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FORMATION CONTINUE

Corporate Social Responsibility as Prophetic Imagination

An Investigation into the Humanisation of CSR

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Abstract This paper will explore how the nature of the prophetic messages of the Old Testament in the Bible, could provide a rhetorical framework for the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) movement in creating alternatives that are more human. It is my belief that CSR offers us an alternative response to the business culture of today, as did the prophecy for the nation of Israel during oppression. CSR is an attempt to respond critically and imaginatively to the challenges facing modern businesses, characteristics shared by the prophetic messages which shaped Israel's transformation. As such, I will argue that the language, rhetoric and imagination of the prophets were their transformative tools, and will use these features to shape our reflection about not only effective change, but change that humanises. It is my contention that this framework can structure our thinking about the humanisation of CSR.

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Introduction

i1. Symptoms of Unease

It may seem strange to try and draw a parallel between the prophetic teachings of the Old Testament and modern day business, but the issues facing both of them aren't dissimilar. The history of the nation of Israel has always been fraught with instability; we need look no further than their present political situation. However, their history remains a fascinating one as the Bible documents the nation's ability to adapt to upheaval and constant change and, more importantly, to challenge the status quo. This, I believe, is comparable to the challenges facing the CSR movement today; confronting traditional business thinking as it promotes the necessity to incorporate environmental and social values in the business equation, and to have long term sustainable goals. Consequently, both the prophets and the CSR movement are addressing changes to a current consciousness, so the theme of *transformation* is ultimately at the heart of the drive to create alternatives.

This paper is also a personal reflection with respect to my own faith and the desire to see people fulfil their human potential in organisations. Humanising for me simply means the ability to choose. Having worked in Burkina Faso, I realised that poverty wasn't just a lack of money or access to health services, but not having the power to choose. One can still be poor by choice in a material sense but when there is no choice, our humanity is suffocated. Like many in the CSR movement, I believe that organisations have their place in assuring that those suffering in 'developing' countries will again have the ability to choose.¹²

My concern for people's lack of choice does not limit itself to the poor and marginalised, but also to the very people that make up organisations. The

¹ Michael Hopkins explores how trans-national corporations can play a role in developing countries in his book 'Corporate Social Responsibility and International Development: is business the solution?'

² Refer to section 1.2 'CSR as Lament: The Language of Compassion' for my comments on the word 'development'

reason for this is that I have observed how people in the lower echelons of business structures often don't have a voice, leading to frustration and disenchantment, whilst those at director and executive levels are isolated and lonely as they feel the need to protect their positions.³ As a result, fear of speaking out becomes a real inhibitor and stunts self expression.⁴

Over time, I have also wrestled with my understanding of the Old Testament as have many in the Christian faith. Due to our distance from the historical events which the Old Testament records, it becomes extremely difficult to understand the contexts and language of the past to then extrapolate a meaningful application in our modern times. Yet intuitively, I felt that there was something that I needed to tap into in these readings despite the distance. Walter Brueggemann, one of the world's leading Old Testament scholars, has been instrumental in guiding my reading to better understand these ancient texts and many of the prophetic messages within them.

I have titled this paper '*Corporate Social Responsibility as Prophetic Imagination*' because in reflecting on these three themes in my life, I feel that Israel's prophetic tradition has a perspective to offer present day business.⁵ That is to say, that the messages of the prophets as recorded in the Old Testament serve as a model to challenge our current status quo, and move us to new possibilities that allow people the self expression so characteristic of being human. Not only did the prophets transform a nation, but they humanised communities.

i2. Prophets and CSR

So the question needs to be asked, what underpins an effective message for change, particularly when the message goes against current consciousness? Furthermore, who is responsible for leading it?

³ Refer to section 4.2 'Rhetorical CSR as Canon: Rhetoric as a Human Thinking System' and the work of Tony Golsby-Smith. He has also made the same observations and in his thesis '*The Art of Strategic Conversations*'. He describes it as a palpable '...cry for freedom, a sense that a living thing was trying to emerge from within a mechanical, constricting fortress.'

⁴ I link self expression to creativity in this paper.

⁵ For this reason, as it is a part of my own experience, I use the first person where necessary.

For Israel, the prophets were the source of this inspiration. The prophets had a transformative role to play in the face of oppression or bondage in alien lands, and therefore the prevailing ideology of the day.⁶ So the context of prophecy is of prime importance when trying to understand their messages, yet the commonly held interpretation has detached the historical setting and tried to extract meaning from a present viewpoint.⁷ The inherent consequence is the misapprehension that prophets are fortune-tellers and that they are predictors of usually ominous things to come. (Brueggemann 2001, p.2)

This is not to dispel the possibility of future meanings beyond our comprehension, however as Brueggemann again asserts

‘While the prophets are in a way future-tellers, they are concerned with the future as it impinges upon the present.
(Brueggemann 2001, p.2-3)

Here we can see the link between prophecy and the CSR movement as both reflect on change in a contextual present for the purposes of a new future. Without this link to the present situation, prophecy would be of no benefit to the CSR movement if meaning could only be extracted from a future beyond our lifetime. The theme of transformation is actually a real concern for the prophets and contrary to the dominant view that they were preachers of doom and gloom against the establishment, thus confirming Brueggemann’s belief that

‘The task of prophetic *ministry* is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture.’ [Emphasis added]
(Brueggemann 2001, p.3)

⁶ Without providing an exhaustive list, Moses prophesied against pharaoh, Isaiah against Babylon, Daniel against Nebuchadnezzar, etc.

⁷ Brueggemann suggests that modernism had a role to play in creating this theological interpretation in his book ‘*Texts under Negotiation*’.

This in turn indicates that the prophets were deeply aware of the social ideology at play and the change needed to effect new beginnings. They were at the intersection of conflicting social forces and the correct characterisation of social reality and thus representative voices that gave

‘...social expression to what may be important and engaged social constituencies.’ (Brueggemann 2001, p.x)

As social change is at the heart of both the prophetic messages and the CSR movement, the prophets’ wisdom is not as far removed as it would seem when challenging the prevailing business ideology. For Brueggemann, the prophetic texts were

‘...ideological statements evoked by and evoking specific forms of social action and policy, social authorization, and social criticism.’ (Brueggemann 2001, p. x)

Is not the CSR movement evoking the same ideologies? Is the CSR movement such a ‘ministry’ to the world of business? Whether it is engaging the community (social action), adhering to a particular social or environmental standard (social policy), facilitating a social voice through stakeholder dialogue (social authorisation) or analysing an organisation’s non financial performance (criticism), these are changes to business related to a new ideology.

But recognising that a social change is needed does not tell us what made the prophetic messages so effective.

What was the ‘social expression’ that characterised the success of their messages?⁸

An over-spiritualised response could easily be that it was ‘revelation’ or that ‘God was with them’ which may well be the case, but in light of so many

⁸ I limit the meaning of ‘success’ to the transformation at the precise point of history. I am aware that many of the religions with prophetic traditions have not sustained the consequent transformation.

claims to universal religious revelation, these responses then become theological, that is, pertaining to the divine. For this reason, the theology relating to prophecy will not be addressed here, despite calls for more spiritual business.

Instead, by recalling the role of the prophets which is concerned 'with the future as it impinges upon the present', it becomes implicit that the prophets challenge us to be authors of our future rather than *looking* for the fulfilment of prophecy in some far away time. This requires imagination and new language, so Brueggemann would argue that the language of the very messages themselves can offer us insight into effective transformation. Thus, the imaginative power of the prophets offered purpose and a vision for new beginnings and their rhetoric served to heal and energise a nation. Their proclamations were radical utterances of imagination which united people and cause, not to mention serving as warnings to those that repressed the possibility of alternatives. It is this imaginative purpose, he suggests, that characterises our humanity.

Thus the question follows, can the CSR movement have this same imaginative power? On examining the characteristics of the prophetic messages, what are the impediments to the CSR alternative and is it at risk of being co-opted? If so, what are the danger signs that this could be happening? Are organisations any more humane through their CSR strategies?

Breaking free from the biblical perspective, Tony Golsby-Smith, a Sydney based consultant, can offer us some guidance into imaginative thinking and making businesses more human places with purpose. Like Brueggemann, Golsby-Smith believes that the imagination is an authentic way of knowing which has long been underutilised in business circles. He explores the role of the liberal arts in business, making notable mention of his consultancy experience having incorporated conversational methodologies in facilitating the development of business strategies. Whilst not privy to his techniques,

the theory behind his thinking will serve us well when considering the humanising of CSR.

1. CSR as Lament

1.1 Challenging the Dominant Order

‘This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.’ (Matthew 3:3-4)

The vocation of the prophets is certainly unique and undoubtedly controversial; any inquisition to propose alternatives to a current social ideology manifests some sort of resistance and CSR is no exception. (Hopkins 2007, p118-129) The immoderate ways of the prophets, as the above verse suggests, give the impression that they were actually lonely social protestors in the wild. (Brueggemann 2001, p.x). However, it is exactly this radical behaviour that allowed the prophets to campaign for change, as it facilitated solidarity with the helpless ones. As Brueggemann explains,

‘...they were concerned with most elemental changes in human society and that they understood a great deal about how change is effected. The prophets understood the possibility of change as linked to emotional extremities of life. They understood the strange incongruence between public conviction and personal yearning.’ (Brueggemann 2001, p.xxiii)

They were actually members of society, and they needed to be, because their messages served to dismantle the ideologies of the day. They were very close to their oppressors, often being educated by them whilst remaining resistant to the subtle invitations of conformity to the regime. (Brueggemann 1989, p.111-143) These privileged arrangements in turn provided the scrutiny

necessary to understand the principles that strengthened the hegemony in which they lived. As Brueggemann proposes,

‘...prophetic ministry has to do not primarily with addressing specific public crises but with addressing, in season and out of season, the dominant crisis that is enduring and resilient, of having our alternative vocation co-opted and domesticated. It may be, of course, that this enduring crisis manifests itself in any given time around concrete issues, but it concerns the enduring crisis that runs from concrete issue to concrete issue.’
(Brueggemann 2001, p3)

The CSR movement has similarly positioned itself as a ministry of sorts, harboured between businesses whose principle value is making profit and the creation of an alternative consciousness that incorporates social and environmental values. On the one hand, it counters traditional thinking about profitability, competition and rationality (Visser 2005, p.17-21) and on the other, it is trying to conceive a new way forward that is more cohesive with the world outside their own. It brings to light irresponsible company behaviour and collaborates with civic society to ensure more responsible organisational commitments to stakeholders. It is a voice calling businesses to make straight their paths and as a result, provides an important critique of the dominant business culture. Thus criticism is an important part of change for both the CSR movement and the prophetic messages.

1.2. The Language of Compassion

Yet the prophets were even more cunning. Brueggemann suggests that the prophets understood the distinctive power of language and that when language is controlled, the capacity to create newness is diminished, as is our humanity. (Brueggemann 2001, p.xxiii) The prophets were masters of meaning who craftily avoided entrapment, poetically creating futures that

evaded the domestication of language.⁹ Their poetry evoked the emotion so essential to human nature. They lamented, they praised, using symbols to counter the rhetoric that impeded the capacity to be human. Their language was full of imagery that captivated the mind and spirit.

The suggestion here isn't that the CSR movement is incapable of creating its own metaphors or indeed that poetic licence will resolve a corporation's responsibility to society, but more that it needs to be aware that metaphors that create newness are not being domesticated.

An excellent example is the metamorphosis of the meaning of 'international development'. The word '*development*' means to disclose or free. Jem Bendell suggests that the idea of development in a personal sense, whereby people discover who they are, does not in fact translate to the societal level when considering the concept of 'international development'. In summarising the history of development when applied to nation states in the post-colonial era, he illustrates how the assumption behind 'development' was that human needs were material and it soon

'...became synonymous with the 'modernization' and 'industrialization' of post-colonial states.' (Bendell 2004, p3.)

Furthermore, he highlights that some believed that this was by design to ensure the dominance of industrialised economies. Now embedded in government policies and with business more preoccupied with their own growth, Bendell in quoting Esteva, suggests that development now meant

'...a devaluation of [people's] skills, values and experience in favour of a growing dependence on guidance and management by bureaucrats, technocrats, educators, and development experts.' (Bendell 2004, p.4)

⁹ In this text, what the Israelites called prophetic, the Greeks called poets. (Brueggemann p.4)

This example demonstrates the prophetic imperative that language must not be controlled and is essential in maintaining our humanity. The term CSR has not escaped unscathed either. Anita Roddick was very aware of this when interviewed on her thoughts in regards to CSR.

‘We didn’t look at the language, the economic language which was about control, which was about everything had to be for the market economy...you know, it’s been hijacked, this social responsibility in business and it became *corporate* social responsibility.’ (Roddick 2006)

Wayne Visser extends this argument in his book *Business Frontiers*.

‘Companies have climbed the CSR learning curve and are now playing the game like experts. They have reframed the debate into language which they can understand and use without upsetting most of their shareholders, and they have designed policies and programs which they can implement without having to question their underlying business model.’ (Visser 2005, p.148)¹⁰¹¹

So language is extremely important when considering transformation otherwise we become paralysed by the present consciousness. To some, this may be viewed as cynicism but the prophets’ language offers a similar warning to those who exclaimed

‘Peace, peace,...when there [was] no peace. [Were] they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they [had] no shame at all; they [did] not even know how to blush.’ (Jeremiah 6: 14-15)

¹⁰ For a satirical look at cooptation, refer to John Stauber’s book review on Managing Activism.

¹¹ Refer to section 2.2 *‘CSR as Imaginative Prolepsis: A Contest of Imaginations’* on how Product RED assists companies circumvent questions about their underlying business models.

Based on the criticism alone, it would be easy to marry the proponents of CSR and prophecy with a moralistic ring. It would then be seen as chastising or carping, which is hardly inspirational. But the implication of the above verse implies is that there were human qualities underlying such criticism that needed to be dealt with; the incapacity to blush conveys that there was a lack of grieving or numbness. For business, this equates to corporate life forgetting that it has a moral significance. This dimension of grief was key to the prophetic messages and essential for healing which leads to newness. So the cost in prophetic terms was a human cost, not a financial one.¹² It was compassion in the face of human hurt, not just responsibility. It was standing in solidarity with those that were groaning. Companies however will always be torn between the call to solidarity and finance because their interests are governed by self security, which indelibly reduces the capacity to grieve and hence criticise.

In her book *'The Flight to Objectivity'*, Susan Bordo illustrates this point when examining the Cartesian masculinisation of thought and the lost feminine consciousness of the pre-scientific era. She proposes that 'sympathy' is an appropriate scheme of values that contrasts the disassociation of Cartesian thought.¹³ It follows that a

"Sympathetic' understanding of the object is that which understands it through 'union' with it...' (Bordo 1987, p.102)

A rather offbeat example illustrates this in the book *'Presence'* by Senge et al (2004). One of the authors, Joseph Jaworski describes his experience on a wilderness retreat on the Baja coast in Mexico. During his isolation in nature, he describes his oneness with the whales performing off the coast and his grieving at the possibility of harming them. He says that he

¹² Refer to section 3.1 'CSR as Oppositional Epistemology: The Tyranny of Control' and my comments on materiality.

¹³ Refer to section 3.1 'CSR as Oppositional Epistemology: The Tyranny of Control' and my comments on Cartesian thinking.

‘...remained in that open state of intense *compassion* for a long time...’ [Emphasis added] (Senge et al 2004, p.63)

Being in solidarity or ‘union’ with nature, he was moved to compassion and the responsibility it entails. Strangely enough, the story itself places Jaworski at the same extremity of society as the one who cried in the desert. Only putting himself in nature’s shoes enabled the grieving necessary to move toward newness.

To be purely prophetic, the CSR movement needs to arouse compassion in organisations to transform them.

2. CSR as *Imaginative Prolepsis*

2.1. A Return to Human Amazement

‘The people were amazed at his teaching.’ Mark 1:22

The prophets however still had unfinished business. Their work was not done by just undermining the present order of things and exposing the fraudulent claims of empire. The prophets had reclaimed the power of language and were now its author. They were not soothsayers of doom as popularised by films such as ‘Pulp Fiction’, ‘Dogma’ and ‘The Omen’ but were actually deeply connected to the needs, whether it be social, financial or emotional, of the people in their society.

As a result the nurturing couldn’t stop at lamenting. The prophets’ compassion inspired them to effect change and so their ministry was just beginning. With an unbridled language, the prophets could now create new worlds of possibility. It was now time to energise healing people to move towards these alternatives. Optimism wasn’t enough, the prophets had to generate hope. They had to be imaginative because what they were proposing did not in fact exist; it was unknown. They concerned themselves with what was imaginable, not what was viable, realistic or practical. And so having brought to expression the public’s yearning for healing and newness,

they authorised alternative worlds. People were amazed by the new possibilities and became hopeful. Moses did not reduce the Exodus to a financial consideration or a motive of profit but transformed a nation with a vision. In fact, following the prophecy of Moses in the Exodus, the Israelites were so amazed that they

‘...found themselves ... involved in the intentional formation of a *new social community*...which was utterly discontinuous with Egypt [and] lasted in its alternative way for 250 years.’
(Brueggemann 2001, p.7)

More recent examples illustrate how imaginative acts centred on valuing people have inspired hope.

People were amazed as The Body Shop shocked the entire business community by demonstrating that business should be about public good, not private greed. Their activism gave hope to the Ogoni people in Nigeria after Shell destroyed land and communities for the sake of oil. (Roddick 2000)

People are amazed by Craig’s List’s offer of free advertising in the service of people. By only charging a minimal fee to employers who list job advertisements, all other users pay nothing.¹⁴ With an income in the vicinity of \$20 million and despite the potential of an estimated revenue of over half a billion, people are amazed that their guerrilla capitalism rejects the notion of profit at all costs, and challenges people to only take what they need. (Lashinsky 2005, Bérubé 2008)

People are amazed that the Grameen Bank, the micro-credit institution created by Mohammad Yunis, reverses the concept of credit by not demanding collateral, and *trusts* people to payback their loans. (Joignot 2008)¹⁵

¹⁴ Craig’s List’s revenue comes from charging the employers who list job advertisements in three US towns; \$75 in San Francisco, \$25 in New York and Los Angeles.

¹⁵ I am aware that micro-credit or in this case ‘Grameencredit’, is a form of interest based financing and does not necessarily challenge the current money system. As Chris Martenson points out, nearly all money is accessed through loans with interest, which in turn forces the economy to grow. Since the Earth’s resources are finite, this is unsustainable. However,

Whilst these examples are not all specifically CSR related, they illustrate that *imagining solutions for people* creates hope for humanity and sustains them, as it did for the nation of Israel.¹⁶ What is interesting in these examples is that profit served as a secondary function. People are amazed that in a profit driven society, putting people *before* profits does work because it benefits humanity.¹⁷ The power of the prophetic imagination is due to this central humanising theme; it is focussed on people. A prophetic CSR movement, and therefore one which is more human, will need to guide companies to serve people before profit. The key in energising people towards creative alternatives that cannot be co-opted rests in providing hope. The hope of new beginnings leads to transformation and the CSR movement has the privilege of providing this vision.

2.2. The Contest of Imaginations

The prophetic imagination has demonstrated its power by its ability to create other worlds and in turn provide hope for people. To humanise CSR, the CSR movement needs to be alert to creating these people-centred alternatives. So the theme of *creating* is actually very important for the prophets and I have suggested that the imagination is essential in providing hope for people. To ensure that the CSR movement is effective in generating hope, it must remain true to creating *new* futures, otherwise it risks being undermined by existing ideologies and it will lose its life-forming power to transform.

The subject of creativity is one of the powerful themes of D.W. Winnicott's book 'Playing and Reality' (1971). It's been said of Winnicott, that he was the greatest British psychoanalyst that has ever lived and was one of the first people to combine psychiatry and paediatrics. Winnicott studied how a child constructs reality through playing. He contended that a child in its initial

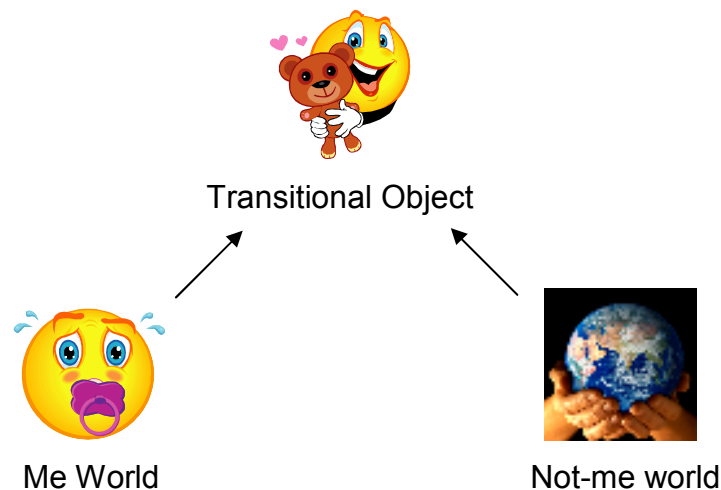
since the Grameen Bank does not charge interest with a view of making a profit and trusts their borrowers, I consider this an imaginative alternative.

¹⁶ I consider the 250 years after the Exodus quite enduring.

¹⁷ I am aware that economic theory in its initial form was a model for the well-being of society. Here, I focus on a prophetic model which puts people first as opposed to the growth of the economy.

stages is engulfed in a subjective world only to realise that in due course, there is in fact an uncontrollable external world outside its realm of thinking. To adapt, the child adopts a transitional object such as a toy to mediate between the two worlds; the toy representing something from the external world onto which the child transfers its subjectivity.¹⁸

Winnicott then advanced the idea that this phenomenon is not limited to the development of a child because he suggests, that this is a lifelong process which then becomes art in the adult world and is in fact essential to normal healthy living. Thus creativity is a life-forming process and important for one's identity.



The submission here is that the prophets understood the transitional object and used their conceptual abilities to imagine life-forming alternatives. They voiced new possibilities from their imprisoned 'Me-world's that opposed the ideologies of their 'Not-me World' oppressors. Having positioned the CSR movement as prophetic, it needs to ensure that it is indeed creating a new vision of the world contrary to old ideologies. By transposing the co-optation concerns of Visser and Roddick onto the Winnicott model, I would reason however, that the CSR movement is in fact the transitional object for the 'Me World' of business and the 'Not-me World' of the civil society, or the

¹⁸ The intermediary object can be described in many ways. Brueggemann identifies it as the 'zone of imagination' (Brueggemann 1993, p.62), The anthropologist Victor Turner, in studying African rites of passage, calls it 'liminality', the place of ambiguity between old configurations of reality and news one (Turner 1969, vii-viii, p94) and Wayne Visser implies it when discussing sustainability as a catalyst for shapeshifting.

organisations that represent stakeholder interests. CSR then becomes a toy to be played with by *business*, potentially compromising the CSR movement's potential to create sustainable alternatives, also ensuring that corporations remain in control.

The prophets however, would alter the order in this model.¹⁹ They have to because they know that it is a contest between competing ideologies. Prophetically speaking, CSR would be positioned as the 'Me world' and business as the 'Not-me world'. The transitional object is something that is being created within the context of business and the proclamation of the prophets is that the CSR movement should be creating the vision, acting as a host of a world *other* than the one self-evident.

It isn't any wonder then that so many companies are partners in Bono's initiative, Product RED. The business model of Product RED is that consumers buy RED products and a certain percentage of the purchases go towards buying anti-retroviral medicine for AIDS sufferers in Africa. Altruistic as this seems, this model does nothing to address the causes of AIDS in Africa. It is a business model of consumption that is more of a band-aid and does not in fact create alternatives.

For instance, Motorola markets a RED cell phone. Like many electronic gadgets including iPods and laptops, mobile telephones depend on a compound metal called Coltan. Eighty percent of coltan mining occurs in the Congo where attempts to control the production of Coltan has led to a ten year civil war. (Ware 2001) Furthermore, the need to dig more mines perpetuates the AIDS epidemic as more and more men leave their families behind in the search of the lucrative metal, in turn opening opportunities for prostitution. It is ironic, that encouraging people to buy a product to help AIDS sufferers may actually contribute to its spread. So a seemingly creative solution connected to an old ideology does not create newness. It only highlights the problem of not undermining an ideology, as the prophets have

¹⁹ I am aware this is a power shift but the subject of power is outside the scope of this paper.

already warned. Without the critique of consumption and addressing questions related to sourcing, there is no transformation because RED companies are not required to change their thinking about how they operate.

If CSR is to become more human, organisations need to provide hope to people. Without a new imagining of possibilities, organisations will remain trapped in the inertia of old ideologies. The prophets have shown how the power of the imagination transforms people; the Winnicott model and Product RED example demonstrate that the health of the CSR movement depends on it because without imaginative alternatives, there is no transformation. The CSR movement needs to ensure that organisations think and create outside current business models. For it to be truly prophetic, creating new alternatives cannot be left to old ideologies otherwise life stagnates and there is no hope. The prophets knew that the same hope inspires and energises people.

3. CSR as Oppositional Epistemology

3.1. The Tyranny of Control

‘The problems of the world today are so enormous they cannot be solved with the same level of thinking that created them.’

Albert Einstein

So the prophets in considering transformation, dismantled the ideology of the present consciousness through their compassion and then provided the imaginative hopeful energy to effect change; human qualities that could not be quantified. Linguistically, the prophets resisted domestication and were authors of new worlds, not afraid to think in new ways and embracing the mysterious unknown. Reason did not limit them because their actions were indeed inexplicable. They were not reductionists who believe

‘Business [was] essentially a rational undertaking and should rely exclusively on the faculties of reason and analysis to support all of its processes.’ (Visser 2005, p.20)

They appreciated that there were other ways of knowing that completed the human condition rather than diminishing it. They welcomed symptoms of unease and trusted in their vulnerability when departing from old ways. Anxiety did not engulf them nor did they retreat into worlds free of every contingency. They could live with uncertainty, something which most business paradigms are incapable when creating futures, for they are hamstrung by budgets and mathematical quantification. The word of the prophets to the CSR movement authorises a break from mechanistic processes to human possibilities. Serious change means letting go of the desire for control. This means letting go of Cartesian ways of thinking.

René Descartes was the father of Cartesian thought which was a method of rational inquiry which sought to establish a foundation for knowledge that was clear, distinct and *certain*; universal truths that were incapable of being doubted. He also followed in the steps of Galileo and deified mathematics. Galileo combined mathematics and scientific language whilst Descartes believed in a mathematical representation for his philosophical system. In *‘Les règles pour la direction de l’esprit’*, he states,

‘All this demonstrates how arithmetic and geometry are a lot more certain than the other sciences, because they alone are concerned with an object so pure and simple that they don’t make assumptions that experience can render doubtful, and they proceed by deducing conclusions via the means of rational arguments. They are therefore the easiest and clearest of the sciences...’ [Translated from French] (Descartes 1824)

So having combined mathematics and certainty, numbers now represented fact. But Descartes also lived in troubled times which explained his desire for certainty. When the trusted set of symbols in the medieval world began to

crumble following the assassination of Henri IV of Navarre, who had promised to extinguish the religious wars of the day, (Toulmin 1992, p45-56) Descartes' desire for certainty led to

'...an intellectual process of individuation...This new 'interiority' permitted the self to generate its own certitude, and the self became an absolute point of reference.' (Brueggemann 1989, p3-4)

A parallel between business and Descartes can be drawn here because the 'interiority' for the most part of businesses is numerical, that is, the financial bottom line.²⁰ Consequently, the financial bottom line is treated as the most *certain* way to determine the truth about how a company operates and should progress. The whole existence of the CSR movement is a testament to the fact that this way of thinking about financials is a long way from the real picture of how companies behave.

Two examples highlight the potential impact for the CSR movement. Consider socially responsible investing (SRI) for a moment and the ranking of companies based on the concept of materiality. Materiality jeopardises the whole thinking behind sustainability by only measuring the environmental, social and governance issues that impact the financial bottom line. In other words, when ranking the performance of a corporation's sustainability, the financial analyst will only consider what is material to the company and the bottom line then becomes the organisation's only 'point of reference'. (Butz & Leville 2007) In a similar vein, attempts to quantify immeasurable intangibles such as 'spiritual capital' as a fourth bottom line, demonstrate how companies rely on the language of the balance sheet and the appearance of certitude that the number gives. (Bendell & Shah 2001) So what these examples highlight is that the context of today's business still remains one set on certitude and control through a financial language. These two examples also show that the system in which a company operates is much larger than can

²⁰ The culture of certitude is ever apparent in management tools such as Total Quality Management (TQM) which focus on 'management by fact'. (Ghobadian et al 2007)

be quantified within the confines of a balance sheet, making the balance sheet a part of a system as opposed to a window onto it.

Tony Golsby-Smith is a consultant in strategy that has similarly identified the invisible power of the budgetary/financial 'interiority'. He warns that it is an inhibitor to the strategic process of creating new futures. With reference to strategic planning, he states,

For a budget is more a shell than a definition of an organisation's destiny and pathway. It addresses only the question of viability, and then only from a monetary perspective. Furthermore, it focuses naturally on costs and control, rather than on markets and expansion. It also extrapolates from last year's experience rather than imagining future possibilities. These characteristics limit budgeting as an intellectual process. The intellectual tools that are useful in budgeting do not grade up to the strategic process. This creates a vacuum of tools for strategic thinking and hence there will be a natural tendency for the thinking to slip back into budget-inspired paradigms.' (Golsby-Smith 2001, p.37)

Moreover, even the appearance of certitude that budgets give has been called into question, as Harvey Pitt, the chairperson of the US Securities and Exchange Commission states

'...there is no true number in accounting.' (Bendell & Shah 2001, p.5)

The Economist, whilst exploring the challenges of the accounting profession post Enron, concludes,

'...accounting will always be as much art as science...' (2002, p.70) leading to the comments of Bendell and Shah, 'By talking of the 'art' of accounting, The Economist gave voice to the socially constructed nature of accounting figures. In doing this,

the magazine inadvertently put its finger on the pulse of an academic vein of work that has for sometime been rejecting the notion of pure objectivity and the existence of a single, scientifically rational truth.’ (Bendell & Shah 2001, p.6)²¹

So there is an irony that companies are using ‘budget-inspired paradigms’ for strategically planning new futures because the apparent credibility granted to accounting numbers is not in fact as certain as business believes. My concern here however, is not the ‘socially constructed nature of accounting figures’, nor the numbers themselves, but the intellectual and rational modes of thought behind the numbers that are characteristic of business thinking today. As the CSR movement is creating an alternative for the future, are these modes of thought appropriate for the task? If as Golsby-Smith confirms it is not, then what is the alternative?

3.2. The Ethical Imagination to Counter Control

For the CSR movement, which attempts to broaden the thinking of business to incorporate non-financial externalities, it would seem logical that such ‘interiority’ is in fact inappropriate. CSR isn’t just a new input on the balance sheet for the purposes of controlling costs or managing budgets, but a new way of thinking about the system within which business operates. As discussed in the previous section, the CSR movement is about creating alternatives and so the process is an act of creation. Since creating new futures is conceptual, it is far more likely that creative thinking and intuition will be more appropriate methods of thinking as opposed to ‘reason and analysis’ and the deductive processes of accounting. Analysis simply won’t do because the data of the future to be analysed hasn’t even arrived. That is to say, as CSR is a new way of thinking, analysis is inadequate when creating new futures because the future is unknown, underived and incalculable. The conceptual side of thought is far better at embracing the ambiguity and

²¹ In his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, T.S. Elliot asserts that ‘No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.’ As such, great art is built on the social and communal experience of life, not just the individual.

incertitude of the future and the CSR movement must direct corporations towards this type of thinking.

The prophetic imagination was not only able to conceptualise a new world with a new ideology, but it embraced the tension of moving towards this unknown. The doubt was *necessary*, but for Descartes, this tension manifested itself as anxiety because the possibility of doubt was far too much to bear, as Bordo reveals.²²²³

‘In the *Regulae*, Descartes has vowed to ‘trust only that which is completely known and incapable of being doubted’ (HR, I, 3). The latter requirement, we now can see, is not only that we should be convinced beyond a shadow of any *present* doubt, but convinced beyond the shadow of any *future* doubt as well.’ (Bordo 1987, p.24)

The problem she elicits here is that in the attempts to control certainty, time also stands still. So for the CSR movement that is trying to create new futures, moving companies towards sustainable change will be problematic if companies want to stay in the eternal present of their security. Even time must be controlled so that the real becomes unchanging which would in effect cripple progress. So it is understandable that the alternatives of the CSR movement will meet resistance because these alternatives ultimately affect the permanence of companies. This in turn gives further credence to the prophetic messages of challenging the dominant order. Living in an eternal now of permanence and security, unencumbered by the outside world, transformation has become limited. Borrowing from Winnicott, access to the intermediary object is now hampered for fear that the outside world will revolutionise the business absolute and therefore, creativity becomes

²² Golsby-Smith indicates that Plato also lived in turbulent times whereby he sought a true reality that was transcendent and immune to the circumstantial. His despair over civic life in turn led him to reject rhetoric as art to guide civic action. See section 4.2 ‘Rhetorical CSR as Canon: Rhetoric as a Human Thinking System’.

²³ It is worth noting that Stephen Toulmin in his book ‘*Cosmopolis*’ views the development of Descartes’ philosophies as understandable rather than anxious considering the turmoil he witnessed.

impossible. With a firm reality in place and no new pieces to the puzzle to be added, all that remains is the controlling governance to procure as much of the world necessary for self security. Cut off from the Earth and society, immoderate monopolies dictate control,

‘...until wealth is aggregated in a few hands...’ (Bendell quoting Lincoln 2004, p. 11)

The prophetic imagination however is opposed to the unchanging timeless present. It reminds us of hopeful alternatives that can’t be controlled or reduced to a balance sheet. As Richard Kearney writes

‘...the ethical imagination explodes the paralysis of a timeless present, cultivated by our contemporary culture, and informs us that humanity has a duty, if it wishes to survive its threatened ending, to remember the past and to project a future. We cannot even begin to *know* what the postmodern present is unless we are first prepared to *imagine* what it has been and what it *may become*. To abandon this imaginative potential for historical *depth* is to surrender to a new positivism which declares that things are the way they are and cannot be altered.’ (Kearney 1987, p.39-58)²⁴

The prophets, having already critiqued the ideologies of the dominant order, knew that dismantling it requires new thinking. They knew this because the old way of knowing deadens the soul and they also knew that it needed to be imaginative so that the interpretive powers could not domesticate their messages. The prophets knew that when something was not right that it didn’t make sense to derive a future from a controlling mindset. The Cartesian mind seeks to order and describe whilst the prophetic mind creates

²⁴ Wayne Visser also discusses the impossibility of progress in discussing the work of Jan Smuts. According to Visser, Smuts’ conviction was that science overlooks the many synergies of the world by reducing the world into a series of ‘dead aggregations’ and in turn ignored creative evolution. Consequently, in quoting Smuts, science was ‘...a fixed dogma, that there could be no more in the effect than there was in the cause; hence creativity and real progress became impossible.’ (Visser 2005, p.25)

and makes. The prophets were not disconnected from history and remembered that there was a time when the tyranny of control hadn't yet been acculturated. For the CSR movement, the prophetic mind is a reminder that control is to detriment of creating new worlds.

Interestingly enough, the CSR movement is trying to reincorporate social and environmental values into businesses that operate with a Cartesian philosophy. Ironically, Cartesian thinking has at its root, provided the basis for ruining the interconnectivity to the environment and society through the autonomy of the self. To establish a more humane response for businesses, the CSR movement will need to oppose the thinking that controls and dehumanises. A return to society and the environment in turn fashions the space necessary to create and imagine, re-establishing the link with the world at large and the human potential to continue making it.

4. Rhetorical CSR as Canon

4.1. The Search for Meaning

'The Word became flesh...' John 1:14

The prophets were now the proponents of a new way of imaginative thinking. Knowing that the scientific approach was in fact inadequate for creating alternative futures, their thinking was liberated to explore possibilities and forms, free from the limitations of controlling structures. They knew that the task of creating new futures was in fact a thinking problem because planning for new beginnings didn't come from a set of conscious steps but a deep place of tension and more often than not, dislocation. They knew that the strategy of new beginnings was a process of conceptualisation where unknowns needed to be embraced. The planning of the task was not in fact a product of a preconceived explicit method which provided the illusion of certainty, but an inquiry.

The prophets' inquisitive tool was language itself. They had already enlisted rhetoric as a means of lamenting to evoke compassion. They had used it to energise people towards hope. They had also used it in opposition to the mythology of the day and as history has shown, they were released from bondage. Their rhetoric was in fact a transformational tool. The prophets recognised that

'...rhetoric [was] indeed capable of construing, generating and evoking alternative realities.' (Brueggemann 1997, p.59)²⁵

The prophets were not just armed with the imagination as a genuine way of knowing, but also knew that language is a form of thought. George Orwell in his essay '*Politics and the English Language*' argues that the euphemisms of political language numb the public (and hence the prophets' lamenting) to avoid recalling mental images of disturbing events. Their inflated linguistic style was in fact a trade in clichés which avoid any thinking, and thus meaning, as clichés are disengaged from personal experience. He believed that

'What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around' because 'when you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing the meaning.' (Orwell 2004, p.8)

Consequently, for Orwell, language was a form of thought. Perhaps this explains the frustration of management guru Charles Handy when he says,

'We seem to be saying that life is about economics, that money is the measure of things. My hunch is that most of us don't believe any of this, and that it won't work, but we are trapped in

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein also said that 'Word enable worlds'. (Roddick 2000, p.7)

our own rhetoric and have, as yet, nothing else to offer, not even a different way to talk about it.' (Visser 2005, p.78)

It isn't surprising then that the prophets used imagery such as death, prostitution and resurrection to ensure that their messages were not domesticated. Orwell, and indeed the prophets, was aware of the generative power of language and that it was not there just to describe, permitting Wayne Visser to boldly say,

'Confronted with the triple imperatives of social responsibility, environmental sustainability and economic justice, business will need to adapt or *die*. [Emphasis added]' (Visser 2005, p.1)

So as Handy evokes, is the CSR movement now trading in clichés, 'trapped in our own rhetoric'? Examining the acronym CSR for a moment, the first word 'corporate' has now become synonymous with corporations yet the word itself also means to unite or combine into one. Are the words now choosing the meaning as Orwell puts it? With so many definitions of CSR, has the meaning of the word 'corporate' been reduced? By broadening the meaning of 'corporate', all of a sudden CSR has a new responsibility within organisations; ensuring the directional unison of individuals *in* the company. Perhaps this is an exaggeration and it maybe a little unsettling for some, but it would mean uniting many of the human aspects that make up the individual with organisational mission, not just freedom of association, a retirement plan or appropriate compensation.

Handy touched upon this by his 'hunch': the values of the individual don't equate to the same values of the organisation. This is nothing new and is in fact part of the business case for CSR. Attracting talented individuals that are socially and environmentally aware to an organisation and then retaining them, is a challenge for corporations if their values do not reflect those of the individual. Consequently, if the theme of humanising CSR is to be honoured, then corporations need to also look within and individuals need to have their place of expression.

Ghoshal and Bartlett explored this in their book *'The Individualized Corporation'* by questioning organisational structures. They observed that

'...rational corporate models are creating an environment in which thousands of capable individuals are being crushed and constrained by the very organisations created to harness their energy and expertise.' (Ghoshal and Bartlett 1997, p.38) and that despite the innate curiosity of the individual, '...somehow, modern corporations have been constructed in such a way that constrains, impedes and sometimes kills the natural instinct in people.' (ibid., p.69)

However having already positioned CSR as a new imaginative way of thinking and honoured rhetoric as a genuine mode of thought, what are the transformative characteristics of rhetoric, so well known to the prophets, and can they link individual creativity with organisational mission? Rather than focussing on organisational structures, is there another way through thinking systems?²⁶

4.2. Rhetoric as a Human Thinking System

Tony Golsby-Smith has been exploring this theme for over a decade in his Sydney based consultancy practice. Like the prophets, he understands the generative power of rhetoric. His consultancy practice 'Second Road', does not prefabricate solutions for clients nor is it a specialist in CSR. Rather, the team at Second Road facilitate the design of strategies through a process called the 'Strategic Conversations'. The underlying principle is that language is a formative feature of thought and that rhetoric is a thinking process. In his marvellous thesis *'Pursuing the Art of Strategic Conversations'*, he testifies to the attributes of rhetoric, an ancient art underutilised in business but

²⁶ In 'Business as Unusual' Anita Roddick comments on the damage done to the Body Shop culture when an external consultant tried to implement a hierarchal structure to their operations. She says that their whole value and language system was eroded because of it.

invaluable for the process of humanising organisations. He argues that rhetoric in its modern form has become a cosmetic art without purpose. However in analysing the history of rhetoric, he explores the impact of such formative thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero to discover that rhetoric is in fact an integrative art with a civic purpose. It is not just mere eloquence but wisdom. It addresses issues of alternatives and hence its power as a transformative tool. Consequently, it is an art of inquiry because it asks questions. It is deliberative as it is concerned with the future. Its objective is thus also different because it doesn't aim to demonstrate; rhetoric seeks to persuade through argumentation with the goal of eliciting a response. It is unashamedly about invention.²⁷ The prophets re-categorise experience and possibilities by inventing new ways of looking at things which is essentially a task of language. Metaphor is thus one of rhetoric's major tools which,

‘...amplifies possibilities and so creates options for action. Metaphor moves people to believe and act.’ (Golsby-Smith 2001, p.23)

More importantly however, the inquiry unifies the community by asking the questions which are pertinent to the people involved. As Golsby-Smith indicates,

‘People do what they believe in, and they believe in only what they have explored.’ (Golsby-Smith 2001, p.100)

The individual is engaged in the process. The individual's subjectivity needs to be embraced because the inquiry is in the service of formulating an argument to construct a social truth. The subjectivity *invigorates* the truth making and as such, the speaker and those that listen, namely the audience, are a part of the process.²⁸ As a result, a rhetorical process also focuses on a locally constructed truth. Contrary to a Cartesian mindset, rhetoric does not seek universal truths but investigates what is locally true and in turn values

²⁷ Cicero's treatise on the subject of rhetoric is entitled 'De Inventione'.

²⁸ The archetypes of rhetoric are the speaker, the audience and the argument. Note the similarity to the Winnicott model for the transitional object.

context and community.²⁹ It liberates only a particular group as opposed to the whole of humanity.

Values then become the arbiters as once an argument is formulated, the audience must reflect on its merits with respect to the nature of the question. In essence, the inquiry is to determine what the audience really cares about which establishes the authenticity in dialogue. By owning the dialogue, there is integrity. By judging the argument against the audience's values, there is coherence, ultimately leading to action. The process is one of discovery grounded in unknowns in the initial stages but through trial and error, it is established as canon.

Rhetoric has moved people from determining the appropriate questions in a given context, to considering the possibilities and developing an argument for alternatives, which is in turn judged by the values of the group so that the audience can make a decision (action). The group is now empowered by the full meaning of corporate and is author of its destiny, recreating the link to humanness and purpose.

Having redefined CSR, organisations now become places of self-expression. By redefining 'corporate', companies become places where individual creativity meet organisational mission, or as Anita Roddick puts it, 'incubators of the human spirit'. (Roddick 2000, p.26) Individuals can express themselves, transforming the concept of value extraction to value creation. Is this perhaps the social responsibility of a corporation? Some would argue that this blurs the real CSR issues of an organisation but that depends on how 'corporate' is defined. Rhetorical CSR defiantly redefines *one* word and all of a sudden, organisations become places of self expression. Imagine what many words could do.³⁰

²⁹ In his book *Cosmopolis*, Stephen Toulmin illustrates how modernism has had an impact on four different kinds of practical knowledge. He suggests that modernism displaced the oral, the particular, the local and the timely, for a knowledge based on the written, the universal, the general and the timeless.

³⁰ Albeit outside the scope of this paper, this then also opens the discussion for considering rhetorical approaches to stakeholder dialogue.

Conclusion

The prophetic imagination, despite its ancient foundations, offers a transformative framework when considering alternatives. It is a reminder to the CSR movement that the power of the imagination inspires people and moves them to act. The suggestion in this paper isn't that the CSR movement lacks imagination but that it needs to be alert to cooptation, particularly with reference to language. Language is a form of thought and as CSR is new thinking, it is at risk of being domesticated because any possibility of alternatives jeopardises the current consciousness. Language is powerfully generative but if it is controlled, people become numb, unable to lament that which is lost or express hope for a new beginning. The prophetic voice offers a framework that can guide CSR to ensure that people do have their voice, guiding organisations towards compassion and hope and hence humanness.

For this reason, the prophetic framework is necessarily rhetorical since rhetoric is an integrative art with a civic purpose. It is inclusive and thus humanising. It is not Cartesian in its ways because rhetoric is unashamedly about invention and the creation of possibilities and forms, essential to being human. It builds a shared picture of problem and purpose and shifts control to people. Rhetoric permits people to be authors of their lives, providing release for self-expression. With people now authors of their lives, perhaps there is a human case for CSR instead of a business case.

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