



APPEARANCES, DUTIES AND ASPIRATIONS

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The following three essays on a business ethics theme together form a kind of bouquet I would like to present, with my best wishes on his Jubilee, to Professor Ladislav Tondl, a man equally well known for valuing the seriousness of science as for his sense of humor. The bouquet thus begins with a text highlighting the opposite meanings, despite a phonetic similarity, of the Polish and Czech words ‘pozór’ (*mask*) and ‘pozor’ (*attention*), a reference to the Professor’s semantic interests. The second text discusses the technicalities of what we call *image*, in other words how artifacts are designed and produced, which is a topic close to the Professor’s designological interests. Finally, the third text discusses acting in fulfillment of duty as the condition of fulfilling our aspirations, which is related to the Professor’s interest in the praxiological and ethical aspects of action. In their original shape, these texts were addressed to decision-makers on the River Vistula, but they are worth passing on, because the country on the River Vltava can trigger similar reflections, especially when one remembers the many discussions held there with the author of “Positive and Negative Aspects of Contemporary Communication”.¹

‘Pozor’ and ‘pozór’ – small diacritic, huge difference

Here we have two related Slavic languages, Czech and Polish, and within them – two words differing only by a single diacritic: ‘pozor’ and ‘pozór’, but meaning completely different things; the Czech ‘pozor’ means ‘attention’, the Polish ‘pozór’ means ‘appearance’ in the sense of ‘mask’. Looking at the fascination with ‘image’ all around us, one gets the impression that in business language these two nouns are drawing dangerously close to each other.

“We have to take care of business’s image,” says the head of a business organization in response to criticism of certain behaviors following a report

¹ Ladislav Tondl’s contribution to the 5th World International Society of Business, Economics and Ethics Congress, Warsaw, Poland 2012

on the results of business ethics studies presented at one of many conferences. “We plan to hold a special campaign to improve the corporate image,” he adds. And it isn’t until someone points out that this image is a façade, just like the façades that were renovated in People’s Poland when a VIP was expected to visit a town but the structure and annexes were left as is, that he swears it’s not about appearances (‘pozór’), but about “grabbing the attention (‘pozor’) of the general public and showing them what business does, what it is, and how much effort this involves”.

“Let’s take working hours, for instance,” another representative of the business community comes to his aid. “Employees are unhappy that staying at work after hours is demanded of them when the situation requires, but, after all, their boss is occupied with company matters for several dozen hours a week.” However, this speaker fails to react when someone from the room says that machines and other equipment are switched off whenever longer operation causes danger of overheating.

And so the ping-pong of views continues, not only at conferences but in the lives of the addressees of image, and would make our neighbors across the River Olza say ‘zdání klame’, which means ‘appearances are deceiving’.

Glossy magazines write about clothes, cars, places to be, ways to spend free time, and the pastimes of some businesspeople. Many are happy to talk about them, acting coy and pretending to dislike the paparazzi whereas what they really want is to attract attention. “With lifestyle magazines looking more and more like catalogs for designers, designer catalogs have begun to look more and more like magazines,” writes Naomi Klein in *No Logo*, a book published in a Polish translation.² This determines, *pars pro toto*, the image of business, i.e. the ‘pozór’ (mask) that takes readers (and even professional journals do it) further away from what is the essence of business activity if one wants to conduct it responsibly. Business is falling into the same trap it set up for consumers as a marketing ploy.

Despite everything, according to a study on business ethics and corporate social responsibility,³ the bosses of Polish companies (and over 90 % of these are small and medium-sized businesses) know what to pay atten-

² Naomi KLEIN, *No Logo*. Izabelin: Świat Literacki 2004, p. 59.

³ The study was conducted by the Business Ethics Team of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, and the Business Ethics Centre as well as the TNS OBOP polling centre on a random sample of 800 companies. See GASPARIKI, W. – LEWICKA-STRZAŁECKA, A. – ROK, B. – SZULCZEWSKI, G., *Odpowiedzialność społeczna i etyka biznesu w polskim życiu gospodarczym: Infrastruktura na rzecz rozwoju etyczności funkcjonującego w Polsce biznesu. Wstępny raport z badań*. Warszawa: Zespół Badawczy Etyki

tion to. In first place, they list legalism (80 %), followed by the company's financial result (77 %), giving the bronze medal to complying with legal and ethical standards treated jointly (68 %). Next on the list are: environmental protection (33 %), activity benefiting employees and their families (18 %) and activity benefiting people and groups connected with the company (17 %), i.e. all that concerns the company's stakeholders. Charity activity comes last (9 %) in the sequence defining the company's actual ('pozor') and not pretended ('pozór') responsibility.

The respondents add that moral standards definitely must be followed (65 %), though the relativists say that exceptions might be justified in certain cases (30 %). Meanwhile, it is the latter who have a negative impact on the image of business, because they are the focus of attention for the media. This has inclined even such an experienced observer of managerial trends as Prof. Andrzej K. Koźmiński to remark that "So far, 'producers of excuses' are doing well, as they are the ones who give the best explanations and justify the growing crisis of values".⁴

'Pozór' – the mask – is gaining the advantage, whereas it is not appearances but 'pozornost', as our brothers the Czechs say, meaning attention, interest and concern, that is the value which we need to uphold like we would care for a valuable plant during the frosty season.

The ultimate in PR

Let us look at the public relations of public relations itself, the ultimate PR, or as the Polish idiom has it – PR squared. This leads us nicely to πr^2 , the formula for the area of a circle, an association with going round in circles, always coming back to the mantra that "it's image that is at stake." Companies, corporations, institutions, in other words all kinds of organizations, want to be perceived – regardless of what they are really like – in a positive light by the world around them, the broad public. For this purpose, organizations hire PR agencies or set up their own PR departments that declare they will take care of the image of their clients. We're talking about image here, makeup, a façade and other external things, according to the saying "fine

Życia Gospodarczego Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk we współpracy z Centrum Etyki Biznesu IFiS PAN i WSPiZ im. L. Koźmińskiego 2004.

⁴ Andrzej K. KOŹMIŃSKI, *Zarządzanie w warunkach niepewności*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN 2004, p. 56.

feathers make fine birds.” Meanwhile, as another saying goes, “handsome is as handsome does.”

Irrespective of how we define it and what we associate it with, PR does not enjoy a good reputation. Moreover, even though its business is image, it shows little concern for its own image, perhaps counting on the power of its phonetic similarity, at least in Polish, to “Piarist” – a monk from the respected educational order. They err, however, because to the man in the street PR is not about piety but about tailoring vestments for some “devil” or other, to hide the “tail” with which the currently trendy Satan “rings the bell for Mass,” as another Polish saying goes. In other words, PR is like the shoemaker whose children are ill-shod. Why? Because when setting out to prove their effectiveness, PR specialists cite cases taken straight from Andersen’s fairy tale about the emperor’s new clothes, where nakedness on issues of merit is covered with the virtual clothing of appearances. No wonder Daniel Boorstin says that “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some hire public relations officers.”

The above quote is taken from the same page of the great book of business on which public relations is described as relations with the public.⁵ The public is the source of stakeholders for any organization, whether economic, social, government, community, academic, business, etc. etc. From the public come clients and consumers, applicants and students as well as employees, clerks, managers, journalists and the family members of all of the above. The point is for all members of the public to have knowledge on the way an organization functions, on the products it offers, on the genuine motive for its existence and operation. “Virtually no company any longer promises lifetime employment. Anyone can be fired. Since employees know that, the good ones are nearly always considering other options. So why do employees stay with a company if it is not out of loyalty? They stay because they believe in the vision of the company,” writes Robert Leaf.⁶ This should be the purpose of in-house communication, or PR targeted at employees. A similar role should be played by PR directed outwards, i.e. toward the company’s clients and partners.

Both types of social communication are components of the complex process of communicating – a kind of “communication mix” – with increasingly demanding stakeholders. Therefore the standard of PR that is practiced testifies to PR officers’ perception of the targets of their efforts. Primitive PR

⁵ *Business: The Ultimate Resource*. Cambridge, MA:Perseus Publishing 2002, p. 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57–58.

(akin to a PR phone-in quiz) – which unfortunately is the predominant kind – indicates that the target is perceived as a “bumpkin”. The stereotype of the primitive audience of PR messages affects the stereotype of PR as falsifying reality like a matchmaker trying to marry off a lazy and unsightly bridal candidate, a matchmaker who is convinced a young man will believe any drivel. Whereas in fact, as Robert W. Haack remarks, “[t]he public may be willing to forgive us for mistakes in judgment [...] it will not forgive us for mistakes in motive.”⁷

PR specialists bragging about their “successes” – anytime you switch on the TV, you can see and hear them – are doing PR a disservice. Defective PR leads to defective presentations of a company and its products, to its image being destroyed, even to its products being boycotted, to loss of opportunities, to losing to the competition, or even to bankruptcy. Neglecting to follow principles makes the company and the clients lose out, concludes Marcus Sieff.⁸

All this should encourage PR officers to take care to build a good image of public relations. The extent to which PR can achieve this will testify strongly to its skills; there’s a piece of advice as old as the world worth mentioning here: “Physician, heal thyself.” Incidentally, when I was at a health center once, I read the following message on the noticeboard: “You can buy a house but not a home; medicine but not health; sex but not love; bed linen but not sleep; a book but not knowledge; a life but not the soul.” To add to this list: you can buy a mask but not a face; appearances but not an identity.

Duties and aspirations

Any decision carries some burden of rightness and lawfulness, because it involves either establishing the law or applying the law. In both cases, the axiological context is important, i.e. the context of values or morals “thanks to which law is possible,” as Lon Luvois Fuller writes in *The Morality of Law*.⁹ This author, one of the greatest American legal philosophers, distinguished two types of morality: the morality of duty and the morality of aspiration.

The morality of duty is the morality of the fundamental rules that organize social life, like those set down in the Ten Commandments: don’t steal, don’t kill, in other words don’t do anything to others you wouldn’t

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 476.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

⁹ Lon L. FULLER, *The Morality of Law*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1964.

want them to do to you. The morality of duty is the foundation whose existence is crucial for building social structures of a higher order. Thus, as Fuller writes, it is a kind of grammar of morality. The rules of grammar define the essential conditions for language to serve as a tool of communication, just like the norms of the morality of duty define the essential conditions for social life to be possible, according to Fuller.

The morality of aspiration concerns the structures of a higher order. It is based, to use the concept of the same philosopher, on the principles of elegant style, which are casual, imprecise, shaky and give us a general outlook on the perfection we should aspire to rather than any specific and reliable instructions on how to achieve it. Aspirations and the related morality are connected with striving for perfection, with all that is righteous, with a completeness of the skills that humans possess.

On the moral thermometer, the most important point is the critical point between the morality of duty that fills the lower part of the scale and the morality of aspiration that occupies the upper part. The higher on the scale the critical point is, the greater the moral rigorism. It is not we as people who are meant to choose a life model by fulfilling our creative aspirations; we are meant to act according to imposed rules that dictate the life model. Rigorism, and in its extreme version – fundamentalism, grows out of the conviction that evil cannot be defined unless we first define the ultimate good. According to the rigorists, Fuller points out, the morality of aspiration is the foundation of all morality, but the moral directive not to steal does not assume any concept of a perfect life. It is based on the mundane truth that if people went around killing one another, fulfilling a moral aspiration would not even be an issue.

The morality of duty and the law, the morality of aspiration and aesthetics are pairs that Fuller highlights. He compares the two kinds of morality to two ways of explaining what economics deals with (which, by the way, should be of some interest to decision-makers, since their activity or lack thereof has economic consequences).

An affinity with the morality of duty can be found in exchange as the essence of economics, an idea based on a praxiological premise, while the morality of aspiration is akin to the principle of marginal utility that is seen to be at the core of economic thinking. Economists from the latter school, like moralists of aspiration, are unable to indicate the ultimate good. They try to conceal their ignorance by using the buzzword “utility”, that thingamajig – or *dinks*, as they say in Silesia – thanks to which if I have 50 zlotys and spend it not on a scarf but on slippers, I do so because I have judged

the “utility” of a scarf to be lower than that of slippers. As Fuller points out, the weakness of an economist in this case is the same as that of a moralist who aspires to showing people the way leading to a decent life but is unable to define what is or what should be the supreme goal of life. When there is no ultimate moral or economic good, in the end we invoke – in both ethics and economics – the idea of balance. And the idea here is not a seemingly “middle road” but the difficult Aristotelian golden mean that is dangerous to the indolent and the inexperienced and requires the same kind of perceptiveness as efficient management.

The numerous proposals put forward lately by current and prospective decision-makers make one want to recommend Fuller’s book, and to suggest reading it as a task from the borderline of duty and aspiration if the decision-makers treat their decision-making seriously. Socrates treated knowledge, as Fuller reminds us, as a virtue. *Sapienti sat!*