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Socrates and Business Ethics Considerations on the ethical origins of responsibility*

Abstract

The presented work attempts to show a link between business and global responsibility, and the Socratic idea of self-knowledge.

Today's ethics discusses the fundamental issues of man's place in the world. The human existence is one of the causes of the contemporary crisis. This crisis between man and the world obliges us to raise a radical question of the ethical origins of individual and global responsibility for the quality of life and the future of human generations. This question requires going back to the historical and ethical considerations about the Socratic project of the good life. The starting point for Socratic ethics is an inter-personal and inner-personal dialogue; the subsequent result is man's practical wisdom of how to build his life with others. Socrates argues that the key issue of responsibility is the awakening of self-awareness and the way to achieve this objective is through dialogue.

Keywords: Socrates, responsibility, business ethics

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1. Introduction

In this article, I wish to examine the contemporary perspectives of business ethics in terms of sustainable development and the corresponding lifestyle postulated by global ethics. This subject combines reflection on the scope of business ethics and the possibilities of its study with the question concerning our personal, social, institutional, international and global responsibility for integral and sustainable development. Behind the idea of sustainable development, raised for the first time by Aurelio Peccei, the founder of *Forum Humanum*, a certain ethical condition of man is hidden. It is most often described by means of the category of responsibility, due to its universal dimension. As stated by Lewicka-Strzalecka (2006, p. 10), “[r]esponsibility should [...] be attributed to both sides of market exchange, albeit the sources and nature of responsibility are varied. [...] Selected responsibility constituting business responsibility is associated with a certain amount of knowledge, competence, and individual characteristics.”

We are responsible for someone, to someone, jointly and to others as beings aware of ourselves and our own history, free and competent. The issue of responsibility is taken up by all types of specific ethics. It is also developed in numerous kinds of ethical advice in the form of certain general directives and suggestions on how to behave in conflict situations, what decisions to make, etc. Moral and ecological aspects of economic activity concern the responsibility of individuals or groups for the effects of their actions. These include certain patterns of behaviour, for example, of decency and social norms. Their advisory role comes down to two main functions:

- (1) the indication of other, alternative possibilities of using the existing technology,
- (2) the impact on reducing or eliminating the cases of instrumentalisation of interpersonal relations.

We may add that in these multithreaded, diverse considerations, a reflection on the responsibility associated with a specific strategy of action emerges. In this way, ethical theses are combined with the morality of principles, i.e. the issues of the good life with considerations for the general rules of conduct.

Within this framework, three areas of responsibility can be distinguished corresponding to three different attempts to interpret it:

- (1) Ethical area—responsibility is understood as the need to accept the consequences of the way the subject participates in his or her own life and in the lives of others based on the choices made, the preferences of values and the accepted hierarchy of goods. This responsibility includes the debt of gratitude to the past generations and an obligation to the next generations.
- (2) Moral area—responsibility applies to the observance of universally and collectively binding moral standards (professional codes) on a societal and global scale.
- (3) Strategic area—relates to the institutional implementation of various forms of responsibility, e.g.: poverty or ecological degradation.

These three models of responsibility remain closely related to the civilisational, cultural, technical, and economic context. The models present various intertwined threads: utopian and realistic, idealistic and pragmatic. These set two complementary horizons of expectations: a radical change in the ethical condition of man and the improvement of the operational strategy of national and international institutions. They find their validation, as well as justification, in the growing belief among ethicists about a deepening crisis of civilisation. It is accompanied by various raising tensions, anomalies, threats, and global conflicts. An interdisciplinary reflection on these issues allows ethicists to understand how people's attitudes towards themselves, others, and the world—considered in the sphere of preferred values, goods and goals, outlooks, styles, and quality of life—are changing. What does the good life mean for most of us today and how do we pursue it? What obstacles and inhibitions affect our negative life-balance in the private and public? How do this impact our cultures, professions, ecology, consumption, politics, and, healthcare? Clearly, such investigations must include business ethics and global ethics. It is only from the perspective of global ethics that in many cases detailed evaluations can be made in the field of business ethics, especially when these evaluations concern the nature of relationships that exist between economic activity and its societal effects. The idea of sustainable and equitable development combines them, creating the theoretical and strategic foundations for the ethics of future-oriented responsibility.¹ One task of such an inquiry is the ethical question concerning the condition of man and the necessary goods. This is the focus of first part of the article: the appeals of ethicists for a responsibility for the future. The second part will outline the Socratic project of conscious and a responsible life, the sources for these reside in man's interest in his own good life.

2. The idea of sustainable development and the ethical condition of man

The attempt to overcome the current crisis must, on the one hand, go beyond existing practices and, on the other hand, adopt a global dimension. In this spirit, one of the most important texts entitled *The Limits to Growth*² was written in the framework of reports prepared for the Club of Rome. One of such texts is the treatise of Aurelio Peccei entitled *One Hundred Pages for the Future* (1987). In this famous text, the author indicates the existence of a direct relationship between the material crisis and the spiritual crisis of man. This crisis extends not only to the scope of growing needs and individual desires but above all leads to the blurring of valuable interpersonal relations. From the point of view of the

¹ Future-oriented ethics is meant to answer the question that is fundamental to our civilisation (Mayor & Bind, 2001, p. 491).

² The subject of this first and the most important report prepared in the framework of the Club of Rome was the analysis of five components that shape the quality of life: investment, population, environmental pollution, natural resources and food production. Cf. King & Schneider, 1992.

history of ideas, concepts such as solidarity, compassion, and human unity are based on two primary assumptions. The first one adopts a certain origin-related order of the world which connects all beings with one another, determining their pluralistic unity. The other one refers to the common humanity that binds all people for which the Kantian idea of moral law is the highest measure. The concept of responsibility introduced by the author of *Hundred Pages for the Future*, on the one hand, assumes the existence of these primeval, transcendental ties, and on the other, postulates new forms of human activity, suitable for civilisational and technical threats, aimed at developing interpersonal bonds and intergenerational solidarity in the global dimension. It requires from the actors a fundamentally new way of understanding themselves and their attitude towards the world. Consequently, the change in the self-awareness of man—as a being originally linked with other beings—is associated with a new interpretation of the world as a commonplace of residence and development. To justify this position, Peccei refers to the anthropological ideas rooted in European culture that reveal the full spiritual dimensions of life. In their light, such categories as freedom and autonomy, individuality and dignity assume a different meaning. We have forgotten that man does not possess these but gains these qualities by working with others, developing them along with all his entire moral condition. This new axiological awareness is meant to lead individuals to accept responsibility for their own fate and the fate of others. A fate that includes fundamental, informed decisions and conscious choices, competence, the project of life, strategies of action, and planning. Therefore, it combines practice and reflection, understanding and emotional experience, cognitive doubts, and emotional dilemmas. Thus, the ultimate balance of life and a sense of fulfilment are determined by practical intelligence which enables man to develop harmoniously, maintaining cognitive contact with himself and the world. To achieve this state, the subject must constantly learn how to live, how to think and how to act under specific conditions. It is necessary to possess comprehensive knowledge which allows for the expansion of the practical field of activity and professional competencies along with the capacity for an in-depth reflection on the universal problems of the world. It is possible to achieve through dialogue, exchange of information and participation in various forms of community. The relationship between science and ethics, practice and the culture of thinking and acting consists in the fact that “[t]he world of life is a medium through which [...] we contact with the results of empirical and technical scientific work reducing its qualitative and quantitative complexities to the things within our reach in the world of life” (Krämer, p. 206).

Ethicists are therefore interested in creating such a pattern of an individual’s activity which has a broad and diversified community-related dimension, i.e. group, social, national, international and global. On the other hand, attention is drawn to the need to acquire, both by individuals and communities, practical skills of self-limitation in the use of various widely available goods and services, since they lead to environmental degradation as well as human harm to the same extent.

For ethicists, issues such as lifestyle, practical and technical knowledge as well as self-awareness of subjects determine not only the possibility of overcoming the current crisis but also the further direction of technical and civilisational development. From this perspective, looking at global issues, one sees responsibility as an attitude resulting directly from the consciously adopted model of life. Such a project implies not only good intentions and right reasons but also adequate knowledge along with a desire to understand more and act in a better, more effective manner. This is possible thanks to practical intelligence, which, surmounting various degrees of reflection, indicates alternative forms of activity. For this purpose, the subject must have appropriately developed skills (i.e. cognitive dispositions) in the form of specific competencies that determine the system and hierarchy of life preferences. They are based on fundamental principles that express what individuals approve of as the best and most important in their lives. Achieving a certain optimal perfection in how a man lives, thinks and behaves determines his ethical courage. Ancient thinkers saw in courage not only the ethos of humanity but also the essence of all upbringing, knowledge and acquired virtues. This moral courage determines the ethical quality of responsibility and its scope. Its axiological horizon is delineated by practical intelligence, i.e. the ability acquired and developed by an individual to plan and act appropriately.

Let us try to confront the concept of courage with the idea of new humanism raised by the founders of the Club of Rome. In its fundamental content, it refers to the harmoniously integrated, spiritual condition of man. Its relationship with the theory of sustainable and integral development is based on the belief that man has a natural ability to transcend towards the things that are different and possible, including emancipation from here and now, both with the reference to herself and the world (Krämer, 2004, p. 251). This idea of self-aware, committed subject results from a vast legacy of philosophical, religious, aesthetic and scientific theories, historiosophical concepts, etc. Today, the proponents of the concept of global sustainable development are asking the question about the origins of the current crisis. Are they rooted in economic processes and mechanisms or in the transformation of people's spiritual attitudes, or perhaps these elements should be considered together? Such considerations lead to the idea of responsibility for the future of the past, since the past is present in the future and, at the same time, what is current is leaning towards the future. And that means that the sources of the crisis go back to history and consequently include the present and the future. That is why research on the crisis, conducted from the perspective of global ethics, strives to reveal all its sources and foundations. These issues also include the ecological crisis and indications on how to protect the environment, and thus effectively protect the quality of lives of future generations. In Agenda 21 (i.e. the Global Action Programme), the meaning of sustainable and equitable development is explained as "development that is economically efficient, socially equitable and responsible and environmentally sound" (Ciążela, 2006, p. 177).

Authors of works in the field of business ethics seek to determine who, how and why should bear responsibility for further economic development which is acceptable ecologically, socially desirable and economically justified. Questions

about sources, foundations, and essence are of a philosophical nature. They provide a certain point of reference for the issues of responsibility raised in global ethics and business ethics. It relates to several issues important from the point of view of ethics which are the subject of an ongoing philosophical discourse. They are centred around the Socratic question: how should we live in the best and most wisely manner? Greek tradition considered these issues at a heuristic and practical level, and thus in the framework of dialogue. It concerned key concepts and techniques of living in conjunction with the collective and individual order concerning their choice and preference. The dialogue was conducted about the original intuitions and fundamental dilemmas which can be found in the language of hidden meanings. They were recorded in Plato's dialogues, which are not only the roots of our culture but also sources of basic ethical categories. Let us add at this point that they are present in every form of ethics, both practical and practicing. Since "[...] ancient philosophy is for the contemporary philosopher, on various levels, the source of his own thoughts" (Skarga, 2007, p. 45).

It is worth considering how, in the light of Socrates' teachings, one can understand more about the ethical courage of man and his ability to bear responsibility: for, to, before and together with others. I think that the most important element, even the core of Socratic ethics, is an attempt to reveal the dialogical sense of human life. What leads to it is the constantly renewed effort to get to know oneself (i.e. to talk to oneself) which is associated with the appropriate art of living. This orientation towards oneself, according to Socrates, determines the rational relationship of man to his own life, to the world and to those events of which he is a participant or a witness. Foucault's commentary on the dialogue between Socrates and Alcibiades emphasises what from the perspective of business ethics and global ethics is the most important for developing responsibility (2001). And these threads of consideration will be developed in the next part of the article devoted to the philosophy of Socrates.

3. Responsibility and the Socratic care for self

The person of Socrates and his actions are a source of two-fold inspiration for us. The first type of inspiration concerns the place, meaning, and function of dialogue, while the other leads to the very roots of Socratic philosophy, and thus to the idea of practical wisdom. It covers all spheres of human activity, which the Greeks basically reduced to three, that is, to theoretical, practical and productive activity. These three categories define different relationships and forms of human activity in the world, among other people, and for oneself. These can be studied from many angles, but for ethics, the most important is practical wisdom contained in them. From it flows not only man's ability to act but also his capability for self-assessment, since man achieves the fullness of his creative, i.e. cognitive, abilities when he knows what he does, understands how to act best in a given situation, and why he should behave in such a manner. Practice, cognition and valuation consti-

tute the state, scope and measure of wisdom. Gaining wisdom, man changes his attitude towards himself and his own actions, strives for perfection, aptly identifies goals, and prefers credibility and justice to immediate benefits. He submits to self-discipline, and a kind of asceticism accompanies him through life as a necessary condition and a natural manifestation of wisdom. At the same time, asceticism is not treated by Socrates as an end or a specific negative reaction to “temptations of the world.” It concerns three types of goods which are most often equated with life pleasures. Their value is determined by the attitude of man to himself and to his life—whether it is directed at wisdom or pleasure. The three goods are represented by:

- (1) Body—exaggerated concern with appearance and experiencing sensual pleasures in excess.
- (2) Food, drink, and sumptuous lifestyle that makes man sluggish, lazy and vain.
- (3) Chasing after wealth, the lust of gold which destroys man’s creative force and enslaves his body and soul.

Let us add that Socrates did not encourage man to mortify himself, fast or embrace poverty. He only taught a certain strategy of life in which the care for the soul (in other words: for the awareness of self) is the fundamental principle of all actions. It sets preferences and a general, harmonious direction of human activity. What is this care for the soul and why does the value of our life depend on it? Socrates sought to explain it in numerous ways, referring to the daily practice and religious beliefs of his interlocutors, providing numerous metaphors or analogies. The knowledge that man acquires about himself and about the world has numerous and diverse roots and cannot be covered by one experience or a specific event, as they are always embedded in a context that imposes their immediate interpretation. Everything that has a true, universal value goes beyond the context and must be considered in its entirety. In fact, caring for the soul is a model of life that is born gradually out of reflection and a certain inclination towards poetical and religious discourse. This ability is characteristic of courageous people who feel responsible for knowing and choosing what is important and valuable. For Socrates, neither wealth nor pleasure and even fame determines courage but a pursuit of wisdom and the accompanying conviction that only a wise man is rich.

This conviction originates in the belief that a reflection on oneself is the beginning of ethical life. Based on practical intelligence, developed in dialogue, it leads to practical wisdom. Knowledge about how to live is the best indication not only of the state of self-awareness but also of the chosen model of life. Socrates constantly emphasises that an individual effort is needed to learn how to live according to the revealed essence of goodness. Successive generations of ethicists will see in this approach an unprecedented revolution in understanding ethics as a sphere of caring for self.

The most important function of the soul is the ability to think (reflect on), and not only to learn, about specific objects. Thanks to this ability, man can challenge existing standards of life and seek new values and goals. Nevertheless, we are limited by our own experience, and our knowledge does not encompass all

dimensions of morality. For this reason, Socrates, in exceptional situations, trusts in his daimonion, or inner voice. It is worth considering why Socrates refers to gods and the daimonion. Why did he not seek explanations by referring to collective practice? In conversations with the sophists, Plato's teacher repeatedly emphasises that what is just and morally good is not given experimentally. It is included in concepts, definitions, and reflections. Two important moments are repeatedly encountered in these conversations:

- (1) the confrontation of what we do with our beliefs that we act in a right and good manner, which can be best seen in dialogues between the representatives of sophists and Socrates. The sophists are pragmatic, they use clear and obvious arguments and refer to facts confirmed by the sanction of common sense. They are far removed from the poetic and religious rhetoric of Socrates. Their ideals of education focus on two assumptions: that everything that is commonly considered beneficial is recommended as morally good and right and that man's career is based on acquired skills. There are no things or ideas inherently good or evil as human practice indicates what is beneficial to us and what is harmful;
- (2) in his dialogues, Socrates continues to emphasise the ambiguity, or rather a multi-aspect nature, of moral judgements that can lead to many different types of behaviour. Whenever Plato's master ponders the nature of virtue, it turns out that the attempt to answer the question of what the good is and how it exists outside the context must lead to dilemmas and further, insoluble issues, as Socrates, in contrast to the sophists, considering what goodness is, above all, tries to find who a good man is. The conviction of this philosopher that only a just man can act justly radically changes the sense of ethics since the original task of ethics is providing a reflective insight into the soul and the ideal of life recommended consists in ethical courage. As everything we do, all our activity, has its source in the soul, therefore, according to Socrates, it determines who we are and how we live.

On this basis, Socrates argues that:

- (1) We are guided by our convictions without bothering with a more in-depth reflection, especially a reflection on ourselves not on our utility, pleasures, etc. which have a relative value. We should act in harmony with our inner "self", and therefore with the soul;
- (2) What is just and good has one and unchangeable basis, regardless of the circumstances and prevailing customs. Only ethically courageous people want and can take care of themselves and their lives. For Socrates, as well as for his successors, courage was associated with acquiring an appropriate culture of thinking and being by an individual. It involves the adoption of such rational principles of action that find confirmation in our inner "self", i.e. the soul. Evil lies in ignorance, in mindless acceptance of prevailing norms and customs, in the passive imitation of others.

The culture of thinking manifests itself in the need to understand oneself and communicate with others, which means the necessity of maintaining a constant dialogue with oneself and with others. If we want to understand ourselves, we must learn how to talk, as Buber says, how to chat others up in order not to fall into routine or lassitude. The conversation always occurs “between”, referring to different experiences, arguments, opinions, attitudes, and judgements. We talk to others as we speak to ourselves and speak to ourselves as we talk to others. This way, we can distance ourselves from our own views, critically evaluate and problematise them. Only such a meeting with oneself can free man from ignorance and all flaws (including bestiality and wickedness), as it opens him to a world of possibilities of actions, of being, and knowing. In this quest to go beyond the closed world of everyday hustle and bustle lies the Socratic idea of ethical courage. Such a wider circle of discussion requires a deeper reflection, the emergence of questions in which the relationship between the performer of the act and the act itself is of an ethical nature. Courage means a life based on harmony and internal agreement between speech, thought, and action. It is associated with freedom but above all with the ability to recognise what is important in life. A free man does not give in to temptation, can resist trinkets and is able to control his emotions. He also finds no pleasure in humiliating others and exalting himself. He wants as much wealth as he can handle, believing that value lies in man, not in accumulated goods, as real power comes from acquired virtues, not currently held power. This attitude of Socrates is not dominated by asceticism but rather by the belief that caring for the soul is man’s highest challenge. It allows the man to understand who he is, what he is capable of, what is essential, important and valuable, and thus corresponds to his courage. The ethical condition of man flows not from any external need but from the spiritual necessity of being responsible for himself and for others. The Socratic belief that ethics is not a social or historical compulsion—in contrast to morality—still provides a challenge for many prominent modern ethicists such as Spamann and Taylor, Nussbaum and Ricoeur, Elzenberg and Tischner.

This combination of practice and knowledge as well as public and professional activity to which the Socratic dialogue referred shapes the culture of an individual and society. It is defined by principles, adequate to the logic of action and cognition. All the virtues, qualities and abilities of an individual or social group are judged by ancient thinkers based on their ethical courage which determines the practical wisdom of a particular individual. It is dominated by prudence as knowledge of life, accumulated based on experience in various situations and circumstances, as well as complemented and enriched by poetry, drama, and mythology which are different forms of a depiction of human fate. A reflection on what we or others have experienced expands the field of self-experience and self-understanding. For Socrates, the good is the factor that links the prudential dimension of cognition with the subjective care for one’s own identity. Knowledge about the good becomes equivalent to a good act. In other words, for Socrates to know the good means to be a good man, as the good has three interrelated properties: cognition, acquired skills (i.e. virtues) as well as the art of living and acting.

Certainly, the most important of these properties is associated with knowing that the good is of a dialogical nature, i.e. we can consider its essence only when our practical opinions and beliefs are subject to criticism. Socrates treats the good also as knowledge that leads to the purification of our consciousness from false beliefs or erroneous judgments. The third property of the good relates to its creative nature, as the good not only “enlightens” but also shapes harmonious human development. Thus, it combines man’s self-knowledge with his actions, i.e. the good (goodness) of man with his capability of good action. This can only be done by overcoming one’s weaknesses and habits so that man can be guided in life only by practical wisdom. The good has its source in the soul, and as we deepen our self-knowledge, we become more aware of how we should live, whereas human courage consists in acquiring virtues because of our own attempts and efforts.

Simply put, it can be said that Socratic ethics raised several new issues which during historical processes took on different forms of narrative. The most important ones include:

- (1) The dialogue between people, which enables a reflection on oneself and one’s life experience, is an inspiration and a background for ethical considerations. The basis of such a dialogue is human experience related to a specific activity and its subject is, among others, an attempt to order the values, norms and responsibilities that we follow in our lives in accordance with the state of our self-awareness. On many occasions, Socrates emphasises that nobody, apart from gods, has full knowledge of these matters. He repeatedly insists that “I know that I know nothing”.
- (2) The ethical condition of man requires him to be able to determine his own stance, understand other people’s arguments and refer in a discussion to rational arguments.
- (3) Courage means going beyond the current standards of action and breaking with the existing customs if they are contrary to the essence of the good.
- (4) Practical wisdom assumes a creative attitude, fully responsible for the implementation of the good and not only for eliminating the negative effects of actions undertaken.
- (5) Thus, a dialogue with oneself is part of a broader ethical discourse that we conduct with others—thanks to this dialogue, the subject becomes aware of the complexity of problems related to moral practice.

They have two complementary sides; on the one hand, we have the contingency and unpredictability of situations that force us to make moral decisions in a state of deep ignorance. On the other hand, the attitude towards the world of a subject relates to this subject’s project of life, aspirations and identity which have a dynamic and open structure. Ethicality arises when man, being aware of the uncertainty of his fate, wants and can take responsibility for how and what for he lives. The implementation of this ethos requires ethical courage which is based on the conscious pursuit of internal harmony between what we think (self-understanding), what we seek (self-fulfilment) and what we do (self-actualisation). It is a continuous and spiral process that includes all significant relations which

occur between the “self” and the world. In contact with the world, in a dialogue with others and ourselves, we find out who we are, and we pose a question who we should be. Socrates is convinced that it is only when man can problematise his existence that he can determine his own capabilities and preferences. This is the prerequisite for taking responsibility for how we live and influence the quality of life of others.

4. Conclusions

If we look at business ethics as a kind of human activity that is subject to rational, thought-out decisions, then it is easy to find a practicing sphere of ethics of responsibility within it. The term “practicing ethics” itself goes back to the Socratic intuition, as—according to this philosopher—getting to know oneself comes with an attempt to understand the world in which we function and create a network of social, political, economic relations, etc., on a local and global scale. Then in this field, we must face our own decisions, preferences and forms of self-actualisation in their technical and civilisational context. Its contemporary version refers to the concept of sustainable, integral development and points to the catastrophic effects of the present economy on a global scale. This state demands not only radical changes in the marketing strategy of large corporations, companies and international institutions but above all a profound transformation of self-awareness of individuals and the growth of individual responsibility in the global dimension. Consequently, it is about accepting a different project of the good life, fundamentally separate from the current consumer model. These issues were raised for the first time by Socrates, clearly, separating morality in the sphere of existing customs, i.e. established standards of behaviour, from ethics understood as an internal dialogue with oneself. According to this thinker, if we want and can talk to ourselves and others about our common issues, we can change our relationship to ourselves and to the world. In the primary, ethical sense, we as individuals are responsible for maintaining this public dialogue, its course and credibility. Open questions about the form and content of this discourse, its more immediate determinants, etc. lead to today’s understanding of matters that belong to the eternal issues of how to ensure the good life for oneself and others.

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