

A Tale of Two Prepositional Phrases: Business as “Noble Vocation”

“Business is a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving our world. It can be a fruitful source of prosperity for the areas in which it operates, especially if it sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good,” *Laudato si* (§129).¹

Introduction

In the 1970s classic, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig identified two dimensions of every institution: the material and the existential (Pirsig, 1974). The material consists of tangible assets. For instance, a university occupies a physical location with buildings, laboratories, and lecture halls. As a legal entity, it also owns property, collects tuition, and sets academic and administrative policy. Its existential dimension, on the other hand, is intangible. This consists of teaching students how to think rationally, which, Pirsig believed, is the “real” work of higher education. A university is a “state of mind” whose purpose lies beyond brick and mortar, no matter how attractive the campus or fabled its history (Pirsig, 1974). The existential dimension is so important that Pirsig called the university a “Church of Reason,” claiming that “[t]he real university is nothing less than the continuing body of reason itself” (Pirsig, 1974).

This analysis can be applied to the institution of business in interesting ways. First, it relates directly to the question concerning the purpose of business. The belief that business’ sole purpose is to increase shareholder value in the form of maximized profit fails Pirsig’s existential requirement. However, a “real” business is also dependent upon internal processes and structures to survive, much as vehicles need fuel and living beings sustenance. Pirsig did not suggest that the material dimension is unnecessary; rather, that it is often mistaken for the more important, existential one. Secondly, this view resonates with Pope Francis’ encyclical letter, *Laudato si*, On Care for Our Common Home. In

¹ Francis, *Laudato si*, Encyclical letter “On Care For Our Common Home,” Vatican Web site, May 24, 2015, accessed October 20, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html#_ftn152. Quote from Benedict XVI, *Homily for the Solemn Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry* (24 April 2005): AAS 97 (2005), 710.

it, the pope refers to business as a “noble vocation” whose twofold purpose contains material and existential dimensions, which he identifies as the production of wealth and improvement of our world (Francis, 2016, §129). When business is directed toward these ends, the result is a nobility of purpose and “service to the common good” (Francis, 2016, §129).

This paper will examine the purpose of business from the material and existential dimensions described by Pirsig. It will argue that a balance is needed to achieve Pope Francis’ “noble vocation” and then suggest a way to do so through what the author calls “generative logic.” Inspired by the Genesis account of creation, this logic rejects commoditization and maximization of profit in favor of the “real” purpose of business. Generative logic views human beings not as resources to be employed in the effort to attain material ends but authentic persons with the capacity for limitless creativity. In developing its case, it will rely on the work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Ellul as well as the emerging concept of “corporate citizenship” (Hinkley, 2011). Finally, this paper will present the “magis method” for implementing and practicing generative logic. It begins by exploring business as noble vocation.

“At All Costs”

Before exploring the potential of business to be a noble vocation, it might be instructive to recount the ways it has been *ignoble*. There are numerous examples, of course, and every morning seems to bring news of yet another corporate scandal. Some of these involve insider trading, bribes and kickbacks, offshore accounts, falsification of financial records, collusion, and theft. Others involve sports (e.g., FIFA) or government (e.g., Petrobras). From LIBOR rate manipulation to Toshiba’s accounting fraud and Volkswagon’s emission test deception, several themes emerge that characterize ignoble business.

First, there is the desire to look good to investors, regulators, and the public by covering up the truth. For instance, Britain’s Financial Services Authority (FSA), the regulatory agency investigating LIBOR interest rate manipulation, determined that senior management at Barclay’s

pressured “submitters” to report lower rates “to avoid negative media,” which would have affected the bank’s liquidity position (Financial Services Authority, 2012, pp. 3-7). While the desire to avoid bad publicity and present the organization in a favorable light is understandable, deception is unethical and illegal. Second, maximization of profit at all costs is the underlying motive of many corporate scandals. Volkswagen is just one example of a corporation “obsessed” not only with maximizing profit but beating out competitors to become the biggest auto manufacturer in the industry (Trope, Ressler, 2016, p. 14). This obsession resulted in the resignation of the CEO and eighteen billion dollars in fines and recalls (Knowledge@Wharton, 2016). Third, business acts ignobly when it treats its employees as commodities (e.g., human resources) rather than persons with natural rights. Dov Charney, founder and former CEO of American Apparel, is a striking example of employee abuse and mistreatment in the clothing retail industry (Harris, 2014).

An analysis of these three characteristics is revealing. Concern for how a company appears to outsiders is perhaps the least offensive, since it involves a superficial flight from the truth disguised as brand or reputation repair. However, spin campaigns are often seen by the public and consumers for what they are: unapologetic attempts to deny or avoid the obvious. In the LIBOR case, the effects might have been worse, because of the scale of the deception and its potential impact on global financial markets. Still, LIBOR reflected the rather unimaginative, puerile nature of the game of deception as revealed in email exchanges documented by the FSA (Financial Services Authority, 2012, p. 11). The underlying basis of this characteristic is despair, also known as *tristitia*. This is a fundamental vice, since a desperate person (or organization) is less likely to have the requisite courage to withstand pressure to act unethically.

The second and third characteristics of ignoble business are more complicated, because they reflect not just bad choices but the logic upon which those choices are made. This logic is causal and used to justify decisions in the material dimension of business. For instance, when upper management

sets unrealistic goals for production, as occurred at Volkswagen, the existential dimension of the company is trampled upon in the rush to please management and meet those goals. Concern for numbers consumes the organization at nearly all levels. Over time, this evolves from a temporary condition to stated strategy to an embedded (and uncontested) feature of the organizational culture. At that point, numbers consume not just the actions of employees but their psyche as well. The material dimension of the business dominates, forcing out identification with Pirsig's reality. This is best evidenced in the *at all costs* attitude expressed by Volkswagen's supervisory board (Trope, Ressler, 2016, p. 16).

This quantitative mentality leads to the treatment of employees as commodities as seen in the American Apparel case, where Dov Charney's outlandish behavior was rationalized away because of the material gains made under his leadership (Townsend, 2015). Initial impressions might lead one to suspect that his objectification of women was the result of personal vice or psychological disorder. However, the problem lay deeper in a management worldview in which Charney, as founder and CEO, not only had the power but the *right* to treat women as sexual objects. Such an imperial view of management derives not only from a command and control environment in the workspace but an underlying instrumental logic in which persons and objects alike are used to accomplish specific tasks without regard for their inherent worth. All of this is decided by the owner, founder, or chief executive, again at all costs.

One would be hard pressed to call business conducted in this way "noble," and it is certainly not a call to something greater, which is the essence of vocation. For a business to be considered a vocation, it must do two things: (1) recognize and nurture its existential dimension, and (2) pay particular attention to the ways in which it achieves wealth production and world improvement. A fundamental tenet of spiritual traditions, East and West, is that *how* something is done is even more important than *what* is done. Therefore, business as noble vocation requires strategic planning and

execution performed not out of despair or pride but courage, humility, and prudence, which Aristotle considered to be the chief virtue (Aristotle,). Aristotle defined prudence, *phronesis*, as the practical wisdom of knowing how to balance excess and deficiency; in this case, wealth and world, material and existential dimensions. Pope Francis' view accords with this, since he sees business as directed toward the twofold purpose but also benefitting the common good through the specific area of job creation. Ie but ignoble but anignoble, but itmanufacturing floor but The problem here is even greater than the objectification of women (until not just the act of meeting targets becomes it works toward its targets. However, the assumes eadlines and quotas. For sided affair but done in consideration of the profitability and mission of the organization. Admittedly, on a practical level this may be difficult to achieve and even more problematic for those working in highly competitive industries like financial services or mobile technology. The good news is that Sabbath does not exist by itself. It often elicits and develops virtues like humility, patience, and prudence, which are crucial qualities to have alongside technical competence and managerial experience. No longer seen as soft skills, these virtues have assumed an important place in the literature on decision profitability.²

“At the Expense Of”

Pick up Pirsig again and develop following the PP sequence. Include Heidegger, Ellul, and Diego Fusaro. Must consider the vocation of business, which is finality. What is the ultimate purpose of business, or its finality? From Thomas' *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 1-5 (ultimate purpose or finality—finalidade). O sentido de vida esta fora de vida—the meaning of business is outside or beyond business. To have “sense,” it must have its meaning beyond itself. If it remains within itself,

² See Shawn Achor, *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology that Fuel Success and Performance at Work* (New York: Random House, 2010); Minda Zetlin, “Here’s Why Half Your Employees Will Be Gone in Less Than a Year,” *Inc*, October 28, 2015, accessed November 14, 2015, <https://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/heres-why-half-your-employees-will-be-gone-in-less-than-a-year-infographic.html>; Lindsay McGregor and Neel Doshi, “How Company Culture Shapes Employee Motivation,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 25, 2015, accessed January 7, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2015/11/how-company-culture-shapes-employee-motivation>.

then it is subject to the decay noted by Diego Fusaro and Francis Fukuyama (*The End of History*, although this is Karl Marx—Hegel), who believed that the capitalist Western worldview (liberalism) had triumphed, but it has mutated into “neo-liberalism.” The results are mixed, including existentialism and meaninglessness. Cannot have that or mass consumerism, so the new logic must be a logic of “other” à la Buber and the transcendent.

First, for an organization to develop in contemplative and prophetic ways, it must rethink its presuppositions about the purpose of business. As a result of globalization, business leaders can no longer ignore the negative externalities of profit maximization. Rather, they must become aware of and acknowledge the consequences of what an earlier pope, Pius XII, called a “cold and calculating egoism which tends to hoard the economic resources and materials destined for the use of all to such an extent that the nations less favored by nature are not permitted access to them.”³ Concern for profit, particularly in a global environment, must be balanced with sensitivity to the organization’s mission and role in wider economic affairs. Sensitivity can be nurtured only through a culture that promotes and is aligned with organizational values. This often requires the ongoing training and support of employees and a consistent focus on mission at all levels. This is famously exemplified by the encounter between President Kennedy and a NASA janitor in 1962. “What are you doing?” Kennedy asked the man, who was carrying a broom. “Well, Mister President, I’m helping put a man on the moon.”⁴

³ Pius XII, “Christmas Eve Broadcast,” *New York Times* (December 25, 1941), quoted in Ludwig von Mises, *Omnipotent Government: The Rise of the Total State and Total War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 226. See also John XXIII, Encyclical letter, *Pacem in Terris*, “Peace on Earth,” Vatican Web site, April 11, 1963 (§88, 92, 101, 121), accessed January 7, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

⁴ John Nemo, “What a NASA Janitor Can Teach Us About Living a Bigger Life,” *The Business Journals*, December 23, 2014, accessed November 19, 2015, <http://www.bizjournals.com/bizjournals/how-to/growth-strategies/2014/12/what-a-nasa-janitor-can-teach-us.html?page=all>.

Like the individual version, organizational alignment begins by stopping frenetic activity and assessing the current situation; in this case, culture. In what ways does the organization suffer from misalignment between what it claims to be and what it actually does? Misalignment can occur consciously at the leadership level or unconsciously among employees. Regarding the latter, it is important to evaluate how employees view their work, their relations with each other and management, and the direction the company is taking. It is not enough to note what people say, since culture is reflected more accurately in unspoken actions. One of the most important factors here is trust. How is trust (or mistrust) experienced throughout the organization? Without trust, alignment is impossible, especially in the long-term.

By giving the leader an opportunity to align being with doing, which is the essence of spirituality, Sabbath can affect one's leadership style in substantive ways. As one withdraws from frenetic activity and turns inward, decisions become integrated not only with the self but with the organization. This means that self-discovery bears directly on individual and organizational performance. Alignment anchors the leader to an Archimedes point, as it were, from which various kinds of decisions can be made, from strategic to tactical and operational. This is important when leading teams from various functional areas whose members bring different expertise to a project. A spirituality of resiliency is about becoming present to oneself and others and operating virtuously in all aspects of life, including decision-making.⁵ It begins with contemplation and ends with reflective action or praxis

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An organization that has aligned profit with mission is in a much better position to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to challenges. This alignment reflects Francis' view of the potential of business to be a "noble vocation" (§129). Becoming noble is the work of the prophetic dimension of presence. This is not meant to disparage profit, since no business can exist without resources. However, like the example of the NASA janitor, vocation puts profit in perspective. Vocation drives the culture of an organization just as profit fuels its operation. All too often, however, the image an organization conveys.

A New Logic

The unwillingness and/or inability of people to acknowledge reality despite scientific consensus and overwhelming empirical evidence may be the greatest challenge to resiliency.⁷ Neither a conversion of heart nor an ecological conversion can take place without acknowledgement of the problem and commitment to follow its solution to the end, even if that solution conflicts with one's established worldview. Thus, the pope's plea for a new vision *of* human beings is also a call for a new vision *for* human beings; that is, for people to see in a new way. It is a call in the tradition of the

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⁷ See "Summary for Policymakers," in *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1-32, accessed November 7, 2015, http://ipcc-wg2.gov/AR5/images/uploads/WG2AR5_SPM_FINAL.pdf and Naomi Oreskes, "The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change," *Science*, December 3, 2004, accessed December 9, 2015, <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/306/5702/1686.full>.

biblical prophets for the people to awake to the impending disaster and change their behavior. Here, “people” might refer more to business and governmental leaders than the public, since common citizens have demonstrated the capacity to act on their own when dissatisfied with official efforts to stop environmental deterioration. Nonprofit organizations like Greenpeace, Environmental Defense, and the National Resources Defense Council are examples of this as well as the emergence of so-called “green” consumers, employees, investors, etc

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Secondly, is development of the contemplative and prophetic dimensions of an organization scalable? The answer depends on the degree to which these are taken seriously and supported by management. A mobile app development company in Silicon Valley, for instance, may be more attuned to and aware of its prophetic role simply because of its size than a more established company like Verizon. However, in either case the development of a culture in which frenetic activity gives

⁹ Richard R. Kilburg, *Virtuous Leadership: Strategy, Character, and Influence in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2012), 57-62.

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way to measured, focused decision-making begins with awareness. Most organizations have accounted for this through their risk management function, some even appointing chief risk officers. However, as the pope has stated, the crisis affecting the environment and society can only be solved by new thinking (§191). Thus, a spirituality of resiliency might provide a fresh approach to current risk management models. This suggests that scalability begins with individual effort and creativity. But the individual need not come from the C-suite, since a vibrant culture can produce ideas throughout the organization.

A New Method

A recent cautionary tale would be Volkswagen, which faces its greatest challenge in the catalytic converter scandal. That scandal caused the resignation of CEO Martin Winterkorn and a dramatic drop in the company's earnings.¹¹ The company is now in what might be considered a Sabbath phase of reassessment, rethinking, and regrouping. The most effective solution will be found through fundamental changes to the culture and not merely in the decision-making or quality-control processes. A recent cautionary tale would be Volkswagen, which faces its greatest challenge in the catalytic converter scandal. That scandal caused the resignation of CEO Martin Winterkorn and a dramatic drop in the company's earnings.¹² The company is now in what might be considered a Sabbath phase of reassessment, rethinking, and regrouping. The most effective solution will be found through fundamental changes to the culture and not merely in the decision-making or quality-control processes

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Finally, are there examples of companies that exemplify resiliency? The North Face, REI, and Whole Foods are three companies that have become resilient by "flattening their organizations

¹³ Richard R. Kilburg, *Virtuous Leadership: Strategy, Character, and Influence in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2012), 57-62.

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and working across vertical boundaries, breaking down silos, transferring best practices, collaborating cross-functionally, and promoting laterally.” And they have done so in environmentally conscious ways that reflect the spirit of *Laudato si*. For example, Doug Thompkins, recently deceased founder of The North Face, was involved in land preservation projects in Patagonia. In addition, General Motors rebounded from bankruptcy in 2009 by reducing debt, eliminating underperforming brands, and anticipating market trends. In reality, most companies react to crises rather than prepare for them, which is the case with GM and its initi. A recent cautionary tale would be Volkswagon, which faces its greatest challenge in the catalytic converter scandal. That scandal caused the resignation of CEO Martin.

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Conclusion

This paper has examined Pope Francis' encyclical letter, *Laudato si*, from the perspective of a spirituality of presence, which it related to resiliency. Resiliency--the ability to respond to current or emerging crises--has become an essential feature of organizations in the twenty-first century. However, it is attained only after the business leader goes through a series of changes beginning with Sabbath and ending with prophetic action. None of these changes can be programmed or controlled with any degree of certainty. In fact, dealing with uncertainty is a major characteristic of resiliency, which means that anticipating, preparing for, and responding to crises are a function of the spirituality of the leader. The focus of this paper, therefore, has been on the person of the business leader and how he or she might prepare for resiliency individually and then lead an organization through a crisis. The particular crisis the paper has been concerned with is environmental deterioration (§3).

What is the significance of examining the spiritual vision of *Laudato si* and relating its vision to resiliency? Perhaps the best answer is to take seriously the call for a new way of thinking about the environment (§215). For a new way of thinking is required not just to meet that crisis but all crises that may develop in an organization, whether externally or internally. New problems will not be solved with the same kind of thinking that worked previously. And although risk management models may contain sophisticated approaches to uncertainty, how many deal with the greatest uncertainty of all: the human psyche? The larger philosophical questions here are obvious but may not be addressed in the rush to find practical solutions to problems, practicality being a powerful bias in business. For instance, are certain decisions predetermined either by the genetic makeup of the individual or the cultural code of the organization? How, exactly, does a business leader exercise free will given

¹⁵ Richard R. Kilburg, *Virtuous Leadership: Strategy, Character, and Influence in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2012), 57-62.

operating constraints and the needs of stakeholders? What does a spirituality of the individual look like on a daily basis? In a different cultural context? What about organizational spirituality? Given that one can speak of organizational consciousness and unconsciousness, both of which have a direct effect on the bottom line, these questions are not purely academic.

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