Business and Society, the Society and Business, and, What Is It Like to Be a Rat?

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This essay reconsiders the possibility and prospects for the relationship between business ethics scholarship and the world of business practice. More specifically, to a field that often considers the question, "What should be the role of business in society?" it poses the question, "What should be the role of the Society for Business Ethics in business?" My intent is not to solve the related epistemological question of whether we have to "be one to know one." It is, however, to encourage scholars to leave our laboratories more often to engage with the work and world of those we study. To that end, the essay poses a series of questions for us – individual scholars, members of the Society, and the Society itself – to consider about our relationship with business. It concludes with a postscript response to one of those questions: When, if ever, should the Society make public statements?

Key Words: theory-practice gap, epistemology, impartiality, cave allegory, engaged scholarship

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1. WHAT SHOULD BE THE ROLE OF THE SOCIETY IN BUSINESS?

When I was new to the board of the Society for Business Ethics, one of my first priorities was to resume a conversation that has always been present in our discipline and that I brought up when I first joined the Society a long time ago. It was a conversation that never seemed to go very far and that has not progressed as much as

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I had hoped; it was about the question: What should the relationship be between this academic society and the business world?

Of course, that's a variation on a very old theme about how interested—or disinterested—scholars should be in the worlds we study (e.g., Hoffman, 2021). Socrates engaged with interlocutors on street corners but also the philosopher risked ridicule by diving back into the cave to save the prisoners (Plato, 1961). However, Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" (Firth, 1952; Raphael, 2007) is more aligned with the so-called "critical distance" (Walzer, 1993) that modern moral philosophers and business academics often favor and that Dewey, among others, considered too far removed from the experience of those we endeavor to understand (Pappas, 2008). In fact, spatial metaphors commonly characterize the way we problematize the conventional relationship between researcher and researched in management scholarship—the "theory-practice *gap*" (Van de Ven, 2007: 2–3, emphasis added), the "great *divide*" (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001: 340, emphasis added), and "professional *distance*" (Anteby, 2013, emphasis added)—and in other fields of applied ethics, such as bioethics (e.g., Elliott, 2016; Fox & Swazey, 2008). These metaphors are rooted in the dominant positivist conventions of, especially, twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy and organization studies, suggesting that researchers should be close enough to *see* their subjects but not so close as to *be* them.

However, I want to explore the prospect that business ethicists have a special responsibility not merely to *see* our subjects from the *outside* but to try to understand their "lived experience" "*from the inside*" (Parmar, Phillips, and Freeman, 2015: 209)—and to consider whether and how that is possible. There are a few reasons why I think it is important to revisit this issue now. One has to do with the *world around us.* In my four short years on the board, many important ethical questions have emerged from that world on which it seems reasonable for business to expect and want answers from academic experts. Moreover, there are more communication channels than ever through which we can share information and combat misinformation. As a Society, though, the conversations we cultivate about these questions at our conferences, in this journal of the Society, and even our social media presence are nearly always *among us* rather than *between us and them.*[1] Another reason this feels timely has to do with how the *discipline* of business ethics has progressed in the time I have been a member. Our field, which was largely founded by philosophers (DeGeorge, n.d.) who prescribe moral reason from the outside in and far away, has grown into a field that is also rich with social scientists (Bowie, 2000), including behavioral ethicists (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011) who endeavor to study the inner workings of moral intuition (Haidt, 2001) from up close. This intermingling of ways of knowing raises the age-old question of whether "you have to be one to know one" (Fay, 1996: 27). Still another reason I care about the relationship between business ethics and business practice has to do with *me*, but I'll say more about that later.

[1] Rather than present statistical evidence for this claim, I refer the reader to the past few annual meeting programs, *Business Ethics Quarterly* tables of contents, and LinkedIn reactions to study the affiliations of those who engage in the business of the Society.

The purpose of this article is therefore to reconsider the possibility and prospects for the relationship between business ethics *scholarship* and the world of business *practice.* It is an invitation to us as individual scholars to consider the kinds of encounters and communications and relationships we should or should not cultivate with the business world. It also concerns our membership in the Society for Business Ethics and what this organization can and should do to inform and potentially facilitate these interactions. Third, it has to do with the conduct of the Society itself in a time when those questions that have emerged from the business world about business ethics also arguably pertain to *our business* as a Society—for example: what are the ethical responsibilities of business organizations to foster inclusion and belonging; how can organizations unify workers toward a common purpose in times of political division; what political responsibilities do business organizations have in times of war; what rights do workers and stakeholders have to privacy and safety and other forms of well-being; and how should management carry out its stewardship responsibilities toward stakeholders?

These are all topics that have appeared in some form in annual meeting agendas and *BEQ* tables of contents in recent memory, and we may all agree they are important questions. Our tendency as a Society has been to go about our *individual* business of studying these questions while refraining from proposing *Societally shared* answers and from pursuing *collective* action to meaningfully influence the behavior of any business organization other than the Society itself. The Society's "objective"—it does not have a mission statement—states that we "keep thinking and discussion surrounding business ethics alive and well" (Society for Business Ethics, n.d.) and one way we have endeavored to do that is by embracing viewpoint diversity rather than taking unified stands. As a board member, I have accepted and even supported that choice but think it is worth at least considering when, if ever, we should exercise our collective voice or empower our members to use theirs. The same page of our website also identifies eight goals we "strive" for, the seventh of which is to "help develop ethical business organizations" and the eighth of which is to "develop and maintain a friendly and cooperative relationship among teachers, researchers, and practitioners"—goals that we arguably achieve with mixed success. In a field that often considers the question, "What should be the role of business in society?" should we also *reconsider* the question, "What should be the role of the Society in business?"

2. WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A BAT?

Before considering the *prospects* for that relationship, I want first to consider the *possibility* of that relationship—between two different worlds, academia and business, and their different resident life forms, scholars and practitioners.

Can one life form understand from the outside the inner experience of a different life form? In his famous paper, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" Thomas Nagel (1979) contends that mental states are not reducible to physical ones.[2] Therefore, we cannot

[2] My characterization of Nagel's paper as "famous" is slightly tongue-in-cheek, because of course it is not actually famous in the world. In the business world we study, in which fortune is often a measure of fame, it is

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understand the subjective experience of a bat by mimicking its objective conditions. Wearing a bat costume and descending into a cave where we hang upside down and snack on flies in the dark can at best show us what it is like to be *like* a bat which is a different experience than what it is like to *be* a bat. Nagel proposes that there is an insurmountable barrier between objective ways of knowing and the irreducibly subjective nature of lived experience.

Nagel's starting point is the mind-body problem, but his argument has implications for the scholar-subject problem as well. He writes, "If the subjective character of experience is fully comprehensible only from one point of view, then any shift to greater objectivity … does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it" (1979: 174). This claim of course suggests that any critical distance is *too* distant and calls into question the efficacy of conventional notions of scientific objectivity. The skepticism it entails challenges not only the default position of the academic enterprise but also foundational principles of applied ethics, which have long embraced concepts of impartiality (Jollimore, 2021; Rachels, 2004; Raphael, 2007), independence (Davis and Stark, 2001), and disinterestedness (e.g., Svanberg & Svanberg, 2022).

This brings me to my third reason for exploring the question of the prospects and possibility of business ethicists to understand business, to make sense of my own identity and impact as a scholar who came to the Society with an unusual range of business experience. A few years after I first read Nagel's bat article in an epistemology seminar, I wrote a partially true short story in which a bat flew into the lecture hall where my Introduction to Philosophy professor was teaching us about Plato's cave allegory. The story became the Preface to my dissertation, *Philosophy Out of the Cave* (Michaelson, 1997), which not so subtly suggested to my examination committee that *they* might be the prisoners disconnected from the real world. I announced during my defense that I was going into management consulting instead of academic philosophy and they generously wished me luck in making the brave descent into the Wall Street cave.

A few years into my career in business, a series of fortunate coincidences led me to accept an offer for a visiting position at Wharton. I descended from the outside world back into the scholarly cave, where I attended my first Society for Business Ethics annual meeting more than twenty years ago. My role in the scholarship-practice dialogue back then was to organize pre-conference sessions at my first annual meetings. Even though the sessions were successful, the fact that they were *pre*-conference sessions at least gave the appearance that practice was *outside* of the primary business of the Society for Business Ethics.

As a case in point, when I asked my early mentors in business ethics how my practical experience might help me succeed in academia, some of them warned me

insignificant. It was published in *Philosophical Review*, a significant journal among analytical philosophers that originated in 1892 and in which Quine's even more celebrated paper, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," also appeared. But even in the terms by which we measure fame in management scholarship, the journal's impact factor of less than 1 does not do justice to what qualifies as famous twentieth-century analytic philosophy. All of which just goes to reinforce how distant the world outside can seem from our scholarly spaces.

that it could get in the way of being taken seriously as a scholar. One even advised me to hide my non-academic experience at the bottom of my CV. "Really?" I wondered. Not to humblebrag, but I had helped launch the business ethics practice of one of the most storied consulting firms in the world. I had worked with global brands and government agencies on everything from conflicts of interest to sustainability. I met with CEOs in Davos and Dalian. And I was being told that all this not only would not count *for* me but might even count *against* me.

To be fair, these scholars' dismissiveness of the business world was shared by my business colleagues, who were just as suspicious of academia as academia was of business. My consulting peers wanted me to *act* smart in meetings while refraining from saying things that were "too academic." For a long time, I kept feet in both academia and practice—not just for the money but also because the inspiration for my research about meaningful work came largely from the experience of doing meaningful and meaningless work, and because my position in each space gave me superficial "street cred" in the other. But my experience in business counted for little in my case for tenure and promotion.

Admittedly, I am paraphrasing from memory the positions of others without giving them a chance to speak for themselves—colleagues whom I admired and still admire, some of whom are retired and others who sadly are no longer alive. But I do remember, almost word for word, what one of them said that seemed to sum up the conventional wisdom: "There's a difference between *studying* businesspersons as your 'lab rats' and *being* one of them."

3. WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A RAT?

Can a business ethics scholar understand the subjective experience of a businessperson without being one of them? In other words, in the spirit of Nagel's challenge to the possibility of objectivity and to riff off of his title, what is it like to be a *rat*?

For our purposes, there are three primary types of *rattus economicus* that are subjects of our discipline's research. The first is commonly known as a manager and is arguably the most conventionally interesting to scholars of business ethics. It is sometimes negatively identified by its odiferousness, which is why its chief adversaries—union workers, federal prosecutors, and investigative journalists—have been known to say, "I smell a rat." But it is also adept at office politics, positively admired for its cunning if ethically questionable resourcefulness (Schrijvers, 2004). This type of rat is especially plentiful in financial institutions, where it has the potential to grow unusually large amounts of wealth, power, and ego.

The second type of *rattus economicus* is perhaps the most mysterious: the whistleblower, who, as the saying goes, "rats on" apparent wrongdoers. One reason it is of interest to scholars is that it is sometimes heroic, challenging the power and misdeeds of management rats at significant personal peril (Ethics and Compliance Initiative, 2012). Another reason is that it is sometimes controversial, alleged by its enemies to have ulterior motives (e.g., Khan, 2018).

The third type of *rattus economicus* is by far the most common in our business ethics classrooms yet arguably gets less attention in our scholarship, the rat racer.

They are ordinary living beings who experience extraordinary pressure to outperform their peers and accordingly sometimes do bad things or have bad things done unto them. They may feel they are living a divided life between their aspiration to eudaimonic well-being and their inability to break free of the hedonic treadmill (Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2024).

Nagel implies that this barrier between objective and subjective experience applies to *every* discipline of study, but I would go further to say that it is particularly problematic for *our* discipline of study. After all, we study ethics, which exists at the intersection of observable, external behavior and inaccessible, internal cognition. Moreover, applied ethics is not an end in itself; what makes it worth doing in the end is the prospect of making business behavior better. Further, we not only observe rat behavior, we *judge* it.

To that point, it is worth noting that the rat analogy was suggested pejoratively by one provocateur. I have already extended the metaphor much further than that person intended, for multiple reasons that I hope are self-explanatory but that warrant explanation if they are not. One is poetry, the obvious rhyme but also the suggestive metaphor involving a hierarchy of life forms. Another is to lean into the implication that scholars are a higher life form than their subjects, not because I agree with it but in order to test its limits. Therefore, a third reason to exploit the metaphor is, in the spirit of fun and self-deprecation, to challenge it and twist it around into a joke that may at first have seemed to disparage our subjects but that turns out, as we shall see, to be equally a joke on ourselves.

4. THE SONAR OF THE RAT

What would it look like for the rats we study, otherwise known as businesspersons, to be a species apart from business ethics scholars? Nagel maintains there is a particular feature of bat experience that is fundamentally inscrutable to human ways of experiencing the world. He writes, "Bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine" (Nagel 1979: 168). It is a form of echolocation that involves emitting high frequency sounds and judging proximity by listening to how the waves bounce off of other objects, a faculty that does not exist within human perception. He concludes that bats are a "fundamentally alien form of life" (1979: 168), arguing that the barrier between objective and subjective is not just a matter of epistemological *distance*, as our scholarly metaphors typically imply, but rather one of *ontological difference*, a species apart from us. Is there something about *rattus economicus* that, like the sonar of a bat, renders the *rat* an alien form of life to us? Three features of my own experience as a rat stand out as unlike anything that I have experienced as a scholar: the manager's complex burden of *duty*, the whistleblower's sense of *desperation*, and the rat racer's feeling of moral *distress.*

When I was in management consulting, the chairman of my firm, which was founded by accountants and governed by a partnership of thousands, had a logically impossible math problem to solve every year: how to grow partner share values at several times the rate of inflation at the same time that there were inflationary pressures on every other aspect of the business: staff compensation and perks, real estate, regulatory compliance, competitive pressures, and clients facing that same math problem. The complex moral and economic *duty* borne by the management rat to a multiplicity of interests might be as foreign as sonar is to the experience of non-administrative scholars. Sure, we have to balance our competing obligations of research, teaching, and service, but those are primarily duties to our own careers. Observing these duties from outside does not confer any sense of what it is like to live among and be accountable to and defined by them every day. On one hand, you could contend that this is just what makes the impartial observer valuable, our ability to rise above the pressure to prioritize among their competing interests. But on the other hand, to observe from above is to miss the point that palpable pressure is integral to the experience of the executive and precisely what makes their experience alien to that of the impartial observer.

In other words, it is one thing to *study* pressure and quite another to *feel* it. I came to appreciate that difference the first time I ever issued an invoice to a client on the first project I ever managed, and my boss's timesheet came in with a 25-hour day. He was a workaholic and was constantly crossing time zones, so it was theoretically possible he had worked that much though I would have known if he had spent the number of hours he had claimed with my client. To make matters worse, our client was a government agency that would have had the authority to take punitive action against fraud. For me the question was not about whether to overbill but rather about how to confront my boss without risking my position. This was a man whose staff distrusted him so much that when we complained to each other about him we would actually go to an outdoor cafe down the street with a waterfall in case he had bugged our flip phones. This seems like a ridiculous prospect in retrospect but it was a very real fear to us at the time. Of course, academic fraud occurs as well but if you have not faced up to a powerful corrupt boss who holds your career in their hands then you cannot identify with the *desperation* experienced by the potential whistleblower anymore than you can know what it is like to have sonar.

Most rat racers will never face great enough desperation literally to blow the whistle. In fact, my remedy to the billing problem did not involve whistleblowing. But many rat racers will experience unrelenting moral *distress*, a third type of sonar that may be alien to the experience of the scholars who study them. Moral distress is a term that comes from nursing ethics (Jameton, 1984) that describes the experience of knowing what is right without having the power to enact it—a daily condition for many nurses who know their patients better than the physicians they report to but who do not have the authority to decide the patient's course of treatment. In a working paper, my colleagues and I have claimed that the reason the term moral distress is virtually unknown in business ethics is not that it is less present in business than in healthcare. Rather, the reason it is underrecognized is that it is *ever-present*, an "existential condition" of business that therefore goes unnoticed (Michaelson, Jameton, & Liaschenko, 2024).

5. OVERCOMING EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISTANCE AND ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE

The logical conclusion of Nagel's argument is radical skepticism about the possibility of understanding the inner experience of other life forms. For business ethics researchers, this does not preclude the possibility of knowing anything about our research subjects, but it potentially places significant limits upon our access to that experience. Of course, if we cannot enter into the subjective experience of another life form from a critical distance, it stands to reason that that life form is similarly incapable of apprehending its own objective appearance. That is to say that one response to Nagel's conclusion is to lean into the epistemological benefits of critical distance. We can learn a lot about our research subjects from the conventional distance of our laboratories that they may not even be aware of themselves. We can analyze the power relations between management and labor, we can identify the conditions under which whistleblowers break ranks with the hierarchy, and we can study the way in which rat racers jockey for position. These outwardly observable phenomena enable researchers to predict and even influence rat behavior even if we cannot reliably infer inner motivations from them. They reveal prejudices, preferences, and predilections of which our subjects themselves are not aware. We can *see* our lab rats without knowing what it is like to *be* them; we can perceive their *external* reality without understanding their internal *feelings.* As Fay (1996) suggests, being a rat may not be necessary for knowing all there is to know about rats, nor is being one sufficient for knowing one.

Another response to Nagel's conclusion is to deploy alternative research methods that bring us closer to being—or being like—our subjects. Nagel was not the first to point out the problem that scholarly distance poses to the possibility of understanding subjective experience, and in the fifty years since his paper was published, even more critical perspectives have arisen that also challenge the possibility of objectivity, including organizational postmodernism (e.g., Kilduff & Mehra, 1997), feminist epistemology (e.g., Grasswick, 2018). Research methods have emerged to close the gap between researcher and researched, such as praxis-driven self-insertion (Takacs, 2003), participant-observer ethnography (Clifford, 1983), and first-person action research (Marshall, 2016). Even reflexive writing methods (Rhodes & Brown, 2005b) have been proposed to reframe the aim of organization studies as "not a quest for scientific truth, but a quest for meaning" (Rhodes & Brown, 2005a: 169). It is noteworthy that these so-called "critical" methods tend to be outside the mainstream and still are often regarded as inferior to the more conventional approach of establishing a critical distance to our research subjects. Moreover, as Nagel's argument implies, *being* and *being like* are not one and the same.

That is, both critical and conventional responses to Nagel's challenge address the problem of epistemological distance, but as we have already seen, reducing the distance between us and our subjects does not overcome the ontological difference between two life forms. If we are reluctant to concede that the subjective experience of a rat is beyond our capacity to comprehend, yet another response to Nagel's conclusion might be to accept the impossibility of empathizing with the subjective experience of other life forms while denying that we are as different from rats as it may appear. Reedy (2008: 68) suggests, "It might be fruitful then to pursue the common roots of both academic and managerial identities. After all, both have experienced the casualization of professional and white collar work, increasing insecurity, increasing surveillance and control and so on." The burdens of duty, desperation, and distress we encounter in our work may manifest differently without being altogether incomprehensible. For example, although the interests that business ethicists have to balance may not be as monetarily significant as those managed by business executives, we do feel the weight of competing duties wrought by managing to specious numbers that are not entirely within our control that our profession overvalues in the form of citation counts and impact factors. And although whistleblowing in academic life is a rarity, it is the exception rather than the rule in business life, too. Recent cases involving alleged academic dishonesty show us that the consequences for the accuser and the accused in academia might be as threatening to academic careers as to business careers. As for moral distress, just as with material production, academic production is sometimes revealed to involve the underpaid, excessive, or even involuntary labor of exploited and comparatively powerless graduate student workers and part-time adjunct faculty.

Even our nonprofit academic Society itself has business matters to tend to. Like any organization of members and employees, we have to think about when and whether to issue public communications about our business and beliefs. We have examined ourselves and endeavored to do more to improve the Society's sense of inclusion and belonging and recognized how difficult and important it is to do so. We have wrestled with our finances: how to manage a surplus, how to use a surplus to support our field, how to maintain a reserve, whether to invoke *force majeure* in a pandemic to limit our liability to our creditors, how to price our services for online participants who cannot partake of the full conference experience, and from whom to solicit sponsorship so that we can do more.

In summary, we *rattus academicus* are rats, too.

6. BATS, RATS, AND IMAGINING BUSINESS ETHICS IN THE CAVE

The primary contribution of this article is, in the spirit of applied ethics, to prompt us to see familiar phenomena differently and in so doing to challenge received views about theory and practice. My intent has been neither to solve the problem of how we know what it is like to be another life form nor to prove that it is unsolvable. Rather, I accept pragmatically that the conventional enterprise of researching our subjects from a critical distance enables us to know them in ways that even they are unable to know themselves. At the same time, I reject the proposition that a distant vantage point is always the best position for a researcher, and so I regard the critical methods that endeavor to bring us closer to our subjects with promise. Indeed, I believe that one of the factors that makes those methods potentially effective is our shared experience with our subjects, that although their experience of duty, desperation, and distress may be different from ours, it may not be different enough in kind to qualify as inscrutable in the way that sonar is alien to human experience. I do, however, insist that the daily and often urgent demands upon the business professional placed by these unrelenting pressures is often underappreciated by the scholars who study them. If we hope for our descriptions of and prescriptions for them to carry pragmatic weight, then we have an obligation to them and to ourselves to leave our laboratories more often to engage with the work and world of those we study. All of which is to return to the question of what the relationship should be between this Society and business?

Before I address that specific question directly, there is one more path that Nagel considers to potentially address the more general question of the relationship between scholarship and practice. Nagel suggests that we can *try* to empathize with the subjective experience of a bat through our faculties of imagination. Unfortunately, he also submits that imagination is a poor substitute for experience, but that it is more than nothing.

I am much more optimistic than Nagel about the empathetic potential of the moral imagination (Werhane, 1999). Even Adam Smith's impartial spectator (Raphael, 2007) employs the imagination to engender an abstract form of sympathy, though that seems to me to fall short of the concrete (Nussbaum, 1990) empathy that I have in mind. I have argued that fictional worlds can be as fertile as real ones for studying the experience of other people (Michaelson, 2016). Even real life cannot transport you into the mind of another person, whether or not you share their sonar. I have gone even further to contend (Michaelson, 2021) that the *only* way you can get into the subjective experience of another being is to be transported by narrative fiction (Green, 2021). For example, in Lucia Berlin's "A Manual for Cleaning Women," you can *identify with* the distress of a cleaning woman as she learns intimate details about her employers's lives, whether she wants to know them or not. You can *feel* the desperation of the alchemist as he apprehends and then runs away from his grotesque creation in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.* Even Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* led me—an American who lived twenty blocks from the World Trade Center and had colleagues who were killed in the 9/11 attacks—at least to *appreciate* if not necessarily *empathize* with the competing patriotic and professional duties of a non-American "lover of America" who involuntarily smiles when he sees America brought to its knees (Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2020). I could go on rhapsodizing about examples from literature, though for now I will share just one more that I quoted from at length in my speech concerning the self-disgust of the quintessential traveling salesman who identifies with a lower form of life in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" (2003): "As Gregor Samsa awoke from unsettling dreams one morning, he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin. He lay on his hard armorlike back and when he raised his head a little he saw his vaulted brown belly divided into sections…" Gregor goes on to wonder, "What has happened to me?" and then to reflect on the cause of his metamorphosis: "'Oh God,' he thought, 'what a grueling profession I picked! Traveling day in, day out," and so on.

There is an extensive body of scholarship in philosophy and psychology on how we can be, as Radford and Weston (1975) put it, "moved by the fate" of fictional characters when we know they are fictional. We do feel actual disgust as we imagine Gregor Samsa staring at his segmented belly, unable to sleep on his side because he is stuck upside-down on his exoskeleton as he watches his six tiny legs flail above him. And as we read on, we identify with his inability to escape from his job because his parents owe money to his boss.

As I praise the powers of the imagination, I have to note that Nagel opts instead to "close with a speculative proposal … to approach the *gap* [emphasis added, with irony] between the subjective and objective from another direction … to form new concepts and devise a new method—an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination" (1979: 179). He likens this so-called phenomenology of experience "to develop[ing] concepts that could be used to explain to a person blind from birth what it was like to see."

Which brings me back to the creative imagination. This metaphor of teaching a blind person to see reminds me of Plato's description of the philosopher who is blinded when emerging from the cave into the sunlight. But there is a difference between being blind from birth and being blinded by the sunlight. The former can only be taught metaphorically what it is *like* to see. The latter can wait patiently until their eyes adjust and they *can* see. I'd like to draw on our faculties of imagination *and* metaphor to paint a new picture of how we can adjust our senses to reconsider the relationship between the Society and business.

Picture people dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light. You know how it goes: They are prisoners facing forward, unable to see the puppets casting silhouettes from behind, and unaware of the sunny world outside, and so they mistake the shadows in front of them for reality. In our version of the cave allegory, however, the prisoners are scholars whose powers of observation are limited by their perspectives and methods from identifying with the subjective experience of the things they study.

But wait, there's more, because it's a cave, and one feature of the scene that Plato's version of the allegory leaves out is that there are bats flying around the prisoners as well. Sometimes they are flying close to the fire behind the heads of the prisoners, throwing enormous images onto the wall that the prisoners can see, which frighten them terribly. Other times they are flying away from the fire in front of the prisoners. "Don't you think," Socrates might ask, "the prisoners would eventually figure out that the very same bats that are creating the tiny shadows in front of them are also responsible for the giant shadows?" In this way they will learn while still inside the cave that the shadows are just reflections of real bats, yet at the same time they will become aware of the limits of the powers of observation to *understand* those bats dive-bombing with the help of their incomprehensible sonar.

But wait, there's still more, because this cave, as caves are, is *also* a home to *rats*, which like bats sometimes cast large scary shadows on the wall but more often skitter around the prisoners' feet searching for food. The prisoners observe and identify with the earthbound rats up close in a way that is impossible to observe flying bats, meaning they understand rats a *little* better than they can know what it is like to be a bat. But they also arguably understand even better what it is like to be a rat from associating with them in their shared space. To the prisoners, observing the rats freely moving around represents the possibility of *their own* freedom because the rats gnaw on the fetters immobilizing the prisoners. As Socrates might say, "Would not such a story provoke laughter and ridicule from the very prisoners themselves?" "It certainly would," Glaucon would respond.

7. QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE SOCIETY IN BUSINESS

Whether my story and my argument have led you to laugh at me or with me, I hope at least to have provoked you to return to my original question: What should be the role of the Society in business? I hope also to have led you to laugh at ourselves, especially our tendency as scholars to separate ourselves from our subjects. To reiterate, I hope it has been clear that my use of the rat metaphor is as much a joke, on the naive superciliousness of scholars whose dominant narrative of business is that it is overrun by rats, as it is a serious inquiry into our capacity to understand business. (On that point, it is worth noting that studies reveal empathy [Bartal, Decety, & Mason, 2011] and reciprocity ([Rutte & Taborsky, 2007] to be present in rat behavior, which not only lends credence to an alternative narrative that business itself can constitute prosocial behavior but also contributes irony to my argument that we probably cannot understand the subjective sentiments involved in prosocial behavior among rats.) And I hope to leave you with a series of questions that I think my inquiry suggests for resuming the discussion about the role of the Society in business, including whether, as a Society, we should refrain from getting caught up in the business of others (see Table 1).

The questions also include, for example, reflecting on our relationship with our research subjects and when and whether critical distance is or is not the optimal position from which to observe. How should we, as individual scholars, interact with our research subjects? These questions also pertain to our practices as potential public intellectuals. How can the Society help its members connect with the press, policymakers, and the public? As a Society of scholars, we may not agree on much, but are there any conditions ever under which we could imagine making public statements? What are those conditions? And finally, we shouldn't forget to turn the mirror on ourselves, as I believe we are seeking to do as a Board, to ask—how we should evaluate our business practices as a Society?

Table 1: Some Questions about the Role of the Society in Business

	As individual scholars	As members of SBE	As a Society
Observing	How should we interact with our research subjects?	How can the Society facilitate academic-practice partnerships?	How might we involve practitioners in the Society's work?
Communicating to	How might we translate our academic research for a non-academic audience?	How can the Society help its members connect with the press, policymakers, and the public?	When, if ever, should the Society make public statements?
Identifying with	What business interests conflict with or are conducive to our scholarly work?	How should our academic profession value non-academic experience?	How should we evaluate the business practices of the Society?

This is not a comprehensive list of questions but rather a starting point. Asking them might help us to better understand the rats we study. At the very least asking them will help us to better understand ourselves.

8. POSTSCRIPT: WHEN, IF EVER, SHOULD THE SOCIETY MAKE PUBLIC STATEMENTS?

The foregoing manuscript is largely the same as the presidential address I delivered at the luncheon during the Society for Business Annual Meeting on August 10, 2024, in Chicago, with a few modifications and clarifications prompted by conversations I had with the audience and others afterwards. I would like to thank the following people who were instrumental to my entrance into the Society for Business Ethics, whose comments on the speech or previous drafts contributed to its final form, or both: Norm Bowie, Frank den Hond, Tom Donaldson, Michelle Greenwood, Laura Hartman, Andy Jameton, David Silver, Abe Singer, and Pat Werhane. To be clear, none of them is the source of the "lab rat" metaphor, but I also owe a debt of gratitude to that person and to many others whom I have not named.

In the interest of time, I did not go into detail about the circumstances in the world around us that led me to think this topic was important enough to constitute the focus of my presidential address, but I would like to be transparent here about the events I had in mind. One was the murder of George Floyd, a few miles from my university campus, early in my Board term. That tragedy led the Board to discuss whether and how the Society should respond. Those discussions contributed, directly and indirectly, to the establishment of the Society for Business Ethics' Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee, one of the developments during my board term for which I am particularly grateful, even while there remains room for reasonable and civil disagreement about exactly what the title and aims of such a committee should be. As we know, business itself is still coming to terms with its role in and response to racial and other forms of injustice, and as a Society, we have a similar obligation to examine our business practices.

The other circumstance was ever-present at our event in Chicago even though we largely avoided conversation about it: the reemergence of Donald Trump as a United States presidential candidate with the potential to influence global business and politics. It was particularly fitting that gigantic letters spelling his surname on a nearby skyscraper imposed themselves on the views from many of our hotel rooms, including mine. Trump is often characterized as a threat to democracy, a claim which is arguably outside the domain of our discipline. Certainly, however, it is squarely within our authority to recognize that he has been a serial violator of uncontroversial principles of business ethics. Maggie Haberman's 2022 biography of Trump chronicles his days as a slumlord, his documented practice of withholding pay from business partners, his engagement in dirty industries, and his abuse of bankruptcy proceedings to avoid creditors. In the years since, he has been found liable for lying on financial documents (Lambert & Honderich, 2024), falsifying business records for political gain (Sisak, Peltz, Tucker, Price, & Colvin, 2024), sexual abuse (Neumeiester, Peltz, & Sisak, 2023) and charged with obstructing justice (Thrush, Nehamas, & Sullivan, 2023), election interference (Hsu, Stein, & Rizzo, 2024), and other crimes. Is it beyond our jurisdiction as applied ethicists to determine that his wealth and power and potential to reclaim the United States presidency, combined with his refashioning of truth to be exploited as a term of personal and political advantage, is a threat to ethics itself?

In view of that threat, it seems to me that the answer to my question, “When, if ever, should the Society make public statements?” is now. And yet I realize that some of my colleagues disagree—not only that we should use whatever power we have to resist the rise of Donald Trump, but also that he is bad for the world, bad for business ethics, and bad for ethics. It is not clear to me that a public statement by the Board of the Society for Business Ethics speaking out against Trump would be politically constructive. (Of interest, in (Nature, 2020) the world’s most cited scientific journal, endorsed Joe Biden—Trump’s political opponent—on the grounds that Trump was a threat to the enterprise of science.) However, it is clear to me that such a statement would be unlikely to be unanimously endorsed by our Board and the membership of the Society. That is one reason why, right or not, I did not bring this topic up in my speech—the other reason being that I did not want to spoil anybody’s lunch. I am raising the topic here and now—still two months ahead of the election as I write—in the interest of intellectual honesty and to assert that I will be using my personal political power to try to prevent the reelection of Donald Trump. By the time this postscript appears in print, it will be too late; the election will have been decided, one way or the other. Regardless of the outcome, I hope these words cultivate conversation about whether there is something we could or should have done in the past, and perhaps even more important, what we can or should do in the future.

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