Business Ethics, Oxymorons, and All of That

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I teach business ethics. Many of you have not altogether playfully let me know that my doing that seemed a bit disreputable to you. Often, I have had to try hard to muster a gracious and undefensive smile when one colleague or another has referred to the subject as an oxymoron. Oxymorons have come up a lot. I have been teaching the course for five years, and everyone I talk to about the subject for the first time seems freshly delighted with the term. Many of you seem to feel under an obligation to giggle about my mix of the holy and the profane when so many op-ed pieces flatly state (1) that the overwhelming majority of American school children, perhaps 90%, are not learning much; (2) that middle class kids are getting their junior high and high school educations in college; and (3) that most American youngsters would not be admitted to a university in any other industrialized country. So as GVSU addresses General Education it might be good, whatever lofty goals our rhetoric establishes, for me to set a floor for how ethics applies to our School of Business.

1. Teaching ethics is not the same as teaching morality. Teaching morality involves teaching people to do the right thing. Teaching ethics, including business ethics, involves teaching people how to think more clearly about what the right thing may be. The emphasis is on the thought rather than the behavior.

2. We may avoid ethics—thinking about doing the right thing—because it promises to make us personally uncomfortable, because our institutions and belief systems make it difficult to raise the necessary questions, because of the constraints on our time, and because we are convinced we know what we ought to do and that thinking more about it will lead nowhere. We may avoid ethics because we believe that once we have thought about what we ought to do, we will have to do it.

3. It does not necessarily make us happier, more successful, or more productive, to think very hard about what we ought to do. Ethics should not be reduced to a simplistic formula like "ethics pays".

4. Ethical inquiry ought to make us slow to act, because it should make us more aware of how little we know. Being slow to act is not ordinarily valued highly in business. However, being aware that there may be a conflict between maintenance of our personal integrity and maintenance of a decisive managerial image is an ethical value. Business values and ethical values do not always have
to match for the business ethics

5. Respecting authority is likely to be an organism. Put a

6. There is likely to be a coordination of responsibility of employees acting in roles. employees act for and as members of organizations. moral responsibilities

7. Thoughtless conformity to ethics. There might be because they like the value of conformity because it is opportunistic. The other hand, there should be on the part of the personal integrity which others are long as conforming deviance. Views are more character of the independence of research—may be such views are for ourselves.

8. The injunction "we" line. It is complacency of the "we" who are likely to choose not to choose not to protect ourselves from muddleheaded.
fully let me know that to try hard to muster all I can to try hard to muster all I can.

I have referred to the first time seems to be a survival value—not just for the individual but for the social organism. Put another way, those in authority are likely to know more than we do; and knowledge, as Plato argues, may reasonably be supposed to lead to virtue.

6. There is likely to be a great deal of organizational support for fine-tuned divisions of responsibility. Business organizations require coordinated action, and coordinated action requires predictable behavior from individual employees. There is ample reason to believe that no complex organization can function if its employees act independently of each other. Nevertheless, if we are to be members of organizations as well as functioning parts of them, we must assume moral responsibility for our own action or inaction.

7. Thoughtless conformity (of which there may well be a great deal) is antithetical to ethics. There may well be a lot of that. Corporate people may be conformists because they have not learned to be morally responsible people. They may conform because they are anxious to fit in. They may conform because they are opportunistic. They may be pressured into conformity by tyrannical superiors. On the other hand, they may sensibly have come to believe that the burden of proof should be on the nonconformist. They are likely to have good reason to recognize the value of predictability—to see the costs associated with intruding into areas for which others are responsible. They may then honorably choose to conform so long as conformity continues to seem to them to make more moral sense than deviance. Views of corporate life which omit this last possibility—one that is much more characteristic of the closely coordinated activities of the corporation than it is of the independent or loosely coordinated nature of university teaching and research—may provide academic people with a basis for self-congratulation. But such views are not likely to help us to understand either corporate people or ourselves.

8. The injunction "know thyself" has historically been pretty close to an ethical bottom line. It is complicated because the "we" who are trying to know ourselves are also the "we" who are likely to be at the same time affirming our identities by protecting ourselves from such knowledge. We are both subject and object—both whole and in process. It is difficult to find firm ground on which to stand.

9. Protecting oneself from any kind of knowledge is a tricky business. It is hard to protect oneself from anything. Making the choice requires thinking it. However, we are likely to subtly screen our thoughts that lead to ideas we do not want to have. We are apt to regard such ideas as tasteless, label them as muddleheaded, convince ourselves we have already considered them and found to match for the subject to be viable. The tension between them is what makes business ethics interesting.
them wanting, or find ourselves “busy” just at the moment they come up. To “do” ethics requires becoming conscious of such defenses. Taking pleasure in the shortcomings of others may well be such a defense.

10. Faculty with a clear sense of moral superiority relative to business people might consider whether they have been willing to make the effort to scrutinize their own university structure. Have they been willing to serve on university wide committees that would take them away from their own research? Have they made judgments about the curricular requirements the university imposes and acted on those judgments? Have they solicited serious student feedback on their teaching? Have they invited colleagues to sit in on their classes and provide them with feedback? Have they been conscious of their public responsibility when they proposed university sponsorship of projects with which they were involved? Have they developed a taste for “Polish” jokes about students? It is useful to ask ourselves how good we have been at recognizing our own moral responsibilities.

11. We can’t think ethically all the time. Doing what we do routinely may be required if we are to undertake a bit of serious self-examination now and then. The point may be to achieve proper balance—both intra-personally and societally. Some social roles (that of being an ethicist based in a university is one of them) are likely to come out relatively high on the examined life side. One has to be careful about generalizing from what works there to what works elsewhere. The key again is not to specialize in analyses of what someone else ought to be doing.

12. If any of us, in the corporation or in the university, comes to believe that classes of people (e.g., blue collar workers, lower level managers, students, faculty) need not know what is at stake in decisions in which they are complicit—need simply be told something that will keep the organization working smoothly—he or she is on dangerous ground. When attempts are made to justify “noble lies” in the name of the social or corporate good, it is important to ask who is to do the lying and who is to be lied to. It is important to consider the consequences of an arrangement where a leadership can lie to those it leads—to consider whether it can then avoid also lying to itself—and to consider where that may lead. These considerations are as relevant to the university as they are to the corporation.

13. A rigorous look at ourselves may interfere with organizational function in the short run. However, it is difficult to justify an unwillingness to inquire into the consequences of our own work. It is especially difficult to justify failure to undertake a serious inquiry into the consequences of ongoing practice before rejecting it. Hard questioning seems to me likely to be good for us, our organizations, and the community in the long run. It is very hard to imagine the consequences of rejecting such questioning in principle.

14. Finally, it is worth noting because of the business matter wars, and Holocaust destruction, our own world that we are guilty of, we have committed horrible things we though sophistry about business congratulatory and using the faults of on one’s own failed thought. Easy mistakes. They can help us.

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Finally, it is worth noting that many of us have become interested in ethics because of the thrill of the spectacle. Ivan Boesky titilates us. It is not just a business matter. We are fascinated with the drama of urban riots, Mideastern wars, and Holocaust documentaries too. There is something exciting about all the destruction, and also something reassuring about it. We do not believe it is our own world that is being destroyed. Whatever it is that we may suspect we are guilty of, we can take some moral credit for not being guilty of the even more horrible things we are being told about. Ethics, however, is not a spectator sport, though sophistry may be. Trading horror stories—even relatively gentle ones about business schools or business ethics—may be a dangerously self-congratulatory activity for people in the humanities. One needs to ask if one is using the faults one can see relatively easily elsewhere as a means of reflecting on one's own faults. The importance of doing that is at the heart of ethical thought. Easy moral judgments about others do not help us to do the right thing. They can help us not to think about it.

*This is a short paper but I have a long list of people to thank. Professors DeBruine, McKendall, Rowe and Sicilian read earlier drafts and helped me to clarify my thinking. So did my wife, Leslie Newman, and my daughter, Zoe Newman Castro. Whatever remains muddled is entirely mine.