

Book Reviews

Thomas I. White, *Business Ethics: A Philosophical Reader* (MacMillan Publishing Co./Maxwell MacMillan Canada, New York/Toronto, 1993), 867 pages

Thomas I White, begins this volume with a the strong claim, that business ethics has matured from a mere discussion of the social responsibility of business firms into an altogether new branch of philosophy, with its own thematic integrity and methodological sophistication. By “business ethics” he understands a species of “philosophical ethics”; that is, a rational and secular evaluation of human virtue and action grounded on the notions of “well-being” and “happiness”. Thus, he clearly distinguishes business ethics from the legal, religious, cultural and professional approaches to human conduct: these are purportedly tainted with subjectivity, arbitrariness and irrationality, on the whole. In ancient times, philosophical ethics concentrated on the nature of moral virtue as exemplified in character; nowadays, it focuses almost exclusively on the moral quality of actions in accordance with either teleological or deontological criteria. Although Socrates, while in the Athenian marketplace, could have readily confronted issues related to life in general, he certainly never dealt with the ethical problem of doing business. For White, therefore, business ethics is not only a new branch of philosophy, but it is also a specialty that is distinctively “modern”.

The book fits the requirements of both a basic text and an anthology. Due to the breadth and quality of its selections, it even comes in handy as a primer for those who wish to initiate research in business ethics. White makes clear that, “This book thus aims to serve the needs of philosophers who prefer to approach business ethics almost exclusively through philosophical readings, rather than a combination of ethical, legal, and managerial essays. Nonetheless, each chapter ends with case studies that illustrate theoretical issues under investigation.” (vii) Surely many professional philosophers are perplexed and need some sort of a guide when faced with business ethics problems. However, it is not at all clear that it would be best to resort to philo

sophical essays alone, when trying to understand and resolve these problems. As a matter of fact, even White finds it necessary to go beyond the philosophic literature, unless of course we were to consider E. F. Schumacher's, "Buddhist Economics: Work" or David W. Ewing's, "A Proposed Bill of (Employee) Rights" as strictly philosophical contributions. Perhaps we should even say that to analyze the ethical problems in business using philosophy alone, is not at all possible. A characteristic feature of business ethics conundra is precisely their "interdisciplinarity." And finally, as anyone who would so attempt would soon discover, teaching business ethics without somehow doing cases is a futile exercise. Apart from business ethics, there is hardly any field in philosophy where theory is more wed to practice.

White describes himself as a philosopher in a business school. And what is expected of philosophers is that they establish a certain conceptual order to the subjects they study. In this regard, the author is most certainly successful. The introductory essay on "Ethics and Business" clearly maps out the plan of the book, and the brief chapter leads are very effective in signaling the salient points or highlights in the articles that follow. There is a smooth logical flow from the macro and theoretical concerns to the micro and practical issues. Among the former we include the discussions of the "Morality of Capitalism", "Distributive Justice", "Work and Human WellBeing", "Corporate Social Responsibility", "Corporate Personhood" and "Corporate Punishment"; among the latter, the incisive and multi-perspective treatments of problems such as "Business Bluffing", "Insider Trading", "Employee Rights and Privacy", "Whistleblowing", "Affirmative Action", "Sexual Harassment", "Mergers and Acquisitions", "Globalization" and "Business and the Environment".

Alongside the above-mentioned merits, however, is a pervasive "American-centeredness" in the presentation of the ethical problems that affect a supposedly borderless activity such as business. Notwithstanding the digressions into "cultural relativism" and the impact of multinational corporations on their host (particularly,

third world) countries, there is a strong, though probably unintentional tendency to make prevalent American concerns and practices the ethical standard. The thin, but nonetheless significant dividing line between what is “culturally relative” and what is “culturally relevant” has somewhat been missed or suffused. For example, how do the ownership and management formulae of the large American corporations compare with those of the Japanese keiretsus and the Korean chaebols? What repercussions do these differences have on the role of government in business, on corporate responsibility and on “distributive justice”?, etc. The linkages among the individual characters of business persons, their established corporate and organizational practices, and the broader ethic of their original and adoptive environments surely deserve a more meticulous attention than what has been accorded them in the book.

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