

***Virtue in Business: Conversations with Aristotle*, by Edwin M. Hartman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 272 pp. ISBN 978-1-107-03075-6**

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Ed Hartman is well known to readers of *Business Ethics Quarterly* and has published extensively on Aristotelian ethics as applied to business. There is always a temptation for those who have such a background to write a book simply by “stitching together” previous papers and chapters. But that does not always make for the most accessible or coherent of volumes. It is, therefore, to Hartman’s credit that he has provided us with a book written, as it were, from scratch. The book flows, building a coherent and persuasive argument in support of the applicability and application of virtue in business.

Nor does the book take a simplistic approach and merely assert that because virtues are good for individuals they can be applied just as much in business as in any other walk of life. Instead, it develops a critical and nuanced account of the role of character and virtue both in life in general and in business in particular. In summarising the purpose of the book, Hartman says, “[n]ot all organizations are good communities; and as Aristotle says, bad communities do not make their citizens good. It is not my purpose to make the case for optimism, but instead to suggest what virtue in business looks like and to argue that it is possible, not that it is probable” (20).

Hartman achieves this aim by developing a detailed account of Aristotelian virtue ethics. But again, this is not by the simplistic method of telling us all there is to know about Aristotle’s ethics and then working out how this applies in the particular domain of business (although the introductory chapter does provide a useful overview of Aristotle’s ethics). By taking us through how virtues relate to ethical principles, decisions, the good life, good reasons for taking action and to how we develop character (chapters one, two, three and four respectively), Hartman introduces us to Aristotle’s ethics by way of well-integrated explanation, critique and example, with application to business always at the forefront.

Thus, we get to understand that virtue ethics is all about taking and reflecting on life as a whole, about the sort of person we want to be and the character we wish to construct for ourselves over time. It is therefore about *teleological* ends and flourishing as well as about being able to give good reasons for our actions. It is also about the development and exercise of virtues, most notably practical wisdom. It also concerns human rationality, but a rounded and grounded rationality, not that of *homo economicus* or rational choice theorists. And it is all about these things in the context of business, with an acknowledgement that not only does all of this apply, and that virtue can be generated and developed in business itself, but also that this is not automatically the case. Hartman takes Aristotle’s own doubts about whether businesspeople can be truly virtuous (because they take making money as an end not a means) seriously, but handles it with his characteristically nuanced approach coupled with moderate optimism.

One of the reasons for this optimism is that virtue is, according to Aristotle, not just an individual matter but is developed in and for community. Sociability as well as rationality characterise human beings; it is in that sense that we are political animals. But again, Hartman does not take the simplistic position that a company is a modern-day equivalent of the Greek *polis*. Instead, he develops a nuanced account of the company as community, acknowledging that this is perhaps easier in small firms than in large multinationals. But that our natural sociability can potentially find appropriate outlets within a business context is affirmed.

Hartman also develops an insightful analysis as to whether and how we might teach virtue ethics in a Business School context (chapter six), and concludes with a further analysis of virtue ethics in a global context (chapter seven). In the latter he returns to a theme developed earlier concerning Aristotle's method—that of dialectic. Here he makes a persuasive case for the application of dialectic in business ethics as a way of making ethical progress, and later demonstrates how it might have application in a global context.

Along the way, Hartman handles the common critiques of the Aristotelian approach; Aristotle's own scepticism about business (as above) and the "situationist" perspective that environment, rather than character, determines action. Again, in characteristic fashion, he takes this latter critique seriously but offers his own extended response to it.

With so many positive things to say about the book, what fault could possibly be found? The observant may have noticed that I have so far said nothing about chapter five, which discusses virtues in and among organizations. This portion of the book is a bit disappointing. It takes as its starting point here the work of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and explores and critiques this in some depth. However, it does not develop a critical sociology of organizations as such, so that in the end the book as a whole is about virtue ethics for individual practitioners and managers (and, to a more limited extent, for leaders) in a business context. Thus, while I felt flattered that chapter five continued by drawing on my own work and how we might "crowd in" virtue such that it becomes characteristic of a good organization (though Hartman also provides an appropriate degree of critical appraisal), I am not convinced that this was the best place to start. This is because a critical foundation of what exactly business organizations are, and their condition under Western notions of capitalism, has not been established in the book. More on MacIntyre's practice-institution distinction, and internal and external goods, the latter of which are Aristotelian notions, would have helped here.

The extended (though largely unreferenced) critique of MacIntyre in this chapter left me with a sense that Hartman starts with a too-optimistic view of capitalism and free markets, even though he is characteristically at pains not to offer a simplistic "all is well" analysis. Thus, for example, one point about the dangers of capitalism—the commodification of the self—is particularly well made. But his Churchillian conclusion (I paraphrase), that capitalism is the worst of all economic systems apart from all the others that have been tried, seems a little on the optimistic side, despite his earlier claim that virtue in business is only possible not probable.

That said, I particularly liked the sections on “framing” (whether we perceive our situation correctly), the role of emotions in virtue ethics, weakness of will, continence (self-control) and temperance. They were accurate Aristotelian reflections on our human condition and make for a degree of realism in virtue ethics even if perfection in virtue is difficult to attain.

The target audience for the book is described as “graduate students and academic researchers in business ethics, applied ethics and philosophy.” I judge that to be an accurate assessment; it is unlikely to be appropriate for undergraduate courses, but could well be a valuable text for generalist business ethics courses at graduate level, and should be required reading for such a course that took a virtue ethics perspective. Academic researchers will find it valuable not just for teaching purposes but for their own research. However, it is not, and does not claim to be, a book for practicing managers; that book still needs to be written. The book, however, does claim to be “an authoritative introduction to the role of virtue ethics in business.” That it most certainly is, and for that we should be profoundly grateful for Hartman’s contribution.