Philosophy, Methodology and Action Research

WILFRED CARR

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of methodology in action research. It begins by showing how, as a form of inquiry concerned with the development of practice, action research is nothing other than a modern 20th century manifestation of the pre-modern tradition of practical philosophy. It then draws in Gadamer's powerful vindication of the contemporary relevance of practical philosophy in order to show how, by embracing the idea of 'methodology', action research functions to sustain a distorted understanding of what practice is. The paper concludes by outlining a non-methodological view of action research whose chief task is to promote the kind of historical self-consciousness that the development of practice presupposes and requires.

If natural giftedness for speaking is lacking, it can scarcely be made up for by methodological doctrine ... This has significance for the theory of science. What kind of science is it that presents itself more as a cultivation of a natural gift and as a theoretically heightened awareness of it? ... Inquiry into the history of science ... indicates that the notion of method, fundamental to modern sciences, brought into dissolution a notion of science that was open precisely in the direction of such a natural human capacity ... This is the practical philosophy established by Aristotle (Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1981, pp. 114–5).

INTRODUCTION

'This book', writes Bridget Somekh on the opening page of *Action Research: a Methodology for Change and Development*, 'is about the many ways in which social science researchers can use action research methodology to overcome the limitations of traditional methodologies' (Somekh, 2006, p. 1). After identifying 'eight methodological principles for action research' (p. 6), Somekh lists 'a range of methodological issues that are problematic for action researchers' (p. 11). Some of these issues— the nature of human action, the status and validity of the knowledge produced through action research—are indeed those that are at the forefront of action research's methodological debates. But one issue that is

never debated or discussed is why it is felt necessary to define action research by reference to something called a 'methodology'. Some writers on action research seem to think that without a 'methodology' action research would lack the norms and standards that safeguard its claim to the status of 'real' research. But researchers in the natural sciences do not find it necessary to legitimise their inquiries by invoking something called 'methodology'. Nor do philosophers or historians. So why is it needed in action research? What is methodology? What purpose does it serve?

Strictly speaking 'methodology' refers to the theoretical rationale or, to use Somekh's term, 'principles' that justify the research methods appropriate to a field of study. So understood, a methodology cannot be derived from research but instead has to be grounded in that form of *a priori* theoretical knowledge usually referred to as 'philosophy'. Thus in action research, as in any of the other social sciences, 'methodology' stands in a particular relationship to 'philosophy' such that research methods are justified by the former which is in turn justified by knowledge derived from the latter. What action research methodology derives from philosophy is a theoretical account of the distinctive nature of the 'action' that constitutes its object of study and an epistemological justification for the kind of knowledge it seeks to generate. It is thus unsurprising that, in elaborating on her 'eight methodological principles for action research', Somekh draws heavily on a range of philosophical theories of human action as well as those epistemological theories which recognise the 'personal' and 'contextualised' nature of knowledge (pp. 27–30). Nor is it surprising that many of action research's methodological debates replicate the general debate about what constitutes valid knowledge of human action that was initiated by the two opposing methodological perspectives articulated in Emile Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim, 1982) and Max Weber's *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Weber, 1949).

But why do we assume that the need for an intellectual justification for action research can only be met by articulating its methodological rationale? Why is it felt necessary to import the methodological discourse of the social sciences into debates about the nature and conduct of action research? Since these are questions about the origins of our current understanding of 'what action research is', it follows that a necessary prerequisite to adequately answering them is to produce an account of how this self-understanding emerged and why it has come to take the form that it now does. In other words, the necessary starting point to any explanation of why action research is now understood as a social scientific research methodology is to show how this understanding is deeply ingrained in the way in which action research interprets its own past.

THE HISTORY OF ACTION RESEARCH

The conventional way of writing the history of action research is to divide it into two stages (Wallace, 1987; Kemmis, 1988; McTaggart, 1991). The first of these covers the period between the 1920s and 1950s and is

intended to show how 'action research originated in the United States where, from the 1920s onwards, there was a growing interest in the application of scientific methods to the study of social and educational problems' (Wallace, 1987, p. 99). The most cited figure of this period is Kurt Lewin (Adelman, 1993) who is generally attributed with introducing the phrase 'action research' to describe a form of inquiry that would enable 'the significantly established laws of social life to be tried and tested in practice' (Lewin, 1952, p. 564). It is also Lewin who is credited with devising 'the action research method' which he portrayed as a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of 'a circle of "planning", "action" and "fact finding" about the result of the action' (Lewin, 1946, p. 205). Thus, in its initial formulation, 'action research' was defined as a method that enabled theories produced by the social sciences to be applied in practice and tested on the basis of their practical effectiveness.

Although the original impulse for the emergence of action research was the widespread failure to translate the findings of social scientific research into practical action, it remained firmly wedded to the 'applied science' view of the relationship between social science and social change embedded in the epistemological assumptions endemic to the positivistic culture that dominated American social sciences in the 1940s. In this culture, action research could only legitimise its claim to be a genuine social science by conforming to the methodological principles prescribed by the epistemology of positivism. It is thus hardly surprising that the eventual rejection of action research by the American social scientific community in the 1950s was not so much due to its failure to relate social research to social action as to its inability to conform to the positivist insistence that it should, like any other social science, produce empirical generalisations by employing quantitative methods for the collection and analysis of data. It was because of this failure to meet the methodological requirements of positivism that action research become marginalised and went into rapid decline (Sanford, 1970).

The second stage in the historical evolution of action research invariably takes as its starting point the 'resurgence' or 'revival' of interest that occurred in the context of educational and curriculum research in the UK in the early 1970s. The reasons that have been given for this revival include a growing conviction of the irrelevance of conventional educational research to the practical concerns of teachers and schools (Kemmis, 1988), the claim that teacher professionalism could best be enhanced by giving them a research role (Stenhouse, 1975), and the view that a reformulated version of Lewin's action research method would, by enabling teachers to test curriculum policies and proposals in their own classrooms, lead to improvements in pedagogical practice and stimulate innovative curriculum change (Elliott, 1998).

The British version of action research that emerged during this period differed from its American predecessor in several ways. One of these was its rejection of a positivistic research methodology in favour of the kind of 'interpretive' methodologies that were increasingly being employed in the social sciences. As a result action research was increasingly seen as a form

of inquiry that utilised 'qualitative' rather than 'quantitative' research methods, that focused on the perspectives of participants and social actors (Kemmis, 1988) and that generally took the form of case studies of specific situations that would be useful to practitioners (Wallace, 1987).

What also distinguished this revised version of action research was a radically different conception of its object of study. Whereas Lewin and his followers had construed 'action' as little more than a practical skill or technique to be assessed in terms of its instrumental effectiveness, its principle exponents now insisted that, in education, 'action' referred to an educational practice which, in turn, was understood as ethically informed 'action' through which educational values were pursued (Elliott, 1991). As Kemmis put it, 'The objects of educational action research are educational practices . . . Practice as it is understood by action researchers is informed committed action' (Kemmis, 1988, pp. 44–45). As a result, action research was no longer seen as a method for assessing the practical utility of social scientific theories but as a means whereby practitioners could test the 'educational theories' implicit in their own practice by treating them as experimental hypotheses to be systematically assessed in specific educational contexts. Reviewed and revised in this way, Lewin's action research cycle was transformed from a method by which practitioners applied social scientific theories to their practice into a method which allowed practitioners to assess the practical adequacy of their own tacit theories 'in action' (Elliott, 1991, 1998).

This brief account of the origins and evolution of twentieth century action research obviously leaves a lot to be desired. Nevertheless it should be sufficient to indicate how our contemporary understanding of action research relies on a narrative which portrays its history as a story of methodological progress and advance—a story of how, by conceptualising 'action' as a species of morally informed practice and by construing 'research' in accordance with post-positivistic research methodologies, action research has been able to liberate itself from the errors and confusions of its historical predecessor and develop a more intellectually sophisticated understanding of its task. But what it also shows is that the history of action research is, like any other history, a history of continuity as well as change. So although this history reveals how action research has changed in accordance with the developments that have occurred in the social sciences, the original assumption that action research is a form of social scientific research has remained unchallenged and unopposed. Similarly, although 'action' is now construed as a species of 'practice', this has not disturbed the assumption that action research can only contribute to the improvement of practice by conforming to the norms and standards prescribed by some research methodology. So while this way of writing the history of action research undoubtedly shows why we now debate questions about the kind of methodology on which action research should be erected, it does nothing to illuminate the logically prior question of why we now assume that a mode of inquiry concerned with the development of practice needs to be erected on the basis of a research methodology at all.

How is this question to be answered? Clearly it is not itself a methodological question and any suggestion that it can be answered from within the confines of action research's own methodological debate simply begs the very question at issue. Moreover, since this is essentially a question about the way in which action research now understands its own historical ancestry, the only way in which it can adequately be answered is by displaying a willingness to construct the history of action research in a radically different way. And one obvious way of rewriting action research's twentieth century history is to treat it as a recent episode in a much longer, more complex, and still continuing, process of historical and cultural change. Looked at from this much longer and larger historical perspective, action research will no longer be seen as a peculiarly twentieth century phenomenon. Instead it will be seen to be nothing other than a modern manifestation of the pre-modern tradition of practical philosophy through which our understanding of the study of practice was originally articulated and expressed.

THE PRE–MODERN TRADITION OF PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

In ancient Greece the word 'philosophy' referred to virtually all forms of serious intellectual inquiry and its modern separation from 'science' would make little sense. Also, the conceptual structures within which the concept of action was understood were very different from our own. Within these structures, the important conceptual distinctions were not between 'theory' and 'practice' or 'knowledge' and 'action', but between different kinds of human activities and the type of knowledge that guides and informs them. Thus theory (*theoria*) was essentially construed as an activity engaged in by those who pursued knowledge 'for its own sake' and 'theoretical philosophy' referred to those contemplative forms of enquiry that used *a priori* reasoning to achieve knowledge of eternal truths. Since the whole point of theoretical philosophy was to transcend the particularities and contingencies of ordinary human life, it was deemed to have no relevance whatsoever to the conduct of everyday practical activities. However, a theoretical task to which the Greeks did attach some importance was that of articulating the mode of reasoning, the form of knowledge and the kind of 'philosophy' appropriate to different types of human action. It is this task which was so brilliantly accomplished by Aristotle who, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, provided a detailed philosophical analysis of different forms of human action and the different types of reasoning they employ (Aristotle, 1955).

For Aristotle, the most important conceptual distinction to draw when considering human action is between the two forms of human action which the Greeks called *poiesis* and *praxis*. *Poiesis* refers to the numerous productive activities that form the basis of economic life. Because it is a form of 'making action' whose end is known prior to the practical means taken to achieve it, *poiesis* is guided by the form of reasoning that the Greeks called *technē* and that we would today call instrumental

'means-end' reasoning. *Poiesis* is thus a form of instrumental action that requires a mastery of the knowledge, methods and skills that together constitute technical expertise. For the Greeks, the activities of craftsmen and artisans were paradigm cases of *poiesis* guided by *technē*. And, as such, they were guided by 'productive philosophy'—what we would today call 'applied science'—which provide the principles, procedures and operational methods which together constitute the most effective means for achieving some pre-determined end.

Although, for Aristotle, *praxis* is also a form of action directed towards the achievement of some end, it differs from *poiesis* in several crucial respects. First, the 'end' of *praxis* is not to make or produce some object or artefact, but progressively to realise the idea of the 'good' constitutive of a morally worthwhile form of human life. But *praxis* is not ethically neutral action by means of which the good life can be achieved. The good of *praxis* cannot be 'made': it can only be 'done'. It follows from this that *praxis* is a form of 'doing' action precisely because its 'end'—to promote the good life—only exists, and can only be realised, in and through *praxis* itself. *Praxis* also differs from *poiesis* in that knowledge of its end cannot be theoretically specified in advance and can only be acquired on the basis of an understanding of how, in a particular concrete situation, this knowledge is being interpreted and applied. *Praxis* is thus nothing other than a practical manifestation of how the idea of the good is being understood, just as knowledge of the good is nothing other than an abstract way of specifying the mode of human conduct through which this idea is given practical expression. In *praxis*, acquiring knowledge of what the good is and knowing how to apply it in particular situations are thus not two separate processes but two mutually supportive constitutive elements within a single dialectical process of practical reasoning.

The name Aristotle gives to this form of reasoning is *phronesis*. But, although *phronesis*, like *technē*, involves subsuming particular cases under general principles, it is not a deductive form of reasoning which issues in a prescription for action. Nor is it a form of reasoning that can be learned in isolation from practice. Rather it can only be acquired by practitioners who, in seeking to achieve the standards of excellence inherent in their practice, develop the capacity to make wise and prudent judgements about what, in a particular situation, would constitute an appropriate expression of the good. Thus, for Aristotle, *phronesis* is not a method of reasoning, but a moral and intellectual virtue that is inseparable from practice and constitutive of the moral consciousness of those whose actions are rooted in a disposition to do 'the right thing in the right place at the right time in the right way' (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 141). As such, *phronesis* is a mode of ethical reasoning in which the notions of deliberation, reflection and judgement play a central part. 'Deliberation' is necessary because, unlike *technē*, *phronesis* is not a methodical form of reasoning about how to achieve some specific end, but a deliberative process in which both means and ends are open to question. Such reasoning is reflective because the means are always modified by reflecting on the end just as an understanding of the end is always modified by reflecting on the means.

And *judgement* is an essential element of *phronesis* because its outcome is a reasoned decision about what to do in a particular situation, that can be defended discursively and justified as appropriate to the circumstances in which it is being applied.[1]

Since, for Aristotle, *phronesis* is inseparable from, and can only be acquired in, practice, it cannot be developed or improved by appealing to theoretical philosophy which provides a purely abstract and intellectual understanding of the idea of the good. Similarly, to assume that *phronesis* can be informed and guided by 'productive philosophy' would simply be to transform *praxis* into a form of *poiesis*. Indeed, for Aristotle, the peculiarities of *phronesis*—its embeddedness in *praxis* and the way in which it is inseparable from the concrete situations in which it is applied— mean that it can only be advanced by a form of 'practical philosophy' that is exclusively concerned with sustaining and developing the kind of practical knowledge that guides *praxis*.

What emerged from Aristotle's analysis of *phronesis* and *praxis* was, of course, the mode of inquiry that was to constitute the pre-modern tradition of 'practical philosophy'—a tradition that permeated western intellectual culture until the seventeenth century and that has only been finally discarded in our own modern times (Toulmin, 1988, 1990). Within this tradition, it was always recognised that the indeterminate and imprecise nature of *praxis* unavoidably entails that practical philosophy is an 'inexact' science which yields a form of knowledge that cannot be applied universally and unconditionally. But, although it was readily conceded that practical philosophy does not provide a body of knowledge that practitioners can simply apply, this did not undermine its claim to be the 'science' that enables practitioners progressively to improve their practical knowledge and develop their understanding of how the good internal to their practice may, in their own particular situation, be more appropriately pursued. But what it did imply is that this claim could only be made good by a science that was concerned to defend and preserve, rather than supplant or replace, the reasoning already implicit in *praxis*. And the only kind of science that could coherently make this claim was a 'practical science': a science that sought to advance *praxis* by promoting the kind of reflectively acquired self-knowledge that would allow practitioners to identify and eliminate the inadequacies and limitations of the practical knowledge sustaining their practice. So understood, practical philosophy is 'practical' in that it recognises that the knowledge that guides *praxis* always arises from and must always relate back to practice. And it is 'philosophical' in the sense that it seeks to raise the unreflectively acquired knowledge of the good embedded in *praxis* to the level of self-conscious awareness in order that practitioners may subject their pre-philosophical understanding of their practice to critical examination.

Interpreted in this way, practical philosophy does not at all resemble that peculiarly twentieth century discipline of 'applied ethics' which separates 'first order' practical and moral questions from the 'second order' philosophical justification of the ethical principles on which these 'first order' questions depend. Rather, it is nothing other than a

pre-modern version of twentieth century action research. Like action research, it takes ethically informed human practice as its unique object domain. Like action research, it can be defined as 'a form of reflective enquiry undertaken by practitioners in order to improve their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situation in which these practices are carried out' (Kemmis, 1988, p. 42). And, like action research, it accepts that the knowledge that informs and guides practice is 'contextualised knowledge that cannot be separated from the practical context in which it is embedded' (Somekh, 2006, p. 28).

But, although action research represents a twentieth century embodiment of practical philosophy, it nevertheless differs from it in several crucial respects. For example, while in practical philosophy an understanding of the distinctive nature of practice is allowed to determine the kind of 'science' appropriate to its development, action research emerged in response to the need for a new social scientific research paradigm that would eliminate the gap between theory and practice. So while practical philosophy 'was designed precisely to protect practice against unwarranted theoretical incursions' (Dunne, 1993, p. 216), action research was designed to provide a research methodology that would integrate theory and practice by drawing on theoretical knowledge 'from psychology, philosophy, sociology and other fields of social science in order to test its explanatory power and practical usefulness' (Somekh, 2006, p. 8).

What also distinguish practical philosophy from action research are the radical differences in the historical contexts in which they emerged and the background assumptions and beliefs shaping the perspectives in terms of which they were made intelligible. It is therefore only to be expected that, when viewed from the historical perspective informing our contemporary understanding of action research, practical philosophy will tend to be regarded as an outmoded and methodologically naïve mode of inquiry that can contribute nothing to action research's current methodological debates. But should the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy be dismissed as having nothing more than antiquarian interest? Or does it provide us with an external vantage point which, by transcending the boundaries of action research's internal methodological debate, may help us to discover why action research has been so keen to embrace the idea of 'methodology' and whether it was misguided to do so? Fortunately, the intellectual resources needed to answer this question are provided by Hans-Georg Gadamer's powerful re-affirmation of the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy and his ambitious attempt to show how it can be rehabilitated in a way that would make it appropriate to the modern world.

THE CONTEMPORARY REHABILITATION OF PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

In his seminal text *Truth and Method* (1975a) Gadamer provides a compelling account of how the modern preoccupation with 'method' has led the social sciences to adopt 'a methodologically alienated form of

self-understanding' (Gadamer, 1975b, p. 312) that conceals the conditions that make human understanding possible and thereby distorts the character of human understanding itself. For Gadamer, the principal cause of this state of affairs is the modern social sciences' 'prejudice against prejudice'—their presumption that it is only by eliminating the distorting effects of bias and subjectivity from their inquiries that they can legitimise their claim to be rational sciences, uncontaminated by irrational presuppositions and beliefs. But what Gadamer clearly demonstrates is that the aspiration to achieve a purely rational understanding is illusory, that human understanding is never simply 'given' in any perception or observation but is always 'prejudiced' by an interpretive element that determines how perceptions and observations are understood. Moreover, just as the act of understanding is always an act of interpretation, so it also has an inescapably historical character. This is so because the particular prejudices that are brought to bear in any act of understanding are not the irrational or idiosyncratic biases of individuals but are embedded in the historical and cultural traditions to which individuals unavoidably belong. But although the fact that we can never transcend or deny the authority of tradition—although we can never escape the hold of what Gadamer calls 'effective history'—means that we can never evaluate our prejudices by appealing to some tradition-independent criteria of rationality, it does not entail the impossibility of rational understanding. For Gadamer 'there is no unconditional antithesis between tradition and reason' (p. 250): just as reason can only be sustained from within a tradition, so a tradition can only be sustained through the active use of reason. As Gadamer puts it, 'even the most genuine and solid tradition does not persist by nature . . . it needs to be affirmed, embraced and cultivated. It is essentially preservation . . . but preservation is an act of reason' (ibid.).

But, if reason is itself always embedded in tradition, how can it contribute to the cultivation of tradition? Gadamer's response is first to show that, just as all understanding involved 'interpretation', so it also involves 'application' in the sense that it is always affected by the particular historical situation to which it is being applied. It is when the practical demands of the present cannot be adequately met on the basis of a mode of understanding inherited from the past that adherents to a tradition are confronted with the need to reflectively expose and rationally revise their understanding so as to transcend the limitations of what, within this tradition, has hitherto been thought, said and done. So although there can be no unprejudiced criteria of rationality, participants to a tradition can nevertheless rationally revise the prejudices inherent in their self-understanding by achieving that level of self-reflective awareness that Gadamer calls 'effective historical consciousness': an explicit awareness of the 'effective history' that is sustaining their prejudices and shaping their understanding of their own historical situation. For Gadamer, it is only this kind of historical understanding that enables us to identify the inadequacies of the prejudices at work in our understanding, recognise their questionableness and 'distinguish the true prejudices by which we understand from the false ones by which we misunderstand' (Gadamer,

1975a, p. 266). And it is by so allowing us to bring the inadequacy of our inherited understanding into dialectical confrontation with the practical demands of the current situation to which it is being applied that historical consciousness promotes the rational development and evolution of the tradition within which this understanding is embedded. Thus, for Gadamer, the relationship between reason and tradition is dialectical: each transforms and is transformed by the other.

How is 'effective historical consciousness' acquired? It is not acquired by employing any method or technique but by engaging in an open conversation in which participants strive to come to a true understanding of their historical situation. It is thus achieved by individuals displaying a willingness to put their own assumptions and beliefs at risk by participating in a genuine dialogue in which they allow the partiality and particularity of their own perspectives and understandings to be exposed to, and amended on the basis of, the perspectives and understandings of others. By engaging in such conversation, adherents to a tradition learn to recognise the historically contingent and culturally situated nature of their own understanding and hence the parochial nature of what Gadamer calls their 'historical horizons'. Thus, the outcome of conversation is not an 'objective' understanding of a situation, but a 'fusion of horizons'—an achievement of shared understanding in which the inadequacies and limitations of each participant's initial understanding become transparent and what is valid and valuable is retained within a more integrated and more comprehensive understanding of the situation under discussion.

Gadamer's account of the historical structure of human understanding is, of course, entirely applicable to an understanding of the social sciences and in a collection of essays published under the title *Reason in the Age of Science* (Gadamer, 1981) he shows how modern social science has its own 'effective history', how its concepts of 'rationality' and 'objectivity' are internal to a tradition and, hence, how social scientific knowledge is only as 'rational' or 'objective' as the historically rooted prejudices that this tradition has bequeathed. What this reveals is that the assumption of a wholly ahistorical concept of reason that is independent of tradition is nothing other than a definitive 'prejudice' of the tradition of modernity and hence that modernity—which for Gadamer 'can be defined quite unequivocally as a new notion of science and method' (Gadamer, 1981, p. 6)—has led to a view of the social sciences in which prejudice and tradition are treated as adversary notions and the concept of methodology is assigned a central role. But once we recognise that the social sciences' aspiration to transcend the distorting influence of prejudice and tradition is one of the illusions of modernity—once we acknowledge that 'there is no understanding that is free of all prejudice' (Gadamer, 1975a, p. 465)—then we cannot avoid the need to articulate 'an understanding of social science that is no longer based on the idea of method' (Gadamer, 1980, p. 74). And for Gadamer the search for a non-methodical understanding of social science inevitably leads to a re-understanding of 'the remote and no longer vital tradition of Aristotelian philosophy' (p. 78). 'But how', he

asks, 'does the philosophy of Aristotle lead itself to this discussion? How can the philosophical analysis of human life and human attitudes and human actions and human institutions by the ancient thinker contribute to a better understanding of what we are doing?' (p. 76).

Gadamer responds to these questions by engaging in a dialogical encounter with Aristotelian philosophy in which Aristotle's analysis of *phronesis* and *technē* is allowed to expose the prejudices of our contemporary understanding of social science and thereby enable us to forge a better understanding of 'what social science is'. What emerges from this 'conversation' is a 'fusion of horizons' whereby our understanding of what is important and significant in Aristotle's practical philosophy is modified and transformed by the perspective formed by our modern historical situation, and our understanding of our modern historical situation is in turn modified and transformed by the perspective afforded by Aristotle's practical philosophy. What we learn from this 'appropriation' of Aristotle is that the kind of reasoning appropriate to the development of human understanding is analogous to the non-technical mode of situated and contextual practical reasoning that Aristotle called *phronesis*. But what we then also begin to recognise is how, in the culture of modernity, the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* has been rendered obsolete, dialogue has been replaced by technical expertise and historical consciousness has been supplanted by a rigid conformity to methodological rules. As Gadamer puts it,

> The great merit of Aristotle was that he anticipated the *impasse* of our scientific culture by his description of the structure of practical reason as distinct from theoretical knowledge and technical skill . . . In a scientific culture such as ours the fields of *technē* are much more expanded. The crucial change is that practical wisdom can no longer be promoted by personal contact and the mutual exchange of views . . . Consequently the concept of *praxis* which we developed in the last two centuries is an awful deformation of what practice really is . . . The debate of the last century . . . degrades practical reason to technical control (Gadamer, 1975a, p. 107).

For Gadamer, one of the major consequences of this deformation of *praxis* is that it has led to the demise of practical philosophy and its replacement by a collection of value-free 'social sciences' exclusively reserved for those who possess the necessary methodological sophistication and technical expertise. In these circumstances, argues Gadamer, the chief task of philosophy is to repudiate the assumptions on which this view of social science has been erected and to develop a non-methodical, dialogical model of the social sciences in which the role of practical reason in the formation of human purposes and social ends is given full recognition. And, for Gadamer, the only way for philosophy to achieve this task is by reasserting the value and validity of the science of practical philosophy in a way that would make it appropriate for the modern world. As he puts it, 'the scientific character of practical philosophy is, as far as

I can see, the only model for the self-understanding of the social sciences if they are to be liberated from the spurious narrowing imposed . . . by the modern notion of method' (Gadamer, 1979, p. 107).[2]

PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY, METHODOLOGY AND ACTION RESEARCH

The implications of Gadamer's rehabilitation of the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy for our understanding of the social sciences are obviously far-reaching.[3] But what is equally obvious is how it enables us to provide answers to questions about the role of methodology in action research that are not available from within the confines of action research's own methodological debate.[4] For what it clearly demonstrates is how the very notion of a 'methodological debate' is itself rooted in action research's acceptance of certain historically rooted prejudices concerning the nature of practice and how practical knowledge can be developed. And what this implies is that it is only by displaying a willingness to bring our self-understanding of action research into dialogical encounter with Gadamer's analysis of the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy that we will be in a position to achieve that level of 'effective historical consciousness' which would allow us to appreciate the extent to which our conception of action research as a form of methodologically principled social scientific inquiry has been contaminated by the prejudices of modernity and how these prejudices continue to exercise a distorting influence on the way in which action research is now conducted and understood. But once we are prepared to give this kind of historical depth to our understanding of 'what action research is', some important insights begin to emerge.

What immediately emerges is a realisation not only of how twentieth century action research represents the starting point for a new social scientific 'research paradigm', but also of how practical philosophy has been transposed into a cultural context in which the pre-modern meanings attached to the concepts of 'action', 'practice', 'knowledge' and 'philosophy' have been radically transformed. Deprived of the conceptual and cultural resources necessary for its continuing existence, it is hardly surprising that practical philosophy has been rendered obsolete and replaced by an 'action research paradigm' which was based not on a philosophical analysis of the role of human reason in the development of practical knowledge, but on the need to develop a research methodology appropriate to the social scientific study of 'action'. It was of course only by so embracing the notion of 'methodology' that action research could be vindicated in terms of the prejudices that shaped the dominant culture of modernity. But in doing this, action research itself became deeply implicated in depriving *praxis* of the tradition of inquiry through which it had hitherto been articulated and sustained.

Thus, what also emerges is an understanding of how, in the course of the transition from practical philosophy to action research, the concept of

praxis has been distorted and how such distortions could only have been avoided by developing a form of action research which acknowledged that *praxis* cannot be developed or improved by a mode of inquiry that is based on methodological principles or rules. This second insight implies another. One of the ways in which action research methodology functions to communicate a distorted concept of *praxis* is by concealing both its historical and cultural embeddedness and the non-methodical mode of practical reasoning through which it develops and evolves. But, by doing this, it deprives us of any understanding of why it is that action research can only contribute to the improvement of practice by meeting the need of practitioners to develop those forms of philosophical reflection and historical consciousness that the development of their *praxis* requires. Moreover, in so far as an initiation into the methodology of action research has now replaced philosophy and history in the study of practice, practitioners are thereby denied access to precisely those kind of inquiries that would allow them to understand why their practice cannot be improved on the basis of knowledge derived from a form of action research conducted on the basis of a methodology.[5]

Thus, what finally emerges is a realisation of how action research has itself contributed to the erosion of the intellectual and cultural conditions that are necessary if its avowed commitment to the development of practice is to be fulfilled. However, once action research is prepared to expand its own 'historical horizons'—once, that is, it is prepared to make its own implicit acceptance of the dominant beliefs of modernity explicit—then it should become increasingly apparent why action research can only be made intelligible as a mode of inquiry that aspires to create and nurture the kind of dialogical communities within which *phronesis* can be embedded and which the development of *praxis* presupposes and requires. If it were to be understood in this way, action research would no longer feel it necessary to demonstrate its legitimacy by appealing to a methodology. Instead, it would be a form of inquiry that recognised that practical knowledge and understanding can only be developed and advanced by practitioners engaging in the kind of dialogue and conversation through which the tradition-embedded nature of the assumptions implicit in their practice can be made explicit and their collective understanding of their *praxis* can be transformed. It would therefore retain its claim to be a form of 'practitioner research' that enables practitioners to test the assumptions implicit in their practice, but would now insist that since these assumptions are always historically and culturally embedded, they can only be tested through a form of research concerned to promote historical consciousness. It would thus be a form of research that recognised that history is the domain in which practical reasoning is constituted and cultivated and that the power of history is something that a research methodology can never eliminate or transcend.

Interpreted in this way, action research would no longer be understood as a social science 'research paradigm' that can achieve what conventional social scientific research has conspicuously failed to achieve. Rather it would be regarded as nothing other than a post-modern manifestation of

the pre-modern Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy. As such, it would be a mode of inquiry whose chief task was to reclaim the sphere of *praxis* from its modern assimilation to the sphere of *technē* by fostering the kind of dialogical communities in which open conversation can be protected from the domination of a research methodology. This is not an easy task to achieve. Within the dominant culture of modernity, the concepts of *phronesis* and *praxis* have been rendered marginal and now face something approaching total obliteration. But it is only by seeking to ensure that the void created by the demise of practical philosophy will not be filled by a research methodology that action research will be able to defend the integrity of *praxis* against all those cultural tendencies that now undermine and degrade it.[6]

Correspondence: Wilfred Carr, School of Education, University of Sheffield, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2JA.
Email: w.carr@sheffield.ac.uk

NOTES

1. My account of Aristotle's distinction between *phronesis* and *technē* draws heavily on the second part of Dunne (1993).
2. For a detailed exposition and analysis of Gadamer's theory of understanding, see Bleicher, 1980; Bernstein, 1983; Warnke, 1987; Dunne, 1993.
3. Some of these implications are developed as part of Bent Flyvbjerg's argument for creating a 'phronetic social science' explicitly committed to contributing 'to the ongoing social dialogue' concerning the questions 'Where are we going?' 'Is this desirable?' 'What should be done?' (Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp. 60–61). For an attempt to articulate the idea of a 'post-paradigmatic phronetic political science', see Schram (2004).
4. The significance of Gadamer's appropriation of Aristotelian practical philosophy for our understanding of action research was noted many years ago by John Elliott (Elliott, 1987).
5. For a discussion of the ideological role that the notion of 'methodology' plays in the social sciences see MacIntyre (1979).
6. This is an expanded version of a paper originally presented at the 2005 *International Conference on Practitioner Research/Action Research* in Utrecht, Holland.

REFERENCES

Adelman, C. (1993) Kurt Lewin and the Origins of Action Research, *Educational Action Research*, 1.1, pp. 7–24.
Aristotle (1955) *The Nicomachean Ethics*, J. A. K. Thompson, trans. (London, Penguin).
Bernstein, R. J. (1983) *Beyond Objectivism and Subjectivism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Oxford, Blackwell).
Bleicher, J. (1980) *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul).
Durkheim, E. (1982) *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Macmillan, London).
Dunne, J. (1993) *Back to the Rough Ground: 'Phronesis' and 'Technē' in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle* (London, University of Notre Dame Press).
Elliott, J. (1987) Educational Theory, Practical Philosophy and Action Research, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 35.2, pp. 149–169.
Elliott, J. (1991) *Action Research for Educational Change* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press).

Elliott, J. (1998) *The Curriculum Experiment: Meeting the Challenge of Social Change* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

Flyvbjerg, B. (2001) *Making Social Science Matter* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Gadamer, H-G. (1975a) *Truth and Method*, G. Barden and J. Cummings, trans. and ed. (New York, Seabury Press).

Gadamer, H-G. (1975b) Hermeneutics and Social Science, *Cultural Hermeneutics*, 2, pp. 307–316.

Gadamer, H-G. (1979) The Problem of Historical Consciousness, in: P. Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan (eds) *Interpretive Social Sciences: a Reader* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

Gadamer, H-G. (1980) Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences, *Research in Phenomenology*, 9, pp. 74–85.

Gadamer, H-G. (1981) *Reason in the Age of Science*, F. G. Lawrence, trans. (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press).

Kemmis, S. (1988) Action Research, in: J. P. Keeves (ed.) *Educational Research, Methodology and Measurement: An International Handbook* (Oxford, Pergamon Press).

Lewin, K. (1946) Action Research and Minority Problems, *Journal of Social Issues*, 2.4, pp. 34–46.

Lewin, K. (1952) Group Decision and Social Change, in: G. E. Swanson, T. M. Newcomb and E. L. Hartley (eds) *Readings in Social Psychology* (New York, Holt).

MacIntyre, A. C. (1979) Social Science Methodology as the Ideology of Bureaucratic Authority, in: M. J. Falco (ed.) *Through the Looking Glass: Epistemology and the Conduct of Inquiry* (Tulsa, University Press of America).

MacIntyre, A. C. (1981) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Philosophy* (London, Duckworth).

McTaggart, R. (1991) *Action Research: A Short Modern History* (Geelong, Australia, Deakin University Press).

Sanford, N. (1970) Whatever Happened to Action Research?, *Journal of Social Issues*, 26.4, pp. 3–23.

Schram, S. F. (2004) Beyond Paradigm: Resisting the Assimilation of Phronetic Social Science, *Politics and Society*, 32.3, pp. 417–433.

Somekh, B. (2006) *Action Research: A Methodology for Change and Development* (Maidenhead, Open University Press).

Stenhouse, L. (1975) *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* (London, Heinemann).

Toulmin, S. (1988) The Recovery of Practical Philosophy, *The American Scholar*, 57.3, p. 354.

Toulmin, S. (1990) *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York, The Free Press).

Wallace, M. (1987) A Historical Review of Action Research: Some Implications for the Education of Teachers in their Management Role, *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 13.2, pp. 97–115.

Warnke, G. (1987) *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Cambridge, Polity Press).

Weber, M. (1949) *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York, Free Press).