

THE ROLE OF CHARACTER IN BUSINESS ETHICS¹

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Abstract: There is good reason to take a virtue-based approach to business ethics. Moral principles are fairly useful in assessing actions, but understanding how moral people behave and how they become moral requires reference to virtues, some of which are important in business. We must go beyond virtues and refer to character, of which virtues are components, to grasp the relationship between moral assessment and psychological explanation. Virtues and other character traits are closely related to (in technical terms, they supervene on) personality traits postulated by personality psychologists. They may therefore be featured in respectable psychological explanations. But good character fits no familiar psychological pattern. A person of good character is sufficiently self-aware and rational that his or her virtues are not accompanied by the vices that psychologists find usually associated with them. A course in business ethics can help develop this self-awareness, which a good life in business requires.

In recent decades some philosophers have held, as Aristotle did, that ethics is primarily about the virtues of character rather than principles. Solomon (1992) has urged business ethicists in particular to take virtue seriously. I think business ethicists have good reason to discuss not only virtue but character as a whole. In particular, understanding character makes one a better manager from a moral point of view. There are difficulties in teaching character, as Socrates noted, but the right kind of course in business ethics can impart some valuable lessons about character, hence about psychology and organizational behavior.

Virtue Rather Than Principles

Virtue ethicists deny that making moral decisions is a matter of calculation as principle-based theories, particularly utilitarian ones, imply. Even if we can describe an ethical person as one whose acts conform to certain principles, it does not follow that the best way to teach Smith to be ethical is to give her principles to follow. Nor does a morally deep description of Smith refer only to the moral principles on which she acts.

We can describe an excellent employee by stating his or her sales figures, number of units manufactured and percentage passing inspection, or other actions or consequences of them that might serve as criteria of performance

evaluation. Or a description can refer to knowledge, managerial skills, and so on. The latter is the deeper description because it gets at the causal basis of the former. The former criteria, not always valid but easier to measure, the employee satisfies thanks to certain endowments that make an employee a good one. So human resources professionals focus on improving employees' skills and knowledge as a way of improving their performance—for example, in units sold.²

Moral training too emphasizes virtues. Parents do tell children not to lie, as employers tell new employees not to leave work early. Beyond that, however, parents usually try to raise children to be inclined not to lie, to feel repugnance on the appropriate occasions, even a little in circumstances that justify lying. We want our children's motives as well as their actions to be the appropriate ones, so that they do the right thing for the right reasons. As they mature, we want them to develop the ethical sensibility to see the salient moral aspects of events in their lives and the moral imagination to deal with them resourcefully.³ It may then turn out that there are occasions on which they regretfully find lying justifiable.

We are faced with the shortcomings of principles as we teach business ethics. Our students readily notice that standard ethical decision procedures do not yield determinate results, particularly if we invoke more than one procedure at a time. What does a Kantian do when an act has multiple and incompatible maxims? How does a utilitarian deal with cases that violate justice and rights? We usually go over various ethical theories and try to apply them to cases, but that can be difficult. Does justice require embracing affirmative action, or color- and gender-blind hiring?⁴ Perhaps we should develop principles for applying our principles? Then further principles for applying those, and on to infinity?

Principles do have a place in business ethics courses, where we ask questions like, "By what criteria should we judge an organization to be moral?" But we may also ask what a manager is more likely to ask: "What should I do to create a moral organization?" A complete answer will refer to structural and systemic issues; but insofar as it refers to people, it will involve people's attitudes, which may be affected by corporate culture and in other ways. Here virtue is prominent.

Some people adhere to moral principles because they are virtuous people. In that sense talk of virtues gets closer to the heart of the matter. But one can follow the principles and yet not be, say, courageous. For example, one can do the courageous thing just because management has provided incentives for doing so.

The virtuous person acts from an inclination to do the right thing. In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle makes the case that character, good or bad, is a matter of the sort of thing one enjoys doing; so his moral ideal is not a person who overcomes temptation and does the right thing, but one to whom doing the right thing comes naturally. If he is right, the question whether there is any selfish reason to be moral is not a straightforward question: for a person

of good character, being moral is selfish in the sense that it is what one enjoys. So in an organization the best situation from a moral point of view is one in which people act morally because they are virtuous and therefore inclined to act that way. This is not a very unusual situation, since many people do have an inclination to be responsible citizens, and moral managers can encourage this inclination at least by seeing to it that good corporate citizenship does not put the employee at a disadvantage.

Character Rather Than Virtue

Business ethicists should go beyond virtue and discuss character, which Kupperman (1991; see esp. 17) defines this way: "X's character is X's normal pattern of thought and action, especially with respect to concerns and commitments in matters affecting the happiness of others or of X, and most especially in relation to moral choices." People of strong character act according to their commitments and values despite possible short-term pressures and temptations to the contrary. The strongest possible character is one in which there is no conflict between values and short-term urges. Saints are like that, but ordinary people of good character need second-order virtues like the ability to withstand temptation. To see how character traits are related to virtues as well as to personality traits, which psychologists postulate, is to see why character is an important issue for managers, hence for business ethicists.

Think of a person—let us call her Margaret Thatcher—with these traits: anal-retentiveness, fidelity to principle, intelligence, self-confidence verging on arrogance, impatience with dissent. If Freud is right, to call her anal-retentive is to describe her character by implicit reference to the causal conditions of its development. To call her principled is to describe her character by reference to the probability that she will act consistently according to certain principles irrespective of social or political pressure. To call her stubborn is to refer to the probability that she will act consistently according to principles irrespective of any other consideration, however sound. To call her self-confident helps explain her stubbornness. To call her intelligent helps explain her self-confidence and her attitude toward dissent.

Her anal-retentiveness and her virtue of being principled are not identical, even if the former is a sufficient condition of the latter. Moral realists would say that fidelity to principle *supervenes on* anal-retentiveness.⁵ The relationship is similar to that between psychological states and properties and those postulated by physicists. Virtues, like other moral states and properties, typically play a causal role in creating human well-being, and not only that of the one who is virtuous.

We can say of a certain incident, "Jones expressed his disagreement with the boss" or "Jones acted courageously." When we mention Jones's courage, we indirectly refer to Jones's having been motivated by concern for the company's welfare and so having acted according to the principle that one should be

prepared to take personal risks to do the right thing. We deny that he was being, say, just stupid. So, moral realists conclude, virtues are real because they figure in causal explanations of behavior. We can see how the managerial tasks of psychological explanation and moral assessment overlap.

Some character traits—a psychologist would call them personality traits—are virtues. Character is the whole of which the virtues are some of the components; but a character trait can be a virtue or a vice depending on the circumstances under which the characteristic behavior appears. Consider the trait of self-confidence, for example. Self-confidence in acting on one's principles despite peer pressure is virtuous. On the other hand, self-confidence in acting on one's principles while ignoring good arguments against them is not, for stubbornness is no virtue, even though in some cases stubbornness will lead to a good outcome.

Some virtues do not easily combine with others. For example, it takes a certain maturity to have self-respect and at the same time to be considerate of others. And some virtues do readily combine with certain vices. As a matter of psychological fact, people who are resistant to peer pressure are usually also insensitive to peers' views and feelings.⁶ One might even have certain virtues that depend on the vice of cowardice. For example, Jones is law-abiding (but not courageous) if he lives in moral fear of being caught and punished for acting otherwise. Whether Jones is a person of genuinely good character depends in part on whether he can be honest when it will cost him. His ability to do this may be enhanced if he understands his own psychology.

What Managers Should Know

These claims should interest managers who want to get employees to act morally. Talk of character emphasizes causal relations among traits, which lend themselves to explanatory hypotheses in a way virtues do not. So explanations of behavior that postulate only virtues must be incomplete relative to explanations that invoke character traits.

When I was a consultant at Hay Associates, our psychologists administered personality tests that helped us place managers in situations in which they were likely to do well. For example, a creative person would be put into an entrepreneurial position. But the psychological descriptions with which we operated were not always morally neutral. For example, we might call a particular manager weak or strong, honest or sneaky, task-oriented or lazy. And why not? Virtues can appear in respectable explanations.⁷

Managers should understand that life in the right kind of organization may have an effect on employees' character. Aristotle implies as much in calling habit crucial to character formation. Yet it takes reflective intelligence to have a reliably good character in a complex world. One reason for this is that such a character does not fit any familiar psychological syndrome in that it does not have the vices to which its virtues are psychologically related. So, for example,

the willingness to take risks can be learned as a habit more easily than can the willingness to take the calculated, justified risks that true courage requires. Recklessness, which is on the same psychological continuum, is not always capable of that sort of calculation. Virtue is after all not simply a mean between vices. Courage is fear of the right things, not just fear of more things than the reckless person fears and fewer than the coward. Like other virtues, courage requires practical intelligence.

Character, Autonomy, Commitment, and Self-Interest

If Smith is a person of strong character, she acts consistently on values that give shape and meaning to her life. Strength of character is a matter of degree, since one may experience indecision or cognitive dissonance, or may waver over time. It is characteristic of people of strong character to make commitments—to family, friends, community, organization, etc.—and so assume some moral obligations, and then keep them. So whether one has the virtue of integrity, which is a virtue of one's character as a whole, is a matter of whether one conforms not only to certain moral principles but also to the commitments one has made.⁸ Now I want to argue that commitments of this sort are essential to one's autonomy and ability to live a good life.

Consider Frankfurt's (1981) distinction between first- and second-order desires.⁹ The latter are desires about desires. I may, for example, want a drink but wish I did not, or I may be motivated more by others' opinions than I would prefer. An autonomous person, Frankfurt claims, is one whose second-order desires are consistent with his or her first-order ones, or override them. But second-order desires may themselves be irrational or incoherent or incompatible with still higher-order desires or with one's values, some of which are desires of the highest order.¹⁰ To have certain values—a passion for justice, for example—is to be virtuous. One's character is in large part a matter of the values one has and the extent to which one is able to act on them. A person of strong character is capable of being committed not only to certain values but also to relationships, as for example to an organization.¹¹ In that case, insofar as the commitment is rational or at least coherent, one can keep it autonomously even when it constrains one's action.

If the good life is an autonomous life, strong character is a necessary condition of the good life. To be unable to act on one's values is the antithesis of autonomy. A good life is an integrated life, one committed to a consistent set of values, principles, projects, people, and in many cases to a community, that can give it meaning.¹² Honoring such a commitment requires a strong character.¹³

A person of strong and bad character, committed to values whose pursuit would alienate others, would find it hard to accomplish objectives that require others' cooperation, as most business objectives do. But couldn't the person of strong character be committed to the pursuit of mere self-interest? No. If Aristotle is right in claiming that character is a matter of what one enjoys doing,

then commitment to self-interest alone is an empty notion; for in making a commitment at the highest level *one decides what one's interests will be*. If I am sufficiently autonomous to be able to decide what kind of person I shall be, then I can decide what will be most important to me and what I shall most want, hence what will be in my interests. And while having interests that are at odds with those of others is disadvantageous, being self-interested is not bad insofar as one's interests include others' well-being.

Unfortunately our values and our interests do not always overlap. Ordinary mortals can act on their values without acting in their own interests. One may, for example, value charity in the sense that one wants to want to be charitable, but where the first-order want is rather weak and the greedy impulse strong, one must urge oneself to act charitably and in that sense to oppose one's interests; and one might succeed in the attempt or fail.

Character and the Good Life

Virtue and character ethicists accuse utilitarians of being too hospitable to happiness or satisfaction of desire like that of the robotic people in Huxley's *Brave New World*. But in avoiding that problem they embrace another, for they adopt a substantive and not self-evident notion of what the good life is really like. An Aristotelian would say that happy robots do not lead a good life because they are not virtuous in the sense of fulfilling the function of a human being, which is to be rational and civilized. The good life is not contingent on what some people happen to want at some time.¹⁴ Business ethicists know that an apparently benign organizational culture can make people unreflective robots whose satisfaction with their corporate lives is pathetic.

But then on what basis can we identify the better conceptions of the good life? And how does virtue help? We may after all make a negative moral judgment about a community on the basis of what it regards as a virtue: think of Homeric virtues; think of what the Mafia's conception of honor implies about that community. (Solomon [1992, 134, 196] discusses this difficulty.)

Let us approach this problem by trying to find some limits to what we can value. To begin with, we must value whatever is required by our ability to ask ourselves what is worth valuing. That ability entails a measure of rationality. So rationality is valuable (though not for that reason alone), and a good life is one in which rationality has a role. Second, it is an unalterable fact about persons that they live with other persons—human beings would be profoundly and unrecognizably different if they did not live together in communities—and one's values and objectives must take others' interests into account. This is to say, as Aristotle said, that man is a rational animal and a civilized animal. So business virtues, and for that matter any set of human virtues that could seem complete to you and me, must include rationality and affability.¹⁵

In the business world the Homeric character is out of place. In business, on the whole, you and others are better off if you are the sort of person who values

caring about and cooperating with people who will do the same for you. The extent to which Homeric virtues are useful for the individual organization will differ from one industry to another and from one society to another, but in the long run the killer virtues are winners only in negative-sum games. Good public policy does not create negative-sum communities, but instead reduces the extent to which behavior that in the aggregate is bad for society is required for the survival of the individual firm. Good managers do the equivalent within the organization by rewarding what benefits the firm.¹⁶

So we come to the question of what we who intend to turn out morally good managers should be doing.

Can We Teach Character?

If character is formed at an early age, as is commonly supposed, it is hard to see how a business ethics course could have a great impact on MBA students. Teaching students ethical principles does have some value because it helps them make sound ethical decisions and convince others of their soundness. It is true that moral soundness will matter only to those who want to do the right thing, as not everyone will. But in the same way, courses in management will be useful only to those who prefer effective organizations to ineffective ones, and finance courses only to those who value money. Teaching students analytical frameworks for dealing with problems in ethics courses—or, for that matter, in management courses—is a part, but a significant part, of what we should do.¹⁷

Managers who want to create and maintain ethics in their organizations need to know how structure, systems, people, and culture can be deployed to accommodate ethical behavior and make unethical behavior disadvantageous. In teaching people to be managers like this, we can consider Martin Marietta, Dow Corning, and other good and bad examples. Aristotle thinks politics is a high form of ethics insofar as it creates a state that supports virtue. The same is true of management. But managers will be more effective in creating organizations that support good character if they understand how personality traits, character traits, and virtues are logically and psychologically related. Clearly, the topic of character is one on which business ethicists and scholars of organizational behavior can come together and do useful work.

An objection: What if our students don't care about good character, or morality in general, but only about self-interest? Again, this opposition between morality and self-interest is facile. Self-interest can take many forms, and we can help our students consider that some of these forms might be satisfactory only temporarily or under certain conditions not likely to hold. One problem that some students have is that they embrace what Solomon (1992, 25, 36) calls abstract greed—roughly, the idea that making money is an end in itself—without considering the cause or the consequences of that embrace, or the alternatives to it. Students who say they are looking out for number one are probably wrong. They have got it into their heads that ruthless pursuit of wealth is what

self-interest is all about, so that trying to be wealthy and powerful will make them happy.

We may well ask our students to consider a choice: Do you want to be the sort of person who is made happy by overwhelming financial success? Or do you want to be the sort of person who is made happy by a life in which work plays an important but not overwhelming role, and in which that work offers challenge, variety, growth, association with good and interesting people, and compensation that permits one to live in reasonably comfortable style? The question is not which one they prefer. It is a higher-order question about which one they *would choose to prefer* if they could choose, and some can.¹⁸

This is not one of those existential questions with no reasonable answer. An MBA student who gives the second answer and can then act on it is likelier to be happy than one who gives the first. That is not only because overwhelming financial success is hard to come by, but also because so many people who achieve it do not appear to enjoy what they can buy with all that money. The money becomes just a way of keeping score in a game that itself has no point. Think of the many who have retired from a financially successful career and now say that if they had it to do over again they would spend more time with their families. So why didn't they? The answer has something to do with peer pressure and with not acting on the basis of self-interest after all.

We do well to discuss such cases as the Zimbardo prison camp experiment (Haney et al., 1973), in which within an appallingly short time subjects are socialized to the role of angry prisoner or brutal guard. Each of the roles takes on the sort of functional autonomy that characterizes the worst workplaces. Abstract greed too evinces functional autonomy. This distortion of values usually has as its purpose to further the interests of some other stakeholder—a manager, perhaps, or the stockholder. Whether it truly serves even those purposes in the long run is another matter.

It may not be too late for education in business ethics to confront our students with this crucial question: What do you want to be motivated by? Some of them can come to see the varieties of the good life and choose among them in deciding what to be when they grow up. They can begin to develop the requisite practical intelligence and bring it to bear on their own dispositions after they have stood back from their lives and achieved some perspective that enables them to judge what is important in the long run. There may still be time in a business ethics course to read literature, including case studies, that raises questions and options about what is most valuable, to sharpen one's ethical sensibility, and to learn a richer ethical vocabulary to articulate one's values and consider and discuss them critically.¹⁹

A little reflection on the Zimbardo experiment will convince some students that they should not automatically adopt the values that the organization presses on them, and that they should be alert to the ways in which their aspirations may be seduced, whether they go on to become prisoners in an organization or its guards.

Yet there is the persistent objection: It is too late to change their character. My response is that I have noted some reasons for saying that character is more malleable than personality. I argued earlier that a good character will probably not fit any familiar psychological syndrome. It takes maturity and reflective intelligence to have a virtue (courage under peer pressure, for example) without the usually related vice (in this case, an uncooperative nature). To the extent that our students not only have certain virtues but understand why they are virtues, they have a better chance of having those virtues without the vices that often accompany them.²⁰ Mostly by birth and upbringing one develops a personality such that one tends to be (say) headstrong. Mostly by reflection and instruction one becomes sufficiently self-aware that one's independence of mind is under appropriate direction, and so qualifies as courage.

In an organization in which decisiveness and acceptance of risk are valued as keys to success, the culture is likely to create peer pressure that encourages shortsightedness and reckless disregard of obstacles and possible bad consequences. One who stops to calculate probable outcomes is likely to be dismissed as a wimp. The successful manager cannot change employees' personalities, but can sometimes teach people the difference between boldness and recklessness, and between courage and the readiness to succumb to macho peer pressure. A business ethics course can begin that educational process.

If our students are to become morally effective managers, they will need to learn enough about psychology and organizational behavior as well as about moral philosophy to create a working environment that supports the right sort of introspection, and therefore good character as well. The mission of those who teach business ethics is to help make that happen, and character should be part of the agenda.

Notes

¹I thank Al Gini for useful suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay. Anonymous referees also had good advice. I presented an earlier version at the University of North Carolina—Charlotte and got some helpful reactions. Daryl Koehn has shared with me her thoughts on virtue in business ethics. My views on some issues that form the background of this essay appear in Hartman (1996).

²The work of Hay Associates, once my employer, is instructive. The position descriptions on which Hay consultants and their clients base their evaluations and performance contracts are written in the language of results: "The incumbent ensures that etc...." The psychological profiles that they use to assign people to jobs, on the other hand, focus on personal endowments.

A difficulty is that character traits cannot be operationalized, for two reasons. First, as Davidson (1980) and others have argued, psychology does not admit of laws of the kind scientists like, though that does not disqualify psychology as a source of explanations of organizational behavior. Second, there are fatal problems about operationalizing any normative concept.

³ On ethical sensibility and some other issues I am indebted to Paine (1991, 77-79).

⁴Derry and Green (1989) discuss this problem and propose not virtue ethics but Rawlsian contractarianism as a way of addressing it. I do not have the space to discuss whether the Rawlsian approach is incompatible with virtue and character ethics, which seem less permissive on the issue of the nature of the good for man. Kupperman in particular (1991, 96ff.) assails Rawls's rootless pluralism. Rawls himself hardly dismisses the virtues in *A Theory of Justice*: see, for example, 433-446, to which Solomon referred me.

⁵See Brink (1989, 172-180). Moral realists want to legitimize moral states and properties, and so want to give an account of how they relate to psychological and physiological states that most moral skeptics deem unproblematic. Moral states supervene on psychological states, which in turn supervene on physiological states; and all three kinds can appear in respectable explanations. (Sociologists and organization theorists should not infer from A's supervention on B that there is no such thing as A. See Collins [1981] and Pfeffer [1982], and criticism in Hartman [1988, chapter 6].) That some character traits are neither necessary nor sufficient for any virtues does not affect the status of either.

⁶In the famous Asch (1955) experiment, cited in Stoner and Freeman (1989, 497f.) and often elsewhere, many subjects asked to judge the comparative lengths of two lines gave wrong responses after hearing a number of apparent fellow-subjects (deliberately) give the wrong answer. Those who gave the right answer rather than buckle under pressure tended to be shown by independent personality tests to be relatively difficult, uncooperative, combative, etc.

⁷See fn. 2. One possible reason why not is that inappropriate moral attitudes could pollute the descriptions. For example, someone who exercised useful discretion might be dismissed as a wimp. But this need not happen.

⁸See Solomon (1992, 168, 172-74) for similar views. McFall (1992) claims that moral autonomy is a necessary condition of integrity: there is no integrity in acting virtuously only because one has been told to do so. You must have a reason for doing so, and it must be *your* reason.

⁹Others, including Gerald Dworkin (1988) and Elster (1984, 1985, 1989), have elaborated on Frankfurt's view.

¹⁰There are some desires of a very high order that we might hesitate to call values because they are narrowly selfish. Whether it is possible to have a value with no associated high-order desires is unclear. If I have no desire to be the sort of person who acts charitably, I do not think I can value charity. If I wish I could be charitable but can't bring myself to do it in the crunch, I do at least value charity, for all the good that does. So one's values are part of one's character only insofar as one can act on them; but a failure ever to act on them will raise the question whether one really has those values—that is, really wants to have and act on such desires. What would the evidence be that one does?

¹¹A mark of good character is a readiness to honor one's commitments without performing a principle-based moral calculation before each decision. Williams (1971) and McFall (1992) emphasize this point, but say little about cases in which honoring a commitment—for example, to a close relative who is a criminal and a fugitive—is the wrong thing to do. Even where there are principle-based considerations that cannot be ignored, it is hard to see how any actual calculation could resolve the issue.

¹²See Kupperman (135ff.). This position a utilitarian might reject, and in so doing raise doubts about utilitarianism.

Philosophers who take character seriously (Williams, for example) often regard consistency of values and commitments over time as not only morally good but also essential to one's selfhood. If Jones at t_2 has radically different values and commitments from Jones at t_1 , there are doubts about whether we are talking about a single person. It is surely important to a person that he or she survive over time.

¹³Socrates believed he could improve his interlocutors' character by exposing incoherence in their principles. People with good principles but weak character he diagnosed as ignorant. Williams would accept neither claim.

¹⁴Aristotelians will also argue that the incommensurability of goods disqualifies utilitarianism for anything other than a few public policy issues.

¹⁵One might go further along the same lines, as McCloskey (1994) does, and argue that the bourgeois virtues ought to be salient in our era.

¹⁶I take it that so-called transformational leadership is supposed to alter people's values and character, presumably to the advantage of the organization. Apart from moral questions, such as those asked by Keeley (1995) and MacIntyre (1982, 25f.) about transforming people's values, we might ask how anyone could want to acquire a different character. The only possible answers are that there is something incoherent about one's current one, in the sense that I am outlining here, or that one has not the strength to act according to one's most important values. Apart from those considerations, which reappear in the last section of this essay, it is a necessary truth that one cannot have any reason for rejecting one's own character. It would be like wishing that one had different highest-order desires.

¹⁷Here and elsewhere in this section I am indebted to Paine (1991, 1994), who in turn acknowledges her debt to some then unpublished work of Kupperman.

¹⁸Here Aristotle's emphasis on habit as the basis of virtue makes some sense. One way to come to value a certain kind of life is to live it over a period of time.

¹⁹If transformational leadership did this, it would be hard to object to it.

²⁰This is not to say that we can repeal any laws of psychology, or that autonomy has to do with the denial of causality. In the best cases rationality and the awareness of a coherent matrix of higher-order desires are part of the causal basis of one's actions.

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