

# From Cynicism to Hopeful Skepticism

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## Abstract

This paper is directed at the pedagogical impediments stemming from a renaissance of a Machiavellian cynicism among business students. If business students adopt and retain a cynical view of the business world, then issues of social justice such as wealth creation and distribution are moot. The paper discusses some philosophical, empirical, experiential and other educational strategies for helping business students reject the current cynicism and adopt a hopeful skepticism.

## From Cynicism to Hopeful Skepticism

A recent survey that included MBA (Master of Business Administration) students and convicts in the United States asked whether a business person should steal a trade secret in order to benefit their employer. The poll revealed that 73 percent of the MBA respondents, but only 60 percent of convicts would hire a competitor's employee in order to obtain trade secrets. Since I teach a class on business ethics, I had trouble believing that such cynicism was so rampant.<sup>1</sup> When I queried my business ethics students on whether they believed that lying, cheating, and stealing were normative in the business world, all my students raised their hands.

The poll and the response of my students are indicative of a rising tide of cynicism that is rampant among business students. The business ethicist, Robert Solomon, refers to the common perception of an ethos of greed and corruption in private market economies as the "myth of amoral business".<sup>2</sup> Many studying or engaged in business assume that amorality is the norm and that success comes from learning how to properly manipulate the system.

The cynicism issue is all very fine, you might say, but what does it have to do with the wealth creation and distribution issues at the Puebla conference? My contention is that if cynicism remains normative for the current generation of business students, then there will be little future interest in the private sector for such issues as wealth creation and distribution. Why not? If the business world is merely an arena to be manipulated for personal wealth and power, then there is little reason to be concerned with social justice issues. A business person in a culture of cynicism would have only the distasteful choices of succumbing to the amorality of the system or accepting isolation or punishment. Either way, the business community will not be concerned with the ethical implications of wealth creation and distribution since ethics is rejected and personal egoism rules individual choices.

The challenge for business professors then is to prevent the cynicism of business students from becoming a fundamental and ingrained value. The Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega Y Gasset, referred to deeply imbedded and fundamental values of a culture as

“creencias”.<sup>3</sup> Creencias are so foundational that they become an unconscious, but critical, aspect of a person in a particular society. Before such cynicism hardens into a creencia of the business and perhaps the larger cultural world of the West, the cynicism must be combated by persuading students that a moral life is possible in the business world and that it may even have intrinsic advantages.

An immediate and perhaps reflexive objection may be that my pedagogy is too pollyanish. I do not deny that there is selfishness and greed among business people. Rather, the objective is to bring a more balanced view of the business world to my students so that they will not feel a sense of moral paralysis. The need to restore balance is like the story told about the Chinese philosopher, Confucius who had two students who were facing a similar problem with their parents. Confucius told one student to confront his parent and the other to submit. After witnessing this divergence in advice, Confucius was asked by an apprentice about the disparity in his advice for similar problems. The master stated that the timid student needed to learn to be bolder and the bolder student needed to learn some humility.

Following the lead of Confucius, I hope to bring my students back from an excessive and destructive cynicism to a point of balance between cynicism and a naive optimism. The new point of balance is a hopeful skepticism that is open to human goodness, but is aware of human depravity. Such a balance is fundamental in Catholic social teachings that recognize that humanity is neither inherently perfect nor completely depraved. Humanity inhabits a point of stress between human creativity and sinfulness that can best be reconciled in the Paschal mystery, divine grace, and the work of the spirit.<sup>4</sup>

Before proceeding any further, and in order to avoid any confusion, it is important to carefully define the terms, “cynic” and “skeptic”. A cynic is one who believes that human conduct is “motivated wholly by self interest” and, therefore, expects nothing but the “worst of human conduct and motives.” In contrast a skeptic has not decided the issue of human motivations and conduct. The skeptic seeks discernment and “instinctively or habitually doubts, questions, or disagrees with assertions or generally accepted conclusions.” A hopeful skeptic would question and probe the regnant shibboleths of any age in search of the truth.<sup>5</sup>

The anthropological assumptions of the cynic and skeptic, therefore, determine their stance in regard to their view of sociality, the need for human interaction and community. The cynic is inherently anti-social because of universal negative assumptions regarding the conduct of other human beings. In contrast, the hopeful skeptic can cautiously critique his or her society on behalf of the common good.

### **The Return of Machiavelli**

How then to challenge the cynicism of students and to prove that the business world is not intrinsically immoral? There are of course many strategies, but I begin my business ethics classes by reading chapters 17-20 of Niccolo Machiavelli’s, The Prince. If the

business students desire realism and a cynical perspective, it is only fair to present a strong case for their views. Initially, they find Machiavelli, like many generations of students, quite bracing. Why not? Here, after all the mush that many students perceive in academia, is somebody who provides the real lessons necessary to survive and thrive in life, particularly in a hyper-competitive business world. After all, is it not true that fear is a more certain mandate for authority than love since a ruler can dictate who should be feared. Hence, like Machiavelli, the business person must trust in that which they can control-fear. A person in authority should cynically assume, therefore, that self-interest is the primary motivation of human action. For example, Machiavelli contended that the ruled feared a loss of their money more than the loss of a parent executed at the whim of the state.<sup>6</sup>

Having set before my students a striking example of unbridled cynicism, it is then fair to subject Machiavelli, in the best tradition of skepticism, to a probing analysis. For example, a fair criticism of the consummate realist is that he failed to get the job from the Medicis that he hoped would flow from his authorship of The Prince. A Kantian insight on Machiavelli is that the unethical agent may also be the victim of other equally unscrupulous agents. Indeed, Machiavelli was not successful because the recipient of the cynicism, Lorenzo de Medici, was also a cynic.

Perhaps, Machiavelli was just unskilled or unlucky. After all, Machiavelli assumed that fortune is an important element in human success and is largely beyond our control. Fair enough.

Now, I turn to another argument against “the myth of amoral business” that is supported by Machiavelli’s cynical assumptions about human nature. I ask my students whether they would like to work for a business executive who operated like Machiavelli’s prince. No hands have ever been raised. The students readily admit that they would prefer to work for a company that treats its employees and customers fairly. Hmm... if that is true, then it would seem that an ethical business would have a competitive advantage in hiring from the pool of job applicants represented by our class. The ethical business could select the best and the brightest in our class while simultaneously avoiding costly turnovers.

If such inherent difficulties contradictions and problems in The Prince were not sufficient to raise some doubts in my modern Machiavellians, there is plenty of theoretical ballast for a critique of the assumptions in The Prince. One of the best essays is Jacques Maritain’s, “The End of Machiavellianism.” The essential foundational distinction between Maritain and Machiavelli is that the latter assumes that the world is infinitely fallen and corrupt. Machiavelli’s simplistic anthropology leads to numerous errors. For example, the cynic of the Renaissance was too simple in his pessimistic account of humanity and described as a vice what was often in reality only “the authentically moral behavior of a just man engaged in the complexities of human life and true ethics.” What Machiavelli perceived as evil may be in reality the most ethical option among an array of poor choices.

The radical pessimism of Machiavelli is the fons et origo of a cynicism which held that humanity is not capable of moral activity. By contrast, Maritain assumes that human

beings, although fallen, are also destined by God to be freely acting agents seeking to achieve their individual and collective good. The subtlety of Maritain's anthropology stands in marked contrast to Machiavelli.

Machiavelli knows that they [human beings] are bad. He does not know that this badness is not radical, that this leprosy can not destroy man's original grandeur, that human nature remains good in its very essence and its root-tendencies, and that such a basic goodness joined to a swarming multiplication of particular evils is the very mystery and the very motive power of struggle and progression in mankind.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to Machiavelli, Maritain's metaphysical grounding of political entities allowed any organization or authority the possibility of transcending the faults and limitations of any one person or entity. Maritain holds that restraint on the part of a person in authority is assumed, although not always obeyed, among Christians because of the recognition of a higher source of authority.

Maritain may be convincing if one concedes his Christian assumptions. What about those who are not believers and who note the success of repressive regimes in maintaining power? Some of Maritain's arguments do not explicitly assume a Christian world view. In a point that has been made by Robert Solomon in regard to business ethics, Maritain observed that Machiavellian regimes will fail on their own terms because amoral leadership will eventually corrupt the search for and maintenance of their leadership. An amoral leader has difficulty imposing self restraint because the character flaw that prompts their quest will corrupt the prudence of their instrumental judgments. Moreover, the contradictions between the operative norms of the ruler and the moral principles of the subjects corrodes the values of the latter that are essential to the maintenance of the ruling entity.

The contradiction between operative norms and moral principles also applies to business entities. The acceptance and trust necessary for business exchanges with other employees and customers are threatened by some unscrupulous participants in market economies. As Maritain predicted in the political world, however, such unscrupulous practices may surface because the unscrupulous business person will not know when to stop and will overstep the bounds of prudence. When the unethical behaviors surface, there will be fewer opportunities for growth, increased employee dissatisfaction, and a strong chance of governmental intervention and regulation.<sup>8</sup>

There is also an important difference between most contemporary economies and Machiavelli's principality. Machiavelli's contention that human beings are loyal to the state because of fear is more plausible in the context of a political entity enjoying virtually unlimited governmental powers than employees in a contemporary corporation. Depending on employment availability and certain personal factors such as family responsibilities, retirement systems, etc., there can be more or less pressure exerted by an employer. Despite these factors, trust and loyalty based on justice and fairness are conducive to an effective corporate

culture according to many business executives. New management approaches, such as servant leadership, employ such values. If managers fail to incorporate ethical values, they will witness what happens when “the instinct for survival takes over and the cost to organization in misexecution, chaos and rebuilding is huge.”<sup>9</sup> The loyalty resulting from an ethical corporate culture may or may not be as deep as that imposed by fear, but it is often the only option in a free market economy.

### **Some Additional Pedagogical Strategies for Combating Cynicism**

To summarize the counterattack against The Prince to this point, the first cracks in the Machiavellian edifice of cynicism are the result of errors in certain anthropological and tactical assumptions that result not in power, but in self-defeat. The issue of ethical competition still remains to some extent: can an ethical company really be successful? There are numerous books that detail positive examples for the cynics. In Michael Novak’s, Business as a Vocation, he advances the claim that business can be both personally profitable and morally worthy.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to course readings, it is valuable to invite prominent business ethicists and leaders to campus to lecture on these issues as part of an effort to create a sense of a pedagogical commitment to business ethics among students. Turning from authors and lecturers to empirical evidence, I present the results of surveys conducted by Saint Edward’s University regarding business ethics. In a broad survey of local businesses, the university found that 75% of employers would encourage their employees to enroll in a proposed Master of Organizational Leadership and Ethics (MSOLE) program. The MSOLE will be an intensive program that will contain five ethics classes. Despite or perhaps because of the strong ethical component, 68% of the employers would pay for their employees to be in the MSOLE program.

While examples from books, articles, lectures and surveys are persuasive for some, many students will not be convinced by selective examples that are distant and abstract. So, what to do? One suggestion is to allow the students to discover for themselves the reality of the business world. Business people can be invited to a class to discuss ethics. Once again, the cynical student may suspect the deck is stacked since the professor is selecting the invitees. To counter this claim, the students can be allowed to conduct their own business ethics survey. The students survey a business person, i.e. someone who has managerial responsibility in the private economy. I provide the students with most of the questions, but they are required to come up with two questions on their own. The independence of the selection process and in regard to some of the questions is designed to insure that the students realize that the results are not manipulated by the professor.

The business ethics survey involves some risk. There will inevitably be some business respondents who are none too enthusiastic about business ethics. Nonetheless, the results

over

the past year have been impressive. To the surprise of many of my students, business people overwhelmingly support the value and teaching of business ethics. Why? Ethical rules and judgments are important because the operation of a business is a collaborative effort requiring some degree of mutual trust and cooperation. Sometimes, the business responses are compelling and this spring I read one survey from a vice president of customer services for Dell Computers to the entire class.

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Question: Do you think the teaching of business ethics is a good idea?

Answer: Mohan [the Vice President for Dell Computers] believes it is a good idea because he says that it is easy to get caught up with numbers, profits and stock options, etc. but at the end of the day a business has many purposes- which are delivering products and services in the market place, but also it has an obligation to do these things in an ethical way. Ethics, he adds, deals with the treatment of employees, communities, and the shareholders. He adds that what is important is not just the letter of the law, but also the intent of the law.<sup>11</sup>

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## **Conclusion**

The input of the business community and the pedagogical guile of business professors confront a rising tide of cynicism among business students in the United States. This paper is a modest effort to suggest some possibilities on how to chip away at the shell of their cynicism. Cynicism encrusts the optimism essential to engaging a community on behalf of social justice. There is no sociality among the cynical. The cynical will increasingly withdraw from one another out of fear and pessimism.

Catholics, and other people of faith or even a genuine humanism, must categorically reject the regnant cynicism and resulting atomism. Despite the challenges, there is reason for a guarded optimism. As the Yale theologian, Cornell West, once proclaimed, “Christians are condemned to hope.” Championing a hopeful skepticism, humanity can recover its bearings and realistically seek to ameliorate the conditions of all human beings. Issues such as wealth creation and distribution, and many others, will be the subjects of a vital discourse and dialogue among our students. After all, God has given us reason and free will for a purpose.

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## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Marianne M. Jennings, “What’s Happening in Business Schools?” 137 The Public Interest (Fall, 1999), 30,31.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Solomon, The New World of Business (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 1994), 33-41.

<sup>3</sup>Jose Ortega Y Gasset, Man and Crisis, trans. Mildred Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1962), 173-175.

<sup>4</sup>The Second Vatican Council, “The Church in the Modern World” in David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., Catholic Social Thought The Documentary Heritage (Maryknoll, New York, 1992), 185-189.

<sup>5</sup>The definition of a cynic and skeptic are taken from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) and Wenster’s New World Dictionary (Springfield, Mass: MerriamWebsters, Inc., 1998).

<sup>6</sup>Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince, trans. David Wooton (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995), 51-53. Machiavelli’s relevance for the modern world is demonstrated by a number of popular new expositions on the Florentine political philosopher. For some different views, cf. Michael A. Ledeen, Machiavelli on Modern Leadership: Why Machiavelli’s Iron Rules Are as Timely and Important Today as Five Centuries Ago (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999); Harvey C. Mansfield, Machiavelli’s Virtue (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Alistair McAlpine, The New Machiavelli: The Art of Politics in Business (1998).

<sup>7</sup>Jacques Maritain, “The End of Machiavellianism” in Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward, eds., The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946), 319-353.

<sup>8</sup>Solomon, The World of Business, 37-39.

<sup>9</sup>Michael Hackworth, “Only the Ethical Survive: Leadership in Fairness and Honesty Makes Sense,” Issues in Ethics (Fall, 1999), 11-15. Michael Hackworth is the CEO of Aspirian Corporation.

<sup>10</sup>Michael Novak, Business as a Calling (New York: Free Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup>This business ethics survey was conducted by my student, Clarita Sanchez, of Mohan Kharbanda, Vice President for Customer Relations of Dell Computers in the Spring of 2000 for my business ethics class.