

**Business Ethics &
Ethical Leadership**

The Case for Complementarity in CSR: Business and Society on a Neo-Freudian Couch

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Abstract: In this paper we bring a psychiatrist's expertise – specifically using the concept of complementarity – to bear on the many seemingly irreconcilable contentious issues in the Business and Society field. Such issues are prevalent at all levels of inquiry and study in the managerial domain: for individual managers, for firms, for entire industries, and even for the capitalistic system itself. They are prevalent also for scholars in the related fields of corporate social responsibility and business ethics. An appreciation for complementarity in the study of managerial decision-making -- and here we use the word to mean the existence of two (or more) ways of perceiving a particular set of circumstances, both of which are valid, both of which are legitimate – leads to a richer and more complete understanding of the problems facing managers and scholars. It results in less confrontation and better decision-making.

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COMPLEMENTARITY

The word “complementarity” is not new to the field of business. It is used in the strategy discipline especially (see for example Zhu, K, 2004, and Chatterjee, Cooper, and Ravikumar, 1993) as a synonym for synergy. A firm considering merging with or acquiring another firm in the same industry might well ask if the assets, the skills, and the market positions of the two firms complement each other well. Or, switching from a horizontal to a vertical perspective, a firm seeking to form an alliance with a key supplier might properly be concerned how much complementarity or synergy exists between the two firms.

Here, however, we use the word “complementarity” to mean something quite different, almost the opposite of the meaning above. Here, the word refers to situations where there are two or more ways of perceiving those situations, quite different ways, both of which are valid, both of which are legitimate. Lewis (2000) tells us that “Philosophers from the ancient Greeks to Existentialists have viewed human existence as [complementary] – grounded in tensions between life and death, good and evil, self and other,” and here she references Hampden-Turner (1981) and Schneider (1990).

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The familiar Taoist Yin-Yang symbol is yet another way to describe complementarity: a natural wholeness composed of contradictions (Lewis, 2000:762).



It seems that these tensions, an integral part of complementarity, are an innate, inescapable part of each of us as individuals. Phillip Lopate (2013) cites Montaigne, “the fountainhead of the modern essay,” who wrote, “All contradictions may be found in me by some twist and in some fashion. Bashful, insolent, clever, stupid, chaste, lascivious, talkative, taciturn..., and whoever studies himself really attentively finds in himself...this discord.” And not just in us as individuals but in the natural order of the cosmos. Looking beyond our selves we find that complementarity is to be found in all fields of study. Some examples should be helpful.

In Physics

Gerald Holton (1988) postulates that William James’s (psychological) writings were instrumental in Niels Bohr’s development of complementarity theory in physics. Particularly important was James’s description of dissociative splitting and the resulting dualistic experience of reality (in *The Principles of Psychology*, 1890). In his highly influential 1927 address (Como, Italy) on the dilemma in physics presented by the Quantum Theory, Bohr proposed the use of the mind’s splitting capacity for managing “contrary themata inherited from the ‘classical’ period (before 1900) and from the quantum period (after 1900).” (Holton, 1970). Here is part of what Bohr would have read in James:

“It must be admitted, therefore, that in certain persons, at least, the total possible consciousness may be split into parts which coexist but mutually ignore each other, and share the objects of knowledge between them. More remarkable still, they are *complementary*. Give an object to one of the consciousnesses, and by that fact you remove it from the other or others...” (James, 1890, p. 206).

Bohr in 1927 (see Holton, 1970) generalized this description into what he considered the mind’s normal splitting of attention. He would eventually extend its range of application far beyond physics to biology, psychology, ethics, etc. He repeatedly reminded his students and colleagues of “the epistemological lesson which quantum mechanics has taught us.” Bohr saw profound thinking as fundamentally dialectical. He repeatedly told stories that illustrated the idea:

His summer neighbor was entertaining friends at his cottage. One guest remarked that he had noticed a horseshoe over the front door as he came in. He asked, "You don't believe, do you, that it will bring you good luck!?" His neighbor answered, "Of course not. I consider myself an intelligent man. (He paused.) But people tell me it works even if you don't believe in it."

Bohr said, clearly and forcefully, we *combine* apparently contradictory notions to produce the most complete picture possible. As a comprehensive scientific domain, physics relies on both classical Newtonian theory and post-1900 quantum theory, the two not compatible, not reconcilable, and *complementary*. Complementarity as a principle in scientific investigation in physics was essential. Each