Reconciling Opposites in Organisation Studies: An Aristotelian Approach to Modernism and Post-modernism

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In view of the current fragmentation in management and organisation studies, we argue that there is a need to elaborate techniques that help reconcile contradictory and superficially incommensurable standpoints. For this purpose, we draw on ‘pre-modern’ Aristotelian epistemological and methodological sources, particularly the idea of ‘saving the appearances’ (SA), not previously introduced into organisation studies. Using SA as our starting point, we outline a methodology that helps to develop reasonable and acceptable intermediary positions in contemporary debates between ‘modernism’ and ‘post-modernism’. We illustrate the functioning of SA in the case of three issues in the philosophy of science where ‘modernist’ and ‘post-modernist’ scholars seem to have incommensurable standpoints: the nature of scientific knowledge; the conception of causality; and the epistemology of practice. We show in particular how to use the logics of ‘qualification’, ‘new conception’, and ‘complementary combination’ to form the basis for mediating positions which could then be accepted by less extreme proponents of both ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’.

Communication between people representing opposing standpoints often fails both in research and in practice. This is not only due to an unwillingness to listen to the other side, but often results from a lack of sufficient intellectual means to deal with apparently contradictory or superficially incommensurable views\(^2\). In this paper we focus on the methods through which one can develop reconciliatory positions between seemingly contradictory standpoints and thus enhance communication between both academic scholars and organisational practitioners.

The methods of reconciliation themselves are as old as the ancient Greek philosophical explorations into the nature of human knowledge and communication. We need only recall the sophistication of the dialogues of Plato and the analysis of their logical moves by his best student, Aristotle, in his treatise on dialectic, the *Topics*. Aristotle was particularly keen on developing theoretical syntheses of previous philosophical and lay views in various philosophical fields. Following the logic of the Socratic dialogue form, an important move in this task was the exposition of contradictions between and within the given belief systems. Aristotle undertook to solve the contradictions by way of argument so that the solutions could be accepted by all parties involved. Though the mode of constructing the solutions varied

from case to case, the basic steps in this process remained the same. This involved presenting synthetic conceptions including, if possible, a part of the mutually contradictory views, namely, that part which survived critical scrutiny. This method is thus called the Aristotelian methodology of saving the appearances (SA). The notion of SA is not part of what we are all expected to know about the old master from Stagira, but rather something emerging from the revival of Aristotle scholarship since the 1960s and the new interest in his actual methods of inquiry.

We argue in this paper that SA, when appropriately understood, can be applied to contemporary contexts. In fact, recent philosophical research has shown the relevance of Aristotelian ideas for current debates and called for a wider application of his methods. This research has focused attention on the unique features in Aristotelian SA. In particular, Aristotelian SA provides concrete tools for synthesis formation which appear to be lacking in widely known dialogue methods. Note that we focus in this paper on the SA method and not on Aristotle’s views on specific philosophical issues.

We will first outline the basic ideas of the SA model and then present a modified version to be used for contemporary purposes. While Aristotle himself used SA to resolve contradictions in singular theoretical conceptions (such as the highest goal in human life), it has since been applied to solve wider theoretical problems. John Rawls, for example, used the method in a fairly conscientious manner to develop his theory of justice to save the best parts of ethical theories. Our focus is the ongoing debate between modernist and post-modernist scholars, which seems to be characterised by extreme philosophical standpoints that leave little room for mediating positions. We start by pointing out that this division is first and foremost a rhetorical construction and that a closer look at specific issues reveals genuine opportunities to bridge seemingly incommensurable standpoints.

We then focus on three issues within this modernism-postmodernism debate: the universalism-particularism discussion concerning the nature of scientific knowledge; the

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dispute over causality; and the opposing views concerning epistemology of practice. We show, in particular, how to use the logics of ‘qualification’, ‘new conception’ and ‘complementary combination’ to form the basis for mediating positions which could then be accepted by less extreme proponents on both sides. Rather than being pre-emptive, our illustrations are meant to be sketches for the first steps in developing fully elaborated and satisfactory positions in the philosophy of science. We maintain that such logics can also be applied in other contexts, in both abstract and concrete debates.

1 Aims and Methodology of Saving the Appearances

1.1 The Aristotelian SA

In this section we shall outline the key characteristics of Aristotle’s actual practice of SA drawing on his brief methodological passages in various philosophical treatises. The Aristotelian SA is first of all to be distinguished from the famous instrumentalist understanding of astronomical theories bearing the same title, the difference resulting mainly from a different reading of the term appearance. While in astronomy SA refers, according to Duhem, to an attempt to systematise observations with the help of mathematical models, in Aristotle the term appearance covers, in addition to observations, the opinions of reputable people for which he coined the term endoxa. For Aristotle, reputable opinions include those shared by all or the majority, the opinions of the wise (the philosophers), as well as the opinions of the experts in the various crafts. For him such a collection of opinions forms the basis of dialectical and rhetorical disputations, as well as that of philosophical inquiry.

In Aristotle, the title ‘saving the appearances’ is explained by its role in scientific and philosophical inquiry, and human discourse in general. The function of SA is to resolve

5 The instrumental reading of SA in astronomy is given by Duhem P To save the phenomena: An essay on the idea of physical theory from Plato to Galilei Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press 1969 (1908). Eudoxus, a member of the Platonic school and famous for his theory of the concentric spheres, is presented as the first systematic developer of this method.

6 Aristotle Topics Book I Ch 1 lines 100b21-23, Ch 10 lines 104a33-34; likewise in Rhetoric Book I Ch 7 lines 1364b13-16. For the works of Aristotle see Barnes J (ed) The complete works of Aristotle Vol I and II (Bollingen Series LXXI) Princeton, Princeton University Press 1984. We follow the practice of Aristotle scholarship in citing the name of the treatise, Book and Chapter and the line numbers based on the Bekker edition of 1832.

problems arising from conflicting opinions of people, groups or schools in such a manner that the partial truth of the opinions is preserved - or ‘saved’ - in the solution. SA does not, however, aim merely at a compromise, i.e., a weighted middle position maximising the satisfaction of the conflicting parties, but an agreement on the basis of sound argument. Its strategy is to show that the conflicting viewpoints are only apparently true. This accounts for the use of the term ‘appearance’ (phainomenon) in the title SA, since the reputable opinions are those understood as expressing how things appear to one. According to Aristotle, appearances are often partially true and partially false, which explains why SA is the proper way of reaching agreement among participants in a debate.

To achieve genuine agreement, certain epistemic and psychological preconditions typical of a fair dialogue have to be fulfilled. The participants need to have sufficient experience with argumentative discourse in the field in question to be able to distinguish fallacious and unsound arguments from reasonable and fair ones. Each of them has to be addressed with arguments they find sound and convincing on the basis of their own presumptions. And they also have to share a non-dogmatic attitude, allowing one to accept the possibility that one’s own initial position is only partially true and that other positions may also contain an element of truth in them. Furthermore, the participants need to be ready to modify their opinions on the basis of argument, otherwise no agreement could ever be possible. Finally, an important precondition is that the participants must have sufficient knowledge to form reasonable solutions to the problems raised.

Those familiar with Aristotle’s conceptions of dialectic, eristic, rhetoric, or scientific demonstration may not be satisfied with the remark that SA reflects his methods of inquiry and expect a clarification of how SA relates to these other forms of human communicative

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8 It has been argued, however, that not all reputable opinions (endoxa) are appearances, as some of the opinions of the wise may contradict common-sense views and how things appear at first sight (Cooper J ‘Review of Martha Nussbaum 1986’ Philosophical Review 97 (1988) pp 543-565).


10 If this is not the case, one can draw on sources of knowledge external to the debate.
action. To start with, it is worth pointing out that, for the Stagirite, SA and explanation, or demonstration (*apodeixis*), form the two complementary methodologies of science, the former covering the methods of inquiry and the latter consisting of the results of research organised in syllogistic explanations. SA appears to share the goal of persuasion with rhetoric, dialectic and eristics, but the similarity is somewhat superficial, since each of these constituted a particular social institution of its own in the ancient Athens, the rules of which Aristotle attempted to codify in his teaching. Rhetoric, like eristics, aims at persuasion by any means available for the case in hand, and rhetorical argument forms the best means to deliberate upon practical matters. The aims of dialectical disputations differ depending on whether the question-answer discussion is held for the sake of training, competition, examination, or inquiry. Only the philosopher, equipped with the SA methodology, possesses the way to truth and agreement among the disputants about theoretical issues.

### 1.2 SA Methodology

It would appear that Plato explored the various logical aspects of philosophical argument in his dialogues, and that it was left to Aristotle to compile them into the methodology now known as SA. An illustration of Plato’s logical achievements in synthesis formation is what he calls, in the dialogue *Phaidrus* (265a-266b), the method of collecting and analysing, here to be called ‘qualification’. This method was introduced to solve the problem raised by two speeches, both made by Socrates, to defend contradictory statements concerning love, one maintaining that love is bad and harmful, and the other representing it as good and beneficial. In applying the method Plato advises one, first, to collect the various kinds of objects studied, such as love, under one notion, here ‘madness’, and then divide it systematically into different kinds or parts - in his own metaphor, ‘to cut each according to its natural joints like

11 For the process of inquiry Aristotle applies the Platonic expression *the way towards the principles*, implying that this is supposed to yield the bases of demonstrations, while the demonstrations are to be identified with *the way from the principles* (*Nicomachean Ethics* Book I Ch 4 lines 1095a30-1095b13).


14 For Plato’s *Phaidrus* see Cooper J M (ed with introduction and notes) *Complete works* Indianapolis/ Cambridge, Hackett 1997.
an organic being’. Following this procedure allows Socrates to distinguish madness caused by human illness as involving bad predcitions, and divine madness as involving good predcitions. This is a clear case of solving conflicts generated by conceptual ambiguity or over-generalisation but, as a general methodology for solving conflicts, SA applies to varied situations and the method of qualification is to be counted as a particular case of it.

Since Aristotle’s extant logical and methodological treatises include works on syllogistics (Prior Analytics), demonstration (Posterior Analytics), rhetoric (Rhetoric), and dialectic (Topics and Sophistical Refutations), but not one on philosophical inquiry, it is no wonder that this aspect remained in oblivion for centuries\textsuperscript{15}. Recent scholarship has availed itself of the many, though brief and somewhat ambiguous, methodological remarks concerning his methods of inquiry. Today there is fairly general agreement that when read in their context, the methodological passages are for the most part in harmony with Aristotle’s actual methodological practice.

Perhaps the most often cited passage describing the stages in the process of SA is the following from Book VII Chapter 1 Lines 1145b2-7 of the Nicomachean Ethics at the beginning of a lengthy treatment of weakness of will (akrasia) and other related matters:

Here, as in all other cases, we must set down the appearances and, first working through the puzzles, in this way go on to show, if possible, the truth of all the reputable opinions about these affections or, if this is not possible, of the greater number and the most authoritative. For if the difficulties are resolved and the reputable opinions are left in place, we will have done enough showing.

In our preferred version of SA one may distinguish four analytical stages: (i) collecting the appearances or endoxa, (ii) laying out the problems involved in them, i.e., contradictions and gaps, (iii) setting out the solutions to the problems, and (iv) justifying the

\textsuperscript{15} For a criticism of the traditional view introduced by Thomas Aquinas, according to which the Aristotelian ethics consists of a hierarchical deductive system of \textit{a priori} rules, see Nussbaum M C Aristotle’s De motu animalium Princeton, Princeton University Press 1978 pp 168-169, 174-175.
solutions\textsuperscript{16}. At the first stage one outlines the appearances or the *endoxa*, consisting of the prevailing knowledge of reputable people relevant to the object of study and, if needed, the new data gathered for the particular purpose. As far as ethics is concerned, Aristotle seems to have thought that all the relevant experience for the outlines of an ethical theory is already available, and therefore uses the terms ‘appearances’ and ‘reputable opinions’ interchangeably here\textsuperscript{17}. As is to be expected, in empirical disciplines such as biology, he considered it necessary to collect new observations, not to be counted as *endoxa*\textsuperscript{18}.

The second stage consists of critical scrutiny of the available views (and other information) by identifying problems, i.e., contradictions and gaps, in the knowledge base assembled. This stage is the one we are familiar with from Plato’s Socrates, who attempted to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the problematic propositions accepted by his interlocutor by means of conceptual clarification and pro and con argument, as well as by explicating their consequences. Since Aristotle developed the prose form of writing, the roles of the questioner and respondent are suppressed in his treatises, though from the logical point of view, the structure of debate remains the same. The idea behind this procedure is still to delineate all the relevant sources of knowledge and arguments in order to make an informed assessment of the problematic situation.

The third step, typical of Aristotle though seldom found in Plato, is to solve the problems either by selecting the best choice among the *endoxa*, by qualifying the previous views, or by constructing new concepts and conceptions.

The fourth and final stage is the justification of the intended solution, consisting of two separate moves. The first one involves showing that the proposed solution does solve the problems, i.e., is not undermined by the critical arguments presented. The second consists of


\textsuperscript{17} Aristotle writes in the *Nicomachean ethics* Book I Ch 8 lines 1098b27-29: ‘Now some of these views have been held by many men and men of old, others by a few persons; and it is not probable that either of these should be entirely mistaken, but rather that they should be right in at least some one respect or even in most respects’.

showing that the solution saves most of the endoxa (and new observations), either as such or in a revised form, i.e., includes a part of each of the contradictory views, if possible\textsuperscript{19}. In fact, if none or only a few less important previous conceptions are preserved, this can no longer be considered a case of SA.

One further argument form Aristotle uses to justify his solution (also applied in scientific reasoning today) is to explain why an appearance which turns out to be only partly true seemed so appealing initially; i.e., why it seemed true in the first place.\textsuperscript{20} We need to note, finally, that the whole SA process is based on the idea that the endoxa are not mere appearances but do contain some truth in them.

\subsection*{1.3 The Contemporary Relevance of SA}

Even though for Aristotle the methodology of SA in its entirety belongs purely to philosophical inquiry, we may in principle apply it to all areas of communication whenever there is enough willingness to learn from others. The potential for extensive use of SA follows from the fact that the method need not be tied to the particular ontological or epistemological theories favoured by Aristotle. SA can be seen as independent of his version of metaphysical realism, according to which individual beings instantiate eternal, unchanging species, the essential properties of which it is the task of philosophical or scientific disciplines to delineate. It is, likewise, independent of the ideal of distinct representative systems of various fields of reality as found with Aristotle himself. This implies that the SA methodology can be applied by inquirers with different conceptions of truth, even those who reject it as a meaningful concept altogether. Abstracting from truth-talk, the method of SA can be said, if skilfully applied, to yield the best conception possible on the matter in hand considering the present stage of knowledge. The notion of endoxa also needs some modification before we are ready to outline the four stages of SA for contemporary purposes.


\textsuperscript{20} Aristotle *Physics* Book IV Ch 4 lines 211a9-10; *Nicomachean ethics* Book VII Ch 14 lines 1154a22-25.
To use terms from contemporary social epistemology, the *endoxa* can be said to include the opinions of socially identifiable *epistemic authorities* or *reliable testifiers*. To recapitulate, reputable opinions for Aristotle include opinions shared by all or the majority, the opinions of the wise (philosophers), as well as those of the experts in various crafts. To be applicable today, the *endoxa* needs to cover studies by empirical scientists as well, phenomena which did not exist before Aristotle’s own empirical research. Thus in our applications of SA we may, depending on the context in question, understand the knowledge of epistemic authorities to cover the opinions of researchers and common-sense thinking, as well as views developed in various trade or professional activities. Accordingly, the SA method may be particularly fruitful in contexts such as organisation research and practice where the role of common-sense knowledge and the ideas of practitioners are pre-eminently important.

The SA methodology can hence frequently be applied when the particular epistemic and psychological preconditions mentioned above are fulfilled by the parties to the debate; i.e., when there is sufficient knowledge available and the participants share a sufficiently non-dogmatic attitude. The SA is thus not neutral to all epistemic standpoints. It is, in fact, in striking contrast with later philosophical schools which form the epistemological basis of positivist thinking. For instance, the proponent of a foundationalist epistemology, such as a strict empiricist, appreciating only observational knowledge and rejecting the epistemic value of both lay experience and theoretical thinking in general, would refuse to enter into dialogue with an advocate of SA. An extreme relativist to whom any argument is worth the same would be an equally unlikely partner of such a disputant. Excluding the strict empiricist foundationalist and the extreme relativist poses no serious limitations to the applicability of the SA, however. Foundationalist empiricism received a death blow almost half a century ago by the general acceptance of the principle of theory-ladenness of observations, and to argue with extreme relativists is to invite them to indulge in selfcontradiction.

The exclusion of foundationalist opponents may, however, provoke another concern. For isn’t Aristotle himself known as a foundationalist of a particular kind? Here we should first point out that the recent scholarly work on the SA method does clearly challenge earlier

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interpretations of Aristotle as an empiricist foundationalist when his methods of inquiry are concerned. Furthermore, to be exact, this does not touch Aristotle’s theory of demonstration (apodeixis) at all. Demonstration in Aristotle deals with the organisation of existing research results beginning from the foundation of first principles of science, while SA is his method of inquiry by which such principles may be produced.\(^{22}\)

Hence, for us, SA can be seen to involve a particular epistemological idea of rationality, in which philosophy, science, and practical decision making are understood primarily as social, argumentative communication processes. The interesting thing about the SA procedure is that it can be carried out either as a solitary exercise or a collective enterprise. As for the latter, we shall point out without further argument that SA is in perfect harmony with the recent suggestions about using dialogues for collective decision making to profit from the various experiences of the members of an organisation by explicating their knowledge, which is often tacit.\(^{23}\)

The importance of the SA methodology as compared with these contemporary dialogue conceptions lies precisely in its heuristic insights for reconciling conflicting views. In organisational settings, the SA approach provokes the ‘reputable persons’ to examine their own conceptions critically, as in the Platonic dialogues, only without any fixed roles. Each participant is free to adopt the ‘Socratic’ role of the questioner or that of the respondent whenever they wish. But more than that, it is the task of the participants themselves to create synthetic views which would solve their disagreements in such a manner that everyone is left with the feeling that, in the final decision, ‘my word counts’. In successful cases the dialogue ends with everyone being convinced by the arguments proposed and ready to adopt the conclusions. This is possible, however, only if everyone assumes a non-dogmatic stance and is prepared to accept that others may also have their share in formulating the correct view or right decision.

We conclude our presentation of the contemporary understanding of SA by listing its phases:


(i) Setting out the relevant knowledge acquired by those familiar with the subject matter in question

(ii) Identifying the problems in the gathered/explicated knowledge; i.e., contradictions and gaps, and revealing the strengths and weaknesses of the conflicting views by conceptual clarification, pro and con argument, and by explicating their consequences

(iii) Constructing solutions to the problems by suitable means, such as qualification of concepts and general propositions, constructing new conceptions, combining previous views in an appropriate manner, argument by analogy, and so forth

(iv) Justifying the solutions by showing that they do solve the problems and save part of most of the conflicting conceptions. The justification may include arguments showing why a view which has been criticised initially appeared to be true.

As there are no recursive rules for discovery, one cannot offer a full account of the third and fourth phases. While the prevalent philosophy of science, methodology, or dialogue literature is not very helpful in this respect, we have chosen three cases to illustrate the functioning of SA which differ in the way the solutions are achieved. The first illustration follows the logic of ‘qualification’ we are already familiar with from the brief discussion of the dispute over love in Plato’s dialogue *Phaidrus*. In the second, entitled ‘new conception’, the solution is brought about with the help of conceptions external to the arguments set out at the first and second phases of SA. In the third, called ‘combination’, the solution is gained by combining the material derived at the first and second stages of SA.

2 Applying SA to the Disputes between Modernism and Post-modernism

2.1 The Modernism versus Post-modernism Dispute in Organisation Studies

The traditional ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations of organisation studies have been harshly criticised during recent years. One of the main sources of criticism has been a group of scholars adhering to post-modern ideas. This heterogeneous group has
been inspired by the more general post-modern turn in human sciences, and accordingly the ideas of Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, Lyotard, and Wittgenstein among others have been in the forefront of this movement.\textsuperscript{24} To outline even a brief review of this influential but varied literature is beyond the scope of this paper, and it is also doubtful that the general post-modern label does credit to the various intellectual traditions under this umbrella. However, on the whole, the post-modern reflections have concentrated on the criticism and ‘deconstruction’ of modernist beliefs and practices characterising traditional organisation studies. Consequently, this literature has focused on issues such as the creation of ‘scientistic’ knowledge that obscures reality and leads to reductionism, meaningless attempts to develop general laws in social settings, the lack of reflexivity characterising modernist studies, production of knowledge that has no meaning for practice, and creation and strengthening of power structures that result in dominance and exploitation. This has resulted in a divide between traditional modernist scholars and their post-modernist critics.

In spite of the insights of the criticism, the ‘mainstream’ management scholars have found these critical standpoints difficult to understand, let alone to accept. In fact, as Alvesson\textsuperscript{25} has pointed out, post-modernists have developed their own scientific debates, which have grown separately from the mainstream studies. As a result, the post-modernists have labelled the mainstream scholars ‘scienticists’ and the modernists have seen the post-modernists as ‘extremists’, judgements often being based on superficial knowledge or wilful misinterpretation of the positions criticised.\textsuperscript{26}

In this paper, we are most certainly not offering a complete integrating theory that would resolve the division between modernists and post-modernists. We are trying merely to show how it is quite possible in the case of specific philosophical questions to reconcile superficially contradictory and incommensurable standpoints. And even in these cases we are


\textsuperscript{25} Alvesson M ‘The meaning and meaninglessness of postmodernism: Some ironic remarks’ Organization Studies 16 (1995) pp 1045-1075

only sketching logically meaningful ways to reconcile the opposite standpoints, not fully developed arguments that would convince all parties.

The first issue that we shall focus on is the nature of scientific knowledge in organisation studies. This is a question where the modernist and post-modernist standpoints seem to be far apart, the former advocating nomothetic knowledge of general propositions and the latter rejecting such projects in favour of particularist knowledge, often couched in narrative form. We will show, however, that it is logically possible to reconcile these standpoints by the method of ‘qualification’. In practice, we argue that the modified conceptions of ‘limited generalisation’ and ‘contextspecificity’ can provide a meaningful basis for dialogues between modernists and post-modernists.

The second issue is the debate over causality. Following the nomothetic line of thinking, the modernists have built on the classical ‘regularity’ view, the origins of which often are traced to David Hume. This view is that true causation implies regular, law-like patterns to be uncovered and specified by researchers. The post-modernists have, in turn, harshly criticised the hope of achieving causal knowledge in the social realm and tend to reject the notion of causality altogether. We argue that these positions can be reconciled by outlining a new conception of causality, no longer linked with the regularity view. Our sketch is based on an understanding of ‘power’ as the primary notion of causality, already developed by Aristotle and used by the so-called ‘scientific realists’, as well as Foucault and Lyotard, for instance. We argue that the notion of power is able to save the initial idea of causality as an important part of our knowledge, and also to avoid most of the problems related to the regularity view, as outlined by the post-modernists.

The third problem to be discussed is the epistemology of practice, closely related to the first and second issues. Again, this is a huge question, but we are targeting specific aspects. In this case, the archetypal modernist view is that increasing general knowledge implies an improved ability to predict, leading ideally to better planning and successful control of social processes. For many postmodernists, it is precisely this view that needs to be criticised and deconstructed. Here, we proceed according to the logic of ‘combination’ by drawing on the conceptions developed in the context of the first two issues and the criticism of the modernist epistemology of practice. This means combining the ideas of limited generalisation, context-specificity, the power-based conception of causality, and the post-modernist emphasis on tacit knowledge and the call for reflexivity.
2.2 The Universalism - Particularism Debate: Qualification as a Reconciliatory Basis

The modernist ideal of knowledge claims is *nomothetic*, characterised by striving for abstract universal knowledge based on an empiricist philosophy of science. One of the inspirations for this ideal is Newtonian mechanics in classical physics.\(^{27}\) We are all familiar with the manifestations of the nomothetic view in the form of abstract models of organisations and statistical studies yielding mathematical formulas. Moreover, among the modernists, nomothetic generalisations are considered the only form of knowledge relevant for the purpose of prediction and control, and the only one entitled to be called ‘scientific knowledge’.

While the nomothetic ideal forms the logical core of modernism, it has become the target of severe criticism in social studies in general and organisation studies in particular, as illustrated by the following arguments. Many researchers agree that the social sciences have not been able to produce universalist knowledge.\(^{28}\) Scholars have claimed that the nomothetic ideal presupposes the possibility of laws of historical change, for instance, but attempts to explicate these have not led to convincing results.\(^{29}\) One can usually come up with counterexamples easily, implying that the knowledge claims are at best of a general nature, that is, hold only for the most part. Organisation research itself provides us with contradictory findings concerning such things as strategies adopted by companies. The universalistic ideal is bound to fail with the practice of offering merely abstract generalisations without specifying their range of validity. Even in statistical studies researchers frequently leave the population unspecified, that is, the circumstances under which the general causal claims or conceptual models are valid.\(^{30}\)

Critics generally recognise that the complexity of the social world and the impossibility of controlled experiment make it difficult and often impossible to detect specific regularities. Several authors have also pointed to the problems of prediction associated with human decision making which plays a central role in social phenomena, such as organisational action or economic competition. For instance, we cannot predict our own


\(^{29}\) Boudon R *Theories of social change* Cambridge UK, Polity Press 1986.

decisions or new technical or other innovations, since this would presuppose that the decision or innovation had already been made. It is even more difficult to anticipate the actions of others and their effects on our own actions in social processes with a game-like nature.  

It seems particularly appropriate to criticise positivist-oriented organisation research for its decontextualised and ahistorical grasp of reality, since it seldom shows any interest in the culturally and historically limited conditions under which organisations operate. Many post-modernists have, however, gone beyond these points and argued that the search for universal or general laws leads to ignorance of the very nature of social phenomena: meanings or discourses produced in specific situations. This view, shared by most researchers engaged in interpretive management or organisation studies, is that nomothetic claims (or general theories as meta-narratives) are not able to address the complex processes of the social construction of reality.

The post-modernist alternative to ‘universalism’ can be termed ‘particularism’. For example, Foucault’s conception of history, with its focus on accidentals over determinism, can be interpreted in organisational contexts as a search for historical preconditions which help us understand the development of particular practices and thus the dilemmas faced in particular situations. This approach involves an in-built criticism of the nomothetic ideal, since it considers given regularities and models of organisations as (almost) arbitrary products of particular circumstances, no necessarily relevant to other contexts. The important thing for our purposes is that post-modern organisation and management scholars have also frequently emphasised the relevance of historical contingencies, locality, and uniqueness.

31 MacIntyre A op cit 1981; Numagami T loc cit 1998 pp 2-15
These scholars have, in fact, advocated situation-specific narratives as an alternative to the nomothetic knowledge traditionally dominating social science.\(^{35}\)

Many of the more radical post-modernist scholars have gone so far as to argue that all knowledge is local and that one should not allow any room for generalisations at all.\(^ {36}\) In our view such ‘radical particularism’ is, however, extremely problematic. Without going into details, we need to mention two important points which are closely linked with the key preoccupations of the post-modernist camp. First, our social world, as socially constructed reality, consists of various kinds of structures, institutions, rules and practices, ‘general’ in the sense of consisting of repeated occurrences of similar incidents, even though their ‘generality’ is bound to particular contexts. These elements of our social life are internalised through socialisation and learning processes, processes that most postmodernists actually seem to focus on. Ignoring generality therefore seems to go against a fundamental claim on the post-modernist agenda: the importance of the social aspect.

To do justice to the post-modern camp, we need to underline, however, that the ontological status of the generalisations is to be understood in a manner quite different from the metaphysical, representationalist mode often adopted by the modernists.\(^ {37}\)

Second, related to the first point, discourses, a key preoccupation of the post-modern movement, are based on general notions – or more exactly on the continual interplay between more general and more specific meanings. When speaking about or discursively constructing...

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\(^ {37}\) A typical modernist conception of language and reality, often called ‘representationalism’, resembles metaphysical (or conceptual) realism, according to which the world is like a ready sliced cake, and proper conceptual distinctions represent the objective classifications given by the ‘universals’. In the Platonist version of realism, the universals (ideas) are general models in which singular objects participate, while in the Aristotelian version, the universals (forms) are instantiated in the singulirs (Butchvarov P ‘Metaphysical realism’ in Audi R The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1995). According to nominalism, there are no universals, neither in the objects nor in the mind; the only existents are singular beings with their similarities and differences. Conceptualism deviates from nominalism by allowing room for universals in the human mind (Butchvarov P ‘Conceptualism’ in Audi R (ed) The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy Cambridge, Cambridge UP 1995; Loux M J ‘Nominalism’ in Craig E (ed) Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy New York, Routledge 1998). Both nominalism and conceptualism are in harmony with the constructivist position (Hacking I The social construction of what? Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, Harvard UP 1999).
organisations, organisational or management practices, we as researchers are unavoidably dealing with some general ideas concerning what they are and what they are not. In fact, it often takes the kinds of social and linguistic analysis that post-modernists favour to uncover the significance and constructed nature of social and organisational phenomena.

How can we then proceed towards a reconciliation of the modernist and post-modernist ideals of knowledge claims? What we propose as a first step is to take the above objections seriously and develop suitable qualified versions of the extreme positions dominating the modernist-postmodernist debate. To begin with, we agree that social and organisational situations often have unique features and that it is seldom possible to produce meaningful generalisations across different kinds of historical and cultural settings. This does not mean advocating a radical call for particularism, or favouring context-specific narratives as the only acceptable form of social or organisational knowledge. Rather, it means an emphasis on context-specificity, an appreciation of the individual features of particular situations.

This does not imply that we could not develop any generalisations or compare specific features across various kinds of social and organisational settings. In fact, to appreciate the features of a particular phenomenon or setting, one has to contrast them with the general case. We can thus talk about ‘limited generalisations’ which are developed to better comprehend social or organisational phenomena, but which always have limited validity or explanatory power. This is not an entirely novel suggestion, but a kind of commonsense position advocated, for example, by MacIntyre, who argues that the conception of management research as successful in producing law-like regularities with strong predictive power is a fiction and calls instead for limited generalisations and predictions.

The limited generalisations can take different forms, but it is legitimate to demand that they be well-defined and specified. Along the lines of the post-modern critique, we can understand these generalisations as contestable theories or models, of which criticism and specification are both possible and necessary. Here narrative knowledge, advocated by the post-modernists, plays a key role along with case studies which may exemplify or complement particular generalisations and, perhaps even more importantly, serve precisely as a means to question the validity of particular overall interpretations and generalisations.

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38 MacIntyre A op cit 1981.
Furthermore, even narratives describing unique events involve general maxims, the explication of which is typically left to the audience. However, even though the modernist and the post-modernist may investigate the same incidents, their focus will differ and thus they will complement each other. While the modernist strives for limited generalisations, the post-modernist explores the underlying social rules and how they are constructed by the actors themselves.

What we want to stress is that through moving from universalism to limited generalisations and radical particularism to context-specificity we have formed qualified positions that provide a reasonable basis for the dialogue between modernists and post-modernists. This does not guarantee that all modernists or post-modernists would be ready to accept the qualified stances, but it seems to us that these qualified conceptions provide at least a fair chance of acknowledging the value of the research on the other side.

2.3 The Dispute over Causality: New Conceptualisation as a Reconciliatory Basis

The modernist notion of causality is closely tied to the nomothetic ideal, because of the emphasis on (law-like) regularities between cause and effect factors, an idea whose origin is usually traced to David Hume. A focus on the discovery of causal statements has been popular in organisation studies, since causal regularities are assumed to have predictive power, thus helping practitioners to make better decisions once the laws have been discovered. A glance at the empirical studies in organisation and management research clearly indicates that investigations focusing on causal explanation of ‘success’ or ‘performance’ by various ‘strategies’ or ‘success factors’, in particular, have been extremely common. The notion of causality underlying these modernist studies is the empiricist one connecting causality to empirical regularities.

41 This is indicated by presentations of causal analysis in textbooks on statistical methods, in which correlation is assumed as a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition of causal relations. See Moore D S and McCabe G P Introduction to the practice of statistics New York, Freeman 2003; also Suppes P A probabilistic theory of causation (Acta Philosophica Fennica) Helsinki 1970; Papineau D ‘Correlations and causes’ British Journal for the Philosophy of Science 42 (1991) pp 397-412.
The criticism of the modernist ideal of nomothetic knowledge implies similar problems with the goal of causal knowledge understood as involving regularities in the empiricist manner. As already pointed out, regularities are difficult to locate in the social world, which implies that causal relations, understood as particular regularities, are difficult to detect. The fact that generalisations, whether deterministic or statistical in form, are often stated without specifying the conditions under which they hold causes problems with using the presumed invariant laws as a basis for prediction because the findings may be relevant only for the particular setting in which the laws were generated. We also face the problem of the direction of causality as can be seen, for instance, in studies which take it for granted that it is particular strategies that produce financial performance, if such a link is found. However, it may often be vice versa. A positive financial performance could create organisational behaviour that would then be manifested in the strategies.  

The post-modern critique often echoes these arguments. However, many post-modernists go beyond them in rejecting the notion of causality. In brief, the argument that most post-modernists subscribe to is that causality does not really fit with the constructionist understanding of the nature of the social world, formed by meanings, rules and discourses. Although not often explicitly cited, these views are compatible with the Wittgensteinian understanding of social rules and meaning adopted by many social scientists. Winch, for instance, stated in his seminal work that ‘The central concepts which belong to our understanding of social life are incompatible with concepts central to the activity of scientific prediction.’ Since causal notions are part of the latter, they are, according to Winch, conceptually incompatible with notions relevant for social life.

Post-modernist organisation scholars have thus often rejected the notion of causality altogether. In our view, positions that leave no room for causal knowledge are, however, extremely questionable. It is hardly possible to talk about social phenomena without notions such as ‘cause’ or ‘causal explanation’, which form an essential part of our language. This is also the case for post-modernist writers of various inclinations who themselves rely on

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causal language in spite of an explicit rejection of causal research. The following statement, typical of descriptions of the ‘post-modern condition’, illustrates this tendency:

Ongoing global changes have produced such complexity and uncertainty that knowledge of causal relations is not possible.46

How can we then try to reconcile these seemingly radically different views? Our point of departure is that both modernists and post-modernists share the problematic empiricist regularity view of causality. Like some other major empiricist postulates, this is a conception intentionally formulated contrary to our everyday understanding. In fact, our common-sense discourse does not link regularity and causality in this manner, but rather employs terms such as ‘power’, ‘force’, and ‘capacity’ to denote that certain things can or tend to influence others in particular ways.

It is this conceptualisation based on causal powers, new in the sense that it is adopted from outside the debates between the modernists and post-modernists, which helps to reconcile these contradictory standpoints. Accepting the power terminology allows us to say that natural and social things have causal powers because of their specific characteristics, emergent and linked with the structures in which these things are embedded. The fact that causal powers lie mostly hidden and are seldom realised in their pure form or in the same combination, explains why we rarely meet with empirical regularities. For instance, organisations and organisational actors possess a multitude of hidden powers many of which may never be realised.

Interestingly, an early elaboration of the ontology of causation in terms of powers can be found in Aristotle’s Physics and Metaphysics:

(1) A complete power (dunamis) consists of two partial powers, typically the active and the passive ones, for instance, that which will heat/build/teach/manage and that which can be heated/built/taught/managed.

(2) One and the same power typically exists in two ways, in the inactive and active state, implying that the realisations of powers (effects) exist both potentially and actually (dunamis - energeia). For instance, a heater/builder/teacher/manager has

the capacity to heat/build/teach/manage also when not heating/building/teaching/managing.

(3) The (a) non-rational (alogikos) powers differ from the (b) rational (logikos) powers therein that the former cannot, while the latter can, be realised in contrary ways. Instances of the former are that which will heat/break/dissolve in pure water, and instances of the latter are human skills, such as speaking a language, medicine, building, teaching, and managing. One who is able to speak English is capable of speaking it correctly or incorrectly, a doctor can both cure and kill the patient, and a skilful manager is capable of managing both well and poorly, etc.

(4) (a) For non-rational powers the effect will be realised when the active and the passive powers meet if there are no hindrances, (b) while for the rational capacities a desire element is needed as well, for instance, one speaking English can decide to speak incorrectly, the doctor can choose whether to cure or kill, and the skilful manager can select whether to manage well or poorly.\footnote{Aristotle \textit{Metaphysics} Book IX Chs 1-7; Frede M ‘Aristotle’s notion of potentiality in \textit{Metaphysics IX}’ in: Scalsas T, Charles D and Gill M L (ed) \textit{Unity, identity, and explanation in Aristotle’s ‘Metaphysics’} Oxford, Clarendon Press 1994 pp 173-193; Witt C \textit{Ways of being in Aristotle: Potentiality and actuality in Aristotle’s ‘Metaphysics’} Ithaca & London, Cornell UP 2003; Kakkuri-Knuuttila M-L and Vaara E ‘Back to the roots of the linguistic turn: Arguments against causal social research reconsidered’ In: Linstead S and A (eds) \textit{Thinking organization (Routledge studies in business organizations and networks)} London, Routledge 2005 pp 17-38; Kripke S \textit{Wittgenstein on rules and private language} Oxford, Blackwell 1982; Bloor D \textit{Wittgenstein, rules and institutions} London, Routledge 1997.}

The first of these ontological distinctions implies that a soluble substance like salt, for instance, fails to possess the power to dissolve in a world lacking a suitable solvent. To take an example from the social sphere, a supposed manager fails to possess the power of being a manager without subordinates who regard her/him as their boss and act accordingly. Equally important is the second distinction between potentiality and actuality which allows us to speak about unused resources or potentialities, that is, to operate with hidden powers in general. The third and fourth points are the most important for our purposes because they make it possible to distinguish the human and social sphere from the realm of nature. This also reveals why we prefer to speak about ‘human capacities’ rather than ‘dispositions’, confining the application of the term ‘disposition’ to the Aristotelian nonrational capacities.\footnote{We believe that many unnecessary complications are caused by speaking about dispositions in connection with following social rules. See Kripke S \textit{Wittgenstein on rules and private language} Oxford, Blackwell 1982; Bloor D \textit{Wittgenstein, rules and institutions} London, Routledge 1997.} Rational human capacities, such as speaking a language, applying concepts, thinking,
medicine, managing, organising, and so on allow reasoned choice and decision, and can hence serve various purposes.

Recently, researchers adopting a ‘scientific realist’ stance have further developed the power and capacity view in the social sphere. One of their ontological contributions is to distinguish different ‘layers’ of social reality. The ‘empirical level’ is the actual, observable one, and the observations are to be explained by distinguishing underlying causal powers, processes, and mechanisms in their interaction. In this model, social actors possess causal capacities, typically emergent in the sense of being created under specific social circumstances, that is, systems of social rules, and not under some others. The causal powers are thus seen to be inherently linked with certain social structures, empowering or disempowering the agents. Interestingly enough, the realist understanding of causality has also engendered interest and response within post-modernist organisation research.

We can now see how some of the key problems with the regularity view can be resolved with the help of the power conception of causation. First of all, the realisation of causal powers is always situational: (i) powers are often in the inactive state; (ii) for a partial power to be realised it needs to meet with its complementary partial power in suitable circumstances; and (iii) the effects of the meeting of the complementary powers depend on the simultaneous realisation of several other powers. This view thus provides a natural way of clarifying the interrelations between causality and regularities. A simple, pure case of regularity is often to be found only in the (virtual) world with only one power functioning ceteris paribus. The fact that we rarely detect regularities is explained by several powers or capacities at play. Likewise, an observed regularity may have been caused by another power than the one presumed, or by several others working together. For instance, studies finding a link between particular strategies and financial performance may simply be barking up the wrong tree. Intended strategies may lead to apparent similarities in financial

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51 Bhaskar R op cit 1975; Harré, R and Madden E H op cit 1975; Cartwright N op cit 1983; Cartwright N op cit 1989
performance trends, but the effects may, for instance, be the results of the unintended consequences.

As for the disparity between causality and the socially constructed world, releasing the linkage between causality and regularity should help the post-modernists to accept causality in this ‘new’ sense as powers with the ontological distinctions above (1)-(4).\textsuperscript{52} We need to add that the concept of social ‘structure’ mentioned above includes social meanings and discourses, and may also be stretched to include more or less stable ‘discourses’ or ‘practices’ at times creating specific subject positions with particular causal powers.\textsuperscript{53} A more fine-grained discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems that this kind of ‘language of causality’ characterises the work of key postmodern writers such as Foucault or Lyotard, not to speak of contemporary organisation scholars.\textsuperscript{54}

2.4 The Dispute over Epistemology of Practice: Complementary Combination as a Reconciliatory Basis

Finally, we come to the important question concerning the relation between (research) knowledge and practical action, aptly called epistemology of practice. The roots of the modernist epistemology of practice can be traced in the optimistic ‘enlightenment’ scientist notion that increasing nomothetic research knowledge leads to better planning and control of social processes. In the case of organisation science, accumulation and systematisation of generalisations is thus presumed to lead to more effective control of organisations and improved performance.

The modernist epistemology of practice, often entitled ‘technical rationality’ or the ‘rule-following model’, has in fact dominated conceptions concerning research and education, and their relation to practice during the past century.\textsuperscript{55} To put it crudely, this view reduces the practitioner’s problem ‘How should I act?’ to an instrumentalist question concerning the best

\textsuperscript{52} Interestingly, even Winch himself later gave up his initial position regarding causality. In the preface to the second edition of his \textit{The Idea of Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy} 1990 he states that causal relations in the social realm can be captured with the help of a notion of causation alternative to the Humean one.

\textsuperscript{53} Of course, to be fully acceptable for most post-modernists, the social ontology of the scientific realists should be suitably modified (see footnote 35).

\textsuperscript{54} Foucault M \textit{The history of sexuality Vol I Introduction} Hurley R (tr) New York, Pantheon 1978

\textsuperscript{55} Schön D A \textit{op cit} 1983
means to achieve predefined objectives, while defining the objectives is taken to be a relatively uncomplicated matter. The selection of the best means is regarded as a process in which scientific knowledge plays a major role. Following the nomothetic ideal of scientific knowledge claims, the means are expected to be found by applying the general laws to the case in question, as in the famous covering law model of explanation and prediction.\textsuperscript{56} For instance, if an increase in productivity is the \textit{desideratum} and it is known that an increase in innovativeness brings this about, then the next move is to search for regularities revealing factors which enhance innovativeness.

Numerous authors have, however, pointed out that the modernist epistemology of practice is unrealistic for several reasons and does not adequately describe actionable knowledge.\textsuperscript{57} Part of this criticism is evidently linked with the problems concerning nomothetic knowledge and the regularity view on causality discussed above. In particular, generalisations are at best limited, hold only under particular circumstances and merely for the most part. Furthermore, as shown in recent discussions of organisational learning, applying general rules or organisational models is rarely a straightforward procedure, requiring no specific intellectual capacities or skills. In brief, as manifested in numerous studies, organisational action requires ‘skills’ involving ‘tacit’ knowledge as distinct from the general propositional knowledge dealt with in the modernist ideal.\textsuperscript{58} Consequently, the bases of the modernist epistemology of practice appear suspect, to say the least. MacIntyre, for instance, argues that the conception of management research as successful in producing law-like regularities with strong predictive power is a fiction and, accordingly, the standard notion of managerial expertise an illusion.\textsuperscript{59}

The post-modernist critique, however, goes much further. In fact, the whole post-modern movement, drawing on the work of Wittgenstein, Habermas, Foucault, or Derrida can

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\textsuperscript{56} Hempel, Carl G and Oppenheim, P ‘Studies in the logic of explanation’ \textit{Philosophy of Science} 15 (1948) pp 135-175
\textsuperscript{57} Schöń D A \textit{op cit} 1983; Tsoukas H ‘Forms of knowledge and forms of life’ in Chia R (ed.) \textit{In the realm of organization: Essays for Robert Cooper} London, Routledge 1998 pp 43-66
\textsuperscript{59} MacIntyre A \textit{op cit} 1981
\end{flushright}
be seen as criticism of the modernist ideals of prediction and control. On the one hand, the post-modernists argue that the nomothetic notion of knowledge claims and the model of technical rationality fail to grasp the actual nature of social reality, that is, uniqueness, complexity, and continuous change in our socially and discursively constructed world. On the other hand, the post-modernists explicitly criticise the political and moral implications of the modernist project with its ideal of technical rationality. This is expressed in reflections on the ideological assumptions of scientific knowledge, in particular, in questioning the privileged status of scientific vis-à-vis common sense or layman’s knowledge, and the narrow understanding of the notion of ‘practitioner’. In the organisational context, this has, among other things, meant raising questions concerning managerial dominance and lack of alternative voices in decision making. While in modernist research the notion of ‘practitioners’ is typically limited to ‘managers’, post-modernists usually wish to include employees and societal stakeholders in organisational analyses. This can imply a critical stance towards ‘empty managerial rhetoric only promoting their own power positions’ or ‘organisational practices socially constructing inequality’.

Precisely because of this strong critique of the modernist epistemology of practice, there is no clearcut post-modernist alternative. This lack is reflected also in numerous post-modernist organisational analyses explicitly rejecting the idea of being able to draw practical use from ‘scientific’ knowledge. For instance, Löwendahl and Revang claim that giving advice to managers is not the task of strategy research, since the concept of advice ‘by definition requires a generalist perspective where a post-modern reality asks for particularist solutions.’ Many post-modernist texts, however, seem to emphasise two things that can be seen as rudiments of a post-modern epistemology of practice. The first is the emphasis on particular and local knowledge – often couched in narrative form or tacit in nature. This type of presentation, among other things, provides access to tacit knowledge. The second is an emphasis on the central role of ‘reflexivity’, meaning a generally critical and questioning attitude coupled with a sense of social responsibility.

How can we then reconcile the widely-separated modernist and post-modernist views? Our solution is based on the logic of combination, more specifically on combining the ideas of limited generalisation, context-specificity, the power-based conception of causality, and the general call for reflexivity. To start with, limited generalisations and knowledge related to specific contexts can be seen, in principle, as two different but complementary types of knowledge. Both are needed for meaningful organisational action, such as decision making, which typically occurs in unique settings. Limited generalisations involve general patterns or models that are important in evaluating the likely outcomes of specific processes. Contextual knowledge, then, focuses on the specific social and cultural features in question. Importantly, this contextual knowledge includes both narrativetype information as discussed above but also tacit knowledge, that is, knowledge that is not explicit linguistic knowledge. Recent organisation literature has focused on how actors adopt, use, and create knowledge in analysing the action-situation and anticipating the appropriate action. The idea that competent practical action requires tacit knowledge can be found within recent discussions on organisational learning, for instance, which increasingly point to the importance of skills involving tacit, as distinct from explicit linguistic, knowledge. As empirical studies in several fields of expertise demonstrate, such judgemental capacities develop best with ‘reflective practitioners’, who have adopted the habit of learning from their own experience by assessing the consequences of their action in a manner analogous to scientific experiment. This involves assessing the success of the action plan, i.e., the test-hypothesis, analysing the extent to which the intended goal has been achieved, where one should have acted differently, and what is to be done next.

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The need for an alternative to the regularity view of causation for practical action has also been recognised in organisation studies. Unfortunately, authors like Schön and Senge are not familiar with recent philosophical discussions on causal powers, the value of which lies precisely in yielding conceptual means to cope with causal relations in unique, complex, and changing situations. We seldom know exactly what powers will emerge and what outcomes they will produce in particular settings. This is the point at which both limited generalisations and contextual knowledge may best complement each other. Narratives, for example, play a prominent role in revealing how social agents have assessed their unique situations, what modes of action they have chosen, and how the choices have affected other agents; that is, how certain causal powers functioned together in particular cultural contexts. This offers decision makers and other organisational actors tools to analyse the relevant powers in new unique action-situations from different perspectives, as well as to assess their probable future development and likely consequences in interaction. This yields a basis, if not for predicting, then at least for anticipating the consequences of specific actions taken by oneself or others.

What we need to add to this outline of an epistemology of practice is the call for reflexivity – a central element in the post-modern critique of modernist stances. This reflexivity is to be understood here in a broad sense as combining various activities such: as learning from one’s own experience; consciously applying and critically evaluating both limited generalisations and contextspecific knowledge; including causal knowledge, possibly relevant for the action-situation; and - most important of all - assessing the political and moral consequences of particular actions.

Evaluating the political and moral consequences is, however, not an easy task, and it requires some criteria. Here, it is easy to fall into the trap of either accepting some universal bases along with the modernist stance or of embracing post-modern relativism in the form of ‘anything goes.’ In the spirit of SA, this is once again a question of combining more general and contextual knowledge to produce ideas about the likely outcomes of specific actions. Note that both the relevant general models and contextual knowledge in the form of narrative or tacit knowledge already include ideas of what is right and wrong and thus (although often

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66 Czarniawska B Writing management: Organization theory as a literary genre Oxford, OUP 1999
implicitly) criteria for moral judgement. In addition, there are specific moral models that can be used in such assessments. Importantly, these ethical - like any universal - models can be taken as general guidelines which should be set against the context in question. In the spirit of SA, reflexivity would then mean a respect for the more general moral ideas that seem relevant for the situation at hand but also the ability to deal with the conflicts between specific criteria as well as the capacity to go beyond the general moral codes, if needed. In this sense, the call for reflexivity implies taking subjectivity seriously.

To make one point clear, even though we here focus on the Aristotelian SA method, translating and developing its key ideas to fit into our society today, this does not imply accepting Aristotle’s views on ethics as our starting point. Aristotle’s list of particular virtues is based on the values and social practices of the 4th century BC Athens where the citizens consisted of free males. Already, for this reason, his ideas would have to be contextualised when reflecting upon the political and moral consequences of specific actions. In fact, Aristotle’s virtue ethics has already undergone profound changes when brought to bear on contemporary organisational life. In spite of its popularity in business ethics, we suggest it be complemented with elements both from deontic and utilitarian ethics along the lines of SA.

Note that this combinatory epistemology of practice is not necessarily something totally new. It consists of elements found in the prevalent literature, put together in a particular way to save the ‘best’ parts of the modernist epistemology of practice combining them with the key ideas of the post-modernists. Again, the position outlined here should not be seen as a fully satisfactory solution but rather as an outline that could be further developed and specified.

3 Conclusion

In this paper we have introduced the Aristotelian methodology of saving the appearances (SA) both in its ancient version and in a form appropriate for contemporary purposes, and shown how it provides a framework for reconciling seemingly incommensurable standpoints in philosophy of science. More generally, SA is a general heuristic for constructing and justifying a potential solution for specific problems given the state of knowledge at one’s

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disposal. The leading idea is that contradictory views, even though not acceptable as such, are often partially correct, and that the weaknesses and strengths in them can be explored by conceptual clarification and critical argument. SA proceeds as follows: the inquirer first collects the relevant knowledge on the subject matter in question, and having critically scrutinised the knowledge basis, constructs appropriate solutions to the problems identified, and finally justifies them by showing that the solutions save that part of the conflicting views which has remained immune to the critical arguments advanced. This explains the title: the methodology helps to save the acceptable core of conflicting views all of which initially appeared to be true.

As a general heuristic, SA does not, and cannot, include a ready list of methods for solving conflicts in a satisfactory manner. Such tools can be learnt only from its applications. Our analysis illustrates three different logics, here called ‘qualification’, ‘new conception’, and ‘combination’. What is required in such efforts is creative reflection based on a thorough scrutiny of the various standpoints and their underlying assumptions. However, no logical or rhetorical move can yield genuine agreement among the participants against their own will. In the end, the most important requirement for the successful application of SA is thus a genuine willingness to engage in an openminded dialogue.

We need to stress that the questions we have tackled here - the nature of scientific knowledge, causality and the epistemology of practice - are complex. We have constructed only the beginnings of fully developed positions and, clearly, a number of points related to each of these issues deserve closer scrutiny in separate studies. We believe, nevertheless, that the above considerations can help both modernist and post-modernist organisation scholars to seek common ground rather than emphasise differences between them. We also think that the ‘middle-ground’ positions created can serve as meaningful bases for more fully developed and refined philosophical formulations bridging the divides between modernists and post-modernists.

While the treatment of our examples has focused on philosophical issues in research, we stress that SA can work in other settings. This follows because the Aristotelian concepts of appearances and reputable opinions (endoxa) are based on a broad understanding of knowledge and knowledge creation, including practitioners’ knowledge. The methodology can consequently also be applied as a means of reconciling contradictory viewpoints in practical settings – for example, in societal debates concerning specific organisational
phenomena or management practices, or in specific organisations dealing with difficult decisions. SA can, furthermore, be applied equally by a single investigator or in dialogue. When the method is applied in a dialogue, the logical steps remain the same, the difference being that, instead of the solitary inquirer working by her/himself, the participants help each other by suitable questions to explicate their own (often tacit) views and the problems within and between them, as well as to construct the appropriate solutions to and justifications of them. Although the method works best when the question to be tackled is focused, this does not exclude people from examining ‘big issues’, a point which we have tried to demonstrate in our analysis.