

## **Grounding Business in Contemplation: Working Toward a New Model of Ecological Management Education**

### **Abstract**

The ecological crisis is a part of our daily reality in business education, and so is the call for future leaders in business to prioritize sustainability, be that through the SDGs, political statements, or commitments to bottom lines that go beyond the traditional, economic bottom line. In response, business schools have expanded offerings in sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Yet dominant models of management education continue to approach these problems primarily through technical, financial, and instrumental frameworks. Students are trained to optimize, calculate, innovate, and scale, often without sustained reflection on the deeper questions that underlie economic activity: what is work for? What do human beings owe to one another and to the more-than-human world? And what vision of the good life implicitly governs the way we organize production, consumption, and growth? As educators in management, the question we need to wrestle with and unpack is how to instill sustainability as a vital value among our students.

This paper will engage a long-standing conversation about how to challenge problematic assumptions in management education and how to more authentically ground business education in ethics and sustainability (Painter, 2015; Shoemaker, 2008). We argue that many of the failures of contemporary business education are not simply methodological but conceptual. Following Pope Francis's diagnosis in *Laudato Si'*, we describe these failures within management education as expressions of a broader "technocratic paradigm"—a worldview that treats reality primarily as something to be measured, predicted, and controlled. Within this paradigm, nature appears as a resource, persons as human capital, and education a mechanism for producing efficient market actors. Ethical reflection, when it appears, is often procedural rather than formative, concerned

with compliance and stakeholder management rather than with the cultivation of wisdom, responsibility, and care for the common good. The result is an educational model that excels at producing competent technicians of material growth while struggling to form reflective agents capable of questioning the meaning, direction, and moral limits of economic life.

Against this background, we argue that in order for management education to be both ethical and ecological—focused, above all, on directing business activity toward the common good—it must foster sustained attention on what it means to live well, probing the relationship between work and well-being, with an emphasis on the vital significance of non-production-oriented values in a thriving human life. We specify the activity through which such an attitude is fostered as contemplation. Although contemplation is typically understood to involve a withdrawal from the world and a sort of inactivity, we will show that contemplation, properly understood, refers to a mode of attentive, non-instrumental engagement with reality that discloses the fundamental interconnectedness, beauty, and goodness of creation. It is a way of seeing that resists the reduction of beings to utility and the reduction of knowledge to power.

In contrast to the technocratic emphasis on production, speed, and control, contemplation cultivates virtues—in particular, attention (openness), gratitude, and love—that orient action toward the good of the whole by expanding our conception of who and what we are. As we will illustrate, contemplation ultimately refers to an attitude we assume while striving to understand things for what they are, in themselves, and not merely in terms of how they can fulfill some immediate need or production-oriented goal. When we are able to attentively and openly observe and behold things as they are, we see that we share the world with human and non-human others and thus come to understand ourselves as integral parts of a greater whole, within which each thing is valued for its own sake—what Pope Francis refers to as *integral ecology* (Pope Francis,

139). This understanding helps us realize that we need less material goods than we often think we do because these things, despite their apparent utility, are much less meaningful than other things (Fitzpatrick, 2025). Contemplation is therefore essential to management education because it is the activity by which we recognize and appreciate intrinsic goods, which is essential to properly ordering our desires and living a responsible and ultimately meaningful life. Grounding management education in contemplation opens space for more holistic and sustained reflection on what we desire and why, as well as the various ways in which our misguided understandings of the “the good life” stifle our pursuit of living well.