

Guest Editors' Introduction
**Reviving Tradition:
Virtue and the Common Good
in Business and Management**

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ABSTRACT: Virtue ethics, the authors believe, is distinct and superior to other options because it considers, in the first place, which preferences are worth pursuing, rather than just blindly maximizing preferences, and it takes into account intuitions, emotions and experience, instead of acting solely on abstract universal principles. Moreover, virtue ethics is seen as firmly rooted in human biology and psychology, particularly in our freedom, rationality, and sociability. Work, business, and management are presented as vital areas for the development of virtues, not the least with a view to human flourishing. We conclude by introducing the articles included in this special issue.

KEY WORDS: virtue, business ethics, moral judgment, corporate social responsibility, organizational ethics

VIRTUE ETHICS takes the view that right action is defined by reference to the virtues, not vice versa, and, in particular, not primarily by reference to principles. In the past half-century this approach, which we associate with Plato and Aristotle, has gained some acceptance among moral philosophers in Europe and America. More recently, thanks primarily to the pioneering work of our late colleague Robert Solomon (1992), it has begun to make an impact on business ethics. It differs from principle based ethics in some ways that raise issues about its suitability as an approach to business ethics. We believe that these issues can be addressed in ways that illuminate some of the advantages of the virtue approach, as our contributors demonstrate.

First, virtue ethics is clearly different from utilitarianism, which seems to be a particularly appropriate ethical theory for business. Utilitarianism fits well with cost-benefit analysis; it places a high value on the enormous productive power of

capitalism; it is consistent with the presuppositions of standard economic theory. From the point of view of virtue theory, however, these features are not all advantages. In particular, virtue ethicists argue that we ought to ask ourselves what genuine happiness is. Virtue ethics focuses not on preference satisfaction but on what preferences are worth satisfying. The question “Is being ethical in one’s self-interest?” is trumped by the question “What interests does a person of good character have?” As we consider what interests one ought to have, we need to follow Aristotle in keeping in mind two truths about human nature: we are rational creatures, and we are sociable creatures. We are capable of creating our own lives according to our own values, but those values must take into account our need for cooperation and community. Having interests incompatible with those two truths will not make you a good citizen and will not make you happy. In “The Common Good of the Firm in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition,” Alejo Sison and Joan Fontrodona explore how the cultivation of virtue in work or production, which is the common good of the firm, contributes to happiness or flourishing, which is the common good of society (Sison & Fontrodona 2012). Moreover, as Claus Dierksmeier and Anthony Celano point out in “Thomas Aquinas on Justice as a Global Virtue in Business,” Thomistic virtue enables the coordination of public and private activities through context-invariant norms while allowing for and incorporating specificities of time, region and religion (Dierksmeier & Celano 2012).

Second, virtue ethics takes ethical principles to be important, but not primary. But how do virtues guide us when we make ethical decisions? We are inclined to believe that principles are action-guiding in a way virtues are not, but that is far from clear. We find it difficult to settle arguments by applying principles in complex cases, particularly those in which competing principles seem pertinent. Virtue ethicists accept ethical rules of thumb, but place great reliance on the intuitive judgments and emotions of wise and experienced people. Robert Audi’s essay, “Virtue Ethics as a Resource in Business,” provides an account of how a virtuous person makes moral decisions (Audi 2012).

Third, we may wonder whether business virtues are real virtues. Surely a competitive market demands something else. Business, like the military, does give priority to certain virtues – honesty in business, for example, and courage in the military. And while virtue in business does not require me to serve my competitors’ interests, it does require me to respect them. In “The Virtue of Governance, the Governance of Virtue” Geoff Moore, utilizing the influential work of MacIntyre (1984), develops the position that virtue, and in particular concern for the common good, can be a competitive advantage for businesses (Moore 2012). We note, however, that competition, which characterizes commercial societies, often does not support the cultivation of the virtues. As Thomas Wells and Johan Graafland point out in “Adam Smith’s Bourgeois Virtues in Competition,” competition can have a deleterious effect on the incentives and institutions that sustain virtues (Wells & Graafland 2012).

Fourth, virtue ethics is reality-based, *pace* anti-naturalists from Hume to Hare. Virtues are actual psychological states. In “Before Virtue: Biology, Brain, Behavior, and the ‘Moral Sense,’” Eugene Sadler-Smith reminds us that ethics or morality, apart from institutional frameworks and social structures, also has a genetic and neural base (Sadler-Smith 2012). The status of the claim that Jones is benevolent is not very differ-

ent from the status of the claim that Jones is paranoid or shrewd. To attribute a virtue to Jones both explains his behavior and commends or criticizes it. The line between the factual and the normative is blurred here, as it is elsewhere in the social sciences.

Fifth, virtue is not easily acquired or maintained. In his discussion of the practical syllogism Aristotle offers us a picture of a rational person having good values and applying them to the facts on the ground. But this picture is arguably more aspirational than factual, for people are not often very rational. We rationalize; we act impulsively; we are influenced more by irrelevant factors in our environment, such as corporate culture, than by our values. So virtue ethicists must show that it makes sense to postulate traits and virtues to explain behavior. In “The Possibility of Virtue” Miguel Alzola defends the virtues against the attack of Doris (2002) and the social psychologists who find virtues wholly inadequate to explain behavior and therefore not worth postulating (Alzola 2012).

Sixth, difficult as it may be to teach ethics, especially to those who are no longer children, teaching virtue seems even more difficult, since virtue demands not only right action but right motivation and emotion. Yet it is possible to engage people in organizations in ways that enable them to make some moral progress. We begin to learn ethics by habituation, and employees already have ethical (or unethical) habits. Business ethics raises issues about the distinction between good values and bad ones. For as there are good and bad preferences, there are good and deeply enjoyable and valuable lives as well as shallow and pointless ones. A strong corporate culture can override employees’ personal values in favor of questionable corporate objectives and attitudes, but the right sort of culture can support the values of a good community. Following MacIntyre, Gregory R. Beabout defends in “Management as a Domain-relative Practice that Requires and Develops Practical Wisdom” the link between the good governance of organizations and the virtue commonly known as practical wisdom or prudence (Beabout 2012). Practical wisdom is essential not only in the identification of worthwhile goals, but in their realization as well. This brings us to the discussion of meaningfulness in work. In “Virtue and Meaningful Work,” Ron Beadle and Kelvin Knight show how meaningfulness supervenes on excellent human functioning, thus surpassing both the purely empirical (which focuses on intrinsic orientation) and ethical (which centers on matters of distributive justice) accounts (Beadle & Knight 2012). Contrary to what MacIntyre and others have argued, competitive success is more than compatible with good character.¹

NOTES

To preserve the integrity of the editorial process, the editors of the special issue played no role in the review of the article by Sison and Fontrodona. That submission to the special issue was instead managed by former editor in chief and current senior associate editor Gary Weaver.

1. We would like to express our gratitude to Joanne Ciulla, Gary Weaver, and Elizabeth Scott, during whose terms of stewardship at the Society for Business Ethics and the *Business Ethics Quarterly* this issue was conceived and gestated. By their constant support and wise advice they have greatly improved our work, and they have demonstrated the professionalism and the personal generosity that characterize our field at its best. And finally, this volume would not have been possible without the several dozens of contributors and acute and selfless reviewers. Our heartfelt thanks to all of them.

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