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# Business as Moral Enterprise

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## *Interview between Andreas Widmer and Joseph E. Gorra*

In this interview, Andreas Widmer draws upon his vast experience as a business leader and thinker about the morality of what business is and how it provides goods for other people. There is tremendous work to be done at the intersection of theology, ethics, and the moral enterprise of business. Christian philosophical and theological witness can be fruitful here, whether in discerning how one's anthropology does work in the reality of business or by countless other ways that business can be seen as an enterprise solution to poverty, for example.

**Entrepreneurship is in your bones. You are the co-founder of the SEVEN Fund, which is doing some remarkable work “to dramatically increase the rate of innovation and diffusion of enterprise-based solutions to poverty.” To start off, I want to have you address what might be aptly described as one of your life themes: *business as a moral enterprise*. Why is it a moral enterprise and not merely a profit-maximizing machine?**

There is a misconception in our society that business is amoral, or that the pursuit of profit is mutually exclusive to conducting business with virtue. A Moral Enterprise is one that approaches business in the spirit of co-creation: as we pursue entrepreneurship, we mirror God's image as the creator, and pursue his invitation to participate in his creative power.

**Are you saying that the nature of business *is* a Moral Enterprise or that it is such as one approaches business in the spirit of co-creation? Both?**

Business is an action, and every human action has a moral implication. Thus business is a moral enterprise. The co-creation perspective makes this even more clear – but that's true not just for business but of other actions as well and sometimes in an even deeper sense, I'm thinking here of marriage, and

specifically of the marital act of a profound participation in the creative power of God.

**How does one's 'mental model' (or, I suppose, 'worldview') shape one's view of prosperity and innovation and affect a process of change in a business culture, let alone a society?**

A mental model is the mindset through which we view the world. Following Michael Fairbanks' framework of the [Seven Forms of Capital](#), I believe that culture (or cultural capital) is the highest form of societal capital we can have ("Changing the Mind of a Nation" in Culture Matters). Mental models rest in that form of capital. They determine how we see the world, interpret what we see and in turn determine how to react to it; mental models inform all of our actions, and inform how we use all other forms of capital. There are clear correlations between our views on innovation, tolerance, punctuality, the future and dignity, with the prosperity of the society we live in.

**Character and spiritual formation are important factors for discerning the health of business leaders if in fact business is to be viewed as a moral enterprise, right? How so?**

Business leaders that act from a moral compass make decisions that support the agendas of all stakeholders: owners, workers, customers, and future generations. Actually, I know an investor who uses a CEO character test for his investment decisions. When the CEO leaves and the new one doesn't cut the character test, he sells the stock. He's way ahead of the S&P 500, or most other portfolios, for that matter.

**It's true that CEOs are responsible for ensuring that their companies make a profit. But you know that they do more than that. How can CEOs (and, in**

**general, business leaders) shape companies in ways that give rise to fostering ecologies of freedom, dignity, and self-responsibility within business enterprises?**

It's a widely held belief that CEOs ought to control profit. The only problem with that belief is that it's wrong. CEOs don't really have control over profit. What they can control is the creation of a company, a system that has a certain culture that enables profits.

**Around the world, what have you seen to be as essential (if not surprising) elements of a company's culture that enables profits?**

Freedom, equality, subsidiarity, humility – these are all key ingredients in a company culture that results in all kinds of profit, not only financial profit.

**What is prosperity? Is it more than a flow of income?**

Prosperity is human flourishing; the best definition of material poverty is a lack of connection to networks of productivity and exchange. However, the greatest poverty today is not material but spiritual.

**In what way is the greatest poverty today not material but spiritual?**

Spiritual poverty is most visible in the lack of meaning that is so prevalent today. Relativism and nihilism are two of the most profound manifestations of that poverty. In my travels, I generally find people yearning for meaning in their life, for transcendence and purpose they can believe in. In the absence of religion, they end up following all kinds of false gods only to find themselves suffering and sorely disappointed – disillusioned. The cynicism that results from that experience is a tangible measurement of our spiritual poverty.

**What is the role of intermediary institutions in a society that can help shape conditions for prosperity?**

[The Seven Forms of Capital](#) framework is a useful frame for thinking about this: The principal thrust for the creation of prosperity is to re-invest gains from the three lower forms of capital to grow the four higher forms of capital. Within the higher forms of capital, we need vibrant and effective institutions to promote democracy, rule of law, education and a robust public moral culture.

**In relationship to His creation, is God like an entrepreneur?**

Definitely. That is a good analogy.

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” (Genesis 2:14-16) That’s the first written business plan as far as I know. And a very effective elevator pitch! ☺

**If you were in a room with a bunch of seminarians and pastors, how would you encourage them about business as a moral enterprise?**

Business is a series of actions, and every human action touches the issue of morality. Business is inherently moral because it is other-oriented: I want the “other” to buy my products or services. A moral business builds prosperity by creating and selling goods that are truly good, and offering and providing services that truly serve.

There’s no better book on this subject than Father Sirico’s [“The Call of the Entrepreneur,”](#) so I’d be sure to have that with me as a leave-behind.

**Andreas Widmer** is the cofounder of SEVEN Fund, a philanthropic organization run by entrepreneurs who invest in original research, books, films, and websites to further enterprise solutions to poverty. Andreas is a Research Fellow in Entrepreneurship at the Acton Institute and an advisor to the Zermatt Summit, an annual business leadership event that strives to humanize globalization. He also serves as an advisor to Transforming Business, a research and development project at the University of Cambridge. See also the EPS interview with Peter Heslam at [www.epsociety.org/library](http://www.epsociety.org/library)