

A DISCUSSION ON COMPLEMENTARISM AND ITS STANCE TOWARDS PARADIGMS

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INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades many texts and authors have used and elaborated on the notion of *paradigm*, which was first brought to broad attention in 1962 by Thomas Kuhn in his celebrated book “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” (Kuhn, 1970). However, the extensive use made of this term seems to have dramatically changed the original meaning Kuhn gave to it, and the variety of adoptions has even led to contradictory conclusions (for a discussion on this as applied to the social sciences, see Bernstein, 1976, part II).

One strand of thinking in management science that has adopted this notion is the one known as *complementarist pluralism* or, in short, *complementarism* (see Jackson, 1997, and Flood and Jackson, 1991). Complementarism is the position that “would respect the different strengths of the various trends in management science, encouraging their theoretical development and suggesting ways in which they can be appropriately fitted to the variety of management problems that arise”¹ (Jackson, 1997, page 2).

Some comments and criticisms on complementarism, as developed by Flood and Jackson, have appeared since it was first introduced. These have opened some issues that still need to be examined carefully, and this paper is an attempt to contribute to this discussion.

In the first section of the paper, we examine the notion of *paradigm* through the consideration of some linguistic elements that are very closely related to it. Making use of these notions, in the following sections we examine two issues on complementarism.

The first of these issues concerns the sense in which it can be said that people can manage different paradigms and be *multiparadigmatic*. Tsoukas has suggested that complementarism is not feasible if these various trends in management science that it deals with are regarded as

¹ Let us notice that Jackson actually uses the term *pluralism* to refer to that position. Indeed, for him complementarism is only one of the three main aims of critical systems thinking (see Flood and Jackson, 1991). However, acknowledging that there might be other possibilities for pluralism that fit in the term as used widely in other disciplines, we prefer to use the word *complementarism*. For a discussion on this, see Gregory (1996).

reality-shaping paradigms, because “there is very little that is common between them to allow them to be included in a contingency framework” (Tsoukas, 1993, page 61). As the notion of paradigm incommensurability lies at the heart of the matter, our analysis is based mainly on its examination.

The second issue is related to the status of complementarism and its relation to the paradigms it seeks to deal with. On the one hand Midgley (1995, pages 62-63) suggested that it is a paradigm on its own, based on the idea that the methodology developed by Flood and Jackson was based on a meta-theory with its own assumptions. On the other hand, Jackson has suggested that the idea of a meta-theory that can resolve the incommensurability of paradigms, should be dropped (1997, page 5); and has also argued that complementarism cannot be one paradigm on its own, because “one paradigm pluralism is simply not pluralism”.

I. PARADIGMS, ASSUMPTIONS AND VOCABULARIES

The notion of paradigm seems to be an elusive one, even for Kuhn himself, as it is revealed by Masterman’s account (1970) of more than twenty different meanings that Kuhn gives to the term, and Bernstein’s claims of Kuhn’s confusion between theories and paradigms (1991, page 75). The general idea of a framework of interpretation (and action) appears in the literature with several different names and variations in its meaning and context of use. Examples of these names are *framework*, *language*, *conceptual scheme* (see Davidson, 1973-1974), *discourse* (see Burr, 1995), *idiom* (see Lyotard, 1988²) and *vocabulary* (see Rorty, 1989).

In the postscript to “The Structure of Scientific Revolution” (written in 1969), Kuhn accepts that he has used the term *paradigm* with at least two different meanings: “On the one hand, it stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by members of a given community. On the other, it denotes one sort of element in that constellation, the concrete puzzle-solutions which, employed as models or examples, can replace existing rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science” (1970, page 175).

While it is clear that Kuhn refers only to science, some other authors have adopted the notion broadening its scope to talk about any other domains of action. For example, Guba explicitly says this in the working definition he proposes for a paradigm: “a basic set of beliefs that guides action, whether of the everyday garden variety or action taken in connection with a disciplined inquiry” (1990, page 17). Kuhn’s purposes went much further than simply to suggest the existence of paradigms, because he wanted to talk explicitly about the history of science. However, for our discussion we are going to focus on their linguistic characteristics rather than on their belonging to scientific communities or their role in the history of any scientific discipline, and this will allow us to extend its use to other domains.

One first element is the beliefs, or assumptions, that militants in a particular paradigm share, and this is what a critical inquiry might help to reveal. These are propositions that may refer to (i) how things are or behave, or (ii) about how things should be, in which case they would be *normatives*³. Concerning the first option, it might be argued that Flood’s and Jackson’s efforts in the development of their Total Systems Intervention methodology, or TSI, (1991) is devoted to reveal assumptions about the situations that are made in different paradigms, around two variables which are to some extent observable variables: the level of complexity of the system to be intervened (which they call the “systems dimension”), and the nature of the way actors’ purposes and intentions are accommodated in the system (which they call the “participants

² In his book “The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge” (1984), Lyotard works mainly with the notion of *language games*, that he takes from Wittgenstein, attaching to them some characteristics Kuhn attributed to paradigms, like incommensurability. In “The Differend” (1988), he has also used the terms *idiom* and *language* with a meaning more similar to what we talk about in this paper.

³ However, we are not ruling out some other possibilities.

dimension”). Regarding the second option, the whole philosophy behind Werner Ulrich’s Critical Systems Heuristics (1994) might, at least in some cases, help to reveal and question normative contents of paradigms⁴.

However, there is something else besides these assumed propositions that makes paradigms different, and that is their *vocabularies*. Let us now say that a proposition is a linguistic phenomenon that does not happen in *words*, but in *distinctions*⁵. When making a distinction, we divide the world in two: something, and the rest. That *something* then becomes an object in our interpretation and action and, as part of them, it carries some meaning. That distinction becomes, then, constitutive of our action. A set of distinctions that are related to each other forming a coherent whole and in connection to a certain domain of action would then constitute what we might call, adopting Rorty’s word, a *vocabulary* (1989). By saying that different paradigms use different vocabularies, we re-interpret what Kuhn claimed when he said, when talking about the comparison between pre and post-revolution normal scientific paradigms, that “old terms, concepts and experiments fall into new relationships one with the other”, and that scientists “see different things” (Kuhn, 1970, pages 149-150).

Since propositions are formulated making use of distinction based on a particular paradigm, they can be only true or false within that particular paradigm; in other vocabularies, those propositions simply may not even exist⁶. This does not rule out the possibility that different paradigms may share some distinctions and therefore that the same propositions may exist in different paradigms. Consequently, a proposition cannot be neutral with respect to all possible vocabularies, because it is based on one. Let us pay attention again to the fact that, even if words are the same, different distinctions would make propositions different.

II. INCOMMENSURABILITY

One aspect that seems to be very appealing about Kuhn’s ideas is not so much the assertion that there are such things as paradigms, but his claim that paradigms are incommensurable. Following Bernstein (1991), we will argue that it means neither incomparability nor incompatibility, and we will also claim that it does not mean untranslatability either.

In Kuhn’s own words, “in applying the term ‘incommensurability’ to theories, I had intended only to insist that there was no common language within which both could be fully expressed and which could there be used in a point-by-point comparison between them” (1976, page 191). This idea of the common language has been interpreted by Davidson in a particular way when he takes incommensurability as untranslatability. He claims that “we may identify conceptual schemes with languages, then, or better, allowing for the possibility that more than one language may express the same scheme, sets of intertranslatable languages” (1973-1974, page 7). However, we would like to point out that translatability between languages is not exactly what we are talking about in this case. If someone does not make a distinction, we can help him/her to make it, and perhaps we can do it by using a certain common vocabulary we both share. And what has been done here, although in Davidson’s argument might sound like a

⁴ Ulrich’s methodology is intended to reveal the normative content of social designs. However, it can be argued that the core notions of the methodology might be adapted to do it at the level of paradigms. Moreover, when social designs are made based on particular paradigms, by revealing the normative content of designs we would be revealing something of the normative content of the underlying paradigm. In some other cases, resulting social designs might be better represented as the product of an accommodation of interests.

⁵ A distinction does not necessarily correspond to a word: for example, one word in Spanish might refer to the same distinction as one in French. Let us notice that our claim argues neither in favour nor against the assertion that not any sentence in any language may be translated into a sentence in any other language. Our use of the term *distinction* is taken from Spencer-Brown (1972).

⁶ Note that these propositions are not the same ones that are assumed as true by the *militants* of a paradigm.

translation, is a kind of teaching-learning process so that now the learner makes the same distinction the teacher made from the beginning. This means that we can go from one paradigm to another through, in Kuhn's own words, a kind of "Gestalt switch", rather than a translation.

It can also be said that incommensurability does not mean incomparability. It is possible to compare some aspects of two or more paradigms at least in two ways: by means of an external set of distinctions (for example a vocabulary for critique), or by means of some common distinctions between them. An example of the first kind is when we look at two communities of scientists working in different paradigms, and we compare the nature of the experiments they make; doing this from a particular vocabulary that allows us to make distinctions about experiments. An example of the second kind is when two theories based on different vocabularies attempt to predict certain phenomena, and we take accuracy for prediction as our criterion.

Lastly, incommensurability is not the same as total incompatibility either. In our case, incompatibility between paradigms might exist if the assumptions made by two different paradigms are mutually exclusive *over the whole range of space-time*, to put it some way. However, if it is possible to have a kind of Gestalt switch, this would mean that they are not. One possibility for this is a separation of domains of action such that a complementarist would interpret and act from one vocabulary when s/he recognises some domain of action, and from other ones when s/he recognises other domains of action. The very possibility of the same person making use of different vocabularies is what we mean by the term *multiparadigmatic*.

To say that it is possible to be multiparadigmatic does not contradict that humans interpret and act⁷ in language, and that therefore we are inseparable from it. However, different authors have used these notions in such a way that whenever they talk about a paradigm (or one of the alternative concepts like the ones shown at the beginning of this paper), we are at the same time talking about some person(s) whose paradigm is being talked about. In a sense, this could be understood as a way of observing or talking about people through the observation of language. Some examples of this way of construing language are Lyotard's work on *differend* (1988), Bruner's exposition of the notion of *culture negotiation* (1986), and Bohm's works on *dialogue* (1996). Complementarism would require that this be not the only possibility.

As part of this, it requires us to be able to learn new paradigms without necessarily having to *unlearn* the old ones⁸. However, a question that arises is the following one: if we are interpreting and acting at every moment in our lives, then how can we be doing this at the same time in different ways? If we create a particular space in which we inquire into a situation from one vocabulary first and then from another one, and so on *one at a time* then it seems to be possible. This is what may happen in an intervention in an organisation. However, if we want that this complementarist practice be adopted as part of everyday interpretation and action in the organisation, then something else is needed, and one possibility is the separation of domains of action mentioned above.

In any of these cases, a vocabulary is needed when it comes to separate domains of action (because distinctions are needed at least to separate those domains) or to choose which paradigm (or method or methodology associated with it) will guide each part of the intervention. This can be done with help from a particular vocabulary for comparison of paradigms.

Even though we think that research into this possibility is very much needed, it seems that in everyday life we seem to change our vocabularies for talking about the same things, and that would reveal that we are already multiparadigmatic to a certain extent. One example of this is the change in the explanation given by many members of the Colombian society, according to Alonso Salazar's account, to the social phenomenon of the Medellín *sicarios* (youngsters who are hired for murdering people) (see the prologue of Salazar, 1990). The vocabulary used in the

⁷ We are taking a notion of action that includes a meaning in it; that is, *meaningful action*.

⁸ Let us note that if we do not accept that assumption, then we might have a different kind of pluralism that would not be complementarist.

mid-eighties in people's explanations of this phenomenon was one that was constituted mainly by mental terms like intentions, will, ambitions, etc. However, after some years this vocabulary was replaced by one that made more use of demographic and economic variables as causally related. This would mean that people learned to interpret and act differently in relation to the same thing⁹. A hint of evidence that suggests that a process of unlearning did not occur is found on the fact that that the first vocabulary of those two is still nowadays central to a large part of the explanations of other similar social phenomena at different levels.

III. THE STATUS OF COMPLEMENTARISM. IS IT A PARADIGM?

We would like to discuss now the status of the complementarist position in relation to the paradigms that it manages when dealing with a situation. In particular, we now turn our attention to the claim that complementarism is neither a meta-paradigm nor another paradigm on its own, standing side to side with the other paradigms (see Jackson, 1997).

According to Jackson a meta-methodology (such as TSI) should be developed "to manage the paradigms not by aspiring to meta-paradigmatic status and allocating them to their respective tasks, but by mediating between the paradigms" (1997, page 6). However, if such a methodology intends to be theoretically well founded, as Jackson has claimed it should be, then it should help its users to make distinctions in methodologies and their corresponding paradigms to assess and compare them, and this requires a vocabulary. One example of such a vocabulary is precisely Flood's and Jackson's TSI, which makes distinctions in terms of complexity and the so called knowledge constitutive human interests. The fact that the critical practice of examination of paradigms is done using a certain vocabulary cannot be escaped because, as Davidson says, "speaking a language is not a trait a man can lose while retaining the power of thought. So there is no chance that anyone can take up a vantage point for comparing conceptual schemes by temporarily shedding his own" (1973-1974, page 7).

Some metaphors used for referring to those elements that we look for when observing paradigms might have led us to think that they might be uniquely given by the paradigms themselves. Jackson (1997) talks about their *constitutive rules* and in Fuenmayor's metaphor it is what is hidden because it is "under our feet" (1990, page 531)¹⁰. But any report on constitutive rules or what is under our feet is necessarily a report made from some vocabulary.

Now, does this mean that complementarism is a paradigm by itself? Accepting the suggestion that a paradigm has a vocabulary of its own, when put into practice complementarism would have to use one of a number of possible vocabularies, and would take the form of a paradigm.

The vocabulary used would be a set of distinctions about vocabularies or paradigms, and this characteristic might be understood as suggesting that a complementarist paradigm stands at a higher level in relation to the other paradigms, holding a meta-paradigmatic status. However, let us notice that this simply means that the domain of action on which interpretation/action takes place is *paradigms* as such. This conclusion would suggest that, in spite of the intention of not having the need for something that resembles in any way what Lyotard has called a *meta-narrative* (*grand récit*) (1984), complementarism in practice requires a vocabulary to interpret and act on paradigms. However, what we suggest here is precisely that one such paradigm does not have an absolute character to "allocate [paradigms] to their respective tasks", but a relative one to talk about them. Besides, it is also possible to look at this type of paradigm not as

⁹ When we use the expression *same thing* we do not mean something which is that particular thing outside of our language, but something that is understood in a broader vocabulary (in terms of an agreement by a larger number of people) as the same. In our example, this would be the existence of people who are hired for murdering others.

¹⁰ Again, let us notice that Fuenmayor does not talk about paradigms. However, some of the *objects* he does talk about share some of the characteristics that we have found in paradigms (see section 1).

standing on higher ground, but as generating a circular relation in language; one that allows us to talk, using a particular vocabulary, about vocabularies including itself.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have argued that complementarism seems to be a viable option inside the more general position of pluralism, although more research is needed into the possibility for people to be multiparadigmatic. We have done this through an examination of the notion of paradigm incommensurability, and of the assumption that we can talk about vocabularies not directly tied to people. Besides, we have argued that complementarism is a position that needs to make use of vocabularies and therefore be a paradigm on its own when put into practice, and that these paradigms, having as domain of action paradigms as such, may be in a relation that is circular.

Complementarism should recognise its paradigmatic nature and give up its pretensions of being outside all languages and paradigms, and continue in the path it already started when adopted an interpretivist position on the different paradigms in management science.

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