de Cultura Económica (1997); J A Pérez López *Fundamentos de la dirección de empresas* Madrid; Rialp (1993)

As advocated by the latter, we too propose to *take philosophy, as it was understood by the classics, as the underlying science for formulating a theory of management and organisation*. In doing so, we are referring, first of all, to the distinctive features of the philosophical attitude compared to the manner of thinking of other sciences. It is our opinion that the philosophical tradition grounded on Aristotelian thought is that which has best preserved this philosophical attitude, while, in the philosophical systems that form part of the modern tradition, philosophy has lost its distinctive character and its method has come to be likened to the methods of other sciences.

Aristotelian Philosophy and Business Management

Aristotelian philosophy - and also, in part, other philosophical approaches - offers at least four functions that may help solve the previously mentioned problems of management theories. These functions are: admirative, globalising, political, and critical.

Admirative function. Admiration is the initial state of the philosophical attitude;³² it is the primary, original gaze at the world, without any conditions or prejudices; it is the highest activity because it satisfies the desire for knowledge that is inherent in human nature.³³ In the modern tradition, the admirative attitude has become a pragmatic attitude. Bacon, for example, says that 'what is most useful in practice is most true in science'.³⁴ However, this entails losing the original reference to reality, and amazement becomes interest. The search for truth requires dispensing with other interests in the scientific inquiry.³⁵ When the door is opened to contemplation, one becomes aware of the existence of an intelligibility of the universe,³⁶ that goes beyond the limits of space and time.

This opening to what is universal enables us to understand two of the problematic features that characterise organisational theories, self-referentiality and ethnocentrism. Admiration enables reason to open itself to reality, transcending the limits of its own interest, and to the universal, beyond the peculiarities of specific cultural systems and centering on what the different cultures share in common and not just on what makes them different.

Globalising function. Philosophy is a global knowledge: it seeks synthesis, it tries to ascertain what relationships exist - real relationships, not just logical relationships - between ideas.³⁷

This synoptic mentality³⁸ is that which best understands the complexity of the contemporary world. This complexity cannot be encompassed simply by greater quantities of analysis.³⁹ Analysis is a tactical vision of reality; synthesis is a strategic vision.

Since the Cartesian search for clear, distinct ideas, the ideal of modern science is analysis. And analysis has led to specialisation. Analysis is necessary to acquire a deeper knowledge of partial aspects of reality, but, having achieved this, it is then necessary to take into account the dynamic relations existing between them. Philosophy tells us that, in addition to the study of partial aspects of reality, there is also a science that contemplates reality in its totality.⁴⁰

This globalising function helps us understand the fragmentation and multiplicity currently existing in management theories. The approaches used by the different management theories view the firm's reality from the particular aspects of the respective sciences on which they are based. All of them may

³² Aristotle *Metaphysics* translated by H. Tredennick Cambridge MA; Harvard University Press (1933) I 982b12-17; Plato *Theaetetus* translated by H. N. Fowler Cambridge MA; Harvard University Press (1977) 155d; M Heidegger *Was ist das-die Philosophie?* Pfullingen; Günther Neske (1956)

³³ Aristotle *Metaphysics* I 980a1

³⁴ F Bacon *Novum Organum* in F Bacon *The works of Francis Bacon* London; Spendding, Ellis and Heath (1857-1874) (Stuttgart; Friedrich Fromman Verlag, 1963) vol II p 4

³⁵ Ch S Peirce *Reasoning and the Logic of Things. The Cambridge Conferences lectures of 1898* K. L. Ketner (ed.) Cambridge MA; Harvard University Press (1992)

³⁶ M Artigas *La mente del universo* Pamplona; Eunsa (1999)

³⁷ L Polo *Introducción a la filosofía* Pamplona; Eunsa (1995)

³⁸ Plato *Phaedrus* translated by B. Jowett Oxford; Oxford University Press (1920) 265d

³⁹ A Llano *La nueva sensibilidad* Madrid; Espasa Calpe (1988)

⁴⁰ Aristotle *Metaphysics* VI 1003a22

be very useful for a deeper analysis of business reality, but they cannot become exclusive or absolute. The fragmentation is a consequence of this preponderance of partial knowledge that wishes to become absolute. Therefore, as a science that studies reality in its global aspect, philosophy may help us overcome the fragmentation and understand the advantages and limits of the multiplicity of approaches.

Political function. The distinctive feature of political government, as opposed to despotic government, is that it respects and furthers the identity and autonomy of those who are subjects of that government. As a global science, philosophy is on a higher order than the other sciences;⁴¹ but its government is political, it respects the autonomy of the other sciences.

The Modern Era is characterised by the crisis in the hegemony of philosophy and the proclamation of the self-sufficiency of the positive sciences. While in classical philosophy, it is accepted that there are different methods for the different sciences, the Modern Era advocates the hegemony and exclusivity of the positivistic scientific method. For example, while Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics* that it would be 'equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs',⁴² Spinoza proposes an ethics demonstrated according to the geometric order.⁴³

The political function of philosophy enables us to understand the multidisciplinary of organisational theories. The value of philosophical exegesis lies in 'harmonising to the extent possible the different approaches arising from the plural proposals formulated by the sciences', giving an explanation for the 'failure that comes after projects that, being grounded on a partial view, are unilateral and, therefore, ineffective'.⁴⁴

Critical function. If admiration is the starting point for philosophy, the critical attitude is the motor that keeps it moving and prevents it from becoming bogged down in dogmatic positions. As MacIntyre has pointed out, the most dangerous theories are those that are accepted acritically.⁴⁵

The critical function cannot become autonomous; rather, it finds its meaning among a common substrate of intelligibility and a hopeful search for truth. When one of these aspects disappears, either because the existence of a reality beyond the subject is denied or because truth is reduced to mere opinion, criticism is transformed into a 'crisis of meaning'. Thus, John Paul II refers to three dimensions of philosophy that should be regained: the *sapiential dimension* of searching for the ultimate and global meaning of life; the *veritative dimension*, which verifies man's ability to attain knowledge of truth; and the *metaphysical dimension*, able to transcend empirical data and move from phenomenon to foundation.⁴⁶

The critical function provides a suitable attitude for addressing the discussion on the paradigm. Philosophy does not only act as 'the decisive critical factor which determines the foundations and limits of the different fields of scientific learning', but it also appears 'as the ultimate framework of the unity of human knowledge and action, leading them to converge towards a final goal and meaning'.⁴⁷ Philosophy advises that the critical attitude does not necessarily mean a sceptical attitude, but rather the responsibility to undertake a search for truth, in which not only the scientific community must be heeded, but also the reality itself that is the cause of the investigation.

⁴¹ Aristotle *Metaphysics* I 982a1-b11

⁴² Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* translated by W D Ross Oxford; Clarendon Press (1908) 1094b23

⁴³ B de Spinoza *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (Ethics Demonstrated in a Geometrical Manner) in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* ed. and trans. E. Curley Princeton NJ; Princeton University Press, (1985) vol I

⁴⁴ L Polo 'La *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*: Una encíclica sobre la situación actual de la humanidad' in F Fernández (ed.) *Estudios sobre la Encíclica Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* Madrid; Aedos-Unión Editorial (1990) p 87

⁴⁵ A MacIntyre 'Utilitarianism and Cost-Benefit Analysis: An Essay on the Relevance of Moral Philosophy to Bureaucratic Theory' in K Sayre (ed) *Values in the Electric Power Industry* Notre Dame; Notre Dame Press (1977). MacIntyre takes utilitarianism as an example of this acritical acceptance of a theory. He shows how the utilitarian approach raises some ethical problems that cannot easily be answered from within a utilitarian system. On the contrary, it needs to be supplemented by other ethical approaches.

⁴⁶ John Paul II op cit 1998 nn 81-83

⁴⁷ *ibid* n 81

In one way or another, ethics appears in all four functions. In the admirative function, the human being's goods are discovered; in the globalising function, the ultimate ends of action, which are also addressed by ethics. Ethics is particularly present in the political function as, for Aristotle, politics, as a principal and directive science, inquires about the good of man.⁴⁸ Ethics also appears in the critical function, approving or disqualifying theories, models and paradigms.

Conclusion

Philosophy, as an attitude held by the human being towards the world and himself, has certain intrinsic characteristics that differentiate it from other scientific methods. The triumph of the modern scientific method and the rejection of the philosophical way of thinking were presented in their time as a liberation of reason from the constrictions of metaphysics. Paradoxically, modern reason has led to forms of skepticism or indifference to truth, nihilistic stances that lead humanity to situations of anguish, and the illusion of a technological progress that, by itself, cannot satisfy people's yearning for happiness.

Although very schematically - and therefore very incompletely - we have shown how Aristotelian philosophy offers a vision of reality that is above partial views, models and paradigms, while at the same time providing an arena in which it is possible to integrate the various views, with the necessary judgement. Consequently, we proposed to maintain scientific rationality, which has made such significant contributions to these theories, but to replace the scientific method used as the basis for developing these theories with philosophy, in its classical conception. We consider that, with this approach, the problems facing current management and organisational theories will be able to find a suitable path for their study and solution.

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⁴⁸ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a-b