

## PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING: COMMON PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS IN BUSINESS

### *CONSEJERÍA FILOSÓFICA: PROBLEMAS FILOSÓFICOS COMUNES EM LOS NEGOCIOS*

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**Abstract:** In this article, I introduce problems which, while being philosophically relevant, are also common in business settings. I present the problems of responsibility, integrity, and autonomy and explain some of the specificities of their application in business settings. I explain that the relevance of the problems discussed in philosophical counseling comes from their significance at an existential level. I illustrate some of these problems by showing how they play out in particular philosophical counseling cases that I have conducted.

**Keywords:** Philosophical Counseling, Business, Responsibility, Integrity, Ethics, Existential Concerns.

**Resumen:** En este artículo, presento problemas que, si bien son filosóficamente relevantes, también son comunes en entornos comerciales. Presento los temas de responsabilidad, integridad y autonomía y explico algunas de las especificidades de su aplicación en el ámbito empresarial. Explico que la relevancia de los problemas discutidos para la consejería filosófica proviene de su significado a nivel existencial. Ilustro algunos de estos problemas mostrando cómo se desarrollan en casos particulares de asesoramiento filosófico que he llevado a cabo.

**Palabras clave:** consejería filosófica, negocios, responsabilidad, integridad, ética, preocupaciones existenciales.

## **Introduction**

This paper is aimed at philosophical counselors and philosophical practitioners in general. The scope of its discussion, though involving issues which are relevant to any person, is in particular relevant to philosophical counseling clients who are, in terms of their careers, business executives.

A motivation of mine in writing an article with this scope comes from the peculiar position which I occupy in my own career. I am currently a Professor of Philosophy at a Brazilian business school. That position gives me, to a certain (perhaps small and yet useful) degree, a sort of insider's view in terms of the sorts of issues which are relevant to executives. For instance, I occasionally can see in class how some of the issues discussed in this article play out in the lives of particular people. I also have the opportunity to see how these issues play out in the lives of philosophical counseling clients. I mention in this article some of those cases as a way of illustrating specific points.

I start by making explicit certain assumptions from which I will work. One is that existential issues fall within the scope of what can be appropriately addressed in the context of a philosophical counseling process. To that assumption, another is connected: developing one's sense of integrity, responsibility and autonomy (which are the problem I focus on in this article) are necessary parts of a healthy life at an existential level. A third assumption is that there is such a thing as existential needs – a notion to which I refer in certain parts of the article. I ask the reader to keep in mind that many of the points made in this article have those assumptions in the background.

## **Philosophical Counseling and its Usefulness in Business Settings**

Why does it make sense to talk about using Philosophical Counseling (PC) to support business executives? PC can, in general, be useful in a person's process of self-development. That is so because some of the core issues in the lives of human beings (e.g. existential and ethical ones) are philosophical in nature. Addressing those issues from a philosophical perspective, in the context of a PC process, allows for their development at a practical level.

This means that PC could be potentially useful to any person with existential or ethical issues. As will become evident, the issues I point out here are indeed relevant to any person and, if not properly attained, will cause problems at some level. But I focus here on issues which apply in a peculiar way in business settings. Issues which are commonly made problematic by the very way in which companies are structured. The discussion of this article reflects needs which are relevant to the lives of any person and that are under a peculiar kind of pressure in business settings<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> It is relevant to mention a sense of contribution to society involved in PC work with executives. That comes from the fact that the influence of large companies on our society is increasingly evident. Figures compiled by Global Justice Now in 2017 shows that 69 of the top 100 economic entities are and only 31 are governments. Analyzing 200 entities, the difference is even bigger, 157 are corporations and 43 are governments. The weight of business in society makes plain the impact of some of the executive's decisions. Given the ethical implications of those decisions, Philosophical Counseling for executives becomes a relevant contribution. Global Justice Now: "69 of the richest 100 entities on the planet are corporations, not governments, figures show", available at <https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/news/69-richest-100-entities-planet-are-corporations-not-governments-figures-show/> (last access September 1st, 2022).

Lou Marinoff's comments on the ideal role of a philosophical counselor point to an issue which illustrates clearly both the usefulness of PC and its peculiarities within business settings:

While a philosophical counselor does not normally tell a client what he ought to do, or make moral decisions for him, a philosophical counselor can indeed help a client ascertain whether a proposed action is consistent or inconsistent with respect to the client's own belief system or worldview<sup>2</sup>

The kind of contribution described by Marinoff in the above quote is more central than it might seem at first look. Executives are not valued by how well they are able to “ascertain whether a proposed action is consistent or inconsistent with respect to the client's own belief system or worldview”. Quite the contrary, they are valued in as much they pursue relentlessly corporate goals – whether or not those goals are consistent with their belief and value systems. Such a pattern is so encrusted in business settings that out of habit some executives won't even take into account their own genuine beliefs while making work-related decisions<sup>3</sup>.

Ran Lahav also points to a potential contribution of philosophical counseling, which appears to be particularly relevant in business settings:

Since much of a person's worldview is normally expressed only implicitly, in an unarticulated manner, the role of the philosophical counsellor is to examine it critically<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marinoff, Lou: *Philosophical Practice*, Academic Press, San Diego, 2002, p.13.

<sup>3</sup> From their perspective, that is not part of their job. The issue with that is that eventually the executive's neglected existential needs present themselves forcefully, at which point ignoring them is no longer an option. That's when a philosophical counselor can be of support in the way described by Marinoff.

<sup>4</sup> Lahav, Ran. “Using Analytic Philosophy in Philosophical Counselling.”, in *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, number 2, volume 10, Cambridge, 1993, P.243.

With the above point, Lahav further unveils how certain features of a philosophical counseling process can be particularly useful in business settings. Even though there are other kinds of settings in which the point has much relevance (the military may even be a stronger kind of example), having one's worldview only implicitly and inarticulately presented appears to be a distinguishing feature of business settings when compared to other sorts of professional settings (there is a difference of degree here).

But pointing to common issues that affect many executives, as I will do in this article, comes with a caveat. This is not meant to disregard the fact that each person is unique and is always experiencing particular circumstances. PC requires considering the particularities of both the person that seeks counseling and their current circumstances. At the same time, there are generalizations which can be made about the situation of business executives, which can provide helpful background and context for many specific issues which an executive may bring to his philosophical counselor.

## **Introducing the Problems**

As already said, in this article, I focus on issues which constitute philosophical problems for any human being. At the same time, these are issues which are pressed in a peculiar way in business settings, given the way these settings tend to be structured. I focus on the issues of 'responsibility', 'autonomy', and 'integrity'. I will provide just enough detail at a conceptual level to allow the reader to have a clear sense of what I mean by each of these problems.

## The Problem of Responsibility

I use ‘responsibility’ as an ethical notion here. Agents perform actions and are accountable for those actions and their respective consequences. There are some nuances in terms of the features that make someone responsible or not for a certain action, which I will briefly mention below, but for our purposes this is the essence of responsibility. As Jean-Paul Sartre proposes in his *Being and Nothingness*:

man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being. (...) this absolute responsibility is not resignation; it is simply the logical requirement of the consequences of our freedom<sup>5</sup>

In business settings, the key thing about the problem of responsibility is that there are responsibilities which are clearly attributable to executives and yet, in many situations, they fail to recognize that. The problem involves, therefore, a kind of failure in terms of properly acknowledging one’s own responsibilities. This problem emerges because there is a predominance in business settings of a lack of understanding about how responsibility can legitimately be attributed (this point will be clearer once I present in detail, later, a view of the legitimate attribution of responsibility).

The executive’s failure to acknowledgement can be illustrated in terms of how they tend to interact with figures of authority within the company. There is an association between the instructions given by the authority and responsibility for the decision and their consequences. Once the agent is instructed to act in a certain way, their interpretation tends to be that their responsibility is mainly to

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<sup>5</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul: *Being and Nothingness : An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1985, p. 669

fulfil the instruction. The responsibility for the action itself (and its consequences) is, in those instances, located by the agent at the source of the instruction <sup>6</sup>. But responsibility isn't transferable like this. As Sartre hints at above, if the agent has a choice at all, they are responsible for the choice they make. One surely can fail to recognise or avoid that responsibility, but that doesn't change the fact that it is their responsibility.

Since the key thing in this discussion is a lack of clarity about the *attribution* of responsibility, I will briefly offer a characterization of responsibility and its proper attribution. I will do so only enough to give readers who are not familiar with this issue a sense of what I mean by the problem of responsibility.

Sartre summarizes it nicely when he presents responsibility as “consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object.” <sup>7</sup> The proposition isn't in itself controversial, and yet what can be understood by “incontestable author” is open for debate. What Sartre means by it is controversial, nonetheless, as his view is marked by a sort of extreme self-responsibilization. His sort of view is profound, interesting, and useful in a philosophical counseling setting, but it is indeed extreme and perhaps wouldn't necessarily resonate with some of the executives that seek the support of philosophical counseling. But even if we don't go down that sort of extreme route and look at the issue from the perspective of a more moderate account of responsibility, some executive's

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<sup>6</sup> This point applies both when the instruction comes from an actual person (such as one's boss), and when it comes in some sense from the mechanisms that guarantee the instrumentalization of the organization's goals<sup>6</sup>. In either case the dynamics is the same. From their perspective, the executive's core commitment is with the company's welfare (understood in terms of the attainment of its goals). This commitment is seen as having preference over other demands.

<sup>7</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul: *Being and Nothingness : An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1985, p. 669.

failure to acknowledgement of responsibility can be clearly noted and described.

There is a reasonable enough consensus in terms of certain features which are key to the attribution of responsibility. Rudy-Hiller summarizes the two key conditions for its proper attribution:

Philosophers usually acknowledge two individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a person to be morally responsible for an action. (...) While the first condition prompts us to ask “was this person acting freely when she did A?”, the second condition prompts us to ask “was this person aware of what she was doing (of its consequences, moral significance, etc.)”<sup>8</sup>

I will introduce here the aspect of the attribution of responsibility that is most relevant to business settings. Harry Frankfurt articulates it in terms of what he calls the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP). “... ‘the principle of alternate possibilities’ ... states that a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise.”<sup>9</sup>

The key thing about PAP is whether the agent has a choice, an alternative route which she could have taken but didn't. According to PAP if the agent does have a choice in the situation, they are responsible for the choice they make. David Robb illustrates the point with the following example:

One day at the cafeteria, Kurt steals John's lunch. Under normal circumstances, we hold Kurt responsible for his act<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rudy-Hiller, Fernando, "The Epistemic Condition for Moral Responsibility", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.): *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2018, , available in <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/moral-responsibility-epistemic/>. (last access August 09, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Frankfurt, Harry; “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (23), 1969, p.829.

<sup>10</sup> Robb, David: "Moral Responsibility and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* , 2020, available in

What exactly is meant by ‘having a choice’ is open for debate though:

Suppose, for example, that Kurt was coerced by a bully to steal John’s lunch; or he is suffering from a neurological disorder compelling him to act; or he was brainwashed. These are some of the many ways in which his alternatives can be closed off. But however this happens, once the alternatives are gone—once Kurt must act as he does—blaming him no longer seems appropriate <sup>11</sup>

As this point suggests, I acknowledge the fact that when it comes to the problem of responsibility in business settings, there will be situations in which executives have no choice. In this article, I am concerned with situations in which executives do have a choice but fail to recognize their responsibility.

A PC process conducted by me in 2020 illustrates how failure in the attribution of responsibility causes the impoverishment of one’s life at an existential level. I will call this client “M”. M worked for many years at a large multinational corporation. Being a woman, she felt that she had to work much harder than her peers to get at her position of director at the organization. In order to be successful at climbing the ladder in the hierarchy of the organization she had to make many choices over the years with which she wasn’t comfortable (even if she didn’t see that at the time).

M was shocked at the realization, during one of our sessions, that she had a choice in many of the occasions in which she saw herself forced to act in ways with which she disagreed. In fact, it seems that the very fact that she didn’t acknowledge having a choice in

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<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/alternative-possibilities/>>. (last access August 09, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Robb, David: "Moral Responsibility and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2020, available in <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/alternative-possibilities/>>. (last access August 09, 2022).

those occasions prevented her from clearly seeing that she disagreed with some of the things that she was doing. An intense and growing anxiety did alert her over time that something was out of place. She became so dissatisfied with her circumstances that she had to quit the job that she had worked so hard to get. Interestingly, she made a career transition and became the head of a large NGO focused on supporting children in situations of extreme vulnerability.

M's case shows the existential implications of the problem of responsibility. Ideally, the person would see the problem not only after it became unbearable, causing, in this case, the need to quit one's job. But even when that is the case, PC can still help the person in making sense of what the problem was, in such a way that she positions herself in a different way in future occasions.

### **The Problem of Integrity**

The problem of integrity, like responsibility, is relevant from the perspective of PC, given its existential significance. Such significance stems not only from the intrinsic significance of properly developing one's sense of integrity but also from the fact that this problem involves specific needs of human beings, which are in themselves existential in character.

In the sense adopted in this article, the word *integrity* refers to the quality of being whole, and undivided. So, integrity gives the agent a sense of lack of fragmentation. This sense brings us back to the relevance of the potential contribution of PC to executives, as mentioned earlier. Ascertaining "whether a proposed action is consistent or inconsistent with respect to the client's own belief system", as suggested earlier by Marinoff, is indispensable for avoiding unhealthy fragmentations and deepening one's sense of integrity. With that in mind, I will illustrate below how the issue of

integrity can become problematic in business settings. I call attention to the fact that I start by presenting the problem in an exaggerated way, a sort of caricature of the issue. Yet such caricature makes the issue plain.

It is common in business settings to have a sense of dissociation between the “personal” and the “professional” dimensions of one’s life. This sense of dissociation can be illustrated through the issue of decision-making <sup>12</sup>. If we assume that executives operate from within a certain model while making work-related decisions (as empirical observation suggests), it looks as if the sense of dissociation mentioned here has a direct influence on such adopted model of decision-making. The result of such influence is the virtual exclusion from the model of concerns which are relevant to the individual at the “personal” level. This means that there is a sort of segregation that is artificially introduced.

What I mean by the sense of dissociation having a direct impact on the adopted decision-making model is the following. Executives have certain aims, which they already recognize consciously. Yet, in making work-related decisions, they tend not to take these aims into account in their calculations of how to act. Since those aims reflect deep existential needs, these needs remain neglected. So, executives tend to incur a lack of consistency in their decision-making model, stemming from having certain aims while making choices that contradict those very aims.

The problem isn’t one of recognizing that those aims are present. It is rather in clarifying and developing the mechanism of integrating those already recognized and central needs into the decision-making process. Executives already are aspiring to properly accommodate those concerns into their lives but are unclear about

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<sup>12</sup> While this is a properly philosophical terrain, executives tend to see that sort of issue (i.e., to do with decision-making) as immediately relevant to them. Such a sense of relevance facilitates the process of integrating the insights related to integrity that emerge during the PC work into their practical lives.

how to do that effectively. Supporting the development of the decision-making capacity of executives in such a way as to integrate into the process sets of considerations which reflect the profound needs that those executives have is, therefore, an important contribution to be given by PC.

The view articulated in this article is that there are at least four sets of concerns which are not only common to most executives, but also are already acknowledged by them as relevant. Executives seem to be not so clear about their motivations for those concerns, but they tend to be clear about the facts that such concerns exist and that they are struggling to accommodate them properly. I articulate those concerns in terms of concerns related to excellence in corporate performance, ethical concerns, existential concerns; and concerns related to one's contribution to society. I will introduce them, one by one, in what follows.

### **Excellence in Corporate Performance**

From the different sets of considerations which are relevant to executives in the scope of their professional decisions, only one takes the central stage in their calculations of how to act. The other relevant sets of considerations - which I will introduce below - are occasionally acknowledged and only to some degree. I refer to this set of concerns as excellency in one's contribution to corporate performance.

This is not only a genuine but also a legitimate kind of consideration. Executives live their professional lives in a specific organizational setting, which in its turn is part of an economic system which operates according to certain rules. Companies don't need to pursue profits at all costs (in detriment of any other potentially worthwhile corporate goals), but they do need to maintain their financial health in a robust condition otherwise they

simply won't be able to play the game at all. It is part of the job to orient oneself, in part, by a view of how one's actions contribute to corporate performance. It is not, nonetheless, the only relevant set of concerns in those calculations.

The way in which the demand for contribution to corporate performance is interpreted by some executives is interesting. Many executives operate out of the assumption that there is an ethical demand on them to promote such corporate (i.e. financial) excellence. I won't get into the issue of whether this is correct. What is relevant is that these executives believe that the decisions they make are being made out of a sense of duty. Not only that. The demand to do so is taken to have predominance over other kinds of demands, sometimes even ethical ones.

### **Ethical Concerns**

When faced with specific situations, there is a moral requirement for executives to consider whichever features of the situation are morally relevant in that specific situation. That not being the case is, in my view, the core failure in the decision-making process of executives. It is not that executives don't acknowledge that ethical concerns are relevant. It is rather that there is confusion about which are the ethically relevant features of each situation, a confusion coming out of a lack of clarity about how to discern them. One of the potential contributions of PC is therefore supporting the development of the capacity to properly discern the ethically relevant features of each situation.

### **Existential Concerns**

Not only developing one's sense of integrity is in itself relevant from an existential point of view, but also all the neglected sets of

concerns mentioned in this article have an existential significance. That is even more obvious with the set of concerns which I call existential. Different things could be mentioned in terms of existential concerns that executives already have. I mention here the most relevant ones for the purposes of this article: the value and meaning of work, cultivating a sense of purpose in one's professional life, and one's contribution to social progress. Since the problem of autonomy will have its own section, I won't mention it at this stage, but I take autonomy as a central existential need of human beings.

The case of 'M', presented above, illustrates the existential significance of the concerns mentioned above. I mentioned that in her case, there was a problem with the level of responsibility. In her PC process, I could work the connection between responsibility and her existential needs through the clarification of how the legitimate attribution of responsibility works. That helped her to recognize instances in which she does have a choice even if she thought she didn't. There was also a problem at the level of the three existential concerns which I mentioned above. She clearly lacked a sense of meaning in her corporate work, and the fact that she transitioned into an NGO suggests that she was seeking more purpose in her professional life and that giving some sort of contribution to the community is important to her.

Other PC cases of mine also indicate that neglecting one's existential needs have important consequences. In less dramatic tones, a client, which I will refer to as "J", had a problem which is not too dissimilar from M's. After working for many years in the Brazilian operation of a large multinational, J also went up the ladder in the hierarchy, becoming a director. Though enthusiastic about his achievements J felt the need for a transition in search of a more meaningful line of work. Moving to a smaller organization (in which he had worked before) already provided him with a deeper sense of meaning.

## Contribution to Society

I have mentioned the issue of one's contribution to social progress as one aspect of the existential set of concerns. Given the peculiar way in which this issue plays out in business settings, it is worth mentioning briefly that it is focused on the following dilemma: how to reconcile the apparent contrasting goals of the needs of the company to ensure its financial health and the needs that those that compose it have of giving a meaningful contribution to society through their work?

There are two different angles from which this point can be seen: as a positive contribution and as a negative one. Ideally, executives would have a positive approach to this issue, seeking ways in which they could use the most of their potential in order to pursue a genuine contribution. But perhaps their most immediate concern is at least mitigating the 'negative footprints' of the businesses in which they work, since those can have devastating consequences for the communities in which they are present. As Valentin Vandyshev points out:

The modern manager is acutely aware of the problem of survival in its broadest representation. He feels a social responsibility for the correctness of his actions to himself, his family, the company and finally to the society<sup>13</sup>

## The Problem of Autonomy

In essence, autonomy means that one is the source of one's own actions. It contrasts with heteronomy which means that an external force is the source of one's actions. Depending on how 'external

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<sup>13</sup> Vandyshev, Valentin N : "The existential problems of management", in *Jagiellonian Journal of Management*, number 2, volume 1, Poland, 2015, pp, 131-140.

force' is understood, we can refer to different things. If we understand it in a non-philosophical way, autonomy just means that other people don't determine your conduct, you do. A philosophical understanding adds to that a complementary sense in which 'external' refers to external to one's true self. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant are examples of this sort of conception of autonomy. I won't discuss here the deeper sense of autonomy, which refers to the notion of the true self.

One way to illustrate how a problem with autonomy emerges is through its connection with the problem of responsibility. The issue of lack of clarity about how the proper attribution of responsibility works causes a failure to acknowledgement of one's responsibilities. Such failure reinforces the executive's idea that they don't have a choice in situations in which they do. That immediately brings a problem at the level of autonomy.

I was confronted with the problem of autonomy in the case of my client "G". When G arrived at my practice for the first time, she was very anxious. She could barely speak without having bursts of tears out of her feeling of being oppressed and abused at work. After a few sessions, it became clear that she held the belief that it would be morally wrong to do anything other than obey her boss. Even though she was feeling abused, this mistaken understanding of situations involving her boss led her to the belief that she had no choice in those instances. Without acknowledging it, she was putting herself in a position of refraining from exercising her autonomy, which in turn caused her to feel intense anxiety.

After clarifying a few basic points about her conception of ethics and the importance of self-respect, G was able to gradually position herself on different terms with her boss.

## Note to the Philosophical Counsellor

Each person is unique, and each situation is particular. Yet, when it comes to business settings, common patterns can be observed. Given that human beings have certain existential needs, it is possible to see how companies tend to be structured and interferes with some of those needs in peculiar ways. My suggestion is not that every executive will face challenges with all the problems discussed above. The reasoning which motivated me to write this article is rather that for executives who seek the support of PC, there is a considerable chance that the difficulty they are having, if it is work-related, is somehow connected with these problems. Even if it is not, there is a high probability that the above issues will still be relevantly present in the background of the work that is being conducted.

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