What is a good project manager? An Aristotelian perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to take a critical look at the question “what is a competent project manager?” and bring some fresh added-value insights. This leads us to analyze the definitions, and assessment approaches of project manager competence. Three major standards as prescribed by PMI, IPMA, and GAPPS are considered for review from an attribute-based and performance-based approach and from a deontological and consequentialist ethics perspectives. Two fundamental tensions are identified: an ethical tension between the standards and the related competence assessment frameworks and a tension between attribute and performance-based approaches. Aristotelian ethical and practical philosophy is brought in to reconcile these differences. Considering ethics of character that rises beyond the normative deontological and consequentialist perspectives is suggested. Taking the mediating role of praxis and phronêsis between theory and practice into consideration is advocated to resolve the tension between performance and attribute-based approaches to competence assessment.

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1. Setting the scene: competent PM, and competence assessment

1.1. An increasing need for competent PM

For sixty years, organizations have increasingly been using projects and programs to achieve their strategic objectives. Nowadays about 25% of global economic activity takes place as projects (World Bank, 2012). To support the resulting need for the development of competent project managers (PMs), over time professional bodies such as the International Project Management Association (IPMA) and the Project Management Institute (PMI), respectively created in 1965 and 1969, have established standards and related professional certification systems (IPMA framework since 1987, and PMP®, since 1984). This is evidenced in the exponential growth in the number of certified project managers (PMs — IPMA Certification Yearbook, 2012; PMI Today, September 2013). Standards and credentials supported by professional bodies are developed based on identified ‘best practice’ within the profession. However, delineating what is a good project manager and the level of performance at which s/he is expected to perform is still a burning issue (e.g. Cicmil, 2006; Hodgson, 2002; Lalonde et al., 2012). For the purposes of this paper we refer to performance in relation to the PM’s actions, not to the overall performance of a project even though the two may be related. We assume that assessing the competencies of PMs enables to infer their level of performance in his/her present and future role (Crawford, 2005, p. 9). This leads us to suggest two questions for further investigation: “what is a competent project manager?” and “how do we assess the competence of project managers?”

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1.2. Defining competence

We use Crawford’s definition of PM competence, broken down into two dimensions: attribute-based and competence-based.

The attribute-based dimension of competence comprises Input and Personal competencies:

1. Input competencies are defined as “the knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities that a person brings to a job” (Crawford, 2005, pp. 8–9). Knowledge is captured in bodies of knowledge (information pertinent to specific content areas) and skills as abilities to perform certain physical or mental tasks through qualification and experience;

2. Personal competencies are defined as “the core personality characteristics underlying a person’s capability to do a job” (Crawford, 2005, pp. 8–9). Personality traits, attitudes and behaviors represent these core personality characteristics;

The performance-based dimension of competence relies on Output competencies:

3. Output competencies are defined as “the ability to perform the activities within an occupational area to the levels of performance expected in employment” (Crawford, 2005, pp. 8–9). Demonstrable performance and use of project management practices in the workplace characterize this ability.

Based on these definitions, a competent project manager is the one who: possesses some attributes to fulfill her/his role; and will demonstrate a certain level of performance. The attributes and performance standards are defined and published by professional bodies such as the Project Management Institute (PMBOK® Guide, PMI, 2013a), the International Project Management Association (IPMA Competence Baseline (ICB), IPMA, 2006), and the Global Alliance for Project Management Standards (GAPPS Project and Program Manager Standards; GAPPS, 2007). PMI’s PMBOK® and IPMA’s ICB have been mainly developed along the attribute-based dimension, whilst GAPPS’ standards have been mainly developed along the performance-based dimension.

For attribute-based standards (such as PMI), the certification examination is designed to reflect tasks and activities a PM is expected to perform on the job (based on PMBOK®). Furthermore, the certification requires a defined length of professional experience, depending on the academic credentials of the applicant. The IPMA certification process is structured in four levels, with different educational and experience prerequisites. The certification process involves a written examination, and depending on the certification level, a report (documenting demonstrable performance), a workshop, and an interview. Therefore, whilst the PMI and IPMA standards do not include specifically performance-based criteria (GAPPS, 2007, p. 2), their certification processes attempt to capture elements of performance. In other words, the transition from standard to certification implies a shift from “what is a competent PM?” to “what does a competent PM do?” The performance-based approach is exemplified by the GAPPS frameworks (2007, 2011). Based on the role descriptions (what does a competent PM), and considering possible differentiations with regard to breadth of responsibility and management complexity, the GAPPS frameworks are defining 1) units of competency, i.e. specific areas of professional performance in the workplace, 2) elements of competency, i.e. key components of work performance within a unit, and 3) performance criteria, i.e. type and level of performance required to demonstrate competence in each element based on observable results and actions (GAPPS, 2007, p. 2; 2011, p. 2).

1.3. Competence and ethics

A competent PM is expected to perform at or above a certain level of performance. One anticipates s/he will do the “right” things “right”, and “get things done” – “At its most fundamental, project management is about people getting things done” (Dr Martin Barnes, APM President 2003–2012, APM web site, http://www.apm.org.uk/WhatIsPM, accessed 6 March 2014) – and deliver “good” outcomes. Expectations about what a PM ought to do in his/her duty (“right” with the idea of compliance) are supported by the general concept of deontology, while the focus is on getting the “good” outcome, by the concept of consequentialism (doing “right” meaning here getting things done, i.e. the “good” outcome). Therefore, defining what is a competent PM and how to assess his/her competence lead to ethical questions such as what are “right” actions and “good” outcomes. These questions are fundamental, as each normative ethic (deontological and consequentialist) carries its own limitations (Duska, 1993, p. 228). On the one hand, the question of arbitrage and conflict of duty (which is the “right” duty, towards which stakeholder?), on the other hand, the relation between means and ends (“the ends justify the means”). As we demonstrate below, we argue that moving from these normative ethics to an Aristotelian ethic of character provides a more holistic ground to answering in a practical way our two initial questions. Thus, the paradigmatic and ethical underpinnings of standards and assessments need to be studied. It is important to address these questions as they have implications for communities of practitioners and scholars who collectively reflect to develop meaningful practices and routines. This in turn is important to achieve the “end purpose” i.e. both doing “right” things “right” and delivering “good” outcomes to benefit stakeholders (GAPPS, 2007, p. 4; GAPPS, 2011, p. 5; IPMA, 2006, p. 2–3; PMI, 2006, p. 1).

In summary, addressing the question “what is a competent PM” leads us to discuss 1) the ethical foundations of what being competent means, 2) the consequences for the assessment of competence, and 3) the underlying perspectives supporting standards. We critically discuss these three aspects for GAPPS, IPMA and PMI in the next section of this article. Then, from...
the conclusions we draw and tensions we unveil between the standards, the related assessment perspectives and their ethical basis, we suggest, in Section 3, an Aristotelian lens, as a promising avenue for a more encompassing, holistic and competent practice.

2. Current standards and assessment perspectives: unveiling inherent tensions

2.1. Ethics and assessment

Defining what a competent PM is, or what s(he) does, and its assessment is foremost an ethical matter in conjunction to professionalism. This is acknowledged by various codes of ethics and professional conduct (c.f. IPMA, 2006, p.2; PMI, 2006, p.1; GAPPS, 2007, p.2).

The assessment perspective is directly subject to underlying ethical questions such as should the focus be on the “right” action, the duty, to be performed? Or, on the “good” or “best possible” outcome to be produced? Harrison (2004) aptly notes that two main approaches of normative ethics are usually considered: deontology (“right action”, duty) and consequentialism (“good” or “best possible” outcome).

Deontological ethics (from the Greek deon, “obligation, duty”), while linked to antique codes of conduct such as the Ten Commandments, takes its modern roots in the Kantian moral theory and the two principles of “universalisability” (sic) and “reversibility” (sic). Universalisability means: “if everyone can act on it” (Schick & Vaughn, 1999; p.334); and reversibility means: “if the person acting on it would be willing to have everyone act on it” (Schick & Vaughn, 1999, p. 344). According to this ethical stance, a “right” action is independent from its “good” outcome, ends can never justify means, and this fits well with attribute-based competence assessment perspective. This view is reflected in the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct where everyone is deemed to act the way “PMI practitioners” act (“universalisability”), and be willing to act the way “PMI practitioners” act towards themselves (“reversibility”). Thus, the focus of assessment is the “role” of individuals, their knowledge, tasks, and skills required, and what they do on their jobs (PMI, 2011, 2013a,b).

Consequentialism “also sometimes termed teleology, is directed towards securing the right outcome” (Harrison, 2004, p.2). An action is “right” if and only if it produces the “good” or “best possible” outcome. The end justifies the means. GAPPS subscribes to this vision, and the GAPPS standard is rooted on what a competent PM does (GAPPS, 2007, p.2; 2011, p.2). Although the focus is not on knowledge and skills, the underpinning knowledge and supporting skills needed to produce the results are measured by performance criteria (GAPPS, 2007; p.40) embedded in each unit, thus reinforcing the “outcome” perspective.

The IPMA assessment process refers to both normative ethical perspectives. Its knowledge assessment (standards and guidelines to define the work of project management personnel) is grounded in the deontological perspective. Competence is assessed using the STAR (Situation, Tasks, Actions, and Results) framework (IPMA, 2006, p.12), which refers to the consequentialist perspective. Similarly, the PMI Program Management Professional (PgMP®) certification assesses the applicant’s history of demonstrated task performance, and thus is grounded in the deontological perspective.

The above discussion is summarized in Table 1.

2.2. Standards and underlying assumptions

2.2.1. Classical perspective


The classical view is supported by assumptions of consensus, transparent & available information, and certainty & stability.

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Table 1: Mapping competence assessment processes.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competence</th>
<th>Ethical approach</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deontological (duty, “right” action defined independently of the “good” outcome)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attribute-based approach</td>
<td>Consequentialism (the “right” action produces “good” or “best possible” outcome)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>IPMA (PMP®, PgMP®)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills (qualifications &amp; experience)</td>
<td>IPMA ICB Knowledge assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Core Personality characteristics</td>
<td>IPMA ICB Knowledge assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performance based approach</td>
<td>GAPPS assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrable performance</td>
<td>IPMA ICB Experience assessment</td>
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2.2.1.1. Consensus. First, standards are established by consensus and focus on commonly agreed ‘best practice’ with a focus on stable entities and structures, where individuals operate on the basis of an exchange relationship with the environment. Under this view, mutual coordination between two parties, such as assessment of competence, occurs via a normative orientation, i.e. common norms and values that exist prior to the interaction. (Hernes and Bakken, 2003, p. 1516). This view can be associated with an equilibrium-based theory (Hernes and Bakken, 2003; p.1516) that enables predictability (Stacey, 2010; p. 20). Multiple perspectives such as the resource-based view, the market-based view, and an overarching stakeholder-based view are integrated using the socio-political lens, enabling the universal applicability of the standard’s best practice.

2.2.1.2. Transparent and available information. Second, standards aim at enabling actions based on full, relevant, and transparent information. In this view the focus is on the process used to make decisions and take action. The focus here is on subjects, who, using transparent information, make rational choices, set goals, and make normative decisions with respect to assessing future risks. Consistent with equilibrium assumptions, this view enables the PM as rational actor to optimize outcomes.

2.2.1.3. Certainty and stability. Third, an assumption about certainty and order is embedded in standards. The definition of standardization and standard (“...aimed at the achievement of the optimum degree of order...” Hatto, 2010, p. 5, p. 9) is related to the assumption of market equilibrium. As Brunsson et al. (2000; p.16) state, standards “are said to make the complex world simpler”. This is acknowledged by IPMA “Standards are essential in an increasing complex world. They should enable collaboration within and across organisations in order to improve effectiveness and efficiency in project related activities”.

Overall, these assumptions mean being able to “rightly” act in order to produce the “best possible” outcome. They are fundamentally rooted in a consequentialist perspective and the attribute-based competence approach logic fits well here, enabling to link attributes to performance in a predictable way.

2.2.1.4. Critique of the classical perspective. The classical perspective of standardization brings value in particular contexts, where stakeholders share unitary views and situations are simple, and therefore the transfer of best practices among stakeholders, complexity reduction, and rational decision-making is possible (Jackson, 2003).

However, in complex pluralistic or conflicting settings, these standards, aiming at universality, face limitations. Challenging the classical perspective, Hodgson (2002) and Cicmil and Hodgson (2006, p.11) discuss how standards, best practices and other bodies of knowledge governed by a tradition of natural science cast project managers in mechanistic roles of “implementers”, disabling a potential wider role in complex project situations. Further, such adherence to universal techniques leads to the loss of reflexive and embodied rationality (Townley, 2002) as ‘best practice’ directs PMs towards one unique course of action, eliminating the need to reflect. Lastly Cicmil and Hodgson (2006, p.12) emphasize the fact that classification (e.g. the “PMP” class — Hacking, 2002, p. 7) and language (e.g. agreed terminology and meaning — Hacking, 2002, p. 9) contribute to reinforce the general idea that “managers face an objective reality which they can control by applying suitable methods for a rational assessment of the problematic situation in order to come up with the correct solution”. Critics of the classical perspective suggest that we need to turn back to perspectives attuned to the empirical dynamics of facts such as a “practice” perspective (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Cicmil et al., 2009; Hodgson, 2002), a practice-turn (Blomquist et al., 2010; Hällgren and Lindahl, 2012), a phronetic approach (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012), or new institutional theories and convention theory (Bredillet, 2003, 2010). Arguably, the value of these perspectives is that they enable to consider what a competent PM does in contexts involving plurality or conflicting views amongst stakeholder and complex and uncertain situations.

2.2.2. Practice perspective

Focusing on the question “what does a competent PM do?” leads naturally to turn to practices. GAPPS (2007) exemplifies this approach focusing on “what is done by individuals in the workplace” (GAPPS, 2007, p. 2) and to the evaluation of “past and present experience based on evidence” (IPMA, 2006, p. 3).

The practice view is supported by the three following assumptions which structurally mirror the assumptions of the classical perspective: uncertainty, interpretation of information and interdependency and cooperation.

2.2.2.1. Uncertainty. Under conditions of fundamental uncertainty, as the future is unknown (Dequech, 2011; Knight, 1921) self-interested agents cannot be guided by calculative rationality only: the optimal course of action cannot be determined ex-ante, as they lack stable information and means of evaluation (Jarvis, 2010; Knight, 1921; LeRoy and Singell, 1987). The notion of known unknowns (Davidson, 1995; Dow, 1995) is thus summarized by Keynes: “...there is no scientific basis on which to form any calculable probability whatever. We simply do not know” (Keynes, 1937, pp. 113–114). Such notions of uncertainty lead to assume incomplete or bounded rationality (Simon, 1957) where competent decision makers are able to satisfy minimum performance thresholds but cannot optimize.
2.2.2.2. Interpretation of information. The inherent uncertainty, about information and lack of knowledge about future events or states, challenges the assumption of information transparency. In this, when agents need to interpret the information in order to make sense of it, agents’ actions cannot be only the product of rational calculation, where the information is fully accessible and transparent (Gomez, 2006, p. 220). This aspect is acknowledged by GAPPS where “competence is inferred based on demonstrated ability to satisfy performance criteria” (GAPPS, 2007, p. 2) and where the “GAPPS framework is intended to help an assessor infer whether an experienced, practising project manager is likely to be able to perform competently on future projects” (GAPPS, 2007, p. 9), thus proving an interpretation framework.

2.2.2.3. Interdependency and cooperation. Considering the conditions of fundamental uncertainty, and the resulting necessary information interpretation, leads to raise the questions of consensus and the challenge to cooperation. Contrasting the classical perspective, the assumption of pre-existing norms binding the decisions and actions of the agents cannot be held relevant in a context of perpetual movement and transformation. Hence, “consensus is but one possibility for interaction” (Hernes and Bakken, 2003, p. 1518). Indeed, pluralistic and conflicting perspectives, as acknowledged by Jackson (2003, p. 19) are also possible modes of interaction in complex contexts. Thus, “contingency lies in the interaction rather than at the abstracted level of norms and, as such, it sets the stage for the emergence of the social system. Social order should not be explained transcendentally, but as a circular movement that has neither beginning nor end (Luhmann & Schorr 1990)” (Hernes and Bakken, 2003, p. 1518).

These three key features have major implications for the way we should consider the development, roles, and relevance of standards for practice. For example, uncertainty, interpretation of information, and interdependency lead to rethink how the process of assessing PM competences is conducted through interviews as in GAPPS (2007, p. 9, 42) or IPMA (2006, p. 8). Contextualized in the inherent complexity of organizational phenomena and uncertainty about the future, in the absence of a structure for calculating the likely outcomes of the actions, actors must still make choices using some mechanism or heuristic (Gomez and Jones, 2000, p. 696). Our point is that a standard as a “...social mechanism that associates a rational void, i.e., a set of non-justified norms, with a screen of symbols, i.e., an interrelation between objects, discourses, and behaviors”, closes the gap between “free will and social context interact to produce both structure and action” (Gomez and Jones, 2000, p. 706). Standards and PMs form a governing system, a system of rules and measures that order social actors. The on-going dynamic adjustment between PMs and the rules enables regulation beyond any explicit “management” policy, and the “conviction” about the “normal” rules (what a competent PM does, his duty) constitutes the accepted common view (Gomez, 2006, p. 224).

Overall, these assumptions mean that the focus should be on the “right” action rather than on an unforeseeable outcome. They are fundamentally rooted on a deontological perspective and the performance-based competence approach logic fits well here, enabling to link what competent practitioners usually do in the role and what is the acceptable level of performance to be considered as competent (GAPPS, 2007, p. 2 2011, p. 2).

2.2.2.4. Critique of the practice perspective. When the level of environmental uncertainty increases, complex situations involve not only by consensus but also through pluralistic or conflictual relations. In such contexts a shift from the classical perspective to the practice perspective is beneficial as this broadens our understanding of managers’ competence: there we do not see them as good professionals (meeting a list of universal attributes) but we consider their demonstrated performance in what they do in a given context (GAPPS, 2007, p. 2). This is assumed to be a “good indicator that future projects will be managed successfully” (IPMA, 2006, p. 3). In this context of uncertainty and complexity, the “known” (practice AND standards) is within the knower and emerges from recursive relations and interactions between purposeful actions using verstehen10, practice and standards. Kraaijenbrink notes: “Management though is rarely like that [certainty with managers as theory-applying rational decision-makers] and managers only really matter when there is uncertainty” (Kraaijenbrink, 2010, p. 2). And Perminova et al. (2008) rightly state: “the way uncertainty is perceived by project managers depends on personal skills, intuition and judgment.” ... “Managers' attitudes and understanding of uncertainty do not create or eliminate it” (Perminova et al., 2008, p. 77). In project situations, Lalonde et al. (2012) recognize that “the relationships established between the actors' cognitive schemas and perceptions of the situation, is an uncertain state of affairs. The actors do not deal with clear-cut situations” (Lalonde et al., 2012, p. 425).

The demonstrable performance based approach of competence fully recognizes this need in two main ways. First through the notion of “threshold” performance (GAPPS, 2007, p. 3) or competence level (IPMA, 2006, p.11), which provides room for creativity, stemming from a balance between “the real and the preferable” (Lalonde et al., 2012, p. 428). Second, standards are about “what is done”, and what one “ought to do” to be recognized as competent by competent peers, not “how the work is done” (GAPPS, 2007, p. 2), in other words “not a cookbook” (IPMA, 2006, p. 10). Thus, judging contextual uncertainty is a reflexive intuitive process leading the competent PM to perform the “right” action, following a deontological perspective. The overall purpose may provide a Kantian categorical imperative to act or some threshold deontological norms (Moore, 1997) but actions are not merely dictated by an unpredictable future.

Several difficulties still persist. On the ethics side, the practice perspective emphasizes a deontological approach and therefore the relation from practice to outcome may be not fully integrated or made explicit. Further, the problem of competing duties remains unresolved: “conflicts between competing duties, such as duty to society versus duty to client” (Harrison, 2004, p. 1). The

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10 According to Schütz, human action is accomplished by the use of verstehen “the intuitive quickness of enlightened understanding” (Schütz, 1964, p. 4).
turn to practice reveals two sets of unresolved tensions (Brown,
2012): between rigor and relevance in knowledge creation and use
(theory v. standards) and between researchers and practitioners
(knowers and doers).

The “practice turn” focuses on “knowledge and inquiry ‘for’
and ‘about’ and even ‘in’ practice” (Kondrat, 1992, p. 238) and
aims to balance scientific rigor and relevance (Carter et al.,
2008; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). However, the “phronetic
turn” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 2004; Flyvbjerg et al., 2012, 2004)
advocates for researchers to have an impact on society —
focusing on relevance, and that “our knowing is ‘in’ our action”
similarly define knowing as “effective action”, and write that
“all doing is knowing, and all knowing is doing.” By contrast,
from the practitioners’ perspective, standards are assumed to
contain what “knowledge” is used in “right project manage-
ment theory and practice” or “acceptable” (IPMA, 2006, p. 3)
and for “acceptable performance” (GAPPS, 2007, p. 2).
Knowledge from research and knowledge for practice may
meet but remain distinct, and sometimes distant.

Therefore we need to question the “divisions of labour
between the researchers and the researched” (p. Eikeland and
Nicolini, 2011, p. 167), the roles, behaviors and expectations of
the communities of practitioners (PMs), as framed by the
classical classes’ dichotomy between scholars and practitioners
(Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006, p. 806), involved in
knowledge creation and transfer. Some authors have pleaded
for some kind of junction or integration between the “scholars”
and the “practitioners” (e.g. reclaiming the practical (Kondrat,
1992, p. 241); social science practitioner (Warry, 1992, p. 160);
engaged scholars (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006, p. 803);
practitioners in the context of project-as-practice (Blomquist
et al., 2010, p. 13); practitioner–researcher (Jarvis, 1999),
researcher–practitioner (Lalonde et al., 2012, note 8, p. 42911),
or being “native” (Eikeland, 2006, p. 45; 2012, p. 11).

The practice turn invites to rethink the relationships between
practices and standards. But in doing so, it reveals the need to
rethink how practitioners and researchers interact towards a
more joined-up relationship where practice and theory are
mutually constructed. In the following section, we discuss how
these unresolved tensions play out in the standards and
associated assessment schemes.

2.3. Fundamental tensions between the current standards and
assessment perspectives

In the above discussion, we have shown that the PMI
and IPMA assessment approaches are mainly rooted in a
deontological approach and are mainly attribute-based. How-
ever for the higher levels of project management, the PMI
assessment moves to a performance based approach still
anchored in a deontological approach, while the IPMA as-
essment, remains attribute based, but moves to a consequenti-
alist approach. The GAPPS assessment approach is performance-
based and rooted in consequentialism (see Table 1 for a full
summary). Therefore the PMI standards are based on a con-
sequential perspective, dissonant with the deontological approach
to assessment. For IPMA the dissonance emerges the other way
around, as a deontological standard is associated with conse-
quentialist assessment. Similarly, the GAPPS standards, which
focus on units of competency applicable to PMs roles, are rooted
in a deontological approach, inconsistent with a consequentialist
assessment. Our investigation of standards and assessment
reveals fundamental ethical tensions between standards including
the way they are developed by the community of practitioners
with the support of scholars, and the assessment processes.

We identify two fundamental tensions emerging from this:

- An ethical tension between means (“right action”) and ends
(“good” or “best possible” outcome) at two levels. First,
for each body, a tension between the ethical approaches
supporting their standards and assessment processes, i.e.
duty vs. outcome, despite their usefulness, and while “both
deontological approaches and consequentialist approaches
are regularly construed as opposite sides of the same coin;
duty versus outcomes” (Harrison, 2004, p. 2); Second, a
tension within each standard and assessment process: the
competing duties dilemma with regard to the “right” action
for those rooted in the deontological approach (conflicts
between competing duties, such as duty to society versus
duty to client) (Harrison, 2004, p. 1) and the conflict
“means” vs. “end” for those rooted in the consequentialist
approach;

- A theory vs. practice, rigor vs. relevance, tensions between
values (what one “ought to” be, or “ought to do”) in the
attribute-based approach, and between facts (what one “is”,
or “does”) in the performance-based approach.

Building on Tables 1, 2 summarizes our arguments.

Recognizing the diversity of approaches and the tensions
within and between them lead to acknowledge the fracture lines
that emerge between the definitions of what a competent PM is
or does, and how we assess competence and what standards
encompass and the ground on which they are developed. This
fragmented picture is not satisfactory and not helpful in practice
as it harbors contradictory positions. Whatever the choice of
approach, there are gaps in the definition and expectations of
what a competent PM is or does. A combination of approaches
resting on different lenses does not lead to a consistent view,
and the internal contradictions arising may prove such a
combination impracticable.

In order to overcome the above-described tensions, we
suggest that turning to Aristotelian ethical and practical
philosophy may provide a solution. Aristotle’s doctrine of the
mean, where virtues reside between excess and deficiencies

11 Following the Aristotelian tradition, Lalonde et al. (2012) refer to the project
actor as becoming a phronimos: “The interest in theorizing inquiry practices is
that it frees professional action from poiesis and solely instrumental consider-
ations and infuses it with praxis. That is, the project actor has the potential to
become a phronimos, or an individual endowed with practical wisdom, with the
capacity to think through increasingly complex project situations where values
must be considered in light of critical issues for organizations, communities
and the general public.” (Lalonde et al., 2012, p. 430).
Performance based approach

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute-based approach</th>
<th>Ethical approach</th>
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<td>(theory, rigor, what one ought to be or do, values)</td>
<td>Deontological (duty, “right” action defined independently of the “good” outcome)</td>
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<td>Tension between theory vs. practice, rigor vs. relevance, values vs. facts</td>
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(Kraut, 2012) appears to be appropriate to connect means and ends, facts and values. The Aristotelian philosophy provides a relational and holistic way of thinking — where knower and known, ethical and intellectual virtues, means and ends, facts and values, ethics and politics are integrated. We argue that such an approach can help us to understand and act about what a competent PM “is” or “does”.

3. The “good” PM

In the social sciences many authors seeking to overcome modern and postmodern limitations build on “pre-modern” philosophies such as Aristotle’s (e.g. Blomquist et al., 2010; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Lalonde et al., 2012; Maclntyre, 1985; Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997). Toulmin (in Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997, p. 655), advises a possible path, summarizing the arguments for this approach:

“It can cling to the discredited research program of the purely theoretical (i.e. “modern”) philosophy, which will end up by driving it out of business: it can look for new and less exclusively theoretical ways of working, and develop the methods needed for a more practical (“post-modern”) agenda; or it can return to its pre-17th century traditions, and try to recover the lost (“pre-modern”) topics that were side-tracked by Descartes, but can be usefully taken up for the future” (Toulmin, 1990, p. 11).

Eikeland (2007, 2008, 2012) and Eikeland and Nicolini (2011) aptly discuss the Aristotelian “gnoseology”12. Eikeland suggests that it “allows for reconsidering and reintegrating ways of knowing: traditional, practical, tacit, emotional, experiential, intuitive, etc., marginalised and considered insufficient by modernist thinking” (Eikeland, 2012, p. 20–21). He emphasizes that the modern and post-modern appropriation of Aristotle’s philosophy are “insufficient for understanding both knowledge and ethics” (Eikeland, 2007, p. 348). In particular, these incomplete appropriations lack the understanding of nuances between concepts (virtues, ways of knowing and knowledge forms) and they attempt to categorize concepts as independent therefore missing a fundamental point of Aristotelian thinking about theory and practical experience (Eikeland, 2008, p. 46–47).

Drawing mostly on Eikeland (2007, 2008, 2012) and Kraut (2012) we summarize below some key aspects of Aristotle gnoesology. A summary of the detailed discussion offered below is provided in Table 3. An overview of the intellectual virtues, various ways of knowing and related knowledge forms is offered (Eikeland, 2007, p. 348; Eikeland, 2008, p. 526; Eikeland, 2012, p. 20). The various approaches (GAPPSS, IPMA and PMI) discussed in this paper are mapped against the Aristotelian intellectual virtues. And we illustrate briefly of how Aristotelian concepts are embodied in project managers’ practices.

3.1. The inseparability between ethical and intellectual virtues

In this discussion, we refer to the main Aristotelian treaty on ethics i.e. the Nicomachean Ethics (Aristotle, 1926)13.

3.1.1. Ethics and ethical virtues

For Aristotle, ethics (and ethical virtues such as courage, temperance, friendship, justice, fairness, ... and prudence (phronēsis)) is intimately linked to the ultimate “end” of human-kind, that is improving our lives and achieving happiness and well-being (eudaimonia) both for individuals and for the society. Ethics is the condition for making righteous actions possible, which in turn enable the development of right habits, and, in turn, enable the development of good character (aretē14) required to

12 For Eikeland (2007, p. 347) gnoseology, by contrast to epistemology, involves broader notion of knowledge. Epistêmê is just one form of gnôsis.
13 We do not consider two other treatises, the Eudemian Ethics and the Magna Moralia as the coverage is quite similar considering the purpose of this article.
14 Disposition (hexis) involving conscious choice.
Achieve happiness. Ethics is thus practical knowledge rooted on experience and “good action” oriented rather than just theoretical knowledge. Practical wisdom (phronēsis) is both an ethical virtue and an intellectual virtue (Eikeland, 2008, p. 53): it must be acquired through practice, rather than learned as a set of given general principles to be applied to particular occasions. In his description of different types of virtuous persons Aristotle mentions that good leaders exhibit phronēsis (Aristotle, 1926, 1144b). Two aspects should be emphasized: every ethical virtue is a balanced condition between excess and deficiency (Aristotle, 1926, 1106a26-b28); and ethical theory does not offer a decision procedure as ethics cannot be reduced to a system of rules...
although some rules are uninfringeable. Ethical theory illuminates the nature of virtue but what a virtuous agent must do in particular occasion depends on the circumstances.

3.1.2. Intellectual virtues

However, Aristotle makes clear that in order to fully acquire practical wisdom or prudence as phronēsis, one must become both ethically virtuous and practically wise through the development of proper habits (ethical virtues, not part of the reasoning soul but following reason) and of the aptitude to reason (intellectual virtues). This development is not sequential, and Aristotle states that ethical virtue is fully developed only when integrated with phronēsis (Aristotle, 1926, 1144b14-17).

“For Aristotle, praxis knowledge represents a relationship between colleagues sharing common standards for how to go about their professional activities” (Eikeland, 2007, p. 351; Eikeland, 2012, p. 26). Phronēsis is a knowledge form related to Praxis. Phronēsis is “the way down from theory to practice… the practical enactment is often immediate and spontaneous…” but in other fields where the practice is not equally standardised and “automated”… the “application” of general competence or of the knowledge of principles… needs deliberation or phronēsis… The point is that the way from theory to practice within this kind of knowledge is not deductive…” (Eikeland, 2007, p. 352; Eikeland, 2012, p. 31). Conversely, Praxis, through dialog and dialectics, is “the way of learning or research, moving “up” from how things appear to us phenomenologically to an articulated insight in basic principles… searching patterns, similarities and differences in our accumulated practical experience…” (Eikeland, 2007, p. 352; Eikeland, 2012, p. 27).

3.1.3. The mediating role of praxis and phronēsis

For Aristotle, praxis, phronēsis and ethics are inseparable. Phronēsis (prudence, practical wisdom) involves “knowing the right values and being able to put them into practice in concrete situations” (Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997, p. 666). As phronēsis is both intellectual excellence and excellence of character, “it is impossible to be practically wise without being good” (Aristotle, 1926, 1144a, 18). Praxis is action in relation to phronēsis and ethics. It is action that embodies a commitment to eudaimonia and the search for truth, and respect for others. Praxis requires that a person “makes a wise and prudent practical judgement about how to act in this situation” (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 190 quoted in Smith, 1999, 2011).

Warry (1992, p. 156) offers an authoritative summary of the articulation between knowledge and practical experience and the mediating role of praxis and phronēsis: “Praxis, as a particular form of activity, can serve as a focal point through which the discursive testing of theory is grounded through decision-making and experience…”. As Eikeland (2008, p. 87) puts it, “Only in praxis, not in the study of external nature, the student and the studied, the knower and the known, coincide.” Project management authors such as Cimil & Hodgson (quoting Balck, 1994, p. 2 in Cimil and Hodgson, 2006, p. 13), Blomquist et al. (2010, p. 9) and Lalonde et al. (2012, p. 428) have acknowledged a similar view. As a matter of consequence, Eikeland explains that “knowledge and competence is increasingly developed from within practical contexts…making organisational learning in work places and all cooperative endeavours – i.e. collective efforts, experiential learning and improvement – increasingly important in general” (Eikeland, 2008, pp. 21–22). This relation between knowledge and practice is also acknowledged by Weisinger and Salipante (2000, p. 387): “The knowing is bound with the practicing of seemingly mundane actions… knowing as situated learning and practicing”. We fully grasp here the recursive logic between “theorizing practice and practicing theory” and the fact that “theorizing practice is itself a practice” (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1250).

Having briefly explained how in the Aristotelian view, ethical and intellectual virtues, knowledge and practical experience, praxis and phronēsis are holistically integrated, we now turn to what this implies for defining a “good” PM.

3.2. The “good” PM: “reconnecting means and ends, facts and values” (Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997, p. 668)

For Aristotle, human agents and natural things are defined for the sake of some functions or “ends” (purposes, subordinated to the ultimate end: eudaimonia). Teleologically, classifying someone as a PM is to think about the purposes, the ends, (he) pursues with regard to the functions or roles (he) fulfills or the way (he) is expected to behave, “not conceiving [him/her] as ahistorical selves or abstract individuals” (Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997, p. 670). Thus calling a PM “good” is to make a factual statement about what an acknowledged “good” PM does (“means”), and not referring to a list of attributes he/she should meet. A concept such as “good” is not an abstract entity or category in a classification system, but is embedded in the activity, particular context and situation (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 113). Calling a particular action “good” means what a “good” PM would (is expected) do in the situation and is therefore making a factual statement (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 59; Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997, p. 670) and closing “the pronomic gap” (Taylor, 1993, p. 57) through the mediating role of praxis and phronēsis to move beyond “a dualistic way of thinking” (Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997, p. 668). Hence, from a factual statement such as “s(he) (e.g. PM) meets recurrently and successfully the project objectives” we can infer the evaluative judgment “s(he) is a good PM”.

3.3. Standards, ethics and politics

For Aristotle, “praxis is not only individual, however. Collective praxis is possible when we follow common standards, and adjust to each other communicatively, i.e. through establishing mutual and common understandings of how things should be done in “concord” (homónoia in EN1167a22-b16 […]”) (Eikeland, 2008, p. 87). Developing “good practice” is done by entering the tradition of a community
of practitioners (MacIntyre, 1985; Schön, 1987) sharing common goals (“ends”) will, wish, or want and opinion (Eikeland, 2008, p. 87, 121) and way of achieving them: “means” with the underlying idea of doing (praxis) and doing well (eupraxia). Being part of the community (polis) doesn’t involve blind acceptance of standards, conventions, norms (nomos — laws) but at the same time the acceptance of historically developed laws and collective dialogs, debates, deliberations about them leading to possibly changing them (Solomon, 1992; Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997, p. 670). Commenting on the ancient Greek conception of politics, Castoriadis (1991) explains:

“If the human world were fully ordered, either externally or through its own “spontaneous operation”, if human laws were given by God or by nature or by the “nature of society” or by the “laws of history”, then there would be no room for political thinking and no sense in asking what the proper law is or what justice is. […] If a full and certain knowledge (epistêmê) of the human domain were possible, politics would immediately come to an end […]” (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 104).

Tsoukas and Cummings (1997, p. 671) rightly enhances: “...in the social domain in general, and in organizations in particular, uncertainty, ambiguity and politics must go together”.

But how are these common standards conceived, developed and used in an Aristotelian perspective? The way of conceptualizing “universals” or “general theory” has to be made clear. According to Eikeland (2008, pp. 25), three kind of traditions can be considered: 1) Covering laws (deductive nomological or hypothetico-deductive model), 2) Statistical generalizations and, 3) Standards. Here standards are defined as “fixed points or “ideals” for practitioners within certain areas, saying something about what it means to perform a certain kind of activity competently or, according to a, saying something about what it means to perform a certain kind of activity competently or, according to certain quality.” (p. 26). Standards are not understood as mere average norms, arbitrary or imposed by external bodies (e.g. Brunnson et al., 2000). Nor are such standards qualitatively or quantitatively influenced by counter facts. Standards are made by the success of virtuoso performers, and they “change when someone finds a better way of doing, making or using something”. The key characteristics of such standards are that “not everybody should or could realize them equally or fully […] their non-arbitrary character, their immanence as patterns to practice, and “ways-of-doing-things”, and their practical inevitability in human life as either implicit or explicit, vague or more exact standards of measurement, as standards of validity of excellence” (p. 26). Contrary to arbitrary standards, which can be conventional, unnecessary, or enforced, non-arbitrary standards are necessary as they express an existential necessity that is what it means to be or to do something. Such standards are to be observed practically from within the practice and they are impossible to be observed just from outside, by perception. The position of the “observer” is thus quite different between these three traditions. In the case of “standards”, the observer is the practitioner, the native, dealing with things and theorizing his/her own practice, and there is no separation between practice and theory (Eikeland, 2008, p. 27).

Therefore the Aristotelian ethic enables to dissolve the tensions between rigor and relevance, practice and knowledge, practitioners and researchers we identified in the practice turn.

4. Critical insights and concluding comments

4.1. Tensions and limitations brought about by normative ethics

The question of competence (standards of practice and assessment) leads to fundamental ethical questions: what is a “right” action, what is a “good” outcome? And, as consequence, how is the ethical perspective embodied in assessment approaches and standards and in the assumptions underpinning them?

Our discussion unveiled two categories of fundamental tensions within and between assessment approaches and standards. First, ethical tensions between means and ends, that is between deontological and consequentialist approaches, i.e. between duty and outcome. For each body under study we have a shift of ethical perspective between standards and assessment approach: PMI and IPMA standards are “consequentialists” while their assessment approaches, emphasizing inputs and personal competencies (with some nuances, explained in the main body of the article, for IPMA and PMI higher level assessments), are “deontological”, and conversely for GAPPS, the standards concentrating on duty, while the assessment approach, focusing on output competencies, considers outcome. As part of the ethical tensions, we have to mention the conflict “competing duties” (e.g. duty to society versus duty to client) inherent to the deontological approach. Second, a tension between facts and values, that is between performance-based approaches (GAPPS) rooted in practice, in what one “is” or “does” and emphasizing relevance, and attribute-based approaches (IPMA, PMI) grounded on in theory and “universal” best practices, in what one “ought to” be, or “ought to do” and highlighting rigor.

In order to overcome these tensions and the related fragmentations of standards and competence assessment approaches we suggest the Aristotelian ethical and practical philosophy offers a more holistic perspective. Hence, we turn our attention to an ethics of character providing a balance between the excess and deficiencies outlined above, of both the normative deontological and consequentialist approaches.

4.2. Towards a holistic perspective on standards and competence assessment

The Aristotelian perspective, acknowledging two fundamental relations through the mediating role of praxis and phrónêsis, between ethical and intellectual virtues, and between theory and practice (the various ways of knowing and knowledge forms) enables us to reconnect duty (means) and outcome (ends) and facts and values. We can now briefly emphasize how it offers a holistic answer to tensions highlighted
above within and between the main current standards and competence assessment approaches and highlight three types of insights: the Aristotelian ethics helps to overcome the duty (means) vs. outcome (ends) and competing duties dilemma; the way a competent PM is assessed enables to reconnect facts and values; the way to define standards enables to overcome the rigor and relevance debate.

First, the Aristotelian ethical perspective, an ethic of character or virtue by contrast to ethics of conduct, goes beyond the classical dichotomy “duty” (and competing duties) vs. “outcome”, deontology vs. consequentialism (Athanassouls, 2010). The mediating roles of praxis and phrónêsis, both ethical and intellectual virtues, make duty and/ or duties (“means”) inseparable from outcome (“ends”), commitment to eudaimonia. Aristotelian ethics transcend the normative dimensions of deontology (“right” action) and consequentialism (“good” or “best possible” outcome) acknowledging that being “good”, i.e. doing “right” action, involves an inseparable relation between ethical and intellectual virtues: “we cannot be prudent without being good and we cannot be fully good without being prudent, taking the particulars of the situation into account” (Eikeland, 2008, p. 64).

Second, the Aristotelian perspective enables to reconnect facts and values (performance-based and attribute-based assessment approaches) transforming evaluative judgement into factual statement (MacIntyre, 1985, pp. 59) about what a recognized “good” (i.e. competent) PM “does”, acknowledging that a “good” action (“right” action) is what a “good” PM is expected (“ought to”) to do in a specific situation with regard to the role s/he fulfills in relation to the purposes and ends s/he pursues, and ultimately how this relates to eudaimonia. Thus, competence and performance “criteria” are assessed, combining factual and evaluative judgment, in a holistic way by peers from the community of practitioners, including the “intellectual” and “ethical” dimensions of the way the PM role is fulfilled and the PM behaves, i.e. what the PM does in situation. This contrasts and goes beyond the competence attribute-based assessment referring to a list of features the PM ought to meet, and the performance-based assessment leading to provide factual evidence meeting some performance criteria.

Third, standards are defined in a dynamic way. They are rooted on historically developed “good practice” made by “good” or virtuoso practitioners, recognized as such by the community of practitioners sharing common values, and include also changes subject to collective dialogs and deliberations considering better ways of doing things. “Good” practice, performed by “good” practitioners, is developed and supported by ways of knowing (theory and practice — see Table 3) and knowledge forms based on perfecting actualization (energeia) as well on practical acquired experience (empeiria) and on perception and abstract, distant and external observation (aisthésis). This holistic perspective can be contrasted with the attribute-based approach focusing on the abstract side and the “universal known external to the knower” (i.e. aisthésis and empeiria for the techniques), and the performance-based approach emphasizing “the known within the knower” (i.e. empeiria).

4.3. Conclusion: and the answers are

We can now answer our two questions in a more comprehensive way:

• What is a competent PM? A “good” PM is a “wise” PM and conversely acts “rightly” or does “good” action in context. That is what a “good” PM is expected to “do” with regard to purpose s/he pursues and role s/he fulfills in this very situation.

• How do we assess competence? By the community of practitioners acknowledging that a PM behaves according to what a “good” PM is expected to “do” with regard to purpose s/he pursues and role s/he fulfills in this very situation.

Lastly, the Aristotelian perspective allows us to outline a general theory of standards, focusing on the role of the community of practitioners (polis) native of the project situations, and made of patterns of practices and ways-of-doing-things by virtuoso practitioners. Standards are thus not centered on “theory” and perception, but on praxis mediating theory (aisthésis, energeia) and practical experience (empeiria). Consequently, developing “good” practice and doing “well” (eupraxia), and thus competence, is done by joining a community of practitioners, sharing common purposes ultimately oriented towards eudaimonia. Through the development of standards of “good” (i.e. competent) practice, “ethics is politics inasmuch as the achievement of human happiness” (Strang, 1998, p. 1).

Ultimately, we do hope reading this paper will provide an opportunity for enérgeia and further dialogs and deliberations.

References


