



# Reconnecting to the Social in Business Ethics

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In their previous reflections on the scope of Journal of Business Ethics, Greenwood and Freeman (2017) noted the need for a double movement at the journal—one toward focusing specifically on ethics as a connecting thread across the journal and one towards broadening the scope of ethics across disciplinary and paradigmatic communities. This dual concern over focus and breadth reflects a tension, as old as the field itself, deriving from the observation that ethics is both ubiquitous and yet difficult to grasp in any one specific part of social activity. Reflected in the construction of business ethics programs and curricula, as well as in delimiting business ethics as a field of scholarship, situating business ethics *in* the world while retaining its unique vantage point *upon* the world is a defining feature and a core challenge of our field.

Over the five years since Michelle Greenwood and Ed Freeman took on leadership of Journal of Business Ethics, the journal has faced this challenge by broadening into new areas of ethical inquiry (such as Sociology, Psychology, Global Studies, among others), while applying the criteria of ethical relevance across all sections of the journal. Rather than taking for granted the ethicality/unethicality of given actions, authors have been challenged to “critically explore and assess” (Greenwood & Freeman, 2017, p. 2) the ethical premises of business practices, a point that applies equally to normative or descriptive approaches. Under the current editorial team, we plan to continue and extend the spirit of this approach, maintaining and extending the plurality of Journal of Business Ethics and drawing upon it to reveal diverse aspects of ethics as a foundation upon which social life is built.

By saying that social life is built upon ethics, we mean to highlight the central importance of normative processes of

argumentation and legitimation, but also on morally-charged feelings such as solidarity, justice and empathy, and the ethical foundations of action, from the courage of contestation to the slow, patient work of institution building.

In a complex society of differentiated roles, partial knowledges, and global-scale, technologically-mediated business processes, it may seem simplistic to insist on the ubiquity of the ethical. The forces shaping our contemporary world—human, non-human, technological, geological—seem to surpass the simple judgments of people, and yet our judgments in the next years will be of critical importance. In this context, business ethics scholarship must deepen its engagement with the social to understand, evaluate and guide action in dialogue with society.

We believe that the tendency to divide business ethics scholarship between social science and philosophy, with considerations of the social world on one side and philosophical thinking on the other, is both reductive and limiting to the field, and should be discouraged. The challenge of moving beyond this divide will require development at the levels of theory, empirical analysis, and practical relevance. Below, we point to three broad and interrelated ways in which this project could be carried forward. First, we raise the idea of evaluation, suggesting that bringing evaluation into normative ethics promotes an action-orientation hitherto lacking. Second, we advocate the thickening of descriptive ethics as a way that it can contribute meaningfully to normative frameworks. And third, we suggest that we can surpass both the descriptive and the normative by radicalizing our imaginations for future possibilities.

## Bringing Evaluation to Prescriptive Ethics to Orient Action

One way to reconnect to the social is to recognize business ethics’ role not only in understanding ethics *in* business, but also using ethics to evaluate the role(s) *of* business in society as such. A great deal of business ethics literature has been concerned with the former, asking whether specific practices

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are ethical or unethical, asking how business can engage in more ethical practices, or describing the conditions under which ethical practices are conducted. Studying the ethics of business, however, involves asking about the roles that society should allocate to business, and where the limits of those roles should be. To what extent, and in what ways, can and should business contribute to spheres of social life outside of the economic as traditionally conceived? While liberal social theory tends to separate society into “value spheres” of economic, political and social life, contemporary business seems to unsettle these limits, deeply shaping civil society through mediated communication and political life through the provision of formerly state-run services. In doing so, business reshapes the contours of the social, and one task of business ethics is to help understand and evaluate this tectonic evolution in the role of business and society.

Helpful in this context is a distinction made by Williams (1985) between ethical analyses involving “prescription” and those involving “evaluation”. While prescriptions involve ethical arguments about what is good or bad to do (e.g., one should treat colleagues with kindness, comply with accounting standards, etc.), evaluative statements pertain to what the world should look like (e.g., economic activity should reinforce or not undermine social/civic freedom, human rights, etc.). Prescriptive analyses begin from specific, often taken for granted projects of actors in the world, analyzing their ethics as actors. Evaluative analyses allow critical reflection on those projects and their wider purview, supporting structural critique as well as guiding action. Prescription focuses on the approbation or condemnation of actions, while evaluation promotes systemic understanding by focusing on the realities built through action. Both involve description and judgment, and both rely on each other—action takes place against an implicit background world of forces, objects, and institutions, and evaluating that world contains an implicit tendency to acting upon it. As necessary moments in ethical analysis, they are inseparable yet distinct elements from which business ethics scholarship can be built.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to emphasize the counterpoint that evaluation offers to prescription as it promotes both action-orientation and critical understanding in our field. Wary of becoming mired in an overly scholastic, and sometimes depressingly negative critique of the world and its injustices, focusing on concrete action and actors retains hope in the possibility to influence business practices for the better. Such action, however, always relies on imagined realities

that may be tacit, and that need to be interrogated critically; failure to do so turns the urgency for action into acritical ideology and eschews scholarship’s responsibility to support action through knowledge production. In short, business ethics literature must practice critical inquiry while remaining attuned to the exigences of practice.

## Bringing Evaluation to Descriptive Ethics to Thicken Concepts

A second point pertains to the relation between normativity and description in business ethics. As has been noted (e.g., Mees, 2018), business ethics literature has transformed in recent years due to the burgeoning of “descriptive” ethics, whose goal is empirical description of ethical life rather than normative judgment; a development which has stimulated “friendly debates” between philosophers and social scientists about the nature of empirical data in business ethics (Werhane 1994, p. 175). The main driver of descriptive ethics is the psychologically-based organizational behavior and behavioral ethics literature (e.g., Tensbrunsel and Smith-Crowe 2008), which examines how people perceive, think about and act in ethical/unethical ways. To a lesser extent, descriptive ethics literature has also drawn on sociological (cf., Shadnam et al. 2020), economic (e.g., Grassl and Habisch 2011) and other social scientific lenses to provide descriptions of ethical life.

This empirical tradition has been a rich addition to a business ethics literature, building upon its earlier focus on analytical normative philosophy (cf., Abend 2014), and leading to a diversified field. As philosophical ethics increasingly realized the importance of empirical observation (e.g., Knobe 2003), ethics scholars welcomed descriptive ethics, often with the tacit assumption that description would progressively feed back into our understandings of norms and lead to what Williams (1985) called “thick” ethical concepts.

Thick concepts maybe favorably compared with thin concepts. Whereas thin concepts tend to be either descriptive (e.g., frequency, category membership) or evaluative (e.g., goodness/badness), thick concepts are both descriptive *and* evaluative (e.g., kindness, hypocrisy, solidarity). Thin concepts tend to over-simplify and generalize whereas thick concepts are situationally-specific and multifaceted. In Williams’ terms, “thick” ethical concepts are dependent on empirical descriptions and not only normative in a formal way. “Good” is normative but formally thin; “empathetic”, “duplicitous” or “courageous” are thick because they depend on empirical states that can be verified. Not coincidentally, “thick” ethical concepts correspond to notions of “thick selves”, viewing subjectivities as multiple, complex and evolving (Walzer 1994) and “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973; Walzer 1994), ethnographically detailed and nuanced

<sup>1</sup> Within business ethics, an ongoing debate about the separation between what is referred to as descriptive theory and normative theory has played out in the context of stakeholder theory. Despite these writings being historical (e.g., Donaldson and Preston 1995; Freeman 1999), this debate is ongoing and relevant to our position here.

accounts of social life. Such nuanced accounts make it easier to connect normative concepts to situated actions in the world (Wicks et al. 2020).

Understanding thick ethical concepts requires ongoing dialogue between the normative and the descriptive. Like “thick description”, it implies empirics that are detailed and interpretively rich, such as those arising from ethnographic description. Such approaches can complement and diversify the dominant trend in descriptive ethics toward standardized construct measurement and statistical modeling. Moreover, descriptive ethics implies not only the individual psychology of ethical behaviors and attitudes, but the social processes of justification, debate, and social-political struggle through which “thick” norms are socially constituted. In short, in order for descriptive ethics to best contribute to “thickening” the normative tradition of business ethics, it should focus more on its strongest contribution to that relationship, namely, its ability to report from the situated, contingent processes of ethics as carried out in the world.

## Imagining Business Ethics for Social Change

A third way to reconnect to the social in business ethics is to recognize the world of business as a work-in-progress, and ethics has a role in building that world within a broader horizon of social values. While descriptive and normative approaches tend to see ethics from the point of view of the “timeless present”—either what is good/right (now and forever), or how people think about the good/right (now and forever)—ethics should be deeply concerned with history, and with the future. We could say that ethics has a fundamentally “imaginative” character, because it is not only about understanding how the world is now, but about how it might become.

The notion that imagination has a role in moral decision-making, that we should imagine a life beyond ourselves, dates back to Kant and was invoked by Adam Smith. Drawing on these two sources, Werhane (1998) brought the idea of moral imagination to business ethics. She argued for what she called a “disengaged view from somewhere” that is self-critical and cognizant of the particularities of situations (ibid., p. 90). This emphasis on situatedness, reflexive awareness and plurality as challenging the imagination can be seen in contemporary attempts to understand the imaginaries that animate contemporary social institutions (e.g., Taylor 2004), and holds promising avenues for business ethics.

Recognizing the imaginary in ethics leads to several important consequences. First, because the imagination is both concrete and embodied, on one hand, and fantastical and speculative, on the other (Eagleton 2009), it bridges description and possibility. Second, because imaginaries are precursors to and drivers of institutional action

(Castoriadis 1987), ethical imaginaries bridge theory and practice. Finally, because imaginaries draw on a stock of common signs, meanings and experiences, yet are not bound to the norms of coherence and conformity that often govern social life, imagination can bridge convention and transformation. Indeed, the radicality of imaginaries (Castoriadis 1987) has been proposed as a way to generate social creativity and avoid mechanistic determinism within social theory. Imagination thus provides the opening necessary for ethical life to be possible.

What would it mean to engage more with the imaginary in business ethics? For one, it would mean moving beyond both normative accounts based on established assessment frameworks (utilitarian calculation, rule compliance, etc.) and descriptive accounts based on thin ethical concepts to imagine new forms of social being. Such new forms would be analyzed ethically in their ability to promote and sustain human and non-human flourishing, but the catch is that the criteria for such flourishing would necessarily be incomplete. This would demand new epistemic and methodological practices to theorize and empirically explore that which at present only exists in nascent outlines. It would also mean thinking about the material architectures and structures through which ethical imaginaries could be realized in social institutions. This would involve complementing the dominant mode of ethical analysis of specific behaviors with explorations of institution-building in which shaping lived realities is brought to the fore. Third, it would involve paying attention to the materiality and historical embeddedness of social life without becoming myopically mired in the given, nor escaping to abstract theory. Ethical imagination thus involves a kind of future-oriented realism that nevertheless rejects mechanistic or deterministic explanations.

## Summing Up

We have outlined some broad and ambitious directions for development in business ethics scholarship. Of course, it should go without saying that ours is but one view in this regard. Furthermore, given the breadth and eclecticism of the field, such developments must be, and should be, respectful of the intellectual heritage of business ethics literature thus far. In many ways, our suggestions attempt to realize the ambitions of this heritage: a focus on practice as well as theory; a valuing of the descriptive and normative; and, a reflexive awareness of the roles of business in society. The directions we gesture towards are extensions of those ambitions and, we hope, can inspire authors to take our scholarly traditions into new areas of exploration.

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