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Developing ecological awareness and responsible business. Spirituality, self and an alternative vision of a long-term future

Version by Authors

Developing ecological awareness in organizations is becoming a pressing and fundamental need in the still dominating paradigm of prioritization of revenues and economic growth. Emergent practices in business organizations today point towards potential development of ecological consciousness and responsible and meaningful economic activity that aims at finding alternatives to economic growth under the principles of ecological economics.

Spiritual practices have been developed from ancient traditions, are interwoven into human existence and are meaningful to economic activity. From the fundamental question of *who am I* as a reflective process, to the meditation based practices, to the realization of the ecological man based upon an organic worldview. Cognitive and meta-cognitive perspectives are important, and they are interwoven with emotional and higher perspectives. The definition of limits and considerations of those is important to approach a praxis-based proposal that can be applied, monitored and evaluated in business.

The conception of self, which can be approached from different traditions, offers a basis for introducing these limits but at the same time integrate a complexity based understanding and apprehensible knowledge about business actors. In the study of the self, we have ancient and modern philosophical considerations, as well as more historically recent psychosocial approaches that can be connected. The study of the self from a long-term perspective is connected with a place of agenciability and action to shape the future. This is related to the process of development in business leadership involved in driving and changing the business arena towards the development of ecological underpinning in the implementation of responsible business.

The study of the self allows us to identify emergent ethical considerations in relation to a long-term future. Long-term perspectives of the individual allow us to explore the commitment and motivational basis for alternative ways for economic development in line with responsibility for change. Those are grounded in technological development for wellbeing of communities both from a local and a global perspective beyond mainstream strategies based on economic growth.

This article proposes key foundations of a process to be applied in organizations. After the theoretical reflection we aim at presenting a proposal in the business arena that goes beyond the theoretical reflection and aims at providing a practical basis that will show potential for specific projects in the business arena.

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SPIRITUALITY: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE WESTERN WORLD

The concept of spirituality in the western world from the Greco-Roman culture is generally considered in the religious context. The subtract where spirituality is considered in Europe from the VI century was the Christian *Cosmo vision*. In medieval Christianity we have two distinct approaches: The faith based via, driven by logic, prayer and a rational character petitionary, and the via of mysticism, vertebrate by the exaltation of the unconscious and the emotions that would bring to a mystic perspective.

In the western world, the movement that proposes for the first time to understand spirituality detached from the religious, is without a doubt the romanticism. In the texts of JW.Goethe, F. Hölderlin, F.W.J. Schelling and G.W.F.Hegel (Goethe, 1999; Hölderlin, 1958; Schelling, 2002; Hegel, 2003), appear two words that will become fundamental: on the one hand “Geist” (spirit). It is said that the human being has an individual spirit and a connection with the collective spirit of society. On the other hand, the “Hen kai Pan” (Hölderlin, 1958), or one in the whole, a connection is the union in the human being, the one with nature. In this way, nature is not only an object, as it is in the industrial vision, but at the same time subject.

The romantic movement presents a new anthropology for the western world; for them, the human being not only is body and soul, but on the contrary the human creature can be understood from different levels: the physical, the vital, the emotional, the intellectual, the unconscious, and the spiritual that crowns all the human creature. In a distinction with Christianity, the spirit becomes detached from the religious, and acquires a new status. The spirit constitutes the dimension of consciousness of superior character that embraces and realizes a synthesis between the emotional and the intellectual, but that projects towards the occult dimension of nature where it is subjacent the absolute (Schelling, 1973).

In the XIX century, poets and romantic philosophers discover that spirituality is the key for the human existential questions. Those questions are: Who am I?, beyond my name, my family and belonging to a nation or culture? What is my destiny as a human being, beyond the species or the social activity? What does the phenomenon of death mean, beyond allowing for reproduction and legacy?

On the other hand, the thinker and traveler Paul Brunton (introducer of the philosophy of transcendental meditation in Europe) will define “self” as superior I (overself), and will provide the idea of a new life in relation with nature through the practice of self-knowledge and personal growth (Brunton, 1966). Philosophers such as Manfred Frank or Jean Gebser (Manfred, 1989 and Gebser, 1999), will provide in their texts elements that based on an identity perspective will define spirituality. From this optic, the spiritual would be the dimension of consciousness that is not oriented towards material aspects, but towards the resolution of existential human questions, constitutes a more complete and elevated human perspective that synthetizes the material with the ideal, the emotional with the intellectual and that tries to exceed the polarities and the human contradictions in a unification.

SPIRITUALITY AND BUSINESS

This spirituality is inherited in the XX century by new social movements such as naturism, conservationism, and a laic spirituality such as anthroposophy; those will be the inheritors in the advance industrial societies. In the second half of the XX century, when emerges ecological consciousness due to the problem of industrial pollution, these movements will be oriented towards a spirituality that approaches nature in a holistic way. In the same line, we understand the line of “deep ecology” (Næss, 1989; s. Ims, 2011 for a comprehensive approach to deep ecology in the context of spirituality in business).

In the preindustrial societies, the noble directions were found by means of the prophet, the noble, the king, the caballier, the warrior, the priest, and the hero; but from the XIX, the drivers in the industrial societies will be the scientist, the industrialist and the business person; and in the XX century, the manager, the politician, and the highly specialized scientist. For this reason it is desirable that due to the current crisis of values and the “ecological mortgage”, to connect the spiritual values with the business world with the fundamental need to change the approach to the current business paradigm.

In the XXI century, ecologic era, we have already emergent businesses (some of them inspired by the thinker Schumacher that developed models for investment for a sustainable economy (Schumacher, 1973). However, the dominating trend is the development of proposals that continue subject to principles of maximization of profit.

It seems necessary that together with the ecological objectives, we introduce foundations of self-knowledge in the members of corporations and companies. In our proposal, we discuss the study of the self as a [process that can launch, through](#) the reflective consciousness of the person, a sense of personal meaning that would imply a connection with the fundamental questions in the person's life. This position can also allow the integration in the self of the conception of spirituality as considered in the present work. This implies a connection of the romantic movement and the emergent perspectives of spirituality in the western world, relevant in the context of development of ecological awareness and responsible business today. Ultimately, we aim towards ecological awareness in business that is rooted in the knowledge of the self, which can be related to specific projects under the umbrella of spirituality.

The self: reflective consciousness, interaction with the social, and agency

The professionals and leaders today can use self-knowledge to make sense of who they are and their place as actors of change in today's world. In integration with a philosophical perspective, the psychological perspective that considers a self that is made in interaction with the social dimension of relevance in our proposal.

From this perspective, the *self* implies the wholeness of three aspects: reflective consciousness, the interpersonal being, and the *self* as entity that chooses and decides a specific action (Baumeister, 1998). The reflective consciousness process requires that there is an "I" that thinks, and that can consider an object that is "me" in the person, classification that is in line with W. James theory (James, 1920). This implies an awareness in the person, to some extent, of who she/he is. Selfhood can be only understood within a social context (Mead, 1993), and there is an implicit reference to agency in the self.

When considering the apprehension and understanding of the self, the term self-concept is relevant. In short, the self-concept has been considered the cognitive representation of the self. It involves people's beliefs about their personal characteristics and not only beliefs about their traits, abilities, and physical attributes but also about their values, roles, and personal goals (Leary, 2011). People's self-concept have a strong influence on how they behave, and people will generally behave in consistent forms to the kind of people they think they are (ibid.). To study the self, and therefore the self-concept, implies to consider a multiplicity of aspects and sides, but also a unity in the self. The conception of the *self* comprises a multifaceted *self* (Baumeister, 1998), but in this multiplicity, we also have a unity that has a continuation in time (ibid.).

The future and the self: Fundamental questions for the long-term

The study of the *self* allows to access behavioural insights in the individual with respect to the future and his/her position as agent of change. This opens the possibility for self-regulation in the behaviour of the person (Baumeister and Vohs, 2003; McCombs and Marzano, 1990), and therefore potential for change. The future outlook is a shaper of the self, and is also part of the self (Mead, 1932). The self is associated with a place of action to shape new models of business and societies, where the person is placed in the future. This is related to the process of development in business leadership involved in driving and changing the business arena towards the development of ecological underpinning in the implementation of responsible business.

The study of the self has been developed mostly for the short-term perspectives. A long-term outlook is fundamental before today's challenges in business development that embrace emergent perspectives beyond profit making that are in tune with ecological awareness and sustainable development. We have seen the importance of the question "Who am I". With a future based perspective, we propose a reflective process to study the self with a starting point as "who am I in the year 2030", which is related to the description of the business leader and manager in 2030. In our view, this should take place as an extension towards the long-term, but in close connection with the present. Another key question is "who I would like to be in 2030? Similarly, the person states who he/she would like to be in the year 2030. This approach, which is

directed to the inner dimension, will also be related to business, which in some way is connected with who would the person like to be. With this proposal, we aim, at the development of an integrated vision in the self in relation to ecological awareness and knowing the challenges ahead to be a better human being and to have better communities and societies.

Developing a proposal in the business context:

The following points are considered as the foundation for the study of the self:

- In our view, if we want to reconsider the issue against nature in the new millennium, we need to face this challenge by means of providing a space to include attention to the study of the self in the development plans within the business arena.
- We propose the implementation of a platform for reflection on the self, which would be developed on a scale according to the size of business.
- In this platform for the study of the self, one part would be allocated to development of social scenarios from a long-term future perspective.
- It is also necessary to learn from ongoing communities that provide good references on how to live more aware of the ecological pressures and the solutions. Some good examples are emergent models in the transition towns initiative (<https://transitionnetwork.org/>) which provides some business models that could be linked at several levels in SME and large enterprises through structured innovation processes. Structured and reputable communities based on the anthroposophy can also be a reference for inspiration.
- We underline the fundamental importance to provide self-conceptions in the year 2030, and relate them with specific projects at corporate level. And here the importance of developing business that can be of interest for entrepreneurs and business developers.

- The development of reflection capacity building in corporations is important. Is the business arena ready to dedicate time and effort to the development of this approach to reflection? What are the human capabilities at stake and where is business placed in this regard? The identification of weak areas and the measures needed to overcome is imperative to make sure that the process reaches specific outcome beyond reflection, or in other words a specific project.

On the basis of this proposal, it is fundamental that we relate a self that is built upon the social context but that at the same time can react to the social through a personal alternative. This is to be connected in the person, from the business development perspective, with a specific case of an innovative project that embraces the principles of ecological awareness and responsibility. Also, this is to be related to the others, to those working in the same company, but better even to the broader community. A search for personal but also for collective meaning can and should take place to advance towards a common project built up on awareness. Present and future are interconnected through the development of social vision that makes possible his realization. In this we aim at the development of a self that sees business opportunities from a spiritual perspective, one that also includes and sees the other.

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