

ON BEING A 'BUSINESS PHILOSOPHER' by Geoffrey Klempner

PHILOSOPHY is the supreme arena of label-fetishism. The first thing philosophers do when they meet is check out each other's labels. Are you an analytic philosopher, a continental philosopher, a process philosopher?

It's a question I refuse to answer because I will not be labelled or put in a category. For the same reason, I dislike the label, 'business philosopher'.

However, there is an additional objection in this case. The terms, 'philosopher' and 'philosophy' have been over-used and abused by people in the business world to the point where the concept has ceased to have any real meaning. A self-taught 'consultant' who has never picked up a philosophy book in his life can call himself a 'business philosopher'. And many do.

Just to get rid of any cosy notions you may have formed about what *real* philosophers do, let me give my take.

Philosophy is radical. It digs down below the surface, strikes at the root. It doesn't offer easy help or cosy reassurances. It demands that you re-evaluate your life and your projects, leaving no stone unturned. Philosophy demands everything that you can give without promising anything in return.

That is how the true business philosopher approaches the business world. Not as a datum but as a problem, a worrying question mark, a concept which is required to go to strenuous lengths to justify its very existence. The first question of business philosophy is, 'How is business possible?'

Maybe it isn't. I *don't know*.

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When I was asked to write an article about the circumstances that led up to the publication of Philosophy for Business [1], my immediate reaction was, 'Which version of the story do you want?'

In the business world, all 'history' is revisionary, a PR exercise, not an attempt to get at the truth in any meaningful sense. And everyone knows this. The result is that such exercises are always evaluated cynically, as mere salesmanship, the only question being what product you have on your shelf today.

I have no doubt that these lines will be read with the same cynical attitude. As if you could somehow sneak past your audience's defences with the emphatic assurance, 'No, no this really isn't a PR exercise, what I am telling you is the truth!'

'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate and would not stay for an answer. [2]

In the end it doesn't matter, because I am arguing a case and not merely giving a historical account (although I am doing that too). I am going to give the case that convinced me to take an interest in business philosophy. If you think my case is valid,

or at least worth a hearing, then I will have achieved my objective.

I am not a socialist or a defender of the free market. I don't have a recipe for business success, nor am I trying to rally people to a cause. I just want to understand *what is going on*. Because it doesn't make sense to me. I feel as if I am an alien who has just landed from Mars, seeing human beings scurrying about in hectic activity, who just hasn't a clue about its meaning or purpose.

Neither, I suspect, do they.

This is how philosophy begins, in a state of 'aporia' or bewilderment, not knowing one's way about. Economic life and competition are so familiar to us that we have ceased to be aware the phenomenon as something to wonder at or put into question.

And yet there must have been a time when this was new. Something happened to make homo sapiens mutate into homo economicus. What was it? How did economic thinking gain such a hold? Is there any alternative? These are the kinds of questions that grip me.

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How would I explain to a business person the point of philosophy?

We are looking at the concept of 'philosophy' or of what it is to philosophize. Philosophy involves thinking. But thinking about what? To think is an action with an outcome. The outcome of software designer Jane Doe thinking about the problem of how to calculate the tax on item B is a formula which can be included in to the program she is writing which will calculate the tax on item B.

Thinking, when it is successful, leads one way or another to a positive outcome. Thinking is always to some purpose. So what is the purpose of philosophical thinking?

Suppose you said, 'The purpose of philosophical thinking is to understand.' After thinking hard about some problem, I 'understand' better than I did before. But we can still raise the same question about understanding. What is that for? what is its outcome? The accountant explains a difficult point to Jane and she understands the explanation. Now she can use that understanding as part of her purposeful thinking activity, e.g. to work out the correct formula.

One of the great debates in philosophy is whether philosophy is ultimately justified by its practical results. I personally don't hold this. My justification for philosophy would be the sheer fact that we are *gripped* by philosophical questions. For someone who feels impelled to philosophize, who feels the need to 'understand' in a philosophical way, no more justification is needed. That is *my* experience. However, I believe that philosophers have a necessary duty to apply their understanding to make the world a better place.

Notice the difference between these two views: the first says that the only possible justification for philosophy lies in its practical results, while the second merely says that philosophers have a duty to apply their thinking to practical problems. When Marx said, 'Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways;

the point is to change it'[3] he was giving expression to the first view. As I said, I don't agree with this. You can't put philosophy in a box.

One of the things that makes ancient Greek philosophy so fascinating is that these issues were still hot questions. In the dialogue *Phaedo* [4], Socrates explains his decision to focus on the question of man and the purpose of existence, thus taking a radically different road from that of his predecessors the 'physical' philosophers who theorised about the structure of the universe. The angry clash between Socrates and the sophists illustrates radically different approaches to the relation between theory and practice and the nature of truth.

The physical philosophers, Socrates, and the sophists each had different views of the ultimate point of philosophy. I don't want to beg the question of the validity one particular view rather than another. Whichever view you take, the tools of philosophy — analysis and logical reasoning — are available to be used to probe and question different aspects of human life, and in particular the world of business.

That is what any philosopher who has an ethical conscience, who recognizes the duty to apply one's thinking to practical problems is bound to do.

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Ten years ago, when I launched my philosophy school, 'Pathways to Philosophy'[5] I took the first tentative steps which would lead me out of the narrow confines of the academic world into the business arena. At first, I was hardly aware that anything had changed. I continued to write philosophy. I had my students. I corresponded with other philosophers.

My first lesson in business was the importance of advertising. I learned how to make web sites. From then on, I was no longer communicating solely with an audience of academic philosophers as I had done previously. I was broadcasting my views to the general public, selling a subject called 'philosophy', selling myself.

Then one day I woke up and realized that I had become the very thing that philosophers over two and a half thousand years have defined themselves *against*: a sophist. No words or descriptions can do adequate justice to the sheer trauma of the discovery that you have gone over to the 'other side'. I was a Jedi knight turned Darth Vader, priest turned devil worshipper, the epitome of all that philosophers fear and despise.

In time, I got used to the idea. I said that I don't accept labels. These days, I don't align myself with the 'philosophers' or with the 'sophists'. You could describe me, with a pinch of salt, as a 'sophist who loves philosophy'.

On the front page of Glass House Philosopher[6] I said provocatively, 'I am one of a new breed. Call us the *internet sophists*. Whether more will follow our example, only time will tell. I believe the university departments have had their day. Time has come for a more democratic arrangement.' You can take that with a big pinch of salt too.

The idea of starting a business philosophy e-journal was first suggested to me by a consultant from a free advisory service based at the Sheffield Chamber of Commerce. One of my Pathways volunteers was very well connected with the business world and

offered to take charge of promotion and building an email address list.

Philosophy for Business was launched in November 2003 and is currently in its 25th issue. When I started the journal, I had only just begun to grapple seriously with the philosophical issues relating to the business world. It has been a steep learning curve. Every contributor to the journal has taught me something valuable. I continue to learn.

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Let me now ask the question I posed earlier, in reverse:

How would I explain to a philosopher the nature of the business world?

There is an ideal, which comes across very strongly when you read someone like Ayn Rand, that the practice of business is, or can be a vocation in the true sense, a calling. The point is that it *can* be. But it need not be. One of the fascinating aspects of the business arena is that the doors are not barred to those whose only motive is profit and material gain. (The film *Wall Street* raises these issues in a very entertaining way, and very much from a moral perspective.)

This is not a 'good' thing or a 'bad' thing because it is part of the package. For the majority, the motivation is complex, not simple: to provide for oneself and one's family, certainly, but equally to contribute to the wealth of society as a whole by playing a necessary and valuable part in the economic process.

That is one view.

On the other side, you have the view of Karl Marx. The young Marx's answer to 'the meaning of life, the universe and everything' was very simple: *work*. Through working on external things we literally *create* ourselves, we make the world a human world. We identify with our productions. They are our very soul externalized, the essential thread that connects us to the rest of human society.

Any committed artist or writer understands this. As a philosopher, Marx lived for his 'work'. Few are so lucky. In return for paper or metal tokens which can be exchanged for food or material goods, the worker sells his *capacity for work*, in other words himself. For the Marx of the 1844 *Manuscripts* [7], this was the definition of prostitution. All workers are prostitutes.

Marx understood fully well that not all work is creative work. The world imposes necessities upon us, and each of us has to share the burden. But this too is part of the process of 'creating ourselves' because of its essentially social aspect. However, that is only how things would be, if we lived according to our 'essence'. In reality, under capitalism, not only are workers reduced to prostitutes, but the very bonds that constitute human society — the human world — are perverted and destroyed.

Do I believe any of this?

In the penultimate paragraph of 'The Business Arena'[8] I talked of the 'hopeless way of Karl Marx — or, at the opposite extreme, Ayn Rand'. The young Marx looked forward to a utopian world where money is abolished, a world of brotherly and sisterly

love where everyone works for themselves *and* the common good, and feels no tension between these two requirements.

That will never happen. The real world is too complex, and being the endlessly creative beings that we are, humans love to make things more complicated still. We sell ourselves, buy ourselves back, find ourselves, lose ourselves in myriad connections and relationships. For some, religion is a bulwark. But even faith has its cost. Compromise is the name of the game. And capitalism is the only system that ultimately recognizes this.

Competitive games and trading are two human inventions which arose before history began, and would occur again in any possible world. Within the strictest socialist regimes, the moral evils that Marx identified thrive just as well as under capitalism.

But what about myself? The best reason I can give for why I am *not* a sophist is that the sophists unashamedly prostituted their intellectual gifts. Everything I have done with Pathways, I have done *for myself*, because the doing of it *meant* something for me on a personal level, defined my sense of who I am and where I belong. I would stop tomorrow if that were not the case. But unlike the academic philosophers, unlike Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and their ilk, I am not afraid to enter the business arena — on my terms.

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I want to help business people. Looking out from my bunker, I see a great deal of unhappiness, the damage done to the environment, the colossal gap between rich and poor, the absurd waste of human talent. My gut feeling is that it doesn't have to be that way. My mission is to get business people to see this for themselves.

Many business people are deeply unhappy. They live and eat stress. They are driven to succeed, time and time again, and every new threat drives out all memory of past successes. You are only as good as your latest deal.

I am reminded of a something that psychotherapists say, about the 'inability to hold on to the good'.

The most successful business people have little time to enjoy their wealth, so can it really be about the pursuit of money? I would argue that a bank account is not wealth. Wealth is access to, power over resources. Things you want or need or enjoy. Money is no good to you if you have little or no time to spend it.

Money is what defines the game. Success or failure has no other measure than in financial terms. In the world of big business, all values are convertible to money. Yet, paradoxically, the money you make for yourself — your salary and bonuses — does not even have value as money. It is reduced to a mere symbol like the score on an amusement arcade machine.

In saying this, I am mindful of the trap over superficial over-generalization and cliches. What is dominant or prevails for the most part is by no means universal. Not all business people are 'unhappy' in the Aristotelian sense of failing to realize their full potential as human beings. But I contend that the majority are.

Do you care about hunger or poverty? Don't waste your time going cap in hand to these people. They can't help you, not even if you succeed in pricking their consciences, a rare enough event. The game has no room for begging bowls, only for winners and losers. The only question is, Which are you?

I said 'it doesn't have to be like that'. Politics will never solve this problem. The bad style of greedy capitalism has got too firm a hold. Nor will revolution. We all know where that leads. The only remaining option is *seduction*.

That is why I want to paint a picture of an alternative world, a world of *reformed capitalism*. My weapon is the word processor rather than the hustings or the gun. Even if only a few people get the message, that would be a start. Let's get the ball rolling now, before it is too late.

FOOTNOTES

1. A German translation of my article is appearing in *Philosophie & Wirtschaft* <http://businessphilosophy.de>

2. Francis Bacon *Essays* 'Of Truth'. Cf. New Testament John 18:38

3. 'Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert, es kommt darauf an, sie zu ver%ondern.' Karl Marx *Theses on Feuerbach* No. 11

4. Plato *Phaedo* 96a - 99d

5. *Pathways to Philosophy Distance Learning Program*
<http://www.philosophypathways.com>

6. *Glass House Philosopher* <http://www.pathways.plus.com/glasshouse/>

7. Karl Marx *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* Dirk J. Struik Ed. International Publishers 1964

8. Geoffrey Klempner 'The Business Arena' *Philosophy for Business* Issue 5, 7th March 2004 <http://klempner.freeshell.org/articles/arena.html>

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