

# HOW MIGHT A PHILOSOPHER TEACH BUSINESS ETHICS IN A MANNER THAT HELPS STUDENTS IDENTIFY AND DEVELOP THE CHARACTER TRAITS OF AN EXCELLENT MANAGER?

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In this paper, I describe the job shadowing experience that I use in my Business Ethics course at Saint Louis University.

## A Brief Description of the Course

The Business Ethics course I teach is an undergraduate course at the 300-level. The course has two prerequisites, both in philosophy: Historical Introduction to Philosophy and Ethics. In these courses, the students (should) have developed a familiarity with both 1) Ancient Greek philosophy (especially focusing on questions about what it means to be a human being and questions about ultimate reality), and 2) modern moral philosophy, (especially the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill and the deontology of Immanuel Kant).

In the past, I have taught the Business Ethics course many different ways. Frequently, I used an approach that is standard among academic philosophers who teach business ethics: I reviewed several of the central approaches to ethics employed by philosophers, explained a few of the main theories, and then encouraged the students to apply those principles to cases and problems from the world of business.<sup>1</sup>

Increasingly, I have become convinced that there are shortcomings with this approach. In particular, I have been persuaded by Alasdair MacIntyre's criticism of modern moral philosophy, namely, that contemporary academics concerned with the moral life find themselves engaged in endless debates, not with building up moral excellence. The debaters then find themselves talking past each other and engaging in disputes that are interminable given the resources of modern moral philosophy.<sup>2</sup> According to the diagnosis suggested by MacIntyre, contemporary discourse frequently involves the use of moral concepts, such as justice, freedom, and goodness, that are unwittingly employed in arbitrary and competing ways. Because the beliefs that made those terms meaningful in their original contexts have been lost, we find ourselves amidst a new Babel. The main moral philosophies that compete in modern life, (utilitarianism, deontology, social contract theories) are thus disordered fragments detached from the social contexts from which their significance derived. Unable to engage in common discourse and unaware that we are using distinct moral grammars, moral discourse collapses into irrational babble. There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement. Within this context, the prevailing wisdom becomes that each individual is entitled to his or her own preferences.

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<sup>1</sup> In a book that I co-authored with Daryl Wennemann (*Applied Professional Ethics*, 1994) we developed an approach to professional ethics that aims to avoid some the problems identified here. We borrowed from Kohlberg and Gilligan to argue that apparent conflicts between competing concerns and principles can be overcome through properly ordering moral principles. Increasingly, I have come to think that a "principle-based" approach to applied ethics needs to be supplemented with a virtue based approach.

<sup>2</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame, 1981. In particular, MacIntyre presents his diagnosis and criticism of modern moral philosophy in chapters 1 and 2.

If MacIntyre's diagnosis of our predicament is accurate, moral philosophers who want to help their students aim toward moral truths and who teach business ethics may find themselves producing results contrary to their goals. A course in Business Ethics that focuses on learning modern moral philosophies may have the unintended effect of providing students with theories and principles that can be used to justify virtually any conclusion. In particular, when applied to the moral dilemmas that arise in the cases studied in business ethics, one might question whether moral philosophy can provide a way to reason through such difficulties. Amidst this context, I have found myself increasingly convinced that the best way forward is through a creative retrieval of the virtue tradition. Rather than aiming to arm our students with the vocabulary of competing moral philosophies, each of which could be used to justify differing conclusions in various cases, I have been drawn to the work of using the language of the virtues within the context of business ethics.

When the issues of business ethics are framed in the tradition of the virtues, the task of the moral philosopher is not to engage a set of debates that arise out of problems and case studies, but rather to cultivate a set of dispositions. The challenge centers on the question of whether those who engage in business activity in a market economy might become more attentive to treating humans as persons endowed with a capacity for intelligence and self-determining freedom who can make choices and form habits ordered toward the common good.

In *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II, writing immediately after the fall of communism, raised questions about the future of capitalism. The pope drew a distinction between consumerism and capitalism. John Paul II unequivocally opposed acquisitiveness and our consumptive culture. (It was in *Centesimus Annus* that Pope John Paul II first used the phrase, "culture of death.") He explained this phrase more fully in *Evangelium Vitae* when he warned that the rising culture of death is based on "an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency" (EV 11). Yet John Paul II was not a complete critic of the efficiency associated with capitalism and free markets. He went so far as to praise "an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector" (CA 42). While extolling the virtues of honesty and justice, John Paul II appealed to "qualified personnel" who might be capable of "managing the economy in an efficient and responsible manner." (CA 20). Is it possible, as John Paul II seems to suggest, to manage "in a responsible manner" with an eye to economic concerns while comporting oneself in a way that is honest and just? In short, is it possible for a manager to practice the virtues?

Those of us who want to answer yes are faced with a significant challenge if we take seriously other features of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. On MacIntyre's account, the interminability of modern moral debates is tied to the reigning moral philosophy: emotivism. Emotivism is the view that questions of ends and purposes are questions of values, and on these, reason is thought to be silent. MacIntyre claims that emotivism is embodied in several contemporary characters; chief among these is the "manager."<sup>3</sup> Drawing from Max Weber, MacIntyre describes the

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<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre identifies two other characters who embody emotivism: the aesthete and the therapist. See chapter 3 of *After Virtue*.

manager as a social role that is a central moral representative of our culture, one who embodies the claim that goals are values that are chosen and as such are not subject to rational evaluation. MacIntyre defines virtues as acquired human qualities, the exercise of which allows one to pursue goods internal to a practice. On MacIntyre's account, the manager devises efficient means to achieve any proposed end. As such, the manager is unconcerned with internal goods. In the capitalist system, this typically means that profit trumps moral virtue. On this account, the manager is a bureaucrat who devises policies aimed at efficiently accomplishing given ends, an amoral character entirely unconcerned with and unable to embody the virtues. So, if MacIntyre is correct with regard to the world of business and the character of the manager, then the life of moral virtue is incompatible with business activity and managing.

This feature of MacIntyre's work has been criticized in a variety of ways.<sup>4</sup> On this score, I side with MacIntyre's critics who think that business and the virtues are not inherently inimical. In particular, I am moved by J. Thomas Whetstone's suggestion that ethics researchers need to listen to managers and the way they use virtue language. In his article, "The Language of Managerial Excellence: Virtues as Understood and Applied,"<sup>5</sup> Whetstone challenged ethics researchers "to increase their understanding of extant virtue language as the basis for a renewed development of virtue ethics." Whetstone proposes a research program that involves "listening to what managers themselves say when discussing excellent managers and their behaviors."<sup>6</sup>

To move in this direction, I have my students engage in a job shadowing experience. Each student shadows someone from the business world. After the job shadowing experience, the student interviews the person shadowed, especially with regard to the virtues required to excel in the practice of business.

Before explaining the details of the job shadowing assignment, it might help for me to review some of the other components of my Business Ethics course. I begin by having the students read the first several chapters of Benjamin Barber's *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*. I use Barber to "awaken" the students to consider questions about the relation between market economies and the culture of consumerism.

Next, I turn to moral philosophy. Given our university's curriculum, I can generally count on my students having studied virtue ethics, either from the writings of the ancient Greeks, especially Plato or Aristotle, or from St. Thomas Aquinas. However, I have the students (re)read Book II of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, with a special focus on understanding what Aristotle

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see K.B. Brewer, 'Management as a Practice: A response to Alasdair MacIntyre'. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 16 (1997) 825-833; Paul du Gay, "Alasdair MacIntyre and the Christian Genealogy of Management Critique." *Cultural Values* 2:4 (1998) 421-44; Geoff Moore, "On the Implications of the Practice-Institution Distinction: MacIntyre and the Application of Modern Virtue Ethics to Business," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 12:1 (2002)19-32; Ron Beadle and Geoff Moore, "MacIntyre on Virtue and Organization," *Organization Studies* 27:3 (2006) 323-40; Laura Nash, "Whose Character? A Response to Mangham's 'MacIntyre and the Manager'" *Organization* 2 (1995) 226-232; A.C. Wicks, A. C.: 1997, "On MacIntyre, Modernity and the Virtues: A Response to Dobson," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 7:4 (1997) 133-135.

<sup>5</sup> J. Thomas Whetstone, "The Language of Managerial Excellence: Virtues as Understood and Applied," *Journal of Business Ethics* 44:4 (June 2003) 343-57.

<sup>6</sup> Whetstone, 344. Also see Bruno Dyck and Rob Kleysen, "Aristotle's Virtues and Management Thought: An Empirical Exploration of an Integrative Pedagogy," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 11:4 (October 2001) 561-574.

means by a "trait," and how he understands the virtues to be traits that make for a life of human flourishing.

We also turn to MacIntyre's account of the virtues. MacIntyre defines virtues as acquired human qualities, the exercise of which allows one to pursue goods internal to a practice. MacIntyre has a (famously) sophisticated account of social practices<sup>7</sup>, but central to his understanding of a social practice is that there are goods internal to the activity. Music, painting, medicine, and farming are all practices on MacIntyre's account, because each is a complex, coherent, socially established human activity through which goods are realized in the activity.

As I have indicated, MacIntyre conceives of the manager as a bureaucrat who prizes efficiency over ethics, placing profit on a plane distinct from moral purposes. The manager as bureaucrat is thus an important component in the divorce between business and ethics, the loss of the virtues, and the moral hollowness of our consumptive culture. MacIntyre leaves us with a sense that the manager is morally empty. He seems to propose that we should abandon this hollowness by turning away from market economies. This strikes me as both unrealistic and inattentive to the ways in which business activity is a practice with internal goods. I am hoping to move my students beyond MacIntyre's work. I propose that moral philosophy can aid in offering a richer conception of authentic freedom in a market economy by deepening our understanding of the practice and character of the manager.

I have my students engage some of the contemporary literature in the business ethics journals by authors who have challenged MacIntyre's account of the manager, business practice, and the virtues.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Description of the Job Shadowing Experience**

Through those readings, my hope is that I have led the students to a place where each can ask whether there are character traits, the development and exercise of which, are internal to the excellent practice of business management. In short, I want them to take up Whestone's challenge by engaging in the practice of "job shadowing." Each student chooses someone from the business world to shadow (for several hours or half a day), and then interviews that person with special focus on the character traits deemed crucial for managing well.<sup>9</sup> The interview falls into three parts.

#### **1. Questions about the Typical Business Practice:**

- What is your job usually like? Was today a typical day?
- What do you do? What are the duties/functions/responsibilities of your job?
- What kinds of problems do you deal with? What kinds of decisions do you make?

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<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre states, "By a practice, I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." *After Virtue*, 187.

<sup>8</sup> See notes 4 and 5 above. I conclude the course by having the students read Tom Morris's book, *If Aristotle Ran General Motors*.

<sup>9</sup> This exercise works best when the students choose someone who has significant experience in the business sector. Some students have been tempted to choose to shadow a friend who has recently graduated and acquired a new job. More is learned when the student shadows a person with more significant work experience.

- What percentage of your time is spent doing what? Does your work involve planning, organizing, leading, monitoring, correcting, celebrating, or other activities?
- How would you characterize the business practice of your job?
- What goals are you aiming for in your work?
- Are there goals that are "given" in your position, that is, goals that come with the position? Are there goals that are "given" by the company?
- Are you able to set, question, or refine those goals? If so, how do you deliberate about the goals you are pursuing in your work?

## **2. Questions about the Position, and Some Personal Background Questions:**

- How did this type of work interest you and how did you get started?
- What might you say to a student considering this kind of work?
- What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying?
- What part of this job do you find most challenging?
- What do you like and not like about working in this industry?
- How does a person progress in your field?
- What is a typical career path in this field or organization?
- What is the most common way to enter this occupation?
- What is the best way to enter this occupation? What is required for success?

## **3. Questions about the Character Traits Required for this Type of Business Practice:**

- For this project, we are focusing on acquired personal traits, that is, qualities of character.
  - For example, patience, perseverance, determination, gentleness, intelligence, friendliness, ambition, punctuality, attentiveness, independence, assertiveness, cooperativeness, sensitivity, clarity in expression, creativity, initiative, honesty, bravery, self-discipline, kindness, depth, mildness, compassion, truthfulness, practical wisdom, deliberative ability, ability to execute, resourcefulness, integrity, loyalty, fairness, civic concern, etc.<sup>10</sup>
- What personal qualities do you believe contribute most to success in this field/job?
- In addition to the skills and talents that are essential to be effective in your job, what character traits do you think are required to do well in this job?
  - Do you think those traits can be acquired?
  - How did you acquire the traits you need for your job?
  - Do you think that those traits can be acquired before entering this job?
  - Do you think those traits can be acquired through a formal training program?
  - How might a student or prospective employee evaluate whether or not one has the personal traits, or at least their beginnings, required in a position such as yours?
- What are the major rewards of your job besides extrinsic rewards such as money, fringe benefits, travel, etc.?
- Does your work relate to any experiences or studies you had in college?
- How well did your college experience prepare you for this job?
- What courses have proved to be the most valuable to you in your work?
- What would you recommend for a college student seeking to pursue work in this area?
- If you were entering this career today, would you change your preparation in any way?

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<sup>10</sup> Morris provides both a summary of the ten virtues that are the focus of Aristotle's concern in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and a longer list of virtues from contemporary life. See Morris, pp. 157 ff. Whetstone also provides a list of virtue terms used by managers. See p. 345.

In light of the job shadowing experience and interview, the students are in a better position to consider the relation between business practices and character traits. The students write a term paper based on their job shadowing experience. The paper has three parts: 1) a description of the notion of a "practice," the notion of "moral virtue," and an explanation of the philosophical question as to whether business practices involve moral virtue; 2) a description of the job shadowing experience and interview; and 3) the student's reasoned answer, in light of the student's job shadowing experience, as to the relation between moral virtues and business practices.

### **My Findings**

I have found that the job shadowing assignment deepens the students' ability to consider the relation between 1) those character traits that are virtues and 2) excellence in the practice of business.

My experience is that students come to recognize that in order to become excellent at the managerial activities of planning, organizing, leading, monitoring, correcting, and celebrating, one must develop more than an ability to increase profits. Excellence at business management involves developing a set of traits, namely, the virtues.<sup>11</sup> Further, my experience is that this job shadowing assignment helps students recognize that contemporary business practice, with its more highly educated workforce, decentralized decision-making, continuous re-structuring, deeper awareness of the quest for work that is worthwhile, and increased desire to balance employment with other parts of a meaningful human life, provides an opportunity for increased understanding of the practice of business while calling attention to the importance of cultivating the character traits of the manager not simply as efficient bureaucrat (à la MacIntyre) but as one who, in order to achieve those goods internal to the activity of managing with excellence, aims to embody the those traits traditionally recognized as virtues.

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<sup>11</sup> The following paragraph, from a student paper, is representative. This student shadowed and interviewed Joan, a recruitment agent whose work involves providing temporary replacement workers on a short term basis. In the concluding section of the paper, the student wrote, "I have argued that business practices involve moral virtues and also that internal goods can be gained through the practice of business. In supporting my view, I have agreed with Kathryn Balstad Brewer's views against MacIntyre's claims about people in business. For MacIntyre to generalize about the business world is unfair. There are plenty of people in the business world who partake in this practice because they have a passion for it. An example of this kind of person is Joan, who during my job shadowing experience really showed me how a person can be passionate about their job and aim for goals that are not just financially oriented. . . . One answer in particular epitomized my belief that her job consisted of virtues that were needed in her line of work. The question was, "what personal qualities do you believe contribute most to success in this field?" In explaining her answer, I am going to incorporate Aristotle's moral virtues to show that the practice of business involves moral virtues. In her answer, she said that friendliness and honesty are qualities that are needed in her field of work, which as we know, are included in Aristotle's list of moral virtues. I believe that four of her answers fall under the moral virtue of courage. They include determination, ambition, initiative and self-confidence. Without courage, a person would not be determined to get up after being knocked down, or to take appropriate risks, or to take initiative, or to stand up for one's beliefs when no one else believes in them. Joan also mentioned that the quality of self-discipline is needed, which falls under the virtue of temperance. Joan also touched on a point that has become very important today, the ability to communicate well. This includes networking, listening to exact requests from customers, and providing information to customers in a way that is clearly understood. Business is indeed a practice, and the practice of business involves moral virtues."