Viewpoint—Furthering the operational research philosophical agenda

Throughout the 1970s, it was being argued that OR was a form of social engineering incapable of reflective action.[1–10]

This led to a crisis in OR[11] from which it has yet to emerge, considering the lively debate which continues inside the pages of OR/MS journals.[12–15]

The need for reflective action has called for interdisciplinary tools which will enable OR practitioners to engage in such issues as (among others): ethics,[16] the nature of social engagements,[17] the acquisition, validation and dissemination of knowledge,[18] emancipation,[19–22] paradigm commensurability issues[23] and methodological underpinnings.[24]

Critical Systems Thinking has set itself as the platform from which such issues can be debated[25] and, being the only branch of OR which has moved the agenda forward, has been allowed to inform the remaining OR community. Compared to its mass of publications, an embarrassingly few number of papers are available which provide an alternative perspective.[26] For a profession which professes to be engaged in reflective action, such reliance on one-sided views risks the development of a further crisis, this time not in response to the imperialistic mathematical techniques, but in response to the lack of alternative reflective guidance.

There is no reason to accept unquestioningly the biases, theories and conclusions of the Critical school, which are based on a selective interdisciplinarity. For OR to be an interdisciplinary, epistemic subject concerned with building prescriptive models of human action, it must embrace an ever-wide interdisciplinarity. Building prescriptive models is only as effective as the epistemic scope to which the profession applies itself. The epistemic scope has thus far been limited. The only ontological understanding of social interaction which continues to inform OR's prescriptions is based on the views of Habermas.[27] A wider ontological understanding of social interaction is required to inform OR's prescriptions.

Although postmodernist and structuralist themes, and in particular the works of Foucault, are increasingly being used to support OR's reflective action agenda,[28,29] OR has neglected to consider the source from which such themes have sprung. It is becoming increasingly clear that Jean-Paul Sartre[30–33] is to be credited for most of the major notions which are today attributed to Foucault, Lacan, Levi-Strauss and Derrida.[34] There also appears to be a link between Sartre and the work of prominent sociologist Georges Gurvitch[35,36] which provides further interdisciplinary scope. Furthermore, related thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty are beginning to be referenced in the OR literature.[23] In addition to this, Sartre provides us with an ontology of existence and social interaction sufficiently rich, varied and well-defined compared to what OR has considered thus far.

There are four main advantageous reasons for pursuing Sartre. Firstly, by considering him we add to OR's reflective agenda in a systematic fashion, especially with reference to the growing sympathy OR has with postmodernism. Secondly, it decreases the Habermasian influence which has inflicted OR and allows an alternative viewpoint to be considered. Thirdly, in support of CST's emancipatory desire, Sartre's method argues convincingly that human freedom is more obvious than agents think and in this way provides badly needed reinforcement to CST's agenda. Fourthly, by arguing the uniqueness of each situation, Sartre provides OR with an argument which explains why the search for a universal typology between problem types and methodologies is inappropriate at best, and deceitful at worst. In doing this, however, he provides us with a phenomenological ontology which OR can use to describe problem types in finer detail.

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Editor's Note:

Following the informal circulation of the above to a small number of people, the following three comments were received. Ion Georgiou then responds to these comments.

Let a thousand flowers bloom!—yes indeed, but notice also that they have already been blooming for quite a while

I read with interest Ion Georgiou's viewpoint; it is good to see calls for OR to live up to its supposed interdisciplinary origins by engaging with a wide range of literatures, social scientific and philosophical especially. So by all means let us look to Sartre and explore his thinking in relation to the theory and practice of OR. *But*, let us do this on the basis of a more accurate recognition of: firstly, the diversity that already exists in OR; and secondly, the relationships between Sartre and other writers. Let us *not* do this on the basis of some extremely dubious assertions about these matters. To illustrate what I mean, let me engage in the following conversation with Georgiou's text:

Georgiou: 'Critical Systems Thinking (CST) has set itself as the platform from which such issues can be debated and, being the only branch of OR which has moved the agenda forward, has been allowed to inform the remaining OR community. Compared to its mass of publications, an embarrassingly few number of papers are available which provide an alternative perspective.'

Response: 'CST may set itself up in this fashion, but there are many other papers moving in different directions, you cite some later yourself (although each of the authors Brocklesby, Mingers, Taket and White have many more publications you could have cited), many of these are openly oppositional to the ideas (wholly or in part) of CST. In addition to the people you mention, what about Burrell,[1] Checkland,[2] Eden,[3] Jacques,[4] Lane,[5] Munro,[6] Smith,[7] . . . to name those who immediately come to mind, and note that I have not even attempted a complete bibliography of their contributions. There is an embarrassment of riches rather than embarrassingly few papers.'

Georgiou: 'There is no reason to accept unquestioningly the biases, theories and conclusions of the Critical School . . .'

Response: 'Quite—and there are many people who do not.'

Georgiou: 'For OR to be an interdisciplinary, epistemic subject concerned with building prescriptive models of human action...'

Response: 'Well, I would rather look for illuminative, explorative or investigative models than prescriptive ones.'

Georgiou: 'it [OR] must embrace an ever-wider interdisciplinarity.'

Response: 'Ah yes—is this a call to a postmodern/poststructuralist framework? If so, I am with you.'

Georgiou: 'The only ontological understanding of social interactions which continues to inform OR's prescriptions is based on the views of Habermas.'

Response: 'Highly debatable, non-prescriptive OR is certainly informed by other ontologies (see some of the authors I have mentioned above for example), even prescriptive OR is not entirely Habemasian (again we can find this in the authors mentioned, but also elsewhere).

Georgiou: 'It is becoming increasingly clear that Jean-Paul Sartre is to be credited for most of the major notions which are today attributed to Foucault *et al*.'

Response: 'No such thing is clear at all—the reference cited is not the only view in this area, there is considerable evidence that Sartre does *not* deserve such credit. As just one example of an alternative viewpoint in the case of one of these authors see Spivak's preface to 'Of Grammatology'[8]; some of the precursors to Derrida, perhaps especially Nietzsche, are also precursors to Sartre, but that is a different matter.'

So I look forward to seeing a detailed paper from Georgiou (and/others) on Sartre and OR. But let us not forget that there are many other candidates to be drawn on as well, de Beauviour for example, working on many of the same notions as Sartre, and according to some interpretations the source of Sartre's ideas in many places (rather than the other way around). Let a thousand flowers continue to bloom!

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Give it a go Georgiou!

Ion Georgiou's viewpoint sees Critical Systems Thinking (CST) as virtually the sole extant platform for change in Operational Research (OR) for issues such as ethics, the nature of social engagement, the acquisition, validation and dissemination of knowledge, emancipation, paradigm (in)commensurability and methodological underpinnings.

Georgiou is disappointed that alongside a healthy set of CST publications, only a few papers provide an alternative perspective. This we are told has led to a one-sided view based on a selective interdisciplinarity, focusing on Habermas (at least for an ontological understanding of social interaction). The conclusion is that postmodernist and structuralist themes might be encouraged and that Jean-Paul Sartre offers an intellectual avenue worthy of consideration.

My response is, great, let us see what Sartre has to offer to reflective practice in OR. Please, however, do not mislead the research community about the nature and extent of CST on your journey.

CST is not a homogenous enterprise. Indeed, it is not an enterprise at all. It is not, as far as I'm concerned, owned by anyone nor dominated by anyone (it sees the age of the guru as past). CST nowadays is no more than an umbrella term under which many people who feel strongly about reflective practice in the combined efforts of Operational Research, Management Sciences and Systemic Sciences, feel that they have a home. The home is furnished with journals like *Systemic Practice and Action Research* and has a growing library of books and articles on its shelves. A home like this is a kind of safe house, which is quite important. The pressures and frustrations imposed on the reflective endeavour by the conventional wisdom of the dominant group can be demoralising and sap enthusiasm. The CST home is a space and forum within which reflective researchers may build a common strength in preparation for further challenges ahead.

A good look around reveals that CST houses many quite different enterprises. It is not a school of thought as Georgiou suggests. True, there is a main room in which Habermas's work resides. However, Georgiou might like to note that there are many other lobby rooms in which postmodernism has made and continues to make a significant contribution. Perhaps, if I may, I can use myself as an example here, see references 1–5. Indeed, my own interpretation of these publications sees them as strongly influenced by, although not succumbing to, postmodern critical thinking. I think that many of my colleagues would have similar observations to make about their own research (see perhaps the research of Norma Romm and Gerald Midgley.)

So, John Ranyard offered a number of people including myself the opportunity to respond to Ion Georgiou's viewpoint. This is most warming. My response, John, if you would be so kind as to pass it on is, with the caveat just stated, 'give it a go Georgiou!'

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Philosophical consolations for OR

> If [people] prefer trying to walk through walls rather than using the door, what do you expect me to do about it?
> —René Magritte

Philosophical themes occupy a curious presence in these pages. It is, I think, fair to say that the intellectual fruits of this labour have been mixed. Part of the problem, it seems, is that very few have articulated a convincing account of the role of philosophical inquiry in the theory and practice of OR. To be sure, some of this work can be seen in a positive light as level-headed efforts on the part of OR scholars and practitioners to utilise philosophical concepts and schemes to further advance the discipline's theoretical underpinnings. With rare exception, however, much of this work smacks of armchair philosophy at its worst: would-be reformers, armed with unwieldy rhetorical mallets, intent on laying down a 'new agenda' for OR and lecturing to us about the abstruse differences between truth, Truth, and 'truth'. Almost invariably, the new agenda arrives stillborn, laced with a heavy dose of the hackneyed catchwords of the day (for example, 'postmodernism', 'poststructuralism', 'reflective', and so on). And here we have yet another attempt—falling squarely in this latter camp—to drag philosophy onto OR's centre stage.

The claims that Georgiou rehearses are simple variations on what are, by now, old and tiresome themes: OR is too narrowly focused, OR needs 'reflective guidance', OR is being held hostage by 'imperialistic mathematical techni-

ques', etc. If I understand Georgiou's missive correctly, the gist of his litany of claims goes something like this: (i) OR is in a 'crisis'; (ii) this crisis needs resolving; and (iii) the crisis is in some (unspecified) way resolvable if the OR community adopts the philosophy/ontology/world view of *x*, where *x* is the name of your favourite philosopher, guru, or cult leader. At this point, the curious reader is sure to ask, 'How has OR arrived at such a disheartening state of affairs?' The answer, Georgiou tells us, is OR's failure to embrace an all-encompassing 'epistemic scope'; herein lies the remedy to all that ails the discipline, or so he would have us believe.

In all seriousness, I find it difficult to comment on Georgiou's 'proposal', for there is little in the way of substance or direction in it. The presentation is, on the whole, confused and muddled. As if that were not enough, the situation is exacerbated by the fact that Georgiou seems intent on playing the role of OR's knight-errant, bravely riding to the rescue—philosophy books in tow—of a discipline that is badly in need (as perceived by him, at least) of philosophical guidance. In the brief space that I have here I shall comment on what I take to be Georgiou's major points. Let us begin, first, with Georgiou's characterisation of OR as a largely 'prescriptive' enterprise. To my mind, this point of view betrays a conceptual myopia that excludes a broad range of theories and methodologies, many of which serve markedly descriptive, explanatory, or predictive roles within OR.

Secondly, Georgiou bemoans the dearth of 'alternative perspective[s]' to Critical Systems Thinking (CST), and he warns that the discipline risks 'further crisis' if it does not seek 'reflective guidance' from elsewhere (see point (iii) above). Frankly, I am at a loss to understand what is really at issue here: at the heart of CST is an openness to alternative perspectives and world views. So, in criticising the supposed one-sidedness of CST, Georgiou seems to lose sight of CSTs *raison d'être*, that is CST does not

preclude the inclusion of alternative sources of 'reflective guidance'. In virtually the same breath, Georgiou hints that he is not altogether pleased with the attention that Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School have received within the OR community in recent years. Regrettably, Georgiou keeps the reasons for his discomfort tightly under wraps, saying only that 'Habermasian influence…has inflicted OR'. To this, one must—perhaps naively—ask: Inflicted it with *what*? I can only guess that what Georgiou has in mind here bears, in some way, on the centrality of *consensus* in Habermas' conception of rationality.

Finally, while I might be willing to accept the reasonableness of Georgiou's call for a 'wider ontological understanding of social interaction', he fails to provide the slightest hint as to what this broader canvas of understanding might look like, and what it is likely to entail for the discipline.

What, then, should we make of all of this? At the end of the day, I'm left wondering what it is that Georgiou and the would-be reformers of his ilk really hope to accomplish. Is it unreasonable to suppose that this type of philosophising—empty and devoid of content, as it is—lends very little to our conceptual understanding of the discipline? If such a view is, indeed, unreasonable, surely it is more difficult to argue convincingly that this sort of windmill-tilting is in any way relevant to practical situations or contexts. I am inclined to believe that the pragmatically-oriented instrumentalists among us have little need for 'wider ontologies' and high-falutin' rhetoric. And even if I am wrong on this point, I still think it extremely unlikely that a resolution to the mythical 'crisis' in OR that Georgiou speaks of will be found in the latest translation of *Being and Nothingness*, or in the back issues of *Le Journal Métaphysique*.

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L. James Valverde A., Jr
L.S.E.

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A response to Flood, Taket and Valverde

It was a pleasure to read the responses[1–3] to my Viewpoint.[4] In particular, I was taken by how Flood and Valverde see Critical Systems Thinking (CST) not as a homogeneous enterprise but as a home for 'people who feel strongly about reflective practice' in Operational Research (OR). Should we then perhaps incorporate Problem Structuring Methods (PSMs)[5] under this banner given the wealth of reflective research which has stemmed from these methods, coupled with the respective authors' obvious strong feelings about

reflective practice? I particularly welcome the encouragement from Flood whose influence permeates CST to great extents. The vote of confidence is much appreciated.

I also welcome the encouragement and constructive critique from Taket and, in the conversational spirit of her response, allow me to provide some further views:

Taket: [*Regarding my statement that OR is concerned with building prescriptive models*] I would rather look for

illuminative, explorative or investigative models than prescriptive ones.

Georgiou: I agree that much of reflective OR is centred on exploratory, illuminative or investigative models—Valverde has echoed your views. I used the term 'prescriptive' as all-embracing in the sense that such reflection also aims at the design of prescriptive action. However, I note the fine distinctions between these terms.

Taket: [*Regarding my view that OR needs to embrace an ever-wider interdisciplinarity*] Is this a call to a post-modern/poststructuralist framework? If so, I am with you.

Georgiou: I see many similarities between Sartre and the postmodern dictums. I do not, however, place much faith in 'isms' but prefer to adhere to individual thinkers, therefore minimising any potential ambiguity. Readers of this journal may well decide that I am introducing existential*ism* to OR. That may be a convenient label, but, as with many other labels, I would agree with Sartre:[6] 'Most of those who are making use of this word would be highly confused if required to explain its meaning...the word is now so loosely applied...that it no longer means anything at all.' So, in response to your question (as well as Valverde's comments on this subject), this is not a call to a frame-work based on any 'ism'. It is a suggestion that Sartre may inform facilitative OR in ways which have as yet not been considered.

Taket: [*Regarding my view that 'it is becoming increasingly clear that Jean-Paul Sartre is to be credited for most of the major notions which are today attributed to Foucault, Lacan, Levi-Strauss and Derrida'*] The reference cited is not the only view in this area. There is considerable evidence that Sartre does *not* deserve such credit. As just one example of an alternative viewpoint in the case of one of these authors see Spivak's preface to [Derrida's] 'of Grammatology.'

Georgiou: The one reference cited as an example dates from 1976. You will note that the reference I provided dates from 1994, reflecting a further 18 years of research, and incorporating more than one author. I used the term 'increasingly' specifically in order to reflect these dimensions of time and space. I may also add that more recently McBride,[7] when discussing how 'it is true that, even before [Sartre's] death and certainly since then, philosophers in his native France have by no means been lavish in citing him or in noting how much of their own world views have Sartrean provenances, even when that is obvious enough to their readers', makes an explicit case of Derrida 'who seldom mentions Sartre in his texts and when he does is usually dismissive of him, but who, when asked, readily acknowledges Sartre's importance for his own philosophical formulation' (an interview with Derrida by Francois Ewald is provided as one example[7] where this is in evidence from the philosopher himself).

Taket: But let us not forget that there are many other candidates to be drawn on as well, de Beauvoir for example, working on many of the same notions as Sartre, and according to some interpretations the source of Sartre's ideas in many places (rather than the other way around).

Georgiou: There are, indeed, many candidates but they merit extensive study before we can begin to conclude how they may inform our reflections. I am sure you will agree that in letting a thousand flowers bloom, they will require careful philosophical pruning. As for de Beauvoir, I agree that her work can inform us constructively, especially when studying emancipatory issues (The Second Sex, for example, provides a wealth of knowledge from which, with enlightened interpretations, we may be able to draw for OR's emancipatory agenda). I also agree with your Sartre – de Beauvoir comparison and, if I may, refer you to my comments in recent issues of The Philosophers' Magazine[8–10] where I have outlined this relationship.

Valverde's overall reaction appears as a general criticism of the whole philosophical debate which has appeared in this and other relevant journals and perhaps reflects the views of a number of practitioners. It is encouraging that a humble Viewpoint such as mine could awake a critique of such emotion. I shall leave for another time and place his obvious unsupported rhetorical—and, it seems to me, somewhat temperamentally personal—remarks, pursuing instead what I feel is most relevant for the pages of this journal.

Valverde asks how 'this sort of wind-mill tilting is in any way relevant to practical situations or contexts'. I can propose the following food for thought. Consider Aristotle who said: 'The object of theoretical knowledge is truth, whereas of practical knowledge it is action.' An implied connection between theory and practice is obvious, as has indeed been recognised by many OR scholars (again, see my previous references). Let us also turn to Habermas who 'accepts that philosophy can no longer sustain its claims to reveal the fundamental nature of reality; but he also denies that contemporary thought is obliged to choose between trivialised technicality or a grandiose arbitrariness. Philosophy *can* continue to deal with substantive questions, but only by acknowledging that it can no longer do so alone, through a collaboration with empirical disciplines'.[11] The pages of this, and other, journals have shown how this collaboration is bearing fruit. None of us claim to be philosophers. But some of us neither claim to be empiricists. Adherence to extreme points of view in our profession (as well as in general) reflect an insensitivity to ways in which the world affects us and how we affect the world. I would also agree with Introna[12] in saying that philosophical efforts are often discarded as endeavours with very limited practical benefit, yet 'the very community who dismiss these efforts does not question the *implicit* assumptions of their own ontological and epistemological position, holding it as self-evident.' In this light, to whom should Valverde be addressing his epigraph?

Valverde also thinks it unlikely that much of relevance can be found in *Being and Nothingness*, or in the back issues of *Le Journal métaphysique*. I am not currently familiar with *Le Journal métaphysique* but, for the purposes of research similar to mine, I can suggest *Sartre Studies International*.

My thanks go to Flood, Taket and Valverde for the time and effort they sustained in responding to my initial article.

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