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Beyond MacIntyre: Grounding the business as practice debate

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Beyond MacIntyre: Grounding the business as practice debate

Abstract

Alasdair MacIntyre's distinction between institutions and practices helps illuminate how powerful institutional forces frame and constrain the practice of organizational research as well as the output and positioning of scholarly journals. Yet his conceptual frame is limited, not least because it is unclear whether the activity of managing is, or is not, a practice. This paper builds on MacIntyre's ideas by incorporating Aristotle's concepts of *poíēsis*, *praxis*, *téchnē* and *phrónēsis*. Rather than ask, following MacIntyre, whether management is a practice, this wider network of concepts provides a richer frame for understanding the nature of managing and the appropriate role for academia. The paper outlines a *phronetic paradigm* for organizational inquiry, and concludes by briefly examining the implications of such a paradigm for research and learning.

Beyond MacIntyre: Grounding the business as practice debate

Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre's distinction between institutions and practices helps illuminate how powerful institutional forces frame and constrain the practice of organisational research as well as the output and positioning of scholarly journals. Yet his conceptual frame is limited, not least because it is unclear whether the activity of managing is, or is not, a practice. This paper seeks to build on MacIntyre's ideas by incorporating Aristotle's concepts of *poíēsis*, *praxis*, *téchnē* and *phrónēsis* into the conversation. Rather than ask, following MacIntyre, whether management is a practice, this wider network of concepts provides a richer frame for understanding the nature of managing. The paper proposes a *phronetic paradigm* for organisational inquiry, and concludes by examining the implications of such a paradigm for research and learning. It begins by introducing MacIntyre's ideas and the attendant debate in management studies about his work. The paper then maps out the essential elements of a phronetic paradigm, building on Joseph Dunne's reading of Aristotle's concepts of *poíēsis*, *praxis*, *téchnē* and *phrónēsis*.

MacIntyre and Management

At the centre of MacIntyre's work is the concept of 'practice', which he defines as follows:

> By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music. (MacIntyre 1981/1984: 187)

For MacIntyre, practices are always situated in place and time, in a living, historical tradition.

A second important concept in his frame is the notion of an institution. Again, it is best to reproduce his own definition:

> Practices must not be confused with institutions. Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories and hospitals are institutions…They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers. (MacIntyre 1981/1984: 194)

Institutions are reflexive and open to change:

> So when an institution – a university, say, or a farm, or a hospital – is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is (MacIntyre 1981/1984: 222)

MacIntyre then proceeds to make an important and influential distinction between what he calls 'internal goods' and 'external goods'. To explain the distinction he tells a story of an adult encouraging a child to play chess. Initially, this encouragement is effected through promising the child some tangible reward, for example sweets or money, if she plays the game. Over time, the child comes to enjoy playing the game and will play solely for the love of playing chess regardless of any reward. In a nutshell, this captures his distinction between internal and external goods: the enjoyment derived through playing the game itself is an 'internal good' while the sweets or money constitute an 'external good'.

Crucially, MacIntyre associates internal goods with practices, and external goods with institutions. Applied to research, one might understand an internal good as the joy one gets from writing, analysing, reading, collecting data, and the other activities that constitute the practice of doing research. In contrast, Research Assessment Exercises, which are created and maintained by the institution rather than the practice, are a good example of an external good. Such goods are "characteristically objects of competition in which there are winners and losers" and when achieved "are always some individual's property and possession" (MacIntyre 1981/1984: 190). These distinctions are captured nicely by the actress Glenn Close who, in a recent interview, spoke about her love for the 'craft' of acting (an internal good) and her detachment from the entertainment industry's intense concern with acting awards (external goods): "I love what I do and the craft of it…. I'm aware that the world likes to have winners and losers. I understand the entertainment value in that, of course, but as it applies to my craft it kind of doesn't make sense" (Clayton-Lee 2012: 42).

While practices depend on institutions – "no practice can survive for any length of time un-sustained by institutions" (MacIntyre 1981/1984: 194) – they can also work to create an unnecessary focus on external goods which can be harmful to the practice: "the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution" (MacIntyre 1981/1984: 194). In particular, MacIntyre is hostile to the bureaucratic manager, who he sees as the primary advocate of techniques that can damage if not destroy practices and their constitutent virtues.

Virtues are the final important concept in MacIntyre's frame, and he explicitly associates them with internal goods and practices rather than external goods and institutions: "A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving such goods" (MacIntyre 1981/1984: 191). Again, virtues are understood and constituted contextually and historically:

> "[First,] all morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and particular…and secondly that there is no way to possess the virtues except as part of a tradition in which we inherit them and our understanding of them from a series of predecessors (MacIntyre 1981/1984: 127)

And again, these goods and virtues emerge and change over time: "A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embedded argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition" (MacIntyre 1981/1984: 222).

MacIntyre's distinction between practices and institutions, and his association of internal goods and virtues with the former and external goods with the latter, becomes somewhat confused when he admits:

> The making and sustaining of forms of human community – and therefore of institutions – itself has all the characteristics of a practice, and moreover of a practice which stands in a peculiarly close relationship to the exercise of the virtues (MacIntyre 1981/1984: 194)

Thus, making and sustaining an institution can be understood as a practice of sorts. To clarify, it is useful to distinguish between an *institutional practice* and a *core practice* (though MacIntyre doesn't use these terms).

Is Management a Practice?

The above summary of MacIntyre's concepts and theoretical frame is necessary before we can consider the obvious and important question, 'Is management a practice?'. There are a number of reasons why we might answer in the affirmative (for development, see Christensen (2012); Brewer (1997), Moore (2002; 2005a; b).

First, 'management' is recognisably a "coherent and complex form of socially established human activity", with its own "standards of excellence". Presumably there are goods internal to the practice of management – even if these could only be identified through interpretative studies of managers – and so it appears to meet the requirements that MacIntyre sets for deciding whether a set of activities is a practice or not. Second, MacIntyre's narrow and prejudiced view of what managers do – he sees managers as amoral implementers of bureaucratic rationality – is not supported by studies of managerial work (e.g. Mintzberg (1973)). Not only do managers seek to maximise efficiency, but they also copy, follow rules, pursue individual goals, have fun, encourage employees, and a myriad of other things that constitute the human condition. Third, even if we took MacIntyre's narrow understanding of the manager as a rational, amoral, efficiency-maximising bureaucrat, the activities associated with this character constitute an *institutional* practice, as defined above.

Notwithstanding these points, one can also argue that management is *not* a practice (Beadle 2008). First, it is not compelling to describe business or management as a 'productive craft' since business and management are never more than a means. We can speak of the 'business of farming', or the 'business of fishing' but the concept of the 'business of business' doesn't make much sense. Second, if management is a practice, then what and where is the institution with which it has a dialectic relationship? Third, there are no good examples of the excellence of business (as business) save for vague and rather empty terms like 'customer service'. Neither are there good examples of the 'internal goods' of management that are in any sense specific to management. Fourth, since management is always related to something else, it is proper to totally and solely locate it within the institutional realm of particular practices. The fifth point draws on MacIntyre's assertion that teaching is not a practice:

> I say that teachers are involved in a variety of practices and that teaching is an ingredient in every practice …Teaching is never more than a means, that is it

> has no point and purpose except for the point and purpose of the activities to which it introduces students. All teaching is for the sake of something else and so teaching does not have its own goods. The life of a teacher is therefore not a specific kind of life. The life of a teacher of mathematics, whose goods are the goods of mathematics, is one thing; a life of a teacher of music whose goods are the goods of music is another. This is one reason why any conception of the philosophy of education as a distinct area of philosophical enquiry is a mistake" (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002: 8–9).

In other words, it is inappropriate to extract the educational element out of different practices and put them together as a single practice. The same logic applies even more so to the 'practice' of management, because, while it is relatively easy to identify an institution (the school), and internal and external goods associated with teaching, we cannot easily do this for management.

MacIntyre's argument that teaching is not a practice is less convincing if we restrict teaching to primary and second level education (for development see Dunne (2003)). It has more merit at the third level and raises interesting issues for our understanding of the university and the business school. Indeed one would expect MacIntyre to be especially hostile to the business school because not only is it, in his view, an institution that fosters and promulgates bureaucratic rationality, but it is also premised on the false and dangerous notion of conjoining elements from different practices together. From this perspective, the attempt to construe management as a distinct practice is best understood as a political (and unethical) move, in which management researchers and business schools are deeply implicated.

Developing the Conversation

MacIntyre's set of concepts provides a useful critical take on management, on the business school and on the idea of the university. Yet it is problematic on a number of levels. His ideas about a form of life – based around activities like football, fishing, chess-playing, architecture and medicine – are initially seductive, but at many levels they are a long way from the reality of contemporary organizations. He is clearly unhappy with modernity, bureaucracy and capitalism, but too often his critique comes across as wishful sentimentalising for a pre-modern romantic idyll. Moreover, his basic concepts seem much too slippery when we try to apply them, generating all sorts of empirical conundrums. Is farming a practice, or are the different types of farming distinct practices? What practice is a brand manager part of? Is the video

game *Grand Theft Auto* a practice, just like the game of chess? How do practices emerge and disappear?

Part of the problem is perhaps that MacIntyre has tended, in his seminal book *After Virtue*, to conflate a number of Aristotelian ideas into his single concept of practice. This section of the paper restores some of these distinctions, in particular, drawing on the work of Joseph Dunne (1993; 2005; 2011), with whom MacIntyre had an interesting dialogue about whether or not teaching is a practice (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002; Dunne 2003).

In his masterful book, *Back to the Rough Ground*, Dunne (1993) discusses many of Aristotle's major concepts but here I will focus on just four – *poiesis*, *praxis*, *techne* and *phronesis* – as shown in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Poiesis describes an activity associated with making or fabricating something, which necessarily terminates in and brings about a separate product or outcome that provides it with its end or *telos*. Three types of *poiesis* or domain of activity can be distinguished (though neither Aristotle nor Dunne make this categorisation). *Artefactual poiesis* describes the activity of making some thing, such as building a house or making a chair. In contrast, *performative poiesis* involves no artefact, and so includes activities like performing a dance, or gymnastics. What is distinctive about the third type, *influential poiesis*, is that luck or chance necessarily intervenes. For example, a doctor may work at making a patient better, but despite the doctor doing excellent work, the patient may still die.

Praxis, unlike *poiesis*, is not structured around a separately identifiable outcome; rather *praxis* is the domain of activity where the end is realised in the very doing of the activity itself: "while making has an end other than itself, action cannot, for good action [*praxis*] itself is its end" (Aristotle 2007: 6.5 1140b7). Thus, *praxis* has to do with the conduct of one's live as a citizen; it is about activities such as being friendly, honest, truthful, loyal, helpful. In essence, the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* is between productive and ethical activity.

Poiesis and *praxis* are distinct domains of activity and each has an associated form of knowledge. *Techne*, or productive knowledge, is associated with *poiesis* and describes the kind of knowledge possessed by an expert in a specialised craft who understands the principles underlying the production of an object or a state of affairs. Dunne identifies two forms of *techne*: first there is the knowledge that explains how an artefact comes into being; in other words it is a form of knowledge underpinning the ability to analyse and describe how an artefact is made. A second form of knowledge is involved in actually making an artefact or creating a performance; in other words it is the knowledge underpinning the ability to actually make an artefact or produce a state of affairs. An important point about *techne* is that while it does contain a concept of 'excellence' (e.g. 'I know how to make an excellent chair') this does not provide a basis for ethical action.

Phronesis, or practical wisdom, is the form of knowledge associated with *praxis*. It is acquired and deployed not in the making of any product separate from oneself but rather in one's actions with one's fellows. *Phronesis* is not a knowledge of ethical ideas or universal principles (which distinguishes it from utilitarian and deontological ethical systems), but rather it describes a resourcefulness and perceptiveness of mind, gained through domain-specific experience. *Phronesis* characterises a person who knows how to act with virtue, with the understanding that virtue is always realised in concrete situations. It is good, practical moral judgement. *Phronesis* is distinct from *techne*, just as *poiesis* is distinct from *praxis*: "*Phronesis* cannot be … *techne* … because acting and making are different kinds of things" (Aristotle 2007: 6.5 1140b3). And while there is such a thing as excellence in *techne*, "there is no such thing as excellence in *phronesis*" (because *phronesis* is an excellence) (Aristotle 2007: 6.5 1140b22).

For completeness, it is worth distinguishing *techne* and *phronesis* from three other concepts in Aristotle's frame: *episteme*, *sophia* and *nous*. *Episteme* is logically deduced knowledge of relations between objects that do not admit to change. The paradigmatic model of how this form of knowledge comes to be is the deduction of a trigonometric theorem from geometrical axioms. Thus, geometry is a good example of *episteme* in Aristotle's sense. *Sophia* is the ability to think well and wisely about universal truths and theories. In contrast to *phronesis*, which is the wisdom associated with the practical matters of human life, *sophia* is the wisdom associated with

thinking about "things much more divine in their nature than man, e.g., most conspicuously, the bodies of which the heavens are framed" (Aristotle 2007: 6.5 1141b1). Finally, *nous* is Aristotle's term for intuitive understanding, which is distinct from sense perception and reasoning. *Nous* is foundational in that it centres on the ability to make sense of what is perceived and to reason: it is "the part of the soul by which it knows and understands" (Aristotle and Hicks 1907: 429a9–10).

Gathering these concepts with some of MacIntyre's ideas provides a useful basis for advancing the conversation while avoiding MacIntyre's tendency towards generalisation and deep conservativism. Four related points can be made.

First, the distinction introduced here between core and institutional practice is helpful, even while recognising that practices are always embedded in one another and are always 'leaky'. Seeing management as an institutional practice is important because it helps us recognise and respond to the corrosive effect that management activity can have on core practices. In particular, it highlights the way that attempts in different domains to identify and foster 'excellence' and 'quality' can work to shift the focus from internal to external goods. In this respect, MacIntyre gives us a helpful frame for interpreting the trends outlined at the start of this paper, especially the way research has become a competitive game centred on the external goods of journal rankings and research assessment exercises, which work to diminish the internal good obtained through the actual activity of doing research, which also dimishes the practice of research work itself. Concepts like internal and external goods are valuable because they provide an accessible and intuitively appealing vocabulary that, when used appropriately, can rebuff and limit the corrosive effect that managerial techniques have on core practices.

Second, if we accept that management is *not* a practice, then this raises profound questions about our understanding of what and how we should teach and research, as well as the nature of, and rationale for, the institutions within which teaching and research are conducted. Specifically, the implication of MacIntyre's argument is that we should work to situate management teaching and research in *core* practices rather than collaborate in the inauthentic work of trying to make 'management' a core practice itself. Following this logic, it is difficult to see a rationale for the business school as conventionally understood, or a coherent epistemological basis for most management and organisational research. This might be fanciful since it is difficult to

envision a world without the industry of business education and research, but it might also provide an additional and useful theoretical perspective on criticisms of the business school (Jones and O'Doherty 2005; Dunne et al. 2008; Starkey and Tempest 2008) and on the hermetic nature of management and organisational research as described at the outset of this paper.

Third, while MacIntyre's concepts of practice, institution, internal and external goods are helpful and insightful, it has drawn the conversation in management studies into something of a conceptual cul-de-sac around the topic of whether management is or is not a practice. One way out of this is to change the question and to instead ask if the activity of managing is best understood as *poiesis* or *praxis* and to build out from there. There is clearly an element of both, but when one considers popular understandings of the nature of managerial work (e.g. Mintzberg (1973)) it seems clear that the bulk of managing is best captured by Aristotle's concept of *praxis*. At the level of knowledge, it is also clear that knowing how to lead, handle disturbances, negotiate, represent, initiate change, allocate resources, disseminate information, monitor, and be a figurehead is not *techne* or productive knowledge, but rather *phronesis* (practical wisdom), which is acquired and deployed not in the making of an artefact but through interacting with others in one's community. Indeed since 'managing' can transcend the production of particular artifacts or the creation of particular states of affairs is precisely why it is properly understood as a form of *praxis* rather than *poiesis*.

Fourth, MacIntyre's ideas – and especially Dunne's (1993) more nuanced reading of Aristotle –provides an interesting and novel take on the relationship between researchers and practitioners, and between theory and practice, not least because the concepts of *techne* and *phronesis* emphasise that knowing and judgement emerge through the lived experience of making and acting. Within what we might call an *epistemic paradigm*, practitioners are constituted as *objects* of research carried out by experts, and also as *consumers* of that research which takes the form of *episteme*. In contrast, within a *phronetic paradigm* practitioners are conceptualised as *critical*, *reflective researchers* and perpetual *students* (Flyvbjerg 2001; Antonacopoulou 2010). Here, the issue is not about creating abstract knowledge (*episteme*) and then making it practical or relevant to practitioners, nor to instruct or dictate to them, nor to moralise. Rather, the academic goal is to help practitioners in their reflective work: to

develop their *phronesis*. The conceptual power of *phronesis* is that it counters the desire to create a systematic body of generalised knowledge ('technical rationality') and reminds us that we should neither forget nor seek to overcome the conditionality, situatedness and historicity of human life. Instead, it impels us to recognise and work with the dialectic between *techne,* which abstracts from past experience of making things, and *phronesis* which is always experiential, modifiable, and premised on the value of improvisation and indeterminateness. The ethics of *phronesis* reminds us that tasks are not value-neutral nor can they be immunized against the human condition. Thus, *phronesis* provides the ethical foundation for *techne*, which is why one should not try to deploy the latter cut loose from the former. For instance, one might make a table, 'badly', for a needy person, or one might play a flute, 'excellently', for the S.S. in Dachau, or one might be an 'excellent' HR manager in an illegal (or legal) drug distributer. *Phronesis* provides the practical wisdom to make a judgement on what's right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust in these cases (Nyberg 2008).

While there have been recent calls for a phronetic approach to organisational research (Nonaka and Toyama 2007; Cairns and Sliwa 2008; Antonacopoulou 2010; Rämö 2011), a coherent phronetic paradigm – in which teaching, learning, research and management are centred on the idea of *phronesis* – has yet to be articulated or brought into being. Doing so will be difficult because, as outlined in the beginning of this paper, powerful institutional forces, which are largely hostile to a phronetic paradigm, constitute and constrain the academic study of organizational phenomena. For instance, if there was a deep commitment to situated studies then one would expect location to be identified in the title of published papers. However, only nine of the most recent 100 articles published in *Organization* (and 5 in *Organization Studies*) include a country or location in the paper title.

MacIntyre's reading of Aristotle gives us a helpful way of thinking through the conversations in, about and around management studies, that are embedded in and are constituted by the dialectic between institutions and practice. Building on this, Artistotle's wider frame of terms, especially his concept of *phrónēsis*, provides a skeletal frame for a new form of critical management studies. While the term paradigm might be over-used and abused, it makes much sense to speak of a *phronetic paradigm,* centred on Aristotle's concepts of *praxis* and *phrónēsis*. While

such a paradigm exists only in outline, it can still be distinguished from the two paradigms that dominate contemporary organisational and management research: the interpretative paradigm, which is focused on describing how things come to be and how actors interpret the world, and the positivist paradigm, which is rooted in formulating *epistēmē* or scientific knowledge. A phronetic paradigm offers the potential to map and explore new ways to critically engage with managing and organising, as well as new modes of researching, teaching and learning.

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Domain	**Knowledge**	**Teleology**	**Ethical**
Making *(poíēsis)*	*téchnē*	Yes (*telos*)	No
Acting *(Praxis)*	*phrónēsis*	No	Yes

Table 1: Framing concepts (after Aristotle)