

RECLAIMING OUR FREEDOM AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Excerpts from *Confronting Our Freedom: Leading a Culture of Chosen Accountability and Belonging*



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The Philosophic Insight

By Peter Block

What we are about to explore is a realm of ideas that are as elusive as they are important. They deal with our way of experiencing our lives, something that is so ingrained and foundational that most of us are unaware of the nature of this experience.

This is the realm of philosophy. The intention is to bring a set of ideas—namely philosophy, or more specifically existential philosophy—into the real, day-to-day world, especially the world of work and relationships and community. To simply understand this philosophy, let alone make use of these ideas, we would normally be required to understand what is meant by phenomenology, existentialism, consciousness, being, and more. These are difficult concepts to grasp, made more so by the fact that much of what philosophers have written has been written for other philosophers or for students in a philosophy class. We don't need to define these terms. We only need to watch for their occurrence.



Conversations on freedom and accountability

This exploration takes us into conversations about ideas such as freedom, anxiety, death, and guilt—ideas that we may talk about in moments of reflection, or often in times of crisis—but usually we try to avoid them or we approach them with great caution. We have lumped these conversations under the rubric of “confronting our freedom and choosing accountability.”

We have focused on freedom and accountability because our most common ways of thinking about them do not serve us well. We think that freedom is associated with doing what we want, feeling happy much of the time, and in general living an unburdened existence.

A false mixture of liberty, license, and entitlement. A vivid example of this is that we think winning the lottery will help set us free. We believe that if we had a different boss, or labored in another workplace, we could more fully experience our freedom. And we think that much of what we care about can be outsourced. This version of freedom is too narrow and is based more on a marketing illusion than our experience of the real texture of life.

We also have a small way of thinking about accountability. We think that people want to escape from being accountable. We believe that accountability is something that must be imposed. We have to hold people accountable, and we devise reward and punishment schemes to do this. We keep clarifying roles, targets, and outcomes as ways to combat challenges.

These beliefs that are so dominant are difficult to question, yet they are the very beliefs that keep us from experiencing what we long for and producing a world we want to inhabit. Many of our beliefs are embodied by the generators of modern culture, the marketplace, the modern organization, and our ways of thinking about management, predictability, and leadership.

The culture

It is by looking briefly at modern life that we begin the dialogue about how to sustain ourselves in the face of the dominant culture and narrative. To bring philosophy into the foreground of a practical life.

The more immersed we become in a changing culture, the more we need to be reminded of what is timeless and fundamental. We live in a culture that measures progress by commerce, by scientific and technological improvement. Today's technology world sees progress as being about the possibilities of the Digital Age. With this electronic revolution, our notions of time, space, and distance shift. My distance from anywhere in the world is now measured by the inches between me and a screen.

Speed has become a value in and of itself, waiting one minute for an app to download seems an eternity. Relationships are now heavily automated. The person from early years is, continually transformed from a human being to a consumer, a target market, and the business world now knows more about my taste and preferences than I do. As this electronic connection continues to grow, it is accompanied by scientific achievements.

None of this is new. We have lived into devices for leisure and the convenience of electricity for a long time. All of it is the reality of our culture; it will not fade away and carries with it many benefits for us all. In the face of all of this, however, there is an increased need to be reminded of all that is true about being human. At the moment when science and technology are able to replace and even exceed all of what I am able to do, my determination to deepen my uniqueness and humanity will grow stronger.

The more control we develop over the material world, the more urgent become the questions “What matters?” “How does my life make a difference?” Not just my work life, but my family and community life.

The individual

In addition to finding ways to balance the power of the culture, we also need to interpret what constitutes a meaningful life in the face of our passion for the practical and engineering question of “What works?”

This focus on what works—our instrumental nature—creates a distraction from the question of “What is the point?” which rises from our human nature. These are very different questions. “What works?” is born of a problem-solving orientation. It is a scientist’s and engineer’s version of our experience that we bring into our own inner world.

The dominance of the question, “What works?” becomes a form of psychic materialism where we measure ourselves on our results, on our effect. It becomes an instrumental view of ourselves. This is deeply reflected in how we have constructed our organizations and workplaces. We have defined management as the cause of the workplace and employees as the effect. It is an instrumental transaction.

Our dominant model of leadership is constructed in this engineering, cause-and-effect vein. Employees have been defined as the problem, and management is the solution. Employees have become objects. When we “acquire talent,” we have made a purchase. We purchase employees.

Philosophy takes a different stance. It holds leadership as a convener where each person is a participant in organized efforts. It proposes that the day-to-day problems facing us are universal. They are best viewed as symbolic examples of the larger question facing us.

It is a different question to ask why we are doing whatever it is and to look for ways we can experience our freedom regardless of the particulars of our workplace or our fractured world.

Organizations and the evolving workplace

The philosophic insight calls for accountability to grow out of more freedom and peer connection. Instead of overseeing, creating vision, becoming a role model for the sake of subordinates, and, in essence, taking personal responsibility for the well-being of subordinates, a manager would see the task of management as confronting subordinates with their freedom.

Treating people as a freedom questions the conventional belief that people working in organizations are resources, human assets, talent acquisition targets—objects and products and effects of the culture and the leadership in which they operate.



Parenting: The origin story of management and leadership

Philosophy calls for us to question whether our beliefs about child-rearing fit for adults. If we seek partnership instead of parenting, it allows us to remove the projection from our thinking about leadership. This means we question the social contract in the workplace that has been organized around good parenting. The basic contract has been the employee behaves well and they will be taken care of.

If we began to believe that employees are “walking freedoms,” accountable for creating the world in which they live, it would change many of our ways of dealing with them. For one thing, it would take the monkey off the back of the managers to develop, nurture, grow, and guide their subordinates. Seeing a larger purpose is a small step in imagining a future that works for all. Every job we do can have a larger meaning. The organization committed to confronting its employees with their freedom could support these efforts, but not initiate and institutionalize them, as it now does.

We would not stop caring about employees, but we would speak to them in a different voice. We would place aside our paternalistic instinct to take care of them, which includes feeling guilty for not having taken care of them. Our voice would be one of a partner, not a parent. We exchange wants with them. When they ask, “What’s in it for me?” we would simply say, “Good question. Not one I can answer.” When employees ask what the future looks like for the business or their career, managers would say, “I don’t know.” Employees then say, “Your response is not meeting my expectations.” Manager then says, “I know.” Silence. Eye contact.

Managers this way free themselves to be themselves, and the role-model yoke would be taken from their shoulders. Managers would have room for the range of human responses and in that way affirm their own freedom. The idea that managers, or us in our lives, are required to meet employee or child expectations can be put to rest.



Shifting the historical context

This exploration is meant to enrich our way of thinking—to shift the framework of how we understand our experience, to essentially place us in the first-person perspective in relation to our experience. The ideas here, which we are calling “philosophic insight,” are intended to simply shift context from one inherited to one created.

We live in a time of great volatility and, like every time of change, it carries great possibilities—the price of which is great anxiety. If we can change the context in which we view anxiety, and even the way we view our mortality or evil in the world, then we are better equipped to manage ourselves when “all that is solid melts into air.” In the end, our freedom and our experience of accountability may be all we have to hold on to and that might be enough.

To capture in a nutshell the philosophic insights that will aid this shift:

1. Freedom is a fact of our existing in the world.
2. Accountability cannot be imposed or demanded; it occurs as an inevitable outgrowth of that freedom, for we account for what we choose and what we claim as our own agency in making things work. People do not resist change; they resist coercion.
3. As inevitably as the existence of our freedom, we are forced to experience and confront:
 - a. **Anxiety** over the choices we have made as a result of our freedom and the uncertainty of tomorrow.
 - b. **Guilt** from having said no to either ourselves (existential guilt) or others (neurotic guilt)
 - c. **Death** of others, first, and the anticipation of our own, next. Not just our personal condition but the fact that institutions have a life expectancy.
 - d. **Evil**, which exists because all persons are free, and it will not go away; it is not solvable.
4. And most important—and this is the unique insight of philosophy—these experiences are what give meaning, character, and texture to our lives; they are not negatives or failures that a healthy person should move beyond.
5. Finally, when we can accept the above, we realize we constitute the world in which we live, which is to fulfill for many the promise of being created in God’s image. And this can be embodied in our day-to-day work, not on weekends and retreats.

If we long to triumph in the struggle for our own freedom, then are we committed to inventing ways for our freedom to get institutionalized in our construction of the workplace? Who is to say? We take on this task knowing that up to this moment, much of how we construct our collective efforts is based on the colonial and market myth projection that not only are restraints and controls necessary but that people want it that way. Our institutions have become a place where we are supported in our escape from freedom. And if we choose to escape from freedom, then we have abandoned any real chance for a culture of accountability.

There is a cost to an organization committed to the freedom of its members, and that is the anxiety and seeming unpredictability that this carries. Managers would lose some of the hunting rights that parenting carries with it. We would have to confront our own need for control at a deeper level and, more important, confront our own lack of faith in the possibilities of the people we work with. And ourselves. We are each afraid of our freedom, and thus we are afraid of the freedom of those around us. Especially when we are in work that has goals, deadlines, boundaries, and an infinite number of restraints.

It is in this paradox—freedom in the midst of restraints, faith in the accountability of others, in the face of a history of disappointment—that the search begins. The question to pursue is whether there is a way of creating a life and a culture of accountability based on freedom and its possibilities, as opposed to the current strategies of creating accountability through inducement and coercion.



The existential understanding

Freedom and accountability are inherent qualities of our existence. They are present all the time and do not have to be nurtured or induced, as much of our culture and institutions believe is required. On the contrary, it takes conscious (or unconscious) effort to create conditions where people do not act accountable, and do not experience the power of their freedom.

The struggle to deeply experience our freedom and to live with the weight of full accountability for the world we have created is in itself not a problem to be solved, but rather what can give meaning to our lives.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from these considerations is that what it means to be a person is your creation. The nature of a person, the meaning of human existence, the provenance and destiny of men and women, the essence and definition of us all—all these are not found or discovered; they are invented.

Existentialism holds that you are totally responsible for your life-situation. ... The realization that this responsibility is total leads, of course, to anxiety—because of the enormous burden—but it leads also to a sense of power and control, since in your freedom you become a genuine creator. ...

Each person must be reminded that “man and woman are beings who have no excuses.” But it must be made clear that total freedom is a sacred fact of life and not a moralistic reproach.

Furthermore, those who instill this knowledge of responsibility in others are human too, and must as a consequence assume total responsibility for their impact.

“The Existential Understanding” adapted from Peter Koestenbaum, “The Existential Crisis in Philosophy and Psychology,” in *The Vitality of Death: Essays in Existential Psychology and Philosophy*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1971

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We invite you to visit Designed Learning, a Peter Block company, for more information on the ideas presented in this paper or any of Peter's work.

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Glossary of Distinctions for **CONFRONTING OUR FREEDOM**

FREEDOM
The choice and capacity to
construct our own future.



LIBERTY
The absence of oppression.

AGGREGATING
Combining locally and uniquely
constructed efforts with a common goal.



TAKING TO SCALE
Replicating one program over a wide area.

LEADERSHIP
Stepping into an unknown future.



MANAGEMENT
Providing order and predictability to the world.

MORTALITY. DEATH. TERM LIMITS
Sunset provisions. Ending is natural to take charge of
one's life. And by design. Failure is an option.
Affection for surprise.



IMMORTALITY. LEGACY. LIMITLESS
Optimism, pessimism, and hope mean something.
Affection for predictability.

EXISTENTIAL GUILT
From not living out your own intentions. Useful.



NEUROTIC GUILT
Not living out what others have in mind for you.
Internalizing their disappointment. Not useful.

EVIL
Immutable shadow side. Fact.
Must be faced. Seen.



ERROR
Illusion that suffering can be fixed
with more awareness. Programs. Education.
Leaders. Technology.

LOCAL MEMORY OF A PLACE
What value is in this?



MODERNISM
What is next?

QUESTIONS BRING US TOGETHER



ANSWERS KEEP US APART

CURIOSITY



ADVICE. WISDOM. OPINION