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MORALIZATION AS A LINK BETWEEN IDEALISM AND NATURALISM IN THE ETHICAL DISCOURSE

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1. The concern about morals.

In order to understand the discourse of busi-
ness ethics or ethics as a whole - it is impo-
rtant to recognize that, in a way, it is always
built on the possibility of moral criticism or
moral praise. Some act being "wrong" or its
leading to a state which is "bad" (or, on the
contrary "right" and "good") discussed in rela-
tion to somebody having committed that act,
thereby being responsible for the outcome,
gives much of the driving force to the interest
in ethics.

The apparent explanation for
the current interest in business ethics, accord-
ingly, lies in the susp
icion that the activities of
business firms and their managers are open to
criticism, either in the sense that business as
such leads to immoral behaviour, or in the
way that managers more or less intentionally
engage in unethical behaviour. There seems to
be good ground for both sus-
picions. On the
other hand it is not clear that man-
agers do
differ from the rest of the population in that
respect.

There may be other reasons for
being interested in business ethics, of course.
Common managerial theory has been built on
an assumption - a belief - that economies, in
some way, are morally neutral. The socially
and politically chosen economic system, of
course, might be open to moral criticism. Pri-

tate ownership, interest and profit, commer-
cialism and consumerism, are questions hav-
ing moral aspects often discussed on an ideo-
logical level. Leaving these aside, however, the
general assumption has been that the instru-
mental organization we call a "firm" is a kind
of techno-economic problem, and that the
work of managers is only to manage that
problem in a morality-free, rational way. This
has been not only a hypothetical idea, it
seems, but also an empirical assumption about
managerial action. Managers, it is often said,
made rational calculations about economic
facts and expectations, they do not let them-
selves be influenced by moral considerations.

And if they do, they exceed the limits of their
legitimate right.

During the last few decades this
position of conventional managerial theorizing
has been somewhat weakened. For anybody
meeting a living manager it is easy to see that
managers, like anybody else, are full of moral
feelings and ethical arguments. In fact Fried-
man's tenet that managers should only take
care of the owners' interests presupposes
strong moral feelings of responsibility other-
wise the only strictly economic urge for
them would be to pocket the money them-
selves. Within the studies of organization cul-
ture, too, it has become clear that any working
instrumental organization is full of moral feel-
ings mixed into the background of almost any
activity. Studies of the phenomena of ethics
and morality in relation to economic activities
also show that morality constitutes an integral
part of economic reasoning. There is also rea-
son to believe that moral feelings or moral
considerations do not always function in the
same way as traditional conceptions of utility
assume.

To this might be added, that in
studying the history of managerial theorizing
we find a strong moral interest not only in
Adam Smith, professor of moral philosophy,
but also in some of the central fathers of prac-
tical managerial reasoning. Benjamin Franklin
is one worth mentioning: Frederick Winslow
Taylor is another.

There might, accordingly, be
reasons for studying the interface between
ethics and economic action regardless of the
perspective of moral criticism.

A look at what has been written
on business ethics during the last decade,
when the topic has made a comeback, growing
almost into almost a fad, reveals, however,
that moral concern dominates the discussion.
On the one hand, there is the discussion re-

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2 Friedman, Milton, 1962.
4 Franklin, Benjamin, 1968.
garding what is right and what is wrong in business, and about how to evade all the moral pitfalls of managerial life. This discussion seems to be motivated by a feeling that everything would work better, if only we showed people the right way to act. Partly it is also an answer to an explicit need. Many managers earnestly ask for advice.

On the other hand, the suspicion that "something is wrong" is aimed directly at managers and other actors in the economic field. Are managers really different, we ask. Are they morally deficient, in some way; are they, perhaps, more egoistic, greedy and ruthless than "we" are? Is economic education corrupting young people? And so on.

2. Idealist ethics

An almost heroic hopefulness colours both approaches, if maybe for different reasons. Firstly, the quest for a definite answer to the question of good and bad has followed man through history. Ethics is one of the foundation stones of philosophy, and the preaching of good morals has gone on for millennia. If there were an easy solution at hand, there would conceivably be no need for the study of business ethics any more. This simple fact sometimes gives the reader of treatises of moral philosophy a feeling of déjà vu", and gives rise to the thought that maybe we should try something else.

It is sometimes said that Kant's categorical imperative - in its short form telling you that you should treat others as you expect them to treat you - gives a definite and un-contestable rule, from which we might deduce all other ethical norms. Maybe so, maybe not. Try to tell that story to a cruel oppressor, or to a ruthless capitalist exploiting workers as well as consumers. They will not understand the argument but, on the contrary, ask why on earth somebody would think that such an idea should sound reasonable for them. Why would somebody, living securely in an uncontested position of power and riches, willingly choose to give all that away, when there is no practical need for it? "On the contrary", the oppressor will reply, turning around the probabilistic point of Kant and Rawls, "just by treating everybody else as cruelly as I do, I can keep them from doing the same to me". The categorical imperative makes sense only if you are poor and otherwise less well off than other people are or if you adhere to the highly abstract and clearly un-provable belief - common in the arguments of moral philosophy - that man is living in a completely probabilistic world, where everybody, at any moment, has the same chance of "happening to be" either poor or rich. So, to answer that question, you are forced to invent some other "higher" moral principle that he might accept - equality, fairness, legitimate rights - and then the search goes on and on again. (This points to a rather general problem in normative ethical argumentation: It is easy to persuade somebody who is already of the same opinion as you are, but almost impossible to persuade anybody who initially - morally, emotionally, logically - is of another opinion. For rational moral argumentation to be more than trivial, however, it should be able "logically" to persuade those wanting to oppose its argument, maybe even those not able or willing to understand it.)

If so much effort has been put into this futile search, without any satisfactory solution, the whole question might be wrongly stated. What if there is no ultimate answer? One possible reply to this might be that even if there is no answer, such a one ought to be developed. Philosophers should go on refining the language of moral argumentation until, finally, they reach a system of clear and "rational" ethical discourse, which in an unequivocal way states what is right and what is wrong. This, however, is exactly what has been tried for several thousands of years - with no clear positive result. The problem seems to be such that rational moral argumentation is possible within strictly limited perspectives, as long as we do not question our more or less intuitive axiomatic assumptions regarding right and wrong. However, as soon
as the discussion turns to more generalized systems of argumentation, it either falls into the trap of practically irrelevant truisms or gets tangled in fuzzy webs of contradictions. Thus, it would seem, moral discourse is only partly open to rational argumentation.

The problem of the main stream of moral philosophy, then, might be that it is inherently idealist. It rests on the implicit assumption that there exists, somewhere and somehow, an ideal set of ethical norms, hidden from us mortals by a veil of ignorance, confusion and misunderstanding.

3. Morality

On the other hand, "morality" can be seen as a truly existing phenomenon, not mirroring any superhuman ideal principle, but rather being a genuinely human, social and cultural fact. Firstly, there is reason to accept the socio-biological argument that some moral "tendencies" - usually called altruistic feelings - may be genetically inherited. Since all other animals exhibit inherited behavioural patterns - including the drive to take care of their offspring, sometimes risking the parents' life - it is easy to accept the inheritance of that kind of tendency in man. There is also ample empirical evidence of spontaneous human altruistic behaviour, some so self-evident - like taking care of your children - that we fail to see that they are basically non-egoist. Also on a more complex level, probably culturally induced, spontaneous moral action is common. On the other hand, the occurrence of "instinctive" altruism hardly explains the phenomenon of complex moral argumentation.

I choose, however, to look at morality from another perspective. When somebody is said to be a moral person or, even better, a highly moral person, or when instead somebody is called "immoral", the existence of some invisible and intangible characteristic - a personality trait - is implied. These traits are often given other names, such as "goodness", "honesty", "courage", "loyalty", "truthfulness" - or the antonyms "badness", "dishonesty", "cowardice", "disloyalty", "deceitfulness", and so on. There is a strong correspondence between classical "virtues" and "moral characteristics", as Alasdair MacIntyre shows. Virtues, as they are described in common language, are semi-stable. Being honest does not imply acting honestly in some specific situation only. Rather "honesty" is a kind of behavioural pattern, not only in retrospectively, but also predictively. If somebody is said to be "honest", this means that she is expected to act honestly in the future, too. Accordingly, because of what she has done to help the poor in India, many people see Mother Theresa as a "good" person. This "goodness" implies an understanding that she will go on being good, helping the poor and the weak.

Morality, in this way, can be seen as a factual phenomenon, produced mainly by human use of language and by patterns of reasoning. It exists and is real in the same way as "culture", and can looked at as a culturally produced fact - a semi-stable pattern of inter-individual actions and habits, maybe.

As noted earlier, the phenomenon of morality is closely connected with the possibility of moral criticism. Unethical or immoral acts are often seen as implying some kind of inherent moral badness or weakness in the actor. People involved in criminal acts, thus, are criminal, and people doing immoral things are immoral. The fact that managers and companies are involved in immoral and/or criminal activities, then, once more reinforces the ancient conviction that doing business is a bad, or at least a questionable activity. Business, in other words, is inherently morally suspect - and so, by association, is the manager and the firm.

This can, however, be interpreted in different ways. Firstly, firms and

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managers in this respect seem not to deviate much from the rest of society. There is no need to argue much in favour of the notion that (almost) everyone sometimes commits "immoral acts", and that about the same number also sometimes breaks a law. Even when talking about economic crime, there is reason to remember that firms, like individuals, seldom engage in murder, armed robbery, theft, and so on. Both, however, rather frequently engage in minor lawbreaking - mainly breaking administrative rules in society. If this is so, then the conception of absolute moral blamelessness loses some of its credibility. If everybody has moral faults, this becomes a genuine human characteristic, and being genuinely human cannot (easily be shown to) be wrong per se.

The same goes for companies. So far as we accept a social system, depending on semi-autonomous instrumental organizations to take care of central processes of social life, we may have to accept that they cannot all act in an ethically blameless way.

Trying to understand the moral behaviour of firms and managers, starting with the assumption that they are inherently immoral, in this way seems to be an approach leading nowhere. Rather, it would seem, managers are "normal" people, and the quintessence of the modern instrumental business organization closely mirrors that of practical life and of the surrounding culture. There is, of course, always the possibility that our culture as a whole is morally deficient. This, however, raises the question of whether something that a whole culture accepts as morally good can be thought to be bad within that culture. Or, to put the question more sharply: can something which is felt to be morally good by the whole of humanity, every human being included, be shown to be bad - without appealing to extra-human rules?

Numerous studies, trying to find differences in moral argumentation or in moral "traits" or in levels of moral development between managers - or students of business administration - and other people, have failed to show more than marginal differences between these and the "general population". At best they may be able to show some small - statistically significant - differences. Students of business administration may be somewhat more "immoral" than managers, and than other students, in some dimension. Younger students may be somewhat more "Machiavellian" than older ones. Women are usually somewhat more "ethically conscious" than men are, and so on. The greatest differences seem to be found between respondents from different cultures - the old truth pops up, once again, that "foreigners" are less moral than "we" are.

What should be held in mind, however, is that these differences as a whole are marginal, and that marginal differences mostly are just marginal. There is nothing special in the fact that different groups from a population show small non-random variations, even if as a whole they are almost identical. Managers can readily be assumed to differ to some extent from the general population - within a given general culture - as regards priorities and perception of the relative importance of social values. Moral and immoral acts, however, are always by necessity discrete individual phenomena, and therefore such findings usually are but of minor significance for the understanding of moral behaviour.

The effort to unveil the moral characteristics of managers, or of any other group of people, is, I shall argue, a case of misdirected naturalism in the field of the human sciences. "Marginal" and "trivial" but statistically reliable differences become non-marginal and non-trivial as soon as there is reason to believe that they are stable, and thereby that they can be generalized outside their own context. If they can be assumed to be "natural", they can be added to the steady growth of scientific knowledge. The dominating instability and the context-bound variability of these kinds of results, however, do not seem to warrant such an assumption. Moreover, the belief in the possibility to aggregate scientific knowledge as a whole, not to speak
of that of social science, has lost much of its credibility in the post modern perspective. Morality is not a natural phenomenon. There is no genetically inherited "moral gland", determining stable moral traits. Instead it is a cultural product, evolving, changing and oscillating as a part of human culture.

So, instead of all this effort put into more or less futile attempts to find marginal and mostly trivial differences between groups of people that on the whole are identical, the interest of the researcher should be aimed at studying moral and ethical differences between groups, which, in a relevant way, are known to manifest clearly different moral behaviour. Then, of course, it is not interesting to ask if they are different, but how and why and in what way.

There is also another problem hidden in the belief in naturally positive moral characteristics. Most managers are rather competent at using higher levels of moral argumentation, in the Kohlbergian sense. Especially in situations actualized as "moral discourse" - e.g., when agreeing to give an interview "concerning business ethics", or in a seminar on that topic they tend to use arguments mostly belonging to the higher levels of morally reciprocal thought. (Not, however, always. Some managers, on the contrary, choose to take an almost theatrical hedonistic and egoistic stand - clearly belonging to Kohlberg's lower levels of moral development.)

There is, however, good reason to interpret hypothetical moralizing activities - experiments, interviews, and other cases of ethical discussion - with some caution. In all these situations people can be expected to act

sub specie ludi - as Johan Asplund notes - arguing within the frame of intellectual play and not as an act within the concrete seriousness of reality. With a given conception of the kind of play best received by the audience, the logic of the play takes form in the mind. The interesting point is that the same persons, when discussing their daily activities in a "non-moralizing" perspective, i.e. when nobody has indicated the ethical perspective or otherwise hinted at the moral dimension of the question, often tend to use arguments related to other, usually "lower", levels of moral development.

This can be seen as a case of the problem of "social desirability", but it is also an interesting phenomenon per se. Any respondent, it seems, has at his or her disposal a set of alternative "moral logics", structures of moral argumentation or "ethical discourses", and is perfectly able to shift from the one to the other when the situational frame changes. One way of interpreting Kohlberg's six stages of moral development, thus, could be that they do not depict any kind of development in "goodness", but rather a transformation and restructuring of the intellectual ability to handle very simple structures of moral discourse in order to arrive at alternative, more abstract, reciprocal ones. At an intuitive level there is nothing strange in this; it only shows that man is not a one-dimensional moral automaton, and that the search for a true and stable human trait, an "absolute degree of morality", misses the point.

The search for positive "natural" moral characteristics is largely analogous to the long and futile search for an exhaustive unique set of "leadership traits". It might be a result of an objectivistic and naturalistic mistake. Thus, a property of everyday language, connected with the tendency to evaluate individuals and acts, is interpreted as indicating a truly existing natural fact. As in Plato's cave metaphor, people implicitly assume that the shadows and patterns on the wall of the cave must be only weak images of the "real" phenomenon. If somebody is (said or thought to be) a "good leader", then, accordingly, they try to find the property giving rise to this "goodness". Following this naturalistic interpretation, if somebody is morally good, then it is because he or she really is good; has a property called goodness. Then we might go on looking for this property, maybe in the head.

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or the heart or some hitherto undetected moral gland or gene.

The assumption of moral badness easily leads to another kind of blindness. Most managers involved in unethical activities do not really feel that they are doing anything bad. On the contrary, they feel that "in this situation" their choice was the right thing to do. The "situation", namely, is usually not ethically one-dimensional. Most ethically relevant practical decision situations embrace a whole set of conflicting or at least partly contradictory ethical principles. The reason for this may be found not so much in the corruption of man, as in the endless complexity of practical life, and in the ensuing moral dilemmas - ethical paradoxes. The problems of business ethics are usually not caused by some wish to be bad or to act immorally. Instead, it would seem, managers are rather "normal", and unethical activities are usually connected with efforts to "do it right" in some way.

What I am trying to put forward is the almost trivial truth that managers seldom behave "unethically" out of a wish to do something bad or evil. They do not, for example, decide to release wastes into rivers and lakes out of some evil desire to pollute the waters, or because they want to defile the beautiful surroundings. Unethical acts, or acts leading to outcomes deemed as unethical in some perspective, can be explained in different ways. The rare case where somebody behaves unethically out of a wish to do something bad or evil - really wanting to pollute watercourses, for example, to hurt somebody or to destroy somebody's life - seems to be a poor explanation for immoral business behaviour. Other, and more plausible, explanations might be found in variants of bounded rationality. The situation may, for example, be so unclear, that the decision maker cannot predict the outcomes of his or her activities. This might be a result of incomplete information, or, on the other hand, of too much information, of too complex cause-effect relationships.

Summarizing the arguments above, I propose that "ethics", as a kind of "theory of good and bad", easily leads to an inherently idealistic search for supposedly existing eternal rules, and that this search may be doomed to failure, because such rules may not exist. The idea of evolving an ultimate consistent network of ethical rules is doomed to failure, because the whole set of rules is genuinely inconsistent. The phenomenon of "moral feelings" and "moral behaviour", on the other hand, easily leads to a naturalistic conception of morality, leading to the search for assumedly stable "moral characteristics". This search has been more or less futile. The reason for this may be that morality as a whole is a cultural product, resulting from an inborn tendency to moral feelings, interacting with cultural facts like language and argumentative style.

4. Moralizing.

This interaction takes the form of moralizing, of day-to-day moral talk, aiming at moral criticism and moral praise. Moralizing is "moral talk"; there is a constant moral discourse going, where people use their more or less articulated moral feelings and ethical conceptions, in order to criticize the activities of some specific individual in a specific situation. This discussion may be seen as a process of applied ethics. When moralizing, people use the structure of the practical syllogism, assuming some intent, some knowledge regarding the consequences of action, and a conscious choice of action, trying to form a reasonable chain of hypothetical moral argumentation.

Moralizing, thus, is always a form of criticism - or praise - in particular; it is bound to a specific context. Ethics, again, is always a theory in general. We can see moralizing as a link between, on the one hand, the clear and pure theory of morality in general and, on the other, practical moral action in particular. On the one hand, the ongoing process of moral talk clearly influences whatever we might call "moral feelings", thus
slowly changing people's morality. On the other hand, both the changes in moral feelings and the moralizing talk can be expected to influence moral theorizing, to change the structure of ethical argumentation. In this way moralization is not only a link; it functions as the pumping heart of the whole system.

Moralization, as the central part of the complex of ethics and morality, may be seen as a constantly ongoing socio-genetic process\textsuperscript{11}, forming and changing particular moral feelings and actions, as well as ethical theorizing, and thereby, in the long run, also the particular conceptions of good and bad in a given culture. Moralization, thus, can be seen as one of the central parts of the "machine" driving cultural change processes - the results of which we, elements of the process, are doomed always to see as "development".

5. Concluding remarks

Alastair MacIntyre\textsuperscript{12}, discussing the belief in the existence of "natural human rights", notes that "The best reason for asserting so bluntly that there are no such rights is indeed of precisely the same type as the best reason which we possess for asserting that there are no witches and the best reason which we possess for asserting that there are no unicorns: every attempt to give good reasons for believing that there are such rights has failed."

In the same way, it seems, the effort to find a unique and truly rational system of moral reasoning has failed, and so has the effort to find natural moral traits in any socially relevant dimension. The failure of moral philosophy, of ethics as a theory of good and bad, despite the efforts of millennia, might be explained by the inescapable gap between idealized general arguments and the problems of particular action in day-to-day life. The failure of naturalism, of the search for "real" moral traits, on the other hand, might be explained if we accept that moral feelings and moral actions are not natural phenomena, but instead formed and reformed by the ongoing process of moral talk, of moralizing.

Even if the quality of moral action may be the main reason for the interest in business ethics, deriving from the general tendency to moral criticism, it may be seen rather as a mirror image or resultant of the process of moralizing. Even if the challenge to find eternally valid moral rules is enchanting, normative ethics in general may be rather irrelevant, and even misleading, to somebody who wants to understand the phenomenon of moral reasoning and action.

Moreover, it may be fruitful to assume that moralizing, as well as ethics, can function as alternative parallel sets of moral argumentation, or ethical discourses, and that any moralizer is readily able to change instantly from one set of moral argument to another, without even noting it. These sudden changes may be caused, actualized, by the situation at hand, by practical considerations, e.g. a sudden chance to make a big profit, or by another person, e.g. somebody asking for an interview regarding business ethics.

The most promising field of the study of ethics, therefore, is probably to be found in living morality - in common moralizing discourse. What we ought to study, then, are the patterns of moralizing and the structuralistic characteristics of the process of moralizing - intellectual, emotional, logical, cultural. Morality is also never a stable and static personal or social characteristic; rather it has to be seen as a process, an ever changing stream of moral feelings and ideas. The characteristics and development of this stream is interesting as an individual phenomenon, but also - maybe even more - as a process of reciprocal interaction, where the characteristics of interactive moralizing determine the patterns of moral change.

If morality and moralizing - and, of course, ethics - are seen as products of cultural socio-genetic processes, moreover, there

\textsuperscript{11} Elias, Norbert, 1978.
\textsuperscript{12} MacIntyre, Alasdair, 1987, p. 69.
is no strong reason to expect that these phenomena might be handled in the inherently naturalistic and idealistic way proposed by neo-classical theory. Instead of obeying the logic of the utilitarian approach, moral feelings and moral argumentation seem to be idiosyncratic, often discrete and without alternatives, sometimes non-reversible. There is little reason therefore to expect that it can encompass the mainly naturalistic energy metaphors of utilitarianism.

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