

Business Ethics: The State of the Art

Edited by R. Edward Freeman

OUP 1991

Over half of these papers deal with the teaching of ethics, how it is possible and important, and what its limitations are. The context is invariably higher education in the USA, though, notwithstanding protests to the contrary, it is not always specifically business ethics that is being addressed. For those outside the academy, this discussion may sound introspective, but the contributions serve eloquently to rehearse the critical and essentially philosophical underpinnings of ethics, which is not to be equated with conventional morality (see "Will Success Spoil Business Ethics?" by Richard T. DeGeorge). The notion of a value-free approach to teaching ethics comes under sustained fire (in "Ethics as character development" by Lynn Sharpe Paine), as too does the paradigm of persons as essentially egoistic (in Robbin Derry's "Institutionalising Ethical Motivation").

These papers are refreshingly pragmatic. They get well away from the tiresome model of moral philosophy as fundamentally sceptical and destructive, and also avoid any dogmatic and infertile preoccupation with the traditional categories of ethical theory.

Apart from the many reflections on the nature of ethics and education, there is something too for the reader who is chiefly interested in how ethical concerns can intelligently be integrated into business life. One particularly strong contribution on this is that by Robbin Derry. This is preceded by a sharp riposte by Daniel R. Gilbert to a paper by Kenneth E. Goodpaster on "Ethical Imperatives and Corporate Leadership", which puts a sharp stop to any unreflective just reading along and forces on the reader some salutary independent thinking. Here the issue turns on where the attempt to provide moral leadership degenerates de facto into the mere imposition of a management value scheme. There is indeed no prima facie reason why those who have succeeded in climbing the corporate ladder should therefore be better equipped than others when the problems are ethical rather than commercial. On the other hand, I read Goodpaster as addressing well-meaning senior management and relatively narrow but still important ethical concerns within the big corporation. I wonder how much Goodpaster and Gilbert really differ.

The third section begins with "Rights in the Global Market" by Thomas Donaldson, which presents a practical guideline for companies operating in countries where political and other circumstances militate against (or even seem to exclude) ethical operation. Donaldson gives a table of the extent of "correlative" duties, namely to avoid depriving, to help protect and to aid the deprived, with regard to ten basic human rights. I can imagine this schema being genuinely helpful to corporate leaders looking for a rule of thumb as to how to conduct business in a moral minefield.

Edwin M. Hartman provides a refinement of Donaldson's taxonomy by adding an "avoiding helping to deprive" category to the three kinds of duty mentioned above. Hartman seems initially to be simply adding a technical refinement, which is then presented as a significant moral distinction. Towards the close of the paper, however, it emerges increasingly as a typically philosophical distinction, that one can query.

Often I had the feeling, not only in the latter paper, that too much attention was focused on the mere avoidance of wrong-doing. Yet virginity is achieved always at the cost of infertility. Conversely, moral courage can mean risking doing wrong, taking a harmful stance, being consequently branded as immoral. And as in epistemology, so too in ethics it is always possible to invent a doubt, with the difference that in ethics the invention will be more plausible or disturbing. Indeed, this is arguably how moral progress is made. What troubled me, however, while reading this and some other passages in the collection, was the apparent assumption that there are moral laws out there, waiting to be defined like the laws of the sciences and then demanding obedience like the laws of the land. Morality, though, surely (as other contributors elsewhere implicitly argue) is part of a wider culture, and also inevitably involves individual judgement, for which there can never be a failsafe guide.

Donaldson and Hartman focus their analyses on the long-running example of South Africa. The issue behind Hartman's argument seems to be that of divestment from countries with morally repugnant regimes. Interestingly, he does not confront the view that divestment pure and simple amounts to chickening out of the moral dilemmas. Nor does he properly bring out the fact that divestment is first and foremost a political decision. Yet it is useful to distinguish between political issues and moral ones, which is not to deny that politics has a moral dimension. (And political decisions too can be taken by default just as moral decisions can be.)

To my mind, the most exciting not to say seminal paper is that by Robert C. Solomon on Literacy and the Emotions. Its relationship to the topic of business ethics is tentative at best, and Solomon does not mean literacy, he means narrative. But in the light of so many insights, this is quibbling. The key contention is that narrative actually moulds, indeed defines emotional experience. The argument that fails entirely to surface is surely that literacy focuses narrative and so serves also to nurture emotional and, one hopes, ultimately moral experience too.

In summary, much of this anthology advocates the need for a liberal education, without which it is agreed that those in business will lack the imagination and the sensibility that are essential to ethics. But a note of caution, if I may. It is also essential to make the connection, and learn to make the connection, between the life of the imagination and the emotions, the life of story-telling, and the banal life of the corporation, day to day, where not literacy but numeracy, and be it a myopic numeracy, reigns supreme.

This said, *Business Ethics; the State of the Art* is a book about ethics and education, and the importance of "useless" pursuits such as literature in its various guises. I do not doubt the value or truth of these contentions. Business ethics sounds less interesting.