

Teaching how to think business ethics²³⁷

The primary business of business ethics is teaching business ethics to target groups who seem to need it. When it comes to most of us business ethics academics, our business is publishable business ethics research (now and then less sure for which target groups who need what). There are potential role conflicts. Teaching can take time at the expense of research, and research can take time at the expense of teaching (preparation, classroom time, supervision, grading). There are potential synergies, too. We can do or at least label our teaching «research-based», use our teaching as research dissemination, conduct research on our students. And we can publish about teaching experience or teaching advice in good enough journals which in a way upgrades teaching to research (since its publishable).

This essay is about my own way of trying to exploit such synergies and to minimize role conflict, in a book project in progress (Brinkmann 2017b), about how one can disseminate published research among students and other target groups, by popularizing it and making it understandable, but on joint

²³⁷ This text is the original English version of the introductory chapter to the present book (J. Brinkmann, *Ubehagelig Næringslivsetikk II*, Oslo, Gyldendal 2018). An earlier version of this text was presented at the EBEN Annual Conference June 2017 in Jyväskylä, for sharing ideas and inviting a dialogue about my essay collection project in progress.

terms, e.g. without making it «relevant» by making it less «critical».²³⁸ More specifically, the book drafts several approaches to business ethics teaching (and research) which can be read and taught one at a time or combined, independently or in a self-selected order. Even more specifically, this essay which has been written after the completion of the book, presents and reflects about the core ideas in each of the essays (and will in this way make it suitable, eventually, as an introductory essay to the book).

If one wants to, the book idea itself, as a collection of essays about approaches to learning how to think business ethics, can be rationalised as triangulation as the term is used in social science methodology (borrowing from trigonometry, navigation, land surveying) for getting a better understanding of a study object by looking at it from different and hence complementary angles. The rationalizing is *ex post*, where an author asks himself if there are any common threads or denominators across what to begin with were different papers, not even understanding themselves «as» approaches, that is getting «closer» to a study object for trying to see it and understand it and evaluate it better, but with an attitude of scepticism, modesty, humbleness.

In the order of the essay collection, these more or less complementary and overlapping approaches are sceptical and student-centred, focus on conflict cases and dialogue potentials, on relationships and risks, on benefits of industry and professional «level» ethics, and on theory criticism. The rest of this paper is about returning to the pieces, about reviewing the contribution or core idea of one essay at a time.

A *skeptical approach* (essay 1) claims that business ethics should promise critical *questions* rather than comfortable answers, start *criticism* with inviting self-criticism, be *inconvenient* and honest (rather than the opposite). For further elaboration of such thoughts, the introductory essay takes a self-critical look

238 Such a formulation raises a question of one's understanding of the purpose of business ethics in the first place. For me, business ethics is essentially about criticism and self-criticism, of business and business schools. The long-term objective of such a project is not really controversial (e.g. being as critical as constructive), but perhaps its point of departure – with inconvenient, simple and radical, often system-critical questions, *or* rather with convenient promises of looking responsible and of win-win outcomes.

at ambiguities and potential blind spots in the self-conception of business ethics and of CSR. A first suggestion is to pay relatively more attention to morality (at the expense of ethics) and to moral conflict (at the expense of ethical consensus). In a second step, inconvenient (as the attribute of business ethics) is tentatively translated and explained – as non-profitable, annoying, ambiguous, and sceptical.²³⁹

A *student-centered approach* (essays 2 and 3). Business ethics is not about itself, but about triggering constructive self-criticism on its target groups' terms, that is in practice mostly full-time or part-time business students, preparing for business practitioner roles or facing practitioner roles already. Business students (of these different kinds) enter and attend business school programs with individual values and attitudes and moralities in their luggage. «Student-centred» means that business ethics teaching needs to refer wisely and critically to such individual and group-level conditions as its raw material. With or without reference to classical «know thyself» ideals, it is a good idea to invite business students to critical self-investigation and self-criticism, asking themselves questions such as: Who am I, what am I a product of, what are my visions and ambitions for my life in general and my work life career in particular, what are my priorities, not least and eventually: what would be ethics teaching «on my own terms»?

Business practitioners, in part-time student roles or e.g. as seminar or dialogue participants, can relate such an invitation to self-reflection to their own practical work-life experience, with its typical conflicts and synergies between one's own attitudes and values and expected expectations as part of one's professional roles. Many full-time business students, especially young undergraduates, have only very limited if any work-life experience. For this reason, a reference to their experience as consumer participants in our economic system makes sense as an alternative when trying to meet these target groups «where they are». An essay which invites to self-critical reflection about one's consumer ethics is written with such a consideration in mind.

²³⁹ Instead of ambiguous one could have used dialectical. And sceptical is inspired primarily by the not really well-known German philosopher Weischedel who likes to use *Fraglichkeit*, questionability, as first and simple catchword for his skepticism.

The essay's four subtopics are: disputable consumer behaviour (consumers as potentially bad guys), responsible consumer behaviour (consumers as potentially good guys), consumer behaviour in a shared responsibility perspective, and finally consumer behaviour in a decision-making and life-style perspective.

A *conflict approach* (essay 4) assumes more or less explicitly that business ethics is most relevant as moral conflict management. Accordingly, conflict cases and case-oriented formats are a more or less dominating ingredient in business ethics teaching and learning. One departs from more or less complex narratives, where an individual or collective decision-maker is expected to handle a dilemma (or temptation, or power abuse) situation, and to justify a choice, in line with ethical quality criteria (as opposed to moral neutralization). As elsewhere in introductory texts, a few example conflict cases are presented first, together with examples of «checklists». Then, some useful distinctions and questions from social science conflict research are offered, for enriching case analysis as (moral) conflict analysis, such as: Are there any primary types of conflict in general and moral conflict in particular?²⁴⁰ What are the typical differences between non-moral and moral conflicts? Is it fruitful to use an ideal-typical distinction of moral conflicts, between dilemmas, temptations and power-abuse situations? Are there any inspiring rules of thumb for how to handle moral conflict in organizations? What are the risks and opportunities of casuistry as «classical» case-analysis?

A *dialogue approach* (essay 5). Business ethics teaching stresses (or should stress) learning how to think and investigate philosophically. Rather than overloading students with too much generic information about more or less classical moral philosophy names and approaches, one should use a Socratic dialogue design. In this essay, Socratic dialogue refers to a specific small group conversation process design suggested by the German philosophers Leonard Nelson and Gustav Heckmann (inspired by Plato's classical dialogues with

²⁴⁰ Cf the headlines in the essay: understanding conflicts as units vs conflict as a variable, conflicts within and between individuals and groups, conflict attitudes, behaviours, contents, conflict of interest vs conflict of values, conflict management styles (reward, persuade, coerce), types of conflict outcomes and management.

Socrates as the ever-questioning main person, or communication «mid-wife»). Also, the business ethics community with its discourse ethics and stakeholder-dialogue tradition should consider and try out this design for how to walk the talk, offering the dialogue participants a learning by doing experience of what an ideal moral conversation could look like, not least for transcending moral muteness (cf Fred Bird's work). A third type of argument in favor of this approach is its complementary fit with a conflict approach (see essay 4) – as a productive way of addressing and handling conflict cases, where the conflict parties involved take a joint responsibility for producing a good enough consensus.

A *relationship (or sociological) approach* (essay 6) emphasises that business and business ethics are not about individuals only, but also (or even rather) about interpersonal, social, societal relationships, asking typically how one could create or further an organization and industry climate where members dare to voice moral concerns, or how competitors could share responsibility for the ethical climate in their own market and environment. Beyond presenting a few definitions of sociology or reviewing (the few) published business ethics articles with a promise of some sociology in their title, one can investigate basic sociological concepts and assess their use value for business ethics teaching and research, or hope for sociological imagination as an extension of moral imagination, or market sociological thinking by its habit of postponed judgment. The main contributions of this essay consist in presenting business ethical case examples in a sociological deviance, role, and power perspective respectively, a sociologically enlightened checklist for case analysis, and not least a systematic comparison of moral sociology with moral philosophy and moral psychology.

A *risk (and risk management) approach* (essay 7). Rather than blaming and shaming business ethical sinners «ex post» as the media like to do it, business ethics should focus on responsibility «ex ante» for *future* events and situations, before it's too late, or in other words, focus on responsibility for risks. Risk and responsibility are treated as highly interdependent – risk-taking triggers responsibility issues, taking responsibility risks being asked critical questions. The essay elaborates why these two perspectives should be combined, and

how, both conceptually, when it comes to procedures and checklists, using five «illustrations» (referring to two case stories, to leadership, to the COSO-checklist, and not least to insurance as a construction of risk and responsibility sharing). In some concluding remarks next steps are drafted: empirical and practical ones, and not least arguments for a positioning of risk perspectives within our field.

A meso-level (or industry and professional ethics) approach (essay 8). There is a risk that business ethics and CSR become too general, deal with everything and nothing. For this reason, one should narrow business ethics to industry ethics and to professional ethics for business specialties, rather analyze critically and constructively specific markets for goods, services, labour, and identifiable professions as institutions, with regard to their specific ethical challenges. Not least, industry and professional organizations are potential allies when it comes to ethics work and ethical climate work (such organizations are after all expected to further their members' common interest, sufficient professional and ethical competency, quality assurance, and education). Departing from examples such as the arms industry, funeral service industry, as well as advertising, PR and real estate agency as business professions and brief conceptual clarifications, a main focus of the essay is on how one can study the moral climates of industries and professions, empirically.

A theory criticism approach (essay 9). Dedicated courses in business ethics as parts of business administration curricula have become more and more common, mainly for fulfilling accreditation requirements. The ideal, however, is to integrate business ethics as self-critical reflection of business school core subjects from within, such as accounting and auditing, marketing, management, or strategy. The assumption is that without such integration one can't obtain a critical consciousness and understanding of these subjects' practice and not least their theoretical premises for such practice. Or in still other words, it is not the ethics professors, but the marketing, strategy and accounting professors who teach business ethics, on the connotation level so to speak. With such thoughts in mind, the essay presents my own experience with ethics guest-lecturing as an ingredient of introductory courses in strategy and marketing respectively.