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Coping with CSR: Some Conceptual Foundations on Discussing Contradictions and their Interplay

As a concept and practice CSR, if any, is subject to debate and controversies. Currently, corporations want to increase their engagement in sustainability-related issues, particularly in redefining their value proposals hence influencing strongly the strategic decision-making as well. On the other hand, more criticism has arisen due to various reasons, of which many are in conjunction with the moral arguments. Moreover, it is worth questioning to what extent the true integration of financial, social and environmental concerns is even possible within a framework of Triple Bottom Line- model *inter alia*. The consolidation of the contradictory elements in inherent models seem to be difficult, if not impossible. Would it be so that the current business models do not absorb truly all aspects of the welfare creation?

The primary purpose of this conceptual study is to examine the issues of responsibility and sustainability in a twofold manner. First, to investigate theoretically how the one (the oneness of things; consolidation of diverse - even opposite - parameters into one cognizable entity) is understood in various scientific and philosophical approaches especially comparing and contrasting briefly non-Western traditions to modern Western thinking. It is assumed that e.g. the oriental way of philosophical thinking (particularly prevalent in some Asian cultural traditions), the harmony of contradictions and their complementary features are well-discussed and provide thus a basis to expose the harmony and reciprocal co-existence. Despite the fact that in the Western philosophy the 'one' (a unity) has also been explicitly discovered a long time ago, it has not provided enough basis for modern theory making particularly in association within the models of organisational responsibility. Second, based on the explication on the first stage, to scientifically discuss how a pre-defined entity, such as a TBL- model, can be understood as a one paying attention to opposites, which actually seem to segregate the aspects under consideration (profits vs planet and people). Besides business ethics, some theological foundations on ethics are also exposed as Christian spirituality has a strong influence on Western philosophy. Based on the current theoretical study, it is proposed whether it would be reasonable to accept the separation and disaggregation as a consequence as conceptually it is not possible to reach a total integration of opposite dimensions in theories and models. In spite of prevalence of contradictions in every phenomenon, in case of incommensurability, the theories of responsibility, such as CSR, fail to achieve an adequate level of convergence in explaining the policies of more responsible business.

Keywords: CSR, TBL, Eastern thinking, Western philosophy, contradictions

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INTRODUCTION

As a practice Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) - if any - has caused wide-ranging discussion both among scholars and practitioners. In principle, the practice of consolidating of activities which *'not only positively affect the natural environment and society, but which result in long-term economic benefits and competitive advantage for the firm'* (Carter and Rogers 2008, 365) is widely acknowledged. It is supposed that a firm can be simultaneously involved – or at least to take an initiative - in policies which take the diverse three attributes (profit, people, planet) of responsibility into account.

On the one hand, CSR can be seen as method for increasing the welfare of the people and communities at the same time as firms – e.g. reducing the amount of negative impacts – can create a new options to expand their business activities. Accordingly, the increased interest among firms to cope with social and environmental aspects may increase their interest in new innovations and in cutting-edge solutions in implementing the novel strategies on a global market place.

On the other hand, there is a lot of doubt relating to the true relevance of the practice. The primary argumentation against CSR (and the Triple Bottom Line model, the TBL, as well) is that a company's major purpose is unconditionally to maximise profits and subsequently transfer high returns to the shareholders. The other aspects of the TBL- model (and policies related to the implementation of CSR) must be subordinate to the major objective. If the environmental-related measures and social concerns influence disadvantageously the financial performance of a business enterprise, they are neglected. The opposite goals prevalent in decision-making and the inherent contradictions cannot be solved adequately and must be discussed separately unless the non-financial practices cannot be converted to activities that increase profits (selfish motivation for increasing welfare of shareholders vs. altruism, philanthropy, and compassion as triggers for human behaviour). This can lead to a situation in which the 'doing good' (or its public manifestation to strengthen brand and reputation) is converted to 'doing money'. Subsequently, it is not a question of new TBL- related thinking in business with strong engagement in social and environmental concerns, but rather an attempt to find new factors of production (such as a positive image) to boost the profit-making. Conceptually, this setting can be exemplified by dialectics, in which there is no space for discussing stability and harmony, but rather of contradictions.

In the sphere of the Western science, dualistic worldview often provides a basis for analytical research as using binary categories (or dichotomies) is often the simplest way to conduct analysis. Indeed, binary opposites and further-categorisation can provide ground for a subsequent scientific analysis. This kind of simple classification is based on the idea that there exist truly identifiable qualities, which can be separated conceptually. Under a simple setting, opposites expressing differences can be discovered in the phenomenon under scrutiny. Furthermore, this idealisation can give some primary foundations for a researcher to depict the nature of the reality. The opposites can include features which can be categorised in a straightforward manner: either the things include a certain feature or not.

OBJECTIVES AND THE RESEARCH TASK

The main purpose of this preliminary conceptual study is to uncover and discuss the prevalence of dualism in explaining the contradictions of the concept and practice of CSR. Analytically,

first separation and then consolidation of the opposites can lead to a discussion on 'oneness', in which the 'one' (as a philosophical concept referring to unity) or 'One' (as examined in many theological explanations) may provide more understanding on harmony (a well-balanced interaction between the things in analytical focus) or disharmony (expressing dialectical instability and tension between the 'things' under consideration).

In this study, dualism (splitting up the one) can be seen as dichotomy (two aspects in consideration remain separately) or as a one coherent entity (strong interplay, even complementarity between two dimensions making the two ultimately into a one). Moreover, an attempt is made to expand the conventional scientific analysis by promoting some conceptual mind-sets representing the 'other' cultural backgrounds. Due to the conceptual nature of the examination, the role of language providing means for communication must be embedded in the analysis, to some extent at least. Undoubtedly, we live in the world of the words. Language that is used in scientific analysis and subsequent communication may permit us for more coherent thinking or restrict considerably our efforts for gaining new knowledge from complex entities such as CSR.

The author of this article is well-aware that the topics under consideration are widely and deeply discussed due to various reasons. The time perspective of the Western philosophical thinking is truly a long one (thousands of years of the history of the mankind with an abundance of written documents) and multiple interpretations exists regarding the different scientific perspectives. Even the Christian spirituality, as a complementary part in the examination, has a number of diverse thematic sub-entities. Hence, the discussion later is based on reductionism, in which only some selected ontological features and aspects are scrutinised.

CHALLENGES IN EXPLORING CSR

In their article Garriga and Melé (2004) classify different approaches to CSR using four distinct categories: economics, politics, social integration, and ethics. The categorization relies on the use interaction between business and society. The ethical theories as discussed in their article are based on responsibilities of corporations to society. Based on their intensive literature review, they draw a conclusion that various theories exist, which are '*controversial, complex, and unclear.*' Therefore, any attempt to depict and analyse models of CSR are subject to a necessity of creating a theory/ies, which truly could integrate the various dimensions (in their study profits, political performance, social demands, and ethical values were used as dimensions). As multiple models and explanations exists, there is need to develop new theories, which could overcome the limitations of the traditional ones. They claim that this needs more accurate information of reality and a sound ethical foundation (Garriga and Melé 2004, 66). To conclude, it may be challenging - if not even possible - to create a single integrative model to cope with CSR- related issues on scientific level. This would lead to a situation in which e.g. dialectical approach (of disharmony), emphasising the clear differences and disaggregation between the issues under consideration, is more appropriate explanation than the dialectical (of harmony) paying attention to unity and integration of various dimensions.

Based on the work by the Garriga and Melé *inter alia*, it seems to be difficult to create one unified theory for CSR despite of the fact that TBL- model *per se* is based on some primary widely-applied and clear dimensions. Critical is still to what extent the profit-making task of a firm influences the other goals of the firm as the glaring dominance of financial intentions *vis-*

à-vis needs of the people and the planet is not possible to depict harmoniously with one entity in focus.

EMBRACING ONENESS IN EASTERN TRADITION

As noted earlier, according to Western scientific conventions, a classification of the ‘things’ can provide a basis for in-depth studies. The basic form of categorization means that an entity - the particular ‘one’ in focus - is firstly divided into two separate parts. Subsequently, the study related to a specified object requires the use of dualism. Employing dichotomies is actually a creation of distinctions – even opposites – to gain more understanding on the issue under consideration. The binary opposites may provide a fundamental organiser, not just for the analytical purposes, but also for increasing understanding on language, culture and human philosophy. Therefore, it is worth analysing how the dualities exposed and used are discussed in various cultural approaches. Would it be possible to uncover differences in various cultural contexts in handling the opposites and the bi-polarities? Besides this ‘Western’, what would be the contribution of ‘Eastern’ thinking and the influence of their spiritual traditions in handling the questions of two and one - and even One?

In the field of modern science, Niels Bohr was one of the most notable physicist of the 20th century. When he was awarded a membership of nobility, he wanted to add a text in Latin to his coat of arms as follows to expose the core of his view of the world he has been involved in: *Contraria sunt Complementa*. This single statement has become well-known amidst scientists, who have perceived his declaration positively representing something that may explain essential conformities of the modern science. Scientific analysis without grasping the contradictions and subsequently the value of the harmony created in the interaction between opposites, would not contribute substantially to the efforts to gain more knowledge in scientific examinations. Bohr himself was deeply fascinated by the Asian traditions in handling the opposites and their contradictional nature in conjunction with the idea of the harmony. In his well-known book Capra (1995) wanted to go even further as he uncovers some other explanations to the theoretic stance by discussing many representatives of the Eastern mysticism such as Taoism, Buddhism, and Chinese thought in general (see also Melé 2009, 60-64).

As far as Asian traditions are concerned (though attribute ‘Asian’ is inevitable obscure and blur in nature due to the vast geographical scope of the area, its cultural dispersion, and deep philosophical heritage), harmony is well-discussed providing potentiality for understanding the logic of the issues of the world we live in. Concisely, the content of these various approaches can be listed shortly as follows (Cheng 2006, 35; Peng and Nisbett 1996,7; see also Nikkanen 2013a, 2013b):

- ✓ All things come into existence by way of polarities and relatives.
- ✓ Nothing is isolated and independent, but everything is connected.
- ✓ Because change is constant, contradictions are also constant.
- ✓ Conflicts caused by the contradictions can be resolved by locating a relevant framework of polarities and their generative relationships. This leads to the reality of oneness and to the ontological equality.
- ✓ All differences and distinctions are both generated and explained by polarities of principles and forces.

To conclude, would it be possible to apply and transfer some theoretical assumptions made under the non-Western traditions in explaining the interplay of the differences to name contradictions, opposites, and their potential complementarities? Is it so that with the Eastern traditions in focus, a researcher is even obliged to employ theories representing something that cannot be explained with the help of the traditional conventions and concepts that are mostly used in Western science? The challenge is the lack of real knowledge (on meta-level at least) of the concepts and abstractions particularly from a Western scholars point of view. The Western way of thinking is poorly equipped to handle the reality which cannot be conceptualised comprehensively and promptly and in which the ‘inner’ of an observer including his/her multiple, and subjective affections, even mystical experiences and spirituality, have a certain role in explaining the behaviour.

OBSERVATIONS ON ONENESS IN WESTERN SPIRITUALITY

Western rational thinking of today, which neglects mostly religion and spirituality (and inherent aspects like myths), cannot utilise the potential contribution of non-rational sciences though under theological explanations (whether representing Christianity or some other religious context) binary opposites are widely discussed. Indeed, they may even provide a basis for understanding the conformities of Faith. It can be even claimed that in e.g. Christianity and Christian spirituality the opposites are largely discussed to reveal the basic attributes of – not just the faith and spirituality – but the world itself. Hence, such concepts as the paradise (a sacred world), as assumed in the Biblical tradition, is an expression of unity, in which there is no difference between ‘this’ and ‘that’ (as may be prevalent in a profane world). Accordingly, under the duality, in which the ‘one’ is divided into separate parts, is only present in this world – in the reality of Man.

Generally speaking, in mythical stories the use of binary aspects provides a solid basis for explaining the fundamentals of the religion and the issues on faith. As Leach points out (as quoted in Gothoni 1993, 43), *‘the opposition Heaven/Earth is followed by further oppositions...Recurrent also is the theme that unity in the other world... becomes duality in this world’*. By reading the very first chapters of the Bible, (as phrased out in Genesis: *‘In the beginning.’*), one can really understand how dualistic distinctions (‘separate’ as a largely used verb in English version) provide us the tools to understand the outer reality. The one was probably something transcending, something beyond our understanding, whereas the One was named as the Creator. Newton claims in his book called Opticks (as quoted by Capra 1995) that *‘no ordinary power being able to divide what God himself made one in the first creation’*. One can claim that even the essence of Christian spirituality relies on use of dichotomies: the darkness and light are some of the most distinctive features in Bible considering e.g. the first chapters of Genesis (1:1-3). The chaos, as represented by the darkness, is prevalent prior to the light, which provides a different worldview. Hence, the contrasts in language and communication provide meanings, which are later manifested in a community. A following example may uncover the role of dualism.

With respect to darkness (the other side; an opposite of light), the following categorisation of three diverse aspects can be exposed (McGrath 1999, 105). Darkness can be seen as an image of doubt. This means that an individual is incapable and not able to see properly. As a consequence, there will be a state in which a full understanding of what is happening is not possible. Though the explanation hereby is mostly theologian, the premises are valid

remembering the strong influence of religion for human behaviour - also from cultural point of view. Indeed, the Biblical images do also influence the contemporary western-style thinking as to understand the one side (visible) attention must be paid on the other side as well. The examination of the other side (the opposite like the darkness as a negation) might even be essential in gaining more understanding on the issues under consideration.

Besides language, also visualisation stems – at least to some extent – from the religious mind of human beings. Bohr, when drafting the basics of modern physics, proposed that entities – such as waves and particles – can be depicted having the two characteristics at the same time. The result (the ‘photon’ according to Bohr), can be visualised as if it were the one or the other (classical suggestion known as the principle of complementarity) allows us to picture or depict a complex abstract entity in a familiar and helpful manner (McGrath 1999, 110).

Under the modern world, Christianity needs to handle the apparent contradictions such as the tensions between the welfare of the people with the welfare of the firms. Despite of the common critics for making excessive money (originated from Gospel as follows: ‘*you cannot serve God (the One) and Wealth;*’ the word in parenthesis added by the writer of this article), Christian churches seem to accept the instrumental value of economics in creating welfare. This, however, needs sharing and solidarity among the actors and a strong, even personal affection for compassion. As the two major leaders of Christian churches - Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew – manifest together (2017):

‘We are convinced that there can be no sincere and enduring resolution to the challenge of the ecological crisis and climate change unless the response is concerted and collective, unless the responsibility is shared and accountable, unless we give priority to solidarity and service.’

The statement has some implications to name solidarity (common human responsibilities binding the people globally together as a one), revering human dignity, and provision of global human rights. Inevitably, these are also some crucial elements in TBL- thinking as well though not so explicitly expressed. On the other hand, solidarity without compassion is very difficult if not even impossible. Due to unity, solidarity makes no difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ nor between ‘this’ and ‘that’. It is thus worth asking how the CSR-related policies encourage the people for giving and just for getting (challenging the reciprocal imperative among business thinking to give if getting something). Without sharing and even altruism there may be no option for discussing properly the unified models such as TBL. Without paying attention to the elements, which truly steer the behaviour of human people - including the motivation factors - - the consolidation of various dimensions into one would be very difficult.

In practice, however, there may be no scientific effort (whether theologian or non-theologian) without considering separation and segregation, which is often, as noted, based on dualistic categorisation – at least what comes to conducting research work at the embryonic stage. In a similar manner in theological tradition, same type of articulation is valid as dualistic worldview enables the people to understand more properly, if not the essence of the Faith, but something profound of the world at least. Later, the dualistic proposals are transferred to our reality and cognition. We see the world through the dualities.

Capra (1995) states that inner fragmentation mirrors our view of the world’s ‘outside’ which is seen as a multitude of separate objects and events: separate parts need to be exploited in a different manner. Due to alleged fragmentation we are unable to recognise all the conformities

of the world. We follow the mechanistic worldview instead. Unlike in Western tradition, in the Eastern view, unity and mutual interrelation of things are widely discussed. Accordingly, and as noted earlier, nothing is totally separated, but interrelated. This requires attempts to identify and discover the interplay of the opposites, the forces that tend to lead to disaggregation, but can be understood only as a unity.

Rational knowledge as an outcome is based on the realm of analytical science in which everything can and should be quantified, classified, and analysed. The other perspectives are – more or less – determined to be anti-intellectual or non-intellectual and, hence, subject to intellectual speculation. Subsequently, there are no real tools for handling truly intuition and abstraction (as system of concepts and symbols) and even myths and narratives. Moreover, we are obliged to embrace the inaccuracy and ambiguity of our language. Verbal descriptions of reality including the conceptualisations are incoherent and incomplete. Suzuki (as quoted in Capra 1995, 45) argues that the contradictions are so puzzling that it leads to confusion: the ordinary way of thinking comes from the fact that we have to use language to communicate on inner experience, which in its very nature transcends linguistics.

Capra (1995) argues - among other scholars - strongly for the limitations of modern language especially in understanding how people truly perceive the things. Accordingly, *'Modern physics (in his discussion representing Western 'true' science) has confirmed most dramatically one of the basic ideas of eastern mysticism; that all the concepts we use are not features of reality, as we tend to believe, but creations of mind...'* This is especially true with space-time-constellation: it's beyond reasoning, the way we see it, and cannot be adequately expressed in words. Moreover, there is need – not just for interpretation - but *interpenetration* as Capra claims. The paradoxes, in which opposites complement each other and not exclude them, require new methods for expanding the knowledge-base.

Paradoxes are characteristic of all mysticism (Capra 1995, 46). If this is true, the question is how to deal with and analyse paradoxes properly. Unlike in modern science, Eastern mystical tradition has developed diverse methods to cope with the dilemma e.g. in Taoism the major work (*Tao Te Ching*) is full of intriguing contradictions added with a poetic language. Presumably, by reading the works of the ancient philosophers, the reader is obliged to challenge his/her logical reasoning. The confused mind must look at new trajectories for one's own thinking. Whereas modern Western thinking requires certain axioms and well-defined processes for gaining deeper understanding, in other cultures, an observant should be prepared to face and experiment his/her personal experiences of reality. Hence, a Western actor's behaviour is both enabled but also constrained by the logical reasoning (looking for causes and judging the causalities) and limits of our own cognition. Despite of our attempts for rationality, we should confess that we as observers are bound by the narratives of that collective (such as our own focal net) we are engaged in.

There is, however, the unpleasantness of the narratives as attempts to depict truly the reality. Narratives as a form of storytelling and communication putting together the words and concepts we use are common in contemporary language both on interpersonal and inter-organisational level. With the help of narratives we aim at transferring or interpreting our visions of the reality to our own world as in case of CSR to firms. Sometimes the events that are in focus are true and real, but in most cases imaginary or fictional. Undoubtedly, the stories represent the embodiment of a set of ideas and values.

Indeed, models like TBL are more or less narratives and stories of the world. In his article, Drewell (2012) uses a poem originally presented in a musical as he writes '*your life is an expression of your mind. You are the creator of your own Universe*' (as quoted in Drewell 2012, 10; compare to Capra 1995). Hence, our intentions to do something (to conduct more responsibility-related policies as an example), are subject to our emotions, affections, and cognition. We create a reality whether it is based on real identifiable facts and figures and rationality or whether it stems from our deeper emotions and feelings we carry on, or – as typical – caused by both. We may have positive intentions (e.g. goal to implement more environmental-related policies), but the affections and moral judgments may hamper us to achieve our intentions. Consequently, our behaviour is most likely subject to moral disengagement: we aim at creating individual justification for something, which is against the accepted moral norms of individuals or organisations. The ethical dilemmas are prevalent and present in all our decisions whether they take place on the interpersonal or interorganisational level.

FINALLY

Based on the preliminary discussion in this study, it can be claimed that unlike in Western tradition, in the sphere of Asian philosophy (or Chinese representing e.g. Daoism or Confucianism) the quest for a balance between the things under consideration (related particularly to the opposites) is highly addressed. This encourages the virtue of magnanimity – a notion that may characterise this worldview. In contrast to the Western way of thinking, under these traditions, complicated contradictions with no intentions for harmonious co-existence on analytical level cannot be accepted. The tensions, even on conceptual level, must be released somehow. Hence, it can be argued that there exists a dialectics of disharmony (prevalent in Western traditions as exemplified e.g. by Hegelian dialectics) and dialectics of harmony (more typical for non-Western traditions). Scientifically, there is need for discussing more how the business ethics and spirituality (whether Western or Eastern) are interrelated both on theoretical and pragmatic level. CSR as form of storytelling (uncovering some positive measures of the actors for embracing social and environmental concerns, but also hiding and covering up some others) is kind of endeavour, in which the observer – whether a person or an organisation – interprets that once experienced and based on that, makes decisions. This is, if any, subject to personal affections and emotions, which are difficult to handle and analyse as there exists a bundle of apparent contradictions in real world (e.g. doing good & ethics vs. doing business & seeking financial efficiency). It is also worth considering, what are the cultural and social consequences of the religious-influenced mind particularly if organisational issues, such as CSR, are analysed? Undoubtedly, ethics associated with the topics of spirituality require more scientific attention (see e.g. Fontrodona *et al.* 2018).

It can be proposed that the true integration of various, even contradictory attributes of the CSR/TBL, is probably not working the way we would like it to be. Dominance of financial objectives of the firm over the other ones lead to a state of disharmony unless the profit-making is perceived as instrumental for increasing true welfare – both for stakeholders and shareholders. This is nicely summarized by the following manifestation by Pope Francis (2018) as he says:

'Economic models, therefore, are also required to observe an ethic of sustainable and integral development, based on values that place the human person and his or her rights at the centre.'

In a previous study (Nikkanen 2014), a following depiction (Figure 1) was proposed to contrast the two distinct ways to see the world. By confessing that there is either one or two, different research trajectories can be created, which might provide some new proposals to comprehend our own reality and its content.

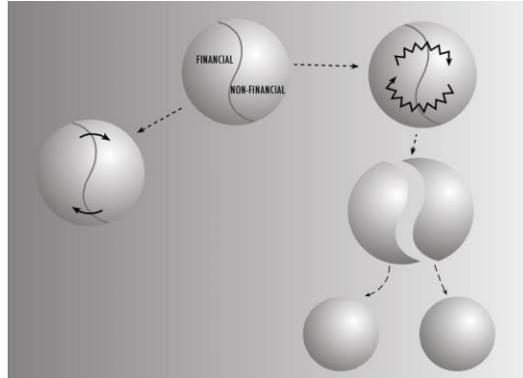


Figure 1: Comparing Harmonisation ('oneness') and Disharmonisation ('twoness')

Based on the depiction above, it is up to us as individuals and scholars to think about whether we are ready to face the reality and subsequent scientific analysis with the presumption on one (or One; unification, integration, and complementarity of the Things under consideration) or with the two (a fragmented reality with diverse contradictions that cannot be integrated). This premise is truly evident within a framework of CSR.

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