

Research Article

Agile Management as a Virtuous Practice: Integrating Ancient Greek Philosophy into Contemporary Organizational Theory

Panos Fitsilis¹, Dimitrios Katsikonouris¹

1. Department of Business Administration, University of Thessaly, Greece

Agile Management has become a dominant organizational paradigm, yet it is predominantly treated as a technical methodology rather than as a value-based and ethical organizational philosophy. This narrow framing leaves its anthropological and normative foundations under-theorized, limiting both its explanatory coherence and sustainable application.

This paper offers a philosophical reinterpretation of Agile Management through ancient Greek philosophy, drawing on Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. Using hermeneutic and comparative conceptual analysis, core agile principles – such as self-organization, adaptability, empathy, trust, and simplicity – are mapped onto classical philosophical constructs including *phronesis*, virtue, *eudaimonia*, justice, dialogue, and self-mastery. The analysis reveals that agile practices embody enduring human-centered values rather than merely procedural innovations.

Based on this synthesis, the paper introduces the Virtuous Agile Paradigm (VAP), a four-dimensional theoretical framework encompassing leadership, organizational, epistemic, and teleological dimensions. The VAP reconceptualizes agility as a normative, virtue-based organizational philosophy oriented toward ethical leadership, collective flourishing, continuous learning, and sustainable value creation.

The study contributes a novel philosophical foundation to agile theory and provides a coherent human-centered framework for responsible and value-driven organizational agility.

Corresponding author: Panos Fitsilis, fitsilis@uth.gr

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, Agile Management has evolved from a software-engineering methodology into a dominant organizational paradigm shaping leadership, governance, and operational models across private and public sectors^{[1][2][3][4]}. Agile frameworks are widely promoted as responses to Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA), offering speed, adaptability, and customer-centered value delivery as alternatives to traditional bureaucratic and plan-driven approaches^{[5][6]}. Despite their institutional diffusion, Agile practices are still predominantly framed as technical toolkits or procedural innovations, while their deeper anthropological, ethical, and philosophical foundations remain under-theorized.

Current literature emphasizes iterative development, self-organized teams, stakeholder collaboration, and continuous feedback as key operational mechanisms^{[2][7][8]}. However, this technical emphasis often marginalizes the value-laden dimensions of agility – such as trust, empathy, responsibility, and practical wisdom – that are critical for sustainable organizational transformation^{[6][4]}. As a result, Agile Management is frequently implemented in a mechanistic manner, leading to superficial adoption, cultural misalignment, and limited long-term impact. This gap highlights the need for a coherent theoretical foundation capable of explaining agility not merely as a method, but as a normative organizational philosophy.

Ancient Greek philosophy offers a rich conceptual tradition that can address this theoretical deficit. In the *Republic*, Plato conceptualizes leadership as a moral and epistemic responsibility grounded in justice, education, and harmony within the community, articulated through the principle of “*ta heautou prattein*” – each part performing its proper role for the common good^[9] (Plato, *Republic* 421b–433b). Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, introduces *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as the central virtue guiding ethical decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, while defining *eudaimonia* – εὐδαιμονία as the ultimate telos of human and communal life^[10] (Aristotle, *NE* I.7; VI.5). The Stoic tradition, particularly in Epictetus’ *Enchiridion*, further emphasizes adaptability, self-mastery, and the distinction between controllable and uncontrollable factors as foundations for resilient and rational action^[11]. Together, these traditions articulate a coherent anthropocentric and virtue-based philosophy of leadership, cooperation, and flourishing.

Several contemporary management scholars have acknowledged the relevance of virtue ethics and practical wisdom for leadership and organizational learning^{[12][13][14]}. However, systematic integration of

classical philosophical constructs into Agile Management theory remains limited. This paper addresses this gap by proposing a philosophical reinterpretation of agility grounded in ancient Greek thought, moving beyond instrumentalist interpretations toward a value-oriented theoretical framework.

The study adopts a hermeneutic and comparative conceptual methodology to examine the alignment between agile principles – such as self-organization, empathy, simplicity, adaptability, and continuous learning – and classical philosophical constructs including *phronesis*, virtue, dialogue, justice, and *eudaimonia*. Based on this synthesis, the paper introduces the Virtuous Agile Paradigm (VAP), a four-dimensional theoretical model (leadership, organizational, epistemic, and teleological) that conceptualizes Agile Management as a form of virtuous organizational life. The VAP reframes agility as a normative philosophy oriented toward ethical leadership, collective flourishing, continuous learning, and sustainable value creation, rather than solely as a methodological toolkit.

This study makes three original theoretical contributions. First, it establishes an integrated virtue-ethical foundation of Agile Management grounded explicitly in ancient Greek philosophy. Second, it introduces the Virtuous Agile Paradigm (VAP) as a normative organizational model that reconceptualizes agility as a form of virtuous organizational life. Third, it reframes organizational agility as a teleological and epistemic phenomenon rather than a purely operational capability.

2. Theoretical Background and Bibliographic Review

2.1. Agile Management as an Organizational Paradigm

Agile Management has gradually evolved from a set of software development practices into a broader organizational philosophy that influences leadership models, governance structures, and organizational culture^{[2][6][4]}. While early agile approaches were primarily focused on iterative delivery, customer collaboration, and adaptive planning^[1], contemporary literature increasingly recognizes agility as a systemic organizational transformation rather than merely a project management methodology^[3].

Modern organizations operate in environments characterized by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA), which challenge linear planning models and mechanistic organizational structures^[5]. Agile Management responds to these conditions by promoting self-organized teams, decentralized decision-making, and continuous learning cycles, positioning adaptability and learning capacity as strategic organizational capabilities^{[6][15][16]}. However, despite this systemic framing, agile

discourse remains predominantly operational, often prioritizing tools, frameworks, and rituals (Scrum, Kanban, SAFe) over deeper theoretical and ethical considerations^[4].

This technical orientation has resulted in what is frequently described as “mechanical agility”, where organizations adopt agile practices without corresponding changes in leadership mindset, organizational values, and ethical orientation^[6]. This phenomenon occurs when an organization adopts the “motions” of Agile (the rituals, tools, and terminology) without embracing the “spirit” of Agile (the mindset, culture, and values). It is often described as “doing Agile” versus “being Agile”^[17]. Consequently, agility risks degenerating into a productivity optimization instrument rather than a holistic human-centered organizational paradigm.

To counteract this mechanical drift, the work of Jurgen Appelo offers a critical pivot from “managing people” to “managing the system,” directly addressing the leadership gap that fuels mechanical agility. Appelo challenges the prevailing machine metaphor by framing organizations as Complex Adaptive Systems – comparable to living gardens rather than engineered mechanisms – where outcomes cannot be linearly predicted but only cultivated. By redefining management as a group responsibility rather than a role, Appelo’s *Management 3.0* and *unFIX* models provide the missing operational scaffolding for decentralized decision-making, ensuring that agility serves as a human-centric driver of engagement rather than a mere efficiency algorithm^{[18][19]}.

2.2. Leadership, Practical Wisdom, and Ethical Foundations

Leadership in agile environments is increasingly associated with participatory, servant, and facilitative leadership models, emphasizing empowerment, trust, and psychological safety^{[20][21]}. These approaches highlight the centrality of relational and ethical dimensions of leadership, yet they often lack an explicit philosophical foundation that systematically explains why such values are critical beyond their instrumental effectiveness. Leadership may therefore be conceptualized as a practice of moral excellence rather than instrumental control, emphasizing character, community, and virtue^[22].

Virtue ethics, particularly in the Aristotelian tradition, provides a coherent theoretical lens for understanding leadership as a moral and epistemic practice rather than merely a functional role^{[12][14]}. The concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) is particularly relevant, as it emphasizes context-sensitive judgment, ethical reasoning, and the ability to act appropriately under conditions of uncertainty –

conditions that mirror contemporary organizational complexity^[13]. Phronesis-oriented leadership aligns with agile principles that prioritize adaptive decision-making, continuous reflection, and learning.

The Stoic tradition further contributes to this ethical foundation by emphasizing resilience, self-mastery, and rational engagement with change, reinforcing agility's focus on adaptability and emotional regulation in uncertain environments^{[11][23]}. These philosophical constructs collectively offer a robust normative grounding for agile leadership, beyond efficiency-driven interpretations.

2.3. Organizational Learning, Dialogue, and Human-Centered Agility

Agile Management incorporates core elements of organizational learning theory, particularly the emphasis on feedback loops, collective reflection, and continuous improvement^[15]. Retrospectives, iterative cycles, and cross-functional collaboration function as institutionalized learning mechanisms that foster shared understanding and adaptive capability. However, learning is frequently conceptualized instrumentally, without explicit articulation of its epistemic and ethical significance.

Ancient Greek philosophy situates learning and dialogue at the core of collective rationality and communal flourishing. Plato's emphasis on dialectic reasoning and Aristotle's conception of learning through habituation and practice (*ethos*) underscore the social and ethical dimensions of knowledge production^{[9][10]}. These perspectives align with agile practices that privilege dialogue, reflection, and shared sense-making, offering a deeper conceptual foundation for organizational learning as a normative process rather than merely an operational necessity.

2.4. Adaptability, Simplicity, and Eudaimonia

Simplicity and adaptability are fundamental agile principles^[1]. Lean Thinking reinforces these values by advocating waste elimination and focus on essential value-creating activities^[8]. While these principles are often framed in terms of efficiency and productivity, classical philosophy associates simplicity with moderation, balance, and the pursuit of the good life (*eudaimonia*), rather than mere operational optimization^[10].

Appelo's rejection of the "machine" metaphor in favour of the "living system"^[18] echoes the Aristotelian distinction between *poiesis* (production/fabrication) and *praxis* (action/cultivation). Just as the Aristotelian leader cultivates virtue to achieve *eudaimonia*, Appelo's "Agile Manager" cultivates the environment to foster emergence, moving from engineering outputs to nurturing organizational flourishing.

This teleological dimension introduces a critical reframing of agility: organizational success is not only measured by performance indicators but also by the capacity to support human flourishing, ethical coherence, and long-term sustainability. Thus, agile organizations may be conceptualized as communities of practice oriented toward collective *eudaimonia*, rather than as purely performance-driven systems.

2.5. Toward a Virtue-Based Theory of Agile Management

Despite growing interest in values-based leadership and ethical organizational design, existing agile literature lacks an integrated philosophical framework that systematically connects agility with virtue ethics and human flourishing. The present study addresses this theoretical deficit by synthesizing agile principles with ancient Greek philosophical constructs, proposing a conceptual model that frames Agile Management as a form of virtuous organizational life.

This synthesis culminates in the Virtuous Agile Paradigm (VAP), which integrates leadership, organizational, epistemic, and teleological dimensions into a coherent theoretical structure. The VAP aligns with virtue-based theories of the firm that frame organizations as moral communities oriented toward internal goods and shared practices^{[12][24]}. Further, the VAP extends agile theory beyond procedural rationality, offering a normative, human-centered and ethically grounded foundation for understanding and guiding organizational agility.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Methodological Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with an interpretive and comparative orientation, aiming to explore conceptual, philosophical and value-based dimensions of Agile Management that cannot be meaningfully examined through quantitative methods. The methodological choice is aligned with the theoretical nature of the research and its objective to construct a normative organizational model grounded in ancient Greek philosophy.

The research does not pursue generalization through quantitative methods but seeks analytical and theoretical generalization through conceptual interpretation and synthesis^{[25][26]}. This interpretive orientation follows phronetic social science, which prioritizes practical wisdom, contextual judgment, and value-rational inquiry over universal law-seeking models^[27].

3.2. Research Paradigm and Philosophical Positioning

The research is positioned within an interpretive–pragmatist paradigm. It assumes that organizational reality is socially constructed and that leadership, collaboration, and organizational practices are shaped by values, meanings and ethical orientations rather than by purely technical mechanisms.

Ancient Greek philosophy and Agile Management are approached as coherent theoretical systems that can be meaningfully compared through hermeneutic interpretation and conceptual mapping.

3.3. Research Design and Analytical Stages

The research design follows four analytical stages, adapted directly from the structure of the thesis:

Stage 1 – Systematic Conceptual Analysis of Agile Management

A systematic review and conceptual analysis of Agile Management literature was conducted in order to identify its core values, principles and leadership constructs. Emphasis was placed on self-organization, collaboration, empathy, adaptability, simplicity, learning and value creation^{[1][2][6][4]}.

Stage 2 – Hermeneutic Analysis of Classical Philosophical Texts

A hermeneutic interpretation of selected works by Plato (*Republic*), Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*)^[10], and Stoic philosophers (Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius) was conducted to extract philosophical constructs relevant to leadership, cooperation, adaptability, ethics and human flourishing.

Stage 3 – Comparative Thematic Analysis

The philosophical constructs were systematically compared with agile principles through thematic mapping. Conceptual correspondences were identified and grouped into five core conceptual pairs:

- Self-organization – Aristotle's *Phronesis*
- Trust – Aristotle's *Philia* and Plato's *Homonoia*
- Empathy – Stoic's *Sympatheia*
- Learning – Stoic's *Dichotomy of Control*
- Simplicity – Aristotle's *Eudaimonia* and *Mesotes*

Stage 4 – Synthetic Theoretical Construction

Based on the above mappings, an integrated theoretical model was constructed, leading to the formulation of the Virtuous Agile Paradigm (VAP), combining leadership, organizational, epistemic and teleological dimensions.

3.4. Method of Analysis

Three complementary analytical methods were employed:

- Hermeneutic analysis
- Comparative thematic analysis
- Conceptual synthesis

These methods enabled interpretive depth and theoretical coherence, ensuring that the proposed model is grounded in both philosophical and management literature.

The study is subject to inherent limitations of conceptual research. Interpretive variability of philosophical texts and the absence of empirical validation are acknowledged. Nevertheless, the systematic and transparent analytical process supports the internal consistency and theoretical robustness of the proposed framework.

4. Conceptual findings

4.1. Mapping Agile Management with Ancient Greek Philosophy

The comparative hermeneutic analysis revealed systematic and non-accidental convergences between the value foundations of Agile Management and the core philosophical constructs of ancient Greek thought. Rather than representing isolated analogies, these convergences form a coherent normative architecture that supports the interpretation of agility as a virtue-based organizational philosophy.

Five central conceptual pairs emerged as stable bridges between the two domains.

4.1.1. Self-Organization vs Phronesis

Agile organizations rely on self-organized teams capable of making autonomous, context-sensitive decisions^{[2][3]}. This principle presupposes judgment, ethical responsibility and experiential knowledge rather than mere procedural compliance.

This logic corresponds directly to Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, defined as practical wisdom guiding appropriate action under uncertainty^[10] (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.5). *Phronesis* enables moral and situational judgment, forming the philosophical foundation of agile autonomy. Self-organization is thus not an operational convenience, but a manifestation of practical wisdom exercised collectively. Unlike *episteme* (scientific knowledge) which deals with universal truths, *phronesis* deals with particulars, enabling Agile teams to make context-sensitive judgments when rigid rules fail. Furthermore, this autonomy is structurally supported by Plato's conception of justice in the *Republic*, articulated as *to ta heautou prattein* (τὸ τὰ ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν) – the principle that harmony arises when each part of the community performs its proper role for the common good. In an Agile context, self-organization is not anarchy, but a Platonic form of order where authority is internalized rather than imposed. Finally, the capacity to exercise this autonomy amidst volatility draws upon the Stoic tradition of self-mastery (*enkrateia* – ἐγκράτεια)^[11], which emphasizes distinguishing between controllable internal actions and uncontrollable external events. Thus, self-organization is not merely an operational convenience but a synthesis of classical virtues: it is a manifestation of practical wisdom (*Aristotle*), communal harmony (*Plato*), and rational resilience (*Stoics*) exercised collectively.

4.1.2. Trust vs *Philia* and *Homonoia*

Agile Management emphasizes trust, transparency and psychological safety as prerequisites for collaboration^{[21][6]}. These elements create the relational infrastructure required for decentralized decision-making.

This aligns with Aristotle's concept of *philia* – *φιλία* (friendship), specifically "friendship of virtue," which he identifies as the glue of political communities, far superior to mere legal justice. While procedural contracts enforce compliance, *philia* generates the voluntary social cohesion – or "social capital" – necessary for high-velocity collaboration. Plato reinforces this in the *Republic* through the concept of *homonoia* – *ομόνοια* (concord or like-mindedness), arguing that a unified community relies on shared values to avoid internal factionalism. Furthermore, the Stoic concept of *oikeiôsis* – *οἰκείωσις* (appropriation) broadens this trust by encouraging individuals to view others not as competitors, but as extensions of themselves. Agile trust structures are thus modern institutionalizations of these ancient ethics: they replace the "fear of the tyrant" with *homonoia* and transform transactional working groups into Aristotelian communities of shared purpose.

4.1.3. Empathy vs Sympatheia

Servant and participatory leadership models in agile contexts prioritize empathy, listening and empowerment^[20]. Leadership is exercised through facilitation rather than command.

This shift finds its practical operationalization in Appelo's *Management 3.0*, which redefines management as "managing the system, not the people." Appelo's emphasis on "Energizing People" through intrinsic motivation mirrors the Stoic ideal of *sympatheia* - συμπαθεια (mutual interdependence), where the leader acts not as a detached architect but as an organic part of the system, sensing and responding to the team's needs. Early Stoic philosopher, Posidonius, systematizes and popularizes *sympatheia* specifically, applying it to explain phenomena like astrology, tides, and natural signs as evidence of universal organic unity^[28]. Marcus Aurelius^[29] does not define *sympatheia* with a formal definition, but he describes it in *Meditations* as the interconnectedness and mutual "family feeling" of all things in the cosmos.

Plato's philosopher-leader and Aristotle's virtuous ruler are characterized by moral responsibility and concern for communal well-being. Empathy functions as the ethical mechanism enabling participatory leadership, reflecting the classical principle that authority is justified through virtue rather than power.

4.1.4. Learning – Stoic Dichotomy of Control

Agile learning and adaptability depend on continuous feedback, retrospectives and iterative learning cycles that distinguish between what teams can control (process, learning, response) and what they cannot (external market demands, client changes). This mirrors the Stoic dichotomy of control, where Epictetus teaches focusing rational effort on internal dispositions while accepting external events with composure^[11]. This iterative process is operationalized by Appelo^[18], who argues that in a complex environment, organizations must move beyond the binary of "success vs. failure" to a focus on learning. "Celebration Grid" tool embodies this shift, encouraging teams to celebrate *learning* (whether from success or failure) while discouraging mindless execution. Dialogue serves as the epistemic engine of collective sense-making.

Dialogue thus serves as the epistemic engine of collective sense-making, transforming raw data into wisdom. This mirrors Plato's dialectical method (*dialektike* - διαλεκτική), where truth is not dictated by authority but discovered through the rigorous friction of opposing ideas and questioning (*elenchus* - ἐλεγχος). Furthermore, Aristotle's conception of learning through habituation (*ethismos* - ἐθισμός) establishes the Agile retrospective not as a mere administrative meeting, but as the ritualized practice of

excellence. Just as Aristotle argued that "we become builders by building"^[10], agile teams become adaptable only through the disciplined habit of reflection. Agile dialogue therefore represents a modern organizational manifestation of classical epistemic practice, validating Appelo's assertion that management is a process of "nurturing the system" to allow collective intelligence to emerge.

4.1.5. Simplicity vs Eudaimonia and Mesotes

Agile simplicity aims to minimize waste and focus on essential value creation. This principle is deeply rooted in Lean Thinking, where Womack and Jones^[8] define the elimination of muda (waste) as the relentless pursuit of "Perfection - striving to create value with zero surplus. This philosophy is most clearly operationalized in the concept of the Minimum Viable Product (MVP)^[30] which seeks to deliver the maximum amount of validated learning with the least amount of effort. The MVP represents a deliberate strategic choice to strip a product down to its absolute essentials, rejecting the "waste" of fully developed but unverified features in favour of core utility.

Classical philosophy frames this radical reductionism within a teleological horizon. The Lean and Agile pursuit of "just enough" aligns precisely with Aristotle's doctrine of the Golden Mean (*mesotes* - μεσότης)^[10], where virtue is found in the perfect intermediate state between the vice of excess (feature bloat/bureaucracy) and the vice of deficiency (chaos). Furthermore, this practice of stripping away the excess finds its most striking philosophical archetype in Diogenes the Cynic^[31], a precursor to Stoic ethics. Famous for living in a large ceramic jar (pithos) with minimal belongings, Diogenes practiced extreme *askisis* - ἀσκησις (disciplined training), arguing that the "good life" is achieved by subtracting artificial wants to align with nature. Just as Diogenes famously discarded his wooden cup upon seeing a child drink from his hands - realizing the tool was an unnecessary redundancy - the Agile mindset discards muda to reveal the product's essential value. *Eudaimonia* thus defines flourishing through moderation, balance, and meaningful activity. Agile simplicity therefore acquires a deeper ethical meaning: it is not merely operational efficiency, but a form of organizational *askisis*, a normative orientation toward sustainable life where the elimination of waste serves the higher telos of human and organizational well-being.

4.2. The Virtuous Agile Paradigm (VAP)

4.2.1. Conceptual Overview

The Virtuous Agile Paradigm (VAP) is proposed as an integrated theoretical framework that reconceptualizes Agile Management as a normative and virtue-based organizational philosophy. Rather than interpreting agility as a set of technical practices designed to increase efficiency and responsiveness, the VAP frames it as a form of virtuous organizational life grounded in ethical leadership, collective learning, and human flourishing. The model synthesizes core agile principles with ancient Greek virtue ethics, positioning agility within a broader anthropological and teleological horizon.

VAP is articulated through four interdependent dimensions: leadership, organizational, epistemic and teleological. Together, these dimensions constitute a coherent normative architecture that defines not only how organizations operate, but also why they operate in particular ways.

4.2.2. Leadership Dimension: Virtue, Phronesis and Empathy

Within the VAP, leadership is conceptualized primarily as a moral and epistemic practice rather than as a hierarchical function. Leaders are understood as facilitators of collective judgment and ethical sense-making, whose authority derives from practical wisdom (phronesis), moral integrity, and empathic engagement with organizational members. This dimension reframes leadership through Plato's conception of the Leader-Guardian, who safeguards the team's purpose and harmony, ensuring that empowerment and participation are directed toward the common good rather than factional interests.

Central to this stewardship is Aristotle's virtue of prudence (phronesis), which transforms trust from a passive sentiment into an active intellectual practice; the prudent leader grants autonomy not recklessly, but through the wisdom of discerning the team's capacity and context. Furthermore, the Stoic discipline of self-control anchors the leader's emotional resilience, creating a stable environment where psychological safety can thrive despite external volatility. Consequently, empathy, trustworthiness, and moral consistency are not peripheral competencies but constitutive elements of effective agile leadership. The VAP thus defines the Agile leader as a virtuous, flexible guide who leads with wisdom, inclusivity, and moral conscience, fostering teams that exercise autonomous yet responsible decision-making under conditions of uncertainty.

4.2.3. Organizational Dimension: Harmony, Cooperation and Social Capital

The organizational dimension conceptualizes the organization as a moral community rather than as a mechanistic system of roles and procedures. The VAP emphasizes harmonious role distribution, trust-based cooperation, and collective accountability, grounding these in Plato's concept of the Organic Polis. In this view, the organization functions as a unified living entity where diverse parts cooperate seamlessly for the whole, replacing siloed competition with structural harmony. This mirrors Plato's description of the 'organic city' in the *Republic*, which he compares to a single living body (*macro-anthropos* - *μακρο-ἄνθρωπος*). Plato argues that in a well-ordered state, the community feels the experience of its members just as a person feels pain in a finger - collectively and immediately - thereby establishing that organic unity, not mechanical aggregation, is the standard of a healthy organization^[9] (Plato, *Republic*, 462c–d).

This cooperation is fuelled by Aristotle's ideal of Friendship (*philia*), which treats social capital not merely as a resource, but as the essential relational infrastructure that enables decentralized coordination. Furthermore, the Stoic principle of Common Reason (*logos*) provides the intellectual foundation for interoperability, ensuring that self-organizing teams remain aligned through a shared rational and ethical purpose. Through this lens, organizational effectiveness is not solely measured by output efficiency but by the quality of these relational infrastructures, resulting in a collaborative environment characterized by the harmonious distribution of roles and moral coherence.

4.2.4. Epistemic Dimension: Dialogue, Learning and Adaptability

The epistemic dimension defines how knowledge is produced, validated, and institutionalized within agile organizations. Continuous dialogue, collective reflection, and iterative learning cycles constitute the primary epistemic mechanisms through which organizations adapt to changing environments. This process is grounded in Plato's method of Dialectics, which establishes dialogue as the rigorous friction of ideas necessary to discover truth and drive improvement. Furthermore, learning is framed not merely as technical skill acquisition but as the cultivation of Aristotle's Practical Wisdom (*Phronesis*) - a shared moral and cognitive process that transforms raw reflection into responsible action. This stance is rooted in the Socratic paradox "*en oida oti ouden oida*" - "*ἐν οἶδ᾽ ὅτι οὐδὲν οἶδ᾽*" ("I know that I know nothing")^[32]. Unlike traditional management which often feigns certainty, Agile empiricism embraces Socratic humility, acknowledging that in complex environments, knowledge is not a pre-existing possession but a continuous discovery.

Finally, adaptability is interpreted through the Stoic principle of the Stoic dichotomy of control “*ta eph’ hêmin - ta ouk eph’ hêmin*” – “τὰ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν – τὰ οὐκ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν”, viewing volatility not as a disruption, but as an external reality to be navigated with rational composure. Thus, adaptability represents epistemic maturity rather than procedural speed, creating an organization that constantly learns through dialogue, logical judgment, and reflective improvement.

4.2.5. Teleological Dimension: Value, Simplicity and Eudaimonia

The teleological dimension articulates the purpose of organizational life within the VAP. Organizational success is ultimately oriented toward sustainable value creation and collective flourishing (*eudaimonia*), rather than short-term efficiency gains alone. This orientation is grounded in Aristotle’s concepts of the Golden Mean and Well-Being (*Eudaimonia*), where simplicity is interpreted as ethical moderation – the virtuous balance that avoids the excess of waste to achieve true well-being. Furthermore, Plato’s principle of Harmony ensures strategic clarity, guiding organizations to align all disparate activities toward a unified, meaningful good. Finally, the Stoic emphasis on Virtue establishes a resilient ethical foundation, defining sustainability not merely as resource management but as moral excellence. This dimension thus establishes a normative criterion for evaluating organizational practices, defining a purpose that connects value with human well-being and virtuous functioning.

This teleological orientation provides a robust philosophical foundation for the modern ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) framework. By defining “value” through the lens of *eudaimonia* (human flourishing) and *mesotes* (moderation), the VAP transforms ESG from a compliance checklist into an intrinsic organizational virtue. In this view, Environmental sustainability is not merely carbon management but a practice of *harmony with nature* and the elimination of excess^[33]. Social responsibility mirrors Aristotelian *philia*, fostering deep community trust rather than transactional relationships. Finally, Governance evolves from rigid control into *phronesis* (distributed practical wisdom), ensuring that ethical obligations are met not through external regulation, but through the virtuous character of the organization^[34].

4.2.6. Integrative Logic of the Model

The four dimensions of the VAP form a unified normative system. Ethical leadership cultivates trust-based organizational communities, which in turn enable continuous learning and adaptive capacity. This adaptive capacity supports sustainable value creation and collective flourishing, closing the normative

loop of virtuous organizational life. In this sense, the VAP reframes agility as a morally grounded and human-centered organizational paradigm rather than as a purely instrumental management methodology. Table 1 summarise the four dimensions of the VAP.

Dimension	Core Principles of Agile Management	Philosophical Foundations	Synthesis in the Proposed Model
1. Ethical Leadership	Empowerment, participation, trust	Plato: Leader-guardian Aristotle: Phronesis Stoics: Self-control	A virtuous flexible leader who leads with wisdom, inclusivity and moral conscience.
2. Organizational Virtue	Self-organization, interoperability, cooperation	Plato: Organic polis Aristotle: Friendship Stoics: Common reason	Collaborative with harmonious distribution of roles and moral coherence.
3. Epistemic Learning	Reflection, learning, adaptation	Plato: Dialectics Aristotle: Practical wisdom Stoics: Dichotomy of Control	An organization that constantly learns through dialogue, logical judgment and reflective improvement.
4. Teleological Purpose	Delivering value, simplicity, sustainability	Aristotle: Golden Mean, Well-Being Plato: Harmony Stoics: Virtue	Purpose that connects value with human well-being and virtuous functioning.

Table 1. *The four dimensions of VAP*

5. Discussion

The present study reinterprets Agile Management not as a merely procedural methodology but as a normative organizational philosophy grounded in virtue ethics and ancient Greek thought. The conceptual synthesis demonstrates that the foundational values of agility – self-organization, adaptability, empathy, trust, simplicity and continuous learning – are not recent managerial inventions but contemporary expressions of enduring anthropological and ethical principles articulated in classical philosophy. This finding challenges the dominant instrumentalist framing of agility and positions it within a broader moral and teleological horizon.

The emergence of the Virtuous Agile Paradigm (VAP) offers a theoretical response to the widely reported phenomenon of “mechanical agility,” in which organizations adopt agile tools without corresponding transformations in leadership culture and ethical orientation. By grounding agility in *phronesis*, virtue and *eudaimonia*, the VAP provides a coherent normative logic explaining why agile practices require moral and relational infrastructures to function sustainably. Agility thus appears not simply as an operational capability but as a form of organizational maturity.

Crucially, this synthesis resolves the “Plato Paradox”– the tension between the *Republic's* rigid political hierarchy and Agile's flat structure – by reinterpreting *Justice* as functional integrity rather than social stratification^[9]. Within the VAP, Plato's principle of *ta heautou prattein* (doing one's own work) is applied to foster organic harmony, where distinct roles cooperate without subordination, mirroring the interdependent unity of the 'organic city'. This distinction clarifies that Agile order arises not from external command, but from the internalized authority of shared purpose and role clarity.

A central implication of the findings concerns leadership theory. The study reinforces the argument that effective leadership in complex environments is fundamentally a moral and epistemic practice rather than a hierarchical control function. The Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* explains why decentralized decision-making and self-organization presuppose ethical judgment, experiential wisdom and responsibility. This philosophical foundation clarifies the normative legitimacy of servant and participatory leadership models widely advocated in agile contexts.

The epistemic dimension of the VAP also repositions organizational learning as a moral and dialogical process rather than as a purely technical feedback mechanism. Continuous reflection, retrospectives and iterative sense-making are interpreted as institutionalized forms of collective rationality that mirror

classical dialectical traditions. In this sense, agility represents epistemic sophistication rather than procedural acceleration.

Finally, the teleological reframing of agility toward *eudaimonia* introduces a critical perspective on contemporary performance-oriented management cultures. By interpreting simplicity and value creation as ethical moderation and meaningful contribution rather than as mere efficiency, the VAP aligns organizational success with long-term human and social flourishing.

Furthermore, the VAP model distinguishes between the instrumental simplicity of Lean efficiency and the normative simplicity of classical *askisis*. While both employ a reductionist methodology to eliminate waste, their telos differs: the former pursues profit and speed, while the latter pursues freedom and self-mastery. The VAP bridges this gap by framing organizational simplicity not as mere cost-cutting, but as the practice of *mesotes*. In this view, the removal of excess bureaucracy and feature bloat is elevated from a tactic for margin improvement to an ethical discipline that sustains a focused, undistracted, and healthy organizational community.

6. Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature in three principal ways. First, it offers an integrated philosophical foundation of Agile Management grounded explicitly in ancient Greek virtue ethics. This reframing extends agile theory beyond its instrumental origins and situates it within moral philosophy and organizational ethics.

Second, the study introduces the Virtuous Agile Paradigm (VAP) as a coherent normative model that integrates leadership, organizational, epistemic and teleological dimensions into a unified theoretical structure. The VAP advances existing agility models by providing explanatory depth and normative coherence, addressing a major conceptual gap in agile scholarship.

Third, the study bridges classical philosophy and contemporary management theory, demonstrating that virtue ethics provides not merely historical inspiration but a systematic conceptual infrastructure for understanding modern organizational phenomena.

Agile Management is increasingly central to organizational life, yet its dominant interpretations remain largely technical, and method driven. This paper has demonstrated that agility is more coherently understood as a virtue-based organizational philosophy rooted in enduring ethical principles articulated by Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. Through hermeneutic and comparative conceptual analysis, the study

has shown that agile values are modern institutionalizations of classical constructs such as *phronesis*, dialogue, social capital, empathy and *eudaimonia*.

The Virtuous Agile Paradigm (VAP) reframes agility as a morally grounded, human-centered and sustainable form of organizational life. It offers scholars a novel theoretical lens and provides practitioners with a principled framework for designing organizations that are not only adaptive, but also ethically coherent and socially responsible.

To bridge the gap between theory and practice, future research could also explore operational tools that translate the VAP into daily rituals. For instance, the framework could be integrated into Retrospectives by adding a 'Virtue Check' alongside standard performance metrics. In this model, teams would not only ask "What went well?" (efficiency) but also "Did we act with *phronesis*?" (prudence) or "Did our decisions reflect *homonoia*?" (unity). Similarly, during Sprint Planning, the definition of value could be expanded beyond customer utility to include "teleological alignment" – ensuring that proposed features contribute to sustainable flourishing (*eudaimonia*) rather than mere feature bloat. Such practical applications would transform the VAP from a philosophical ideal into a tangible tool for decision-making.

References

1. Beck K, Beedle M, van Bennekum A, Cockburn A, Cunningham W, Fowler M, Grenning J, Highsmith J, Hunt A, Jeffries R, Kern J, Marick M, Martin RC, Mellor S, Schwaber K, Sutherland J, Thomas D (2001). "Manifesto for Agile Software Development." *Agile Manifesto*. <https://agilemanifesto.org>.
2. Highsmith J (2009). *Agile Project Management: Creating Innovative Products*. Pearson Education.
3. Rigby DK, Sutherland J, Takeuchi H (2016). "Embracing Agile." *Harvard Bus Rev*. 94(5):40–50.
4. Fitsilis P (2023). *Agile Management Methods*. Kallipos, Open Academic Editions. doi:10.57713/kallipos-196.
5. Bennett N, Lemoine J (2014). "What VUCA Really Means for You." *Harvard Bus Rev*. 92(1/2).
6. Denning S (2018). *The Age of Agile: How Smart Companies Are Transforming the Way Work Gets Done*. Amacom.
7. Sutherland J, Schwaber K (2020). "The Scrum Guide." *Scrum.org*.
8. Womack JP, Jones DT (1997). "Lean Thinking – Banish Waste and Create Wealth in Your Corporation." *J Oper Res Soc*. 48(11):1148–1148.
9. Ferrari GRF (Ed.) (2000). *Plato: 'The Republic'*. Cambridge University Press.

10. ^a ^b ^c ^d ^e ^f ^g Crisp R (Ed.) (2014). *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*. Cambridge University Press.
11. ^a ^b ^c ^d Long AA (2002). *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*. Clarendon Press.
12. ^a ^b ^c MacIntyre A (2013). *After Virtue*. A&C Black.
13. ^a ^b Nonaka I, Takeuchi H (2019). *The Wise Company: How Companies Create Continuous Innovation*. Oxford University Press.
14. ^a ^b Nussbaum MC (2013). *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton University Press.
15. ^a ^b Senge PM (2006). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Broadway Business.
16. ^a Tsoukas H, Cummings S (1997). "Marginalization and Recovery: The Emergence of Aristotelian Themes in Organization Studies." *Organ Stud.* 18(4):655–683.
17. ^a Eilers K, Simmert B, Peters C (2020). "Doing Agile Vs. Being Agile—Understanding Their Effects to Improve Agile Work." In: *International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS)*.
18. ^a ^b ^c Appelo J (2011). *Management 3.0: Leading Agile Developers, Developing Agile Leaders*. Addison-Wesley Professional.
19. ^a Appelo J (2022). "What Is UnFIX?" *unFIX*. <https://unfix.com/blog/what-is-unfix>.
20. ^a ^b Laloux F (2014). *Reinventing Organizations*. Vol. 58. Brussels: Nelson Parker.
21. ^a ^b Edmondson A (1999). "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams." *Adm Sci Q.* 44(2):350–383.
22. ^a Solomon RC (1992). *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business*. Oxford University Press.
23. ^a Robertson D (2018). *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Life: Embrace Perseverance, Strength and Happiness With Stoic Philosophy*. Hachette UK.
24. ^a Moore G (2012). "Virtue in Business: Alliance Boots and an Empirical Exploration of MacIntyre's Conceptual Framework." *Organ Stud.* 33(3):363–387.
25. ^a Creswell JW, Poth CN (2016). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Sage Publications.
26. ^a Yin RK (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications*. Vol. 6. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
27. ^a Flyvbjerg B (2001). *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge University Press.

28. [△]Holiday R, Hanselman S (2020). *Lives of the Stoics: The Art of Living From Zeno to Marcus Aurelius*. Penguin in.
29. [△]Marcus Aurelius (2006). *Meditations*. Modern Library.
30. [△]Keller JM (2017). "The MVP Model: Overview and Application." *New Dir Teach Learn*. 2017(152):13–26.
31. [△]Diogenes Laertius (2018). *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Harvard University Press.
32. [△]Plato (1997). "Apology." In: Cooper JM (Ed.), *Plato: Complete Works*. Hackett Publishing. pp. 17–36.
33. [△]Jordan K, Kristjánsson K (2017). "Sustainability, Virtue Ethics, and the Virtue of Harmony With Nature." *Environ Educ Res*. 23(9):1205–1229. doi:[10.1080/13504622.2016.1157681](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2016.1157681).
34. [△]Dzwonkowska D (2024). *Virtue Ethics and the Environment*. Routledge. doi:[10.4324/9781003433156](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003433156).

Declarations

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.