# Introduction: critical crossings

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## Why read this book?

Authors like to imagine that people read their books out of passion for the subject matter or at least out of a curiosity regarding the new perspectives that the text may yield. Years of teaching have, however, made this team of editors more realistic. This book was more likely assigned by your teacher, and bought with hard-earned money squeezed from an increasingly tight textbook budget. You are most likely opening it now because your teacher assigned the introduction for your first class meeting, or because you are eager, or anxious, or both, to know what will be expected of you in this course within the next few weeks. The other possibility is that you are a teacher yourself, trying to determine what your students should spend their money and time on. It is therefore pointless to convince you that this book is worth the money you or your students have spent and the time that all of you will devote to reading it over the next couple of weeks. We cannot convince you, even if we tried. Reading books is a uniquely personal activity. The journey that reading this book will take you on is shaped by who you are and by what you bring to the table in terms of questions, passions, and expectations. The best we can do is try to explain why we went to the trouble of putting this book together.

At face value, this book may look like a normal textbook. You will encounter facts, figures, tables, text boxes, learning goals, and all other things that one would expect from a decent textbook. Like many other business ethics textbooks, the material is interdisciplinary in nature. It aims to offer some philosophical perspectives on the business environment, and since it deals with the behaviour of systems and institutions, it draws on disciplines such as sociology and psychology as well. The global context in which businesses operate also requires the development of insight into political economy and cultural studies. The authors in this book therefore represent many different disciplines. They are also from different areas in the world. Some are philosophers, others are organizational theorists or business ethicists. They all share an interest in ethical issues about business and society.

A few things set the book apart from many of the other textbooks available within the business ethics field. The most important difference lies in the fact that this book offers some 'critical crossings'. This introduction's title should be read in all of its senses. In the first place, 'critical' means that we consider the

themes we address and the way in which we challenge the mainstream literature on these themes as important. We believe that if we can start to reconsider some of our basic understandings of certain business practices, it can make a difference to our world. This can only happen by changing people's orientation and practices. This is why you should understand the idea of 'crossing' not necessarily in the sense of crossing a bridge, or making a link, but rather as a willingness to take a critical stance, to 'cross' positions that may have remained unquestioned thus far, and to formulate a dissenting position if you come to the conclusion that you in fact disagree with a specific standpoint. Engaging in critical crossings by no means entails rejecting the *status quo* out of hand, nor does it mean agreeing with the dissenting position offered by the authors of this book. The important thing is that you formulate your own perspective after having had the opportunity to engage in a critical assessment of a variety of positions.

Another way in which what you are reading here is 'new' or 'unusual' is that it tries to link worlds that typically function miles apart. We are in the business of crossing divides, i.e. the divide which seems to exist between philosophers and business people, and between business ethics and a certain part of the philosophical tradition, i.e. continental thought. These divides are not 'natural facts', but rather something that has emerged over time. The Ancient Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle, were all philosophers of the market place (*agora*) where all kinds of activities took place: political, social, and commercial. They practised their philosophy amid the hustle and bustle of the trading and negotiating that was going in ancient Athens and elsewhere. The problem that we face in contemporary society is that this space, where both trade and socio-political and ethical discourses could flourish, was lost in the course of history. With it, the kind of conversations that were so characteristic of ancient philosophy disappeared as well. Nowadays, we do not take for granted anymore that philosophy and business might share the same space. On the contrary, most people would probably claim that business and philosophy belong to completely different realms. This book, however, can be seen as a modest attempt to recreate this space. Of course, it cannot recreate exactly the same kind of space the ancient philosophers occupied. Imagine a bunch of philosophers walking round our contemporary shopping malls asking people tricky questions and debating the socio-political and ethical state of society. They will most likely be removed by the mall security for bothering customers and distracting them from their spending sprees!

It is clear that the context has changed profoundly. We live in a globalized environment and this book is at once a product and symptom of this. New technologies, socio-economic dynamics, and cultural orientations have opened up new possibilities of how we can live, and we have to figure out how we want to do that. It may be difficult to find common ground on how to live given this pluralistic environment. However, we do believe that through a renewed engagement between philosophy and the world of commerce, a space may

emerge where dialogue and debate will become just as important as it was in ancient Greece. What we can still learn from the ancient philosophers is that it is important to challenge common wisdom and to critically interrogate the assumptions that we encounter in what we have known so far. In this respect, we need the help of the philosophers, and in this book we will frequently resort to continental philosophers.

## The divide between analytic and continental philosophy

This brings us to the second divide that matters to us, namely the one between analytic philosophy and continental philosophy. The distinction is important because business ethics is much more grounded in analytic philosophy than in continental philosophy. This implies that we should tell you a little bit about this notorious distinction.

Nobody knows exactly who is responsible for it. A meeting at a conference in the small Swiss city of Davos in Spring 1929 is often seen as the event that engendered this distinction.[1] At this conference, two very influential German philosophers, Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer, engaged in a discussion about the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). One of the attendants at the meeting was a young Austrian philosopher called Rudolf Carnap. This young man, who was already on his way to becoming one of the most famous analytic philosophers of his time, accused Heidegger, who is widely seen as perhaps the single most important continental philosopher of the twentieth century, of talking only 'mumbo-jumbo'. This accusation has led, at least among logicians, positivists, and other scientifically inclined philosophers, to either mirth or downright contempt. But it is not just a meeting between two philosophers that helped to bring about such a distinction. Carnap actually read Heidegger quite closely and remarked, in an article published in 1931, that Heidegger is driven by only one truly 'big question', to wit, 'the question of Being and nothing more'.[2] But what is the meaning of such a big question? Carnap frankly admitted he could not make much sense of such a question and offered some arguments that need not concern us here. The point that is interesting in the present context is that Carnap claims that Heidegger is a 'metaphysical' philosopher. He is adamantly clear about what this means:

> Metaphysical philosophers do not offer us 'propositions', that is to say, statements that describe the world and that are as such either false or true. They rather offer us something entirely different, something that might be an expression of our attitude to life, something that comes closer to poetry than to exact logical thinking.[3]

The allegation that metaphysical philosophy expresses pure artistry rather than logical ingenuity has haunted what came to be known as 'continental' philosophy. In the wake of Carnap, many analytic philosophers have claimed to abhor the 'metaphysics' that seems to underpin continental philosophy. There has been a lot of debate about whether the analytic portrayal of metaphysics is right, but we will not enter into that. However, you should know that there were times that it was taken for granted that metaphysics is the most important kind of philosophy since it allegedly asks the most basic questions that human beings can ask: What is the essence of life? What is the essence of being? Does the human soul exist and is it immortal? Carnap's way of denouncing all these questions as poetry, artistry, or pseudo-science was widely seen as challenging and provocative. The discussion between Carnap and Heidegger became emblematic of the divide between analytic philosophy and continental philosophy. Analytic philosophers think that not just Heidegger, but all continental philosophers are at best metaphysical poets or artists.

How did continental philosophers respond? Most of them simply ignored all these allegations and continued with the kind of work they were doing. But underneath this superficial indifference, it is clear that many continental philosophers think that analytic philosophers lack depth, are not rigorous, and engage in their own kind of metaphysics. Such a different kind of 'metaphysics' implies, for example, a naïve belief in the idea that science has straightforward access to objects in the world and does not experience any difficulties in phrasing unequivocal propositions about these objects. In fact, scientists operate in a world where hard facts have become increasingly exceptional. In this book, for example, we will see that issues such as globalization or sustainability are hardly ever uncontested and do not have the clear factual status some people may long for. Many continental philosophers alert us to the difficulties we may experience in accessing the world.

The following table outlines some of the distinctions between analytic and continental philosophy as seen from the perspective of analytic philosophy.

| Analytic philosophy | Continental philosophy |
|---|---|
| (as seen from the perspective of analytic philosophy) | |
| language analysis | poetical analysis, poetry itself |
| scientific | artistic at best, in fact nonsensical |
| disciplined | wild, unruly, anarchistic |
| politically neutral | politically left |
| methodological | chaotic |
| believe in the progress of knowledge | situational truths, contingency |
| really philosophical | rhetorical |

Having looked over the distinctions drawn above, you may feel that you would have preferred a business ethics text written from the perspective of analytic philosophy. After all, what is wrong with a disciplined, politically

neutral, methodological text that offers 'real' philosophical perspectives on business? As indicated above, this table of distinctions was drafted from the perspective of analytic philosophy, but one could easily redraft it to cast a more positive light on the continental perspective, and be more dismissive about the contributions of analytic philosophy. Many of the commitments of the analytic philosophers, especially their commitment to science, progress, and politically neutral analysis, have been questioned by the continentals. Some of this has its contextual origins in the political events in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. Especially the events of the second world war were pivotal in shaping the concerns of many continental thinkers. In fact, Auschwitz has been described as 'the collapse of reason'. Therefore, one can detect a distinct disillusionment with reason, science, and technology in the writings of many continental thinkers. The events of the war and the demise of humanity and morality during this time made it eminently clear that science, technology, and the desire for progress are neither politically neutral nor unequivocally 'good'. Continental philosophers made clear that some critical crossings in the realms of science, politics, and philosophy were desperately called for. One cannot continue, as analytic philosophers would propose, to venerate science as a bulwark of reason and objectivity.

However, it is not the purpose of this book to engage in philosophical hair-splitting about the pros and cons of either analytic or continental philosophy. Instead, we'd rather show you how specific continental philosophers do philosophy. Therefore, to give you a foretaste of the kind of philosophical work you can expect to encounter, we thought it may be helpful to introduce you to just some of the basic issues that concern continental philosophers. One example of such an issue is 'truth'. Thinkers like Nietzsche or Heidegger, who are often seen as the precursors of many of the key figures you will encounter in this book, had a problem with the big claims to 'truth' that we find within science or history. Nietzsche proposed that there are always very specific interests of power lurking behind these seemingly 'objective' claims. Heidegger agreed with Nietzsche in the sense that he also thought that language does not straightforwardly correspond to reality. Many continental philosophers would subsequently relate to this issue of truth, for example by arguing that truth is not a state of affairs, but rather an ongoing process. Others argued that instead of looking for all-encompassing explanations of reality, we should rather focus on specificity and particularity. In some cases, this led to a re-evaluation or downright condemnation of what came to be known as 'grand narratives' or 'big stories'. An example of such a big story would be the self-portrayal of science as a heroic quest for truth, or the history of humankind as a march from tyranny to more and more liberty. François Lyotard, a very influential French philosopher, proposed that philosophers and scientists should be more modest and only tell 'small stories'. Historians, for example, should henceforward not focus on the great events in our history (the battles, the revolutions, or the deeds of the big heroes) but on how all of this might have impacted on the lives

of smaller communities (particular trades, villages, or families). Small stories, so the argument goes, are taken from real life, whereas big stories lack any connection to it.

The skepticism regarding big and all-encompassing 'truths' led other continental figures such as Jacques Derrida to rethink the very nature of language. His idea of 'deconstruction' opened up the possibility that meaning and sense in language can be very slippery. Indeed, texts and words can obtain a significance that was initially not anticipated. In this book, we will see that many concepts used in business ethics – globalization, responsibility, value, or sustainability – have undergone a constant shift in meaning. Another key figure in this book, Gilles Deleuze, proposed to replace what he understood as 'transcendental' reason with a kind of 'vitalist empiricism' that would take concrete bodily affections and experiences as the point of departure. Like Nietzsche, Deleuze reminded us of the importance of emotion and embodiment, and we will return to this topic in many chapters of this book. For the moment, it suffices to note that many continental philosophers do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is or should be an entirely reasonable and disembodied endeavour. And what counts for knowledge, in this regard at least, also counts for language.

This very brief exposé of some of the issues that continental figures engage with should not, however, be read as a 'position statement' that all continental philosophers would subscribe to. On many issues they do not agree with one another at all. Therefore, they should most certainly not be portrayed as all singing the same tune, as if they were putting forward a homogeneous, coherent position. For instance, the German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk, responds to the fragmentation that the rejection of big stories might entail by deliberately constructing a new 'big story', which narrates how human beings have always been in the business of constructing and destroying the kind of communities he refers to as 'spheres'. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek dismisses Deleuze's vitalism as a philosophy that merely incites people to indulge in their own feelings rather than to be concerned about real problems in the world. Against this conceitedness, he hopes to reinvigorate a revolutionary zeal and clearly argues that big truths are needed for that. Only big stories engage people, not small stories. But this has, in turn, led Sloterdijk to accuse Zizek of flirting with the possibility of violence. If there is one lesson to be drawn from history, Sloterdijk argues, then it is that big stories can be dangerous, especially when they turn out to be political.

This debate between Deleuze, Zizek, and Sloterdijk serves to show that 'continental philosophy' is not a name for a unified tradition. However, what seems important to many of these thinkers – in spite of all their mutual differences – is to engage critically with the tradition that informs their own work, and with each others' work. Contemporary continental philosophers still take their inspiration from earlier philosophers who played an important role in the history of philosophy: Aristotle, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx,

and many others. They also reflect on thinkers who can be seen as their immediate predecessors: Nietzsche, Bergson, Blanchot, Batailles, and even someone like Ludwig Wittgenstein, who is a big name in analytic circles as well. All these philosophers cast doubt on some central tenets and values not only of philosophy but also of modern culture as such. However, it is important to note that continental philosophers never envisaged a radical rift with the history of philosophy. If, for example, Derrida talks about 'deconstruction', we should not forget that he never envisaged a wholesale attack on heroes of ancient or modern philosophy. In fact, it is a distinct characteristic of continental philosophers that they take the history of Western thought very seriously. Subtle and precise textual analyses of classical philosophical texts are the hallmark of much continental philosophy, something which has tempted commentators to label this philosophy as difficult and obscure.

We want to reiterate that the distinction between continental and analytic philosophy remains opaque and contentious. Also, we should never forget that the very notion of 'continental philosophy' has been created in the Anglo-Saxon world. Just a few philosophers in the continent would actually endorse the distinction even though many of them might deem 'analytic' philosophy to be boring, superficial, and overly rigid. Be this as it may, business ethics is firmly rooted in the analytic tradition and has largely ignored continental philosophy altogether. This is not to say that it does not add meaningful perspectives. Indeed, business ethics has embraced the analytic agenda and offered clear normative perspectives on important issues. It has, for example, formulated codes of conduct for business practitioners, it has developed new and important insights in the business environment (in terms of stakeholders, politics, and so on), and it has also raised important issues about worldwide processes such as capitalism and globalization and what businesses can do about them. Despite the advances made, however, we do believe that research in this area can be so much richer when it opens up to a long but neglected continental tradition of thought.

Continental philosophers suggest that one should always start from where one is. In terms of this project, it means that we should start with what has been produced in business ethics, and where that puts us at this specific juncture. As such the book wants to provide an accessible overview of what is available in the business ethics field and push us towards a critical reflection on where that leaves us. What do we mean by 'reflection'? It is clear that the discipline of business ethics has always been reflective, but in a somewhat different kind of way than what we will be proposing here. The field of business ethics reflects issues that are topical in the corporate world; it has indeed an enormous reputation in doing so. Yet, we maintain that it hardly ever discusses its own assumptions. Instead, business ethics has always been intent on improving the *status quo*, but was, in our opinion, much less inclined to questioning the *status quo*. This made it impossible to question commercial motivations such as yielding more profits, limiting liability, or building reputational value from

a normative perspective. The central question seems to have been how ethics could make business more profitable. The result is that it forecloses critical discussions of the idea of 'profit' and what it might mean for our society. In the process, many business ethicists forgot the most basic ethical question: How should we live? In our opinion, ethics should always remain questioning – if it fails to do this, it ceases to be ethics. Ethics is not primarily about answers, or solutions, but about questions, puzzles, or dilemmas. This does not mean that solutions cannot emerge, but they should always be submitted to the process of critical questioning. We argue that this is an important lesson that can be drawn from continental thought. The importance of this lesson will become more evident as we look into the meaning of concepts such as ethics or morality.

## Clarifying some basic concepts

In terms of establishing a common conceptual framework for your reading of the book, we would like to offer a brief description of certain key terms. It is yet another misconception that within continental philosophy 'anything goes' and that argumentation need not conform to rational restrictions. Though it is true that continental philosophy employs a slightly different conception of and stance to 'rational' deliberation, it by no means embraces irrationalism or relativism. Instead, it makes us aware of where our ideas about 'rationality' come from, and gives us an eye for the political, social, and economic context of our judgements. This does not mean that we cannot provide a framework for the concepts and that a certain rigour in argumentation isn't expected in putting forward continental philosophical positions. This makes it important to embark on some reflection regarding the typical terminology that is employed in the field of business ethics.

A few central concepts, such as 'morality', 'ethics', 'norm', 'value', 'principle', 'dilemma', 'relativism', or 'absolutism', are pivotal in the normative discussion and critical evaluation of business practices. The most central term is surely 'ethics'. When one asks any audience or group of students what comes to mind when they hear the word 'ethics', one typically gets the response that it is about right and wrong. But what does it mean to say that something is 'right' or 'wrong'? This question has kept philosophers occupied for centuries, and does not lend itself to simple answers. Suffice to say that 'right' or 'wrong' seems to make reference to what a specific society finds acceptable or unacceptable in terms of judgement, conduct, or institutional arrangements. This has led some theorists to argue that ethics is about morality. Morality can be defined as the whole of the current norms and values, i.e. ideas about 'right' and 'wrong' that exist in society. Certain beliefs about what is acceptable emerge over time and, after a while, some level of consensus seems to develop. The problem is that when ethics is just about what has emerged over time, we get stuck in one

of the most basic philosophical fallacies, i.e. the 'is–ought' fallacy. From the observation that something *is* the case, we do not need to infer that it *ought* to be the case. For example, to say that there have always been instances of injustice in our society, does not mean to say that there ought to be injustice. This brings us to an important distinction between ethics and morality. Whereas morality describes the current norms and values in society, ethics is the discipline of questioning whether we still agree with what is commonly accepted as right and wrong in society. It studies the norms and values of society, plots the factors involved in its emergence, and subjects it to critical scrutiny based on a philosophical interrogation of its validity and functioning within specific societies. If ethics loses this critical perspective, we have compromised its essence.

In order to perform its critical function, ethics has to engage particularly with concepts such as 'norms', 'values', and 'principles', since these are the notions that refer to society's beliefs and orientation regarding 'right' and 'wrong'. Values can be defined as enduring beliefs about what constitutes a preferable existence. It indicates what we consider a 'better' way of living. So, after having lived in society for centuries, we may come to realize that it is preferable to treat other people fairly rather than unfairly, either because those who are treated unfairly will revolt and protest against their treatment or because we realize that we ourselves would not like to be treated unfairly and that it would therefore be unconscionable to treat fellow human beings similarly. We therefore come to value certain states of existence.

These beliefs about what is valuable also dictate how we should act. Hence norms, which tell us how we should act from day to day, come into existence. Many modern philosophers have argued that norms provide a more binding perspective on values. But the perspective should not only be more binding, it should simultaneously be more general. The argument for this is that there must be some beliefs about right and wrong that transcend particular contexts. Kant, for example, argued that this transcendence can only be found in our reason. He argued that what set human beings apart was their capacity to come to rational precepts that all other rational creatures will be able to accept as normative. This allows us to formulate principles, which function as moral laws that we adhere to because of their rational appeal. Often terms such as values, principles, ethics, and morality are used as synonyms, and we by no means expected of our contributors to keep them neatly apart. The overall point is that all these terms refer to the same process of delineating 'good' versus 'bad' and 'right' versus 'wrong'. This is not so much a clear-cut conceptual issue as a judgement that is made on the basis of available knowledge, circumstances, and beliefs.

Therefore, some continental philosophers have come to the conclusion that it may be precisely the clear distinction that is drawn between 'right' and 'wrong' that requires ethical interrogation. Often these binary extremes function as political tools to protect those in power from criticism and dissent – in this sense, the 'right' can become pretty 'wrong'. Continental philosophers argue

for an awareness of the contextual particularity of norms and values. One aspect of this context is the power interests that lurk behind the use of moral terms such as 'good' or 'bad'. Contextual awareness alerts us to the fact that an appeal to 'what makes rational sense to all human beings' may be an oversimplified way of thinking about normativity. What seems to make perfect sense to one group of people, may not look so 'sensible' to others.

Let us consider an example that we are all familiar with in determining what is 'fair', namely the question whether downloading copyrighted music from the Internet without paying for it is unethical. A discussion of this example may typically reveal what we value. Normally, we are willing to pay people a certain amount because we place a certain value on their contribution, effort, talent, and uniqueness. So, there seems to be no reason why we should not pay for copyrighted music when we download it from the Internet. However, we may find some inconsistencies in these kinds of arguments and here too everything hinges on context: why is it that in normal contexts we would pay for music and why is it that the Internet apparently does not provide a normal context? For instance, we do not necessarily mind paying a few hundred dollars for a concert ticket, even if the famous artist will just make a thirty-minute appearance. But at the same time, we may have no problem justifying downloading that artist's song online without paying for it. If, by paying for the expensive ticket, we have already acknowledged the value of the artist's work, could we justify taking that asset without paying for it in a different context? Surely we don't want to say that we'll only pay the artist what his/her work is worth when we are forced to do so? That will be like admitting that we will steal as long as we do not get caught! But the argument is seldom that simple and we tend to have immense powers of rationalization in arguing what is fair.

Let us consider some more arguments relating to this example. As a relatively 'poor' student, you may argue that popular artists are rich anyway, and therefore do not 'deserve' or 'need' even more money. The question of effort also enters the debate – some students may argue that artists make quite enough money already by doing something that is a lot of fun, comes easily to them, and that they make enough through concerts anyway. They even argue that artists benefit from the marketing that they get when people download their music from the Internet, and therefore require no additional compensation. Another argument that downloaders all over the world would utilize is that it is not the artists who get the money but the record companies. Hence they do not steal any more from artists than others are already stealing from artists, and that the theft of songs online is stealing from the thieves themselves. This assumes a kind of Robin Hood attitude – stealing from thieves does not really amount to stealing. These arguments amount to a combination of the classic 'you too' argument: 'if you do it, why can't I?' Once again, the underlying philosophical fallacy is that *ought* is derived from *is*. The fallacy plays out like this: 'Cheating is a part of life, it happens all the time, and so cheating ought to happen all the time'.