

# **Agoricus: A Platonic Exploration of the “Good” Businessperson**

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## **Instructor’s Manual and Teaching Notes**

### **Case Synopsis**

This article is written as a dialogue with the central question, “What constitutes the essence of a ‘good’ businessperson?” Written in the form of a Platonic dialogue, this is an imaginary exchange between Socrates and Agoricus, the fictitious son of a well-respected businessperson of Athens at a time of unethical business practice. Various qualities are entertained in terms of defining a successful and good businessperson, including producing quality products at low prices, effective sales techniques, creativity and innovation, respectful treatment of the customer, business “know-how” (e.g. accounting), contributing to the community welfare, as well as being honest and trustworthy.

Eventually the discussion winds its way to a kind of care and concern for customer welfare and satisfaction, leaving the initial question partially answered, while raising another question related to the proper way of teaching business. Connections to classical and contemporary business readings are made throughout the dialogue by the use of footnotes. This only adopts the format of a Platonic dialogue for purposes of exploring the question. However, the dialogue does not claim to represent the ideas or position that Socrates or Plato might take on the question at hand.

### **Intended Courses and Audiences**

The dialogue could be used with various graduate and undergraduate audiences, and it can be used in various ways, including class discussion regarding whether business should be conceived as a profession and whether and how ethical conduct lies at the heart of business.

The dialogue could be used in various courses. Included are an introductory course in business, an ethics and social responsibility course in business, or a capstone course at the end of a business curriculum.

### **Teaching Plan and Possible Approaches**

This is, indeed, a very different kind of reading for business students. To prepare for the reading, the instructor might determine how many students have had any exposure to Plato. Many may have read at least selections from Plato's *Republic*. For those not having exposure to Plato, the instructor might suggest reading Book I of the *Republic*.

With sufficient class time, the instructor could have students take the parts of the characters in class, reading the dialogue in class. Depending on the size of the class, students could be asked to read the dialogue and prepare responses to some of the questions listed below. If the class is large, the instructor might break into small groups to compare responses to the questions, then report out to the larger class. With a smaller class the instructor can lead a discussion, using questions list below.

### **Teaching and Assignment Questions/ Flow of Discussion**

These kinds of questions could be used for written assignments or for preparation for class discussion.

*Why does Socrates think it is important to understand the essence of business? What difference does it make?*

- One reason that surfaces in the dialogue is to be able to distinguish good from bad business people from a customer's perspective. If one cannot count on all businesspersons providing good products and services, then one needs to be able to discern the "pretenders" from the real "craftsmen" in order to make good choices as a customer or client.
- This idea of the "craftsman" comes up early in the dialogue. One could ask students to provide examples of business people they consider as real "craftsmen" and what makes them good craftsmen. They might think of carpenters, artists who produce furniture or other useful products, or expert mechanics, electricians, plumbers, and perhaps even professional athletes. Characteristics of a true craftsman might include things like having a special skill or expertise, dedication to

perfecting the skill, and pride and commitment to producing quality products and services that please and fulfill needs of customers.

- The notion of craftsmanship and the essence of craftsmanship, then, could be extended to business generally, and one could bring in the ideas of Sherwin Klein (see footnote 3).

*How does understanding the essence of business relate to achieving success and happiness in business and life, at least for Socrates?*

- One might ask students to share examples of when they have been and are happy. There may be examples of achieving a goal, e.g. after doing well on an exam, writing a particularly good paper, or winning a sporting contest. Such examples frame happiness as a state of contentment or accomplishment. Or students may volunteer examples where happiness is a kind of enjoyment in the moment, e.g. being with friends or family and enjoying time together. There will likely be examples of students loving the challenge or activity of something for which they have a passion, e.g. skiing, running, biking, solving problems as a manager, closing sales, or starting a new enterprise.
- Building on this latter definition of happiness, one can refer to Socrates's discussion early in the dialogue, in which he outlines the Greek conception of "eudaimonia." This term for happiness is perhaps better thought of as "human flourishing," and such flourishing occurs when one is engaging with excellence or virtue (arête) according to one's nature. On one level, this can be thought of as engaging with excellence in the activities for which one has a passion, that which one loves doing, whether skiing, accounting or any other human activity. Closer to the Greek notion, it is engaging in excellence according to the essence of humans, demonstrating excellence in body and mind. It is flourishing or demonstrating moral excellence of character (moral virtue) and excellence of mind (intellectual virtue).
- The happy and successful businessperson, then, understands the essential nature of business and demonstrates these excellences consistently in his business interactions and activities.

*What is the structure of the argument in the dialogue?*

Agoricus attempts to answer Socrates's initial question about the essence of business by listing various aspects important to success in business. These include:

- Producing quality products and services.
- Selling at fair and reasonable prices.
- Having “know how” in terms of the product or service.
- Being friendly and responsive to customers.
- Respectful treatment of customers.
- Being good citizens in the community.
- Creativity and innovation.
- Honesty and trustworthiness.
- Making money (profit).
- Planning, organizing, controlling.
- Sales persuasion.
- Care and concern for the welfare of customers.

Throughout this discussion, Socrates critiques each of these as being the essence or core of business. He probes to know what is at the heart of business, while acknowledging the importance of each of these aspects of business.

*How would you summarize the outcome of the dialogue or discussion? Is there an answer to the original question?*

By the end there seems to be some agreement.

“As you say, perhaps the essence of good and excellent craftsmen and businesspersons is that they have and use their skill and knowledge to produce something of value for their customers out of a care and concern for their customers’ happiness and wellbeing.”

Additionally, Agoricus returns to the question of how business knowledge and skills should be taught, and Socrates offers several approaches that should be discussed more thoroughly on another occasion.

*After reading and considering the various responses to the question regarding the nature of business, how would answer Socrates’s question, “What is the essence*

*of business?” How would you state or describe your own particular vision of what you want to achieve in business and how you will conduct the business?*

This could be a written assignment, either before or after discussion of the dialogue in class. The dialogue can be used as a springboard for students to articulate their own philosophy about business.

To expand the assignment a bit more in terms of analysis and critical thinking, one might have students read 3-5 other sources mentioned in the footnotes or drawn elsewhere and include them in their reflection paper.