

Virtual Special Issue on Humanities and Business Ethics

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Abstract This collection of articles on Humanities and Business Ethics is the second virtual special issue of the *Journal of Business Ethics*. It is a curated selection of previously published papers aimed at inspiring future contributions on Humanities and Business Ethics. This new section of the journal explores artifacts that provide timely and timeless insight into the essential culture and values of business. The ten articles in this VSI draw on seven humanities disciplines: anthropology, architecture, art, classics, history, language, and literature. The questions raised by these papers are relevant and timely, but like the humanities, they are also important and timeless. I hope these reflections will inspire you to read each paper for yourself and to imagine your own contribution to the Humanities and Business Ethics section of the *Journal of Business Ethics*.

About Humanities and Business Ethics

Will Arthur Miller's iconic American salesman ever be great again? Can Mary Shelley's monster tale inform modern entrepreneurs about the obligations of stewardship? How did Edward Burtynsky's photographic landscapes of exported e-waste help to inspire a sustainability compact between the world's largest retailer and its supply chain? Were David Bowie and Freddy Mercury thinking about behavioral ethics when they described pressure as the culprit that "brings a building down/splits a family in two/puts people on streets?" What are the particular

implications for business ethics when the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 is *post-truth*? Can gaudy skyscrapers—emblazoned with the owner's name in oversized, faux-gold block letters—tell us something about his business and social values?

Humanities and Business Ethics (HBE) is a new section of the *Journal of Business Ethics (JBE)*. It invites contributions that address these kinds of timely and timeless questions. As these questions suggest, HBE will explore artifacts that provide insight into the essential culture and values of business in our time—to tell us about the capitalism we have inherited, to represent the impact it has had on the human condition, and to influence a more sustainable future.

While HBE is new, the idea that the humanities and business ethics are related is not new at all. Business is a human endeavor, and ethical business practice takes into account above all the welfare of human beings who are affected by it. Whereas the term "humanities" demarcates those fields with a special interest in human values and culture, it is not meant to imply that other disciplines are unconcerned with those things. Indeed, earlier in the evolution of our field, one of the editors-in-chief of this journal co-edited a volume called *Business as a Humanity* (Donaldson and Freeman 1994).

The Foreword to that volume stated, "The authors ask us to entertain the idea of seeing business in the same light that we see art, literature, and philosophy." This was a visionary statement, one that inspired this portion of the HBE section description: "Business ethics...can be studied as a humanity, when it investigates, for example, how our economic lives are shaped by underlying cultural values—and how those values are influenced by our market systems."

HBE seeks to build upon that vision and description. While business and humanity are inseparable, the idea that

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business could be a humanity is a radical departure from the way it is conventionally practiced as an economic and social science in which human beings and their creativity are primarily instrumental to practical ends. The humanistic idea of intrinsic value has no standing on balance sheets in which everything that counts can be counted. Meanwhile, humanities scholars might be loathe to see intrinsically beautiful objects used instrumentally in service to profit-making. Business as a humanity in its purest form might obviate those distinctions. It may be an unattainable ideal toward which this section of the journal nevertheless reaches. By putting the humanities and business ethics into dialog, it seeks to influence underlying attitudes about ethical business that over time contribute to more humane—and, dare I say, beautiful—business practices.

The HBE section will consist of papers that represent a range of humanities sub-disciplines and a variety of approaches to “using” humanistic objects and ideas. The section description suggests that the contributions to this section could utilize one or more of these approaches:

Study (a) work(s) of the arts of humanities with relevance to business ethics; interpret the works of an artist, author, composer, genre, etc., that put that oeuvre into correspondence with conventional scholarship; examine an art form to yield findings about the ethical values of business; apply arts and humanities theories to generate insights about business ethics; explore how ethical characterizations of business have evolved in the humanities across time and place; and, synthesize other research involving business ethics and humanities.

Admittedly, there is one important limitation on the section as it is currently conceived: It does not, for example, publish original contributions of poetry, paintings, and the like. The editors-in-chief and I actually considered that possibility and decided that we might reconsider it in the future. For now, the section description explains that it “seeks contributions that utilize humanities and arts objects and methods to yield creative, insightful, and high-quality business ethics research.”

About This Virtual Special Issue

Exactly what this description means may be unclear, and that is part of the point. The purpose of the VSI is to inspire future contributions by sharing past exemplars. However, those exemplars need not constrain our imaginations from what future contributions may look like. HBE is perhaps necessarily a continuous work-in-progress, wide-ranging, emerging, and evolving with the intelligence and imaginations of its scholars and practitioners.

In conducting the research to create this HBE Virtual Special Issue (VSI), we found an impressive number of *JBE* papers drawing upon the humanities. A search through past issues of *JBE* yielded thousands of hits on the following search terms: anthropology, architecture, arts, classics, design, drama, film, history, humanities, language, literature, and music. Yet, the volume of humanity-related papers remains a very small proportion of total *JBE* production. The humanities are an increasingly conventional teaching tool, but pure humanities-driven business ethics research remains a charming curiosity. The ten articles in this VSI are presented as compelling exemplars providing a glimpse of HBE’s potential range.

The VSI was compiled with significant assistance from University of St. Thomas Research Associate Pati Provinces. I made the final selection of articles after we went through the following process: First, we searched the *JBE* archives for 12 key words (the disciplinary areas, plus “Humanities”). We then screened for inclusion first by scanning titles and, in some cases, abstracts and full articles. With some searches, we screened all titles when it seemed appropriate and possible to do so. However, terms like “Design” and “History” yielded thousands of hits, and most such hits used those terms in ways not intended to invoke the humanities discipline. While there is inevitable and constructive overlap across sections of the journal, I deliberately excluded articles that seemed to fit more squarely into another section (e.g., an article on business ethics education using film may belong in the Teaching Business Ethics section). I looked at citation/download counts before making final selections, mindful that those are imperfect measures of impact that also tend to favor older articles. Admittedly, the final set of articles reflects my own subjective judgment, with an emphasis on fit.

Contents of the Humanities and Business Ethics Virtual Special Issue

The ten articles in this VSI draw on seven humanities disciplines: anthropology, architecture, art, classics, history, language (2 articles), and literature (3 articles). They were published between 1995 and 2016, covering much of *JBE*’s history. Their authors and subjects represent most of the globe.

To summarize these articles here might spoil them in the way that a film trailer is only a pale reflection of the artistry of the full work of art. Therefore, rather than providing the customary one-paragraph restatement of the author’s thesis that often appears in the introduction to a special issue, I will instead provide a short account of why each article was selected for the VSI.

Anthropology Sherry's (2008) "The ethnographer's apprentice: trying consumer culture from the outside in" examines how the lens of ethnography in market research, like any lens, has the potential to distort or refocus the way in which we see the world. That observation from the perspective of anthropology is an interesting critical perspective on a common business practice. Not incidentally, Sherry's essay is especially well written—and why shouldn't business scholarship aim for artful expression, like the humanities do?

Architecture Collier's (2006) "The art of moral imagination: ethics in the practice of architecture" offers architecture as a potential exemplar of morally imaginative business. Of course, students of moral imagination know that scholars of moral imagination often appeal to the humanities as a tool for cultivating the moral imagination. Collier shows how architecture is one such tool in that architects must exhibit empathy for the end user's needs and awareness of social and environmental context.

Art Dobson's (2010) "Aesthetic style as a poststructural business ethic" provides a useful primer on the history of Western aesthetics. It asserts that "the firm is a work of art"—a product of its managers' intentional shaping and branding. Equally interesting, Dobson suggests that stakeholders' impressions of the firm are shaped not only by their ethical interests but also by their disinterested, aesthetic attention.

Classics Joullie and Spillane's (2015) "Heroic Drucker" reinterprets the work and legacy of a modern hero through the lens of the classic, Homeric hero. The authors explore the hero narrative both in Drucker's work and in how that work has been received over the years by audiences.

History Bird's (2009) "Why the responsible practice of business ethics requires a due regard for history" reminds business ethics scholars that the experiments and evaluations we make have a historical context. Understanding the past can help us understand what is practical and possible to prescribe for the present and future.

Language Pan and Patel's (2016) "The influence of native versus foreign language on Chinese subjects' aggressive financial reporting judgments" empirically demonstrates that language can influence auditors' conceptions of control. In doing so, it suggests a larger, compelling case that there are no language-independent facts, even with seemingly objective accounting determinations.

Language Similarly, Lucas and Fyke's (2014) "Euphemisms and ethics: a language-centered analysis of Penn State's sexual abuse scandal" shows how, even in a single language, word choice can influence action or inaction. The article accordingly encourages careful reading, not only of formal humanities texts but also of natural language.

Literature When I encountered Feldman's (2004) "The professional conscience: A psychoanalytic study of moral

character in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*," I was struck by how much I learned about the character of Ivan Ilych that I did not know, even though I had read the story at least ten times before. I was further surprised that I was not previously aware of Feldman's paper, having published my own analysis of Ivan Ilych in *JBE* after his appeared (Michaelson 2008). That Feldman's paper had much to teach me is a testament to the fertility of Tolstoy's great novella—and of great literature in general—to teach us about ethics.

Literature Sarachek's (1995) "Images of corporate executives in recent fiction" is the oldest paper in the VSI, which is at least one reason why it is interesting. More than two decades after its publication, should we expect images of corporate executives in recent fiction to have changed? An update of Sarachek's paper, and an analysis of the evolution of these images over time, would be a worthy research project.

Literature Rhodes and Westwood's (2016) "The limits of generosity: lessons on ethics, economy, and reciprocity in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*" shows how humanities-inspired examination of our ethical tendencies can complement burgeoning scholarship on behavioral ethics inspired by the social sciences. Surely, Kafka's famous, imaginary insect is an even more compelling case study in difference than reality could produce.

The questions raised by these papers are relevant and timely, but like the humanities, they are also important and timeless. I hope these reflections will inspire you to read each paper for yourself and to imagine your own contribution to the Humanities and Business Ethics section of the *Journal of Business Ethics*. Thank you for your interest.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

Informed Consent Some of the specific individuals named or alluded to in this article are public figures, and the information about them is in the public domain. The other specific individuals named in this article are authors whose work has been published in academic venues, including the *Journal of Business Ethics*, and the information about them relates to their work in the public domain.

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