
Plato's Ethical Values

What lessons for today?

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Abstract

In this article is postulated a set of ethical guidelines, derived from Plato's philosophy, capable of serving as a template or model for everyday conduct and decision-making by modern business persons and professionals. This Platonic Model ('PM') of ethical conduct is founded on the key values and virtues of reason, lawfulness, justice, temperance, wisdom, and courage. These are the universal values and virtues which Plato presents in his dialogues as the foundation of ethical human conduct at all times and in all places. While the ethical norms contained in the PM never change, their application must of course be tailored to meet the needs of a particular age and society. Thus this article gives empirical examples to illustrate the role which the PM can play in the modern African business world.

Introduction

Plato's philosophy has stood the test of time: it remains one of the richest treasures in our inheritance from the ancient world. But it has seldom been looked upon specifically as a repository of ethical directives which can provide practical guidance and inspiration in modern life. It is the purpose of this article to synthesize, from the abundant storehouse of principles contained in Plato's dialogues, an ethical model capable of serving the needs of persons in the modern business world. While the business sector represents only one facet of modern life, it provides a convenient stage on which human conduct can be closely observed. I have therefore chosen this sector to exemplify the playing-out of Platonic values in our daily life.

The modern business environment is beset by moral and ethical dilemmas of many sorts. A report by the African Union says that corruption is one of the main reasons why Africa is so deeply in debt and poverty. The African Union (AU) estimates that corruption on the continent has increased the cost of goods by as much as 20%. Capital flight from Africa between the end of colonialism and 2003 reached \$148bn (*Business Day* newspaper, Johannesburg, 14 October 2004: "Corruption sucking Africa dry, says AU").

Not all of this corruption, however, is business-related. There is evidence to show that corporate crime is costing South Africa about \$7bn a year. This is more than the country's annual income from tourism (*Business Report* newspaper, South Africa, 5 November 2004). According to a recent survey, almost all incidents of workplace fraud committed by employees in South Africa are repeat offences. In one out of every six cases of fraud, other employees were aware of what was taking place. These data point to a widespread and pressing need for ethical guidelines in the workplace.

The ethical model proposed in this article will be referred to below as the Model of Platonic Ethical Norms, or MPEN: it comprises a set of six norms or values drawn from Plato's dialogues, including the *Republic*, the *Laws* and the *Crito*. These norms are reason, lawfulness and the four cardinal or Platonic virtues of justice, temperance, wisdom and courage. The model will be constructed step-by-step by examining each of these six norms or values in turn. The examination in each case involves two stages: in the first or theoretical stage, I seek to determine the precise meaning and scope of the concept, as it is presented by Plato. In the second stage, the practical application of the norm, with particular reference to the modern business world, is examined. The MPEN, when fully constructed in this manner, is proposed as a template for business conduct. Such conduct, if it is to comply with the proposed model, must be reasonable, lawful, just, temperate, wise and courageous. When the MPEN has been fully constructed, it will be evaluated and attention will be drawn to various features of the model.

Plato's notion of one absolute, transcendent, universal Truth is alien to our modern subjective, relativistic mindset, which requires that "you work on your underlying assumption and I'll work on mine". For Plato, justice, beauty, equality and truth are eternal, unchanging values, valid in all ages and in all places. Adoption of the MPEN requires us to be open to the possibility that such values, derived from ancient texts, may be capable of serving as useful practical guidelines for the conduct of business today. While the values contained in the MPEN never change, their practical application must of course be modified to meet the needs of modern business.

The point of departure in any discussion of Plato's values is always the individual, and never the group or aggregate, such as the state, or society at large, or a particular community, or a corporation, or some other business vehicle. Virtue in any form, according to Plato, invariably starts with the individual, and from the individual it passes, by what could be described as a process of assimilation or osmosis, into the group or collective (*Republic* 435e: Jowett, 1953 II, p 288–289). It follows that if ethical conduct is to grace the public life of a state or the dealings of a corporation, ethical values must first, through proper education, have been inculcated in the individuals of whom that state or that corporation is composed (*Laws* bks 1

& 2 *passim*: Jowett, 1953 IV, p 189–242). Too often, the response to unethical conduct takes the form of measures which address it at the collective level, whether within or outside the corporation. It is primarily because the individual is taken by Plato to be the ultimate source and origin of all ethics that, in applying the Platonic norms to modern business practice below, I shall adopt the point of view of a director, manager or other employee of a corporation, rather than that of the corporation as a whole.

I proceed now to construct the MPEN by considering in turn each of the six Platonic ethical norms of reason, lawfulness, justice, temperance, wisdom and courage.

Construction of the Model of Platonic Ethical Norms (MPEN)

Reason

Reason is the foundation of Plato's philosophy and the fountainhead of all his ethical values (*Laws* 631e: Saunders, 1970, p 55). Every action by an individual, whether in or outside business, must therefore in the first instance be reasonable.

The starting point for a proper understanding of Plato's notion of reason is *Laws* 644e–645c (Jowett, 1953 IV, p 210–211). In this key passage, Plato speaks of reason as a "sacred and golden cord" which exists in every one of us and pulls us in the direction of truth. He enjoins us to grasp this cord and never to let go, but to pull with it against all the other cords within us. These other cords, if left to themselves, pull us in the direction of untruth and ignorance. Thus the individual ought to act according to the pull of reason. Plato calls the golden cord of reason the common law of the state. The connection between reason and law which Plato demonstrates here is significant for present purposes: the first two norms in the MPEN are reason, which is presently under discussion, and lawfulness, which will be treated next. Thus already at this early stage it is clear that Platonic norms and values are not separate, unrelated entities; on the contrary, they overlap considerably, to the point of constituting a unity. The unity of the Platonic virtues is a theme which we shall revisit later.

Reason is the highest element in man (*Timaeus* 90a–c: Jowett, 1953 III, p 777–778; *Republic* 500c: Jowett, 1953 II, p 351). Reason is the reflective element in the mind (*Republic* 439d: Lee, 1974, p 215). Reason, the golden principle, supported and reinforced by the element of resolution, ought always to rule us, because it is reason alone which possesses the wisdom and foresight to act for the whole (*Republic* 441e: Jowett, 1953 II, p 296).

But how does all this translate into a workable norm or standard which an individual in business may apply in her everyday dealings? According to

Plato: “[I]f our desire for gain and our ambition will follow the guidance of knowledge and reason, and choose and pursue only such pleasures as wisdom indicates, the pleasures they achieve will be the truest of which they are capable, because truth is their guide...” (*Republic* 586d-e: Lee, 1974, p 412–413). This passage contains the practical pointers: Plato does *not* require that the profit motive (or other desires) be suppressed or denied. Instead, the individual must ensure through constant vigilance that this desire is subjected to the dominion of reason. Reason requires that in seeking wealth, the individual harms no one. Thus, if a company manager is faced with the opportunity of making an improper gain – for example, he is offered a bribe – a critical moment will generally arise. This moment is critical, because it is the moment of choice: either reason, reinforced by resolution will restrain the desire and the offer will be declined, or the desire to make the improper gain will assert itself and harmful consequences will ensue. Only alert, detached observation of his inner state at this critical moment will enable an individual to act reasonably in such circumstances. Again, the operation of reason at the critical moment will restrain other, equally improper desires, such as the desire to embezzle, to steal, to break an agreement, to reveal a trade secret, or to underpay an employee.

Lawfulness

Respect for law today appears to be increasingly on the decline. From executive fraud, political corruption, and match-fixing in sport to hijackings and rape, lawlessness in its many guises is everywhere in evidence.

Obedience to law by the individual is the foundation of every stable, cohesive society or organization. It follows that the individual's duty to obey the law, whether it takes the form of national legislation, a municipal regulation or an employer's code of ethics, ought to be uncontroversial. But this is far from being the case today: the question “Why ought we to obey the law?” is a vexed one in contemporary jurisprudence. This question is hardly new: Plato's answer to it, which occurs in his dialogue *Crito*, is as startling as it is pertinent to the conduct of modern business. I proceed now to summarize his treatment of the question (see Domanski, 2000).

In the key passage of *Crito*, the personified laws of Athens address Socrates as follows (*Crito* 51d–e: Jowett, 1953 I, p 381):

[W]e ... proclaim to any Athenian by the liberty which we allow him, that if he does not like us, the laws, when he has become of age and has seen the ways of the city, and made our acquaintance, he may go where he pleases and take his goods with him. None of us laws will forbid him or interfere with anyone who does not like us and the city, and who wants to emigrate; ... he may go where he likes, with his property. But he who has experience of the manner in which we order justice and administer the state, and still

remains, has by so doing entered into an implied contract that he will do as we command him.

Thus, to the question: "Why ought we to obey the law?" Plato's cogent and compelling answer is: "Because, whether you realize it or not, you have by your conduct agreed to do so." The laws of Athens go on to warn Socrates that the citizen who commits a breach of this implied contract by disobeying them is wrong, because (*Crito* 51e–52a: Jowett, 1953 I, p 381):

... having made an agreement with us that he will duly obey our commands, he neither obeys them nor convinces us that our commands are unjust; although we do not ... require unquestioning obedience, but give him the alternative of obeying or convincing us.

In the case of a modern company employee, the basic implied contract enjoining his obedience to national law is reinforced by his express consent, if any, to abide by terms contained in a letter of appointment or a code of conduct. Conversely, it follows from the passages quoted that the citizen's contractual obligation to obey the law is subject to two qualifications: first, he must in law be free at any time to emigrate and take his goods with him (The freedom offered by Plato is greater than that afforded by certain modern states, which place restrictions on the amount of money that an emigrant may take with him). Secondly, the citizen must in law be free to campaign for reform of a law to which he is opposed.

For the individual in business, the most obvious and immediate demands of lawful conduct are surely simple honesty and being true to one's word. The keeping of promises by individuals is the very lifeblood of commerce. No enterprise whose employees ignore these precepts can ultimately prosper.

The Financial Services Board (FSB) is responsible for regulating South Africa's financial services industry, which looks after more than \$700 bn through retirement funds, collective investment schemes, life assurance policies, and the stock and bond markets. Financial service providers recently came under attack from the FSB for their lack of integrity and ethics as well as their disregard for the law. Offending members were warned that if they do not clean up their act, they could lose their licences to conduct business. The chief executive of the FSB said that one of the pillars on which sound regulation rests is the instilling of a culture of ethical behaviour, which means having the courage to do the right thing (*Saturday Star* newspaper, Johannesburg, 18 September 2004, "Obey the law or kiss your business goodbye").

The code of conduct of one South African financial institution enjoins obedience to law upon its employees in these words: "Bankorp employees shall always perform their duties to meet the requirements of the relevant

laws of the country. This precept may under no circumstances be departed from, even if an employer is of the opinion that it may hold financial gain for Bankorp or its clients to break or circumvent the law. It is important that Bankorp's employees be seen as law-abiding businessmen and businesswomen".

Justice

Justice (*dikaosynē*) is the first of the four Platonic or cardinal virtues. The others, discussed below, are temperance (*sōphrosynē*), wisdom (*sophia*) and courage (*andreia*). Plato defines virtue as the general concord of reason and emotion (*Laws* 653b: Saunders, 1970, p 86). Thus virtue has to do with striking a proper balance between reason and emotion. Plato sees the four cardinal virtues, not as discrete, separate entities, but rather as facets of virtue as a whole. Virtue, for Plato, is one, whole and indivisible (*Laws* 630c–631a, 688b: Saunders, 1970 p 54, 135).

Justice is the central theme of Plato's dialogue, the *Republic* (see Domanski, 1999). The meaning of justice and of the other three virtues in the Platonic sense bears little resemblance to modern understandings of these terms. Modern thinking links justice to such ideas as equity, fairness and equality. Plato, however, holds that justice is to do the thing that is appropriate in any given moment, to the exclusion of everything else; it is to do one's own duty at the right time; it is to refrain from interfering in the function or work of another (*Republic* 433 ff: Jowett, 1953 II, p 285–288). Staying within one's own sphere is thus what Plato means by justice. An important example of Platonic justice in the modern political sphere is the doctrine of separation of powers. Drawing examples from the economic sphere, Plato says that a farmer will not make his own plough or other implements of agriculture, if these are to be good for anything. Neither will the builder make his own tools (*Republic* 370c–d: Jowett, 1953 II, p 212). By analogy, Platonic justice would require that the organs, office-bearers, departments and employees of a modern business organization perform their own functions, and do not encroach on the functions of others. Justice in this sense is clearly indispensable to the efficiency of every business enterprise, for the interchange and commingling of one employee's function with that of another must ultimately spell its ruin (*Republic* 421a, 434b: Jowett, 1953 II, p 270, 287).

Plato proceeds to apply his definition of justice to the specific activity of producing goods. He says: "[A]ll things are produced more plentifully and easily and of a better quality when one man does one thing which is natural to him and does it at the right time, leaving other crafts alone" (*Republic* 370c: Jowett, 1953, II p 212). This formulation of Platonic justice and the

one given earlier have a crucial element in common, namely the element of timing. It is not enough that an individual performs the function to which she is naturally fitted: that function must, in addition, be performed at the right time. Consider the case of a manufacturer of shoes. Plato's definition of justice requires of the manufacturer, first, an aptitude for and a dedication to his craft, to the exclusion of any unrelated occupation. Secondly, the manufacturer's skills have to be deployed in the service of his customers, at the time when they have need of his products, and at no other time. This may sound trite, but the point is that if the manufacturer neglects this principle by producing shoes for which there is no demand, his conduct is not merely wasteful or uneconomic, but unjust: if pursued, such conduct must eventually result in the failure of his enterprise.

The dictate of Platonic justice, then, whether in business or in any other sphere of activity, is simply that the individual respond to the present need before her, to the exclusion of every other consideration. Meeting the need of the present moment may well require her to deviate from, or even to abandon, instantly if necessary, her predetermined course of action, plan or agenda. Thus the hallmarks of Platonic justice are flexibility, openness and responsiveness. This leaves no room for rigid, mechanical action.

Here is one final, hypothetical example to illustrate the practical operation of Platonic justice in the business sphere. John, the managing director of a large company, is due to attend a board meeting. Minutes before the start of the meeting, he learns that workers at the company's manufacturing plant are about to embark on a major strike. John decides to miss the board meeting and proceeds directly to the plant, where he addresses the workers. What he says has the effect of averting the threatened strike. His action saves his company from suffering a substantial financial loss. This is Platonic justice in action.

Temperance

Plato first addresses the subject of temperance in his early dialogue *Charmides*, but his developed thinking on the subject is to be found in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. The word has a faintly Victorian ring, but the Greek original *sōphrosynē* embraces a vast range of meanings of contemporary relevance. These include restraint, moderation, impartiality, objectivity, order, equilibrium, harmony, measure, self-control, stability and balance. All of these meanings are to be found in the *Laws*. In the *Republic*, temperance is described as "harmony and symphony", "the ordering and controlling of certain pleasures and desires", and the condition of "a man being his own master" (*Republic* 430e: Jowett, 1953 II, p 282–283). In relation specifically to the individual, Plato defines temperance as the habitual self-control of a

soul that uses reason (*Laws* 631d: Saunders, 1970, p 55. See also Domanski, 2003). Thus temperance, like the other virtues, is under the dominion of reason, which, as we have seen, is the highest norm and governs all the other norms. Like the other virtues too, Platonic temperance originates always in the individual; from the individual, it passes into and extends throughout the collective (such as the state or a corporation), producing a consonance of all its elements from the weakest to the strongest (*Republic* 432a: Jowett, 1953 II, p 284). A striking expression of Platonic temperance is the "Golden Rule", which is expressed in the Bible as follows: "All things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do even so to them: for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Mt 7:12, Authorized Version). This rule "continues to stand as a universal expression of the highest ethic, an encoding of natural moral law, and a fulfilment of both the Mosaic and the Christian ideals of behaviour" (Cunningham, 1998, p 108).

In the business sector, Platonic temperance can manifest in a number of apparently unrelated ways. Consider, firstly, the description by Mohandas K Gandhi of the true relationship between a business enterprise and its customers: "A customer is the most important visitor to our premises. He is not dependent on us, we are dependent on him. He is not an interruption of our work; he is the purpose of it. We are not doing him a favour by serving him; he is doing us a favour by giving us an opportunity to serve him". Secondly, Platonic temperance requires that the rights of employees be carefully balanced against their duties and responsibilities. Thirdly, it is temperance in the form of self-control which restrains a manufacturer from abusing a monopoly or a dominant market position, for example by increasing the prices of his goods without objective justification. Fourthly, legislation governing the relationship between landlord and tenant must strike a fair balance between the interests of the parties. In some countries, landlords have walked away from apartments which they own, because their tenants have failed to pay rent for many months, and there are no effective legal remedies available to evict them.

The rationale for the existence of competition laws is Platonic temperance in the form of balance – balance between, on the one hand, the financial power of large companies and, on the other hand, the vulnerability of consumers and of smaller, weaker businesses. And the part played by Platonic temperance in the field of competition does not end here: David Lewis, the chairman of South Africa's Competition Tribunal, has recently pointed out that local competition authorities are being faced with challenges which their international counterparts are spared. Thus he asks: Should Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), a vital ingredient of current government policy, take precedence over competition in South Africa? According to Lewis, there is a national, South African reality, including

government policy objectives, which has to be balanced against competition concerns. Such a balancing act can be very difficult at times. (*Sunday Times* newspaper, Johannesburg, 29 August 2004).

Another area in which Platonic temperance has a key role to play is the proper balance to be struck between industrial development and environmental protection. Recent South African legislation imposes stringent penalties on companies and developers who flout environmental regulations. Said a Member of the Executive Council for Gauteng province: "Our ecosystem and our quest for a better life in a sustainable environment are under pressure because of the activities of uncaring industries and land developers" (*Business Day* newspaper, Johannesburg, 9 March 2005).

Platonic temperance can also manifest as an attitude of contriteness and humility on the part of business enterprises which have provided their customers with less than satisfactory service. Such an attitude, however, is seldom to be found. Neville Melville, the South African banking ombudsman, has noted the reluctance of banks to apologize for their errors. In one case, a delinquent bank chose to make a substantial payment to its customer rather than to tender an apology.

Finally, a vital field for the operation of ethical norms, particularly Platonic temperance in the form of moderation or restraint, is advertising. Ethical advertising emphasizes the positive attributes of a product, but does not exaggerate or make false claims. The problem here is the slippery slope by which puffery can quickly descend into lies (<http://www.ethics.org>: 17 September 2003). The field of operation of Platonic temperance in business is indeed vast, but the few examples given here will suffice for present purposes.

Wisdom

According to Plato, this virtue involves knowledge not of any particular activity or thing within the state, but of the wholeness and unity of the state (*Republic* 428d: Jowett, 1953 II, p 280). Thus a city renowned for the skill of its carpenters could not be considered wise (*Republic* 428c: Jowett, 1953 II, p 279), because wisdom requires an all-encompassing view which includes every facet of the life of the state. The people most likely to possess wisdom in this sense are those entrusted with the rule and care of the state. Plato calls them guardians, and says that if they possess this knowledge of the big picture, then the state as a whole, being constituted in accordance with nature, will be wise (*Republic* 429a: Jowett, 1953 II, p 280).

By analogy, a business corporation (or other collective) will flourish when the vision of its directors is whole rather than partial. Such wholeness of vision would embrace, for example, the wellbeing of all employees rather

than only certain classes of them; it would include the adoption of policies which tend to unite rather than to divide the organization.

The absence of Platonic wisdom at the political level is well described by a South African commentator (Johnson, 2004, p 232):

[South Africa] has always been ruled ... by elites which seek their own group self-interest rather than that of the country as a whole. Only when it at last acquires a ruling elite which thinks and feels for the whole of this beloved country, will this sad cycle change. This is what guarantees Nelson Mandela a special place in South African hearts. He alone for a brief and precious moment seemed to promise at least the possibility of a common South Africanism.

The second King Report on Corporate Governance for South Africa holds that governance in any context ought to reflect the value system of the society in which it operates. Thus corporate governance in Africa ought to observe and take account of the African worldview and culture. More particularly, companies and boards operating in South Africa need to take account of the country's wide range of value systems and rich diversity in defining their corporate ethos and conduct – both internally and externally. Some aspects of the African worldview, as set out in the Report, are the following (King Report, 2002, par 38):

- Spiritual collectiveness determines the communal nature of society, in which households live as an interdependent neighbourhood.
- An inclination towards consensus rather than dissension helps to explain the loyalty of Africans to their leadership.
- Humility and helpfulness to others takes precedence over criticism of them.
- Co-existence with others is highly valued. The essence of *ubuntu* (humanity), a pan-African value which is enshrined in the South African constitution, is that a person can be respected only to the extent of her cordial co-existence with others.
- There is an inherent trust and belief in the fairness and goodwill of all human beings. This attitude is made manifest in the predisposition towards universal brotherhood.
- Optimism runs deep as a result of a strong belief in the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent superior being, in the form of the creator of mankind.

Platonic wisdom requires that business leadership in Africa should, in formulating policies and operating procedures, adopt this worldview. The King Report adds that successful corporate governance in the 21st century requires companies to adopt an inclusive rather than an exclusive approach. Companies must be open to institutional activism. There must be greater emphasis on the sustainable or non-financial aspects of its performance. Boards must apply the tests of fairness, accountability, responsibility and transparency to all acts and omissions. The thread of Platonic wisdom runs through all of these requirements.

Courage

Plato's early dialogue *Laches* deals with courage, although it is inconclusive as to the nature of this virtue. More helpful is the treatment in the *Republic*, which defines courage as a "universal saving power of true opinion in conformity with law about real and false dangers" (*Republic* 430b: Jowett, 1953 II, p 282). Thus Platonic courage is not an impulsive, uninstructed response to danger. On the contrary, it is the product of evaluation and reflection; it is the ability in all circumstances to judge safely, correctly and in accordance with law, what is and what is not to be feared (*Republic* 430b: Lee, 1974, p 200).

The scope for application of Platonic courage in business practice is very wide indeed. Consider first the hypothetical scenario of a company's board of directors who, after careful deliberation, decide on a radical change in policy direction. For example, they decide to launch a new product, which represents a departure from the company's traditional range. The new policy involves a considerable degree of short-term financial risk. The directors believe, however, that their decision, which is strongly opposed by certain shareholders and by market analysts, will ultimately redound to the benefit of the company. Such a decision typically displays Platonic courage.

No act in business calls for more courage than whistle-blowing, provided it is not prompted by malice or some other improper motive. Whistle-blowing has in recent years been the subject of extensive scrutiny in the South African media. The whistle-blower's greatest fear is typically that a rift with his employer may jeopardise his subsequent career prospects. He may fear that potential future employers will see him as a trouble-maker. He may fear that he will experience hostility rather than receive support from his colleagues. He may fear victimisation or an act of revenge by the person whose corrupt or dishonest conduct he has exposed. He may fear that he will have to give up time to co-operate in a criminal investigation and give evidence in court. All these fears must be consciously faced and evaluated, by the employee who decides to take a stand by blowing the whistle. Provided he acts in good faith and in the best interests of the company, his act will be a manifestation of Platonic courage. The need for such courage is underlined by the fact that in South Africa, even specific legislation designed to protect the whistle-blower has so far largely failed: very few people have come forward, because there are powerful intimidatory forces operating within companies and government departments. For example, the senior accountant of the Northern Cape transport department was recently dismissed on charges of "gross insubordination and a contravention of public service regulations" after he blew the whistle on departmental corruption.

Nevertheless Louis de Koker, a prominent economic analyst, has spoken out strongly in favour of whistle-blowing, saying that the problem lies in South Africa's culture of not backing those who disclose misconduct. Whistle-blowing, he says, is an effective management tool which must be encouraged: although the company's share price will initially be dented, the disclosure could save the organisation substantial sums of money in the long run. (*Business Ethics Direct*, Issue 248, 21 September 2004, p 3: "Culture of whistle-blowing should be encouraged") This is all very well as far as the company is concerned, but it does little to allay the typical fears that a whistle-blower has to face. Only courage can enable him to overcome those fears.

Evaluation of the MPEN

The construction of the MPEN is now complete. At this stage, I shall evaluate the model as a whole, and draw attention to certain key features.

In treating of ethics, Plato makes little or no express mention of certain values which feature prominently in modern constitutional and business practice: these include honesty, accountability, responsibility, sustainability and dignity. Yet can it be doubted that the employee who puts the MPEN into practice will inevitably incorporate these contemporary values into her conduct? Indeed, it is arguable that reason (the overarching ethical standard) and wisdom together would, without more, sweep all of these modern values into their compass.

A major advantage of the MPEN as a practical business tool is that it is free from religious or sectarian bias of any kind. The Platonic norms are universal and thus applicable to people in all ages and in all places.

How difficult would it be to implement the MPEN in everyday business activities?

Can persons in business be trained in the values and virtues contained in the MPEN? The question is critical: if the answer is "no", there would be little point in proposing these norms as a basis for business practice. The question whether virtue is teachable is vigorously debated in a number of Plato's dialogues (in particular *Meno*, *Protagoras* and the *Laws*). It is not easy to extract or synthesize a clear-cut answer, and the extensive modern scholarly literature sheds little light on the matter. The thrust of Plato's teaching is that virtue can indeed be taught, but not in the sense of instilling or implanting some desirable quality from outside. Instead, virtue is an innate, immutable characteristic of every human being, and the teacher's sole function is to draw it out of the student, to provide the guidance which will enable the student to manifest what was hitherto obscured by layers of accumulated ignorance. Thus the teaching (and learning) of virtue is a process of inner cleansing which dissolves and removes impediments. An

appropriate analogy is the polishing of a silver goblet which has over time become coated with grime: the removal of the grime does no more than reveal what was always there, but hidden from view. It follows from this that the virtues and values of the MPEN already lie latent within every one of us. The ethical training of persons in business ought therefore to be directed solely to making manifest these hidden qualities.

Here, in conclusion, is Plato's description of the individual who has succeeded in realizing and harmonizing these virtues within his own being (*Republic* 443d–444a: Lee, 1974, p 221):

[He] will in the truest sense set his house to rights, attain self-mastery and order, and live on good terms with himself. When he has ... become fully one instead of many, he will be ready for action of any kind, whether it concerns his personal or financial welfare, whether it is political or private; and he will reckon ... such action just and honourable if it contributes to and helps to maintain this disposition of mind, and will call the knowledge which controls such action wisdom. Similarly he will call unjust any action destructive of this disposition, and the opinions which control such action ignorance.

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