How to let Philosophy act in the contemporary Business environment?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to spark some reality-based dialogue and reflections about the role philosophy can play for people, in the contemporary world. To keep these reflections as realistic as possible, we narrowed the pragmatic and specific field this paper aims to investigate to a specific domain: the business environment. Although this sphere will not be analyzed in depth, it plays a role as the implicit reference and proscenium for the whole paper's reflections.

In accordance with the methodological choice adopted, the domain selection has been naturally derived directly from the actual specific point of view and reality the author finds herself in, within her daily life and experience, as a Business Professional.

From this specifically located observation point, the paper aims to reflect mainly on three thesis. First, a methodological consideration on relevance and power of philosophizing through questioning and, more concretely, through the selected questions. Second, an observation about the original and unavoidable interrelation between individuals and their milieu. Third, a cue about the application of the first thesis on the second one, offered here in the form of brief reflection on a concrete philosophical experience[1], as a suggestion for further thoughts.

The following brief dissertation will be divided in two parts, keeping it simple, a start and an arrival, - terms which, however, have merely the intent of indicating a direction - during which we will see the continuous play of three participants: the individual, the context (business context) and philosophy.

1. A start. *How to* and *From where?*

Following a millenary tradition, the reflections that will be developed in this paper will start from the most philosophical of practices: a question. Given the fact that the art of questioning has always been historically the favored ground and the typical *modus* of philosophizing, special attention should be paid first to the form and method of this query.

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[1] The considered methodology is the Socratic Dialogue as described in M.N. Weiss paper (2016) "*How to implement core values?*": please see original paper for the complete description of methodology as applied by Weiss in multiple workshops.

Let's see then how our questioning is, from the start, setting and defining the scene for subsequent reflections, implicitly indicating possible directions to follow in the quest for satisfactory answers.

First of all, the question that here was chosen to be asked is a question regarding the "*How*", and more precisely a question on "*How to [do something]*". This because, unlike questions which interrogate and investigate about the "why" or "what", immediately taking the path for ontological and essential reflections, wondering "*how to*" accurately connotes right away the adopted point of view, the perspective from which the question is asked. Wondering "*how to*" actually means starting immediately from an observational point already located within a contextual milieu, which already reveals a well-defined postural choice.

Rather than putting ourselves in a separate location, judgmental and dangerously on the edge of a normativity dropped from the outside, the choice is here to embrace the becoming, the continuous change of the contemporary professional and business world being immediately immersed in the middle of it, recognizing our original and unavoidable entanglement.

I want to mention in this regard the impeccable words of contemporary Italian philosopher Rocco Ronchi, who deeply analyzed these concepts in his works:

> "*The question about 'how' is in fact substantially an 'ethical' question. It asks how to 'dwell' that absolute becoming that we ever are, and that we cannot not be (try, if you can, to escape it…).[2]*"

"*How to*" is therefore a pragmatic, realistic question that predisposes and orients, through the evaluation of choices and alternatives, toward a decision about what actions to take.

In fact, we may refer here as well to Heidegger' interpretation of the famous fragment of Heraclitus "*ethos anthròpo daimon*"[3], with his etymological analysis focusing on the dwelling, the housing of the human stay, understood as the open ground for the showing up of our own inner demons. Human beings are then existentially dwelling beings, which "make home ground" of their surroundings. Following these considerations, *to reside in* characterizes and qualifies our existences.

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[2] R. Ronchi, (2012) "*Come fare. Per una resistenza filosofica*". [Translation is mine]
See also R. Ronchi, http://www.inmagazine.it/2013/04/rocco-ronchi-guardare-il-mondo-con-filosofia/
[3] Heiddegger Martin (2005) "*Lettera sull'"Umanismo""*, Adelphi, Milano. Ed.or. "*Brief uber den "Humanismus"*" (1976).

Although these words immediately seem to echo in ourselves with their depth and significance, and may sound so obviously and humanely acceptable, if I take a moment to stop and think about my concrete, ten years professional experience in multinational business and IT companies playing a variety of different roles, the situation that presents itself to my eyes looks much less rosy and charming.

How many among colleagues, clients, and the whole stakeholders' network with which I've found myself to interact during these years, would I feel confident to state that they actually made their professional life *their home*, to the point that they could inhabit it in a full and authentic way?

How many people do *you* know whom you would feel confident to say that they inhabit their own professional environment as if it were their home, meaning here an inclusive environment: an abode which includes a consciously lived, chosen part of their lives, which they continually take care of and where they can truly express themselves?

Whereas at least one third of the precious life time available to us is routinely employed within a professional sphere, I have always felt great surprise for the passive acceptance with which most people seem to relinquish their sovereignty over their own time, their own *ways*, finally on themselves, for a quantitatively increasingly greater portions of their existence.

Ironically, the problem has presented itself to my eyes exactly like a non-issue, that is, with the appearance of an 'absence of problems': a sign of having given up the questioning of the implicit assumptions and presuppositions of the productive, relational, existential modes required and considered legitimate in business context.

The business in its everyday form, as it has appeared to my observations, seems to have marginalized and rejected truly critical thoughts. With this I meant that a thought that knows how to analyze, problematize, question and, in doing so, can open to the new, becomes a mean and ground for the blooming of personal, creative and unique individual characters; arena of the enriching multitude of personal, authentic, lived views.

Such non-critical attitude of Businesses toward their fundamental assumptions is a strategy that has proven its own logic and effectiveness for that historical modernity that has seen the triumph of industrialization, the firm establishment of large enterprises for which their

elephantine character could have only been a proud element of effectiveness and efficiency, as well as a contractual undeniable advantage over solid and defined markets.

For decades, the lesson-basis for the market analysis was confident and optimistic: the external analysis of marketing discipline that saw, for example, the analysis of *barriers to entry* and *barriers to exit,* as one of the cornerstones for the evaluation of opportunities and risks of a market.

Playing with an immediate insight of an analog and visual thinking could help us to better understand the situation. Try to see it: there it is! A glittering, reassuring metal *barrier* at the border checkpoints between markets, to delimit the competing ingoing and outgoing flux, a flux of *pachyderms*. A barrier that was simply waiting to be well described and analyzed to be understood in its essential, therefore stable, characteristics. What could have been the only challenge then for the attentive and analytical view of marketing professionals in search of control, if not to simply understand its solidity, heaviness, levers, width of step?

That seems a pretty stable, pretty credible and reassuring representation, as solid as so far away now from our contemporary businesses: business that are attacked and exposed to increasingly blurred, liquid and multiform boundaries between sectors, to the point that it has become very difficult now to even keep talking about barriers and borders; even the representation has started to creak, not being so accurate anymore. The need for a more realistic and insightful analysis arises, making it necessary to rethink the former border area as an indefinite fringe, inevitably always open to the passage of mobile, liquid actors and forces, coming both from the inside and outside of the ecosystem.

Immersed in this context, having eyes and minds able to catch such new and innovative in-sights, as well as adopting different and innovative point of views has started to become the most compelling needed and sought skill.

The pragmatic next step in the quest is then the emergence of another "*how to*" question: *How to* develop such insightful new sights and skills. To answer it, I dare to think that using the same pattern that brought us here might not be the best path to follow if trying to get different results in a changing and evolving paradigm.

Taking into serious consideration our "*how to*" questioning has brought to light and has given us visibility of our own pragmatic observational point; moreover, it has highlighted also the

need to examine both the extremities of his constituent dyad, namely: the world, the unavoidable and fast-pace changing context, and the individual, the person, reflectively posing himself the "how to" questions.

2.   An arrival: *How to* and *where*?

The advent of digital transformation is reshaping interactions and relationships inside and outside our life and work communities. This is the actual and concrete context we find ourselves playing and living in. It is only from this context, from this perspective and toward this concrete reality, that it could acquire some significance to pose ourselves the question about how to keep ourselves as individuals, vitally accountable and responsible not only for our own actions and decisions, but also for the direction taken by the ecosystem we inhabit.

How can the individual-in-the-world survive and thrive when the world itself reveals a continuous growth of complexity and interrelation, changing at exponential rate? This and similar questions cannot be ignored if not by a dangerously naive attitude or a deliberately mystifying one.

If data is never just a given, objective set, but always an event, a process, a dynamic perspective cut, an *actual object*[4] (using Whitehead's words), in a becoming that immediately arises as the only constant, the crucial question on which philosophy can play a key role is therefore *how becoming, as individuals, in this new world*[5].

It is then from and toward this located perspective (the individual-in-the world), that we can see *how* philosophy can play its essential role in such a characterized world.

Therefore, the position adopted here with regards to philosophy, is *neither* asking how to *apply* philosophy to business context, as this would consider the latter kind of an external element "to be applied", *nor* to implement it as a system of competences. Rather, the idea here is to recognize philosophy as intrinsically and lively inhabitant the individual: we should then simply let philosophy free to act, do its job and be itself.

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[4] A. N. Whitehead, "*Process and reality*" (1929).
[5] R. Ronchi, (2012) "*Come fare. Per una resistenza filosofica*". Feltrinelli Ed.

The second dyadic element, the individual, constantly present and ever changing throughout history, is precisely what makes philosophizing a fruitful activity also for the other dyadic element (namely, here, the business context).

How does this concretely translate in the contemporary world?

Problematizing the obvious and questioning, and thereby opening for the individual new perspectives and new looks on his everyday life. Moreover, crossing the barriers of individual thoughts as a reality component: active, inter-agent and transformative.

Couldn't that capability of adopting new ways of looking at the same things, be what both individuals and business organizations need in the pervasive, disruptive digital liquidness?

Given this paper's aim to make some concrete reflection starting from a contextualized point of view, it can be extremely valuable to dedicate some space to a concrete example of Philosophy in business environment. I'm referring here to the experience described by M. N. Weiss in his recent paper "*How to implement Core Values*?"[6]

Leaving the general presentation and detailed description of Socratic Dialogue methodology, which is not the topic of this paper, to the reading of Weiss' full article, I will focus the attention and my analysis on some very interesting points that deserve to be further expanded in order to show their full potential.

Weiss' essay starts immediately with a "*How to*" question, "*How to implement Core Values?*": it is clear for us now, after our considerations, that the viewpoint adopted and proposed by his methodology locate itself immediately in the middle of Business Context.

The complex and pluralistic character of the environment we find ourselves in is clearly recognized since the introduction: Weiss starts from the reality-based observation that we are inevitably surrounded by such a dynamic milieu "[…] *In light of the fact that we are living and working in pluralistic cultures and societies…*"[7]

First of all what I would like to point out here is that this is, in a lively and rich meaning, what can be signified and indicated by the concept of *concreteness*. Secondarily, as most negotiation techniques and creative conflict resolution strategies underline, in such complex dynamic environments what is required to be able to effectively cope and influence the flux of

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[6] Michael Noah Weiss (2016) "*How to implement core values?*"
[7] Weiss (2016), Ivi, *Introduction*.

events is a form of practical wisdom based on observation, analysis and the capability of a creative, reflexive, second-level meta-thinking. In Weiss' words,

> "*phronesis* [practical wisdom] *in a post-modern society can be understood as an ethically oriented and informed mindfulness (awareness) towards given situations, which finally comes to expression in the way we respond to these situations*"[8].

If we follow the flow of the methodology described by Weiss, what we can find are multiple interesting clues of an in-the-doing educational and enlightening path toward the acquisition of this crucial, secondary meta-thinking, assuming here the form of a reflexive practical wisdom.

The aim of the dialogue, as explicitly stated, is "*discovering different perspectives[9]*". This could allow participants not only to discover their own implicit and peculiar perspective on things, but also to take into consideration the possibility of different ones.

This type of awareness is reached throughout a very concrete series of steps, which brings very soon the process into a very concrete and practical dimension. If we carry on with the visual metaphor of different perspectives, then immediately follows the need to identify, for each perspective, the single viewpoint from which that specific experiential cut has been done: namely, this bring us to the single, concrete individual.

At this stage, participants of Socratic Dialogue are asked to think at a personal experience they've had in their lives, in which they could identify a concrete example and application of the concept under investigation in the initial question. This simple step is actually theoretically and pragmatically quite relevant.

Here we can see the first of two main movements actualized in the Socratic Dialogue: the one from general to individual, from the theoretical enunciation of a concept, to his concrete realization into a specific life experience of a *person*. We assist here simultaneously at *two* relevant conceptual passages, giving to participants the chance to reflect on both of them: from general to individual, and from conceptual to experiential.

With this step, the Socratic Dialogue methodology take on the shape of an *invitation:* an invite to take part in a self-reflexive experience aimed to provide some personal, biographical

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[8] Weiss (2016), Ivi, see "*Moral knowledge (phronesis) requires self-knowledge.*"
[9] Weiss (2016), Ivi, see 2.1 "*The different steps of a Socratic Dialogue.*"

material for the group reflection. If the dialogue reflection started with a rather general and universal concept, now is entering the field of individual biography.

Following M. Zambrano considerations about individual identity, this simple act of reflecting on our own experiences allows to transform the *stream of living* in a more structured form, our experience, a key building block of personal identity: "*the person - is something more than an individual. Is the individual with a conscience, who has self-awareness, and is conceived as a supreme value, as a last terrestrial purposes*[10]".

Developing a critical reflection on our own experiences is then a key step toward the acquisition of a more defined and resistant image and sense of our own identity. In fact, we could say that experience, as a structured organization of lived occasions and moments, takes its form when we start to reflect about our own living. Is it through this secondary meta-reflection that our living can acquire some sort of symbolic consistency, becoming a usable component of our own biographical storytelling. And this brings us to the immediate next step of the Socratic Dialogue Methodology as explained in Weiss paper, where experiences selected by participant have to be narrated in the form of a story: chosen and requested communicative style is here the *storytelling*[11].

Individual biographies are recalled and brought not only into the Socratic Dialogue/Workshop dynamics, but into that specific organizational moment devoted to the workshop. This second aspect is not a secondary one for business organizations as it lights up a space and time, within company environment[12], for a contextualized reflection, which by definition brings into discussion the context itself, unveiling to individuals its role, relevance and correlation.

And here we might have arrived to a first pragmatic and reality-based answer to our initial "*How to*" question.

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