Profit and Other Values: Thick Evaluation in Decision Making

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ABSTRACT: Profit maximizers have reasons to agree with stakeholder theorists that managers may need to consider different values simultaneously in decision making. However, it remains unclear how maximizing a single value can be reconciled with simultaneously considering different values. A solution can neither be found in substantive normative philosophical theories, nor in postulating the maximization of profit. Managers make sense of the values in a situation by means of the many thick value concepts of ordinary language. Thick evaluation involves the simultaneous consideration of different values: making sense of a value always involves knowing how to engage with it given the other values in the situation. This also goes for profit: maximization is only one way of engaging with the value of profit, and grasping whether maximization is appropriate involves considering other values. We discuss some consequences of our approach for stakeholder theorists and profit maximizers.

KEY WORDS: stakeholder theory, profit maximizing, values, thick concepts

INTRODUCTION

Companies engage with many "types of stakeholder value" (Harrison and Wicks 2013, 99). For instance, they can make profit, deliver products and services, provide jobs, avoid unnecessary harm to the environment, observe human rights, and respect the democratic integrity of governments. Although some of these values have started to receive our attention only relatively recently, businesses have always engaged with different values—and they have probably always encountered difficulties when doing so. Recently, stakeholder theorists have argued that different kinds of value may need to be simultaneously considered in decision making, and not only in so far as they contribute to the maximization of profit. They state for instance that "multiple measures of firm performance are superior to just one" (Harrison and Wicks 2013, 118) and that managers are "guided by many starts" (Mitchell et al. 2016, 267). This seems diametrically opposed to the position of "profit maximizers" that decision making requires a "single dimensional objective to be maximized" (Jensen 2002, 248; see also Sundaram and Inkpen 2004).

 Business Ethics Quarterly 27:3 (July 2017). ISSN 1052-150X pp. 353–379
DOI: 10.1017/beq.2017.1

However, the difference between stakeholder theorists and profit maximizers is not as fundamental as it may seem. Friends and foes of stakeholder theory can agree that managerial decision making may involve the consideration of different kinds of value simultaneously. It's true that Jensen (2002, 237) argues that "[t]he real conflict is actually an unjoined debate … whether the firm should have a single-valued objective function." Nevertheless, if seen from the perspective of values, the gap that divides "stakeholder theorists" and "profit maximizers" is not unbridgeable. Notwithstanding their insistence on the importance of a single-valued function, the idea that decision making involves the simultaneous consideration of different kinds of value should not be entirely foreign to profit maximizers. Even if managers would make decisions through the maximization of profit, others may consider different values simultaneously, and managers may need to follow their considerations in order to maximize profit. Moreover, maximization of profit involves simultaneously respecting other goods such as "open and free competition" and avoiding bads such as "deception or fraud" (Friedman 1962, 133, but see also Jensen 2002, 171).

If not only stakeholder theorists, but also profit maximizers have reasons to recognize that decision making involves the simultaneous consideration of different kinds of value (cf. Freeman 2008, 166; Freeman, Wicks, and Parmar 2004), then the worry of profit maximizers that it is unclear how managers should make decisions in the absence of a single objective, becomes their shared concern. Stakeholder theorists do not yet have a complete solution for this problem either. Nowadays, in stakeholder theory, decision making is often seen as the simultaneous pursuit of the "utility functions" of the corporation and its stakeholders (Hill and Jones 1992; Harrison, Bosse, and Phillips 2010; Harrison and Wicks 2013; Tantalo and Priem 2016) and a stakeholder utility function "expresses the stakeholder's preferences for particular types of value" (Harrison and Wicks 2013, 101). However, pursuing different utility functions presupposes that managers and/or stakeholders have already considered different values simultaneously in order to include them in these functions with a certain weight. Moreover, deciding how and to what extent these different utility functions can be pursued may itself be a matter of the simultaneous consideration of different values.

Although profit maximizers have reasons to accept that decision making can entail the simultaneous consideration of different values, they often emphasize that profit maximization is important for the efficient functioning of markets and businesses (cf. Jensen 2002; Sundaram and Inkpen 2004). Stakeholder theorists do not necessarily have to deny this. For them, profit may only be an outcome of business, but they do consider it a condition for the creation of value for stakeholders (cf. Senge 2000, 78; Freeman 2008, 166). Profit maximization may be one of the "narratives" (Freeman et al. 2010, 76-77) that can help to create value for stakeholders. However, notwithstanding (that profit maximization is relevant for stakeholder theorists as well as profit maximizers, it stays unclear how the maximization of one value—profit—can be reconciled with the simultaneous consideration of different values. From the perspective of values, then, profit maximizers as well as stakeholder theorists are left with two joint questions: 1) how can managers simultaneously consider different kinds of value in decision making, and 2) how can this be reconciled

https://doi.org/10.1017/beq.2017.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the maximization of profit? In this article we aim to provide an answer to these two questions.

Of course, the vast body of normative stakeholder literature proposes various theoretical foundations for managerial decision making that can provide a basis for answering these questions. These solutions are grounded in, for instance, utilitarianism (Jones and Felps 2013) or a Kantian perspective (Evan and Freeman 1988), and they articulate theoretical foundations for managerial decision making. However, such normative-theoretical foundations are best seen as "normative cores" (Freeman 1994) or "narrative cores" (Purnell and Freeman 2012) that provide different "narratives" of how to engage with stakeholders (Freeman et al. 2010, 76-77) and cannot lay ultimate foundations for decisions (see also Jones and Felps 2013, 373n2). Decision making can—and usually does—go on without ethical theories as "normative foundational justification" (Freeman 2008, 163). Neither postulating profit maximization as a universal dictum, nor reverting to philosophical foundations of ethics can always explain how managers should make decisions.

Rather, managers usually make sense of the values in the situations that they encounter by means of the many concepts that everyday language provides to them (cf. Sonenshein 2005). The recent philosophical discussion around thick value concepts (Putnam 2002; Dancy 2013b; Williams 1985) indeed shows that many concepts of daily language are full of evaluative content. Language can provide managers and stakeholders with the thick concepts necessary to engage with the values they meet. Looking for "foundations" for decision making in substantive normative theories would then be a search in the wrong place (cf. Williams 1985, 129-130). In order to grasp what could go wrong (and right) with managerial decision making, we should understand, as Jensen (2008, 171) also underlines, how managers make sense of the values in the situations they encounter.

Therefore, we do not propose another "foundation" or "normative core" for stakeholder theory. Rather, we start from the idea that ordinary language can provide managers with the thick concepts necessary to make sense of values (see also Mitchell et al. 2016 for an emphasis on sensemaking and value pluralism). Our goal is to explain from this perspective how managers can simultaneously consider different values in decision making, and how the maximization of a single-valued profit function can be reconciled with the simultaneous consideration of different values. This can enrich stakeholder theory as well as the profit maximization approach.

The article is organized as follows. First, we elaborate the point that both profit maximizers and stakeholder theorists have reasons to accept the view that managerial decision making engages with different values simultaneously. Second, we zoom in on how managers make sense of values with thick concepts and explain how the competent use of these concepts necessarily involves the simultaneous consideration of different kinds of value. We also sketch the elements of decision making that are implicit in the idea of thick evaluation, and we explain what it means to be competent with a thick concept in order to address the issue of circularity that may seem to threaten an approach that locates knowledge of values in language. Third, we approach profit as a thick concept. We demonstrate that maximizing is only one way of engaging with profit, and that how to engage with it is sensitive to the other values in the situation. Stakeholder theorists as well as profit maximizers can therefore see decision making as the simultaneous consideration of different values, but this does not exclude that profit maximization can play a role in decision making. Fourth, we discuss the consequences of our elaborations for profit maximizers and stakeholder theorists. Fifth, we briefly summarize our main conclusions and indicate some further questions that the perspective of thick evaluation evokes.

VALUES FOR STAKEHOLDER THEORISTS AND PROFIT MAXIMIZERS

Although value plays an important role in the principles of stakeholder capitalism and is central to stakeholder theory in general (cf. Freeman 2000, 176-177; Freeman et al. 2010, 280-285; Freeman, Wicks, and Parmar 2004, 364), the question as to what value is, has not received much attention in stakeholder theory. Freeman, Gilbert, and Hartman (1988) address the role of values in strategy, and emphasize that "economic opportunity is one possible value, or more likely a class of values" (1988, 829). Hendry (2001a, 2001b) argues that in a stakeholder theory based on economic value, the interests of different stakeholders may be integrated, but at the considerable cost of reducing all interests to economic interests. These remarks point in the direction of the idea that corporations engage with different kinds of value, but do not articulate systematically what values are and how managers should engage with them.

Recently, Harrison and Wicks (2013, 97) have stated explicitly that "value has been overly simplified and narrowed to economic return" and they take stakeholder theory "as a lens for considering a more complex perspective of the value that stakeholders seek as well as new ways to measure it." They argue that business is dependent on and creates value for different stakeholders and, following Phillips's (2003) "principle of stakeholder fairness," that the firm "owes an obligation [to them] based on their participation in the cooperative scheme that constitutes the organization and makes it a going concern" (2013, 102, see also 118). In this context, they "define 'value' broadly as anything that has the potential to be of worth to stakeholders" (2013, 100-101) and develop measurement scales for different kinds of value in order to support the engagement with stakeholders and the creation of value for them. They emphasize that these measures are not meant as variables that explain firm performance in the traditional sense of profit, but should be taken as dependent variables themselves (2013, 99). The rationale for this being that "while recommendations made by business scholars on how managers can create economic value may have merit, they could also lead managers to take actions that create economic value while reducing other types of stakeholder value" (Harrison and Wicks 2013, 98-99). These elaborations suggest that managerial decision making may not consist of maximizing one value, such as profit, but of pursuing different values simultaneously.

Profit maximizers take issue with the idea that managers would have to pursue different values simultaneously. They do not so much dispute the claim that managers and stakeholders engage with different kinds of value, but mainly insist that a "single objective function of the firm" is necessary for guiding the consideration of these values in decision making. The function of a business must be singular because "[i]t is logically impossible to maximize in more than one dimension" (Jensen 2002, 238).[1] According to Jensen the "long-run market value of the firm" is the most likely candidate for maximization since "200 years worth of work in economics and finance indicate that social welfare is maximized when all firms in an economy maximize total firm value" (2002, 239). For Jensen, a single-valued corporate function is a function in the mathematical sense "that explicitly incorporates the effects of decisions on all the goods or bads … affecting the firm" (2002, 238). For the reasons just mentioned, Jensen proposes the long-run market value of the firm as the single dependent variable of this function (for the sake of conciseness we label "long-run market value of the firm" as "profit" in this article).

Such a function does indeed not exclude the possibility to consider different kinds of value in decision making (cf. Jensen 2002, 245-247). It only requires that these values are introduced by reference to their financial consequences for the profitability of the firm. The maximization of such a function means that the company engages with all kinds of value in such a way that profit is maximized. For example, the value of an inspiring job may not be primarily (or at least not entirely) of a monetary nature, but when making a decision along the lines of profit maximization, only its potential contribution to profit is what counts for it. Such a function may be "non-monotone, or even chaotic [which] makes it more difficult for managers to find the overall maximum. But even in these situations the meaning of 'better' or 'worse' is defined, and managers and their monitors have a principled basis for choosing and auditing decisions" (Jensen 2002, 238). Proponents of a single function of business could thus accept that businesses engage with different kinds of value, but hold on to the idea that the necessity of a single function justifies engaging with different values through maximizing profit (this is also the core argument of Sundaram and Inkpen 2004).

A response to this line of reasoning can be found in the work of Mitchell et al. (2016). They develop the idea that corporations simultaneously engage with different kinds of value through an elaboration in the philosophical tradition of value pluralism. Value pluralism consists of the recognition that many different kinds of value can be distinguished, that these values can be incomparable, and cannot always fully be realized at the same time (cf. Frankena 1973; Nussbaum 1999; Raz 1999, 2003). Such a pluralist approach is not only an accepted position in contemporary philosophy, but also wins terrain in economics (cf. Anderson 1995; Mousavi and Garrison 2003; Hsieh 2007a; Putnam 2003; Sen 1999). In both philosophy and economics, value pluralism means that the evaluations we make cannot be reduced to one kind of value that forms the foundation for all evaluations. Mitchell et al. (2016) take value pluralism as a basis for scrutinizing the idea of managerial decision making as the maximization of a single-valued function. As a basis they take the starting point of Jensen and other profit maximizers that the raison d'être of corporations is their contribution to social welfare. Subsequently, they explain that welfare itself has a plural character and entails many values. This is still something that Jensen's approach can accommodate. However, they criticize the ideas of Jensen and others by arguing that the incommensurability of these different values implies that not a single-valued function, but a multi-valued approach to decision making best helps corporations to increase welfare. Then a decision about, for instance, designing a job is not a matter that can be settled by, say, a comparison of labor related costs and the expected productivity of employees, without obscuring the point of the value of providing inspiring jobs, safe-guarding the work-life balance, and respecting the privacy of employees (see below for a further elaboration of this example). From this perspective, decision making involves the simultaneous consideration of different values.

On closer scrutiny, profit maximizers should indeed be more familiar with the simultaneous consideration of different kinds of value than is suggested by the emphasis they lay on a single-valued function. This is apparent in two complications that value pluralism poses for them.

First, even if managers would make decisions along the lines of the maximization of a single-valued function—and thus ignore the incommensurability of values—stakeholders may pursue different values simultaneously (cf. Tantalo and Priem 2016). On these occasions managers may have to adhere to this value pluralism in order to maximize profit. Indeed, Jensen affirms that "the world is structured in sufficiently complicated ways" to make maximizing "difficult or impossible" (2002, 238). One aspect of this complicated structure of the world may be the incommensurability of the different values that make up social welfare. This incommensurability does not exclude, of course, that stakeholder preferences for certain choices between these values can be expressed in prices (Mitchell et al. 2016, 264) and can in that way be included in a profit function. However, in order to draw up and maximize this function, managers may need to understand and endorse the choices of others to whom these values can be incommensurable. For example: even if decision making is about maximizing profit, then a decision about job design involves understanding the effects of values such as wage costs, employee productivity, inspiration at work, and work-life balance on the profit of the firm. For an employee, however, the value of an inspiring job and the value of a good work-life balance may neither stem from some other kind of value such as profit, nor may the value of work-life balance stem from the value of an inspiring job (or the other way around). These choices genuinely require the simultaneous consideration of different values but nevertheless affect how the corporation can maximize its profits. Even if managerial decision making would only revolve around maximizing profit, managers may need to endorse the incommensurability of values for others because their preferences can affect profit and may need to be included in the single-valued corporate function.

Second, profit maximizers explicitly endorse the view that at least some values require consideration independently of whether they contribute to the maximization of the long-run value of the firm. According to Friedman, for example, a business should maximize profit, but only while it "engages in *open* and *free competition* without *deception* or *fraud*" (Friedman 1962, 133, italics ours; compare also Jensen 2008, 170-171, citing Hayek). These and other values are "embodied in ethical custom" (Friedman 1970) and should be considered simultaneously with profit maximization. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any managerial interaction with stakeholders that does not involve respect for values such as freedom, and the right of property (cf. Donaldson 2011). There may be many values—which Mitchell et al. (2016) call "sacred values"—that cannot be left entirely to who wants to pay a price for them. Even if there are laws and moral norms protecting such values, these rules can only be followed accurately if those following them understand the importance of these values. Interpreting and following such "rules of the game" in practice relies—so we will argue below—on considering these values simultaneously with the value of profit. The category of "sacred values" does not need to be limited to obvious moral values such as liberty and property, but may also encompass other important values such as the ones in the example of a job design. Maybe profit maximizers could even agree that values such as safety, privacy, and work-life balance also can require consideration simultaneously with profit.

The above elaborations suggest that not only stakeholder theorists, but also profit maximizers have reason to think of managerial decision making as somehow entailing the consideration of different values simultaneously (cf. Freeman 2008; Freeman, Wicks, and Parmar 2004). This creates a serious challenge for profit maximizers. After all, on the one hand profit maximizers (as well as authors from other backgrounds) give various reasons for taking profit maximization seriously. Profit maximization is important for the functioning of markets, and markets, in turn, are necessary for the "invisible" coordination of complicated welfare producing networks of activities that usually extend far beyond the view of the individual (cf. Hayek 1988; Jensen 2002; Smith 1759; and many others). Moreover, efficiency in business operations and decision making may be dependent on some idea of profit maximization (cf. Jensen 2002; Sundaram and Inkpen 2004). On the other hand, profit maximizers seem to have reason to embrace the idea that managers consider different incomparable values simultaneously. It remains unclear, however, how the maximization of profit can go together with the simultaneous consideration of different values.

An answer to this question can be important for stakeholder theorists as well. For them, profit is merely one outcome of business, but yet an important condition for the creation of value for stakeholders (cf. Senge 2000, 78; Freeman 2008, 166). Profit maximization may be part of a useful narrative for the efficient creation of value for stakeholders. Moreover, stakeholder theorists may endorse at least some of the reasons that profit maximizers give for taking profit seriously. Therefore, profit maximizers as well as stakeholder theorists face the challenge of answering the questions as to how managers can consider different values simultaneously, and how profit maximization can be reconciled with the simultaneous consideration of different incomparable values. In the following three sections, we approach decision making on the basis of thick evaluation, sketch a solution for the challenge of reconciliation, and discuss the consequences of our approach for profit maximizers and stakeholder theorists.

THICK EVALUATION IN DECISION MAKING

In the literature on normative stakeholder theory, many theoretical solutions have been developed in order to provide normative guidance for dealing with profit and other values in managerial decision making. For example, Jones and Felps propose that, from a utilitarian perspective, managerial decision making should be guided by the principle of "stakeholder happiness enhancement" which states that "the objective of the corporation should be to enhance the aggregate happiness of its normatively legitimate stakeholders over the foreseeable future" (2013, 358). From a Kantian perspective, it has been argued that stakeholders should not be treated as means only, and principles such as "the corporation and its managers may not violate the legitimate rights of others to determine their own future" have been established (Evan and Freeman 1988, 79).

It would be a mistake, however, to see these theories as "foundations" for decisions. Any normative theory for managerial decision making is necessarily a contingent product of the language and culture of those who develop, discuss, and apply it (cf. Rorty 1989; Putnam 2002, 1995). A theory can always be criticized from the perspective of another theory, as Jones and Felps (2013, 373n2) also recognize. Moreover, in practice, managers usually rely on all sorts of considerations that can be extracted from many different narratives within and outside the organization, but which are usually not normative philosophical theories (cf. Sonenshein 2005). "Normative cores," like the Kantian and utilitarian examples above, provide different "narratives" of how to engage with stakeholders (Freeman et al. 2010, 76-77), but are best not seen as foundations for decision making. Following Dewey (cf. Pappas 2008, 59ff.) and Putnam (2004, 15ff.), philosophical normative theories are best seen as instruments for making sense of the reasons that situations provide. Likewise, Sonenshein (2005) proposes that moral principles can at best help managers and others to critically engage with the narratives of an organization.

Therefore, comprehending how decision makers can consider different values simultaneously should not start with understanding or developing normative cores, but with getting a better picture of how managers make sense of the values they encounter by means of the concepts of their everyday language. In line with this idea, Mitchell et al. (2016) propose that making sense of values has a "holistic" character and "does not occur predictably according to some rule or formula, but will reflect the complexities of an individual's or collective's expectations, motivations, social context and experience" (see also Arnold, Audi, and Zwolinski 2010). However, they do not discuss in more detail what this holistic sense making of different values consists of. Harrison and Wicks (2013, 101, 103) seem to zoom in on this issue by suggesting that managers could pursue the profit function of the corporation simultaneously with the utility functions of stakeholders (see also Hill and Jones 1992; Harrison, Bosse, and Phillips 2010; Tantalo and Priem 2016). A stakeholder utility function "expresses the stakeholder's preferences for particular types of value" (2013, 101). However, pursuing different utility functions presupposes that managers and/or stakeholders have already considered values simultaneously. This is necessary in order to include these values in utility functions with a certain weight. Moreover, deciding how and to what extent these utility functions can be pursued may itself be a matter of the simultaneous consideration of different values. Seeing decision making as the simultaneous pursuit of the utility functions of corporations and stakeholders assumes that managers and stakeholders consider different values simultaneously, but does not conceptualize the holistic evaluative sense making that is necessary for doing so.

In this article, we will focus on the basic question as to how managers and stakeholders "holistically" make sense of the different values in a situation by means of the thick concepts of ordinary language. The role of thick concepts in making evaluative and practical judgments has recently been addressed in the philosophical discussion of thick value concepts (Williams 1985; Dancy 2013b; Putnam 2002). The evaluative nature of many of the concepts of daily life is at the core of this discussion, and is also explicitly related to holism in making sense of values (cf. Dancy 2004, 1995, 2013b). This makes thick concepts a suitable starting point for understanding how managers make sense of—and engage with—the different values they encounter in decision making.

Thick Evaluation in Business

Many concepts of everyday language have not only descriptive but also evaluative dimensions. These so called "thick evaluative concepts," such as *lie*, *cruelty*, and *friendship*, "express a union of fact and value" and thus are not only evaluative, but "world guided" (Williams 1985, 129) at the same time. Applying them involves a descriptive grasp of the features of an actual situation, as well as an evaluation of these features, and often provides reasons for action. In order to become a competent user of a thick concept, one needs to share the evaluative point of view of those who are competent with the concept, that is, one must learn how a thick concept relates to the other concepts of a vocabulary (Putnam 2002, 37ff.). The competent use of a thick concept involves the ability to make sense of a value given the other values in the situation.

Below we elaborate the idea of "thick evaluation"—making sense of values through the application of thick concepts—in order to argue that evaluations typically involve the simultaneous consideration of different values, and thus to explain how managers can simultaneously engage with different values in decision making. For this purpose, we take the following steps. We start by (1) introducing the idea of thick concepts, and continue by (2) explaining in more detail that the evaluative and descriptive dimensions of thick concepts are inextricably related. This is necessary in order to (3) argue that the competent application of such concepts does not only involve the descriptive, but also the evaluative dimensions of other concepts. This means that making sense of a value is sensitive to the other values in the situation. Subsequently, we (4) explain how the evaluations that result from the application of thick concepts give rise to reasons for action, and how competent users of thick concepts come to practical responses to different values considered simultaneously. This provides a basis for sketching decision making as consisting of four elements that are implied in thick evaluation.

(1) The use of the thick evaluative concepts of ordinary language consists of applying them to features of situations, and through these applications, these features obtain descriptive, but also evaluative meaning (Putnam 2002; Williams 1985). Thick concepts thus play a central role in making sense of values in a situation. For example, when we call someone *industrious*, we do not only mean that s/he has

the feature of working hard, but also that something valuable is realized in her/his so working. Likewise, when we say that a car is *green* we do not only mean that it uses relatively few natural resources, but usually also that it is good that it does so. These thick evaluative concepts provide a description *and* an evaluation of features of situations.[2] Frequently discussed examples of thick concepts include cruelty (Putnam 2002, 34), treachery, promise, brutality, courage (Williams 1985, 129), lewdness (Gibbard 1992, 279), and lies (Payne 2005, 89).[3] In daily life, within and outside corporations, we use many of these thick concepts in order to grasp the values in a situation (cf. Anderson 1995, 98; Raz 1999, 146). The importance of thick concepts appears in many business practices. When hiring an employee, for instance, we may look for a *productive* and *innovative team player*, who feels *at home* in a culture of *respect*, *purposefulness,* and *mutual support*. Stakeholders and managers use many thick concepts which are full of evaluative contents that help to frame situations and give descriptive and evaluative meaning to them. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that managers can use the "tools" of normative theories for making decisions. These "normative cores" (Freeman et al. 2010, 76-77) are made up of thick concepts and give systematic accounts of the contents of these concepts from the perspective of a specific theoretical tradition. Establishing the usefulness of these tools in a situation—and actually using them—presupposes that managers rely on thick evaluation in order to grasp the values they encounter there.

(2) When in use, the evaluative and descriptive contents of thick concepts cannot be separated (Eklund 2011; Kirchin 2013; Putnam 2002; Williams 1985). This is often discussed by stressing that definitions do not suffice for learning how to apply a thick concept (e.g. Dancy 1995, 263; Garrard and McNaughton 1993, 57-58; Williams 1985, 141). For example, understanding what makes certain work *industrious* and other work *being on the make* is not only a matter of having command of a certain body of definitional knowledge, but also of understanding the value implicit in industriousness and being on the make. Competently using the concept of *industriousness* requires—of course—other descriptive concepts regarding the features of the things to which this concept applies (say, to individuals who work more than eight hours per day and exceed their targets). However, in order to learn to apply this thick concept intelligibly, one also needs to grasp why and when industriousness can be valuable. Being industrious and being on the make are different because of the values they have. Of course, a definition of *industriousness* could be refined by specifying for example that, contrary to *being on the make*, *industriousness* is not only self-regarding. Yet, in the end, such specifications cannot entirely determine the application of the thick concept to new cases without relying on other evaluative concepts (which is indeed the case with *self-regarding*).

(3) Being a competent user of a thick concept requires understanding the place of this concept in the whole of the concepts of the vocabulary to which it belongs from an ethical point of view (Putnam 2002, 37ff, but also Raz 2001; Raz 2003; Williams 1985, 141-142). In order to understand the value of mutual support in work life, to continue with one of the examples from above, one may have to understand that it can be valuable in itself, but also, for instance, that it may be important for cooperation and psychological well being in teams, that it can jeopardize decisiveness,

and may not always go well together with impartiality. In thick evaluation the value of a feature depends on the values of other features of the situation (cf. Dancy 2004). For example, whether mutual support is good, bad, or has no value at all, depends on other values in the situation, such as cooperation, psychological well being, decisiveness, and impartiality. Making sense of a value through the application of a thick concept is thus sensitive to the other values in the situation.

Ethical lapses in actual business practice can indeed be analyzed along these lines: understanding why it was wrong of managers at Enron to think that changing the numbers was valuable as an instantiation of loyalty to the company (cf. Tourish and Vatcha 2005) involves the simultaneous consideration of values other than loyalty. In the Enron case, loyalty was bad, say, because in this situation loyalty doesn't go well together with impartiality, and threatened values such as honesty, the reliability of information, and the long term value of the firm.

Incompetence with thick concepts is by no means an academic matter only, and can, as this example shows, have serious consequences for business and society. It explains how managers can—and must—consider different values simultaneously in decision making. The competent application of a thick concept necessarily involves other values, so that, even if managers focus on a single value, other values can be taken into consideration and affect the evaluation made. The evaluative dimensions of thick concepts may remain largely inarticulate when making sense of a value (Raz 2001, 7; Dancy 2004, 191-193). Nevertheless, they are in principle available to, and used by, competent users so that merely applying thick concepts competently involves considering different values simultaneously.

(4) The above approach shows how different values can—and must—be considered simultaneously, but does not suffice for explaining how thick evaluation can support decision making. This also requires the further step of expounding how thick evaluation provides reasons for action. After all, decisions are not only conclusions about what is of value in a situation, but also about how to act with regard to these values. In order to explain how thick evaluation provides reasons for action and guides decision making, we address the practical meaning of the application of thick concepts.

Thick concepts do not only hold together description and evaluation, but are usually action guiding as well (cf. Dancy 2004, 191-192; Tappolet 2014; Dancy 2013b, 57; Payne 2005, 93-96). They "are characteristically related to action" so that "if a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action" (Williams 1985, 140). These reasons for action can take many different forms: some values should be admired, other values should be protected, still other values should be created, etc. Moreover, different values require different specific behaviors. For example, the value of privacy often requires our respect, but we should engage with it in a specific way in order to respect it. Respecting privacy may, for instance, require remaining ignorant of certain aspects of the life of others. The appropriateness of such a practical response also depends on other values in the situation (Williams 1985, 140; Dancy 2013b, 57). For example, how to respect privacy, and even whether it should be respected at all, may depend on which aspects of life are considered shameful or intimate by those engaged, and also on which other values may have to be abandoned for the sake of privacy.

Competent users of a thick concept grasp which "contribution" (Dancy 2004, 192) its application can make to what should be done in a situation, and also how this contribution can vary depending on the other values in the context. A plurality of different kinds of value is an assumption for any thick evaluation, and engaging with a plurality of values does not require comparing them along the lines of one value (cf. Dancy 2013a). Rather, knowing how to engage with different values involves understanding which practical reasons they can contribute and finding a way to engage with them. Typically "[w]e are faced with several contributing features, and what we know about each enables us to cope somehow with the interfering effects of the context considered as a whole" (Dancy 2004, 192). Managers and stakeholders see the "practical shape of the situation and thereby the nature of the appropriate response" (Dancy 2004, 191) through the application of thick evaluative concepts and thus the simultaneous consideration of different values.

The above leaves open the possibility that only a single thick concept appears explicitly in reflection or communication, while other values are simultaneously considered implicitly. On other occasions, various thick concepts may appear explicitly. In all these situations, the sensitivity of the thick evaluation of a feature to the other values in the situation explains how managers can "holistically" (cf. Mitchell et al. 2016) consider different values simultaneously and decide about an appropriate response.

Thick Evaluation in Managerial Decision Making

From this perspective, a managerial decision is the establishment of a practical response to the values in a situation, and the rightness of a decision depends on whether this response is appropriate given the reasons that these values contribute in the context as a whole. The idea of thick evaluation shows that establishing an appropriate response to the values in the situation neither requires a single value to be maximized, nor does it require reverting to a theoretical normative core such as stakeholder theorists sometimes suggest. Even the application of only a single thick concept involves the simultaneous consideration of other values. Decision making thus typically involves a plurality of incomparable values and the rightness of decisions hinges upon the competence of managers to apply thick concepts. On this account, the usual "dilemmas" from the literature on value pluralism—in which two possible responses to the whole of the values in a situation are juxtaposed (e.g. Chang 1997)—are potentially present in any decision. These dilemmas do not always appear because decision making does not need to involve developing these alternative responses and choosing one of them. Even if different response alternatives are developed and a choice between them is hard to make, the way forward is a better understanding of what sorts of reasons the different values contribute to what should be done, and finding a way to engage with them. Maximizing a single value or reverting to a substantive normative theory can help reflecting on alternatives and making them comparable, but cannot resolve the dilemma of the practical reasons that different values provide.

This "holism of practical reasons" (Dancy 2004) implies that general principles or normative philosophical theories cannot express the requirements for managerial decision making—these reasons are to be found in the situation using the relevant thick evaluative concepts.[4] A more obvious strategy for sketching the practical consequences of taking seriously the role of thick concept in decision making, is not a substantive, but a formal approach. Such a formal approach starts from the idea that the value of a feature may be "enabled," "disabled," "intensified," and "diminished" by other values in the situation (Dancy 2004; see Mckeever and Ridge 2013 for a summary in these terms). The value of provocation for instance, may be enabled by the value of probing, disabled by the value of politeness, intensified by the value of a lively discussion, and diminished by the value of a laid back conversation. How to engage with a provocation (whether or not to continue provoking, how, and to what extent) therefore depends on other values in the situation.

This formal characterization of how engaging with a value can be affected by other values in the situation allows us to further flesh out an approach to decision making that explicates the requirements implied in the idea of thick evaluation. Such an approach should commence by noting that almost all thick concepts have a "default valence" (Dancy 2013b, 45). For example: in the absence of disablers and/or diminishers, efficiency and beauty are good-making features, lying is a bad-making feature, nutrition is a good-making feature, etc.[5] Attached to these default values are default responses: efficiency should be improved, lying should be avoided, beauty should be admired, nutrition should be eaten, etc. These default responses can—and may often do—change depending on other values in the situation: lying may be necessary to expose an impostor, beauty may need to be ignored when admiration would be embarrassing for the person whose beauty is concerned, safety may exclude further efficiency improvements, etc. On this basis we can now sketch in more detail what decision making should entail if thick evaluation is taken seriously. Upon encountering a value that is at stake, the decision maker should:

1. Establish what is the "default response" to this value.
2. Take stock of the other values in the situation.
3. Assess how these values affect the default response.
4. Decide how to respond to this value given the other values in the situation.

This is a conceptualization of the paradigmatic decision making in which one value is encountered and other values affect how to engage with this value. These steps can be performed for different values in the situation. Making a decision consist of finding an appropriate response to the reasons that the values in the situation contribute.

Managerial Competence with Thick Concepts

The formal approach to decision making that we have presented above relies on the competence of managers with the relevant thick concepts. This renders the question as to what makes a manager competent with a thick concept very important. Above, we have argued that competence with a thick concept is the practical ability to apply it intelligibly considering its complex relation to the other concepts of a vocabulary.

Therefore, in the end, only (other) competent users of a thick concept can judge the conceptual competence of managers. As a competent user of a thick concept one has "full recourse to the whole of one's conceptual armory, information and powers of argumentation in reaching conclusions as to which practices sustain goods and which sustain evil, or worthless things" (Raz 2003, 24). Nevertheless, this idea of conceptual competence may seem to constitute a vicious circularity in which there are no other grounds for deciding between good and bad than the contingent contents of thick concepts that have evolved over time in the practices and conversations of their users.[6] A solution for this problem, so we have argued above, can neither be found in the development of substantive normative philosophical theories, nor in postulating the maximization of profit. Indeed, if the thick concepts of ordinary language provide the basis for managerial decision making, then this would be a "search in the wrong place."

Fortunately, relying on the users of thick concepts for judging the conceptual competence of managers does not need to be smothered in circularity. Following Dewey, we suggest that managers and stakeholders are not caught in a network of concepts that only refer to other concepts, but can actually investigate, validate, and reconsider their concepts by (jointly) using them in structuring and making sense of their experiences (cf. Pappas 2008). Raz (2003) identifies a similar possibility when he argues that notwithstanding the general dependence of values on social practices, there are values that do not require social practices in order to exist or be experienced (see also Wallace 2003). In locating knowledge of values firmly in the concepts of ordinary language, we have therefore not given up the possibility that the competence of users of thick concepts also rests on experiences of actual states of the world. Rather, we have, as Davidson (1974) puts it, only given up the possibility of a sharp distinction between concepts and experience of the world, and embraced the idea that the thick concepts of everyday language do not only enable, but are also organized by, what we experience as valuable.

An answer to the question as to whether a manager is competent with a certain thick concept is therefore not necessarily circular, but can also be founded on actual experience of the value of which it is the purported concept.[7] Of course many concepts will play a role in judging the accuracy of the applications of a thick concept that a manager makes in practice, and some—and perhaps even many—of these concepts may be flawed to some extent. Yet, the circularity in judging the accuracy of an application of a thick concept can be interrupted by referring to experience with values in practice. For example: in order to judge whether a supplier has made sufficient efforts to avoid child labor, a manager is not limited to applying thick concepts like child labor, efficiency in production, risk assessment, and profit to the features of this situation. She could also go and see the people working there, try to remember how it was to be a child, imagine how it would have been to work in circumstances like these, take part in (and initiate) conversations with others about these values and their experiences, and subsequently ask herself whether the efforts of the supplier for avoiding child labor are sufficient.

Against this background the most important managerial insight that this article delivers may just as well be that competence with relevant thick concepts is of central importance to any managerial decision and should be developed by engaging with values in practice and in conversations. Without the actual experience of the values of a work-life balance, an inspiring job, and a productive business—to pick up one of the examples we used above—it may be difficult to make appropriate decisions about job redesign. Of course, explications of the values in a situation along the lines of the procedure we sketched above can support managerial decision making. However, without the largely inarticulate evaluative contents of thick concepts that are developed through experience and the actual use of these thick concepts in practice and conversations, these procedures would remain empty formalisms devoid of a substantive understanding that could support making sense of the values in a situation and deciding about an appropriate response.[8]

PROFIT AS A THICK CONCEPT

When thick evaluation is taken to be the basis for decision making, there is no need for setting down a single function to rule all managerial decisions as profit maximizers propose. After all, the many thick concepts of ordinary language provide managers with sufficient resources to consider different values simultaneously. This does not exclude, as we discussed, that profit often is, and should be, a central consideration, and that profit maximization may be important in business. Nevertheless, as we argued, profit maximizers have reasons to agree with stakeholder theorists that managers may need to consider different values simultaneously in decision making. This puts them in a quandary: how to reconcile profit maximization with the simultaneous consideration of different values? An answer to this question can be important for stakeholder theorists as well.

If thick evaluation is taken to be the basis for decision making, it should be possible to resolve the quandary of profit maximizers by approaching profit as a thick concept. From this perspective, understanding profit does not only involve the ability to descriptively define a corporate function, but also to evaluatively make sense of the value of profit given the other values in the situation, and to know how to engage with profit because of this. Of course the *descriptive dimension* of the concept of profit (say, benefits minus costs) is important for managerial decision making. Indeed, nowadays, the fields of finance and accounting provide complicated systems of definitions (for instance on costing and value assessment) that help managers and others to calculate profits. However, a competent user of the thick concept of profit is not only able to reliably calculate a profit, but also to grasp the *evaluative dimension* of this concept: a competent user understands that profits are important for the functioning of markets, that they can be used to realize many different values, that they may be a symbol of success, that they may not always go hand in hand with for instance privacy, and more generally human rights and environmental values, and so on. Competently using the thick concept of profit does not only involve making accurate calculations of (potential) earnings, but also evaluations of these earnings given the other values in the situation.

Competent users of the concept of profit can thus grasp which "contributions" its application can make to what should be done, and how these contributions can vary depending on the other values in the situation. In business, the "default contribution" (Dancy 2004, 191) of the application of the concept of profit may be that profit should be maximized. Nevertheless, a competent user of this thick concept has the ability to understand when the practical meaning that is contributed changes because of other values in the situation. In principle, as we argued earlier, any kind of value that affects profit can be descriptively included in a profit function. However, competently using the concept of profit also entails the ability to grasp the value of profit given the other values in the situation and to understand against this background whether maximization is appropriate. Thick evaluation can reveal various ways of engaging with the value of profit, of which maximization is only one. Engaging with profit may for instance also consist of maintaining it, pursuing it, or even sacrificing it.

Indeed, examples can be provided to show that the competent use of the concept of profit may yield various differing conclusions about how to engage with profit. Think for instance of a situation in which calculations show that earnings could be made by taking large risks with the safety of employees in a developing country. For many competent users of the concept of profit, the idea that such earnings could constitute a profit would probably just not come up. They would not consider the concept of profit applicable at all in this situation given the value of safety that is at stake. Other competent users of the concept of profit may see such earnings as a profit, and may also see maximizing as the default response to profit. However, taking stock of the value of safety in this situation, and assessing how this affects the default response of maximizing profit, would probably yield the conclusion that such a profit is bad, and this would be a strong reason to *sacrifice*—and not maximize—it.

On other occasions thick evaluation may lead to subtler conclusions about how to engage with profit. Take an example in which a manager is restructuring the work of a group of employees. Profit may be an important consideration here, and maximizing may again be considered the default response to profit. However, such a restructuring operation can also involve the value of loyalty towards employees. Here, loyalty would be one of the values in the situation of which the manager takes stock, and assessing how loyalty affects the default response to profit could lead to a decision that involves a response to profit that is neither maximizing nor sacrificing it. Assessing how loyalty affects the default response to profit will of course involve calculating and considering the potential profits related to different alternatives for restructuring. However, loyalty may, for instance, also require investigating, which of these alternatives involves the smallest number of breaches of labor contracts, while not only paying a fair compensation to those who leave, but also making enough profit to avoid the risk of insolvability in order to keep the company afloat. Here, the appropriate response to profit may be neither maximizing nor sacrificing it, but rather finding a way to *maintain* it.

These examples are not—and, from our perspective, cannot be[9]—definitions that catch the essence of the content of the concepts of profit, loyalty, safety, etc. Nevertheless, such examples illustrate that it makes sense to approach profit as a

https://doi.org/10.1017/beq.2017.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thick concept. The concept of profit appears to have not only a descriptive dimension that helps to calculate profits, but also an intricate evaluative dimension that entails an understanding of how the value of profit can be affected by other values in the situation. This evaluative dimension allows competent users of the concept of profit to grasp how to engage with profit given the other values in the situation, and to understand when maximization is appropriate. How often maximization is appropriate, is an empirical question we cannot answer here.

Approaching profit as a thick concept helps to understand how profit maximization and the continuous consideration of different values can be reconciled, and can thus help solve the profit maximizers' quandary.[10] If profit is a thick concept, then any competent application of it involves the simultaneous consideration of other values in the situation. Decisions about how to engage with profit—including those that involve maximizing it—are necessarily made against the background of other values. Maybe in business, the "default contribution" of the value of profit is that it should be maximized, but there are also situations where it could have another practical meaning. Even in those situations where the competent use of the concept of profit indicates that "maximizing" profit is appropriate, this involves considering the other values in the situation. Therefore, also in these cases, engaging with profit cannot be seen as maximization *tout court*. The evaluative dimension of the concept of profit is always involved in the competent use of this thick concept, even if the practical meaning of its application is that maximizing profit is the appropriate response to the situation.

The thick evaluation of profit that underlies the establishment of the appropriateness of maximization may often happen intuitively and already in the first phase of decision making when the situation is framed and the need for making a decision is recognized (cf. Dane and Pratt 2007, 37-38, on intuiting as making holistic associations). The simultaneous consideration of different values then remains in the background. This could explain how even seemingly straightforward profit maximizing decisions such as a lease-or-buy decision are made against the background of an implicit understanding of the appropriateness of profit maximizing,[11] and how competent users of the concept of profit can recognize situations that require a different response (maybe, for instance, when buying instead of leasing would provide capital to a local supplier to invest in a new sheltered workshop). Profit maximizers can now explain how the simultaneous consideration of different values is possible even if profit is maximized, and stakeholder theorists can stick to the idea of the simultaneous consideration of different values while not entirely abandoning the advantages of profit maximization.[12]

CONSEQUENCES FOR PROFIT MAXIMIZERS AND STAKEHOLDER THEORISTS

Above, we have established a general sketch of the elements of managerial decision making that are implied in the idea of thick evaluation. Upon encountering a value that is at stake, the decision maker should: 1) establish what is the default response to this value, 2) take stock of the other values in the situation, 3) assess

https://doi.org/10.1017/beq.2017.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

how these values affect the default response, and 4) decide how to respond to this value given the other values in the situation. Subsequently, we have approached profit as a thick concept in order to show that maximization is only one way of engaging with profit, and that how to engage with profit depends on the other values in the situation. Taking thick evaluation in decision making seriously has consequences for stakeholder theorists as well as profit maximizers. Below, we sketch some of these consequences by elaborating two specifications of our four-step sketch of thick evaluation in decision making that are dedicated to stakeholder theory and profit maximization.

Consequences for Profit Maximizers

In the first section we concluded that profit maximizers can encounter two kinds of situations in which they may embrace the idea of the simultaneous consideration of different kinds of value. First, even if managers would make decisions through the maximization of profit, others may consider different values simultaneously, and managers may need to follow their considerations in order to maximize profit. Second, maximization of profit involves simultaneously respecting other goods such as "open and free competition" and avoiding bads such as "deception or fraud"—and there may be more "sacred goods" that require consideration simultaneously with profit. The first kind of situation does not constitute a fundamental challenge for the profit maximizing approach, but only confirms that "the world is structured in sufficiently complicated ways" to make maximizing "difficult or impossible" (Jensen 2002, 238). Here, the idea of thick evaluation explains how it is possible that managers make decisions through profit maximization, even under the condition of complexity that stems from the simultaneous consideration of values by stakeholders. It does not, however, challenge the core of profit maximization.

In the second kind of situation, however, the idea of thick evaluation may have more substantial consequences for a profit maximizing approach. Profit maximizers usually see the simultaneous consideration of different values as "playing by the rules" (literally in Friedman 1970, but also a central idea in Jensen 2002), that is, they conceive of certain values as constraints on profit maximization. However, if understanding these values involves thick evaluation, then they will not have the character of "fixed" constraints. These "constraints" depend themselves on the other values in the situation including the value of profit (and the latter is the very value they were meant to constrain). If it is useful to think about these values as constraints at all, then they are constraints that may in principle need to be set again in each situation through thick evaluation. For example, profit maximization in choosing suppliers should be constrained by avoidance of child labor, but in order to make this constraint practical and to establish which efforts can reasonably be expected of a particular supplier to avoid child labor, other values in the situation such as profit and environmental protection may need to be considered simultaneously.[13] Even in a situation where constraints are met, and where maximizing is the appropriate way of engaging with profit, this conclusion follows from the simultaneous consideration of other values and the affirmation that these values neither disable nor diminish the value of profit (i.e. when the present efforts sufficiently guarantee avoidance of child labor). Maximizing may well be the default response to profit, but in order to establish whether this default response is appropriate, other values in the situation must be considered simultaneously[14] even if they are labelled as "constraints." As we argued above, engaging with profit is thus never maximizing *tout court*.

If profit is approached as a thick concept along the lines above, then maximizing may be the default response to profit, but yet only one of several ways of engaging with it. If an appropriate response to profit could also consist of, for instance, pursuing, maintaining, or even sacrificing profit, then there may be situations in which maximization is inappropriate given the other values in the situation. For example, it may be inappropriate to maximize profit when child labor is insufficiently avoided by a supplier, and sacrificing profit for the sake of avoiding child labor would be a much better idea. Here, the strategy of profit maximizers could be to require managers to set extra company-internal constraints on the decision making process in addition to the "rules of the game" in order to render maximization appropriate (see Hsieh 2007b for a proposal in this direction). For example, a business may develop its own code of conduct or engage in the establishment of branch-specific rules with regard to the selection of suppliers in the light of their efforts to avoid child labor, and maximize profit within these boundaries. However, just like in the case of the interpretation of the "rules of the game," setting and respecting such constraints requires the simultaneous consideration of different values in order to establish whether and how they should be followed (cf. van der Linden 2013). If setting additional constraints is to help decision making through maximizing profit, then these constraints need to be adjusted time and time again through thick evaluation.

A profit maximizing approach to decision making that can accommodate the two considerations above—and thus incorporates the idea of thick evaluation—would be as follows:

1. Take stock of the values in the situation.
2. Assess how these values affect the appropriateness of maximizing profit.
3. If maximization is inappropriate, set additional constraints for making a decision (and do so considering the other values in the situation—including profit).
4. Make a decision through maximizing profit.

If thick evaluation in decision making is taken seriously, then it appears that engaging with profit is never maximizing *tout court*. The "constraints" within which maximizing is supposed to take place appear to depend on the other values in the situation including the value of profit, and they must in principle be set again in each situation through thick evaluation—the simultaneous consideration of different values.

Consequences for Stakeholder Theorists

Stakeholder theorists have explicitly embraced the idea that corporations create different kinds of value (see for instance Harrison and Wicks 2013). For them, other values than profit do not need to appear as constraints on profit maximization, but can in principle be simultaneously considered from the outset. Our perspective reveals two aspects of this move that have hitherto not been systematically considered.

First, in stakeholder theory, decision making is now often seen as the simultaneous pursuit of the "utility functions" of the corporation and its stakeholders (Hill and Jones 1992; Harrison, Bosse, and Phillips 2010; Harrison and Wicks 2013; Tantalo and Priem 2016). These utility functions are often considered to contain different kinds of value. Our perspective identifies a problem for these utility functions, but at the same time proposes a solution. The problem is that it remains unclear how corporations and stakeholders come to attach certain weights to the different values in their respective utility functions. The solution is to assume that managers and stakeholders can be competent with the relevant thick concepts and that their reasoning evolves along the lines of the four steps of thick evaluation in decision making that we sketched above. However, if thick evaluation plays the role in decision making that we have sketched, then the suggestion that the utility for a corporation or a stakeholder can be "calculated" on the basis of a mathematical function, would obscure the challenge of integrating the qualitatively different practical responses that the values in a situation call for. From the perspective of thick evaluation, a utility function could at best be seen as a numerical representation of the outcome of a complex process of grasping the values in the situation and of finding an appropriate response to them through thick evaluation.

Second, so far the utility functions of corporation and stakeholders have been treated as somewhat discrete sets of values created for stakeholders, and considerable effort has been put into explaining how it is possible that corporation and stakeholders are prepared to consider each other's interests to a larger extent than strictly necessary (Bosse, Phillips, and Harrison 2009; Bridoux, Coeurderoy, and Durand 2011; Bridoux and Stoelhorst 2014; Tantalo and Priem 2016; Harrison, Bosse, and Phillips 2010). The arguments in these articles revolve around values such as trust, reciprocity, fairness, etc. From the perspective of thick evaluation, the willingness of managers and stakeholders to consider each other's interests can be explained without reference to these additional values, but by reference to the interrelatedness of the values in a situation. This interdependence is not necessarily confined to the values within one utility function (see the point just above), but can also transgress the boundaries of utility functions. For example, the disvalue of child labor does not only provide reasons to the engaged children for finding ways to get education instead of work, but can also affect how a business should engage with other values that belong to its utility function (i.e., not maximizing profit when this involves child labor). Thick evaluation can naturally entail considerations of what is valuable for stakeholders beyond what serves the utility of the firm. Dividing the whole of the values in the situation into discrete utility functions for corporation and stakeholders does not do justice to the interrelatedness of all the values in the situation.

A stakeholder approach to decision making that can accommodate the two considerations above—and thus incorporates the idea of thick evaluation—would be as follows:

1. Identify the values in the utility functions of stakeholders.
2. Establish what are the default responses to these values.

3. Assess how these values mutually disable, diminish, and intensify these default responses.
4. Decide how to respond to the values in the situation.

The stakeholder theorists' move of widening the idea of the maximization of a single profit function of the corporation to encompass the simultaneous pursuit of different utility functions of company and stakeholders emphasizes that "value has been overly simplified and narrowed to economic return" (Harrison and Wicks 2013, 97). Thick evaluation explains how managers and stakeholders can deal with the simultaneous consideration of different utility functions and the values within them, but also shows that the idea of discrete utility functions neglects how the values in a situation are holistically related.

CONCLUSION

This article has started from the idea that corporations engage with different kinds of value. From this perspective, the differences between profit maximizers and stakeholder theorists appear not to be as stark as they may seem. In fact, both may have reasons to answer the questions as to 1) how managers simultaneously consider different kinds of value in decision making, and 2) how this can be reconciled with profit maximization. One of the central points of this article is that managerial decision making, no matter what form it takes, does neither require substantive normative philosophical theories, nor the maximization of one single value. What is of value and how to engage with it can—and must—be established in the particular situation using all the thick conceptual means that ordinary language makes available. Therefore, our proposal to consider the role of thick concepts in decision making cannot provide substantive guidelines for managerial decision making. Rather, we have answered the two questions above by explaining how managers should go about making decisions if thick concepts are taken seriously.

We have argued that competently applying thick concepts to the features of a situation involves evaluating these features considering the other values in the situation, and that this provides practical reasons that are sensitive to these other values. Decision making thus always involves the simultaneous consideration of different kinds of value. More specifically, thick evaluation in decision making implies: 1) establishing what is the "default response" to a value, 2) taking stock of the other values in the situation, 3) assessing how these values affect the default response, 4) deciding how to respond to this value given the other values in the situation. These steps can be performed for different values in the situation. Making a decision consists of finding an appropriate response to the reasons that the values in the situation contribute.

From this perspective, the maximization of profit can be reconciled with the simultaneous consideration of different values by approaching profit as a thick concept. Then, maximizing appears to be only one way of engaging with profit, and how to engage with profit appears to depend on other values in the situation. Even in those situations where the competent use of the concept of profit indicates that "maximizing" profit is appropriate, this involves the simultaneous consideration of other values in the situation. Therefore, also then, engaging with profit cannot be seen as maximization *tout court*. Conceiving of profit as a thick concept is important for profit maximizers as well as stakeholder theorists. Profit maximizers can now explain how profit maximization can be reconciled with the simultaneous consideration of different values, and stakeholder theorists can maintain that decision making involves the simultaneous consideration of different values while not entirely sacrificing the idea of profit maximization.

We have elaborated the consequences of the perspective of thick evaluation for both traditions by making two specifications of our four-step sketch of thick evaluation in decision making. *Profit maximizers* tend to think of values other than profit as "constraints" on profit maximization. However, if thick evaluation is taken seriously, then the values that figure as "constraints" within which maximizing is supposed to take place appear to depend on other values in the situation including the value of profit—the very value that is supposed to be constrained. Therefore, these "constraints"—if that is a useful way to address these other values in the situation at all—must in principle be set again in each situation through the simultaneous consideration of different values including profit. *Stakeholder theorists* have adopted the mindset of utility functions that contain different kinds of value. Here, the idea of thick evaluation explains how stakeholders and managers can accord weights to the values in their utility functions, and also makes clear that pursuing the utility functions of corporation and stakeholders is not a process of calculation, but of finding a way to integrate the qualitatively different practical responses that the values in a utility function call for. Moreover, it demonstrates that the interrelatedness of different values does not stop at the boundaries of utility functions, but encompasses all the values in the whole of the situation. This offers new theoretical opportunities for understanding why corporations sometimes consider the interests of their stakeholders to a larger extent than what seems strictly necessary.

This article roots decision making in the plurality of values that any manager encounters and shows that the thick concepts of ordinary language are of central importance for the simultaneous consideration of these values. From this perspective, managerial decision making requires neither substantive normative philosophical theories nor the maximization of one single value such as profit. This article also demonstrates that this perspective offers new opportunities for the development of the traditions of stakeholder theory as well as profit maximization. If thick evaluation is taken seriously, the simultaneous consideration of different values appears not to be a problem, but rather the very basis for managerial decision making—no matter whether one is a profit maximizer or a stakeholder theorist.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Wil Martens, René ten Bos, Andy Wicks, and the editor and reviewers at *Business Ethics Quarterly* for their helpful comments.

NOTES

1. That maximization is only possible if there is a single function to be maximized, could probably be logically true. Below, we will not argue against the conditions of maximizing, but reconsider the idea of maximizing itself as this is discussed by Jensen and others. The problem is maximization as it is currently understood, and not whether the logical conditions for maximizing can be met (cf. Mitchell et al. 2016, 260).

2. Thick evaluative concepts can be distinguished from "thin" evaluative concepts such as good, ought, and right (Williams 1985). Thick concepts "express a union of fact and value" and are "world guided" (Williams 1985, 129) so that they only apply to features that meet certain descriptions. Thin concepts, such as right and good, on the other hand, are not "world guided" and therefore can apply to virtually everything. Thick and thin is probably a "matter of degree" (Scanlon 2003, 276).

3. Eklund enumerates: "[a]mong concepts that have been regarded as thick are discretion, caution, enterprise, industry, assiduity, frugality, economy, good sense, prudence, discernment, treachery, promise, brutality, courage, coward, lie, gratitude, lewd, perverted, rude, glorious, graceful, exploited, and, of course, many others" (Eklund 2011, 25).

4. Indeed, if knowledge of values is located in the thick concepts of everyday language, then even business ethicists cannot expect to express this knowledge entirely in philosophical accounts of values such as the free will, happiness, justice, or democracy. Methods from disciplines such as anthropology and history may be important for catching and investigating the complex content of these and many other thick concepts (see, for instance, Mol 2010 for an antropological investigation of the value of food in eldercare). It would be interesting to elaborate how these methods can be employed in order to better understand the values with which businesses engage.

5. Provocation is one of the rare examples of a thick concept that seems to have no default valence and therefore does need an enabler to have value (Dancy 2013b, 45). Above, we used this example to systematically explain how a value can be affected by the other values in the situation.

6. We thank one of the reviewers for asking us to elaborate this point.

7. It is important to note that being a competent user of a concept (Raz 2001, 8-9; Dancy 2004, 136-137) does not presuppose having a full understanding of the concept, but consists of the practical ability to apply it intelligibly in actual situations. The knowledge that individual people have of a concept may be partial or defective, and there even does not need to be anyone who knows the full content of the concept. People can be competent users of a concept to a greater or lesser extent (Raz 2001, 16-18; Crary 2007, 42). See also Mantere (2013) for a similar Wittgensteinian view, but then specifically with regard to the concepts of a corporate strategy.

8. Organization structures, ethics programs, HR practices, innovation processes, and many other organizational characteristics shape experiences with and conversations about values of managers and stakeholders. If the competence of managers and stakeholders with thick concepts is developed through experience of values and the public use of thick concepts in practice and conversations, then it would be interesting to elaborate how these organizational characteristics can support (or impede) the development of competence with thick concepts.

9. As we understand them, thick concepts do not have an essence or a core definition that guides their application, and competence with such a concept does not consist of being able to follow a definition. Rather, being a competent user of a concept is the ability to apply it intelligibly considering its complex relation to all the other concepts of a vocabulary (cf. Raz 2001, 8-10; Dancy 2004, 136-137). Our examples are directed to competent users of thick concepts in order to illustrate for them that it makes sense to approach profit as a thick concept. They may of course disagree with the content of our examples, but this only proves that these thick concepts are contestable. We thank one of the reviewers for asking us to clarify this point.

10. Profit maximizers may not be convinced by the examples above. They may argue that safety is a constraint within which profit should be maximized, and that loyalty does not require abandoning the maximization of profit. For an elaborated response to this line of reasoning, see the *Consequences for Profit Maximizers* section below.

11. We thank one of the reviewers for asking us to elaborate this point.

12. This does not mean that we have solved all the issues that Jensen (2002, 2008) mentions with regard to multiple-value decision making. He argues that accounting for decisions, dealing with conflicting

stakeholder interest, and resolving disagreements are difficult or impossible in the absence of a single value that can be maximized. However, if decision making can and should involve the simultaneous consideration of different values—no matter whether one is a profit maximizer or a stakeholder theorist—then these three issues have become problems for both traditions, and not just for stakeholder theory. It would be interesting to further elaborate how accounting for decisions, dealing with conflicting stakeholder interest, and resolving disagreements must take place in the face of a plurality of values.

13. Elaborating the example: In practice, the requirement to abolish child labor in the supply chain involves that suppliers find measures to reduce the risk of child labor to a reasonable extent. But what are sufficient measures to reduce this risk, and what would be too much to expect? Can a supplier be expected to check the age of all employees by verifying their official identity documents and by deploying sophisticated medical scans to assess their age if identity documents are missing? Answering such a question requires understanding the value of avoiding child labor vis-à-vis profit and probably other values (this line of reasoning resembles Williams (1982, 1988) "negative responsibility" argument against utilitarianism and Kantianism). Even only the interpretation of rules of the game that can set limitations within which profit maximization is appropriate, may often involve the simultaneous consideration of different values (amongst which profit).

14. Here it is important to note that a default response is not the same as the most commonly appropriate response.

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