Handbook of Research on Technoethics

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Volume I

Chapter VII
Planning, Interests, and Argumentation

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ABSTRACT

Within the organisational development people's arguments rise from their personal or group interests, which in turn are based on the systemic differentiation of society and technology at a given time. We face a crucial issue: Must we accept separated group interests as inescapable circumstances, or can we reach out for universal human interests? This chapter addresses the issue combining Rawls' idea of an original position behind a veil of ignorance with Habermas' concepts of communicative rationality and discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Planners and decision makers encounter competing interests that emerge from the division of labour and of our economic system, but the interests do not provide any rationally motivated legitimation basis for planning. People's arguments rise from their personal or group interests, which in turn are based on the systemic differentiation of society and technology at a given time. The group interests and the division of labour reproduce each other all the time, technology often being the major driving force behind the new division of labour. The choice between technological alternatives is an ethical issue because it affects people's rights and position in the organization in question, as well as through its products and side effects external society and, in the long run, also future generations. The focus of this chapter is inside organizations, but we briefly touch upon the broader perspective in the discussion on future trends.

The theoretical background of rational planning has two main sources, the economists' notion of rational decision making and the systems approach (March, 1982, Simon, 1982, Churchman, 1968). Planning theorists with a more practical stance have been looking for a theoretical basis for planning professionals. Planning theorists take into account the multi-agency view of decision

making, and the planner should bring different political and technical aspects of relevant alternatives into the open (Faludi, 1973), or even demand that the planner should take an active political role so as to defend the interest of the oppressed (Forester, 1989).

We face a crucial issue: must we accept separated group interests as inescapable circumstances, or can we reach out for universal human interests? The situation is a challenge for rational argumentation, since, if there is a possibility of a generalized interest, it is only rational argumentation that can lead us out of the dilemma. By means of the accounts of two outstanding thinkers of last century we can address the problem of the universalisation of interest: Habermas and Rawls.

RAWLS

Rawls (1973) derives his theory of justice, justice as fairness, through a very simple but powerful concept of rational choice in an ideal 'original position behind a veil of ignorance'. His aim is to derive principles of justice that equal, rational persons would agree on when they do not know their share of the utilities ensuing from the principles and their social circumstances or personal characteristics. The veil of ignorance guarantees the universalisation of the principles. When the participants do not know their social position or any personal characteristics, they are in a position to think of the principles from the generalised position of any rational decision maker. They can only make their decision with regard to the principles of justice, not their contingent natural fortune (p. 18). Rawls sees the original position as a procedural interpretation of Kant's categorical imperative (p. 256).

Their rational choice will then be to define justice as fairness. Rawls (1973) derives two basic principles of justice. (1) The principle of liberty says: "Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for other" (p. 60). (2) The difference principle states: "Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity" (p. 83, also p. 302). Accordingly, the optimum configuration of economy is achieved at the maximum point of the least advantaged members. The principles are arranged by two priority rules: (1) According to 'the priority of liberty', liberty can only be restricted for the sake of liberty. (2) According to 'the priority of justice over efficiency and welfare', the equality of opportunities is prior to the welfare of the least advantaged (p. 302). Partly due to the criticism of his 'Theory of Justice', Rawls gave up the central role of the above two principles in his work Political Liberalism (1993) without abandoning the idea of the original position. (For discussion on Rawls, see Freeman, 2003). Rawls' later work expanded the view from the rules of a democratic state to the rules of nations (Rawls, 1993) and between nations (Rawls, 1999), so his views have hardly been discussed at all in a limited organisational context, which is our aim in this paper.

In his later work Rawls (1993) accepted it as a fact that people can adhere to different notions of freedom, due to, for instance, their religion. In this context we can leave the detailed debate concerning the above principles aside, although they are most interesting from the point of view of ethics in general. The second principle also addresses technology as it replaces Pareto optimality as the notion of efficiency. (An economic situation is Pareto optimal, if it cannot be changed for the benefit of anyone without worsening it for someone else.) Efficiency as a driving force of social development will be discussed briefly below, but we focus on Rawls' idea of 'the original position behind a veil of ignorance'. The notion of the original position was challenged by Habermas' communicative rationality.

HABERMAS

During the 1970's Habermas worked out a theory of communicative action which was summed up in two volumes published in German in 1981, and in translations into English in 1984 and 1987 (Habermas, 1984, 1987). One of the basic notions of his theory is communicative rationality. Habermas (1984, 75) characterises communicative rationality in the following way:

We can begin with the claim that the concept of communicative rationality has to be analysed in connection with achieving understanding in language. The concept of reaching an understanding suggests a rationally motivated agreement among participants that is measured against criticisable validity claims. The validity claims (propositional truth, normative rightness, and subjective truthfulness) characterise different categories of a knowledge embodied in symbolic expressions.

The idea of discourse put forward by Habermas (1973 and 1984) can be summed up in the notions of an ideal speech situation, levels of discourse and validity claims which stand up with rationally motivated agreement. The ideal speech situation presupposes a certain kind of process and procedure according to which discussants conduct argumentative speech (1984, 25). The process guarantees the participants' symmetrical and equal chances to express their opinions and raise questions about any issue (Habermas, 1973). Argumentation excludes all force but the force of the better argument. In a discourse "participants […] test with reasons, and only with reasons, whether the claim defended by the proponents rightfully stands or not" (1984, 25). Habermas' idea of discourse comes close to Argyris and Schön's Model II theory of action (Schön 1983, 230 ff.). Habermas' theory partly emerges from the criticism of instrumental reason in the spirit of the Frankfurt school of thought (Habermas, 1968 and 1981, cf. Marcuse, 1968). Habermas'

theory of communicative action has raised discussion within one field of technology, information systems (Lyytinen & Hirschheim, 1989, Klein & Hirschheim, 1991).

In accordance with the idea of communicative rationality, Habermas (1983) replaces Kant's monological universalisation principle (which does not require a discourse to back it up), as expressed in the categorical imperative with the principle of universality that is based on formal conditions of discourse. His universalisation principle says (1983, 75) that any valid norm must satisfy the condition that the consequences which follow from the fact that individuals generally keep the norm when they strive for their particular interests must be submitted to the acceptance of all those affected. Habermas sees this universalisation principle as compelling each participant to take others into account as well, i.e. it leads to what Mead has called 'ideal role-taking'. Each participant in the discourse must have an opportunity to express his or her ideas, so that consensus is a result of real argumentation. A discourse will bring about a consensus through the force of the better argument. We may ask, however, what it is that can provide moral discourse with better arguments. Rawls has given a plausible, at least a partial answer.

UNIVERSALISATION IN A REAL DISCOURSE

Habermas (1983, 76) explicitly contrasts his notion of ethics with that of Rawls, and criticises the latter's view of a fictitious original position and the monological basis of his ethics. Habermas has himself been criticised for assuming a fictitious situation in which all those affected could take part in an ideal speech situation (Ulrich, 1983). Not all people can be expected to meet formal requirements of rational argumentation, and future generations cannot in principle take part in decisions that influence their lives. It is obvious

that the ideal process in which everyone can take part (also an ideal assumption) does not guarantee rational motivation as such, nor does it serve as a better argument. In practice, a dialogue naturally has a greater chance of achieving a just solution than monological, theoretical contemplation.

Rawls (1995) also directly denies Habermas criticism on monological ethics: "The point of view of civil society includes all citizens. Like Habermas' ideal discourse situation, it is a dialogue, indeed, an omnilogue" (p. 140). Rawls explains this further in a footnote:

Habermas sometimes says that the original position is monological and not dialogical; that is because all the parties have, in effect, the same reasons and so they select the same principles. This is said to have the serious fault of leaving it to "the philosopher" as an expert and not to citizens of an ongoing society to determine the political conception of justice. [Rawls refers to Habermas, 1983]. The reply I make to his objection is that it is you and I – and so all citizens over time, one by one and in associations here and there – who judge the merits of the original position as a device of representation and the principles it yields. I deny that the original position is monological in a way that puts in doubt its soundness as a device of representation. (Rawls, 1995, fn. p. 140).

Already in his Theory of Justice, Rawls (1973) says that "one or more persons can at any time enter this position or […] simulate the deliberations of this hypothetical situation, simply by reasoning in accordance with the appropriate restrictions" (p. 138). So Habermas' criticism misses the point of generalisation, but Rawls does not directly answer the question of real discourse versus private contemplation.

For Rawls, universalisation is a consequence of freely choosing any citizen (untied by quantifier), which leads to the conclusion that principles decided by that citizen are valid to all citizens, whereas for Habermas the universalisation is more

straightforward, because he explicitly refers to all citizens ('ideal role taking'). From the logical point of view their expressions amount to the same result, Rawls chooses 'any citizen' and Habermas uses the quantifier 'all'.

We can think of the possibility of combining these seemingly opposing views within a given organisational context. From Habermas' point of view the participants are known beforehand, although not necessarily all those affected by decisions, and the decisions can be reached through rational argumentation. From Rawls' point of view we can recognise here a special case of the original situation: the participants do not necessarily know their position in the reorganised division of labour. This leads us to formulate the following principle of the universalisation of moral-practical discourse (modified from Visala, 1993 and 1996):

Arguments assume a universal validity only to the extent that they do not appeal to personal interests; decisions are only backed up by arguments for the optimal total interest of the organisation and pass the tests for general human needs.

The combining of Habermas' and Rawls' ideas strengthens them both. Rawls' notion of original position provides Habermas' communicative rationality with a principle of what counts as a better argument. The conditions of the original position are conditions of an ideal speech situation, even to the extent that they can be realised through the argument that biased personal needs do not count as a rational argument. Habermas' idea of rational argumentation with the above supplementary principle provides Rawls' notion of the veil of ignorance with practical implementation. The above principle works in a manner of Popper's refutation principle: a universal proposition cannot be verified as true, but they can be refuted by one counter-example.

How should we organise a discourse in order to reach rationally motivated consensus? A necessary

precondition for this is that the participants share a common view of validity claims, i.e. what counts as a valid argument. Habermas (1984) identifies four types of validity claims: truth, rightness, truthfulness (sincerity) and authenticity. The first three of them are relevant in the organisational context of this paper. Rightness refers to the normative and ethical values of arguments, truthfulness to the sincerity of a speaker, who expresses his or her emotions or opinions. Authenticity refers to the aesthetic value of a piece of art. Truthfulness is a precondition of any serious talk. There is no way of checking the validity of subjective expression through argumentation (Habermas, 1984, 303). As regards rightness, the above principle provides a means to test the universality of a claim. Truth is at first sight the most obvious validity claim, but as the long history of philosophy shows, it is a controversial one. Toulmin (1958) has given a concise formulation of how to use arguments: a claim is a statement expressed with conditional modal qualifiers, based on data, warrant and backing (p. 104). The ultimate ground for any rational discourse is a life-world shared by the members of society. They must have some common 'preunderstanding' of what counts as an undisputable fact, for example. What is meant by this is described best by Wittgenstein (1979). We have discussed the philosophical foundation of the rationality of argumentation elsewhere at some length (Visala 1993). This discussion will not be repeated here.

TECHNOLOGY AND PLANNING

The above universalisation principle can be used as a rule of argumentation, when there is a plan to re-engineer the organisation by means of new technology. The guiding principle for arranging a discourse is that participants first agree on those issues that will be used as a backing for other claims and are thus more general in nature. A new technical production concept should be evaluated against efficiency objectives and environmental constraints, for example. The process view of an organisation makes it possible for us to encounter a situation in which the division of labour can be discussed without referring to any existing organisational positions. There are no particular interest groups yet, as new tasks have not been allocated to anyone. The participants are in a kind of real original situation, and they can divide the tasks and the benefits attached to them under a veil of ignorance. A planner could serve as a facilitator of discourse and, in a manner of speaking, hold the veil of ignorance in front of the participants.

In accordance with Rawls' difference principle, the participants may end up with unequal shares of the outcome of the firm, if they are a way to get better total returns, i.e. more to share between stakeholders. However, the participants may come to some other conclusion as well, due to their shared values, which have been agreed upon during the discourse, or – what may be a more realistic assumption – due to regulations imposed on them. For example, new technology may not improve the returns of the firm (in the short run), but it is chosen because it is less polluting. The purpose of this speculation is only to stress the point that Rawls' original principles need not be assumed as necessary starting points for a discourse. (This debate could be continued further with the argument that non-polluting technology is chosen for the benefit of the future generations, etc.)

DISCUSSION

The above principle still remains as an ideal objective. There are two obvious reasons leading to doubts as to whether it can be implemented directly in modern organisations. The first one follows from the prevalent organisational culture of Model I (control and competition, Argyris, 1990). The second reason is the existing power

positions embedded in organisations that presume a certain inequality as a precondition for their existence.

Argyris (1990, 13) sums up the Model I theory: "Model I theory-in-use instructs individuals to seek to be in unilateral control, to win, and not to upset people. It recommends action strategies that are primarily selling and persuading." However, Model I cannot find its justification in economic efficiency. It leads to skilled incompetence that actually inhibits everybody from utilising all their energy and leads to malfunctioning in the organisation and defensive routines. These abandon the questioning of existing norms and values. Model I theory is not rational in economic sense, and hence executives should direct the organisation towards open discourse, i.e. Model II theory-in-use. The prevalent unilateral control ought to be replaced by bilateral control and power with competence and expertise (Argyris, 1990, 127).

The second obstacle leads to the same irrational consequences as the first one, although it is based on legal rules of market economy rather than any organisational tradition. Owners could also take into account how business organisations can benefit from rational argumentation: the success of the organisation is a common interest, and it can best be achieved when all relevant opinions can be expressed freely. However, regarding the present globalization and the accelerating pace of (quartile) economy this hope for a rational discourse between workers and stock owners seems utopian. Firms calculate the economic optimum on the basis of the marginal utility of labour. There is not much use for the better argument, when agents step out of the sphere of discourse to the world of sellers and buyers. Money then serves as a disembedding token and a medium of the transactions between people (Giddens, 1990), but it is a substitute of language that does not allow rationally motivated consensus through agreement based on reason (Habermas, 1987).

ADDITIONAL READINGS

We may never reach sufficient control over the world by means of rational decisions, as there will always be hidden social and natural interactions and unexpected consequences. This only means a longer learning cycle: some day nature will hit back, and then we will learn from experience. We will realize that we have had too tight a system boundary. Conflicts between rivalling interest groups may have to be put on one side, when mankind encounters the common threat of climate change, for example. There is a long road to such a consensus because of the present unequal division of wealth. Can technology provide a solution, or is it a threat as such? At least the global information network gives us a forum for discourse, and a chance to evaluate our own values against those of others. Senge's influential work (2006) opens up yet another universalisation perspective of systems thinking in learning organisations and society in the large.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has proposed an universalisation principle that combines Rawls' notion of justice as fairness derived 'behind a veil of ignorance' and Habermas' ethical doctrine that is based on discourse in an ideal speech situation. Technological development provides a special motivation for this principle, because it may give an opportunity to a new division of labour. The members of the organization are then in a manner of speaking behind the veil of ignorance, when they do not know their future position. Habermas' theory of communicative action sets the rules for organising rational discourse which gives all members an opportunity to express their opinion in the matter, but without possibility of referring to their own special interests. Modern network communities provide another link to technology and one that may facilitate to expand the discourse

over organisational boarders. The issue will be discussed elsewhere in this volume.

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KEY TERMS

Categorical Imperative (Kant): "So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as the principle of universal legislation" (Critic of Practical Reason, A, 54).

Veil Of Ignorance: A person makes his or her ethical choice without knowing his or her share of the utilities ensuing from the principles and his or her social circumstances or personal characteristics.

Discourse in an Ideal Speech Situation: The participants have symmetrical and equal chances to express their opinions and raise questions about any issue.