Strategy as Metatheory

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Abstract: Business strategy or strategic management is a subject that has comprised a major part of the curriculum in business schools around the World for at least 40 years. It is routinely described as "integrative," yet has arguably remained somewhat limited in its scope and philosophy. The purpose of this paper is to expand the scope of strategic management accordingly (to include ethics for example) but to do this in a way that arguably offers efficient insights to students and practitioners. The approach involves bringing together several formal metatheories while at the same time indicating how each of them can function as an integrative theory of strategy.

Keywords: Ethics, metatheory, modeling, optimality, rationality, strategy.

Introduction

Business strategy or strategic management is a subject that has comprised a major part of the curriculum in business schools around the World for at least 40 years. It is routinely described as "integrative," yet has arguably remained somewhat limited in its scope and philosophy (cf., Burrell, 1989; Calori, 1999). The purpose of this paper is to expand the scope of strategic management accordingly (to include ethics for example) but to do this in a way that arguably offers efficient insights to students and practitioners. The approach involves bringing together several formal metatheories while at the same time indicating how each of them can function as an integrative theory of strategy.

In this paper the term "metatheory" refers to any general theory that elaborates upon a core behavioural construct or theme. For example, the term metarationality refers to a general theory that recognizes many distinctive definitions of rationality. Such themes transcend and thus potentially inter-relate the traditional disciplines that are usually associated with strategy. They include: ethics (ethicality), optimality, modeling, forecasting, recursivity and synergy. Each such metatheory is well-documented and can be succinctly reviewed by deploying a mixture of conceptual frameworks, natural language descriptions and mathematical formalisms. The central points of the present paper are that (a) each metatheory can be placed relative to strategy, in an appropriately expanded conceptual space, or epistemological landscape; and (b) these "placements" seem to inform strategic management in an efficient and effective way, even

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though they do not necessitate a mastery of each of the traditional academic disciplines with which they are each associated (e.g., moral philosophy, economics, ecology, sociology and psychology, management science and the cognitive sciences).

It is therefore an implicit suggestion throughout the paper that we might think of the metatheories as teachable content in business schools that potentially offers efficient insights (i.e., maximum understanding for minimum effort) as well as a degree of wisdom, to students and management practitioners. In contrast, the *status quo* in the study of strategic management involves a selection of historically determined discipline-based theories, large parts of which have only a remote bearing upon well-informed economic action. In other words, the set of metatheories can be thought of as a powerful and adaptable toolkit for the managerial mind.

Rationality & Metarationality

Rationality has well over 40 distinctive forms (cf., Singer, 1996, pp. 20-23; 2007, pp. 53-56), each of which has been explicitly defined within the spectrum of the social sciences and philosophy. These can be described as the elements of a rationality *set* that can, in turn, be placed in correspondence with core concepts in the domain of strategic management (i.e., a strategy-set). Metarational arguments then provide an integrative and high-level theory of strategy that in turn maps out its some of the *terra-incognita* and indicates directions for development. A general theory of rationality that maps out the structure of the rationality-set is like an interwoven fabric, as it involves not only the identification of multiple forms of rationality (elements of the rationality-set R**)**, but also the specification or construction of :

1. C*lassificatory* metarational criteria for classifying the elements (e.g., calculated vs. systemic forms; belief, means, ends-oriented forms, backward-looking forms, etc.).
2. *Evaluative* metarational criteria (e.g., universalizability, globality, level of self-support, etc.).
3. R*elational* metarational arguments that place elements and subsets of the rationality-set in relation to each other (e.g., utility-capture, relations between beliefs and ends, etc.).

Within the general theory, a distinction has been drawn between calculated versus systemic forms of means-rationality, then between other means-rationalities, belief-rationalities and ends-rationalities. It then becomes possible to identify direct linkages to, or correspondences with, almost every topic within strategic management. These correspondences between rationality concepts and strategy concepts can be made explicit, as follows:

1. Belief-rationalities ~ managerial-perspectives and expectations.
2. Means -rationalities ~ strategic decision processes.
3. Action rationalities ~ logical incrementalism.
4. Backward-looking rationalities ~ historical processes and learning.[2]
5. Interactive rationality ~ predicting or diagnosing strategy.

[2] Another example is the strategy concept of "planning as learning" (De Geus, 1988) which corresponds with backward-looking or retrospective forms of rationality, whose definitions contain explicit reference to past events, such as "thorough learning from past mistakes."

6. Ends -rationalities ~ corporate objectives and missions.
7. Rational-morality ~ managerial ethics.

A relational structure can then be implanted in the rationality-set **R** (and hence also in **S**, the strategy-set) using two types of metarational relationship:

1. rI is a form of rJ . For example, sympathy . . . is a form of . . . extended-ends-rationality.
2. rI has significant common properties with rJ , for example, expressive rationality (which involves communicative action like signaling) . . . has significant common properties with strategic-belief rationality (which is concerned with game-theoretic interdependencies).

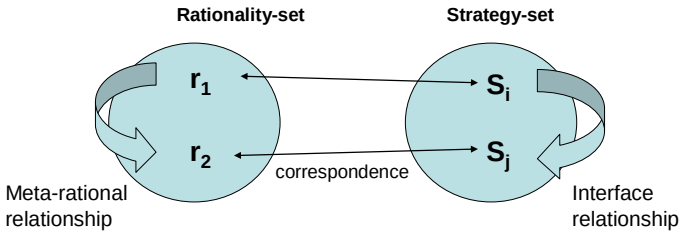

Figure 1. The concept of an isomorphism between a strategy set and a rationality set

The relational structure in S is similar, and it is preserved (or in some cases identified, or implanted or transcluded) by assuming that the one-to-one correspondence between R and S is a structure-preserving mapping, or isomorphism. In that case, corresponding to 1 and 2 in R, we have relationships between the images 1* and 2*, as follows:

1* Stakeholders-as-constraints…is a form of…organizational goal system.
2* Positioning is an ingredient of organizational strategy. This strategy-concept…has significant common properties with…signaling behaviour.

More generally, this is to say that every form of rationality has its corresponding strategy-concept, whilst strategy interface concepts reflect the corresponding metarational relationships. The central tenet of "strategy as rationality" is that this statement provides a succinct (but somewhat fierce) summary of many lengthy academic articles on strategic management.[3]

The overall conceptual framework of an isomorphism between a rationality-set and a strategy-set can be represented diagrammatically (Figure 1.) but it can also be expressed in a *quasi*-formal way, as follows (non-mathematical readers might skip the remainder of this paragraph). Let (r_I r_J) be any pairwise relationship in Rx R that is, a metarational relationship like those described above. The mapping I: R → S gives I (r_I) = s_k and I (r_J) = s_l for some k, l. Then, for all i, j, we have: I x I (r_I , r_J) = [I (r_I) , I (r_J)] = (s_k , s_l), for some k, l, where the latter pairwise relationship in S is an *interface* relationship between a pair of strategy concepts.

[3] A current reviewer identified the axiological framework (value-orientation) of "strategy as rationality" as "post-postmodern integrative normativism." It might also be regarded as *pre*-post modern, that is, fitting between neo-classical type formalisms and postmodern narratives. An early review by Geoffrey Hodgson suggested linkages with the Classical Pragmatic tradition (cf., Singer, 2009a & b).

The mapping I is an isomorphism in the mathematical sense; that is, a structure-preserving map that identifies the two sets, **R** and **S** as essentially equivalent, even the same thing. An **R ~ S** isomorphism specified in this way effectively states that the concepts of strategic-management and plural-rationality are co-extensive, meaning that the language and underlying concepts of these two sets (or domains of knowledge) parallel one another. Accordingly, one can make the claim that it not only makes sense to view "strategy as rationality," but that it also make good sense to assert that "strategy *is* rationality" and vice versa. This equivalence or sameness is no coincidence. It may explained by the simple observation that both sets (R and S) have been produced as a result of attempts by scholars and practitioners to grapple with quite general problems in human systems. These involve action and decision, behavior and exchange, production and communication. Put differently, there is no single valid theory of strategic decision-making (or decision-taking), there is only a metatheory of decisions

Ethics & Metaethics

A similar approach can also be used to equate or identify strategy with ethics, via metaethical arguments (e.g., Van Gigch, 1991). It is at this level of inquiry and language use that we encounter the many incomplete arguments or formal paradoxes and contradictions that convey the difficulty of reconciling utility/profit based approaches with alternatives that involve expressive, Kantian, reflective and other forms of rational-morality. Accordingly, the conceptual framework of "Strategy-as-Rationality" extends to "strategy as moral philosophy" (e.g., Singer, 1994) in which plural rationalities, metarationality and metaethics become recast as a general normative theory of the strategy of productive entities.

Some forms of rationality may be captured by arguments that identify them, for at least some purposes, as special cases of Rational Utility Maximization (RUM), that is, the rank-ordering of, and selection from a set of objects-of-choice (including possible actions), according to formal preferences. Sen's *sympathy* (preference incorporating others' interests) or Etzioni's *interdependent* utility (as in game theory and other studies of joint-optimization) are partly captured in this sense, as is bounded rationality after allowing for the costs of information and computation. RUM thus becomes an umbrella-term covering a subset of the rationality-set, or more accurately a fuzzy-subset whose membership is by degrees. The degree of membership in this fuzzy set is a matter to be settled through metarational arguments, often in natural language, that vary in their level of persuasiveness and coherence. Other elements of the rationality set are more elusive, or hard to capture. Examples include commitments (altruism), expressive rationality, and contextual forms. Within the present framework, the existence of these *elusive* forms implies that strategy should/ought to involve occasional (corporate) self-sacrifice; expression of (corporate) values; or the creation and maintenance of institutions and (corporate) traditions, in a way that cannot be entirely subsumed into profit- maximization.

Any given strategy concept may thus be evaluated and placed relative to others with reference to metaethical criteria (i.e., criteria for choosing rationalities and forms of ethical reasoning). The concepts of (a) capture (above) and (b) scope are salient examples of such criteria. Several concise metacriteria can be used to evaluate the "scope" of any given form of rationality or ethic, as follows:

Global versus Local Optimality. A globally-optimizing form maximizes total lifetime utility for the agent, after taking into account the impact of current decisions on the agent's own future preferences, learning, habit-formation and co-ordination with others (resolute-rationality is global, narrow-egoism is local, in this sense).

Universalizable versus Exclusive. A universalizable form is one that the agent prefers other agents to adopt (Kantian rationality is universalizable by definition, self-interest modeled as RUM is not, as made quite explicit in Prisoners' Dilemma games).

Self-Supporting versus Self-Defeating. A self-supporting form hypothetically chooses itself when used to select a form (cf., recursivity, below). While Kantian and commitment forms are self-supporting in this sense, formal-RUM can be self-defeating as also demonstrated in the Prisoners' Dilemma game context.

Collectively, these and other metacriteria (perfect-imperfect; precision-of-definition, etc.) characterize the prescriptive gap that currently separates the rationality assumptions of the mainstream (i.e., economic) theory of strategy from (business) ethics. Put differently, while the axioms of economics undoubtedly have powerful normative appeal, so also do the various metacriteria that *RUM* fails to meet fully. With the isomorphism in place, the metacriteria can be used directly as tools to evaluate the corresponding business strategy concepts.

Optimality & Metaoptimality

Over 40 years ago, C. West Churchman, a famous Berkeley systems-scientist, ethicist and management theorist declared (1994, p. 108) that "we do not know the meaning of optimum."[4] Since then it has indeed become increasingly apparent that optimality is "a far more profound and elusive state of affairs than can be derived from the most powerful of mathematical proofs" (Mason, 1994, p. 70) and that there are many definitions of optimality. In sum, different conceptual definitions of optimality have developed over time and there are many distinctive forms. As with rationality and ethics, some forms can be stated mathematically (e.g., Zeleny, 1996) while others require natural language statements to complete their definition. The same is also true of strategy; yet this is no coincidence. Optimality, "broadly defined" can be invoked as an organising principle in order to restructure and augment current thinking in the latter discipline. The converse is also possible, because empirical research in strategic management can potentially stimulate and refine ideas about the possible meanings of optimality.

As with the plural rationalities, the several forms of optimality correspond with strategy concepts, as listed in Table 1. These fall into two broad classes, under the metaoptimality criterion of elusiveness *vs*. capture. The captured forms are implicit in several traditional paradigms and they accordingly underpin the idea of an Economically Optimal Strategy (EOS).

[4] This might mean (a) we do not have a single definitive operational definition of optimum, so there are many distinctive forms of optimality (e.g., Zeleny, 1996). It might also mean that (b) we don't know what is really the ideal human system, the best way of living with others, so we cannot be sure of the merits of any of our actions. As one reviewer put it, "the search for optimality is always relative, never absolute"

A second class, the Systemic-Ethical Optimum (SEO) with its corresponding strategy concepts, includes the elusive (non-maximising) forms (cf., Singer, 2007).

Table 1. Optimality and Strategy

Form of Optimality	Strategy Concept
Maximisation	Finance-theoretic decision models
Cybernetic	Mgmt. by objectives, or exception
Evolutionary	Environmental fit & adaptation
Inherent	Org. dynamics & dissipative structure
Optimal design	Management without tradeoffs
Multi-criteria	Stakeholder model & multiple objectives
Systemic	Plural rationality & embeddedness
Ethical	Co-production of human-goods

As a practical matter one can then ask which class of "optimal strategy" is better? Attempts to answer this question require the invocation of metaoptimality criteria, such as (a) the proper scope of optimality formulations (i.e., optimal for which entities) (b) the reducibility or otherwise of goodness to betterness, and (c) the overall relationship between facts and values. Given the high level of ambiguity, contentiousness and incompleteness at this metalevel it is inevitable that strategic business decisions are often experienced in practice as "wicked messes." Currently, the idea and ideology of EOS undoubtedly prevails, yet systemic perspectives are also evident. It seems that a more inclusive perspective[5] is now appropriate, reflecting SEO *and* EOS. Such complementarities and possible synthesis at this level stands to expand the boundaries of conventional strategic thinking.

Models & Metamodels

The analysis and development of firms' strategies in practice is almost always carried out (pragmatically) with reference to diagrams, conceptual models and their surrounding narratives. Some of these are off-the-(library)-shelf and often appear to be offered in the spirit of one model fits all, while others are custom built by managers or consultants for a particular situation. These models can be reified and themselves depicted and described in a variety of ways (Table 1). For example, any conceptual model can be described as a set of images and expressions that depict and describe aspects of reality. More generally, a "conceptual metamodel" is therefore:

A CONCEPTUAL-MODEL OF (a conceptual-model of (aspects of reality)).

[5] Some strategy concepts embody subsets of these forms. For example, as a reviewer noted, the evolutionary, systemic, ethical and design forms all appear to be embodied within an "eco-centric strategic business orientation" known as Biomimicry or Biomimetics.

That is, a set of images and natural language expressions, or patterns, or discourses, that describe and depict "conceptual models" of themselves. The relevant expressions then include terms such as comparison, design, transition, renewal, influence and replication (Table 2). In the "comparison" metamodel (Table 2), for example, a conceptual model is described as an object-of-choice within a static decision problem (Table 2 column 2). Some of the better-known conceptual models of strategic behavior (strategic management) involve competitive strategy, hyper-competition, stakeholder management, etc. An inquiring strategist (or metamodeler) might seek the richest possible description of these "objects." Accordingly, features are identified, classified, and contrasted, as in a taxonomical approach.

Table 2. Metamodels

Metamodel	Depiction of CM	Role of Inquirer
Comparison	Object-of-choice	Analyser
Design	Trigger	Designer
Transition	End-state	Learner
Renewal	Trigger	Self-producer
Influence	Instrument	Political entity
Replication	Meme	Host

A conceptual model can also be depicted as a *trigger* of a process of design (an "instigating causality" in von Bertalanffy's terminology). The tension between a new model and prior understandings motivates an inquirer (e.g., strategist) to find a resolution. For example the competitive strategy model can be combined in a single figure with the stakeholder model, despite the evident underlying tension between them.

Design

The transition metamodel (Table 2, row 3) involves a process of accommodation (creation of a new cognitive schema). For example, a simple input/output model of the firm can be transformed by incremental steps into a more complex stakeholder model. The competitive strategy/ advantage model can be transformed into the hyper-competition model. Here, features or elements of the first model, such as the existence of industries with weak forces are replaced with new elements, such as escalation of incumbent rivalry and multiple competitive "arenas." This "transition metamodel" is very effectively communicated in a non-strategy context in the lithograph *Liberation* by the artist/designer Escher, in 1955, which shows a row of triangles transform, by barely perceptible steps, into birds in flight.

Transition

A conceptual model can also trigger a process of inner-directed change, or psychological renewal of the individual who interprets or constructs the model. Exploration of core values and

rationalities implicit in the model can result in individual and collective self-renewal. Psychologists have called this type of process "deep self referral" and have associated it with increased confidence and performance, making the individual more competitive (but not because of the explicit content of the conceptual model *per se*). For example, a person who reflects upon a model in which the category "trust" features prominently, might not only change their policy, but also refresh and renew themselves.

Influence

Models can also be deployed for political purposes. A person in a position of power (a manager) draws attention to a particular model, with the covert intention of influencing other's behavior. The models might be used to try to inculcate a culture, to create a team of like-minded players, or to direct attention away from (or towards) wider stakeholder concerns. People (e.g., subordinates, voters, etc.) thereby adopt a given model out of deference to power, which opposes or displaces the type of self-referral described above (see the later section on "pragmatism and power"). As Sennett (1998) put it, it can lead to a loss of identity, or the colonization of the self.

Replication

Finally, conceptual models can themselves be depicted as productive entities that co-produce many copies of themselves. Here, models are seen as distinctive abstract patterns that compete for share of mind. The "replication" metamodel is consistent with Foucault's description of "competing discourses" that he says characterize contemporary (post-modern) life; but perhaps it finds its sharpest expression in the idea of a model as a *meme*, or a chunk of information that lodges in brains or minds. The role of the model in an ecology of knowledge is then analogous to that of genes in biological systems. Every time an entity (e.g., an individual or a collectivity) attends to a meme (i.e., a model) a replication occurs. Yet, as suggested earlier, an entity that hosts any particular meme or model is not necessarily advantaged. The effect can also be neutral or destructive.

Strategy

Another revealing correspondence (or equivalence) exists between this metalevel perspective on modeling and an object-level perspective on strategy itself. For example, the replication metamodel implies that entity cannot freely choose a conceptual model, instead the model (a *meme*) is reproduced through cultural and behavioural processes such as imitation. A similar evolutionary model of "strategy" (at the object level) sees that a firm "cannot freely choose" its strategy. Questions of timing also recur at these two seemingly-separated levels of analysis: one can always question the timing of a strategic move, but equally the timing of any transition from one model to another.

This "correspondence" between strategy and metamodel can also be made more explicit (Table 3). Having identified the set of "metamodels" (comparison, transition, design, etc.) we can point to many corresponding concepts within strategy (e.g., strategy-selection, change-management, generation of strategic options, etc.). It is thus evident that the elementary categories of meaning that apply to the "real" (object-level) world of strategic management all

re-emerge during any sustained process of inquiry at the metalevel, where they can be applied to abstract conceptual models themselves.

Table 3. Metamodels and strategy concepts

Metamodel	Strategy Concept
Comparison	Strategic choice, selection
Design	Generate options, overcome tradeoffs
Transition	Management of change
Renewal	Develop Competencies
Influence	Incrementalism, symbolism
Replication	Emergent strategy

This type of recursive re-generation of a concepts is not only characteristic of metatheory and inquiry, it is also strikingly evocative of a phenomenon in Chaos Theory (dynamical systems theory) whereby essentially the same fractal patterns re-appear, with just slight changes, as one drills down ever further into the "edge of chaos;" for example the boundary of the Mandelbrot set. As this is done, using visual computer models, this boundary reveals the so-called baby-Mandelbrot sets that come into view successively and infinitely many times, as resolution continually increases. Put differently, sustained inquiry that moves beyond traditional disciplines and categories ultimately seems to generate something like the patterns found in nature.

Recursivity & Ecology

Recursivity and self-reference are found in many arguments and lines of inquiry that attempt to bring together of once-separated levels of description and representation, as in the above example of strategy and metamodels. This general abstract notion was first developed in Ancient Greece (cf., Hofstadter, 1979) where it found expression as Epimenides' paradox: "this sentence is false." More than 2000 years later, the notion was re-formulated in metamathematical terms as Russell's paradox: If we write "the set of all sets that are not members of themselves," the proposition that "this set contains itself" quickly yields in the mind the idea that it does not. To resolve this paradox, a more elaborate Theory of Types was duly designed (in *Principia Mathematica*) that made an explicit distinction between signs (e.g., sentences, conceptual models) and their referents or semantics (this being a central theme in the field of Semiotics).

The link between recursivity and *ecologica*l systems becomes more apparent when Russell's paradox is restated as a riddle involving self-production (i.e., Maturana & Varela's (1972) concept of auto-poiesis), as follows: "In a certain village, there is a barber who only shaves the men who do not shave themselves. Who shaves the barber?" Here, the proposition that the barber shaves himself quickly yields its opposite; but this time the paradox is not so abstract: it concerns a physical entity that is producing a slight variant of itself (i.e., the shaved barber). In this way, something that initially expressed a purely abstract idea of self-reference becomes transformed,

by a small step, into a description of self-replication in the natural world. This particular transformation was explored in detail by Hofstadter (1979, p. 535), who compared several mechanisms that create self-reference with mechanisms that self-replicate and uncovered "many remarkable and beautiful parallels."

Meanwhile, strategic management narratives have often referred to the idea that conceptual models and frameworks (like competitive strategy, stakeholder models, etc.) all compete for share of mind, in much the same the way that other intangible products such as websites do. It is perhaps less obvious that the models themselves might behave rather like the very entities (i.e., knowledge-producing firms) to which they refer. The full implications of this type of competition and self-reference, within an ecology of knowledge, has not been entirely worked through in business and economic theories. It has certainly been recognized that knowledge products act as (co-) producers (e.g., Ackoff, 1981; Evans & Wurster, 2000) and that this forces business entities in practice to "deconstruct" (i.e., to dismantle or re-configure) their business processes. Yet, at the same time, managers' conceptual models of strategy also compete and co-produce, perhaps implying that they too must be periodically disrupted.

Despite the implied self-reference, theories based upon value-creating exchanges and mechanisms still remain at the core of business and economic thought. Marketing, for example, still describes itself officially as "the science of exchanges" while the modern theory of finance is constructed around the notion of equilibrium in market-based systems. While these ideas of exchange and mechanism remain at the foundation of much business theory and the engineering view of economics, they are slowly being joined (not necessarily displaced) by the equally elemental, foundational and ecological ideas of self-reference and self-replication. Put more technically, the formal *preference*-relations that lie at the base of the Neo-classical paradigm are being augmented by formal *recursive* relations in models of business strategy. The latter are much more closely associated with living systems and the kind of chaotic dynamic systems that generate the emergent patterns of "syntropy" found in nature.

Synergy & Dialectics

In addition to the many conceptual models within business strategy, several authors and consultants have advocated variants of dialectical reasoning in the strategy formulation process. Over 30 years ago, for example, Mason (1969) proposed a dialectical-inquiry method of policy formulation and since then others have advocated various forms of trinetarian thinking (thesis, antithesis, synthesis; triple-bottom line reporting, etc.) but often without explicitly mentioning the dialectic, as such. There are also numerous conceptual frameworks and philosophical (qualitative) discourses that involve oppositions or tradeoffs, together with some kind of designed synthesis (Table 4). For example, the notion of moral imagination (in philosophy and business-ethics) involves devising new ways of including others (e.g., the poor) in the business strategy discourse, thereby widening moral boundaries and the scope of justice. In the organizational behavior tradition, similar practices such as stakeholder learning dialogues and generative discourses have been advocated.

In systems theories, the multi-capital conceptual framework (arguably, yet another metatheory having "capital" as its central construct) depicts a set of forms of capital, including financial,

ecological, human, social, cultural, political and moral "forms." These are almost always described as being highly inter-related, not fully commensurable (reducible to one overarching measure) and as forms that should be accumulated at the same time, with a view to achieving synergies. A rather similar prescription for synergy-seeking can also be derived from the general theory of rationality described earlier. A hyper-rational industrial system, in the sociological sense of the term (Ritzer & LeMoyne, 1991) is one that continually designs new patterns and structures that express and foster a synthesis of distinctive forms of rationality. Ritzer & LeMoyne confine their account of this idea to the Weberian forms (formal, practical, theoretical, substantive) and to entire industrial systems, but their core idea of hyper-rationality (i.e., synergy amongst forms) can easily be generalized and extended to include Kantian and expressive forms, and so on. A hyper-rational entity thus attempts to design ways of adding to income, identity and justice (deliberative rationality) all at the same time, but in a way that also seeks and achieves synergies. The general theory of optimality also offers some recognizably similar types of prescription, particularly in its concept of optimal design as formalized in *de novo* programming (e.g., Zeleny, 1996).

Table 4. Synergy elements within the metatheories

Metatheory or Theme	Some Components & Forms	Synergy Element	Implication for Strategy
Rationality	Utility-max, Expressive, Weberian	Hyper-Rationality	Compete through synthesis
Ethics	Deliberative, Kantian,	Moral-imagination, Pluralism	Combine forms
Optimality	Maximisation, Ethical, Dynamic, etc.	Optimal design	Co-produce human goods
Modeling	Dialectical Inquiry, Generative Discourse	Synthesis	Forge stakeholder-synthesis
Multi-capital	Economic, Human, Social, Ecological	Synergetic design	Accumulate all forms

All these frameworks (Table 4) involve some aspects of dialectical thinking. A single concept, such as financial capital formation, income-poverty reduction, or utility maximization, is expanded into a wider view, involving multiple forms. Then, the relationships, or *meta*relations, become the focus of attention and theory development. Finally, some form of synthesis is proposed, especially synergy-seeking (e.g., hyper-rationality, optimal–design, generative discourse, etc.). This last step can be thought of as embodying an important quality of the human spirit: that is, creatively overcoming tensions and oppositions involving self and others in various contexts (e.g., Basseches, 2005). This, in turn, is one of many dualistic elements of strategy, in which the search for synthesis and synergy has been linked to the wider quest for high performance (e.g., De Witt & Meyer, 2005).

Metatheories & Practice

Over 20 years ago, the works of Argyris (1982) and Schon (1983) on the reflective practitioner and double-loop learning drew attention to the role of managers' mental models in the determination of business strategy and performance. They reported that the mental pathway from a model to a metamodel, or from a norm to a metanorm was often blocked in practice (Figure 2). This was taken to indicate a need for cognitive therapies (implying that some given models might be dysfunctional, or "sick," as one reviewer put it) or socio-political interventions. Such "therapies" might then be structured around the explicit metatheories mentioned in this article, whilst a complementary "political" approach (see next section) involves cultivating or fostering metanorms, such as "It's OK to challenge norms," as well as hypernorms that challenge or refine the metanorms.

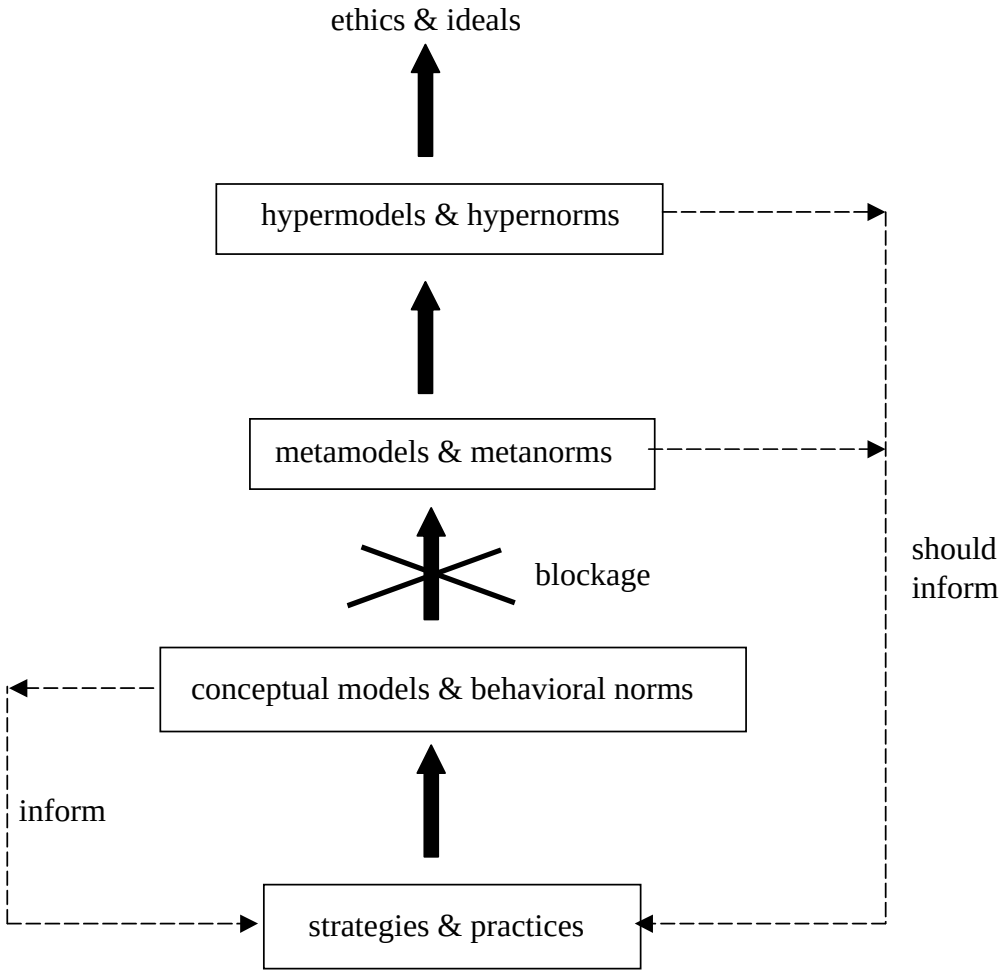

Figure 2. Metatheory and practice.

Pragmatism & Power

All such hierarchies of reflective thinking linked to practice (including Argyris' triple-loop learning) lead quickly to considerations of what, if anything, exists at the pinnacle? What is the

culmination of all this reflection? This might be the "ultimate meaning" mentioned at the outset, or perhaps as John Dewey once put it (and as a reviewer suggested) it is "the unity of all ideas and ends arousing us to desire and action." Previous attempts to answer this question have considered processes, or how to get towards the top, as well as contents, or what you might find when you arrive. The latter approach dates back at least to Plato, who specified a set of human goods including justice, health, wealth and friendship. This idea of good as something more than individual preferences or desires has persisted in various forms, including notions of hyper-goods and hyper-norms. The latter are implicit social contracts or cross-cultural agreements about "fundamental conceptions of the right and the good" and they constitute yet another contemporary linkage between strategy and ethics that fits well with the metatheories.

The idea alluded to throughout this article - that sustained human inquiry culminates in hypothetical ideals but also guides practical action - is central to the Classical American Pragmatism expressed in the works of John Dewey, William James and Charles Sanders Peirce. Although Dewey and James are often regarded as foundational figures in educational theory and psychology respectively, their works are often omitted or downplayed in contemporary curricula, even in these disciplines, not to mention business studies. Ironically, however, their pragmatic (and pluralist) philosophy has been making a strong comeback during the last decade of progress in management and economic theory (e.g., Margolis, 1998; McVea, 2008; Rosenthal & Buchholtz, 2000; Webb, 2007; and Wicks & Freeman, 1998; to mention a few). Classical pragmatism readily accommodates the type of pluralism that has been expressed and analysed in this paper so far. Not only are the various elements and metatheories presented as if they were useful and efficient guides to ongoing action, but such actions are to be predicated on multiple perspectives and a sense of mutuality encompassing a decision maker (or any strategic entity) and its environment; an idea that is at last becoming mainstream.

There is, however, yet another type of metatheory within Sociology, one that (a) extends the *political* process model of strategy (e.g., Allison, 1971) as contrasted with the rational (or metarational) processes discussed so far; and (b) builds on the idea first developed by Burrell & Morgan (1979) of classifying sociological paradigms. Two decades later, Alvesson & Deetz (1998) set out a "metatheory of representative practices" in which four types of knowledge (rather than forms of rationality or paradigms) were distinguished. These types depend upon the political contexts within which entire research programs develop; rather than any particular patterns or contents of reflective inquiry. The four distinctive types of knowledge-production practices were then placed relative to each other. The types are: the normative (e.g., economic theory), the critical (e.g., critical management theory), the dialogic (e.g., minority and radical voices in a global context) and the interpretive (i.e., local communal understandings). Accordingly the Alvesson & Deetz metatheory draws attention to several sources of knowledge that differ with respect to the level of political power of their source, rather than their cognitive salience or persuasive power. At the same time it appears to place the four types (and their sources) on an apparently equal footing. That is, the minority voices, the local knowledge, the distinctive community-wide understandings and the so-called "elite discourse" of scholars and experts, might in principle all be given equal prominence and legitimacy.

This metatheory of representative practices is in considerable tension with the pragmatic ideal and the forms of pluralism that have been expressed and advocated so far in this paper. It is

perhaps aligned more closely with a contrasting philosophical position known as deep-pluralism (cf., Aitkin & Talisse, 2005) in which values (hence also some of the forms of rationality and ethics) are held to be incommensurable, or incapable of being adjudicated rationally. Deep pluralism implies that conflicts between values (or forms, or theories) must be settled through the exercise of power among the entities or "research communities" that uphold and express them; a position that, as one reviewer noted, "does not seem to add much;" but that more critically appears to point to the potential use of force, or at least to license it as an alternative to the kind of essentially dialogic and reflective notion of strategy considered previously.

Conclusion

In addition to relating theories to communities, as in the "representative practices" approach, we can also relate particular metatheories to source disciplines, such as sociology, economics, moral philosophy, management science and psychology. As mentioned at the outset, these traditional "disciplines" are supposed to be integrated in strategic management capstone courses in business schools (and in other interdisciplinary-studies programs). However, as every educator must surely be aware, all such attempts at the integration of entire disciplines suffer from a generic weakness, namely, that under contemporary cultural conditions there is little mastery of any of the disciplines, in the first place. Furthermore, even where a student is reasonably well grounded in one or two disciplines, these usually emphasize just a small subset of the "core" constructs, or elements of strategic behaviour that are to be found in any of the metatheories. This is not a new observation. For example, in a rather similar context Etzioni (1986) referred over 20 years ago to the "*mis*-education of economists" and by implication, of business students as well.[6]

Although it seems idealistic, if might be possible to teach metatheory directly to academically inclined students and practitioners. Perhaps the strongest case for this could be made in PhD programs, but programs that offer a cross-cutting focus on themes such as sustainability would also be a good fit. Certainly, a good awareness and understanding of all of the core themes: rationality, ethicality, optimality, synergy, dialectics, recursivity and power has often been considered the mark of a properly educated person, or generalist, or strategist. Business education has been notably lacking in this respect and the situation has long been unbalanced. Unfortunately, many have learned about exchange, property and ownership; yet they have never encountered ideas of ethics, recursivity and dialectics. At the level of practice, the potential of metatheory also remains untapped, due in part to the above-mentioned blockage on reflective thought amongst many of the practitioners who have been upheld as role-models or leaders; but also due to the narrow pecuniary motivations of many business students. Given the limits of human attention and the extent of institutional influence, a good case can now be made to propagate metatheory in the business curriculum while at the same time highlighting its direct link with well-informed reflective practice.

[6] Many commentators, including the Premier of China (in 2009 on CNN) Patricia Werhane and a current reviewer, have noted that it is common to refer to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* whilst overlooking or ignoring his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

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