

Educating business students towards the common good: applying the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a teaching tool for intellectual and practical engagement¹

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1. Introduction

In the field of management teaching and research² we are facing increasingly urgent calls to place a heavier emphasis on business purpose, with the aim of closing the divide that would appear to exist between business and society. This divide is reflected in a discouragingly low level of public trust in business³. In an editorial in the *Academy of Management Journal*, Hollensbe, Wookey, Hickey, George and Nichols (2014) express their conviction that trust in business can only be restored by a shift from the prevalent orthodoxy in management research - around the roles of businesses and managers as agents striving to optimize the returns of a particular group of company stakeholders (the shareholders) - to the development of a more holistic understanding of business purpose as seen from a broader social perspective. This view of business purpose would include more comprehensive societal goals, such as contributing to sustainable development or to “improving lives” in general. *Purpose* is understood in this context to mean “the reason for which business is created and exists, its meaning and direction”⁴. According to this broader understanding of purpose, maximizing shareholder value accounts for just one of the several contributions a firm makes to society.

Hollensbe et al. also express the view that “a focus on purpose acknowledges the interdependence of business and society”, and that “one cannot flourish without the other”⁵.

More specifically, “focusing on purpose sets the challenge for all businesses in terms of

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² Cf. Donaldson and Walsh, “Theory of business,” 181; Hollensbe et al., “Organizations with purpose,” 1227; Khurana and Spender, “On what ails business schools,” 619; Waddock and Lozano, “Holistic Management Education,” 265.

³ Hollensbe et al., 1227.

⁴ Hollensbe et al., 1228.

⁵ Hollensbe et al., 1228.

promoting the common good”. The concept of common good, according to the authors, “assumes that we not only have individual goals, but that we also participate in joint or common projects. When people come together to pursue a shared goal, they create a common good – such as a friendship, a family, or a business”⁶. This is similar to the Aristotelean concept of common good, in which unity in a social group is achieved through shared purpose⁷. It also resonates with Catholic Social Teaching (CST), which sees business organizations as a communities of individuals, bound together not merely by “legal contracts or mutual self-interests, but commitments to real goods, shared with others to serve the world”⁸.

But is it possible to delineate a common good which individual actors in a firm share with those external to it? And how might we communicate this to would-be managers, i.e. to business students? The UN-based network of business schools, which advocates “Principles of Responsible Management Education” (UNPRME) has proposed using the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a “common language around sustainable development, one being used by governments, NGOs, and business”. Furthermore, the SDGs “can also be used externally as a platform to engage stakeholders, and in particular business in a common set of goals and targets”⁹. When applied to business education, the SDGs should help “sensitize future business leaders to values like sustainability and responsibility”¹⁰. Here, we suggest that the SDGs have the potential to serve as tool in management education for introducing and developing concepts like *common good* and *business purpose*. This proposal is timely, given that management education is currently coming under criticism for transmitting a fragmented mindset to its students¹¹ in which business actions are apportioned to disciplines, sectors and functions, or even delegates overall goals – e.g. social or technical and profit-seeking goals –

⁶ Hollensbe et al., 1229.

⁷ Cf. Calleja and Melé, “Political Wisdom in Management,” 105.

⁸ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Vocation*, 18.

⁹ Weybrecht, “From Challenge to Opportunity,” 85.

¹⁰ UNPRME, *In Davos*.

¹¹ Cf. Waddock and Lozano, “Holistic Management Education”.

to distinct functions within a company. This partitioning makes it almost impossible for management education to define what “good” management is¹², still less to define the purpose of business. An inability to answer these questions may also be partly the result of what Donaldson and Walsh call the “conflation of business means with business ends”¹³. They contend that concentrating on functions in management education may be a beneficial way of helping students understand the methods and instruments required to achieve operational efficiency, but that the issue of business purpose – what the business is for – goes largely unexamined.

The present paper contributes to this discussion by proposing a curriculum outline for an ethics-based core management course on the relationship between business and society, with the goal that students will develop a purpose-oriented understanding of business and at the same time begin thinking about concrete strategies for contributing towards the common good. A combination of the SDGs and the normative approach known as *virtue ethics* will be used as a framework for discussing the common good and applying the concept in a management setting.

The paper is structured as follows. The second chapter presents a theoretical outline in which we explore the concept of common good as understood by virtue ethics, as well as its relationship to the purpose of business. We also explore how purpose and common good are related to notions like corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate sustainability, as these concepts are often used to characterize the relationship between business and society. We also investigate the interrelationship between common good, the SDGs and the principles of UNPRME. In the third chapter, we develop an outline of a curriculum and propose teaching tools which are suitable for use at the onset of a management study program aimed at teaching how business and society relate, based on the notions of purpose and common good. We focus

¹² Cf. Baden and Higgs, “Challenging the perceived wisdom”; Christopher et al., “Pedagogical Innovation and Paradigm Shift”.

¹³ Donaldson and Walsh, “Theory of business,” 187.

on the SDGs, including their underlying principles and how they were developed, as a way of fostering the intellectual and practical engagement of management students. The fourth chapter contains some final remarks.

2 The Common Good

In the business ethics literature there exist two main debates around the concept of the common good: the first views political life and the common good from the perspective of *virtue ethics*¹⁴, while the other takes a civic republicanism approach conceived mainly by Fort¹⁵ and strongly influenced by Habermas¹⁶. The latter is also known as the *discursive ethics* approach¹⁷. According to Sison and Fontrodona, the main distinction between these two debates lies in how they conceive human nature¹⁸.

According to the *virtue ethics* approach to the common good, a good is an action that increases overall human happiness, in Greek *eudaimonia*. The essence of *eudaimonia* is the living of a full life, or as some modern authors have called it, “human flourishing”¹⁹. According to this perspective, the person, or actor, has the capacity to step back and reflect upon the circumstances and consequences of her actions and desires and to look at herself as if at the end of her life; from this perspective, each and every action is part of the greater whole which is the entirety of a life²⁰. Virtue ethics also considers humans to be social by nature. In order to achieve their goals, humans need to cooperate with each other. There is a certain type of good that

¹⁴ Cf. Alford and Naughton, “Managing as if faith mattered”; Calleja and Melé, „Political Wisdom in Management”; Costa and Ramus, “Italian Economia Aziendale”; Goodpaster, “Human Dignity and the Common Good”; Melé, “Integrating Personalism”; Sison and Fontrodona, “Common good of business”; Sison and Fontrodona, “Common good of the firm”; Sison and Fontrodona, “Participating in the common good”.

¹⁵ Cf. Fort, “The First Man”.

¹⁶ Cf. especially Habermas, “Between Facts and Norms”.

¹⁷ Cf. Scherer and Palazzo, “Toward a Political Conception”; Scherer and Palazzo, “Political role of business”; Scherer, Palazzo and Matten, “Business firm as a political actor”; Scherer, “Theory assessment”; Whelan, “Political CSR”.

¹⁸ Cf. Sison and Fontrodona, “Common good of the firm,” 220.

¹⁹ For a further discussion of the notion cf. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”; Annas, *Morality of happiness*; Foot, *Moral dilemmas and other topics in moral philosophy*, 163–167; 199–200; Foot, *Natural goodness*, 25–26; Foot, “Grammar of Goodness”; MacIntyre, *Dependent rational animals*, 102; 132–134.

²⁰ Cf. Ortiz, *Ethics and Order*, 95. Alasdair MacIntyre is the precursor of this narrative understanding of “human flourishing”. Cf. especially MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

cannot be achieved by any one person acting alone, but instead must be pursued in common with others. Russell Hittinger²¹ defines this type of action as follows: “When two or more persons engage in a common structure of action for a common end, and where the common action (what Aristotle would call the ‘form of order’) is an intrinsic good, we have something like a common good. The union of the members in common activity is not an end that comes after some other purpose but is the good being continuously aimed at and sought. The scholastic philosophers called such a union *bonum commune*, always in the singular. The salient mark of a *bonum commune* is that it cannot, just as such, be distributed or divided in exchange but only participated by its members”²². According to this definition, the common good is not the sum of individually-pursued, self-interested goals, but a common end sought by all members of a group. The common good cannot be achieved by individuals acting on their own: it is something created by a common action and as such, cannot be distributed or divided but only participated in by all members of the community acting in concert.

Discursive ethics, on the other hand, does not make the assumption that humans are by nature social, and instead considers the existence of an institutional arrangement - based on a deliberative decision-making model – to be a necessary condition for the attainment of a common good in political and economic life. In other words, the latter approach stresses the procedural dimension. The former also considers the procedural aspect but not does focus on a specific form of institutional arrangement. Every community pursues a common good and the achievement of it does not only depend on the institutional arrangement by which that community is governed, but is the outcome of the social nature of the human species as well as of specific attitudes or habitual inclinations of its members, specifically those relating to virtue. This paper will take the *virtue ethics* perspective, since in our opinion it is the more holistic.

²¹ Cf. Hittinger, “Divisible Goods”.

²² Hittinger, 49.

2.1 *The Common Good as an analogical concept*

In their proposal for a “theory of business”, Donaldson and Walsh²³ were the first to formulate a concrete response to Hollensbe et al.’s editorial. They put forward the notion that the purpose of business as a whole is to optimize value for all those who affect or are affected by business²⁴. If we understand this optimization of what they term “collective value” to include the sum of all contributions made by business to the satisfaction of what all business participants’ value in a given society, then it becomes clear that individual firms cannot, if they act alone, fully contribute to this process. As a minimum requirement, the authors suggest, individual business firms should not perform actions which destroy collective value and should avoid violating what they call the *Dignity Threshold*, i.e. respect for an individual’s dignity. Using this definition of the purpose of business, Donaldson and Walsh²⁵ argue that we can define both a focal and a contextual purpose for individual firms. In other words, purpose is used in an analogical or proportionate way. The focal purpose of a firm reflects its work *in* society, i.e., it refers to the purpose shared by the community of individuals who are members of the firm, and the contextual purpose refers to what the larger society in which a firm is embedded values; thus it reflects a firm’s work *for* society. Whereas the first can be described as maximizing the value for a firm’s constituents by providing goods and services in a competitive manner, the latter is necessarily broader and looks at how the value created by the firm surpasses its boundaries.

According to the virtue ethics approach, the common good is also a concept that can be applied analogically or proportionately to different human communities: “There is the common good of humanity as a whole (integrating every human being, past, present and future), the common good of a particular political community (i.e. of a firm), and a common good of each human

²³ Cf. Donaldson and Walsh, “Theory of business”.

²⁴ Cf. Donaldson and Walsh, 188.

²⁵ Cf. Donaldson and Walsh, 198.

group”²⁶. The relationship between these different levels of the “common good” should be regulated by the principle of subsidiarity. In our view, in the same way as it is possible to talk about the focal and contextual purpose of a firm, so it is also possible to talk about the focal and contextual common good. The first relates to the common good shared by the people who go to make up the company, and is reflected in its collaborative and coordinated work for the provision of goods²⁷. The latter applies to the common good of the broader political community, or society, in which the firm is embedded. CST, which in great part overlaps with the virtue-ethics approach, defines this overarching common good as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment”²⁸.

The focal common good of the firm

For Sison and Fontrodona²⁹, the focal common good of the firm can be substantiated in the activities that lead to the production of goods and services needed for flourishing, in which different members participate through work. More specifically, these authors state: “The common good of the firm is the *work in common* that allows human beings not only to produce goods and services (the objective dimension), but more importantly, to develop technical or artistic skills and intellectual and moral virtues (the subjective dimension)”³⁰. In pursuing the common good, the authors claim, virtue is key: according to the Aristotelean position, without virtue, flourishing would not be possible in the political community, and in the same way, without virtue, neither would be flourishing possible in the firm.

Flourishing also depends on the fulfillment of the personal needs and interests of the members of a community. As Sison and Fontrodona state: “the justification for participation of all

²⁶ Calleja and Melé, “Political Wisdom in Management,” 105.

²⁷ Cf. Sison and Fontrodona, “Common Good of the firm”.

²⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, Nr. II.26.

²⁹ Cf. Sison and Fontrodona, “Common Good of the Firm”.

³⁰ Sison and Fontrodona, 212.

different stakeholders, not only employees but also shareholders, suppliers, etc, to the common good of the firm is based not mainly on a deontological perspective that deals with participation focusing on rights, but on the identification of *certain important interests (e.g., self-esteem, selfworth, identity) or to autonomy (i.e., self-governance, freedom) among the different stakeholder groups*. This does not mean that it ignores rights. The common good justification of participation takes different stakeholder rights into account, but only as a lower limit. *What it seeks, above all, through participation is the cultivation of excellence or virtue*³¹.

So according to the virtue ethics approach, the focal purpose of the firm is in a way defined jointly by all the constituents of the firm: in the first place by its founder and management, who determine the products and goods that will be produced and how they will be produced, and in the second place by its employees and other stakeholders, who have a voice in how and under what conditions the goods and services are produced.

The contextual common good of the firm

The CST-definition of the common good as “*the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment*” puts the focal common good of the firm within a social context, as it describes how the value created by the work in common by all members of the firm surpasses the boundaries of the firm and influences not only what happens inside individual communities, but also “*the sum of conditions of social life*”, these being created together by all human communities: other firms, families, associations, and so on.

For Aristotle, the common good was the good of the *polis* – i.e. of society or of the city – and of each citizen³². Another name for it was *eudaimonia*, man’s highest good, as was explained above. The manner in which human beings participate in *eudaimonia* is through citizenship, i.e.

³¹ Sison and Fontrodona, “Participating in the common good,” 612.

³² Aristotle, NE 1094b.

by exercising their proper right to participate in deliberating and deciding on the common good³³. CST, too, stresses this aspect by highlighting the practical, sociohistorical and dialogic or discursive nature of the common good³⁴. In other words, CST takes into account the fact that, in its concrete form, society's common good is a function of sociohistorical circumstances as well as of the expressed needs and interests of its citizens.

Kennedy³⁵ supports this understanding of the contextual common good and holds that individual firms may contribute to the contextual purpose of business by making sure that their products and goods are “authentic goods” and serve to fulfill the genuine needs of the citizens. Additionally, they may contribute by ensuring that they do not infringe upon “The Dignity Threshold”³⁶, thereby violating universal norms such as those set out in the Human Rights Convention.

2.2 The Common Good and related concepts

We will now briefly explore where the common good can be identified in discussions about corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate sustainability, as these terms are also very often used to delineate the relationship between business and society.

The Common Good and Corporate Social Responsibility

In our view, CSR's main goal lies in how to achieve the focal common good of the firm without damaging social and environmental resources. The concept of Triple-Bottom-Line (TBL) makes this clear by requiring that business decisions consider not only the economic results but also “people and planet”, i.e. the costs and benefits of business decisions in terms of society and the environment. Since the 1990s a growing interest has been observable in the scholarly

³³ Sison and Fontrodona, “The Common Good of the Firm,” 214.

³⁴ Cf. Sison and Fontrodona, 217; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of Social Doctrine*, Nrs. 164-166.

³⁵ Cf. Kennedy, “Good that business does”.

³⁶ Donaldson and Walsh, “Theory of business”, 188.

literature in combining CSR with business strategy³⁷. CSR has come to be considered, in the main, as an integral factor both in a firm's strategy as well as in its success³⁸, such that nowadays, CSR focuses predominantly not on *whether* but rather on *how* companies implement social and environmental issues into their strategies, in order to minimize negative outcomes and maximize benefits for the firm and its main stakeholders. What is missing in the literature, in our view, is the active identification of those societal issues which a company would be in a position to help tackle. The contextual common good is not really discussed. The focus remains strongly company-internal, i.e., what is mainly sought is the improvement of the firm's effectiveness.

The Common Good and Corporate Sustainability

The debate around corporate sustainability is predominantly descriptive; it is based in the natural sciences and takes a systems approach³⁹. From our perspective, this means that it also starts from the focal common good of the firm and how it needs to be achieved, and takes into account the interaction of the business and economic systems with the environment and other social groups. The UN World Commission on Environment and Development's (WCED) definition of sustainable development reflects this very clearly, stating as it does that "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"⁴⁰. Embedded within this definition there is a clear urgency to create awareness of the "limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs"⁴¹. Corporate sustainability, according to this view, requires from businesses the acknowledgement that technology and resource utilization by social organizations affects the

³⁷ Cf. Carroll, "Corporate Social Responsibility"; Lee, "A review of the theories"; Porter and Kramer, "Creating shared value".

³⁸ Cf. Hart, "Beyond greening"; Kotler and Lee, *Corporate social responsibility*.

³⁹ Cf. Bansal and Song, "Similar but not the same," 106.

⁴⁰ WCED, *Our Common Future*, Ch. 2, Nr. 1.

⁴¹ WCED, Nr. 1.

environment's ability to meet the needs of all generations. Businesses should take this into account and minimize their negative impact on the environment. However, in our view, this definition does not directly address the contextual common good of the firm. More recently, terms such as "True Business Sustainability"⁴² are beginning to imply that business can and should address sustainability challenges in a positive way and thus that business activities can directly contribute to the common good of society as a whole.

2.3 The Common Good in relation with UNPRME and the SDGs

In this section, we link our view of the common good to the SDGs and to the principles of UNPRME.

The Common Good and SDGs

At a meeting at the UN Headquarters in New York from 25 to 27 September 2015, 193 Heads of State, Heads of Government and High Representatives committed themselves to achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and the 169 associated targets. This commitment embodies the global plan of action towards a sustainable development up until the year 2030. The plan is also known as the "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". As the constitutive document "Transforming our world" states, the Agenda "is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom"⁴³. The SDGs "seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental"⁴⁴. The 17 Goals are comprehensive in nature and include: (1) ending poverty, (2) ending hunger, (3) ensuring healthy lives and well-being, (4) ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, (5) achieving gender equality, (6) ensuring availability of clean water and sanitation, (7) ensuring

⁴² Cf. Dyllick and Muff, "Meaning of Sustainable Business".

⁴³ United Nations, *Transforming our World*, Preamble.

⁴⁴ United Nations, Preamble.

access to affordable and clean energy, (8) promoting decent work and economic growth, (9) building inclusive industrialization and resilient infrastructure, (10) reducing inequality within and among countries, (11) making sustainable cities and communities, (12) ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns, (13) taking urgent action to combat climate change, (14) conserving life below water, (15) protecting life on land, (16) promoting peace, justice and strong institutions, and (17) strengthening the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. The goals may be seen as elements of “*the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment*”⁴⁵.

Although the 2030 Agenda is primarily a state-level compact, it explicitly declares that “all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan”⁴⁶. These goals thus contribute to defining the contextual common good of a firm as it accords with our present sociohistorical circumstances. In line with our understanding of the common good is the idea that the goals are activities: common actions for a common end, in which individuals and communities at all levels can and should participate. They thus, according to our definition, constitute part of the common good.

Another important feature that underlines the goals’ strong correlation with our own definition of the common good is the global consultation project that led to their formulation. In order to allow the participation of the greatest possible diversity of stakeholders, the project included “almost 100 national consultations, 11 global thematic consultations, 6 global consultations on implementation and pilot exercises with illustrative goals in 10 countries”⁴⁷. Unprecedented in scope, this global consultation had its ups and downs, and many lessons can be learned from it. Nevertheless, as the evaluation of the process shows, its overall results were positive: “First the

⁴⁵ Second Vatican Council, Nr. II.26.

⁴⁶ United Nations, Preamble.

⁴⁷ MDF, *Outcome Evaluation*, 5.

project did mobilize and engage a broad coalition of stakeholders of unprecedented scale and diversity to contribute to the shaping of a post-2015 agenda. Second, the project's inclusive approach did contribute to increased understanding and ownership among Member States, which was one of the most important lessons from the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals). Third and finally, the project did enable the provision of inputs that influenced a 2030 Agenda that is of universal relevance and does justice to the complexity of integrated development and sustainable poverty eradication"⁴⁸. It is our view that the SDGs provide a good basis for business students to reflect about, and work towards, the consecution of the common good. More specifically, it provides a concrete illustration of the nature of the contextual common good to which a firm can contribute.

The Common Good and UNPRME

As Haertle, Parkes, Murray and Hayes⁴⁹ recall in their recent account of the history of the United Nations Principles for Responsible Management Education (UNPRME), in "the mid-2000s, the UN Global Compact and its academic community recognized that the business leaders of tomorrow would need to play a critical role in tackling sustainability challenges. The response was the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative, launched in 2007 by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon with a mission to inspire and champion responsible management education, research and thought leadership globally."⁵⁰ As the statement implies, UNPRME sees companies as necessary contributors to a broader understanding of the common good, targeting not only the focal dimension, but the contextual one too. However, UNPRME is not aimed directly at companies, but rather at the institutions preparing the human capital that will eventually be in charge of making this contribution to the common good. UNPRME defines how business schools may create value for society by

⁴⁸ MDF, 5.

⁴⁹ Haertle et al., "Building a global movement,".

⁵⁰ Haertle et al., 66.

producing responsible managers and conducting research into the common good. In the eyes of some leading scholars in Responsible Management Education⁵¹, this concept aims at providing students of management with a holistic perspective of the purpose and aims of business activity.

As Haertle et al.⁵² state, the idea of creating a partnership for engaging directly with management-related higher education institutions was conceived in 2006 by the then Head of the Global Compact Networks, Manuel Escudero. Escudero highlighted the strategic role that the academic sector can play as change agents, educating the managers of today and tomorrow, and incorporating the values of responsible corporate citizenship into their educational activities. More specifically, Escudero saw the academic sector as able to contribute in the following three areas:

1. Developing a) teaching materials, b) case studies, c) technical tools, d) capacities, and e) skills for training future responsible leaders;
2. Training professionals to act as generators of sustainable value for both business and society who are keen to work towards an inclusive and sustainable global economy;
3. Embedding curricula and educational disciplines in universal values of global corporate citizenship: from marketing to financial analysis, from operations to business strategies, from accounting to international analysis, and from microeconomics to legal studies.

From this idea came the formulation of the six PRME Principles, which provide business schools with guidelines as to how responsible management might be introduced into their curricula and research areas, and how it can shape the manner in which schools engage in wider society and the private sector. More recently, UNPRME has officially endorsed the SDGs as part of its overall objectives: after “a declaration issued at the conclusion of the 2015 PRME

⁵¹ Cf. Laasch and Conaway, *Responsible Business*; Rasche and Escudero, “Leading Change”; Storey et al., “Responsible management education”.

⁵² Cf. Haertle et al., 67.

Global Forum for Responsible Management Education, participants not only reaffirmed support for PRME, but also pledged to support achieving the SDGs”⁵³.

3. Developing a curriculum for teaching the common good to business students

Below we will outline a curriculum design for a core management course that will give an ethics-based answer – i.e., an answer grounded in the normative concept of the common good as developed in the previous section – to two pressing questions: “What is the purpose of business?” and “How should business pursue this purpose?” Bansal and Song⁵⁴ state that “ethics-based analysis occupies the unique and important position that builds a set of internally consistent statements that help managers define the purpose of business. Such analysis is important to help managers determine who a business serves—the owners, managers, or other stakeholders. Without ethical analysis, researchers cannot explore how the purpose of business can be assessed and will default to a shareholder perspective”⁵⁵. An ethics-based analysis may be used as a complement to a more science-based or descriptive investigation of what actually takes place in corporations and how change is brought about.

We propose a curriculum structure and potential pedagogical instruments to be used in a course for undergraduate business students in their first semester. The course objective is to cover the topics and terms described in the previous section. However, a mere theoretical or intellectual transmission of these topics would be insufficient. As voiced by scholars in the area of responsible management education⁵⁶, the alumni of business schools still very often lack the necessary practical competencies to make sustainability happen. This can also be said of the capacity to work together towards the achievement of the common good. Baden and Higgs⁵⁷ note that the models and frameworks commonly used in management education lack a wise

⁵³ Haertle et al., 70.

⁵⁴ Cf. Bansal and Song, “Similar but not the same”.

⁵⁵ Cf. Bansal and Song, 126.

⁵⁶ Cf. Aragón-Correa et al., “Sustainability management teaching”; Ortiz and Huber-Heim, “From information to empowerment”; Waddock and Lozano, “Holistic Management Education”.

⁵⁷ Cf. Baden and Higgs, “Challenging the perceived wisdom”.

understanding of what business is – i.e., of its purpose – or even hinder wisdom from flourishing within the scope of business education. “Wisdom” is understood by these authors mainly in its Aristotelean meaning of a cardinal virtue by which political or wise men “can see what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general: we can consider that those who can do this are good at managing households or states”⁵⁸. Here, that which is good for humans in general is the common good. Thus, in our course we aim at the development of intellectual, as well as self-reflective and practical competencies. Specifically, at the end of the course (to express it using Bloom’s taxonomy of learning outcomes⁵⁹) students:

1. understand the distinction between the focal and contextual purposes of business as conceived by the virtue ethics approach to the common good;
2. understand what is meant by the terms *corporate social responsibility* and *corporate sustainability*, and how these relate to the common good;
3. know and understand the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), how they were developed, what their scope is and how these relate to the common good;
4. be able to apply the SDGs in specific business contexts, and create measures and strategies for achieving specific targets;
5. have learnt how to evaluate their own capacity to contribute to the common good via practice oriented projects which provide opportunities for them to engage in authentic and collaborative interaction with their peers and other partners.

The structure of the course should follow Kessler’s “triumphant triumvirate” or the three fundamental thematic rubrics of a university curriculum: the cognitive, the affective and the conative⁶⁰. The cognitive purpose involves the acquiring and processing of information. It refers to the intellectual dimension of the course and its main outcome can also be referred as

⁵⁸ EN 1140a: 9-10

⁵⁹ Cf. Anderson, *A taxonomy*.

⁶⁰ Cf. Kessler, “The Triumphant Triumvirate,” 799.

“knowing” and “understanding” a specific concept or topic. The first three objectives above fall into this category. The affective objective looks at the course content through a whole-person-based lens. Its core dynamic is “reflecting” and involves identifying and integrating the intellectual part of the course within the self. This second objective might also be termed “being”⁶¹. The fifth objective of our course relates to this dimension. In the conative part of the course, the students put into practice the knowledge they have acquired and pondered in the earlier parts of the course. This dimension stresses “doing” and is covered by the fourth objective of the course.

3.1 First part: Knowledge transmission

This first knowledge-oriented section refers to the following course objectives and accounts for around 50% of the total teaching time and 30% of the independent study time:

- understand the distinction between the focal and contextual purposes of business as conceived by the virtue ethics approach to the common good;
- understand what is meant by the terms *corporate social responsibility* and *corporate sustainability* and how these relate to the common good;
- know and understand the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), how they were developed, what their scope is and how these relate to the common good;

The first goal of this part of the course is to transmit a holistic view of business, its purpose and the common good. Underlying concepts need to be transmitted at this point, and for this reason this section should be taught at the beginning of the course. The concepts are: the common good (from a virtue ethics perspective); the community and the firm as a community of individuals; participation of different stakeholders in the pursuit of the common good; corporate social responsibility; corporate sustainability. The ideal didactic instruments for developing this

⁶¹ Cf. Dyck, “Reflecting on 25 years of Teaching”.

content are predominantly teacher-centered and should focus on lecturing. Additionally, some essential reading material may be given. Suitable assignments might consist of writing of a summary of the reading material or a short reflection on its content.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) comprise the second part of the theoretical content, including their formation (involving multiple stakeholders), their underlying principles and their legal and political frameworks. This part may be achieved by giving research assignments to groups of students on the different subtopics: e.g. (1) the SDGs and their aims, (2) the multi-stakeholder process, and (3) the underlying normative, legal and political frameworks. Students might be asked to present the results of their assignments to their colleagues, thus facilitating peer-to-peer learning.

3.2 Second part: Personal involvement and self-reflection

The second section of the course refers to the following course objective and accounts for around 20% of the teaching time and 20% of the independent study time:

- have learnt how to evaluate their own capacity to contribute to the common good through practice oriented projects which provide opportunities for them to engage in authentic and collaborative interaction with their peers and other partners.

This objective aims to develop the collaborative competencies required for engaging a firm in the furthering of the common good, i.e. the ability to engage effectively with stakeholders, especially by facilitating collaborative decision-making⁶². In a first step, students may be exposed to situations in which they have to decide collaboratively the best course of action. A useful way of doing this is by playing the dilemma simulation board game designed by the UN Global Compact (UNGC)⁶³. The game involves the discussion of real ethical management

⁶² Cf. Barth, et al., “Developing key competencies”; Sipos et al., “Achieving transformative sustainability”.

⁶³ Cf. Ortiz and Huber-Heim, “From information to empowerment,” 324. “The board game has been developed for the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2010 as a tool for companies to strengthen their CSR commitment and implementation efforts” (Ortiz and Huber Heim, 329).

dilemmas as faced by UNGC members, covering the themes *environment, labor rights, human rights* and *corruption*, and taking as guiding criteria the 10 UNGC principles. One team rolls the dice and moves a counter on the board accordingly. The position on the board defines a subpart of the dilemma corresponding with one of the four fields: Human Rights, Labor Rights, Environment and Anti-Corruption. Cards are picked, which give scenarios demonstrating the ways in which business professionals are often faced with dilemmas involving CSR and Sustainability issues and the need to balance conflicting stakeholder views. The stakeholder groups represented in the game are: the consumers, the community, the employees, the NGOs and the shareholders, while the final team takes up the role of management. The teams swap their roles in each round. The dilemma is read aloud, and the management team members discuss within their group how to choose upon one of the four options, while at the same time evaluating the social and environmental business risks against the 10 principles of the UN Global Compact. At the same time, the stakeholder groups each also discuss the possible choices from their own perspective and decide on the one that best suits their interests and needs according in the given situation. Once the management group has decided and justified their decision, the stakeholder groups each comment on the decision from their own perspective and give feedback to management. By this, students have the opportunity to discuss in groups the economic, social and governance aspects of the cases. We suggest adapting the board game such that students are required to not only consider the UNGC principles but also the SDGs. The solution proposed should aim to achieve one of the targets of the 2030 Agenda.

In a second step, time should be allocated for students to reflect on what they have learnt. One method for encouraging self-reflection is the writing of a diary over the period of the course. The instructor poses two or three questions which the students should aim to answer in their diaries. Example questions might be: “Describe how you experienced the discussion”, “In which ways did you contribute to the finding of a solution?”, and “Were you satisfied with the outcome?” Students may also be asked to identify the benefits of the experience, e.g. how it

allows for multiple perspectives to be considered and how this improves problem understanding. At the end of the course the diary is handed to the instructor, who can use it to assess the learning outcomes.

3.3 Third part: Putting into practice

The third section of the course refers to the following course objective and accounts for around 30% of the teaching time and 50% of the independent study time:

- apply the SDGs in specific business contexts and create measures and strategies for achieving specific targets.

In this section, which should be situated at the end of the course, the focus is on “doing”, i.e. putting into practice the theoretical concepts learnt in the first section of the course, and the collaborative skills learnt in the second. The preferred methodology would be “action and experiential learning”⁶⁴. For this, the instructor may either choose to let the students develop, for a company of their choice, a concrete strategy for implementing one of the targets of the 2030 Agenda, or else to develop a strategy for a company chosen by the instructor. In either case, students would need to go through the entire process of communication and development, from initial contact with the company to final presentation of results. A third possibility, especially if time does not allow for a fully-fledged project to be conducted with a real company, would be to discuss a case in class⁶⁵. The objective of this section of the course is to develop “cognitive engagement” by involving students in problem formulation, research about the relevant topic, problem solving and critical reflection.

At the end of this part of the course, some questions for self-reflection could be posed, with students giving the answers in their diaries. Questions should aim at assessing the individual

⁶⁴ Cf. Figueiro and Raffluet, “Sustainability in Higher Education”, 28.

⁶⁵ Harvard Publishing has already developed some cases on the implementation of the SDGs in a corporate context, e.g., Zelleke and Billaud, “Passion and Strategy”.

learning outcomes in terms of: the development of specific project-management and communication skills, a deeper understanding of the implications of the SDGs for business practice and their opinion as to how the focal and contextual common good of the company might be achieved in the specific case they developed.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined how an undergraduate course might explore the concept of the common good and its relationship to the purpose of business, taking virtue ethics as a theoretical underpinning. We have also explored how purpose and common good are linked to concepts such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate sustainability as well as to the SDGs and the principles of the UNPRME.

According to the virtue ethics approach adopted here, the common good is understood as a common set of actions adopted by members of a community with a common end in mind. As such, the common good cannot be distributed or enjoyed individually but instead can only be created jointly by all members of the community and shared within it. We are convinced that to understand the common good, a solely theoretical or intellectual consideration of the concept would be insufficient. We have therefore developed the outline of a curriculum and potential didactic instruments for teaching how business and society relate, based on the notion of purpose and common good, to be used in the initial stages of a management study program and aiming to foster the intellectual and practical competencies that are necessary to understand and progress towards the achievement of the common good. We focused on the SDGs as an instrument for fostering the intellectual and practical engagement of management students.

The contributions of this paper may be summarized as follows:

Firstly, it recommends using virtue ethics as a way of understanding the common good and as a framework on which to base a core management course on the relationship between business and society. The recommended approach will aid in answering the question: What is the

“common good” which business in general, and individual businesses in particular, should aim to further? Secondly, it shows ways in which the SDGs may be used as a teaching tool for helping students reflect upon the common good and possible strategies for achieving it.

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