



BOOK REVIEWS

***Kantian Business Ethics: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Denis G. Arnold and Jared D. Harris. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2012. 196 pp. Index. ISBN: 978-1-78100-495-1**

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It is hard to overestimate the impact of Norman Bowie's contributions to the field of business ethics over the past three decades. Although he is principally associated with the interpretation and application of Immanuel Kant's moral and political philosophy, his work in business ethics is perhaps even more distinctive for the range of foundational problems that it addresses. His work examines the relationship of self-interest and ethical motives, the notion that business firms are moral communities, how ethical and legal responsibilities are related in the marketplace, ethical decision making in international contexts, ethics and agency theory, and the challenges of institutionalizing ethical conduct within corporate culture.

It is therefore fitting that a *Festschrift* honoring Bowie's work be published. *Kantian Business Ethics: Critical Perspectives* features essays by an array of prominent and emerging scholars in the field of business ethics that challenge and extend Bowie's distinctive application of Kant. R. Edward Freeman maintains in his contribution to the book that Bowie's Kantian thought and pragmatism share more in common than observers might at first think. Patricia Werhane adds some characteristic subtlety to the book with her chapter exploring the implications of the Kantian moral point of view on the profit seeking. Others, such as Richard Nielsen, test Bowie's application of Kant's moral theory with an examination of concrete problems, most notably the risk taking and fraud witnessed during the most recent financial crisis. Jeffery Smith extends the Kantian notion of beneficence to explain the normative dimensions of corporate social responsibility. These and other insights are punctuated with Bowie's thoughtful response in the closing chapter.

Two particularly significant themes in the book that are worthy of additional comment are the ethical dimensions of capitalism and meaningful work. Richard De George, in his chapter entitled "Bowie's Management Ethics: An Alternate View," criticizes contemporary business ethics for leaving too many crucial themes untouched, including the need to evaluate capitalism as a political and economic system. De George worries that inattention to capitalism's distinctive problems helps mask structural moral problems. It also gives rise to view that individual managers are responsible for problems beyond their control. De George takes issue, for

instance, with Bowie's argument against the excessive compensation of CEOs. He asks: what can business leaders do about the "systematic workings" of the market?

De George's criticism is ironic. He may be right in his general criticism of business ethics as it developed in the United States but, in many ways, Bowie is the exception to the rule. Bowie *does* evaluate capitalism and stresses our moral duty to do so. Capitalism as a system is only acceptable when it does not require practices that are structurally immoral. Bowie has also been quite keen on making the distinction between the system, on the one hand, and the individual within the system, on the other. In their chapter "Citizens, Kant and Corporate Responsibility for the Environment," Cohen and Dienhart remind us how Bowie has utilized this important idea. Bowie argues in his seminal paper "Markets, Morality and Money Cars" that we cannot hold the automobile industry responsible for doing away with pollution. It is a systematic problem borne out of failures in the market. What is more, it is precisely Bowie's Kantian point of view that allows him to be uniquely perceptive of this distinction. Kant's moral philosophy distinguishes between Right and Virtue. Right has to be created and sustained by society's most basic institutions, in particular the law, and virtue is about the morality of our individual lives. De George seems to argue that when a problem is systemic, individuals, including individual firms and their agents, are in the clear, as if it is not even their problem anymore. As a Kantian, however, Bowie does not accept this result. Individuals cannot solve systemic problems but they are not allowed to be indifferent either. There are duties of virtue that we need to consider, including the duty to assist in the making of proper laws. Cohen and Dienhart point out that this duty is very relevant today as it challenges many forms of political lobbying designed to undermine market-correcting regulation.

A second theme that has helped established Bowie's significance in business ethics is meaningful work. Joanne Ciulla argues in her chapter, "Worthy Work and Bowie's Kantian Theory of Meaningful Work," that Bowie's plea for meaningful work is philosophically and empirically flawed. Bowie organizes his argument for meaningful work around the Kantian concepts of negative and positive freedom. Ciulla defines negative freedom as "the freedom from constraints on our ability to make choices" (116) and positive freedom as the experience of finding your work meaningful, which might lead to the experience of happiness at work. She goes on to argue that, in the context of organizations, negative freedom is by definition limited as the negative freedom of employees is caught up in a "zero sum game" (128) with the negative freedom of the employers. The positive freedom of employees is necessarily limited, too, because the means available in the market are scarce. Meaningful work is a subjective and capricious concept that every person interprets differently and demanding that every person adhere to a specific conception of what is meaningful at work can easily lead to objectionable forms of paternalism. Ciulla therefore argues that it is better to replace "meaningful work" with the notion of "worthy work," which, according to Ciulla, has the big advantage of providing an objective measure of what is owed to employees at work.

There is one feature of Ciulla's argument that is absolutely unacceptable for a Kantian like Bowie. The element I have in mind also shows up in other papers,

including Ronald Duska's "Revisiting the Egoism Question in Business." It is the supposition that Bowie's account of morality in business makes "unrealistic" claims because business firms rarely operate according to moral ideals "that conflict with their self-interest" (124). From a Kantian point of view, however, morality *always* challenges the reality of existing social relations. Morality is what the world *ought to be* like, knowing that it often does not obtain in reality. Kant comes from a tradition that understands very well that for most people the world is—or has been—a difficult place to be. Lives have gone unfulfilled and others with whom we live exhibit the vices of greed and indifference. "Ought implies can" is often taken to mean that we cannot morally demand things that are impossible; however, for Kant, it means exactly the opposite: if we *must*, we can.

As Bowie also acknowledges, the rest of Ciulla's argument is basically in line with Kantian moral philosophy, at least in terms of *content*. Still, Ciulla presents it in opposition to the Kantian tradition. One reason may be that Ciulla interprets the core concepts "negative freedom" and "positive freedom" in a way that link up with the post-Isaiah Berlin conception of these terms; but for Kant these terms are metaphysical concepts relating to the (transcendental) nature of human beings. That human beings cannot help but consider themselves negatively free means that they are unlike inanimate objects or creatures without agency. We cannot but consider ourselves having the capacity to say "no" to the causal forces determining us. We live in the inescapable awareness of freedom. Kant insists that having this ability to say "no," as such, is meaningless. If it is just the ability to say "no," it is an arbitrary force. Freedom can only have meaning if there is some objective guidance in how and when to say "no." If human beings can somehow find objective guidance, they would have the possibility to become positively free. Kant argues that we have the potential to become positively free because of our rationality. Rationality provides us with a formal framework that can be used to give guidance—and thus meaning—to this ability to say "no" to the causal forces determining us. We can act for good reason. It therefore is ironic that Ciulla criticizes Bowie's conception of positive freedom as "subjective." That is exactly the concern that leads Kant to come up with the idea of positive freedom.

A second chapter on meaningful work in the book is written by Joseph DesJardins. He argues for a teleological conception of human nature and the human good. We need this base to ground a "thick conception of the good" and we need the latter to come up with a true conception of meaningful work. In terms of content there is a lot with which Bowie can agree. So, again, the issue is: why does DesJardins construct his argument in opposition to the Kantian tradition? DesJardins seems to think that Kant sides with Hobbes, the modern libertarians and the representatives of modern science in rejecting a teleological view of humanity. Yet this is misplaced. The second part of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* maintains that human beings cannot avoid understanding nature itself—and all natural living things—in terms of teleology. The concept of a "tree," for example, presupposes a conception of what a "tree" is to become; similarly, since human beings are natural creatures, we must understand ourselves as having a distinctive purpose. Kant only disagrees with DesJardins when it comes to the special nature of human teleology. The unique human

telos is freedom which means that we have to consciously determine the ideal that we ought to pursue and try to become. From a Kantian point of view “thick theories or the good” are mistaken because either they turn us into unfree animals or make us hostage to an unenlightened past.

DesJardins worries that Kant’s concept of freedom provides individuals with a right to choose whatever life they want. This worry is unwarranted. Each person must choose for himself but he also must take into account positive freedom as a criterion of right choice. Conversely, Kant would worry about DesJardins’s position because there is more to life than simply realizing one’s potential. Kant would point out that human beings have all manner of potential; the potential to become greedy, mean and vicious as well as the potential to become virtuous. To realize the first potential we need to do nothing but give in to our preferences; realizing the second potential presupposes a criterion that we understand as meaningful for us as positively free, rational beings. Embarking on this second option is hard work that often will demand going against certain preferences and certain kinds of happiness. Attaining the good life may be far more difficult than DesJardins takes it to be. We have to go *against* some of our strongest inclinations. But, because we are human, we must take ourselves to be capable of doing it.

Kantian Business Ethics: Critical Perspectives is an interesting book that honors an important business ethicist. Many of the themes that the authors address need urgent attention. It is often said that the real tragedy of Kant is that a distorted interpretation of his philosophy has become dominant, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. Hallmarks of this distorted view are that morality is about altruism (22), Kant leaves little room for a consideration of moral virtue, that Kant divorces a consideration of consequences from morality (28) and that we may never use others as means (31). Although the book is strong in content, it unfortunately shows that the distorted picture of Kantian philosophy remains strong. This is problem for those that believe that Kantian philosophy can help us to attain meaningful and morally worthy lives. Bowie is among those who believe that it can and his lifetime of work in business ethics is testament to the enduring influence and strength of Kant’s ideas.

***Corporate Responsibility: The American Experience*, by Archie Carroll, Kenneth Lipartito, James Post, Patricia Werhane, and executive editor Kenneth Goodpaster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-107-02094-8 (hardback), 978-1-107-60525-1 (paperback)**

Ronald Duska

C*orporate Responsibility: The American Experience*, edited by Kenneth Goodpaster, and coauthored by Archie Carroll, Kenneth Lipartito, James Post, and Patricia Werhane, was made possible by a grant from Harry Halloran to the University of St. Thomas’s Center for Ethical Business Cultures to help write a “robust history