



# Management, Political Philosophy, and Social Justice

## Special Theme

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### Abstract

This paper introduces the special theme on management and political philosophy, following a call for papers in the journal *Philosophy of Management*. The scope of this introduction is to emphasize the importance of political philosophy as a subtheme in the discipline of philosophy of management by shedding light on a cornerstone conversation: the role of the state in fostering corporate accountability for social injustice. For doing so, we present the papers invited to this special theme and show how they contribute to this conversation. Inspired by the arguments that the articles in this special theme develop, we also provide further thoughts for the directions that future research should pursue for enriching the discussions in the political philosophy of management.

### Introduction

This paper introduces the special theme on *Political Philosophy and Management*. It is prompted by the general observation that political and organizational spheres strongly influence one another and that inquiry in each area must be pertinent to the other. One example is the recent argument that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has taken a political turn (Kourula et al. 2019; Scherer et al. 2016; Wickert 2016)., This call for papers, however, is designed to open a wider philosophical angle. We have invited contributors to take a step back from the current conversations over corporations as political actors (Scherer et al. 2014) and think more broadly about the overlapping and interaction of the managerial and political spheres.

The scope of this introduction is to emphasize the importance both of political philosophy as a subtheme in the philosophy of management, and also of the philosophy of management as a subtheme in political philosophy, by shedding light on a common theme of the featured articles: the role of the state in fostering corporate accountability for social

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injustice. The first section details the broader context in which political and management spheres overlap and interact. The second section previews the papers invited to this special theme, showing how they contribute to this conversation. The third section provides further thoughts for the directions that future research should pursue in the discussions in political philosophy of management.

### Putting Political Philosophy of Management in its Context

The philosophy of management has emerged in the recent decades as an identifiable and self-standing area of scholarly interest (Erkal and Vandekerckhove 2021; Mir and Greenwood 2021). Since its theoretical and conceptual tools are often borrowed from self-standing and well-established disciplines in the academic landscape (philosophy and management) and also given the human significance of their conversations, the inquiries addressed by philosophy of management are both deep, extending into antiquity (Blok 2019; Wilson 2017) and wide, reaching into moral philosophy, social philosophy, economic philosophy, and even aesthetics, ontology, metaphysics, and epistemology, broadly construed (Wilson 2018; Mir and Greenwood 2021; Neesham 2022). However, each of these subfields of philosophy does not receive equal attention from the contemporary scholarship in philosophy of management.

The recent systematic literature review offering a meta-synthesis of the articles published in *Philosophy of Management* (the leading journal of this field) shows that “social and political philosophy” stands out (along with “ethics”) as the major philosophical subfield in terms of numbers of publications: 83 out of 358 ( 23,18%) (Erkal and Vandekerckhove 2021, see Table 6). Moreover, the article by Erkal and Vandekerckhove (2021) also identifies a growing tendency of this subfield over the 20 years since this journal came into existence. In the past ten years, there were 46 published articles on social and political philosophy issues compared with the previous decade when there were 37 articles. It is precisely for emphasizing the increasing interest of the scholarship in political philosophy of management (testifying to the manifest importance of this subfield) that we proposed this theme.

Indeed, what is political philosophy if not reflection upon how to organize ourselves in order to achieve our fundamental social goals? Providing for security and welfare, as well as other organizational goals such as providing products or delivering services, requires the management of resources of every sort. And so, in the same way that governing overlaps with management, political philosophy overlaps with the philosophy of management. Each can learn from the other, and, in this issue, the junior subdiscipline seeks to learn from its elder.

There are many reasons why the issues pertaining to political philosophy occupy an important place in the field of philosophy of management. One reason is that the sphere of politics is both pervasive and elastic (Eabrasu 2022). On the one hand, a large share of conversations in society are influenced by political decisions insofar as they influence the distribution of resources and rights across the members of society. Politics significantly shapes the goals adopted by individuals and institutions (including managers and businesses), as well as the means they use to attain them. On the other hand, the political sphere is elastic in the sense that political decisions tend to cover new issues that might have initially been beyond the sphere of politics, i.e., technical and/or scientific issues (such as environment or health). This tendency towards a reduction of the nonpolitical sphere is epitomized

by Krugman's recent claim stating that "in 21st-century America, everything is political" (2020, p. 9).

Within this perspective, it is symptomatic that the current international political context, featuring a backsliding of liberal democracy (Haggard and Kaufman 2021a, b), enhances the porosity of the boundary between business and political spheres. Firms are increasingly called to take a political stand vis-à-vis authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. While the political polarization of private enterprises is not a new phenomena, as it already occurred in the context of the apartheid in South Africa (Moses and Vest 2010), it is now being taken to a higher level. Whether is about the military junta in Myanmar (White 2004), the products made in the labor camps in Xinjiang (Kriebitz and Max 2020; Polaschek 2021) or, more recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, 2022, it becomes increasingly difficult for a firm having business interests in these areas to remain politically neutral. Consider, for instance, the calls for companies to divest from Russia and to voice their opposition to the invasion of Ukraine, but also the calls to boycott those who still comply with Russian laws and duly pay their taxes in Russia. In this case, the refusal to divest tends to be interpreted not as a politically neutral stance, but as support for the Russian political regime and warfare.

### Management, Political Philosophy, and Social Justice

This issue of *Philosophy of Management* features four thematically related papers that philosophically illuminate the relationship between the political and managerial spheres. And, in a happy coincidence, they all do it in a way that focuses our attention on how to think about corporate accountability for social injustice. Shaw (2021) takes us back to the *fons et origo* of political philosophy to reconsider views that have retroactively been assigned to Aristotle regarding the purpose of the business corporation. Contrary to mainstream exegesis, he argues, Aristotle would not take the firm itself to be a sort of community-providing polis, nor would he see it as a kind of corporate person which should relate to the polis as a specific type of citizen. The one thing that we can say for sure, Shaw argues convincingly, is that Aristotle would be opposed to a simple-minded profit motive. But it would not be merely a negative and moralistic case. The constructive Aristotelian point, and the one we can benefit from today, is that there should be one important limit upon corporate profits: the extent to which the wealth can be deployed in the service of the needs of the *polis*.

One idea that Shaw effectively drives home is the systemic centrality of slavery to the economy of ancient Athens, and, more troubling, Aristotle's explicit support of it. This provides a thread to the other two theme papers. In their article titled "Management, Political Philosophy, and Colonial Interference," Pat Werhane and David Bevan (2021) pick up the thread with the Enlightenment, detailing how the expanding reach of colonizing corporations continued to rely on slavery and other forms of human oppression in order to achieve financial success. This happened in parallel with the Enlightenment's rising commitment to human rights, which served both to fuel de-colonialism yet also to camouflage subtler forms of neo-colonialism. Despite the confounding barriers which Werhane and Bevan identify, they persuasively point us in the right direction.

Phillips and Schrepf-Stirling (2021), in their contribution entitled "Young's Social Connection Model and Corporate Responsibility", explicate one of today's most promising proposals for how to remove some of the most difficult barriers. How, exactly, can I, or my organization, be held responsible for past injustices? They find in the work of Young (2010) a model that can be morally sensitive, politically palatable, and practically useful.

Termed the “social connections model,” Young’s emphasis is less upon placing blame and more upon finding shared solutions that we can collectively implement. This article, in combination with the other two, illustrates not only the important links between the philosophy of management and political philosophy, but also the hope that philosophy of any sort can give us when applied creatively and intelligently to our social afflictions.

Finally, Vandekerckhove (2022) critically reviews two books (Ceva and Bocchiola 2019) and (Boot 2019) with a view to engaging us in a discussion of the political philosophy of whistleblowing. Whistleblowing involves patent moral dilemmas that are typically sorted out by defining the conditions under which it is morally acceptable for a person to publicize a wrongdoing. As the books discussed by Vandekerckhove (2022) suggest, such dilemmas have also a noteworthy political dimension. Consider, for instance, situations where whistleblowing refers to the duty of a civil servant, and more particularly of a civil servant in a liberal democracy. The debate over the conditions under which it becomes morally acceptable for a civil servant to disclose information within a liberal democracy is implicitly anchored in longstanding theories of political obligation (Simmons 1981).

### Research Directions for Moving Forward Contemporary Debates at the Crossroad of Business and Politics

While these papers open essential conversations at the crossroad of business and politics, they are not meant to settle a specific debate nor to use a specific normative theory. On the contrary, we stress here the importance of maintaining and confronting different normative theories (Eabrasu 2012a). Most importantly, the papers selected in this issue offer valuable philosophical insights for advancing specific contemporary debates in this area. For instance, the insights of Shaw’s article regarding Aristotle’s prioritizing of the polis over private interests shed light on contemporary public debates on nationalizing specific business industries or specific private companies (Reich 2007; Stringham 2014). Such a philosophical argument, of course, does not necessarily entail support for State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) or critique of private enterprise. Insofar as we distinguish the legal and moral interpretations of what are meant to be the “needs of the polis,” a governmental industrial strategy is not necessarily right on moral grounds, especially when the political regimes are authoritarian and illiberal (Wettstein 2009).

It is nonetheless interesting to look at these conversations through the Aristotelian lens to better perceive the importance of discussing the moral conditions of public policies that are set to regulate business activities (Kourula et al. 2019). More generally, this thought is meant to show the importance of fueling the ongoing discussions on business accountability with political theories, and the need to take into account the critical variable of a political regime’s legitimacy, on which depends the political obligation (Rosanvallon 2011) and the moral obligation of firms to give primacy to the interest of the polis. This macro-perspective needs further fine-tuning by inquiring into the conditions under which institutions and policies acquire and lose the legitimacy to regulate business activities.

Indeed, as we understand from the arguments put forward by Pat Werhane and David Bevan (2021), business and political interests have intertwined since the very inception of corporations. Especially from a mercantilist perspective, governments tend to have interests in corporate activities abroad: on the one hand, they protect them, and, on the other hand, they limit and control their scope through policies such as the 19th -century charters (North and Thomas 1973). This observation contributes not only to a better understanding of contemporary subtler forms of neo-colonialism, but more generally, it joins the

conversation about the pervasiveness and elasticity of the political sphere (Eabrasu 2022) and its unavoidable interactions and overlapping with business sphere. While the period of chartered companies seems to be over, we nonetheless cannot ignore the rise of similar (and possibly more subtle) forms of mixing political and business interests in international affairs that need to be studied through the lens of the political philosophy of management.

This obviously leads to the importance of considering contemporary political theories when discussing various facets of the entrepreneurial state (Wennberg and Sandstrom 2022), or the role of international corporations, especially when they are state-owned (Musacchio and Lazzarini 2014). The responsibility of companies that are integrated into the political strategy of a government, and benefit from various privileges, cannot be separated from an assessment of the legitimacy of the respective government. Hence, it is essential to bring management studies into existing conversations in political philosophy on the border between business and politics (Brennan and Jaworski 2016) and, more specifically, on modern forms of crony capitalism (Munger and Villarreal-Diaz 2019).

Another way political theory could shed valuable light on contemporary managerial issues is to consider the conversations about political obligation (Simmons 1981). This can happen at the individual level, where conversations about whistleblowing could join those about conscientious objection (Blanc 2021). Theories of political obligation could also be applied at the level of the organization itself, thereby joining the conversations about corporate divestment (Dann and Haddow 2007) and corporate disobedience (Pollman 2019). Looking at these issues through the lens of political theories can also provide an alternative perspective to discussions about the moral grounds on which disclosure and disobedience are justified. Such a political standpoint could promote a better understanding of the policies and institutional arrangements that could protect individual and collective rights. Also, it could allow us to see the rights to disclosure and disobedience as a signal for the legitimacy of a specific institutional setting, and possibly as a threshold for liberal democracy (Brennan 2012; Eabrasu 2012b).

As Phillips and Schrempf-Stirling (2021) indicate, political philosophy can contribute not only to identifying issues and problems in the contemporary interactions between business and politics, but also to identifying solutions. By putting Young's (2010) "Social Connection Model" at the forefront of these contemporary debates, they also pinpoint how a redefinition of a keynote concept in political philosophy ("responsibility" redefined in relation with "structural injustice") can shed entirely new light on the interpretations of interactions between business and politics. Indeed, further research in the philosophy of management regarding various philosophical interpretations of concepts such as "harm," "guilt," "fault," "blame" and "liability" should be able to offer a plurality of moral perspectives on business and political interactions (Eabrasu 2019).

## Conclusion

Political philosophy and the philosophy of management, in short, have much to talk about. While this special theme provides a deeper look into only one such topic—the relationship between the state and corporate social accountability—our intention is to advertise that there are many such topics, and to promote continued inquiry into all of them. To what extent is governing the state the same as managing a firm? Do arguments for liberal democracy apply equally to the political and the corporate setting? If so, is it for the same purposes—legitimacy, deliberation, and justice? And is there a place for whistleblowing,

political activism, conscientious objection, and corporate disobedience both in firms and governments? If the perennial problem of managerial corruption (or, at least, the problem of agency) is agreed to be one of the chief threats in both arenas, are there ways in which the two can cooperate in addressing it? The *Philosophy of Management* looks forward to continuing to provoke and publish these conversations.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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