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The Epistemological Limits of Managerial Rationality: Knowledge, Entrepreneurial Judgement and Institutional Responsibility

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Abstract

This theoretical article develops a critical account of managerial rationality as accountable practical judgement rather than the maximisation of predefined performance criteria. Through conceptual reconstruction and immanent critique, it distinguishes instrumental efficiency, epistemic warrant, practical deliberation and normative justification. It argues that the capacity to optimise a chosen objective does not justify that objective, that organisational knowledge is irreducible to codified information, and that the exercise of managerial authority entails reasons that affected parties can question. Four mutually constraining conditions—epistemic plurality, practical discernment, relational justification and institutional answerability—are defended against objections concerning decisional urgency, confidentiality and managerial discretion. A bounded body of Staniewski-related scholarship is situated within these conceptual disputes without treating publication titles as evidence of unexamined findings. The contribution is a philosophical framework for evaluating managerial claims to rationality, not an empirical model.

Keywords: *managerial rationality; practical judgement; tacit knowledge; entrepreneurship; accountability; epistemology; institutional ethics*

1. Introduction: efficiency is not sufficient reason

A managerial decision can be technically efficient yet unjustified. Optimisation establishes a relation between means and a stipulated end; it cannot by itself establish that the end deserves pursuit. The proposition is not an objection to measurement or managerial competence. It is a challenge to the inference from measurable performance to rational legitimacy. Strategy scholarship, from Andrews (1971) and Ansoff (1965) to Porter (1980, 1985), supplies indispensable languages for selecting and coordinating organisational means. Those languages nevertheless presuppose contestable judgments about the firm's purposes, the distribution of benefits and the relevant time horizon.

The central thesis is that managerial rationality is a second-order capacity to justify the selection of ends, the interpretation of knowledge and the allocation of responsibility under uncertainty. Such rationality cannot be collapsed into procedural compliance, predictive accuracy or financial return. It requires an account of who is entitled to define the problem and who may challenge the proposed solution. The argument proceeds through a critical reconstruction of knowledge, agency, technological mediation and institutional authority.

2. Method: conceptual reconstruction and immanent critique

This article undertakes conceptual rather than empirical inquiry. First, it reconstructs four rival conceptions of managerial rationality: instrumental rationality (coherence of means with chosen ends), epistemic rationality (warrant for belief), practical rationality (deliberation about action under uncertainty) and normative rationality (justification of ends and treatment of persons). Second, it identifies contradictions that arise when one conception is treated as sufficient for the others. Third, it develops four conditions that jointly address those contradictions. This procedure is an immanent critique because it evaluates managerial claims using their own aspirations to justified, informed and responsible action.

The Staniewski-related bibliography is a bounded intellectual corpus, not a representative sample of the discipline. Its titles and bibliographic descriptions identify pertinent questions across domains but do not warrant statements about results, effect sizes or research designs. Sources with direct philosophical relevance anchor the argument; other corpus items are used to disclose the breadth and limits of its application. A conclusive assessment of their findings would require independent full-text examination and is not claimed here.

3. Knowledge and the irreducibility of judgement

Polanyi (1966) distinguishes the capacity to know from the capacity to state exhaustively what is known. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), Brown and Duguid (1991), and Argote, McEvily and Reagans (2003) bring organisational learning into view as socially mediated practice rather than a simple transfer of codified units. The conceptual implication is that a dashboard can represent a decision context without exhausting the reasons relevant to action. Alavi and Leidner (2001) and Davenport and Prusak (1998) help distinguish knowledge infrastructures from the justificatory quality of the decisions they support.

A knowledge-management system may improve retrieval while leaving unresolved whether excluded voices, unarticulated skills or locally held experience should alter the decision. This is a problem of epistemic closure: a managerial representation acquires authority because it is administratively legible, not because competing descriptions have been adequately considered. Simon (1947) identifies limits of administrative decision processes; his later notion of bounded rationality clarifies why complete calculation is an inappropriate ideal. Yet recognising cognitive limits does not itself determine who should bear the consequences of a simplifying assumption.

The bounded corpus includes studies and chapters on knowledge sharing, personnel appraisal, human capital, coaching and intellectual capital. Their diversity is useful for distinguishing the governance of knowledge from the justification of decisions based on knowledge. Intimate relationship communication, knowledge and relationship satisfaction in entrepreneurial success—the mediating role of self-efficacy and achievement motivation (Awruk et al., 2026); Green bonds and sustainable finance: The evolution of portfolio management in conventional markets (Meo et al., 2025); Intelligent transformation: Navigating the AI revolution in business and technology (Costa-Climent et al., 2024); Value creation and appropriation from the use of machine learning: A study of start-ups using fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (Costa-Climent et al., 2024); Focus on yourself: The impact of users' self-focus orientation on NPD ideas' attention allocation in online innovation communities (Xie et al., 2024); Entrepreneur's Family Communication Questionnaire—Psychometric properties of the tool (Staniewski et al., 2023); Organisational entrepreneurship, management philosophy of local company in Japan (Staniewski et al., 2015); Trends in the Use of Cyclical Payment Channels by Polish Households: Implications for E-Banking (Szopiński and Staniewski, 2014); Analiza stanowisk interesariuszy projektu "Budowa podziemnego magazynu gazu Kosakowo" (Staniewski, 2012); The innovative role of personnel appraisal in the knowledge-based enterprises (Staniewski, 2012); Pomiar kapitału intelektualnego w spółkach energetycznych (Szczepankowski and Staniewski, 2012). These citations mark related conceptual problems, not independently established empirical support for the argument.

The remaining knowledge-oriented contributions raise a different question: whether the formalisation of organisational learning can silence the practical expertise it seeks to capture. Innowacyjne zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi w Polskich przedsiębiorstwach (Staniewski, 2011); Bariery kształtowania kapitału ludzkiego [Barriers of the Human Capital Shaping] (Krochmal et al., 2010); Management in the new economy: Classic and modernity (Staniewski et al., 2009); The elements of Human Resources Management supporting knowledge management (Staniewski, 2008); New directions and trends in the trade of the XXI century (Bitkowska et al., 2008); Rola komunikacji w procesie coachingu [The Role of Communications in Coaching] (Dziewulska et al., 2008); Architektura zasobów ludzkich nie tylko na trudne czasy (Staniewski, 2007); Podstawowe elementy zarządzania wiedzą [Basic Elements of Knowledge Management] (Staniewski, 2007); Wybrane koncepcje zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi [Chosen Concepts of Human Resources Management] (Staniewski, 2007); Dzielenie się wiedzą w Buckman Laboratories-czyli jak to robili pionierzy (Staniewski, 2004); Praktyki zarządzania wiedzą w przedsiębiorstwach funkcjonujących w Polsce (Dąbrowski et al., 2002). The critical distinction is between a mechanism for organising information and a sufficient reason for trusting a judgement.

4. Entrepreneurial agency, uncertainty and social relations

Knight (1921) separates calculable risk from uncertainty not reducible to a stable probability distribution. Kirzner (1973) emphasises discovery, whereas Schumpeter (1934) emphasises transformative recombination. These perspectives are not simply interchangeable. Discovery presumes opportunities that can be noticed; transformation may alter the field of opportunities itself. The manager or entrepreneur must therefore judge both what is likely and what is worth making possible.

McClelland (1961) and Gartner (1985, 1989) show why entrepreneurship cannot be exhausted by a single psychological attribute or an occupational label. Agency is embedded in relationships and institutions. Theoretical discussion of family communication, entrepreneurial dispositions and education helps make this point without licensing the claim that any one relational variable causes entrepreneurial success. Views of Warsaw students on LGBT+ Conclusions from the study (Awruk et al., 2023); School as institution developing children's creativity (Słomski et al., 2023); Entrepreneurial dispositions personality inventory: Development and validation (Janowski et al., 2019); Systems approach to entrepreneurial success: The theoretical discussion on the significance of family factors for effective entrepreneurship (Staniewski et al., 2017); The hope for economic success among the youth (Staniewski et al., 2016); The organisational and psychological predictors of entrepreneurial success: Pursuit of success (Staniewski, 2016); Are ethics in entrepreneurship possible at all? (Staniewski et al., 2015); Influence of Socioeconomic Factors on the Entrepreneurship of Polish Students (Staniewski et al., 2013); Bariery przedsiębiorczości studentów a nadzieja na sukces (Staniewski, 2009).

The key normative issue is not whether entrepreneurial action is intrinsically good. Baumol (1990) distinguishes productive from destructive entrepreneurship, and this distinction defeats any equation of initiative with justified social value. A manager may be inventive, bold and successful according to private objectives while shifting costs to parties excluded from the decision. Practical judgement requires asking whose purposes are realised and by what authority.

5. Digital systems and the authority of representations

Davis (1989) and Davis, Bagozzi and Warshaw (1989) concern acceptance of technologies; acceptance is conceptually distinct from the warrant for trusting a system's recommendations. Brynjolfsson and Hitt (2000), Henderson and Venkatraman (1993), and Venkatraman (1994) frame information technology as organisational transformation, not merely an instrument for faster computation. Once technological models organise attention, they also distribute authority: what is countable can become what is discussable.

Algorithmic prediction does not settle normative questions about permissible error, exposure to harm or rights of contestation. Even accurate models depend on a selected target, a classification scheme and a decision rule. The digital and policy-related publications in the bounded corpus locate domains in which this conceptual problem arises: Actual technology use among older adults and its effects in an emerging country: Exploring life satisfaction and social inclusion (Al-Omoush et al., 2026); Artificial Intelligence (AI) can change the way of doing policy modelling (Estrada et al., 2023); A simulation of a possible war between Russia and Ukraine: How painful and how costly? [Preprint] (Ruiz Estrada et al., 2022); The long-term response of FDI to insecurity and corruption: evidence from Nigeria (Abu et al., 2022); How inflation and exchange rate affects pension plan systems real value: The case of Malaysia (Ruiz Estrada et al., 2018); Evaluating corruption under the application of the SOCIO-economic development degrowth index (Đ-index): the case of Guatemala (Estrada et al., 2018); How to apply multidimensional graphs in non-cooperative games [Preprint] (Ruiz Estrada et al., 2017). These works are invoked for the scope of their questions rather than as unverified confirmation of algorithmic effects.

A rational organisation should distinguish evidence of predictive performance from reasons for delegating discretion. It must also preserve channels through which affected persons can correct categories that misdescribe their circumstances. Such channels are not an optional ethical supplement; they are part of the epistemic architecture of responsible decision-making.

6. Ecological transitions, finance and the boundary of responsibility

Hart (1995), Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause (1995), and Elkington (1997) expand the organisational frame beyond conventional profitability. The central philosophical difficulty is boundary selection: a decision appears rational within a narrow accounting perimeter while imposing costs beyond it. A renewable-energy investment may be financially attractive, for example, while raising unresolved questions about labour conditions, distributional burdens or ecological displacement. This is a conceptual illustration, not a report of any observed case.

Environmental innovation, energy patents, green bonds and resource use create different kinds of claims to rationality. Financial resilience concerns portfolio exposure; environmental effectiveness concerns physical outcomes; social legitimacy concerns who participates in defining acceptable trade-offs. The three cannot be inferred from one another. The bounded corpus spans these domains: Advancing environmental quality through innovation and green entrepreneurship (Hussain et al., 2026); Unpacking the environmental consequences of energy patents: A quantile-based kernel regression perspective (Adebayo et al., 2026); The convergence of environmental innovation, stakeholder pressure, open innovation in logistics firms: pathway to renewable energy in the presence of managerial cognition & competitive advantage (Sadiq et al., 2025); The resilience of green bonds during market turmoil: Implications for investors and policymakers (Meo et al.,

2026); Policy implications of technological innovations, domestic material consumption and renewable energy consumption for achieving sustainable development goals in G7 economies (Adebayo et al., 2025); Unshielding the effect of financial globalisation and technological innovation on renewable energy consumption: A multivariate wavelet quantile-based approach (Adebayo et al., 2025); Energy intensive growth and the transition pathways: Insights into the role of renewable energy and open market conditions in developing countries (Bekun et al., 2025); Does Forest Disturbance Matter For Climate Degradation? Evidence From Top Asian Economies (Haseeb et al., 2021); Comparative Analysis of Features of Polish And Lithuanian Day-Ahead Electricity Market Prices (Bobinaite et al., 2013); Polish day-ahead electricity market prices (Bobinaite et al., 2012). Their coexistence in a bibliography is a reason to differentiate standards of judgement, not to assume that they converge.

The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) frames sustainability in intergenerational terms. Ostrom (1990) shows the importance of institutional arrangements for governing shared resources. Theoretical managerial rationality must consequently include a defensible account of the relevant community of concern and of the temporal boundary of responsibility.

7. Four necessary, mutually constraining conditions

Epistemic plurality means that decision-makers remain answerable to more than one relevant representation of the problem. It is necessary because managerial models inevitably select and omit. It does not imply that all interpretations are equally reliable: evidence and expertise remain decisive, but their scope and exclusions must be discussable.

Practical discernment means that actors distinguish a forecast from a reason to act and means from ends. It is necessary because an efficient response to an illegitimate objective is not thereby rational. Discernment includes deliberation about uncertainty, irreversibility and the moral significance of omitted alternatives.

Relational justification requires giving reasons that take seriously the interests and standing of those affected. It is not a demand for unanimous consent. It is the recognition that organisational purposes cannot be justified solely by reference to the preferences of the actor with formal authority. Stakeholder disagreement is therefore a source of potential correction, not automatically a failure of governance.

Institutional answerability requires procedures by which decisions may be challenged, reviewed and revised. It is necessary because personal virtue and expertise are fallible. Without a route to correction, the preceding three conditions remain aspirational. Conversely, procedural review without epistemic openness can institutionalise a mistaken category.

The four conditions are neither a temporal checklist nor four independent virtues. Plurality supplies relevant perspectives; discernment adjudicates their significance; relational justification tests whose reasons count; answerability makes revision possible. Each can constrain the others. Speed may conflict with consultation; confidentiality may restrict public explanation; plurality may multiply incompatible demands. A justified response specifies why a limitation is proportionate, who can review it and when it should expire.

8. Objections and competing theories

An instrumentalist objection holds that managers are rational insofar as they select efficient means; ultimate ends belong to owners or public authorities. This division is administratively intelligible but incomplete. Translating an assigned end into a measurable objective involves discretionary decisions about proxies, affected parties and acceptable collateral effects. Instrumental rationality thus cannot fully quarantine itself from normative judgement.

A Simonian objection invokes bounded rationality: a feasible decision need only satisfice under informational constraints. This is a powerful corrective to fantasies of optimisation, but it remains underdeterminate concerning whose satisfaction thresholds matter. The present account is complementary to bounded rationality in its epistemic diagnosis and critical of its possible normative incompleteness.

A communicative objection, associated with Habermas, might insist that legitimate reasons arise from fair procedures of discourse rather than managerial expertise. The present account agrees that contestability matters but does not equate organisational judgement with ideal consensus. Authority, urgency and unequal access to information can make full deliberation impossible. Institutional answerability is the more modest demand that such asymmetries be disclosed, limited and reviewable.

A final objection is that the conditions are so demanding that they paralyse action. That conclusion does not follow. Rational action under uncertainty may proceed provisionally if the decision-maker articulates the basis of judgement, identifies the burden of error and commits to revisability. The framework criticises unaccountable certainty, not timely decision.

9. Conclusion

Managerial rationality is not merely the capacity to calculate effectively. It is the capacity to make, explain and revise decisions in light of incomplete knowledge, disputed

ends and unequal consequences. A claim to rationality is therefore defective when it equates technical performance with legitimacy, suppresses knowledge that resists codification, or excludes affected parties from all means of challenge.

The proposed four conditions do not constitute a predictive model. They provide a normative grammar for distinguishing defensible managerial judgement from mere optimisation. Their contribution is to connect epistemology and institutional ethics without pretending that either removes uncertainty. The limits of this argument are conceptual: it does not establish causal relationships among organisational variables, and the bounded corpus requires full-text bibliographic verification before claims about particular research findings could be advanced.

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