

Chapter Eight

On the Need for Theory in Business Ethics

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As is the case with much of the short history of modern applied ethics, business ethics has largely unfolded as bringing to bear tools and resources of modern ethical theories to the moral quandaries within the practice of business. Without a doubt, modern ethical theories such as rights theory, deontology, utilitarianism, and even sophisticated forms of egoism have motivated those interested in the moral complexities of business to deepen their awareness and understanding. The question that this chapter seeks to explore is whether or not it is time to outgrow a certain strain of the application of ethical theory—as it has been conceived in much of modern philosophy—and to embrace an anti-theoretical perspective in our endeavor to tackle diverse issues in the ethics of business.¹ Here I will argue that it is quite plausible that modern ethical theory as it has been characteristically understood fails to provide a plausible account of the nature of moral value as well as fails to prescribe appropriate models for mature moral decision making for business ethics. As a result, business ethicists should continue their trend away from modern ethical theory and toward various proposals endorsed by anti-theorists in ethics.

Following a detailed discussion of the commitments of modern ethical theory, I will argue for the above conclusion by rendering a series of plausibility arguments. It is my conviction, given the nature of the debates, that settling the theory versus anti-theory controversy is not only out of the bounds of this simple paper, but it may—at bottom—not be resolvable at all.² Such arguments will try to amass the salient reasons against modern ethical theory, as well as those reasons which lend credence to anti-theoretical ethical positions. I will conclude with a brief exposition of what I take to be the upshot of embracing ethical anti-theory for the future of business ethics as a philosophical endeavor.

1. MODERN ETHICAL THEORY

Questions about the adequacy of modern ethical theory are nothing new. At least since Elizabeth Anscombe's watershed paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" in 1958, many have explicitly challenged the picture of ethics as it has been conceived within modern ethical theory. We do not have the time to rehearse all the misgivings philosophers have had about modern ethical theory, but in order to demonstrate the general implausibility of such theorizing we need to understand the family of notions that are regularly but tacitly held to be conditions to adequately capturing morality.

Modern ethical theory, whether in the hands of a Kantian, a utilitarian, or a rights theorist, tends to aspire to two goals for any ethical theory. First, an adequate theory should be able to explain what features of the world make various actions morally right or wrong, as well as character traits and states of affairs morally good or evil. Let us call this the "explicability thesis" (ET). So, for instance, the moral hedonist holds that pleasure is morally good and pain is morally evil, and it is on the basis of whether or not an action produces overall pleasure or pain that it is morally right or wrong. Second, an adequate ethical theory should be able to prescribe a tractable procedure for conscious moral deliberation. Let us call this the "decision-procedure thesis" (DT).³ These two goals are orthogonal insofar as the achievement of one does not issue in the achievement of the other and, strictly speaking, one need not seek to fulfill both ET and DT. However, many modern ethical theorists have had the ambition to achieve both of these goals, and many have held that the principles they defend capture the grounds of moral value as well as being adequate guides for rational moral deliberation. We will not assume that the failure of modern ethical theory to produce a system adequately fulfilling one of these goals yields a failure of modern ethical theorizing overall. However, the aspirations to fulfill ET and DT are conditioned by some deeper assumptions that anti-theorists have found wanting.

At the heart of modern ethical theory's hopes to fulfill both ET and DT is the thought that we can adequately capture the conditions for correct application of moral concepts within moral principles. A moral principle, as has been conceived since Kant, is a biconditional generalization that ties a list of non-moral features, thought to be individually necessary and jointly sufficient, to the application of a moral concept (e.g., morally right, wrong, good, or bad at the most general level and respectful, wrongful harm, helpful, prosperous, etc., at more specific levels).⁴ It is also thought to be the case that the list of features in the application conditions of the biconditional must be projectable across a limitless number of cases; for instance, a classical utilitarian holds that an act is morally right if and only if the act produces more happiness over

unhappiness for all affected. Finally, it is required that the nonmoral features tied to the moral concepts will always have the same moral valencies (e.g., right-making, wrong-making, etc.). Again, to illustrate, the classical utilitarian holds that happiness is always a right-making feature and unhappiness a wrong-making feature. The idea that morality can be captured or adequately reasoned about in terms of such general moral principles has come to be called in the literature "generalism."⁵ And such generalism has been a tacit condition in the aim to fulfill, at the very least, ET, if not DT as well.

We can observe generalism emerging in business ethics within any number of discussions of moral business practice and policy. We can observe the assumption in arguments over whether or not failure to offer reasons for the termination of an employee is—without exception—an act of moral disrespect or if requiring such explanations would be immoral on the grounds that it would always limit human freedom. Regardless of the stance taken in the employment-at-will debate, we witness ethicists projecting features underlying "disrespectful behavior" or underlying "inappropriate limits on human freedom" across a broad range of cases in employment practice. Generalism creeps into most ethical discussions (within and without of business ethics), because it is a prominent assumption of all modern ethical theorizing; principles are premised upon the notion that certain types or categories of action have moral characteristics, and thereby offer reasons for or against certain behavior, across a broad range of situations.

In addition to the assumptions that we can capture the truth conditions for all moral concepts, and that such truth conditions are projectable across a wide array of cases, is an aspiration that such conditions be relatively simple. The hope to fulfill ET as well as DT seems to motivate many theorists to project that morality be relatively simple in its content. As is explained to all first-year philosophy students, we assume that the simplest explanation is most likely to be true. Occam's razor has long been a tool of theoreticians in the sciences. Simplicity, in turn, has come to be an embedded virtue of all theorizing, including ethical theorizing. How does this impact our interests here?

First, so as not to be too hasty with modern ethical theorizing, embracing generalism as a condition for fulfilling the explicability thesis is in and of itself compatible with morality still being so complex as to escape the understanding of finite cognitive creatures such as ourselves. As such, it is possible to aim at ET under the conditions of generalism, but fail to yield a normative theory simple enough as to be practicable for the decision-procedure thesis. However, such a form of ethical theory has not been terribly palatable to many theoreticians because of their hope to not only have us fulfill ET but DT as well.⁶ In order for there to be a tractable procedure for moral deliberation, it must assume that morality is accessible to limited cognitive creatures such

as ourselves. It is not agreeable to many ethical theorists that morality only be accessible to minds that approach omniscience. Thus, it is argued that since "ought implies can,"⁷ we must be able to capture DT in a reasonably compact set of principles or procedures. Given this position, theorists hope that morality be relatively simple—that it be cognizable and communicable in a rather undemanding list of the conditions for the appropriate application of moral concepts embedded within principles.⁸

Though a demand for simplicity constrains the level of complexity that could still be permitted under conditions of generalism, simplicity may not be incompatible with the morality being grounded in multiple features held to be valuable. Moral pluralism holds that the moral value of actions, character traits, and so forth are rooted in more than one feature of our world. For example, some pluralists hold that the rightness and wrongness of actions is determined by both valuable consequences and procedural fairness. As an instance, Freeman's expression of "stakeholder theory" exhibits commitment to a pluralistic system that holds equality and respect for autonomy as the paramount features needed in deciding what acts and policies we should choose in the world of business.⁹ This is not the only form of moral pluralism available or the only form utilized in business ethics; in fact, more often than not, business ethicists tend to commit themselves to some form of pluralistic ethics that aims to balance the moral demands of respecting individuals and the best consequences for all affected. Nevertheless, a demand for simplicity inexorably favors any view that appears to capture morality with fewer features and an easier decision-procedure over any view that has more features or a more difficult process for reasonable moral thinking. In fact, the condition for simplicity has tended to drive theorists' hopes for a defensible form of moral monism—i.e., the position that all morality can be explained and/or understood to be rooted in one morally relevant feature in the world. This vision of proper ethical theory has certainly been the case in much modern ethical theory in general. To a limited extent, such simplicity exhibits itself in business ethics as practitioners either extend one of these monistic theories to business (such as in Kantian deontology or utilitarianism) or seek to systematize the ethics of business in its own right under a single explanatory and guiding principle (such as in libertarian or stakeholder thinking that attempts to build an endogenous ethical theory of business).

The current state of ethical theorizing in the subfield of business ethics is not easily captured, as the field has grown much more diversified. However, it seems that business ethicists, along with many other applied ethicists, have tended to acknowledge the messiness of real life and how ethical theory can sometimes distort the complexities of that life. Nevertheless, the aspirations to explain moral value as well as to provide useful guidance pervade much of the work being done in the ethics of business. There are still signs that ethi-

cists aspire to achieve the fulfillment of ET and DT for the ethics of business, and that these aspirations usually bring with them the conditions of generalism and simplicity. Unfortunately, it is ill advised to nurture such aspirations. Before I move to show the implausibility of modern ethical theory for business ethics, I want to acknowledge the work in business ethics that has been and continues to be done under its influence.

2. BUSINESS ETHICS AND MODERN ETHICAL THEORY

Although ethical issues of business have been acknowledged for as long as we have been reflective about our commercial transactions, the advent of normative theorizing being applied to such issues is quite recent. I am not one for tracking baptismal moments, but literature devoted to ethical theorizing with a purposeful eye to aiding and evaluating business practice clearly came into its own in the 1980s. For such a short history, business ethics, as a normative discipline, quickly became quite sophisticated in its normative views. Many of the criticisms of our canonical ethical theories often do not hold against the more thoughtful accounts of such views now defended by many business ethicists. Consider a few instances. Norman Bowie's defense of Kantian deontology is quite sophisticated; thus, his understanding of Kantianism steers clear of typical concerns over empty formalism and absolutism that are associated with less refined Kantian views. Andrew Gustafson has brought a more humanistic and less calculative utilitarianism to bear on the ethics of business. The works of Tibor Machan and Ian Maitland each constructively add to the development of Smithian liberalism and extend it beyond the slogans found in simplistic readings of Milton Friedman.¹⁰ And Robert Solomon deftly extended the full tradition of virtue ethics to the life of business.¹¹ The full range of normative theories are represented as well as skillfully developed in the area of business ethics, and their contributions have been immeasurable in their ability to make us think about and review our own perspectives on various particular ethical issues as well as the moral value of business in general. In spite of the relative sophistication and interest of contemporary ethical theory, the power of such theories to fulfill ET and DT is sufficiently problematic as to motivate rejecting ethical theory in favor of some anti-theoretical approaches to business ethics.

3. MORAL PLURALISM IN BUSINESS ETHICS

Modern ethical theory congealed with Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*.¹² It is the first influential work that consciously envisioned the need to capture

morality in a simple set of projectable features and recognized that there were competing theories that hearkened to diverse nonmoral features as necessary and sufficient for the application of moral concepts. Sidgwick felt the sting of not being able to find the feature or features sufficient to eliminate all competitors in the ethical theory game. He was left with being unable to adequately determine whether or not utilitarianism or egoism best explained morality and which yielded the best moral decision-procedure. However, this apparent failure to definitively settle on the best theory did not dissuade others from accepting Sidgwick's assumptions concerning what would constitute the proper structure of any adequate ethical theory. Sidgwick set the stage for ethical theorizing in the twentieth century.

In spite of Sidgwick's and the rest of modern ethical theory's failure to fulfill uncontentiously both ET and DT, ethical theorizing has been amazingly resilient. This is due to the fact that insofar as we pursue a theory that aspires to explain and/or to guide us, the conditions of generalism and simplicity tacitly come with the pursuit. In fact, McKeever and Ridge correctly diagnose that ethical theorists do tend to assume the constraints of generalism to be something akin to transcendental principles, i.e., the very conditions for thinking about morality. It is difficult for theorists to conceive of moral reasoning without the strictures of generalism, as well as simplicity, precisely insofar as theorists believe morality to be as systematic as other phenomena over which thinkers have created theories. However, the strictures of generalism and drive for simplicity may be more of a kind of intellectual hopefulness than they are binding requirements. The hope of systematizing morality keeps the project of ethical theorizing alive, in spite of its continual failure to produce a theory that has clearly and uncontentiously explained the bases of moral value (ET) and/or provided tractable and determinate moral guides (DT). As McKeever and Ridge quite rightly argue, the mere fact that we have yet to find an ethical theory that reasonably fulfills both ET and DT does not—by itself—necessitate the conclusion that we should abandon the theoretical project.¹³ Just as moral disagreement does not necessitate moral relativism, a continued lack of closure on the project of ethical theory does not necessitate that the project is doomed in perpetuity. Past failure under relentless trials by “the best and the brightest” in conjunction with other theoretical, empirical, and practical considerations does, I think, make our aspirations toward such ethical theorizing much less reasonable.¹⁴ We will return to this line of thinking below, but let us consider some more intricate moral theories that have arisen in the realm of business ethics.

Many business ethicists have taken approving attitudes toward various forms of nonrelativistic moral pluralism because of the shortfalls (both theoretical and practical) of modern ethical theories of a monist variety. These

monist theories aimed to fulfill ET and/or DT with a single morally relevant feature (e.g., respect for persons) and/or a single supreme moral principle (e.g., the categorical imperative). It is such theories that appear to have failed to achieve the aspirations of modern ethical theory, according to many ethical theorists. Thus, a significant number of theorists—inside and outside of business ethics—have come to explicitly defend some form of the view that the final moral value of actions, characters, and policies is determined by some range of moral values rather than by a single moral value.¹⁵ This is what is known by the general name “moral pluralism.”

Given that moral pluralism has become ubiquitous in business ethics circles, where many have more or less agreed that justice, consequences, care, and self-interest are generally among those features of our experience that are morally relevant to the ethical evaluation of acts, policies, and character, it is safe to say that the simplicity of moral monism has been jettisoned as being too simple to capture the limitless variety of cases we encounter in our moral lives. What this indicates is that the push for simplicity has been overridden by the desire for a kind of descriptive and intuitive accuracy in our attempts to capture justified applications of our assortment of moral concepts. If this is right, then we need not spend the time to run through the standard worries about the inadequacy of the traditional forms of moral monism (e.g., classical utilitarianism, Kant's ethics, classical egoism, certain varieties of monistic libertarianism, etc.). Suffice it to say that those who engage the ethics of business have embraced W. D. Ross's sentiment (even if they do not ultimately accept his form of moral pluralism or his moral intuitionism) that we would rather have our reflections on the nature of moral normativity to be accurate than to be simple.¹⁶

However, among moral pluralists we find a range of views. Some of these views are pluralistic about moral value but argue for explicit ways in which some values always trump other values when they compete. For instance, a somewhat popular general model that one finds defended at various levels of sophistication is one that prescribes the following moral principle: An act is right if and only if it maximizes good consequences (however such a good is naturally explained) for all affected except when such an act violates the rights or autonomy of a person(s).¹⁷ This is an expression of a form of moral pluralism that one may call “hierarchical moral pluralism.” Such a view argues that the appropriate application of moral rightness (and wrongness) supervenes¹⁸ irreducibly on more than one nonmoral feature, but it holds that one feature will always trump the other in cases of conflict. In *Theory of Justice*, Rawls defended a form of hierarchical pluralism in his “difference principle,” when he argued that inequality in the distribution of primary goods is only justified in cases where the unequal distribution is to the best advantage

of the least well-off.¹⁹ Such forms of moral pluralism have been quite popular, because they do a relatively better job than their monistic counterparts in capturing the complexities of moral life, while remaining as simple as possible. These moral pluralists are more sensitive to the ways in which morality resists uncomplicated moral principles sought by ethical monists, but they still aspire to generalism and/or comparative simplicity as conditions for explaining morality and providing moral guidance in their views. Thus, such moral pluralists are still moral theorists in the modern ethical tradition.

The other popular form of moral pluralism that has arisen in business ethics is more like that of W. D. Ross. It is a nonhierarchical moral pluralism, whereby there is some list of nonmoral features that when present are relevant to the proper application of moral concepts, and these features will compete or collude to determine the final moral value of a given act, policy, or practice. However, there exists no rule or principle for adjudicating conflicts between right-making and wrong-making features. Rather than prescribe secondary moral principles for adjudicated conflicts in real cases, Ross and others hold that settling such conflicts is a matter of experienced moral judgment and not algorithmic. For instance, John Dienhart elaborates a complex form of moral pluralism, as a set of moral values that apply at the level of the institutions of business. Utilizing Werhane's pluralistic reading of Adam Smith alongside Aristotle's account of the virtues, Dienhart explores how justice, care, happiness, and self-interest are moral values that are all interpreted within individual and institutional contexts, and that the interpretation of these values sets the interpretive horizon for moral deliberation. In the end, moral deliberation cannot be adequately captured in a complete and structured cognitive process. Instead, moral pluralism demands "interpretational openness," that although any moral judgment is constrained by our rudimentary conceptions of justice, care, happiness, and self-interest, our judgment should not allow the values to be interpretively reduced to a singular set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the application and adjudication of the values. Such a reduction would treat all individuals, institutions, and situations as if they are alike, but (as Aristotle acknowledges) the final judgment of the moral value of an act, policy, or character trait lies in the particular.²⁰ The themes we find characteristic of nonhierarchical moral pluralism are abundant in business ethics.

Robert Frederick nicely describes one impetus for a kind of nonhierarchical pluralism in business ethics.²¹ In his account, he calls it "pluralistic relativism." The attraction to a set of features that are morally relevant but none are supreme is that it promises to be an ethical view that has the virtues (but not the vices) of both ethical absolutism and ethical relativism. In short, he thinks that nonhierarchical pluralism aspires to be an ethical view that ac-

knowledges the flexibility of ethical demands without being too permissive in its flexibility. Frederick sympathizes with the aspirations of such a view, but he failed to see at the time that anyone had yet generated a view with enough substance to supplant the more traditional views one finds under moral absolutism and moral relativism. However, in the same volume, Sandra Rosenthal and Rogene Bucholz elaborate various types of nonhierarchical pluralism under the heading of pragmatism. For Rosenthal and Bucholz, the first key feature that pragmatism has to offer normative theory is its "implicit moral pluralism with all the problems this involves."²² They then define moral pluralism the following way:

There is no one unifying, monistic principle from which lesser principles can be derived. According to moral pluralism, the right act is the one which is subsumed under the proper balance of rules or principles or theories, but in none of these theories can there be guidance in deciding when to use a particular theory, for each theory is self-enclosed or absolute: no principle or rule can provide any guidance for the moral reasoning that underlies the choice among the various principles or rules. The basis for this choice . . . , the very foundation for moral decision-making, remains mysterious and outside the realm of philosophical illumination.²³

It appears that for Rosenthal and Bucholz there is neither a supreme principle that explains all of morality (ET) nor is there any such single principle that could be used to reasonably determine what we should choose when we have conflicts between other moral values (DT). As such, they urge that pragmatism is pluralist at the level of both moral explanation and moral guidance. They go on to argue that any adequate ethical view must have theoretical coherence at some point, but they urge that the coherence of pragmatism's pluralism is to be found in its nonmoral commitments about human nature rather than within its ethical standards. Rosenthal and Bucholz go farther than most in attempting to adequately capture a form of moral pluralism that is thoroughly pluralistic about both what explains the moral value of acts, characters, and so on, and for decision-making guidance as well. What generally follows in their account is that values such as justice, care, good consequences for the whole, and even self-interest naturally emerge from human interactions with each other and their environment. None of these values is explicable by any of the others and there is no way to project how we should substantively judge all cases of conflict before they occur. Instead, pragmatists have a method of openness that sees moral reasoning as an activity that is "concrete, imaginative, attunement to situational complexities."²⁴ Now, this may appear to be mysterious, but most nonhierarchical moral pluralists urge that normative moral judgment should not be explicated in any algorithmic manner.²⁵

Given that moral pluralism of either a hierarchical or a nonhierarchical variety is so prominent in the business ethics literature, it seems that moral pluralism must be the foil (rather than traditional forms of moral monism) if one aims to question the value of ethical theorizing in general. So, anti-theorists ask, if moral pluralist views are ethical theories, then how well do they do in fulfilling ET and DT?

4. ANTI-THEORY IN BUSINESS ETHICS

Anti-theorists' primary challenger comes in the form of moral pluralism. As such, they must show the implausibility of the position, and to do so they must speak to both its hierarchical and nonhierarchical varieties. Hierarchical forms of pluralism still suffer from a deep tendency to yield strongly counterintuitive consequences because when two (or more) irreducible moral values conflict, these pluralists *a priori* prescribe which of the competing values will trump its competitors. Thus, such forms of pluralism rule out ahead of time any values being overridden in reverse from its prescribed hierarchy.

Consider a form of mitigated consequentialism that states that an act or policy is morally right if and only if it maximizes good consequences for all affected except in cases where the act or policy violates the rights or autonomy of persons. Now consider the following case: At the conclusion of World War II, the United States faced the need to employ returning servicemen and to create a non-wartime economy as active as the wartime economy.²⁶ If the U.S. government, in conjunction with American manufacturers, did not do this as swiftly as possible, then the United States would most certainly fall into a postwar depression. The rub, however, was that many Americans who remembered the prewar depression were of somewhat limited means. They distrusted the use of loans and credit and were disposed to save their money rather than spend it. It is the case that corporate America (with the blessings of the FCC) used the new medium of television to shift American attitudes about spending their money on new "luxury" items as well as using credit to purchase such items. The major manufacturers moved situation-comedy writers to develop plots in which the characters struggle with the decision to spend their hard-earned cash to purchase a luxury item, such as a dishwasher, as well as struggle with whether to buy such on store credit. In all cases the plots wrap up with the characters deciding to make the purchase, finding that they are so much happier because of their new item, and finding that buying on credit did not destroy their financial lives.

This is but one way in which corporate America converted Americans into consumers and saved the United States from spiraling into a postwar depres-

sion. It catalyzed consumer buying habits that made the United States into the leading economic power for the rest of the twentieth century. Now if it is the case that this use of television yielded the greatest possible consequences for all affected, it did so at the expense of violating viewers' autonomy. They were manipulated (some will argue) into desiring luxury items and cajoled into believing that it was economically feasible to buy them on credit. Manufacturers and television writers accomplished this knowing that Americans would likely do so because they would identify with characters in their situation comedies. Our mitigated consequentialist would condemn these policies and actions as immoral because—under their principle—there is no quantity or quality of consequences of an action that can overrule the wrongness of violating the autonomy of persons. We all know of other hypothetical cases in which the consequences of our actions intuitively overrule the violation of autonomy and, as such, hierarchical moral pluralism appears not to be in a much better position than moral monism as far as its ability to adequately explain the complexities of moral value and/or moral evaluation in a generalized manner.

Given the above, hierarchical moral pluralism still appears to aspire to generality and simplicity, because it still pursues the explanation of morality by features that can be projected across innumerable cases and have specific moral valences. Given the types of examples above, such views still fail to adequately fulfill ET, and this is due to the implausibility of the generality and simplicity conditions conjoined to ET. Given such weaknesses, I will spend no more time critiquing versions of hierarchical pluralism. This leaves us with the idea that the strongest contender for an adequate moral theory must be forms of nonhierarchical moral pluralism. The rest of this section will attempt to deepen our understanding of this view within the ethics of business and conclude by raising questions about its theoretical and practical adequacy (although many of these criticisms apply *mutatis mutandis* to all forms of ethical theorizing that maintain generalism as a condition to fulfilling either the explanatory or guidance aspirations of ethical theory).

How does nonhierarchical moral pluralism fare in relationship to the theoretical aims of ET and DT? First, it should be noted that this form of pluralism abandons hope to fulfill the typical aspirations of DT. Insofar as nonhierarchical moral pluralism commits itself to the idea that—at bottom—moral reasoning "remains mysterious and outside the realm of philosophical illumination,"²⁷ it abandons the aim of DT and distances itself from this aspiration of modern ethical theory. At this juncture it is a bit hyperbolic to say that one must think of moral reasoning as beyond philosophical inquiry in order to be a nonhierarchical moral pluralist; one could be such a moral pluralist and utilize what cognitive psychologists have learned of reliable human decision

making to preserve the claim that moral judgment is largely not rule based or algorithmic in nature.²⁸

For the purpose of simplicity, let us use Ross's view as a paradigm case of nonhierarchical moral pluralism and its attempt to fulfill the explanatory aspiration (ET) of ethical theory. He holds that there is a limited range of features relevant to the moral value of acts, policies, and character, but no feature in that range is morally superior to any other. Thus, what might be most morally salient in one case may not be so in another. However, in that range of features, Ross holds that the nonmoral features associated with veracity, beneficence, fidelity, and so on, are such that wherever and whenever they are present, they are morally relevant. In addition, Ross holds that when they are present they will be morally relevant in the same way, e.g., truthfulness is always a right-making feature in a situation. In our earlier terminology, these features are projectable across all cases and always have the same moral valence. Thus, Ross continues to hold that in his list of morally relevant features all fulfill the conditions of generalism. As such, Ross envisions a way of explaining the nature of moral value in his list of morally relevant features such that the moral value of any act, policy, or character will be explained by the presence, absence, and configuration of features from this and only this list.²⁹

Most forms of nonhierarchical moral pluralism adhere to generalism in this form. But, as Jonathan Dancy has continued to effectively argue, even generalism in this form holds that whenever a feature from a list of morally relevant features is present, then it is morally relevant and morally relevant in a certain way (even though it may be overridden by another morally relevant feature in any given situation). For instance, the protection of self-interest is a morally relevant feature and a right-making feature and, as such, it must be part of what makes an action morally right even though it might be overridden by the well-being of others in a given circumstance. In no case could self-interest not be morally relevant or a wrong-making feature. In Dancy's terminology, the generalism that continues to be maintained by nonhierarchical moral pluralists forbids the possibilities of "silencing" or "reversal" of morally relevant features.³⁰ However, there is a strong intuition that features we believe to be morally relevant and relevant in certain ways can silence or reverse their moral valence. For instance, although fulfilling self-interest is morally relevant in many business situations where others' interests are not in jeopardy, it appears that fulfilling it at the significant expense to others at the very least silences self-interest (e.g., it is not morally relevant in such cases) or reverses its valence (e.g., fulfilling self-interest at the expense of others is a wrong-making feature). Or, to recall our earlier example of the use of situation comedies to effect peoples' consumer behavior, autonomy is often said to be a hallmark morally relevant feature insofar as it is always morally rele-

vant and always a right-making feature. However, if the absolute protection of said autonomy would cause more or less universal suffering through a severe economic depression, then it could be reasoned that protecting individual autonomy would be morally silenced or the act of protecting it would reverse its valence to being a wrong-making feature in that situation. As such, even central features to morality, such as self-interest and autonomy, can be reasonably understood as features that can be silenced or reversed. In the cases outlined so far, it may appear that the well-being of the majority is the sole moral feature that trumps all others; thus, what I have demonstrated is not the plausibility of any anti-theoretical position but the plausibility of consequentialism. However, even the well-being of the many may be silenced or reversed.

Suppose that the manipulation involved in the use of situation comedies were to lead to the destruction of individual autonomy (e.g., where the freedom to act or not on one's desires were removed altogether). In this case, the power of advertising would be tantamount to the implantation of a control device in each person's head (and he or she could not do anything but go out and buy a specific brand of automobile). If this were the case, then it would appear that, regardless of protecting the majority from suffering, protecting persons' autonomy would at least trump and possibly silence the moral relevance of mass suffering from an economic depression.³¹

So, what's the upshot of such examples? If generalism, as it has been adhered to in modern ethical theory, is correct, then such silencing and reversals of valence should be normative impossibilities. At the very least, such examples should appear to be deeply counterintuitive. However, the few brief examples thus far—and one could expand the list—show that it is not normatively implausible to think that features which play prominently in business ethics are subject to these common moral phenomena.³² Critics of the kind of anti-theoretical considerations presented above will often turn our attention to the apparent generality necessary for reasons as such in order to *prove* that moral theory is correct to embrace generalism. The argument aims to show that reasons (of any and all varieties) can only have normative power if they can be subsumed under broader general truths or claims (e.g., laws, principles, norms, etc.). Thus, critics claim that generalism is a necessary feature of reasoning as such, moral reasoning included. Generalism is a transcendental regulative norm governing all moral reasoning, and what the examples above prove is not that we abandon ethical theory, but that we lack the right articulation of moral principles.³³

On this view it is often argued that, since we must maintain generalism and we want moral principles that capture the intuitive complexities of moral life, the moral principles must become more complex and, as such, build into the

application conditions for moral values all the relevant exceptions.³⁴ Thus, they would hold that an appropriate moral principle may be formulated like the following: An act is morally right if and only if it fulfills self-interest, except in cases where it undermines the well-being, or rights, or autonomy, or X, of others. Thus, generalists of this variety want to maintain, at the very least, some form of moral pluralism, because they argue that there is a more general theoretical consideration that necessitates that moral principles cannot be abandoned on pain of irrationality. As such, they are willing to embrace much more complex moral principles in order to maintain generalism.

There are four basic responses to this line of reasoning—two theoretical and two practical. First, paralleling concerns that J. L. Mackie raised about rule utilitarianism, it seems that adding the complexity of exceptions to the moral principles we are prescribed to live by, once all the exceptions are included, tell us no more than what act utilitarianism would have prescribed in the first place.³⁵ As a result, a sophisticated rule utilitarianism's account of a moral rule would be an unnecessary epicycle to our understanding of the appropriate conditions for the application of moral rightness. Analogously, once we include in the appropriately sophisticated moral principles all the relevant exceptions (i.e., covering all the conditions in which the antecedent morally relevant feature is trumped, silenced, or reversed in its value) then the principle plays no more role in our understanding than what would be assessed by any anti-theorist who focused directly on the morally relevant features particular to each given situation. In other words, such principles abandon all hope to fulfill the aspiration of generality. Hence, it seems theoretically plausible that once any theorist attempts to make generalism fit our moral intuitions concerning the flexibility of morally relevant features in our moral experience, then the generalism he or she seeks to defend collapses back into an anti-theoretical form of moral particularism.

Second, there is also a more direct defense of moral theory. This is to claim that generalism is a necessary regulative ideal on all moral reasoning. The idea is that we cannot reason without some form of moral principles committed to generalism, due to the fact that moral reasons can only be captured as reasons because of their relationship to a moral principle that projects some feature as relevant across cases and relevant in certain ways (even if the principle is quite complex). The anti-theorist response to this line of reasoning is that this argument shows more about what we think is necessary for theoretical systematization than what is necessary for practical reasoning in the real world. What the argument for the need for general principles demonstrates is actually more about what philosophers—driven by the dream of a final theory—think is necessary for moral reasons than about the actual practices of reasonable human beings in real moral situations. On the one hand, the claim

that moral reasons must be subsumable under moral principles in order to be moral reasons at all seems to reflect more the Socratic prejudices of philosophers than the effective cognitive and behavioral habits of most reasonable human beings. The typically reliable, non-rule-based moral judgment of most human beings speaks against the need of moral reasons to rely on moral principles to be guiding reasons at all. Thus, the failure to capture a tractable decision-procedure (DT) stands as some evidence against this transcendental move. On the other hand, if this is solely about explaining morality (ET) and theorists are correct that generalism is a regulative constraint on any explanation of moral value, then any account of moral value without appeal to general moral rules or principles must be deeply incoherent. As I will suggest shortly, however, it is not incoherent to explain morality without appeal to the types of moral generalizations that hold features to be morally relevant in all cases and to have the same moral valence. If this is correct, then generalism is not a regulative principle to explaining moral value.

In tandem with the above theoretical concerns, there is a pair of simple practical objections to the preceding defense of ethical theory. The first is that if generalism is a necessary regulative ideal for any adequate moral reasoning, then it is incumbent upon theorists to provide a defensible set of moral principles that fulfill ET and/or DT. Much of the defense of moral theory in this debate operates at the level of metatheory rather than normative theory. This is to say that much of the discussion has been a theoretical defense of theory as such rather than attempting to provide an ethical theory that adequately explains moral value and/or guides moral reasoning. However, if generalism is necessary to morality, then the final proof is in whether or not theorists can provide the set of moral principles that are adequately general and simple for fulfilling ET, if not DT as well. And the adequacy of said principles is judged—in part—on whether they concur with our intuition that morally relevant features can be silenced or reversed in individual cases. Most of those who defend the need for principles are typically silent as to the content that the moral principles should take; it often seems that defenders of ethical theory in this debate tend to fall into the position that it is a matter of principle that we need principles, and they become mute when asked for the content of such principles.³⁶ The response is that the proof of the power of principles to explain and guide is in finding moral principles that adequately explain morality and guide moral decision making. But, as most anti-theorists will point out, what partially motivates the plausibility of their view has been the history of theorists' being unable to provide substantive, defensible moral principles that fulfill the demand of simplicity and, especially, the demand of generalism. Thus, anti-theorists are moved to think about morality in the absence of moral principles.

When moral theorists provide what appears to be adequate content for their moral principles, then—as indicated above—these will tend to be moral principles that contain exceptions or are of the *prima facie* variety. The hitch with such moral principles is that they will either fail to adequately capture the flexibility of morality or be so complex as to be intractable and, thus, useless. As to the first problem, they can fail to capture the nuances of morality because they still reflect the theoretical hope that the conditions of the application of moral values are universally projectable. They therefore succumb to the numerous counterexamples that indicate the contextual flexibility of morality. If they attempt to capture all the flexibility within principles that expect to capture the necessary and sufficient conditions of application for the moral concepts, then the moral principles will lose the intended generality while meeting an explanatory function. Moreover, the complexity of such moral principles would be too complex to be adequately comprehended or used by beings like us, and thus be inadequate to guiding moral reasoning. It appears plausible (although not conclusive) that modern ethical theorists' adherence to generalism and simplicity that conditions the hopes of fulfilling ET and DT is misguided. The lesson for business ethicists is that it is plausible that we should abandon our explicit or tacit acceptance of modern ethical theory and continue the movement toward more anti-theoretical ethical approaches, which we have tended toward as we have already embraced types of nonhierarchical forms of moral pluralism in the first place. The remainder of this investigation aims to outline an anti-theoretical vision applicable to business ethics.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS ETHICS

Part of the impetus for discussing the plausibility of anti-theory for business ethics arose from a discussion to which I was a party. There were a few of us—all philosophers—at a business ethics conference discussing how we taught our business ethics courses. I was astonished that quite independently but uniformly we each admitted (and with some hesitancy by some as if it might be a philosophical heresy) that the more we taught the course, the less time we devoted to teaching ethical theories. Instead, we each admitted that the focus of our courses had become more devoted to teaching critical thinking skills—e.g., identifying relevant facts, common relevant values, and so forth—and developing skills for providing thoughtful justifications for moral decisions. We acknowledged that we elicited such skills from our students even in the absence of their formally learning the range of moral principles elucidated and defended by generalists. Directly or indirectly we all admitted

that knowing ethical theories was not necessary to understanding morality and to making sensible moral decisions. This, along with all said above, raises the question What is to be done in business ethics in the absence of modern ethical theory?

There is still plenty that can be carried over from modern ethical theory, but it will be carried over without its more problematic trappings. I hope that I have shown that it is plausible that the assumptions of generalism and simplicity as necessary parts to fulfilling ET and DT are the more problematic elements of modern ethical theorizing. If this is plausible, then we need to have an idea of how we can engage in interesting and useful thinking about morality without these assumptions. I think we can, and in many ways, we already do so in our daily moral practices. It is not that we must eschew moral generalities per se, it is that we must eschew the rigidity we think moral generalities must have in order to adequately explain moral values and guide moral decision making. In short, we need to abandon the idea that moral generalities contain features that are universally projectable and always projectable in the same way. And, as I noted above, if this story is coherent, as I believe it to be, then generalism cannot be a regulative ideal for moral thinking.

Dancy makes a useful distinction between “invariable” and “invariant” morally relevant features.³⁷ Insofar as the generalism of modern ethical theory holds that the features listed in a moral principle must always be morally relevant and relevant in the same way, it is committed to the claim that morally relevant features are invariable, i.e., they are *never* irrelevant and *never* have a different moral valence. However, this is precisely part of what makes the assumption of generalism so problematic for modern ethical theorists. We need not think that morally relevant features (e.g., avoidance of suffering, autonomy, honesty, etc.) are invariable in order to ensure their moral relevance. They may be, according to Dancy, “invariant” moral features. An invariant morally relevant feature is one that in our experience tends not to be silenced or reversed, but it does not hold that there is no situation in which that feature can be (or has been) silenced or reversed.³⁸ According to certain anti-theorists like Dancy, this is the genuine function of moral principles and rules. They are a kind of heuristic tool to remind us of those features that—in the breadth and length of human experience—have tended to remain more often morally relevant and relevant in certain ways across cases, and without extending such a claim to the position that they could *never* be irrelevant or relevant in a different way. Thus, moral principles and rules—properly conceived—are ways of communicating, capturing, and utilizing the most general moral knowledge we have without committing ourselves to the theoretical prejudices captured by the conditions of generalism and simplicity.

At this point, one may say that this is merely a matter of what it is that we mean by "ethical theory." I agree that this is part of the matter. Whether we call a systematization of morality that bases itself on the assumptions of generalism and simplicity or the anti-generalist variety described here an "ethical theory" is of no matter to me. What is most important is to understand that when we articulate and think about morally relevant features, such as duties, rights, autonomy, self-interest, character, and so forth, we are considering features that are, at most, morally invariant rather than morally invariable. Although this makes the process of considering the nature of morality and proper moral decision making much messier than even the going views of nonhierarchical pluralism, it mirrors the complexity of morality as such.

In business ethics, many have already welcomed the idea that morality is more complex than any modern ethical theories have been able to adequately capture. If it is the case that in teaching and researching issues in business ethics, specialists have already distanced themselves from modern ethical theories, then they have already moved a significant way toward anti-theoretical positions in ethics. Moreover, if it is plausible that generalism and simplicity are the assumptions of ethical theorizing that make modern ethical theory problematic to successfully engaging in teaching and discussing ethical issues in business, then, as I have tried to show here, business ethicists should consciously embrace the abandonment of the kinds of moral principles and systematization that are the hallmarks of modern ethical theorizing (even as they arise in nonhierarchical forms of moral pluralism). I think that this is the kind of approach to understanding the nature of morality and moral decision making that fits best with discussions and practices that already occur in the research of business ethics, as well as with the critical-thinking emphasis that has been arising in the teaching of business ethics. An anti-theoretical approach of the kind outlined here provides some level of adequate explication of morality and some parameters in moral decision making without sacrificing the complexity of moral life as it is lived and experienced, including the life of business.

In many ways the teaching, thinking, and writing by many business ethicists betray a certain trust of the generalism and simplicity found in classical modern ethical theory. However, at the same time, they still speak of general applicable moral values. The only point to emphasize here is that in utilizing general moral values business ethicists consciously steer away from the generalism that still lurks in many forms of nonhierarchical moral pluralism that weds itself to the invariability of morally relevant features, and explicitly embrace the weaker form of generalism that only commits itself to the invariance of many morally relevant features. This shift in attitude and emphasis will help steer business ethics away from certain kinds of debates that may be

driven more by theoretical hopes than by the practical needs of persons in and affected by business, and it will keep those of us tackling the complexities of morality in business honest about the limits of our Socratic proclivities.

NOTES

1. Anti-theorists in any field typically recognize that they are not calling for us to be nontheoretical per se, but they call for us to eschew a certain conception of theorizing that dominates a field of study. In our case, I will question a prominent picture of how we are to reflectively understand moral value and/or moral decision making.
2. Paul Moser has argued in the realm of epistemic normativity that there are no "non-question-begging" arguments for opposing sides in epistemology. All sides utilize intuition-pumping examples that favor their own views. I think that this is paralleled in ethical theorizing. Thus, the best that can be done is to imagine which vision of the nature of morality seems most plausible given our moral experience and other theoretical convictions that we hope to fit into an empirically and metaphysically adequate conception of life as we know it. See *Philosophy after Objectivity: Making Sense in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
3. For more on these assumptions, see Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory: An Introduction* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), and Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge, *Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
4. McKeever and Ridge, *Principled Ethics*, do an excellent job elucidating this conception of moral principles.
5. See, in particular, Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics without Principles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
6. I would suggest that although Occam's razor has always been a tool for sorting competing theories, a shift has occurred in much modern ethical theorizing (and possibly even scientific theorizing), in which simplicity of explanation has moved from a comparative virtue between competing theories to an assumption or regulative principle about the nature of morality itself. See Nancy Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
7. Most ethicists hold that in order to require or forbid any activity, it must be an activity that we are capable of performing.
8. Bernard Gert's work is an excellent example of a sophisticated but conscious demand for simplicity. See *Morality: Its Nature and Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
9. R. Edward Freeman, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* (Boston: Pitman, 1984).
10. Norman Bowie, *Business Ethics: A Kantian Perspective* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999); Andrew Gustafson, "Utilitarianism and Business Ethics," in *Ethical Issues in Business: A Philosophical Approach*, ed. Thomas Donaldson, Patricia Hogue Werhane, and Joseph Van Zandt (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall,

2008); Tibor Machan, *Business Ethics in the Global Market* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover, 1999); and Ian Maitland, "The Human Face of Self-Interest," *Journal of Business Ethics* 38, no. 1 (June 2002): 3-17.

11. Although it is debatable whether or not virtue theorists hold to the conception of ethical theories attempting to cash out the necessary and sufficient conditions for the proper application of moral concepts in nonmoral terms, some who ally themselves with virtue ethics may do so, and others may not insofar as they prefer to explicate morality with thick moral concepts that find the moral and nonmoral features to be inextricably intertwined. See Robert Solomon, *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and *It's Good Business: Ethics and Free Enterprise for the New Millennium* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997). See also Edwin Hartman, *Organizational Ethics and the Good Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), and Marvin Brown, *Corporate Integrity: Rethinking Organizational Ethics and Leadership* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

12. See Bernard Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers, 1982-1993* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Margaret Walker, "Where Do Moral Theories Come From?" *Philosophical Forum* 26 (1995): 242-57. Each argues that Sidgwick's *Methods* is the watershed moment for modern ethical theorizing.

13. In fact, I find myself in the odd tension that any "anti-theorist" finds himself or herself. I am arguing in a theoretical manner for the inadequacy of ethical theory. However, it is not really theory as such that is the problem, but a certain popular and limited version of the point and proper structure of ethical theorizing that is brought into question here.

14. The same, I think, could be concluded about other disciplines that aspire to dream of a "final theory" in the face of a recalcitrant set of phenomena. On such in physics, see Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie*.

15. See John Dienhart, *Business, Institutions, and Ethics: A Text with Cases and Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Patricia Werhane, *Moral Imagination and Management Decision-Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and, outside of business ethics, see Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Timmons, *Moral Theory*; and Robert Audi, *Practical Reasoning and Ethical Decision* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

16. For a classical statement of moral pluralism see W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, ed. Philip Stratton-Lake (1930; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002). For a contemporary defense of such a view see Robert Audi, *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

17. James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).

18. By "supervenies" I mean nothing metaphysically robust. I merely mean that there is a consistency constraint that if one asserts that features X, Y, and Z are fun-

damentally relevant to right action in one case, then, on pain of irrationality, they are relevant in all cases. What is dubbed a supervenience relation here, R. M. Hare calls universal prescriptivism in his own work. See *Essays in Ethical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

19. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

20. In addition to Dienhart, *Business, Institutions, and Ethics*, a similar sentiment has been expressed by Solomon, *Ethics and Excellence*; Hartman, *Organizational Ethics and the Good Life*; and Brown, *Corporate Integrity*.

21. Robert Frederick, ed., *A Companion to Business Ethics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999).

22. Sandra Rosenthal and Rogene Bucholz, "Toward New Directions in Business Ethics: Some Pragmatic Pathways," in *A Companion to Business Ethics*, ed. Robert Frederick (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), 112.

23. Rosenthal and Bucholz, "Toward New Directions," 113.

24. Rosenthal and Bucholz, "Toward New Directions," 112.

25. Thus nonhierarchical moral pluralists would reject Michael Jensen's call for developing simple single objectives for business managers, because of the fact that they can be algorithmically captured and the results quantitatively measured. See "Value Maximization, Stakeholder Theory, and the Corporate Objective Function," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (April 2002): 235.

26. Peter French, *Corporate Ethics* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace, 1995).

27. Rosenthal and Bucholz, "Toward New Directions."

28. For a nice discussion of how modern cognitive science may illuminate non-algorithmic accounts of moral decision making, see Larry May, Marilyn Friedman, and Andy Clark, eds., *Mind and Morals* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

29. For more in-depth analysis of Ross's generalism, see Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993).

30. Dancy, *Moral Reasons*.

31. Another feature that many suppose to be always morally relevant and relevant in the same way is the feature of human life (i.e., being alive). However, many intuitively see how being alive could be silenced or reversed in cases where the quality of life is such as to make it an evil or silenced by the suffering to be avoided. Hence, even with a morally relevant feature as important as life, we may find the plausibility of silencing and reversal.

32. For other examples, see Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, and David McNaughton, *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

33. See McKeever and Ridge, *Principled Ethics*.

34. Another alternative is of the following character: Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Audi, *The Good in the Right* have all suggested that the values captured in moral principles (usually of the supremely general variety such as the respect for persons) are not usefully definable in necessary and sufficient application conditions and, thus, they are context sensitive and open to interpretation

in moral decision making. The anti-theorist would welcome this type of move, because either one could easily question to what extent these kinds of principles do any work in explaining morality in ways sought by generalists, or one could claim that these theorists must be admitting to a kind of theory that abandons generalism.

35. See J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

36. See McKeever and Ridge, *Principled Ethics*.

37. Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*.

38. I think of Dancy's thought here as being much like the new riddle of induction: Although in our experience all emeralds we've experienced to date have been green, this cannot rule out that they are grue. The same could be said of morally relevant features: Although, in our experience, some act X has always been morally right, we cannot rule out a time at which it is silenced or reversed.

Chapter Nine

Values and Capitalism

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The defining terms of contemporary business ethics set up a conflict between two forms of value, economic and ethical. "Business ethics," "business and society," "social issues in management," "corporate financial performance vs. corporate social performance," "stakeholders vs. stockholders," "corporate responsibility," and "corporate citizenship," among other terms, each, fundamentally, pair an ethical interest with an economic modifier (or vice versa).¹ This tension is set forth in the work of contemporary free market economists, like Milton Friedman, to which the contemporary field of business ethics is a response. Free market economists, broadly speaking, suggest that economic value is the only form of value that matters (or the primary form of value in terms of which other forms of value can be measured), and in their work, business ethics tends to have the status of an uninvited guest that needs swiftly to be shown the door. Friedman, in his often-quoted "The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits,"² seeks as much as possible to obviate the conflict by suggesting that the principal ethical duty of managers is to increase profit in support of owners' economic interests. His opponents, also to speak in broad terms, contend that certain ethical obligations are uncompromising and that legitimate economic activity must balance economic and ethical value. The point where they meet, which also is the fundamental point of conflict, is where alleged market imperfections warrant consideration of a moderating force to correct for the imbalance between economic and ethical value. It is on this point where the business ethics debate focuses—whether seeking to weigh relative values, to achieve confluence between them, or to define the tolerance for variation without upsetting the balance. The debate is characterized by its defining terms, notwithstanding the breadth and importance of each topic to the human good, as a two-dimensional debate.