Introduction

"Business is a human enterprise. To be good in business is to be a good human being."[1] These two sentences sum up the great majority of research and writing on business ethics. Ordinarily, business ethics is a humanistic undertaking. Its key proponents ask businesspeople to be as decent, honest, caring, cooperative, and respectful at work as they are in other contexts.

Robert Solomon wanted to change the narrative about business by writing about business as a humanistic enterprise. He believed that the theory of business ethics should derive from practice and from positive stories about how people become successful by behaving responsibly. Solomon was right that narratives have power in our imaginations and actions, and he may also have been right to describe a business humanism grounded in classical virtues. But classical virtues are not sufficient to traverse the convoluted expanse of modern business responsibility.

The business world is bewilderingly complex, and businesses are often structured in ways that multiply these complexities, intentionally obfuscating responsibility. We have long since departed from the realm of sensible responsibility where a professional can manage the consequences of her work by taking care of the people with whom she has contact. As long as we apply kin-based interpersonal responsibility to the modern workplace, business ethics will fail to account for the global scope of business impact. Such a morality, born in the nuclear family, becomes unreliable as complexity increases.

Traditional business ethics is arguably part of the problem. It may seem like progress to say that managers are responsible to employees for substantive provisions like a living wage and a safe workplace. It may seem like progress to place managers and employees in the same moral community and to acknowledge the obligations that follow from their interdependence. But if we allow organizational boundaries to define the scope of responsibility and managers to define the scope of organizational boundaries, then we empower managers to distance

themselves from whomever they choose, even if their actions directly affect these parties. Since it is often costly to treat people responsibly, offloading these costs can improve (or seem to improve) business performance. Things take a perverse turn when managers are able to use the language of business responsibility as camouflage for a campaign to limit their real moral obligations.

The call to move business ethics beyond the narrow scope of in-group loyalty is not new; it has been a central theme in both critical management studies and supply chain ethics for more than a decade. But while the question is well established, my answer is not. I propose that we expand the circles of moral regard around businesses through a better understanding of the physical, tangible materials with which businesses deal. The human scope of a business entity's moral community is the conclusion in my analysis rather than the point of departure. Material stuff forms the reaching tendrils of our economy. As such, we will not start with people, but with the things that bring people together. By looking closely at these things and our relationships to them, we will find new ways of organizing our moral responsibilities and moral communities. The shift in focus allows us to transcend the firm and its boundaries, to know the moral scope of our work without reference to the distortions of managerial fiat.

Often, objects will lead us back to people and to the same forms of dignity with which we should treat everyone, but through objects we can assemble a moral system that is much more elaborate and comprehensive than we could ever develop without them. Thus, material things function as a sort of moral scaffolding that we will erect in order to build an ethical system. The scaffolding is not the substance of the ethic, and it can even be removed once construction is complete, but without moral scaffolding it is impossible to build a system of morality with the reach that the modern economy requires.

Starting with Objects

Every living thing is entangled in a complex web of material relationships. Humans are no exception. We rely upon physical, chemical, and biological processes, depending on things at every scale.

Many of our relationships with material things exist in a balance. The Earth's massive core draws us to the ground, and it is the

combination of this gravitational force and the adequate thickness of the atmosphere pushing oxygen into our lungs that allows us to breathe. Our evolved fitness to a specific material environment is such that if the Earth were bigger or its atmosphere thinner, the structure of our lungs would cause us to be poisoned or to asphyxiate. The specific properties of these things, of the Earth's mass, the gases in the atmosphere, and the membranes in our lungs make our lives possible.

Yet traditional moral theories take little interest in material stuff. We are taught that ethics works from intentions and agency. Material things lack both. This book will complicate the simplified understanding of objects as inert, meaningless props in an anthropocentric morality. It will show that objects act, and that people can find a sense of responsibility in objects.

Both social science and humanistic writing have recently turned toward material things. The turn is partly caused by the proliferation of human-made things in the world and the rising significance of these objects for the way that we work, live, and communicate. But the more pressing global cause of the materialist turn is ecological. The relationship between people and material objects is of special interest now as we place unprecedented pressure on our biophysical environment. Our ancestors had no reason to think that the oxygen a fire consumed and the carbon dioxide it released would eventually change the weather. Until recently, that thought was unthinkable. But as our impact has increased, so has our scientific knowledge. Human conduct, having no precedent at the present scale, is a massive environmental experiment with only one trial and an uncertain result. As preliminary findings accumulate, we begin to realize that the relationships between things are much more complicated than we previously imagined. Today, the threat of global climate change forces us to confront species-level impact as a matter of public policy and private responsibility. To do so, we must think about things.

New Understanding, New Norms

This is a transformative moment, one where new norms are born and old conventions crushed. History may eventually look at our disregard for CO_2 emissions with as much disgust as we now feel when we

imagine the sewage-filled streets of a medieval city. "How could they live that way?" our descendants may ask of us.

Relationships between people and things do change over time. The trouble with CO_2 emissions is that we cannot see them and we have to infer their consequences. But again, there is precedent. Our eyes also cannot see the germs that make us sick. Before germ theory, custom alone gave cause to wash hands. Doctors did not think twice about moving directly from autopsies to obstetrics. When Ignác Semmelweis observed high death rates among mothers whose babies were delivered by doctors and further observed that these doctors came directly from autopsies, he inferred the existence of germs and gave medical professionals a new reason to wash their hands.[2] Now, we look back on these practices and pass judgment. Everything seems wrong. It seems revolting that a doctor would not wash his hands before delivering a baby, but Semmelweis was widely disbelieved at the time. Then, as now, perceptions of things were ripe for change.

What will these changes be? What kinds of insights will guide them? Climate change interventions may begin with science, but the norms of environmentalism depend on a much wider application and a new public consciousness of the environmental consequences of material consumption. Nonhuman things give order to this new consciousness. New linkages are already being formed between the energy intensity of production and use, and the things that require this intensity. As Jane Bennett argues in her book, *Vibrant Matter*, "the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption."[3]

In writing this book, I hope to improve the language and methods that business ethicists use to talk about responsibility. Looking at objects more closely can guide our moral ascriptions more efficiently to apply the right responsibilities to the right firms and employees. But blame is not my cause; responsible business practice is the primary objective. I wish to change the way that business is done, to starve rather than feed firms' "earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption." It is not only business ethicists but also managers who must change the way that they see things. Chapters 1, 7, and 8 all speak directly to practical problems in the business application of object-based stewardship. In practice, we discover problems and try out solutions. And yet, fundamental problems do not get solved by practice alone; we need to use practice to hone our insights and to develop better

theories for action. I explore objects and the problems that objects can solve as a theory for action that prescribes practical change. As Semmelweis showed, to learn to wash, first we must see that our hands are dirty.

Objects for Humans' Sake and Objects for Objects' Sake

Though the threat of an ecological crisis raises some of the most pressing calls to ascribe moral meaning to material objects, there are other forces in play. Many consumers, activists, and researchers are deeply concerned about the human costs of global production. Fair-trade labeling schemes provide moral cues to consumers, embedding moral meaning about human welfare into material products. Fair-trade labels remind purchasers that coffee is more than a flavor profile and stimulant, and that the beans they grind have a very different meaning to the people who grow them.

Coffee is an interesting character in the development of global capitalism. The proliferation of its cultivation across numerous small patches of mountainous soil began with the observation that coffee was expensive. Historically, the obscure mountain origins of the beans set the price, but as cultivation spread to new regions, supply increased more rapidly than demand and prices fell. Coffee roasters benefited most significantly from a rise in consumption and the decrease in input costs.

Fair-trade labeling schemes are designed to emphasize the human aspects of a supply chain. But coffee's tale is also one of soils, plants, and coffee cherries. It is the mountainous terrain where coffee grows and coffee cherries' tendency to ripen unevenly that gives manual labor an advantage relative to mechanized harvesters. The lives of the pickers who scour the hills are shaped as much by the attributes of the plants as they are by the structure of the market for coffee. The plants do not play an inert role: they act to shape human behavior. They become what Bruno Latour calls actants, which "*emerge in surprising fashion*, lengthening the list of beings that must be taken into account."[4]

Placing our species at the center of the system of meaning skews our perspective on material entanglements. While we play a special role insofar as we are the ones perceiving and evaluating, we must decide what else to make special and to endow with meaning. Doing so is

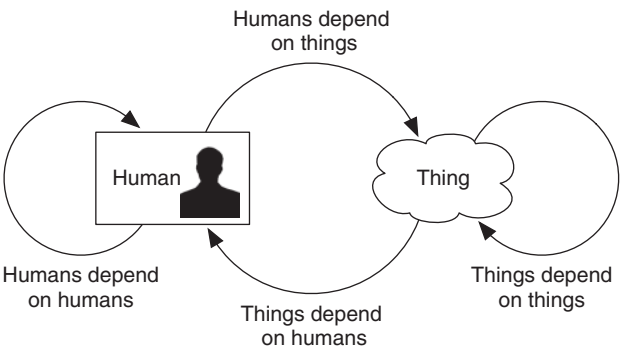

Figure 1.1 Dependences

initially an empirical matter. As Ian Hodder has argued, we depend upon things and things depend upon us, just as things depend upon other things.[5]

In the case of coffee, people depend upon plants and plants depend upon weather conditions. Increasingly, these climate conditions are believed to be precarious. A 2016 report on the future of coffee cultivation warned that as much as half of the land where coffee is currently being cultivated may not be suitable for coffee production by 2050.[6]

Climate change is one of many forces in play that is helping people to construct new meaning around objects, but material dependence is an important part of everyday life. Think of the things that you carry when you leave your house: a phone, some keys, and probably a wallet. Each thing serves as a gateway to a whole system of communication, resources, and exchange. We cover ourselves in things, ride around in things, fix things at work, and buy things for play. Our relationships with these things are not simple. Some of them afford us benefits that we desire; others make us dependent upon them in ways that are not desirable. Some things bring us together; other things, like flies and the SARS coronavirus, force us to create boundaries. Hodder distinguishes between dependence and dependency, reserving the latter term for the kinds of reliances that reduce options. Dependence is the more general category, which includes some historical relationships. For example, the development of telephones was unlikely to precede the discovery of the telegraph. The possibility of transmitting signals through wires needed to be discovered before that signal could be refined to transmit

a complex sound. The relationship between the phone and the telegraph is one of dependence, not dependency.

There are situations in which the historical origins of ideas and cultural artifacts warrant moral consideration, especially where these elements have special significance to an unacknowledged group or when someone unfairly profits from expropriation.[7] The commercialization of culture raises a number of questions about indigenous rights and ownership,[8] and these are worthy of study. However, I will focus on the more general system of functional object dependence, where things need other things in an immediate sense rather than a historical or developmental sense. The extensive network of interdependence is important for understanding how systems work and how we take care of their elements. Though historical dependence is a part of this story, the fact that the Internet comes after modems which come after phone lines is less significant for our normative analysis than the fact that computers require energy, materials, and eventually disposal. In fact, as we will discuss later, computers are sometimes put forth as a characteristic example of dematerialized production (see Materiality for Business Ethics in Chapter 8).

Tracing these dependences acknowledges the social and physical complexity of entirely mundane tasks. Imagine that you need to make a shopping list to cook a simple dinner. Your task begins with the ingredients. If you're cooking at home, the list may be short, but if you're camping, it gets longer. Campers cannot rely upon the availability of kitchen implements. They cannot get salt and pepper from the shelf. The list grows again if we account for the knowledge that makes a meal possible, knowledge of hygiene, flavor, cooking time, the operation of equipment, etc. Now suppose we add the resources that were necessary to create our ingredients. We use energy to prepare, package, and refrigerate ingredients. Adding these items to our list further expands the dependence we have on things. Cows eat grass and grain. One pound of beef also requires almost 7,000 liters of water.[9] These are secondary ingredients. Now imagine that we add the tertiary inputs. Tertiary ingredients include fertile soil, pesticides, roads, and additional water used to create secondary ingredients.

Many of the things in this web have dependences of their own. Things depend on people as well. Edible plants, for example, are ecologically precarious. The hybrids that are best for human consumption would not thrive on their own. With a few exceptions, such as

mint, most plants that people eat are outcompeted by more vigorous plants that people do not like to eat. In service of the preferred plants, humans maintain a delicate ecological niche. Thus, even as people rely upon these plants for food, the plants also rely upon people for care and protection from competition. In the introduction to *Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan compares a gardener to a bumblebee, and asks whether both the gardener and the bee are deceiving themselves to imagine that they are the ones choosing which plants and flowers to favor. Instead, "the flower has cleverly manipulated the bee into hauling its pollen from blossom to blossom."[10] Pollan's project is an imaginative one, a perspective-taking exercise that recognizes how plants rely on people for their ecological success in a coevolution that shapes both organisms.

These reliances go far beyond biological forms. Think of the aging infrastructure of a city. Water flows under streets and washes foundations away; it freezes and thaws, creating cracks and fissures. Walls lean and crumble; paint cracks. In time, glass pools downward and thins at the top. Everything degrades. Even things that seem relatively stable in a human lifespan require people to make them useful. A toll bridge is not especially ephemeral, but its economic and regulatory structure is only sustained through human labor.

In philosophy, the movement to reappraise the meaning of things began with Kant, who recognized that all things, whether people or objects, are mediated by mental representations in the way that we understand them. But where Kant wished to reify the distinction between morally free subjects who make choices and these mental representations, postmodernists have since sought to dismantle or complicate this distinction, leveling the playing field of subjects and objects.

This book is not necessarily a work of postmodernist philosophy. With the exception of a short discussion of Heidegger, it makes only episodic references to the literatures that inspire postmodern thinkers. Instead, it is grounded in a pragmatic reappraisal of things as key factors in the way that we decide to be responsible. Pragmatists deal with many of the same problems that concern postmodernists. However, postmodern philosophy is not as open to the uses of modern social systems and technology as pragmatism tends to be. As Ryder describes, postmodern philosophy "is guilty of an abuse of modernity in failing to recognize its contributions to intellectual development and

in rejecting it more or less wholesale." In comparison, pragmatism provides "a positive alternative."[11] Rather than despair of the challenges that modernity presents, pragmatists augment critique with adaptation in an effort to realize better possibilities. Likewise, objects and their networks of dependence provide the substance for both critique and adaptation.

This text will highlight the chains of dependence in which people and things are entangled, demonstrating the relevance of these chains for business responsibility. It will show that objects have their own stories, and that telling these stories helps us to develop a more comprehensive account of social and environmental responsibility for businesses and businesspeople.

How to Think Things

In this text, I will argue that complex networks of things and people are morally relevant to us in ways that we often forget. I explore the stewardship of material objects as a way to address social and environmental issues within a complex global economy. To make this argument, we will have to think much more sensitively than we normally do about the histories and consequences of the things with which we are entangled.

Thoughts in this vein are increasingly fashionable. A lively conversation about things, materials, matter, and stuff has already caught on in anthropology, archaeology, sociology, and in interdisciplinary fields like science and technology studies. Though many scholars trace the material conversation through figures like Aristotle, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, and Darwin, the proximate cause of our captivation with things is much closer to hand. In the uncertain ecological future of our planet and a materialistic economy, it is hard not to take notice of the ways that matter matters. Scholars are drawn into writing about things, not so much by the history of scholarship as by the present and future of our societies and cultures. Now, more than ever before, it is necessary that we confront the place of things in our social, political, and economic systems.

As fashionable as it may be, writing about things presents significant challenges. Things are everything. As we confront them, we face what Theodor Adorno calls the "preponderance of the object."[12] Faced with

the plurality of things, it is impossible to categorize and control the whole range. Academic knowledge ordinarily develops by breaking the world into small pieces of expertise, but material things cannot always be structured and studied in this way.

Scholars often approach objects from the perspective of their academic disciplines. The boundaries of professionalized scholarship partition the intellectual encounter with things, separating the functions of objects within the psychology of identity, the communication of symbolic meaning,[13] the structure of interpersonal and intergroup power,[14] and the formation of political groups.[15] These specific roles each yield different examples, and objects become touchstones in the process. Thus, the pumps in laboratories become an object of inquiry into the relationships with things in science,[16] the transformation of uses and techniques of ceramics organizes a wide array of studies into ancient civilizations, and the treatment of the human body becomes a study of the extent and form of political domination.[17] While these things and their interactions operate in distinctive ways within a disciplinary dialogue, the objects themselves remain undisciplined. Vacuum pumps are not only a character in the discovery of Boyle's law, but also a character in factories that vacuum seal food and in the production of lightbulbs. Moreover, objects allow for multiple perspectives from different people and different objects: "[w]indow panes are designed to be looked through rather than to be looked at, unless one is a window cleaner."[18] In order to understand objects, we must also understand their relationships to each other and the distinctive perspectives that different people with different expertise bring to them.

Academic studies of material objects must also work through a fraught intellectual history. Marx's materialism juxtaposed the power of things with the power of ideas, claiming that historical materialism could help us to understand the false consciousness of ideas. As Shiping Tang explains, "epistemologically, materialism holds . . . it is always better to explain social facts with material forces than with ideational forces."[19] Tang proposes that these ways of thinking can be complementary, that materialism can augment other ways of theorizing. To argue otherwise places the dogmatic Marxist in an illogical position, since historical materialism is itself an idea.

While I use materials as Marx did to develop ideas about social processes, the approach taken here gives objects much more room to