

Business Ethics and Continental Philosophy

Business ethics has largely been written from the perspective of analytical philosophy with very little attention paid to the work of continental philosophers. Although very few of these philosophers directly discuss business ethics, their ideas have interesting applications in this field. This innovative textbook shows how the work of continental philosophers – Bauman, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, Jonas, Latour, Levinas, Nancy, Nietzsche, Sartre, Sloterdijk, and Žižek – can provide fresh insights into a number of different issues in business ethics. Topics covered include agency, stakeholder theory, organizational culture, organizational justice, moral decision-making, leadership, whistle-blowing, corporate social responsibility, globalization, and sustainability. The book includes a number of features designed to aid comprehension, including a detailed glossary of key terms, text boxes explaining key concepts, and a wide range of examples from the world of business.

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Foreword

For too long, business ethics has been the captive of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Ethical theory to most business ethicists means the traditional trifecta of consequentialism (usually utilitarianism), deontology (usually Kant), and virtue ethics (usually Aristotle). While this has been quite useful in the academic beginnings of the field, it is high time that we begin to connect these now traditional texts and arguments in business ethics with other traditions in the humanities.

Business ethics was born in scandal. It seems to regenerate itself with each succeeding wave of scandal. And, there are two problems here. The first is that our world is so interconnected that we can no longer afford to see business as a separate institution in society, subject to its own moral code. Business must be thoroughly situated in society. This means that we can no longer accept the now rather commonplace narrative about businesspeople being economic profit-maximizers and little else. Business is a deeply human institution set in our societies and interconnected all over the world. The second problem is that business ethics, by being reborn in scandal, never escapes the presumption that business starts off by being morally questionable. It never seems to get any credit for the good it brings into the world, only questions about the bad. In fact, capitalism may well be the greatest system of social cooperation that we have ever invented. But, if it is, then it must stand the critical test of our best thinkers, if for no other reason than to make it better. Simply assuming that capitalism is either unquestionably morally good or unquestionably morally problematic violates both scholarly and practical norms.

Analytical business ethics and its concurrent management theory has produced much that is useful to theorists and managers, from employee rights to stakeholder theory, social contract theory, corporate responsibility and sustainability models, and much more. However, there is almost a non-human quality to some of these ideas, as they take for granted the underlying social scientific reasoning, which is primarily economic in nature. Again, while economics has been an important cornerstone for business theory, there is much more to consider if we are to return the institution of business to its rightful place as a deeply human institution.

There are very few people who could put together this book. Hopefully the old tensions between ‘continental’ and ‘analytic’ philosophers have passed. However, I’m afraid they are still alive in business ethics. The late business ethicist, Robert Solomon, when asked whether he was a continental or analytical

philosopher, replied ‘what are the politics that are at stake by asking that question?’.

What Professors Painter-Morland and ten Bos have done is to make the question moot. They have crafted an outstanding volume that speaks to the issues with which analytical business ethics has been concerned, and then demonstrates how to think about these issues in a very different way. They invoke the theory of Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Zizek, and others that may be foreign to many business ethicists and students, yet they show how much these thinkers have to offer us.

They have put together a cutting-edge collection of chapters that has the possibility to transform business ethics as a discipline. They set business in its broadest societal and human context, and ask us to see business as just one more part of the continuum that we humans have woven together. At the end of each chapter I found myself wanting to read more and thinking differently about issues that I had believed to be long settled, even in my own research. There is much here with which to agree and disagree. That means that Painter-Morland and ten Bos have vastly enriched our conversation about business and ethics.

This is an important book for business ethics as a field. It will repay reading, many times over, and we will see the results as a more human, socially conscious, discipline of business ethics.

R. Edward Freeman

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