

**Letter to a Young Executive:
American Philosophy and Corporate Social
Responsibility**

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Dear _____:

First, let me congratulate you on your new position! You are now a business leader and, whether or not you think of it in these terms, an important steward of our culture. I know this last characterization sounds a little odd to you, not something you heard very much during your training, except perhaps when you happened upon Sen or Drucker in some bibliography, and then not to be dwelled upon for too long. Certainly, there are those in the terrain of what is called "Culture" and in the academy who would take issue with that characterization. As you know, these days you are being lumped together into what is called, pejoratively, an ilk. That is, you are an executive in a public corporation, a member of a class in disrepute, fair or not. And that is really what I decided to write to you about -- to share some thoughts on your status and the various ways you might come to perceive it.

As you know, I too have some experience in the world of trade and commerce. I spent many years helping people like you run their businesses or otherwise address their business issues. I only say this to remind you that what I am about to discuss is not merely idle or uninformed ruminations about executive life or the concerns and challenges you will face in the marketplace. But those worldly *bona fides* aside, I want to nevertheless offer you some of my views about the soul and spirit of business enterprise, not only its mercantile and strategic dimensions. In order to do that I'll don my philosopher's hat and invoke some of the thinkers who have shaped my thinking most profoundly.

Let me begin in an odd way, then - with reference to what philosophers have called the mind-body problem. Beginning in this odd way may help to drive home some points I want to make about the business life. The mind-body problem often reminds me of a problem that exists in many areas of our public culture. What I am getting at here is the problem of dualisms and what can be called 'realm-think.'

Now, a common business dualism is that which holds apart commerce and personal life, or commerce and the life of the mind, or commerce and the life of faith. This dualism may not sound very much like the mind-body dualism

but in a way it is. You see, as it turns out the so-called mind-body ‘problem,’ the conundrum of how two radically different substances could interact with one another, turned out to be a pseudo-problem. But for centuries it occupied much of the time of some brilliant philosophers until a handful of thinkers stopped taking the distinction between mind and body seriously, until mind and body began to be seen as two sides of the same coin, or different activities of the same creature, or different ways of describing those different activities, rather than radically different substances. “Minding,” if you will, is just what human bodies do, a good deal of the time.

Now, there are many thinkers, influenced by American philosophers, who have come to see the demise of such dualisms as mind-body as salutary to our reflections about such things as how we establish our institutions and what our roles are in society. We believe that seeing business and personal life as separated by impermeable borders is very problematic, a harmful habit with roots in too long a gaze through theological and scientific spectacles. For as much as traditionalist religion still keeps many saddled with an absolutely other plane of existence where ultimate reality may be found and which is separate from the here and now, science and markets have and continue to point downward to the hard earth and to animal interests as the place where the ‘really real’ may be found. And don’t we clever and practical Americans love the really real? To this day the great civilizational debate is about whether we should look up, or look down (to use the jargon of the still dominant metaphors).

The philosopher John Dewey, one of my heroes, said of the mind-body and other dualisms that:

Our language is so permeated with consequences of theories which have divided the body and mind from each other, making separate existential realms out of them, that we lack words to designate the actual existential fact. The circumlocutions we are compelled to resort to. . . induce us to think that analogous separations exist in nature, which can also only be got around by elaborate circuitous arrangements. But body-mind simply designates what actually takes place when a living body is implicated in situations of discourse, communication and participation. In the hyphenated phrase mind-body, ‘body’ designates the continued and conserved, the registered and cumulative operation of factors continuous with the rest of nature, inanimate as well as animate; while ‘mind’ designates the characters and consequences which are differential, indicative of features which emerge when ‘body’ is engaged in a wider more complex and interdependent situation. (EN, 284)

Please re-read that quote a few times. If you get the point Dewey is making here and can see its general application to other dualisms, you will no doubt see the problem with casting the commercial and the private into the form of a

hyphenated dualism, into separate realms. Dewey is inveighing against the creation of bureaucracies out of nature and out of social functions, and even, in other of his works, of hard and inert existential distinctions in our theologies. While I don't like Dewey's phrase - "actual existential fact" - I think he is right about the prospects of his preferred way of conceiving ourselves.

Human beings, as I am sure you have observed, tend to carve-up the world into realms and classes because it is useful to our effort to negotiate it. We cannot be faulted for this. But sometimes that carving and classing creates trouble in other areas of our lives because it leads us to draw conclusions about the things carved and classed that are anything but useful or healthful. I've learned to stop carving up the world that way by people like Dewey and Emerson, or rather I am learning to (it is a difficult practice in a world assembled out of boxes, and as hard as I try I always feel the tensions).

Dewey and Emerson were what we in philosophy call holists -- that is, they saw the interconnections that exist in the world and found fault with the way we are often taught to experience it. While they regarded rigid dualisms as problematic, they did not deride the necessary and pragmatic distinctions that we make, distinctions between sets of activities that we carry out using particular lexicons and languages. There is a language for art and a language for building bridges, but even here, at and even inside of the margins, there is overlap and there is a blending of bridge building into aesthetics, into poetry. Here you can take the point of Emerson, where he tells us in his essay, *History*, that

The power of [human beings] consists in the multitude of [their] affinities, in the fact that [their lives are] intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being. In the age of the Caesars out from the Forum at Rome proceeded the great highways, north, south, east, west, to the centre of every province of the empire, making each market-town of Persia, Spain, and Britain pervious to the soldiers of the capital: so out of the human heart go as it were highways to the heart of every object in nature, to reduce it under the dominion of [humanity]. [Human beings] are . . . [bundles] of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world. . . .
[They] cannot live without a world. (27)

If you get a chance, I would suggest you read in full some of the works I mention. In fact, I would suggest you read them again and again, as I try to do, and particularly, for sheer love of his poetic approach to hard concerns, Emerson, since it is only by way of reminders like they give us that we do not forget ourselves and become cut up into pieces in our own relations. In the relevant case that is the subject of this letter, we wind up believing that there are two real realms of values and conduct (*ganz andere*, as the Germans say -

wholly other) – the business realm and the private realm, just as bygone philosophers used to believe the mind and the body are split into two realms, are two substances – the problem being their connection and interaction. But in fact, there are no two realms or, *better put, it is best not to view things as though there are*. When we do we start to find it difficult to see how one set of activities connect to the other set, how the values and exigencies of one set have meaning and application in and to another. Indeed, it is more useful more often than we think to view what we call the business life and the personal life as but general sets of activities that often overlap. The school of philosophy I find most interesting in my life prefers to remember that whatever can be considered conceptually and in the abstract can usually be cut down to collections of *activities organized around principles of relevance that make those activities cohere and produce results*. Every demographic can be better understood if you consider what makes it tick rather than just slapping a classificatory label on it. What makes it tick are issues, concerns, desires, fears that extend beyond its functional borders. A good marketer never forgets this.

You may have thought that business is a set of activities ordered around a *logic* of economic pursuits, and the personal is ordered by other logics. Well, I would dispute even this characterization, although not because the notion of sets of activities rather than talk of realms doesn't work better. I have just asserted that this is indeed a better way to view things. But seeing separate logics driving different areas of life can drag you right back into '*realm-think*.' The way out of this way of seeing is as follows: try to see not logics, but judgements about the *relevance* of certain actions and ways of thinking as the thing that establishes the *passable boundaries* around various life pursuits, as the thing that makes it possible to know when one is writing a poem rather than a letter of resignation or an ad for the Sunday paper. But consider always that no activity is wholly irrelevant to another. Those who think otherwise like to use phrases that dismiss one set of activities from the domain of another set, so we have come to see *useful* activities as limited to credentialing and to the pecuniary, and aesthetics and re-creation as precluding these, as "non-useful." The only serious scholars, it is thought by these lights, have credentials; the only playful spirits are those who reject them. This is I would not characterize so much as false, but harmful. *It economizes our efforts to judge at the expense of or humanity*.

Clearly, some activities are more relevant to your work as an executive than others, just as some activities are more relevant to commerce in general than others. People don't sing Gospel Hymns in the board room or carry briefcases to the family dinner table because of pragmatic considerations. What do these activities have to do with or what do they add to these settings? What makes singing gospel hymns out of bounds in board rooms is not anti-religious sentiment or disdain for music, but the lack of relevance to the immediate work at hand. This is obvious enough. *But, at the same time, we mustn't conclude that gospel hymns, per se, have nothing to do with the lives of*

directors. Thinking about relevance rather than logics is a way to better understand how distinctions are drawn between business and art, business and family, business and God. It is a way to see the boardroom as a place to serve not narrow but broad interests, not profit alone but also the service of one's fellow citizens so that they will have what they need to sing their hymns without the destitution and want that might silence their voices. Business is noble, though some businesses may not be.

I know that it may be difficult for you to hold these ideas in mind when faced with the need to make the numbers or meet your deadlines or please your superiors. I have seen the pressures of executives close-up. You and your firm will still do what you both do (carry out the creation and distribution of the products and services that are the *raison d'être* of the franchise) even if you had the above remarks nailed to your office door. The question becomes what practical difference it all makes to see the world this way. Indeed, won't viewing the world as devoid of realms create certain dangers to the growth of your business, and your purse? Isn't it calling for a less focused view of your firm's place in the market? If so, in what way can all of this be recommended? Whether defined in terms of realms or collections of activities which overlap, there are still standards for and measures of success and failure.

This is all true, but seeing the world holistically, as Dewey and Emerson suggest, tells us that each "game," each set of activities, is relevant to the other, is connected to all others, and can make demands of the others that can be adjudicated as either fair or unreasonable, depending upon the standards and imperatives that prevail. Labor unions made the needs of employees relevant when they were thought outside of the logic of business. This is true also of fair hiring practices, effluents, and vacation time – all were thought, at one point or another, to be more or less beside the point, considerations that are burdens to business and free enterprise. No longer. Business has its claims upon our society, but other activities have their claims upon it as well. In our present culture, the demand for art in our lives legitimizes a claim against the resources of business and government, and in other cultures even more so. That demand is that art must somehow be seen as necessary for the flourishing of the polity and of the individual spirit. On the other hand, the demand for economic success (i.e., the ability to have an adequate amount and quality of the material things of life and address the going concerns of the institutions that make them possible) have told art that it, too, cannot dominate the field. And there are similar adjudications between the responsibilities to family and to the self in terms of personal growth, between being a person of faith and being a citizen (or between the city of God and the earthly city, if this language is meaningful to you).

All of these adjudications do not belie but make the point that it is best not to see realms, but rather collections of activities gelled around specific interests and purposes that give them an identifiable texture of their own (business, art, politics, sport, religion). But this does not mean that there is no pressure to see

these activities as though they were realms, as Dewey tells us, and in this pressure we find the beginning of errors that cut us off from our *integrated* selves. They cut us off from the effortless act of stepping from one part of our natures into another – from mental to physical affairs, from teacher to student, from executive to believer. We are always all of these, but there are powers in each set of activities that are jealous and would cut us off from our more integrated and so in some sense “truer” selves by denying the existence or importance of the other ways that we can construct the world and live the world as so constructed. (Philosophers do this themselves, when they cast the world in their own images.) Indeed, this is not just true of business, but of philosophy and the arts as well. Soon, the jealousy leads to scoffing at the other sets of activities as of little importance, as crass or out of touch, as dystopian or utopian, as serious or fanciful.

Some time ago, letters settled on the desks of executives at a major automotive company and a major tire company, respectively. They were about tire blowouts and ensuing vehicle roll-overs on a particular car model, a certain SUV. The companies were Ford and Bridgestone-Firestone, and the SUV - the Ford *Explorer*. Something happened with those letters. Those executives seem to have denied the facts contained in them, at least early on, because they were apparently unable to see their firms and their functions within them as, to revisit Emerson, “a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world.” And while Emerson instructs each executive that she “cannot live without a world,” nevertheless, each thought she could. Each thought her only obligation was to the company and the only obligation of the company was, ultimately, to itself and, more specifically, to its short-term profit position. Worse, each thought the world could live without her, even though her job was to look after the world’s interests by assuring that Ford and Bridgestone-Firestone turned out a safe product at all times. As people died, one by one in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela and the United States, the companies lacerated their corporate selves, moving ultimately toward ruin which was only forestalled by leaks and the glare of public scrutiny that, ironically, brought the issue to a head before it was too late. As for the people who died, alone or with their families, their interdependence with these two companies became all too obvious, and fatal. Literally, these victims could not live without a world, a world in which the purveyors of the automobiles they trusted betrayed them.

What follows is contained in a letter from Al Jazirah Vehicles (in Saudi Arabia, which was where the pattern of blow-outs was noticed early) to a Bridgestone-Firestone affiliate:

As you know this concern goes back to mid-1997 when we first notified you of this concern. I have to state that I believe this situation to be of a safety concern, which could

[endanger] both the vehicle and more importantly the user of the vehicle. So I am asking what is going on? Do we have to have a fatality before any action is taken on this subject. . . . I understand that Firestone [has] to investigate what has happened regarding the tyres, but this subject is more than 12 months in the making, and all I am told in correspondence received from Firestone [is] to be patient.”

In an internal Bridgestone-Firestone memorandum, dated January 1999, discussing a meeting between Bridgestone-Firestone and Ford executives, the memo’s author states that “The . . . concern the Ford people had was the length of time that it has taken [us] to inspect the subject tires. Apparently the first accident occurred back in mid-1997, and they produced a long list of letters between their dealership (Al Jazirah) and our distributor . . . confirming this.”

Who is to say for sure whether the tire issue could have been addressed any sooner than it was. Yet there are many who believe it could have been. I raise the case of Ford and Bridgestone-Firestone, but could just as easily talk about Beechnut and diluted infant fruit juice, or Enron and executive excess, or Arthur Andersen and client sycophancy. What could have headed off all of these scandals was their executives’ possession of a holistic view of the world and of themselves, a view of the world as integrated, not governed by a certain crude realism and pragmatism, a crude realpolitik.

There is nothing naive in this. On some counts the recent corporate scandals, from Sunbeam to Arthur Andersen, cost the loss of several trillions of dollars in the value of the public equity markets – which means several trillions of dollars worth of deferred retirements, sleepless nights, unemployment, and all the attendant miseries. You must not forget that to be an executive is not to simply perform a function for your firm – it is to enter a class of persons capable of moving and controlling vast resources with relative aplomb, resources that build things, fix things, insure things, in fact, do almost all things that keep the wheels of civilization turning. In that regard, your high compensation package is not simply the reward for your risk and hard work, it is also an insurance policy, because the day may come when you will need to listen to your internal holism and professionalism, when you will need to say *This, This I cannot do*. Oddly – and note the word – it will be the day that your **integrity** is on the line. That is, it will be the day that you must choose to have all the sweet fixtures of your humanity collapse into the single fixture of pecuniary interest and self-protection, or not. This will be the day of decision for you, and your compensation should be seen, in part, as preparing you to fight the battle against the pressures that may make you face selling your very soul, just as the artists and philosophers who reject your world *en toto* have, to some degree, sold theirs.

We philosophers, people who think that reading Emerson and Dewey along

with sales reports and financial statements can be worthwhile, see human life as taking place in the interlocked and overlapping spheres of something like a Venn Diagram whose lines and circular borders are dotted rather and continuous. We like to occupy that space where art, family, business, faith, education, science and contemplation coincide. And, we want to increase the area of that space where they do coincide. This was Dewey's and Emerson's message, and it is a message I would share with you, and wish for you to consider.

One last thing. We live in a time in which the specialization of the bureaus and offices that we occupy blind us to those possibilities and concerns that lie outside of their focus. So these times remain extremely precarious for all of us. It is why some Secretaries of Defense see the world only in terms of stark power relations, unconcerned with the cares and concerns of Secretaries of State or of the Interior who occupy offices down the hall, and it is why we need wise referees between them. It is why some philosophers, who claim as heros those who counseled just the opposite, still write abstruse, over-tweezed, absurdly over-refined pieces about ordinary decisions in ordinary life for consumption by only a bureaucratically-selected set of professional peers. It is why some environmentalists turn a deaf ear to the needs of economy, of housing, of agriculture. I would only implore you, as I brow-beat myself in this regard when necessary, not to become like them. I trust you will do you job well, and be well compensated, but in all you do I hope that you will force yourself to consider things that are affected by the large footprint of your institution. Whether you are rewarded for this in a material sense should be beside the point. As well, be prepared to walk away should the money-getting monomania of your colleagues force you to violate your duty, as an executive, to the world that counts on you to help it thrive and to protect it as you look after closer interests. As an executive, you are part of a powerful class that transcends particular organizations. You are not part of an ilk, but part of a community of leaders, and your skills are transferrable and usable elsewhere. Never forget that, and you will not lose your way or violate the trust that the state itself has placed in you when it granted your organization and those like it the franchises they enjoy with the public's permission.

I could say much more, but I will save that for another letter.

All Successes!

Sincerely,

D.E.M.

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