

**BACK TO GOLDEN RULE
AND A NEED FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACH**
A Brief Note on
Teaching Business Ethics at Catholic Business Schools in a Manner that
Helps Students Identify and Develop the Character Traits
of an Excellent Manager¹

Andre Ata Ujan
Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia
Jakarta - Indonesia

In teaching ethics, most of our ethics teachers in Indonesia tend to adopt the most common or traditional approach which has been shared for years by our former philosophy and ethics teachers. It starts with a survey on some ethical theories. Utilitarianism, Kantianism, and some theories of justice, particularly distributive justice, are the ethical theories we usually introduce to our students. We then use these concepts to discuss some cases taken from business world or workplaces.

At the beginning I found such an approach successful enough to increase students' knowledge about ethics. However, through an involved survey on my students I eventually realize that students' knowledge about all the substances we discuss in classrooms is not promoting enough to develop moral character.

I am not familiar enough with Alasdair MacIntyre's criticism of modern moral philosophy. But just like Prof. Beabout, I agree with him that endless intellectual debates and exercises are not sufficient to develop moral characters. It is not surprising because to be a moral person requires not simply good knowledge in ethics but rather true commitment to do what is right, good, or just. Robert C. Solomon puts it appropriately: "...it is cultivation of personal character that counts, long before we begin to rationalize our actions, and the formulation of general principles need not be an explicit step in correct and virtuous behavior".²

Our daily experience teaches us that most of our decisions are taken without any prior philosophical analysis. General principles are rarely referred to as the basis for a good decision. Yet, our daily decisions can in fact be morally justified for they are inspired by virtues or wisdoms that have been unconsciously internalized through consistency to practice what we believe meaningful for being a honorable moral person. This is precisely the excellence of virtues or cultural wisdoms. So, if the formation of moral

¹ Presented as a responding paper in International Conference on Business Education at Catholic Universities organized by John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought on June 11 to 13, 2008, at Notre Dame University, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA.

² Robert C. Solomon, *Ethics and Excellence, Cooperation and Integrity in Business* (New York, Oxford: New York University Press, 1992), 113-114.

attitude is at the center of the aim of business ethics teaching, then some fundamental adaptations both in terms of substances and approach in teaching business ethics is indispensable. Here I in essence absolutely agree with Prof. Beabout's approach in teaching ethics.

So what I put in this paper is simply a brief commentary that might be helpful to stimulate further discussions on the topic we are discussing in this conference. Two points to be added in this commentary: (1) back to golden rule; and (2) the importance of transformational approach in teaching business ethics.

Back to Golden Rule

I do agree with Prof. Beabout that business ethics must be focused more on virtue ethics rather than on various competing moral theories. In this respect I have to be honest enough to recognize that John C. Maxwell's little book *There is No Such Thing as Business Ethics*³ has awakened me to be more critical of the business ethics substances I ever provided my students. This book reminds me that ethics is first of all a matter of practice; not simply knowledge. And there is only one rule for behaving ethically, i.e.: The Golden Rule: "Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them" or "Treat others in the way you want them to treat you" (Christianity); "No one of you is a believer until he loves for his neighbor what he loves for himself" (Islam); "This is the sum of duty; do naught unto others what you would not have them do unto you" (Hinduism); "Hurt not others with that which pains yourself" (Buddhism); "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others" (Confucianism).⁴

The book reminds us that living a *24-Karat-Gold* life, in Maxwell's terms, or living a meaningful life is the essential *telos* every human being, including a manager, seeks to achieve. And the rule that helps human beings to enjoy such a life is the golden rule. So I have included and even considered this small book as one of the most important books for my undergraduate business ethics classes.

There are at least three reasons for focusing business ethics on virtue ethics which is naturally centered on the golden rule. (a) Virtue ethics directly awakens students to see ethics first of all as a matter of practicing values. It challenges everyone's moral integrity. So learning ethics is not complete without readiness and true commitment to practice what students understand and believe good, right, and proper to do. Practicing or doing what we believe right, good, and proper is the best way to cultivate moral attitude. Virtue ethics would encourage students to be moral persons not by words but by deeds.

(b) Since the so-called virtues or wisdoms are commonly shared by all religions, focusing business ethics on virtue ethics which specifically stresses the centrality of the golden rule will inspire students to see the essential relationship between their religious creeds and secular moral beliefs. And as a Christian I believe that virtues and local wisdoms in general which in essence sustain human dignity must not be at odd with

³ John C. Maxwell, *There's No Such Thing As Business Ethics* (United States of America: Warner Books & A Time Warner Company, 1982).

⁴ Maxwell, *Ibid*, 22.

Christian values. Thus, moral education must be extended to cover both Catholic values and local wisdoms which in essence are multicultural.⁵

(c) Virtue or wisdom languages are more acceptable to a pluralistic society. In a pluralistic society such as Indonesia a direct reliance on any comprehensive doctrines (such as Catholic theological and moral doctrines) would provoke social and political resistance. Hence, teaching Church's Social Thoughts as they are seems not wise enough to do in a pluralistic society.⁶ It should be kept in mind that graduates from Catholic business schools are both members of the Church and the society they belong to. They are supposed to contribute not only to the good of the Church but also to the society at large. To quote Bishop Albertus Soegiopranoto, S.J., a Catholic Bishop who was declared national hero by Indonesia government: "An Indonesian Catholic must be one hundred percent Catholic and one hundred percent Indonesian".

In such context, golden rule can serve as the common ground for people to discuss and set up their common operational rules for it in essence reflects a win-win philosophy. This is not to say that Church's Social Thoughts must be avoided from business ethics training; rather that the message of Church's Social Thoughts can be effectively disseminated if they are announced in the words of virtue or language of wisdoms that communally shared by society.

Indonesian society, for example, shares some moral wisdoms that have been held dearly for centuries. Local wisdoms such as *tenggang rasa or tepo sliro*, and *ngono yo ngono ning ojo ngono*, to mention two of them, are traditionally and culturally maintained since they are considered central to develop harmonious and good relationship in a civilized society. They are even considered standard for meaningful life. *Tenggang rasa or tepo sliro* (being thoughtful) stresses the importance of considering one another. It reminds every human being to take others' fate to be one's own. *Ngono yo ngono ning ojo ngono* particularly reminds human being not to be enslaved by greed and selfish interests.

Such wisdoms are in essence reflections of the golden rule; they put a special stress on the importance of the so-called *a sense of community*. Pursuing one's own good is of course worth sustaining. But pursuing one's own good in a way that eliminates opportunity for others to enjoy a decent life is not only shameful but also a reflection of moral mediocrity. An honorable and meaningful life requires true sensitivity and openness to take the fate of others to be one's own.

Transformational Approach

To help students see the centrality of living a *24-Karat-Gold* life, traditional approach, that is teaching as the process of the transfer of knowledge is no longer adequate. Teaching ethics that aims at building up students' awareness of the importance of moral values requires students' active participation in learning process. Awareness of moral values that in turn promotes the development of moral attitude presupposes students'

⁵ Bhiku Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (New York: Plagrave, 1999).

⁶ See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University, 1995).

ability to be critical and reflective. To this extent, transformational approach in teaching business ethics would be indispensable since such an approach basically encourages students to be reflective, that is, a capacity that help students face their own life independently and intelligently. The whole process of learning is then a student-centered learning process. This approach provides students with more room to find by themselves what they believe morally right and good to do.

To achieve such an aim, conditioning students to get themselves accustomed with ethical problems would be necessary. Through the challenge of problems students learn to find and formulate ethical problems and an appropriate identification of the problem can provide them with insight that enables them to make a decision which is morally and economically good and responsible. The only condition is that problems must be real, familiar to students' experience, not the fictive ones. This will stimulate students to be more sensitive of business' ethical dimension, on the one hand, and to develop their capability to find out promoting moral values both for a good business and a successful manager, on the other.

In this respect, assigning students to learn from the past would be helpful to intensify their self-awareness of the importance of virtue in doing business. Learning from the past would enable students to realize potential negative effects that an unethical manager can bring about not only on his/her own life but also on society at large. Failed managers and the shameful life or a life without dignity that they have to bear due to their unethical behaviors will be a good lesson for students. They learn that the Iron Rule of Responsibility will severely punish them if they fail to take into account moral values in doing business. Stressing such a truth Maxwell rhetorically said: "Have you ever met anyone who lived a life of shortcuts, deception, and cheating who finished well?"⁷ This rhetoric again reminds us that ethics is primarily a matter of doing, not simply knowing.

Besides learning from the past, assigning students to try to find by themselves the so-called basic character of an excellent manager is important. Here I agree with Prof. Beabout. Encouraging students to observe and write their experience and share their reflective findings in class rooms would be advantageous. Yet, in doing this, I prefer not to equip students with guiding questions. It is good to let them creatively find by themselves the way they think appropriate to bring into surface moral values which are supposed to characterize an excellent manager. In this way students are encouraged to explore their experience independently by applying ethical concepts and ideas they have acquired through reflections in class rooms. Students should be encouraged to develop their ethical perspective and use it to analyze cases or ethical problems they find in real business world. At this point they transform themselves to be conscious moral persons which is nothing but the very basic condition for being a good manager.***

Jakarta, May 2008.

⁷ Maxwell, Ibid, p. 15.