Ethics and Action Research

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The starting point for this lecture is my article about “condescending ethics and action research” in the Action Research Journal (Sage Publishers), Vol.4, Issue no.1, of this year (2006). Since I cannot assume you have all read it, I will have to give you some ideas about its contents. In this lecture, however, I will mainly try to elaborate some points and explain some of the background for my points of view presented in the article.

Since I am a philosopher by training, however, I have to admit (or warn you) that the background is philosophical. For those of you who think philosophy is too strange, too lofty, too far out, too difficult, too irrelevant, or whatever, I apologize in advance for bothering you with it. I realize that for many, this will sound more like theory than experience. As I hope will become clear, however, it is a special kind of theory. Anyhow, after a few philosophical detours that are important for understanding the background, mind you (!), I will return towards the end to what has been my working reality for the last 20 years: Action research in work life settings. In case it gets complicated (which I always fear), the lecture will be made available to read after it has been presented (I hope).

In the article mentioned, I try to say something briefly about action research and ethics on at least three different levels. First of all, I present (without concluding) some general ethical considerations about what principles and ends we should pursue in our lives. In a way, this is ethics on a broad and general macro level. Secondly, I say something about micro ethics, that is, the ethics of micro-relations and micro-decisions in projects or in everyday transactions with others. Thirdly, and for the most part, I discuss what might be called ethics on a meso level. This is what I will discuss for the most part here as well.

The meso level concerns certain ethical aspects basic and immanent to different research approaches themselves, and hence implied, consciously or not, in the very choice of research methods and approaches. Such approaches are often both bound and bounded within specific historical and institutional arrangements and divisions of labour that make the choice of approach less free and voluntary than we might like to think. Since institutions are mostly taken for granted, institutional embeddedness often makes meso ethics almost invisible. These different levels of ethics cannot really be separated, of course. They are interconnected in real life. But in order to make the meso level more visible I launched the expression “condescending ethics” in the title of the article.
1. **Macro** ethics concerns what standards should guide us in life, individually and collectively. What should we pursue, protect, and care for above all, how, and why? Should it be the personal integrity and inviolability of individuals, should it be the accumulation of happiness for the largest number of people, should it be private self-interest, or maybe some kind of strict reciprocal equality and justice (an eye for an eye, etc.), should it be love and forgiveness, should it be the growth in insight, independence, and autonomy for each individual or each community, or maybe it should be the preservation of the community and its traditional ways of life, the responsibility for short and long term consequences of our actions, the unlimited freedom of each individual, or democracy, or mutual care, or something else? Could we pursue all of these aims simultaneously perhaps, or sometimes one, but at other times another one? Or, maybe we can do fine and even better *without* any such overarching aims and principles, considering all the historical failures of well-intentioned “do-gooders”? An important question is whether the aims and principles are compatible, or in conflict with each other? In case of conflict, which ones should overrule the others? Almost all of these potential aims mentioned also contain ambiguous and controversial concepts. An important part of the philosophical ethics project is to discuss and clarify the meaning of concepts like happiness, justice, love, autonomy, democracy, community, responsibility, and freedom. The question is: What constitutes happiness, justice, democracy, equality, freedom, community, and the rest, and how is it possible for human beings to live up to such ideal standards?

Although I will not pursue many of these questions directly here, I think we most definitely ought to reflect upon and deal with questions like these. Declarations – from action researchers or from others – about how much we are in favour of democracy or justice do not help us much if we don’t know what concepts like these mean, what kind of controversies rage about their meaning, and what forms might be suitable for different circumstances. But macro ethical principles and ends are also often hard to comply with in real life because of different, enforced, and inescapable standards or “rules of the game” in different sectors of society, like business, politics, culture, families, etc. The rules of these local or sector games are often in conflict with maximum compliance with macro ethical principles. Living our everyday lives is often more like “muddling through”. So, declarations supporting certain un-analysed values, combined with a lack of consciousness about institutionalised and sectored standards for how things must be done, obstructing compliance with higher standards, do not really inspire very much confidence.
Micro ethics on the other hand, concerns the micro-decisions and relations in projects or in everyday transactions with others. The ethical questions that concern action research often seem to operate on this smaller scale once we have started our projects, like who is to be involved, how and why, who makes decisions and how, whose interpretations are to prevail and why, how do we write and publish about people involved, who owns ideas that are developed, etc? Questions like these are definitely all very important to ask openly and continuously in any project, and in our everyday lives as well. The consequences of letting such questions pass unattended may be — intended or not — the spontaneous, habitual emergence of subtle power structures on a micro-level, not clearly visible in the beginning, but accumulating and "petrifying" over time into larger unwanted patterns. History is full of devils hiding and thriving in the details. Critical micro ethical questions concerning our practical, day-to-day interpersonal relations must be asked continuously, in order to prevent small devils from growing into big devils through mutually established and gradually emerging habits, customs, and traditions protecting vested interests.

So, micro ethics is definitely important. But sometimes a unilateral micro ethical focus may conceal what I call meso ethics, when the devils inherited from micro ethical neglect have already grown big and old, and have become invisible by being taken for granted. Being nice and polite, letting everyone speak freely, listening to everyone, etc. can be insufficient, since being nice etc. does not change the implied, basic, and often institutionalised meso relationships carrying important ethical or unethical principles along. In principle, a nice, polite, and mutually respectful apartheid state is conceivable. It is conceivable for blacks and whites, for jews, muslims, and Christians, for catholics and protestants, or for other groups to live parallel lives, separately, side by side, with different standards, without much interaction and communication, but also without having to despise and kill each other. It is possible to retain the basic differences, keep the distance, and still be respectful and polite, and even have a dialogue with those in the other camps. But irrelevant differences of race, religion, gender, or whatever, may easily be reinforced and perpetuated if used to define (1) membership in separate sectors, societies, or states, (2) who is worth taking seriously or listening to, or (3) to restrict certain groups from participating in certain activities. But as long as the constitutive differences, restrictions, and divisions of labour are mutually respected, the micro ethics of such a state of peaceful coexistence may be impeccable, while the meso- or macro-ethics is not.

This, then, is where the possibility for "condescending ethics" enters the scene. As you may understand, I am more concerned with condescending ethics than with condescending unethical behaviour, which is easier to detect, understand, and react to. Between separated
groups like this a good but still “condescending ethics” would set standards for how to treat the strangers nicely and politely but without any possibility of letting the strangers become one of us. A condescending ethics is not very controversial towards animals. “We” are nice to “them” and “they” to “us”, but none of “them” will ever become one of “us”. But between different “human races” or ethnic groups such a condescending attitude is very controversial, to say the least. I must admit, though, that my concern in bringing this up has not primarily been racism, sexism, or things on that level. My immediate concern is rather with the way attitudes like these sneak into academic and research practices between academic tribes and traditions, or between so-called “incommensurable” paradigms and discourse formations, or into the relations between researchers and the researched. Condescending ethics is about the relationship between some “us” and some “them” permanently or quasi-permanently separated like this. I think it is what American feminists react to when they exclaim “Don’t patronize me”! It is different from an ethics regulating the relations among “ourselves” within a group.

So, is there any basis for this, I think widespread and spontaneous, condescending way of talking or thinking? In what way is an ethics among “ourselves” different from an ethics between “us” and “them”? Who are “they”, and who are “we”?

2. In order to articulate and clarify the level of meso ethics better, I will present some thoughts on knowledge forms or ways of knowing extracted and borrowed from Aristotle. This may seem like a detour, since why should we discuss knowledge and epistemology when speaking about ethics? Aren’t they altogether different departments? But there are several good reasons for resorting to Aristotle. First of all, he is a great thinker in general. In addition, Aristotle’s thinking has fundamentally influenced and formed western thoughts about philosophy and science. In many ways, he is part of our cultural sub-consciousness. Also, his thinking about knowledge and about ethics is not really divided into separate departments. In my opinion, he provides some concepts and distinctions that are quite important for understanding meso-ethical challenges. This is the most important reason. But finally, besides working as an action researcher at the Work Research Institute in Oslo, I have been studying Aristotle rather intensively for almost half of my life.

Although influenced by Aristotle, modern mainstream epistemology has mainly been very one-dimensional. In a modernist perspective, knowledge is knowledge, more or less precisely. Knowledge is claimed to be ethically and politically neutral. Measured along one and the same dimension, with the same measuring rod, and according to the same standard,
some kinds of knowledge are “bad” and insufficient, and some kinds of knowledge are “good”. Scientific knowledge is considered good and superior, while the bad, insufficient, and inferior knowledge forms have been all the ways of knowing – traditional, practical, tacit, emotional, etc. – that are not yet infused with modern versions of “science”. According to this way of thinking, then, in order for practical knowledge to become good, it must somehow “apply” scientific methods or the results of scientific research. Otherwise it will remain on a level of untested habit at best, and stay full of prejudices, superstitions, imprecisions, lack of factual knowledge, etc. Scientific methods are usually specialised techniques quite different from and extraneous to the ways of producing knowledge prevalent in our everyday lives. In my opinion this modernist way of thinking is not totally false. But it is very insufficient for understanding both knowledge and ethics.

Although modern epistemology can be traced back to antiquity and to both Plato and Aristotle, the old philosophers themselves, especially Aristotle, were far more differentiated in their thinking about knowledge. Aristotle was not one-dimensional in thinking about knowledge. Modern ways of talking about knowledge and research have admittedly become more differentiated too with different approaches to social research in the post-positivist era, and also with more recent discussions about “tacit knowledge”, “apprenticeship”, “habitus”, etc. But the older, formal and deductive ideals are still with us, and it is still quite normal to talk about (1) “science and research” as one category of academic or scholastic knowing contrasted with “experiential knowledge”, about (2) researchers and the researched as different categories of people, and about (3) “theory” and “practice”, or about “theory”, “data” and “methods”, as meaningful separate categories. But these ways of talking still belong to some ways of knowing, not to all.

Aristotle did not start out with abstract knowledge as such, however. And he did not think about knowledge from the standpoint of specialised academic institutions. His thinking about knowledge is fundamentally relational. This is important. In his way of thinking there is always a knower and something or somebody known who relate to each other in specific and different ways. There are also certain relationships between means and ends specific to the different ways of knowing. Since his ways of knowing are explicitly relational, the ethical implications of the different ways of knowing are brought to light quite directly. Ethics is an aspect of the epistemology, or rather of the gnoseology of Aristotle, since episteme, normally translated as “science”, is just one form of gnosis (a wider category of knowledge). Ethics deals with or even constitutes relations between people, and the ethical aspects of the different relational knowledge forms become obvious when the different forms are implanted among people. Aristotle’s different ways of knowing make relations visible that are normally
kept in the dark in modern ways of thinking about knowledge, as if knowledge and ethics really were completely different departments. His relational starting point also results in several fundamentally different ways of knowing that are not possible to reduce to one basic form along one dimension only. They are mostly ways of knowing independent from each other, with their own ways of acquisition, and with their own validity criteria. The modernist dream of being able to transform and reduce all kinds of knowledge to one basic form, that of science or of formal logic and its application to different fields, was very far from being Aristotle’s. In order to move on, explaining this, I must now introduce some Greek concepts. I will explain them all, and since they are important, I will try to move forward slowly, in order to make it easier to follow. I will also make use of one, and only one, power point slide, in order to make it somewhat easier.

As will be known by many, I am not alone in trying to find ways out of modern epistemological challenges by consulting the writings of Aristotle. The most current “applied” way of presenting Aristotle on knowing, however, is to separate epistêmê from tékhnê and phrónêsis. This is usually done in order to emphasise phrónêsis as an independent alternative to epistêmê and tékhnê, or to “science” and “technology”. Phrónêsis is deliberation connected to praxis, which is interpreted to be approximately our everyday activities, in contrast to science and technology. Quite frequently, rhetoric is also mustered as the deliberative rationality most appropriate for everyday practice and interaction, in the attempt to transcend modern reductionist science. In this way, Aristotle is used in order to produce a parallel and separate alternative to modern science and technology, creating a new division between “us” and “them”.

I must say, however, that this most current interpretation is not my picture of Aristotle. I have tried to criticise some of these attempts in a recent article about “Phrónêsis, Aristotle, and action research” in the International Journal of Action Research (Vol. 2, No.1). The concept of epistêmê cannot be equated with modern science. It is really much more differentiated. There are both fundamental differences and differences of degree only, within the Aristotelian concept of epistêmê. I will explain in detail very soon. The concept of praxis on the other hand, is much more specific than our everyday activities. It is also much more specific than any modern concept of “practice” as in the quite imprecise opposition between “theory” and “practice”. And even in its specialised Aristotelian sense, different aspects of praxis must be determined. I cannot go into all the details of this discussion, of course. There are complex overlaps and interconnections too intricate to even mention here. The details are in a book of mine that will be published at the beginning of 2007¹. But my own reading of Aristotle has resulted in the following “knowledge forms” or “ways of knowing” presented right
now on the screen (I hope). The knowledge forms are not all of them found as explicitly in the writings of Aristotle as I have made them here, however.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basis</th>
<th>Way of knowing</th>
<th>Associated rationality</th>
<th>English equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aisthēsis (perception)</td>
<td>Theôrêsis = epistêmê</td>
<td>Deduction</td>
<td>Spectator speculation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Páthos</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>Being affected passively from the outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empêria (practically acquired experience)</td>
<td>Krêsis</td>
<td>Têkhne (calculation)</td>
<td>Using</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poîêsís</td>
<td></td>
<td>Making, manipulating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Praxis</td>
<td>Phrônēsis (deliberation)</td>
<td>Doing: virtuous performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Praxis</td>
<td>Dialectics / dialogue. The way from novice to expert, from tacit to articulate</td>
<td>Practice, training for competence development and insight (theôría)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theôría = epistêmê</td>
<td>Dialogue, deduction, deliberation</td>
<td>Insight</td>
</tr>
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In my opinion, modern concepts of theory, modern concepts of science, modern concepts of practice, modern concepts of experience, and certain ways of thinking about ethics, all need to be differentiated and revised in light of these ways of knowing. And when they have, both action research and the ethics of action research will be easier to conceptualise.

I will start by saying something about the concept of epistêmê, often but rather confusingly I think, translated as “science”. As you can see from the table, there are two concepts of theory and epistêmê, one on the top and one at the bottom. Both forms share similarities that make them both theoretical in an Aristotelian sense. The principles of movement, change, or development in the subjects studied reside in the subjects studied themselves, not in anyone or anything outside the subjects studied. Things studied theoretically move, change, and develop by themselves, not because some external agent makes them move or change. We might say they move, change, and develop naturally, not artificially. Aristotelian theory is interested in knowing and understanding such things without altering them. This separates both forms of theory from all the intermediary non-theoretical knowledge forms. But the two forms of theory are still fundamentally different and need to be kept apart.

The first one, called theôrēsis, epistêmê, or “spectator speculation” in the table, is based on observation at a distance. Theôrēsis relates to external objects. The relation, or the ethics implied between the knower and the known, is difference, distance, separation, non-interaction, and non-interference. In its deductive form, astronomy has served as a paradigm, and for social and historical reasons, this astronomical model conquered the whole field of science from the 17th Century on. Its experiential base is collections of “data” as bits of information or observations. Its way of generating theoretical explanations is somewhat mystical and creative, but when theories have been made, they are required to function as models for predicting the behaviour of the observed phenomena or events. Although the things studied move and change naturally, what we use to make sense of them must be
things that we – the researchers – can understand and use. But as long as our theories and models can be used to predict correctly, it does not matter where they come from.

The way of moving “down” in this knowledge form, from theory or models to “data”, experience, or practice, is primarily formal and deductive. But in my opinion even interpretive social research, so called qualitative research, remains mainly within this model of theôrēsis, although it normally does not formalise its theories, and although it has long since expanded the repertoire of data collecting techniques to include interviewing or questioning in different forms. Still, the people studied, the people known, are the others, not the knowers themselves. The people known are not the researchers, and usually they are not researchers at all. It is important not to intervene, and to neutralise any unintended effects of observation or of the research activities at all. Because of its status as scientific paradigm in the modern period, almost all philosophy of science and research methodology has used the model of theôrēsis under different names (covering law, HDM) as their starting point and framework.

With Aristotle, however, this was not the only model for epistêmê, that is for knowledge that was stabilised and pretty secure, about subjects that were for the most part or always stable and regular themselves. At the other extreme in the table, we find the other form of epistêmê, which in many ways also represents the extreme contrary knowledge form to the first one. The other knowledge forms are in between, not only in the table. With Aristotle, and in ancient Greek more generally, not only what we normally consider sciences were forms of epistêmê. Besides the philosophy of nature and astronomy – boxing, music, grammar, orthography, medicine, and other skills and disciplines were called epistêmê. They were called so because there was a certain stability and regularity in what they represented.

We may use grammar as the paradigm example for this other kind of epistêmê or theôria in the table. I have translated theôría with “insight”. In grammar the relation between the knower and the known is quite different from the corresponding relation in astronomy. Grammar is about ourselves as native speakers of a language. It expresses and organises certain aspects of our linguistic practice, the more or less stable patterns that repeat themselves in certain ways in our performance. Grammar is descriptive and analytical, but it is also normative, since it delivers standards for correct speech and writing. The basis for grammatical knowledge is not primarily artificially collected “data” of sense perception observed from the outside, but the practical competence, or patterns and structures in the acquired experience of the knower himself. There is no distance between the knower and the known as in astronomy. In some sense, we are internal to grammar, or grammar is internal to us.
This means that the subjects studied – our own forms of practice – must be “reified” reflectively in order to be grasped, since they are not really outside us or outside our practices at all, the way stars are, and the way external nature is in general. In grammar, the knowers and the known are really the same. Principles of movement, change, and development are in the known and in the knower simultaneously, but not outside the known as in most of the other knowledge forms. Grammar coordinates aspects of our practice, and all language users – the practitioners – have the same relationship to grammar. We may be novices or experts in using the language and in articulating the common forms. But as practitioners, we have grammar in common, and we relate to the grammar of our spoken language as equals. Knowledge forms like grammar organise and structure the competence of their carriers, within a certain field or in general, and become primarily a qualification of their carriers themselves, individually and collectively.

Now, grammar also exemplifies what is called praxis knowledge in the table, where the relationship between the starting point, the means, and the end or objective for our actions is one of formal equality. Praxis knowledge is the primary base for theôría, the epistêmé-form at the bottom of the table. As in playing an instrument, or in dancing, what we do as novices, what we do on our way to perfection – as means – and what we do as perfected virtuosos are all formally the same. There is no technical “method” totally different, in-between, and separate from the starting point and the end. We dance or play our instrument all the way, but we do it gradually better over time. For Aristotle, praxis knowledge represents a relationship between colleagues sharing common standards for how to go about their professional activities. But our common and equal relationship to practical standards also sets an ethical standard both for practical political communities of equals, and for a political science very different from one based on the first spectator-form of theoretical stance. It clearly also could become a model for a different form of organisational science, one very relevant for modern action research. Praxis knowledge regulates the relationships between equals. It constitutes a “we” literally as a community with common standards (as in grammar), and it regulates relations among “us”, not between “us” and “them”. All those with an equal practical relationship to the common standards make up the relevant “we” as a community. According to Aristotle, the ethical virtues, for example true justice, are praxis forms we share as equals, as a sort of ethical grammar for our conduct.

Although I am trying to move slowly, I have to go reasonably fast, so I will just present it as a fact that for Aristotle as for Plato, the way of learning or research moving “up” from how things appear to us phenomenologically to an articulated insight in principles of grammar or
of any other fields of knowledge we relate to in similar ways, is through dialogue or dialectics as they understood this. By searching for patterns, sorting similarities and differences in our accumulated practical experience, and in how we use language, dialogue helps to articulate what we carry with us as tacit knowledge, and it helps us on our way from novices to experts and to virtuoso performers. This is what is called praxis, on the second lowest row in the table. Dialogue is a praxis form in itself, common to all other forms, even to the knower-side of the non-practical knowledge forms in the table. Our own practices, as with grammar, we articulate and make explicit from the inside out. Hence the way to principal insight is not mystical as with theôrêsis. Dialogue needs relief from immediate pressure to act, however. It needs leisure interspersed in practical contexts. Leisure is otium in Latin, or skholê in Greek, the word that has become “school” in most European languages. The skholê was primarily a space for reflection, however, not a didactic didaskaleíon as normal schools were called in ancient Greek.

The way down from “theory” to “practice” in this kind of theoretical knowledge is also quite different. With grammar the practical enactment is often immediate and spontaneous in proficient speakers. We usually don’t think twice before speaking or acting. But in other fields where the practice is not equally standardised and “automated”, for example in ethics, the “application” of general competence or of the knowledge of principles provided by ethical virtues like justice, courage, friendliness, honesty, etc., needs deliberation or phrónêsis, trying to find out how to act in the most just or fair way towards someone we must act in relation to right here and now. This is what is called praxis_2 in the third row from below in the table. The point is that the way from theory to practice within this kind of knowledge is not deductive, nor does it go by some form of technical calculation of effects. And by Aristotle, it was never intended to be deductive or calculative. The common denominator for both forms of epistêmê is that they are both non-interventionist, theory-oriented. Neither one is practical in the sense of being directed at producing specific actions of any kind. The second one, theôría, is action based, however. Although it is directed towards theory development, it is necessarily developed from a base in acquired practical experience, which could include all the action oriented knowledge forms khrêsis, poîêsis, and praxis.

Praxis_2 and phrónêsis are action oriented or action directed, then, and so are the intermediate knowledge forms in the table (except páthos). Praxis regulates relations among some “us” having an equal relationship to standards of conduct that some “we” have in common. But both theôrêsis and all the intermediate forms regulate relations between some “us” and some “them”. The known is separate from the knower(s). In a way, theôrêsis creates and requires total ideal apartheid. Where we cannot communicate with whatever we
study, as with stars and planets, this is OK and the only possibility. But the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, in his positivist dissertation from the 1930s, wanted to make even social scientists into aliens from another planet in order to secure objectivity by total separation. Páthos is knowledge created from being passively affected by external sources. I will not say much more about this way of knowing here, however.

**Khrēsis** is competence in using external or reified things for purposes of the user. It is an independent competence, as for example in driving a car. Driving a car is not a vague and insufficient form of science in astronomical form. In order to become good at driving, you do not need any of the other knowledge forms first. You need to practice in the specific relation as a user of this specific kind of thing. Khrēsis is possible and even prevalent in human relations too, of course. Some are even very good at it. But the ethics of using other people as instruments for achieving your own interests is hard to defend generally. But although it is an ethics between un-equals, it does not have to be a bad micro-ethics. It is possible to be nice and polite, and even communicate with human beings used as tools, without suspending the relationship of user and tool. In addition, work life seems to be full of these kinds of relationships in apparently legitimate and institutionalised forms. Since employees are paid to be the voluntary instruments of their employers during working hours, we might say that modern work life is fundamentally based on khrēsis-relations. It is so basic that it has become almost invisible.

With poiēsis the case is similar. It is competence in manipulating external objects according to the manipulator’s own plans and intentions, making something out of them as materials. In poiēsis movements and changes in the external object depends on us. It is not natural. Poïēsis intervenes artificially in its material. I think the conventional experiment is a variant of poiēsis. Also, a carpenter intervenes in wood, and he is only interested in those aspects of wood relevant for making houses, tables, chairs, and other artefacts out of it. His interest is not theoretical, and he needs very little botanical theory in order to become a good carpenter. When this relationship is transferred to human relations, it does not look as nice anymore, however. The art of manipulating others is hard to defend ethically on a general basis, although it exists, and many people are very good at it. As an art of rhetoric, persuading and seducing, this art is also sold to business executives as an art in making people do what you want, see things your way and support you, work with you not against you, etc. Both khrēsis and poiēsis are based on calculating effects in instruments and materials for reaching their aims.
3. This presentation of different ways of knowing now makes it easier to return to the subjects I discussed in the article on condescending ethics in the Action Research Journal, and to work life challenges. It makes it easier to understand why many forms of action research do not communicate very well or easily with institutional review boards controlling the ethical quality of research projects. As I hope has become clear, some forms of condescending ethics are inherent to all the knowledge forms in the table, except to praxis and theôria. Things, animals, or other human beings observed, manipulated, or used are not one of “us” the observers, manipulators, or users. But as practitioner researchers or co-researchers in action research projects, they are among us the researchers. For review boards this creates confusion. We can discuss exactly how much of modern social research that produces knowledge in the form of either theôrêsis, khrêsis, or poîësis. It may not be all of it, but I think we have to say that most of it does. The normal social research ethics of “informed consent” is both nice and necessary, but it is still based on a fundamental distinction between the researchers and the researched. It is a condescending ethics. Informed consent regulates “our” relations to “them” and vice versa, but neither does it regulate their internal relations, nor our internal relations as research colleagues. The researched are still treated as objects subjected to observation, manipulation, or use. In a way, informed consent makes them accept it.

So, although informed consent is both nice, and necessary within such relations, it does not raise any questions about the fundamental relations themselves. As I have tried to show in a recent article, there are fundamental insufficiencies of validity inherent in all social research approaches based on “othering”\(^2\). I have no time for explaining it here, however. But, not only is the ethics of normal social science insufficient by keeping meso-ethical aspects of itself invisible, no matter how nicely it treats its researched subjects on a micro-ethical level. Even the cognitive achievements of these approaches have serious problems with their validity. The question then becomes, of course, are there any alternatives? And at least the table of Aristotelian knowledge forms has suggested that “othering” ways of doing social research are not necessary, natural, or the only possible ways.

Praxis and theôria are possible knowledge forms. Action research would seem to be a good candidate for developing these forms. In order for action research as it exists today to be able to do this, however, I think it needs to sort things out within its own practices first. I will ask some questions, but not really provide answers in what remains of my speech. Speaking in normal but less precise modern ways, all the intermediate knowledge forms in the table could be spoken of as “practical”. They are all directed at some form of action, but at quite
different forms of action. The relational and ethical implications are also very different for the different action oriented knowledge forms. We cannot simply choose any kind of meso-ethics combined with khrēsis or poïēsis, both of which are clearly action oriented knowledge forms. So, what kind of knowledge does action research want to, and what kind is it able to produce?

Action research is often conceived as collaboration between researchers and practitioners, but without really suspending the difference or the division of labour. But collaborating about development projects is not automatically the same as collaborating in any research processes. Researchers can collaborate in development projects without suspending the division of labour, operating in complementary ways instead. I don’t want to conclude, but I think it is well worth thinking through whether praxis-knowledge can really be achieved within such complementary relationships. But there are also quite different ways of thinking about action research. Others consider action research simply to be practitioner research, that is, practitioners doing the research themselves in order to improve their practice, individually and collectively. Collaborating in the research processes themselves cannot be done without including the “others” among “us” the researchers, at least as apprentices³. There are no longer any radical “others”!

Ultimately, I belong in this group, as I have tried to explain in articles discussing the method of methodology as an eminent action research form⁴. The discipline of methodology develops and maintains the professional knowledge of researchers. My claim is that the methods for developing this kind of knowledge are not the usual empirical methods used by empirical research. Instead it is a form of professional self-reflection we as researchers have in common with other practitioners. Here, researchers are not complementary to practitioners. Dialogue about our own practically accumulated experience is common denominator, creating a “we” quite naturally across former frontiers of division between researchers and practitioners. This approximates some kind of praxis-research, but praxis-research is praxis₁, but not necessarily praxis₂ in the table. In practitioner research, the distinction between the knower and the known, between the researcher and the researched has apparently been suspended, even though sometimes it does not mean more than practitioners using conventional research methods. But in practitioner research the ethical research question has changed from “how should we relate to them in doing research” to “how should we relate to each other in doing research”? And among researchers the answer has always been “through critical dialogue”. Among researches the highest ideal both cognitively and ethically has always been "critical dialogue".
Some also think of action research as intervention. But what does intervention mean? Among the forms in the table, poίēsis and khrēsis intervene. Praxis-research by practitioners in order to develop and improve their own practice is hardly intervention, unless every activity is interventionist by influencing and being influenced by their surroundings. If action research really is intervention, what makes it legitimate to intervene in the daily lives of others?

Also, action researchers usually think of their research as democratic, although both democratic and interventionist at the same time sounds somewhat complicated after this. But similar discussions need to be raised about the democracy part. Praxis-research needs undogmatic, learning communities of practitioners that are open and inclusive. But is this the same as being democratic? Democracy normally means freedom of speech, free and open discussions, and finally majority decisions (directly or through elected representatives). But is this how professional competence and insight is developed, individually or collectively? Praxis-research is practically based, but it is not directed at decisions about things to do, and at least not by simple majority. It is directed at building insight and competence, individually and collectively. Democratic freedom of speech is based on the right for everyone to try to manipulate or seduce others by means of words (persuasion), nothing else, to support their point of view, or to join in promoting special interests, solutions, or decisions. Democracy on the societal level is mostly rhetorically based. It is not designed to foster and promote learning. Praxis-research is. Praxis-research is based on the ability to establish some internal distance to your own system-internal roles and interests through dialogue and reflective "reification" of your own activities, by taking a "meta-stance". Originally, dialogical competence was not meant for discussing decisions in large assemblies. It was meant for far more critical but far less polemical professional conversations among colleagues. Rhetorical competence was for handling large assemblies, and "democratic dialogue" was almost a contradiction in terms. Some forms, but not all forms of democracy are clearly participatory. But praxis-learning and research is participatory by necessity. So, if action research is democratic, which is not obvious, the very least requirement is to explain in what sense it is democratic. In order for action research to approximate praxis-research, then, internal things like these need to be discussed and sorted out.

But there are, of course, also external obstacles to the actualisation of praxis-research. These obstacles lie in the realities of work life and organisational life. Work life organisations are still not normally organised for learning and collaborative research. This means that social researchers and even action researchers from within or without the organisation often do research projects pretty much alone. Both researchers external to and internal to the practices researched will procure reactions in such surroundings not tuned to learning and
inquiry. People normally act, think, and speak from within their niche-roles without the internal, reflective distance necessary for praxis-learning. In the article I am trying to elaborate on here, I talk about “othering effects” being carried over during transitional phases from ways of knowing based on “othering” to ways of knowing exploring things we have in common. As long as whole collaborative groups (in private and public enterprises) are not organised for learning and inquiry, and have the competence required, we are in transition, and such othering effects must be expected. As researchers we are caught in roles defined by institutions and policies based on othering ways of knowing. Even practitioners in work life organisations expect othering ways of research. But we need to step out of our roles. That is why othering effects are very hard to eliminate, and different ways difficult to introduce.

On the other hand, work life organisations are changing by themselves. Highly educated and competent workers require other ways of coordination than top-down command and obedience. Productive competence does not primarily reside in the top levels, making it into a big challenge to lead and manage people who are more knowledgeable than yourself. Relations of equality in understanding, to common standards and principles of tasks to be performed, as in grammar, replace hierarchical ways of coordinating collective work and action among professional colleagues. Amazingly enough, Aristotle detected this tendency more then 2300 years ago. Nothing seems more obvious and natural than to establish and develop practitioner and praxis research among such workers. In order to cope with these challenges, in order to organise whole collaborative groups for learning and inquiry, I think it is necessary to introduce dialogue systematically into work life settings. Dialogue is the ultimate coordinating praxis and the ultimate research praxis. This may not sound very original or revolutionary today. In many ways, we – including myself – have been actively promoting dialogue in Scandinavian work life research for at least 20 years. But seen in light of what I have already said here, I think it does put forward some new requirements.

First of all, I am not suggesting that we as researchers simply organise dialogues for the others. I am suggesting that we enter into a dialogue with them as practitioner colleagues in learning and research. I have suggested more about how in a recent article on validity in action research. Secondly, we need to say more about what dialogue is not. It is not negotiations, it is not rhetoric, etc. Thirdly, although I am all in favour of democracy, like most people in the Nordic countries, this does not take us very far. We need learning communities based on dialogue, not necessarily democratic structures where rhetoric is hard to prevent. We need to pursue insights, learning, and competence development, individually and collectively, not necessarily all-encompassing discussions about decisions of different kinds. We also need to be clear about what kind of knowledge we are seeking for what
purposes. As I said earlier, dialogue is a praxis form common to all the other forms of praxis, and even to all the other forms of knowledge, among their performers as colleagues. This is indicated in the rationality column of the praxis row in the table. Dialogue, as other ways of using language, like rhetoric and didactics, is also relational. The dialogical relation – the ethics of dialogue if you like – is one of helping each other learn and develop. It is mutual recognition of autonomy and insight. It is one of equality in the common activity of sorting similarities and differences, quite independently of whatever differences we arrive with from our work roles and experience, and quite independently of whether the dialogue reaches an agreement on anything at all. Dialogue is not action oriented, it is action based. It consists primarily in searching for and sorting out patterns of differences and similarities in our practical experiences and in our habitus, individually and collectively, in order to map the landscapes, the topographies we live in our daily lives together. This mapping has to include the kind of sorting of knowledge forms I have attempted in this presentation and of their institutional expressions in current societies. As with grammar, these structures or patterns will be found to be repeating themselves in the depths of our own practices as a “grammar” of knowledge forms. As praxis-knowledge they organise and structure our competence as their carriers, and they become primarily a qualification of ourselves, individually and collectively.

The learning needed, then, is more than anything else organisational learning involving everyone depending on each other in collaborative relations, that is, learning to solve collaborative tasks better together, improving our organisations in order to do so. I think such collective learning is both more immediately necessary in order to solve primary tasks of the enterprises better, and also less controversial in work life settings than relatively vague ideas about democracy. For me the first part about more necessary is decisive. For my own part I have been working for many years trying to build learning capacities into work life organisations by organising a systematic alternation between, on the one hand, being “on stage” within the division of labour in work organisations and in work roles “playing roles” and, on the other hand, moving “back stage” into the kind of skholê or leisure as a free space for dialogical reflection mentioned earlier, also called “development organisation”. Through approaches like this, I believe we are approximating a kind of praxis-learning. But I must admit also that the going is sometimes difficult, and the sustainability of the efforts is often hard to maintain.

I have reached the end. I will not try to summarize. I realize that I have thrown more balls in the air than I could possibly hope to take down safely in this lecture. Some of them may have hit you hard falling down, on the top of your heads, on your toes, or in your stomachs. But
hopefully I have provided at least some tentative answers, and at least some ideas and concepts to discuss. I leave it at that, and thank you so much for your attention.

ENDNOTES

3 See Eikeland, Olav (2006a) (endnote 3) and (2006b): *Yrkeskunnskap og aristoteliske kjennskapsformer*, i Askerøi, Else og Olav Eikeland (red): *Som gjort, så sagt? Yrkeskunnskap og yrkeskompetanse*, Høgskolen i Akershus: Forskningsserie no. 13, on the possibility of this relationship of masters and apprentices within action research projects.
5 Cf. Eikeland (1997 and 2007)