

Lesson Plan August 28, PHI334

Today, we begin that part of our class where we completely and thoroughly examine what business actually is. This class is called business ethics, and I do not see how we can do an ethic of something unless we break down programmatically, as it were, what that something is.

Philosophy is a multiplicity—there are different fields within philosophy that ask different questions. Ontology is that field that examines the nature of being. For example, what makes me who I am is an ontological question since it is a question about the very essence of my being. Another word for this is metaphysics.

Now, some think that ontological questions are ahistorical—they pertain to that which is eternal, never changes, and so on. The idea behind this way of thinking is that we do not need to do history to understand essences. However, I disagree with this approach. We are going to see why.

Detour into Metaphysics and Ontology

I want to linger on this question a little bit. We are speaking about essences, and we are trying to get at the essence of business. Here is a problem: I have asserted that I think that things change over time. But, if something changes over time, it becomes a different thing altogether, since what made it what it is differs.

In other words, if the essence changes, then it is a different thing that comes and goes. Suppose you have a piece of clay. At some point, it is just clay. But if you make it into a statue, it becomes other. While it matters that the statue is made of clay, if we are studying what makes the statue what it is, we probably do not care about the inessential, such as whether it is clay.

There is a distinction therefore to be made between essential and nonessential properties. Essential properties are what is inherent to the thing in question, and arguably what makes it precisely what it is. In other words, a thing would not be what it is if it did not exhibit some essential properties or attributes. Nonessential properties are accidental facts about a thing that do not define it, though can be said about the thing.

Here is an example. Consider fishing, and how sometimes you catch the same species. What makes a red snapper what it is? Certainly it is not size, since they vary in size but we still call them red snapper. It is not sex, since it does not matter whether a red snapper is male or female. But, it is something, and it is the general way it looks, the genetic code nowadays, perhaps some features about it. There is something about a red snapper that makes it what it is, and there are some things about a red snapper that can variate and still make the snapper remain itself.

So, when it comes to history and change over time, it is important to understand that I do not mean to say that the essence of a thing becomes different. The essence remains the same, but the presentation and manifestation changes. Social practices, and we will discuss that business is one, have an essence too, but they change in how they are enacted and performed, not only over time but also culturally.

Friendship is a social phenomena with a certain essence. But it takes many forms, and historically has differed. For example, even something like 100 years ago, it was taboo for unmarried men and women to be just friends. Some today still think it is impossible for men and women to be just friends, but generally, socially the attitude has changes. This means we learn about essence too as the presentation changes.

Here is another thought. When things change over time but we call it by the same name, we see that what has changes about it is not essential to it, for we would have used a different name. Thus, with friendship, we see that 100 years ago, someone might have said that the essence of friendship is that it is a tight bond between two men or two women. Today, we would not say so, for we generally think that the sex of a friend is irrelevant to whether they are a friend.

The same logic, I assert, applies to business and hence it is important to look at it historically, since doing so allows us to abstract away the inessential and the historically contingent, therefore revealing what it is in and of itself.

There is another point that I wish to make about the importance of looking at business, specifically at the variation of business over time, in this context. Often, one mistakes the way in which things are today for the way in which they have always been. Foucault writes about this in his many other books.

For example, he writes about discipline and punishment. We tend to think today that the carceral system has been the way that it is forever, or perhaps that it used to be worse but now it is better. However, today we lock prisoners up, nobody sees them, nobody knows about them, and it is over there and not here. But carceration used to be different, it used to be such that punishment was public, for example.

Another notion he writes about is intimacy between adults. Intimacy the way it exists today is entirely the product of 1800s science, and things were very different prior. In other words, and to make this brief, the idea is that it is important to study the historical manifestation of a social practice because it allows you to realize that the way in which it is today is no the way in which it has always been.

Let us briefly summarize. I have said that it is important to look at business historically because:

- (1) It allows you to extract the essence apart from historical contingency
- (2) It allows you to see that the way it is today is not how it always was

So, put simply, it is important to look at the historical progression of the essence of business because history both conceals and reveals the essence of a thing, and it gives you perspective, for better or worse, regarding how it is today.

People today talk about how things are either very good—the best they have been—or that things are very bad—the worst they have been. Both of these views are mistaken. There were better times, but there were also much worse times. Knowing this is how you can better understand yourself in relation to your surrounding.

What, then, is business?

This is the main question for today, but also for the next few weeks: what is business? The main thing I want to talk about today, and this will become clear as we progress from Hesiod to Foucault, is that business is a kind of practice and that it is also individual.

Consider this expression that one sometimes retorts with a personal question from a person that should not be asking such things: “It is none of your business!”.

Why do we say this? We say this because business seems to be something that one is concerned with, there is such a thing as one’s business, as that with which one presumably engages. Business also sounds like busy and busyness. It is something one is busy with, for one engages with it at all times.

We can say that strictly in terms of how we use the word, business seems to be something personal. But, I also have claimed that business seems to be a kind of thing that only exists in the social. I think this is still true, and I will explain why.

Imagine a mountain man who knows no other mountain man. It is just him. He does not speak. He kills animals and occasionally gathers berries. We may be tempted to say that he is engaged in the business of living life. A farmer’s business is farming, a cook’s business is cooking, so why not mountain man’s business doing mountain man things? Because mountain man does not understand that what he is engaged in is a mode of life, one that he himself concerns himself with. He has seen no one else, so he does not even know that he himself is himself.

We think of ourselves as individuated and cohesive since we contrast ourselves to others. The very concept of a self is actually social since it obtains by a process of differentiation from the other. If you speak no language and have seen no other person, you cannot even refer to yourself as yourself.

So for that reason, sociality is requisite for business. It is both incredibly personal what one does, but at the same time it is in relation to others. Since time immemorial, humans have lived in communities or at the very least in loose social associations. No one was through and through self-sustaining, and therefore trade became necessary. Say I killed a mountain deer but you gathered some berries. What happens if you only eat deer to your bowels? The same holds for berries, one cannot live on berries.

So, the idea is that while business is an activity that one essentially concerns oneself with, it is also an activity that is in relation to others, and therefore becomes subject of ethics. It would be subject to ethics if it was in relation to oneself alone, but we cannot escape the social. Business could in principle be a solitary activity, think lighthouse keeper. But because the self is a social product, we cannot ever think apart from the other. In having reflective selfhood, it is as if we are infected by the social conceptualized as a plague that takes over. The world is unfortunately a world-with-others.

So, to wrap up, we are going to look at the historical trajectory of business because historical variation allows us to strip away what is inessential since

what variates is what is contingent. Doing so also allows us to see that business the way it is today is not business how it is in and of itself because today there are probably many contingencies too. Our working definition so far is that business is a practice one engages in to sustain life. In this way, a hunter or a group thereof is in the business of hunting, a band of brothers raiding is in the business of war, a farmer is in the business of farming. These are the things one does in one's life. So business fundamentally is what one does. The question is this, for class, in future: how does one live a good life doing what one does?