



*Business Ethics for a Material  
World*

Increasingly, conscientious consumers and green marketers are recognizing that material things, not firms, are the locus of social and ecological responsibility. Even so, many scholars in ethics, sustainability, and governance focus on people and organizations, ignoring the flows of things.

In this book, Ryan Burg argues that material things are fundamental features of moral life, serving as both valuable instruments and guides for responsibility. Unless care is taken for these nonliving entities, living things cannot be protected. Viewing the global economy as a network of material transfers, Burg argues that to facilitate object care, professionals must act as stewards. By tracing the origins and disposal of workplace objects through this material network, businesses and employees can discover the outcomes for which they are responsible, and managers can align ethics, sustainability, and governance with a truly global formulation of responsibility.

RYAN BURG is Visiting Assistant Professor in the College of Management at Bucknell University. He holds a joint PhD in Business Ethics and Sociology from the Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania, and his dissertation was a finalist for the Social Issues in Management Dissertation award. Professor Burg is also a cofounder of the Responsible Endowments Coalition, a national organization that supports the student-led responsible investment movement on college and university campuses.

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# Business Ethics for a Material World

An Ecological Approach to Object  
Stewardship

RYAN BURG

*Visiting Assistant Professor, Bucknell University*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India  
103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781316634004](http://www.cambridge.org/9781316634004)

DOI: 10.1017/9781316869147

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First published 2018

First paperback edition 2022

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Names: Burg, Ryan, author.

Title: Building market ethics of material things : an ecological approach to object stewardship / Ryan Burg, National Research University, Moscow.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017024709 | ISBN 9781107183018

Subjects: LCSH: Sustainable development – Moral and ethical aspects. | Business ethics. | Material culture. | Materials.

Classification: LCC HD75.6 .B863 2017 | DDC 174/.4–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017024709>

ISBN 978-1-107-18301-8 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-316-63400-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-63400-4 — Business Ethics for a Material World  
Ryan Burg  
Frontmatter  
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*For Sherman and Marlo, collectors of stuff  
and stewards of things*

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## *Foreword*

Ryan Burg suggests that the normal way we think about business ethics is in need of a radical reorientation. He suggests that the sheer complexity of modern business requires new narratives and new ways of thinking. The complexity of business today obscures the important relationships between people and objects, and most of contemporary business ethics starts with people, and adds the context of business.

Burg's reorientation will seem quite strange to many. He suggests that we start with things and objects, rather than people. He says that we need to understand "the physical, tangible materials with which business deals." It is only by starting with things, and in particular the things that matter and affect the stakeholders of a business, that we can even begin to assign responsibility in a meaningful way.

It is easiest to see Burg's view if we look at the physical environment, but he goes far beyond sustainability in his analysis and prescriptions. If we are to address many of our societal issues, we must address the stewardship of objects, and that is impossible without understanding the objects themselves and the roles they play in human society.

Philosophically, Burg is a pragmatist. He is deeply rooted in practice and in the phenomena he writes about. Starting ethics with "things" engenders a raised eyebrow and a "why in the world would you do that" look. This is precisely the kind of new narrative that we need for the twenty-first century. And it is precisely that kind of book that this series on Business, Value Creation, and Society is proud to publish.

My hope is that this book will be one of many more to come that will help us develop a better business ethics, and continue to make business and capitalism a system of value creation and trade that is truly fit for human beings.

R. Edward Freeman  
*Series Co-Editor*  
*January 2017*

## *Acknowledgments*

This book benefitted from a passel of supportive teachers, colleagues, and friends. Tom Donaldson and Diana Robertson read early drafts and provided helpful feedback. Bill Laufer gave invaluable advice on organizing the manuscript. Ruben Flores, Manuel Maroto, and Yuval Weber provided constructive scrutiny on a more mature (and much longer) draft. Ryan Fehr collaborated on a paper on the moralization of objects and challenged me to clarify several concepts in the process. Three anonymous reviewers contributed helpful suggestions.

The Higher School of Economics in Moscow provided the time and resources to write. At HSE, Nikolay Filinov, Veronika Kabalina, and Valentina Kuskova deserve special thanks for their collegiality and guidance. The Zicklin Center for Business Ethics Research at the Wharton School of Business provided the research assistantship of Emma James, who was endlessly helpful in gathering and organizing materials that were unavailable in Russia.

On the subject of Russia, I should not write a book about material things without acknowledging my own entanglements. My ecological imagination owes a special allegiance to South Dakota, my productivity to Moscow's weather, and my income to a petrostate-funded university. Make of these entanglements what you will; an ecological consciousness admits of many contradictions.

Writing is a solitary activity, but publishing is an act of engagement. This book is an invitation to anyone who is ready to make room for things in the crowded moral space of the modern firm. There is much to be done, and we will need to work together.

I have been fortunate to find a community of thoughtful and creative scholars who take ideas seriously. I will single out Robbin Derry, Eric Orts, Mollie Painter-Morland, Stephen Pavelin, Rob Phillips, Caddie Putnam Rankin, Noah Buckley, Lili Di Poppo, Benjamin Lind, David Szakonyi, and Valery Yakubovich among the many

*Acknowledgments*

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important interlocutors in my academic life. Ed Freeman deserves special mention. His scholarship and leadership in the field of business ethics made this project possible. I am grateful to these friends and mentors, and to numerous others who make the study of organizational ethics a joyful undertaking.

At Cambridge University Press, Valerie Appleby has been efficient and encouraging. Daniel Brown conscientiously guided this manuscript and its moving parts to completion. The text benefited from their professionalism. It was a special pleasure to work with Todd McLellan to develop the cover image. His worldmaking deserves special acknowledgement.

Some of my debts in writing this book can never be repaid, most notably my debt to Thomas Dunfee. Aspects of this book's thesis emerged a decade ago in a conversation with Tom, who has since passed away. We disagreed about whether business ethics scholars expect too little from corporations. I said that shareholder activists and conscientious consumers are right to set high expectations for firms. I defended the way that some consumers moralize objects and demand product stewardship across the length of a supply chain. In a sense, Tom agreed, but he stipulated that firms must also be free to define and pursue their interests. Law, he argued, creates boundaries around firms so that they can do so. I make a case that the responsibilities of object stewardship exceed the legal boundaries of the firm, but I have tried to keep Tom's insights in mind. His passing was a great loss for his family, friends, colleagues, and students. This book would likely be better if Tom Dunfee were here to read it.

Beyond professional tributes, I wish to thank my parents and sister for their continuous support. The newest member of our family, Stella, has played the least constructive role in this book's completion, but I could not be more delighted by the distractions she provides. Her mother is a different story. My deepest gratitude is to Imanni for making my life more livable and my writing more readable. Without her, I would be bearded and lost in the wilderness. Other textual cleanups are thanks to Dominic Fean, Seraphina Davey, Anna Gomberg, Andrew Matheny, and Laura Mills. All mistakes are my own.