

Guest Editors' Introduction

Overlooked Thinkers: Stretching the Boundaries of Business Ethics Scholarship

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This special issue is devoted to highlighting thinkers who have been overlooked within business ethics and who have important contributions to make to our field. We make the case that, as scholars of a hybrid discipline that also aims to address important issues of business practice, we need to look continually for new sources of insight and wisdom that can both enrich our discourse and improve our ability to generate ideas that have a positive impact on business practice. In this introductory essay, we discuss our rationale for creating this special issue, summarize the articles contained within, and close with thoughts on its significance for the field going forward.

Key Words: overlooked thinkers, Adorno, Du Bois, Fricker, Rorty, Ross, Vitoria

The year 2021 marks thirty years since the founding of this journal, a milestone that invites reflection about meaning and purpose. The Society for Business Ethics (SBE) and *Business Ethics Quarterly* were founded in response to the demand by many undergraduate and MBA programs in management that were beginning to require business ethics in their curricula. The founders of SBE and this journal were mostly trained philosophers who had taught and done research in theoretical ethics. Because business ethics was then a new academic field, most of the SBE founders relied on the insights of traditional ethical theorists, such as Aristotle, Kant, Mill, and Dewey, and applied their theories to business practice. From SBE's inception, however, early business ethics leaders, predominantly philosophers, envisioned *Business*

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Ethics Quarterly as a dynamic venue for multidisciplinary dialogue at the intersection of business and ethics (Werhane 1991). Founders of an emerging discipline at the dawn of digital scholarship were particularly eager to welcome diverse methods of inquiry and discovery to keep business ethics discourse fresh and vital; they also faced the daunting challenge of adapting to the deluge of scholarship unleashed by digital tools and platforms. Since that founding, the field has expanded. Theorists from sociology, social psychology, psychology, and religious studies, as well as practitioners, have entered the field, enlarging its interdisciplinary dimensions.

Hybrid fields like business ethics require continual updating to ensure they remain vital and relevant. We need to continually ask questions about our field and the quality of our work: Why are we (and why is our field) here? What is our field, and what questions should we explore? How do we add value and relevance? Which audiences and stakeholders do we serve—and how do we figure out if we are doing this well? How faithfully are we fulfilling our founding mission and aspirations? And how well have we learned and grown as a field, including adapting to a changing world and meeting the challenges of the present and future? These were some of the pressing questions on our minds as we decided to embark on this special issue. In this introductory essay, we discuss our rationale for creating this special issue, summarize the articles contained within, and close with thoughts on its significance for the field going forward.

RATIONALE AND APPROACH

Launched by the still developing SBE, the first volume of the *Business Ethics Quarterly* was edited by Patricia Werhane, with articles by Norman Bowie and other leading business ethics scholars. As founding members deeply involved in shaping SBE, and now participating as coeditors of this special issue, Bowie and Werhane bring unique perspectives on the field of business ethics that inform and enrich this issue on heretofore overlooked thinkers.

We envisioned the special issue as an outlet for scholars whose work has great promise for our field but has not made a substantial impact on it so far. It is easy for fields to grow stale or become stuck on particular thinkers who rightly have a distinguished place within the literature yet whose influence can make it harder to find room for other voices and ideas. Business ethics is such a field, and there is no question that there is a handful of thinkers who have had a substantial influence on our field, due both to the quality of ideas generated from their work and to their recurrence in the literature. We need such thinkers and ideas to cultivate coherent themes and frameworks that enable both rich scholarship and related tools that can be used in pedagogy and engagement with practice. As creatures of habit, most of us have risen to the challenge of creating a coherent field by building a corpus of carefully curated and readily accessible reference materials. With a couple of clicks, familiar authors, experts, ideas, data, and quotations pop up on our screens and into our documents as neatly formatted references.

The coherence of the field and its predominant approaches have been established by the corpus of thinkers established thus far. Still, we envision a variety of

ways in which business ethics would be well served by an effort to step back, ask new questions, and refresh our take on which ideas are central to our discourse. We also need to consider which thinkers might enrich, complicate, or open up the conversation—especially if we think about what we need to face the challenges of the present and future. If we stay in our own neighborhood, we won't get lost, but neither will we discover new perspectives and ideas to enrich our work. This special issue on overlooked thinkers is thus a guided tour to some of the fringes of familiar business ethics territory, with the goal of emboldening ourselves as a community of scholars to explore less familiar intellectual terrain that will widen and revitalize our discursive world, something the founding scholars of business ethics envisioned. We need, periodically, to revisit the larger objectives of our scholarship and question whether we have the tools and resources we need to address the challenges of the day. Given the multidisciplinary backdrop of our field, it is vital that we continue to seek ideas and theories that might be important for this ongoing project.

One of the reasons for looking outside the mainstream of our field is a growing awareness of new and emerging ideas that are important (more generally) and that appear to have increasing relevance to business ethics. Ethics scholarship fulfills its purpose in thoughtful, evidence-based exploration, analysis, and reflection on what constitutes good and right action under conditions of uncertainty, risk, and threat. As we look at the world of today, we can find many places where critical topics and ideas are growing in importance and increasingly demanding attention from our field.

The impact of genomics on rapid vaccine development is just one recent example of what champions of the Fourth Industrial Revolution hail as the unlimited transformative potential of material, biological, and digital fusion for enhancing human power, freedom, and opportunity (Schwab 2016). Advances in neuroscience are raising new questions about human morality (Kelly and O'Connell 2020; Dominguez 2015; Gazzaniga 2005; Glannon 2018). Accelerating climate change, income inequality, and technological change converge as a set of new challenges that call for new thinking and ideas that may be critical to our ability to generate wisdom that matters.

The global pandemic of 2020 and 2021 highlights the moral urgency of these changes. In the current Anthropocene era, climate scientists warn of the irreversibly damaging planetary impact of human activities, which now outcompete natural forces (Crutzen 2006). Rapid economic and technological gains have deepened global inequality and undermined progress toward sustainable development goals (Guterres 2020). Emancipatory movements all over the world are disrupting political economies based on hierarchical social structures of gender, family, ethnicity, and class (Huke, Clua-Losada, and Bailey 2015).

All of these changes pose critical challenges for humanity—and for the role of business in addressing them. As a field, we need to be looking for ways of incorporating such ideas and themes into our discipline and to continually be on the lookout for developments within related disciplines that can expand our conceptual horizons to ensure that we are doing our best work.

What Qualifies as “Overlooked”?

Like any field, ours has gaps and blind spots. While some ideas and thinkers have had huge influence and lent it the coherence it needed at its inception, others have either remained in the background or not been included at all. Particularly in an era when we are becoming more attuned to structures and systems of power, as well as more aware of whose voices are included and whose are not, it is appropriate for us to look for the gaps, the places of silence, the thinkers and ideas needed in the room but largely missing.

While business ethics has been heavily influenced by theory, especially within philosophy, it is also an applied discipline. A vital aim of the field is to engage with practice and speak to those who lead and operate in business organizations. Diminishing public trust in media, government, and social institutions reflects a long-standing pattern of disengagement from mediating institutions as a source of social cohesion and moral support in times of stress (Edelman 2021; Putnam 1995). As they are faced with ever more complex challenges, we anticipate that leaders in the business sector will turn to trusted sources of wisdom in navigating their ethical responsibilities and maintaining public trust. Indeed, in 2019, the Business Roundtable declared in a new statement of the purpose of the corporation that “companies should serve not only their shareholders, but also deliver value to their customers, invest in employees, deal fairly with suppliers and support the communities in which they operate” (Business Roundtable 2019). As an academic community, we need to be prepared to respond to the challenge of the Roundtable with rigorous business ethics scholarship that spans the depth and breadth of uncharted ethical terrain.

Thus, as we considered which overlooked thinkers to engage with in this special issue, we had to grapple not only with who had been missing or excluded but also with questions of applicability to practice: What thinkers and ideas might be helpful in deepening our engagement with business as a human activity—one that is done by humans and for other humans? How can we see business less as just another domain for understanding philosophy and more as an interesting practice worthy of the time and effort so many people put into it? What thinkers can enable the field to develop new insights and practices that will allow us to see ethics as an integral, rather than optional, part of how business operates—and, finally, to marginalize the kinds of problematic assumptions that make the separation thesis a recurring challenge for the field (e.g., Freeman 1994)?

The emerging ethical challenges facing business and the world are not only new; they are also different in ways that can overwhelm the capacities of conventional ethical tools. For millennia, humanity’s diverse wisdom traditions—collective regimes of affiliation through religion, philosophy, politics, ethnicity, and even science—have served us well by anchoring individuals and communities in shared values, norms, and practices. But these traditions were not designed for the scope and scale of human power as it is exercised in the contemporary world, in which values of social justice, equity, and sustainability are highly contested among people who live and work together. The postmodern condition of multiple, competing wisdom

traditions imposes a burdensome freedom. It is our challenge and opportunity to create an eclectic moral compass able to address questions likely to be troublesome for academic ethicists trained in disciplined inquiry and deliberation. Among them are the following: Can threats to the whole of humanity and the planet be tackled without normative ethics—and if not, how can we construct a credible approach? Are normative ethics even possible without a common epistemology? How can societies ethically enforce majority norms when their populations include conscientiously divergent minorities? How does any society that is deeply divided by ideology and divergent understandings of “truth” maintain social order, productivity, and stability?

Underlying such questions is the steady stream of strategic and operational business dilemmas that are the springboards of ethical innovation. Concrete, unavoidable problems with no easy solutions force us to venture beyond familiar zones of thought, practice, and people to clarify our understanding and generate workable solutions. Willis Jenkins (2013) insists that this regenerative practice of adaptive moral learning in response to problems is what keeps ethics relevant and useful.

It is in the spirit of adaptive moral learning that we introduce this special issue, which is intended as well to encourage us as a field to look beyond it. Stepping back, asking questions, and revisiting the intellectual resources we bring to bear to the field of business ethics is a recurring and continual practice of our work. As editors of this special issue, we look forward to future issues featuring scholarship that embraces a wide range of wicked problems with diverse methods, disciplines, and perspectives. Our field will be enlivened and invigorated by an ongoing search for overlooked thinkers who can help regenerate the wellspring of ideas that will keep business ethics a vital source of wisdom going forward.

EXPLORING OVERLOOKED THINKERS

Our first thought in issuing this special issue’s call for submissions was to cast a wide net, inviting the broad community of business ethics scholars to contribute in “shaking things up”—to consider how we might grow, change, and innovate in ways that fulfill our aspirations. We focused on “overlooked thinkers” as an engaging prompt with no clear sense of which thinkers or ideas might be included. We saw it more as a call to encourage our colleagues to reflect on this question and put forth their candidates than as a way for us to create space for particular thinkers we might consider deserving. The focus of the issue is the very act of stepping back and questioning, looking for new ways of doing good work in business ethics, and expanding and enriching the kind of inquiry we do. Dozens of submissions in response to the call attest to the vitality of scholarship in our field, but the abundance of excellent papers also catalyzed the challenging task of narrowing the field to the small collection of articles in this issue. We were surprised by many of the submissions, as you will see in some of the work we selected. The articles in the issue, summarized here, offer a rich sampling of overlooked thinkers whom our colleagues bring to the forefront of business ethics scholarship.

*Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund Adorno (1903–1969)**Article by Craig Reeves and Matthew Sinnicks*

Theodor Adorno was a leading social theorist of the Frankfurt School and is widely known for his influence on the development of critical theory. Vehemently opposed to fascist, totalitarian regimes, Adorno was instrumental in the revitalization of German intellectual culture following World War II.

Critical theorists of the Frankfurt School have been largely unexamined by business ethicists, who tend toward a more positive view of business and markets. In “Business Ethics from the Standpoint of Redemption: Adorno on the Possibility of Good Work,” Craig Reeves and Matthew Sinnicks explore Adorno’s critical view of modern market-based society to introduce an ethical critique of work. Rather than justifying the dehumanizing effects of market dynamics that reify and commoditize people and relationships, however, Reeves and Sinnicks point toward the good by calling out the bad. Applying Adorno’s critical theory to modern work, they concur that most people are compelled by market pressures to subordinate themselves to the arbitrary will of others; they accept ill-fitting roles in exchange for financial compensation rather than choosing meaningful work in pursuit of their own goals. Modern workers have adapted so fully to these pressures that they may not know their own goals or how to pursue them; they have internalized the necessity of inadequate, unsatisfying work that precludes the possibility of good work. Although Adorno’s critique does not offer a prescription for good work, Reeves and Sinnicks assert that its uncompromising insistence on human freedom and flourishing is a foundation that business ethics can use to define the qualities of good work.

*William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963)**Article by Rashedur Chowdhury*

W. E. B. Du Bois was an acclaimed American scholar, a civil rights advocate, and founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. A prolific author and formative influence for generations of social justice scholars and advocates, Du Bois remains an active force in American social thought.

In “Self-Representation of Marginalized Groups: A New Way of Thinking through W. E. B. Du Bois,” Rashedur Chowdhury argues for a new framework for marginalized groups to represent themselves and create successful avenues for power and equality. Using Du Bois’s writings, Chowdhury proposes that marginalized groups need to focus on overcoming the political and strategic limitations created by self-pity, suffering, and power dynamics that favor those in charge. This can be achieved, Du Bois argues, not merely by demonstrations and resistance but rather by self-recognition of each individual as an equally valued person with a soul. Then, from that perspective, individuals should “use political imagination and direct strategies of resistance against more powerful opponents. This influences powerful actors to accept the demands of marginalized groups.” The importance of these insights cannot be underestimated for the analysis of race and gender in business ethics. In the pursuit of equal opportunities as part of the ethics of commerce, embedding the idea of self-representation in the minds (or souls, as Du Bois states

it) of those who are marginalized or discriminated against will ultimately change the power dynamics of race and gender in the workplace.

Miranda Fricker (1966–)

Article by Helen Mussell

Miranda Fricker is an English philosopher with academic appointments in the United Kingdom and the United States. Focusing on the intersection of ethics and epistemology, Fricker established the concept of epistemic injustice in theorizing the interconnection of social and feminist epistemologies.

The fiduciary relationship is a central concept in business ethics. It is not uncommon to claim that the board of directors of a publicly held corporation stands in a fiduciary relationship with the stockholders who are the beneficiaries of the relationship. But beyond concern for the financial well-being of stockholders, how should the beneficiaries of fiduciary relationships be treated? This question is seldom addressed. In “The Silenced and Unsought Beneficiary: Investigating Systemic Injustice in the Fiduciary,” Helen Mussell examines Fricker’s work on epistemic injustice to throw new light on ethical issues that surround the fiduciary relationship. Central to the analysis is the power relationship that exists between the fiduciary and the beneficiary, a relationship in which the beneficiary is silent. Reimagining the fiduciary relationship has important implications for business ethics. For example, if the beneficiary should not be silent, then stockholder activism has an additional justification. Mussell’s rich analysis provides an opportunity for a wide-ranging rethinking of a central concept of business ethics.

Richard McKay Rorty (1931–2007)

Article by Sareh Pouryousefi and R. Edward Freeman

Richard Rorty was an American philosopher who developed a distinctively synthetic blend of critical and constructive pragmatism. His wide-ranging progressive thought was oriented toward fostering a more hopeful view of humanity and human potential.

In “The Promise of Pragmatism: Richard Rorty and Business,” Sareh Pouryousefi and R. Edward Freeman outline invaluable insights about Rorty’s pragmatism and suggest how it might contribute to our thinking in business ethics. Rather than appeal to unverifiable abstract principles, absolutes, or fixed norms, Rorty’s work teaches us that philosophical pragmatic thinking is embedded in moral sentiments, intuitions, deliberation, and practice and thus is suitable for applied thinking in business ethics. Agency theory, which imagines each of us as autonomous, neglects the fact that we are embedded in complex societal and political systems and thus have responsibilities not merely to ourselves but also to the inescapable existence and well-being of others. By deliberating in the context of each actual issue, such as, for example, modern slavery in commerce and its systemic causes, we are better able to come up with solutions that are both applicable and more likely to be agreed upon. This approach to business ethics belies Kantian and utilitarian perspectives, which are so often appealed to in ethical decision-making, and “encourages much more broadly based and practical and useful decisions.”

William David Ross (1877–1971)

Article by J. Drake

William David Ross was a Scottish moral philosopher and humanities scholar known for his translation and interpretation of works by Aristotle and other ancient philosophers. His distinctive contribution to ethics is the concept of self-evident, prima facie duties, such as doing no harm or keeping promises, that do not require justification.

One standard framework for business ethics views the field as an application of major ethical theories to specific issues in business. As these theories are largely presented as being principled, the exercise therefore becomes the application of general principles to business situations. Many adopting this approach have thus resisted implementing the most prominent development in ethical theory in recent history: particularism. In “Particularism for Generalists: A Rossian Business Ethics,” J. Drake argues that particularist thinking has much to offer business ethics and that standard resistance to particularist business ethics is based largely on the misconception that particularists do not appreciate the importance of general ethical principles in reasoning about ethical issues.

Drake points out that at least two viewpoints are allied with particularism. One is holism, which stipulates that what counts as a reason in one case may not be a reason in another case. In other words, reasons have variable relevance. The other viewpoint is pluralism, which maintains that there is more than one kind of morally relevant property. Ignoring particularism has the effect of ignoring holism and pluralism, and thus business ethics is impoverished. This combination of features of particularism and generalism contributes both to theoretical business ethics and to applied business ethics. It eliminates the appearance of unhelpful abstraction, and it acknowledges the importance of context that makes reasoning in business ethics more robust. Drake shows how Ross is both a generalist in the traditional sense and a holist and pluralist.

Francisco de Vitoria (ca. 1483–1546)

Article by Alejo José G. Sison and Dulce M. Redín

Francisco de Vitoria was a sixteenth-century Dominican scholastic and jurist and founder of the Spanish Salamanca school of philosophy. Known for his theories of just war and international law, Vitoria defended the human dignity of indigenous peoples in the early years of Spanish colonization of the Americas (Koskeniemi 2010).

When we consider early defenses of free trade, we inevitably think of Adam Smith. But in their article, “Francisco de Vitoria on the Right to Free Trade and Justice,” Alejo José G. Sison and Dulce M. Redín introduce us to Vitoria’s rights-based defense of free trade. Specifically, the right to free trade is based on what we would call natural rights to communication and association. The fact that Vitoria’s defense of free trade is located in a work that also defends the Spanish conquest of the new world is jarring to the contemporary ear. However, in contrast to utilitarian considerations of efficiency, Vitoria provides an early, perhaps even the earliest, defense of free trade on grounds of rights and justice. By bringing his work into the conversation,

Sison and Redín invite increased research on deontological justifications of free trade, extending the discourse around free trade beyond the standard utilitarian accounts.

LOOKING AHEAD

Our collection of articles for this special issue of *Business Ethics Quarterly* is just the beginning of the development of new narratives in business ethics, and we encourage readers and authors to continue to engage with these narratives and ideas. There are many well-known thinkers in a range of fields whose important insights will yield new approaches to business ethics. These six are some enticing examples of new ways of thinking that we envision for business ethics research and practice in the future. The field will continue to thrive and be relevant only if it is actively engaged with new and emerging thoughts and methodologies, such as the approaches of Rorty and Ross. Some of these are unsettling and controversial, as illustrated, for example, by Adorno's challenges to free enterprise and Du Bois's provocative argument that minorities have to take responsibility for their own lives and future. Some push us out of our staid traditional "boxes," as Fricker does in her analysis of epistemic injustice. Still others, such as Francisco de Vitoria, remind us that there is much to be learned about the historical roots of what we commonly assume are contemporary theories of human rights, including rights to free trade.

All these thinkers—and there are hundreds more—are propitious for expanding business ethics in light of new challenges posed by the global geopolitical environment, poverty and economic inequality, growing ecological threats, and artificial intelligence, among other issues. We are excited about these articles and the opportunities they offer to appreciate the insights of these overlooked thinkers. We are also pleased that there are scores of other thinkers we were unable to include in this issue whose contributions to business ethics discourse we can anticipate in future issues of the journal. This issue is meant to whet appetites and pique curiosity. We invite readers to join this enticing conversation and ongoing exploration of ways to improve, grow, and better serve the purposes for which we began.

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