Aristotelian Foundations of Business Ethics: The Possibility of Moral Judgment in Organizations

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Abstract: Ethics, decision-making, and moral judgment are interwoven issues of paramount importance in both philosophy and management. Understanding ethics in business has been conceptualized many different ways throughout history depending on the standpoint. The roots of business ethics extend to the roots of business itself when commercial transactions and the exchange of goods/materials (trade) started. Identical to various views on the nature of business ethics, several different strands are found concerning the historical foundation of business ethics. Although this concept had not been described as business ethics prior to the 1970s, justifying business practices has been an important endeavor since much earlier. This paper aims to survey the Aristotelian foundations of business ethics and because one important strand in the history of business ethics claims that moral beliefs play a vital role in managerial decisions and eventually business practices, I will try to question the possibility of moral judgment in organizations.

Keywords: Aristotle, Philosophy, Business ethics, Moral judgment, Decision-making

Aristotelian Foundations of Business Ethics

Although the philosophical approach to business ethics was initially questioned and obviously not welcome by those in business for several reasons, studies on business ethics in the last two decades have been very well established in many different academic disciplines, including philosophy (De George, 2005). One can trace the concept of business ethics and virtues related to business back to the early years of Western philosophy. "What actions are universally morally good?", "Is there a best way of life for human beings?", and "When it comes to moral decisions, what is good and bad?" are among the major philosophical dilemmas. Today, philosophers tend to divide ethical theories into three distinct categories: meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied

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ethics. Meta-ethics explores the status, foundations, and scope of moral values and properties. In other words, meta-ethics explores the concept of morality itself. Investigating moral standards, the possibility of universal moral standards, the possibility of moral facts, and moral justification of human behaviors are among the questions that fall under the scope of meta-ethics. It also explores how and why we behave in a certain way. On the other hand, normative ethics and applied ethics mainly focus on what is moral. Normative ethics seeks to find moral standards on what is good or right. Applied ethics focuses on specific issues such as animal rights, biomedical issues, issues about sexuality, and the environment. As for business ethics, today it is considered one of the main disciplines of applied ethics. Discussions on the role and responsibilities of corporations have always been a central topic in applied ethics.

Among these ethical theories, normative ethics plays a relatively more crucial role in managers' moral judgments. Because the majority of discussions on business ethics focus on moral problems in business activities and what morally conscientious managers morally ought or ought not to do to fix these moral problems (Klein, 1985). When business ethics is seen from the morality standpoint, modern studies on business ethics must be noted as having their roots in the ancient philosophical thinking. The main reason for the existence of such roots is that ancient people needed moral standards to maintain order in their daily lives and in the governance of their city-state – *polis* – (Lewis, 2009). Traces of the concept of business ethics can be found in Aristotle's moral philosophy. According to Solomon (1992), Aristotle was best known for his emphasis on cultivating virtues. Aristotle's moral philosophy can be coupled with business ethics as he wrote much about the ethics of exchange. That is why Aristotle could be argued as the earliest known business ethicist. Aristotle distinguishes between *oecinomicus* and *chrematisike*. While the former refers to household trading, the latter refers to trade for profit in a broader sense. Although Aristotle approved of *oecinomicus* as a function of a complex society, he claimed *chrematisike* to lack morality and virtues. According to Aristotle *chrematisike* is a selfish practice and those who perform it are parasites on society (Solomon, 1992). About these two concepts, Aristotle said,

> But, as we said, there are two kinds of wealth acquisition. One has to do with commerce, the other with household management. The latter is necessary and commendable, but the kind that has to do with exchange is justly disparaged, since it is not natural but is from one another. (Politics, 1258a, 1258b)

However, important to note is that, for Aristotle, what lacks morality is not the trade for profit but doing it without having any virtues. Thus, profit people make can be seen to not constitute a problem for Aristotle – lack of virtues does.

In his famous work *Given Time*, Derrida (1991) wrote about Aristotle's distinction between *oecinomicus* and *chrematisike*:

> *For Aristotle, it is a matter of an ideal and desirable limit, a limit between the limit and the unlimited, between the true and finite good (the economic) and the illusory and indefinite good (the chrematistic).*

In *Nicomachean Ethics* (1096a), Aristotle said:

> *The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else.*

For Collins (1987), Aristotle supports establishing businesses in order to fulfill individuals' needs and provide stability to society. However, for Aristotle, business goals must be consistent with that of the Polis and its citizens. In other words, the function of business is the attainment of the good life for all society. Furthermore, Aristotle saw private property as an essential: "...part of the household, the science of property acquisition is also a part of household management - for we can neither live nor live well without the necessities" (Politics, 1253b). Thus, Dierksmeier and Pirson (2009) claimed that Aristotle possesses a rather positive view on commerce and the social relations it engenders because he views trade as a relationship where at least potentially both partners find respective benefit. In the process of regulating such relationships between partners, especially in business and trade settings, making ethical decisions is a crucial issue that deserves careful consideration. According to Aristotle and virtue ethicists like him, the best decisions are made by a person of good character who knows the apparent facts of the case and can frame the situation appropriately (Hartman, 2008). Aristotle stressed the priority of exercising moral virtues and of habitually acting in ways that fulfill the highest human potentialities. Thus, people are called to show moral virtues such as courage, self-restraint, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, sociability, justice, prudence, and wisdom in their business and trade activities (Bragues, 2006). Based on what has already been said about Aristotelian views on business and trade, both can be noted as being closely linked with ethics and morality. Before looking into the possibility of moral judgment in managerial decisions, the major moral philosophies closely related to decision-making must be reviewed.

Contemporary Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics has a solid position as a major normative theory within the area of contemporary ethics. As discussed above, the dominant mode of virtue ethics historically continues to be Aristotelian. In other words, the vast majority of virtue

ethicists feel indebted to Aristotle in some way. However, such a perspective is far from being sufficient for a theory to be considered a version of virtue ethics. On the other hand, most – though not all – forms of virtue ethics have an Aristotelian flavor. G. E. M. Anscombe, Peter Geach, Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, and John McDowell are among the leading names of contemporary virtue ethicists who also relate to the Aristotelian tradition. Among these philosopher, Anscombe, Geach, and MacIntyre also have strong Thomistic commitments. The Thomistic tradition is crucial because it has played and still plays an integral role in carrying the torch for virtue ethics (Stohr, 2006). MacIntyre in particular needs to be addressed as virtue-based theories have gained traction again in philosophy over the last few decades. The philosophical resurgence of studies on virtue is generally attributed to MacIntyre's (1981) book, *After Virtue*, which articulates the history and foundations of virtue ethics (Bright et al., 2014). MacIntyre wrote about the nature and origin of virtues and their importance for living a good life. He worked to develop a moral philosophy based on the Aristotelian tradition. His famous work, *After Virtue*, is a modern reference to Aristotelian tradition because it considers the problems of modern moral philosophy from the Aristotelian moral application instead of considering these problems from the modern liberal point of view. He grounds his ethics in human practices and locates virtues within a conception of human flourishing. MacIntyre also calls for human activity to be ordered within a dialectical quest for the good. McIntyre could be argued to possess a conservative stance; he argues that moral inquiry, as a primary human activity, must take place within tradition (Carden, 2006). For MacIntyre, ethics is not just choosing what to do as individuals but also, and more importantly, discovering who we are in relation to others, our membership in organizations, communities, and societies. Ethics can only serve as a guide on how to behave in particular, localized contexts (Crane et al., 2008). Such a perspective reflects the main idea of contemporary virtue ethics as contemporary virtue ethics is a reaction to the pre-dominance of Kantian, utilitarian, and meta-ethical theories that concern either giving ethical directives to specific moral problems or defining the meaning of the predicate *good* (McBeath & Webb, 2002). Most contemporary virtue ethicists do not propose foundational lists of virtues as Aristotle did but are more inclined to see virtues as expressions of particular cultures, traditions, and narratives. Perhaps the most important development in contemporary virtue ethics could be considered its shift from a normative theory –a theory for determining right and wrong actions– to a theory of applied ethics or how one should live and act in response to specific situations (Duffy, 2017). By switching the focus from a normative theory to a theory of ap-

plied ethics, contemporary virtue ethics has had a major impact on moral theory while also creating a stimulating impact on the social sciences. In return, organizational scholars and business ethicists have imported much from contemporary virtue ethics and its cooperation with other relevant fields such as psychology.

Triad of Moral Theories

Ethical theory's only recently being linked to management is important to note. One possible reason for making this connection late is that authors on management had believed the field of business ethics struggled because both empirical and non-empirical studies lacked theoretical grounds. However, philosophy provides well-developed ethical theories that can be applied to business ethics. Management authors had been unable to widely use these theories as their understanding of the philosophical theories and relevance to management research was less likely to be good (Fritzsche & Becker, 1984). Among the ethical theories given above, normative ethics is especially crucial for this study as it deals with the moral standards on what is good or right. Cavanagh et al. (1981) suggested the field of normative ethics to rest upon three types of moral theories: Utilitarian theories, theories on rights, and theories on justice. Utilitarian theories, formulated in the 18th century, evaluate behaviors according to their social consequences. Mainly formulated by Hobbes, Locke, and Kant in the 17th century, theories on rights focus on individuals' entitlements. Finally, formulated first by Aristotle and Plato in the fifth century B.C., theories on justice emphasize the distributional effects of actions or policies.

An individual who acts in accordance with the principles of utilitarian theory makes decisions solely based on their consequences by choosing the path that provides the greatest good. According to the utilitarian tradition, social welfare is the most important criterion for morality. In other words, utilitarianism encourages moral agents to promote overall social welfare by engaging in acts that result in the greatest total beneficial consequences for society (Jones et al., 2007). Utilitarianism has two forms: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. While act utilitarianism refers to examining each act and deciding if it would maximize the good to the greatest number of people, rule utilitarianism refers to following a set of rules to act in a particular way (Rallpalli et al., 1998). Act utilitarianism is a consequentialist view and thus holds actions to be right or wrong based on whether their actual consequences are good or bad. Frey (2013) claimed act utilitarianism to be a welfarist view as rightness is a function of goodness and goodness refers to human

welfare. This view being impersonal and aggregative is important to mention. In other words, rightness is determined impersonally by considering increases in the welfare of those affected by the acts. Similarly, according to the views of rule utilitarianism, the greatest good is sought to be achieved for the greatest number of people. However, different than act utilitarianism, the expected result of achieving the greatest good for the greatest number of people is reached by conforming to a set of general rules (Zhu et al., 2004). Thus, according to rule utilitarianism, one act is right or wrong based on whether it conforms to a set of generally accepted rules.

The theory of rights provides a guide for ensuring that individuals' rights are respected. Moral rights refer to the natural freedoms that all members of a society possess. According to the moral rights approach, all humans are found to possess both positive and negative rights just because they are human. Such rights can be natural or conventional. While natural rights refer to moral rights, conventional rights refer to human-made rights. Conventional rights reflect the culture and values of a society. Life and safety, liberty, happiness, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and personal privacy are among the many aspects of a rights-based ethical system. Such exemplified rights cannot be sacrificed for the good of any organization.

Finally, the theory of justice, mainly developed by Rawls (2009) based on ideas from Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and Rousseau, emphasizes that decisions must rest upon equity, fairness, and impartiality. According to the theory of justice, individuals should receive differential treatment only when such treatment serves the goals of the organization (Premeaux & Mondy, 1993). Within the organizational context, if an organization's resources are distributed based on personal biases, then the practice of resource distribution cannot be said to be fair or just. Such a practice heavily damages employees' perceptions of organizational justice and indicates the existence of mismanagement.

Each of these theories has its own strengths and weaknesses. However, the most important point when considering these theories is that each one excludes the other two. This could be the main reason why none of these theories have been universally accepted by philosophers and researchers. In addition, because individual moral judgments change and sometimes conflict, no single theory can exist that best fits all moral judgments.

Taxonomy of Personal Moral Philosophies

Reviewing personal moral philosophies is also important as moral judgments are made by individual moral agents. I believe that a careful attempt to review personal moral philosophies will shed light on the possibility of morality in managerial decisions. According to Forsyth (1992), four major personal moral philosophies exist (see Table 1): situationism (relativistic and idealistic), subjectivism (relativistic but not idealistic), absolutism (not relativistic but idealistic), and exceptionism (neither relativistic nor idealistic).

Table 1.

Taxonomy of Personal Moral Philosophies (Forsyth, 1992)

Ideology	Dimensions	Approach to Moral Judgment
Situationists	High relativism High idealism	Reject moral rules; ask if the action yielded the best possible outcome in the given situation.
Subjectivists	High relativism Low- relativism	Reject moral rules; base moral judgments on personal feelings about the action and setting
Absolutists	Low relativism High idealism	Feel actions are moral provided they yield positive consequences through conformity to moral rules.
Exceptionists	Low relativism Low idealism	Feel conformity to moral rules is desirable, but exceptions to these rules are often permissible

According to *situationism,* variables in the conditions surrounding a moral agent have more impact on determining how an individual behaves than personality characteristics. Forsyth and Pope (1984) claimed that situationists are idealistic because they think people should try and achieve the best possible consequences. However, situationists are also relativists because they believe no universal moral rules exist that can be applied across various situations. For Upton (2009), situationism is the empirical thesis that behavioral variance in moral agents is a function of the situation a person inhabits or takes to inhabiting rather than character traits. Famous situationist experiments are found in the literature that are initially both morally and motivationally harmless yet produce morally inappropriate and dubious behaviors from the subjects. One of these few experiments clearly shows that people can engage in acts and make decisions that do not originally fit

within their character traits. The prison experiment by Philip Zimbardo focuses on harmful behavior. In 1971, psychologist Zimbardo and his colleagues created an experiment to see what happens when people become prisoners and prison guards. Also known as the Stanford Prison Experiment, Zimbardo and his colleagues wanted to investigate the effects of situational variables on human behavior. They set up a simulated prison environment in which subjects (prisoners and guards) react to each other. They selected 24 psychologically and physically healthy undergraduate students for the experiment from among 70 volunteers having no criminal record, psychological problems, or other medical issues. The experiment was initially planned to last two weeks; 24 subjects were divided randomly into two groups: prisoners and guards. Prisoners stayed in the prison 24-hours a day during the experiment. Guards were assigned to work in teams of three for eight-hour shifts. Guards were allowed to return home after their shift ended. The researchers used hidden cameras and microphones to observe subjects' behaviors. Although planned to last two weeks, the experiment was ended after six days because of the events that had occurred between prisoners and guards. While the prisoners started showing signs of massive stress and anxiety, the guards started to behave very abusively. Interactions between prisoners and guards were hostile and, in some cases, even degrading. In a power struggle between the prisoners and guards, the guards responded by using a fire extinguisher against the prisoners and stripping them naked. As a result of such cruel and aggressive interactions, several prisoners exhibited anxiety attacks and crying bouts. These reasons are why the experiment was stopped after six days instead of two weeks. Consequently, the subjects playing the guards had shown no psychological problems such as psychopathy before the experiment but had engaged in brutal, cruel, and aggressive behaviors toward the prisoners. From the situationism standpoint, the behaviors of the guards can be claimed to have been determined based on the nature of the situation they inhabited.

Subjectivists, identical to situationists, are skeptical about moral principles. However, subjectivists are much less idealistic than situationists because they believe avoiding negative behaviors to be impossible in many cases. This ideology is called subjectivism because subjectivists describe their moral decisions as subjective and personal judgments. They feel that no universal moral values or objective information exists that could be a basis for their judgments and decisions. In other words, morality according to subjectivists is an individual matter (Forsyth & Pope, 1984). Thus, subjectivism as a philosophical theory claims all value to be subjectively derived and grounded; objective value is cognitively meaningless. According to subjectivist ideology, the contents of the human mind and individual decision-ma-

king are not determined solely by external events (McDonald, 1984; Metcalfe & Ramlogan, 2005).

Absolutism is also an idealistic ideology. Absolutists also approve acts that yield many positive results and few negative results. However, their approach to moral principles is different from that of situationists because they feel the actions of moral agents must be consistent with absolute moral principles (Forsyth & Pope, 1984). In other words, absolutists believe universal moral principles exist that should be included in any ethical system. Absolutism is very similar to the system of ethics known as deontology. Deontologists embrace an ethical position that focuses on moral principles rather than the consequences or motives of an action. An act is considered right as long as it conforms to moral principles. Deontology is primarily associated with Immanuel Kant, who claimed human rationality to be the foundation of ethics. Kant's formulation of categorical imperative[1] is closely linked with absolutism. Kant's formulation of "Act according to a maxim[2] that you can will to be a universal law" is very consistent with the ideology of absolutism.

Finally, *exceptionists* tolerate exceptions to moral principles. Both non-relativistic and pragmatic, exceptionists feel that if a possibility exists to achieve negative results, breaking moral principles is acceptable for avoiding negative consequences. For instance, exceptionists generally believe that deception is not right. However, they can break this moral norm if deception appears unavoidable (Forsyth & Pope, 1984). An exceptionist feels a moral agent must comply with universal moral principles unless a given situation presents a compelling reason not to or forces one to balance two conflicting universal moral principles (Deering, 2006). For instance, although an exceptionist knows lying to be a morally wrong action, lying may be chosen in order to save others' lives because saving lives is considered a more important moral maxim than not telling lies.

The differences among these personal moral philosophies can be better understood when applied to business settings. For example, consider a manager and team who are preparing to launch a new product. As part of the pre-launch final testing, they found a very small sample size to be flawed with a potential to be dangerous for customers. Launching the new product or holding off the launch would be a tough decision as the decision could be viewed differently from the standpoints of

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1   An absolute, unconditional duty/command to act in a certain way regardless of the action's possible consequences.

2   A general rule with which the moral agent intends to act.

different personal moral philosophies. For instance, a situationist would be concerned with the consequences for the company and for the customers. If both parties are considered to benefit from the product in a broader sense, the situationist would most likely ignore flaws in the small sample size and launch the product. A subjectivist would most likely focus on the overall gain for the company and not even consider the ethical dilemmas involved in the case. An absolutist will most likely reject the launch of the new product because of the flaws. However, even an absolutist may accept the launch of a program if convinced that the flaws are very minimal and the launch of the new product will result in great financial gains for the organization. Finally, an exceptionist, although feeling the new product should not be flawed at all, would tend to ignore minimal flaws. Thus, the exceptionist may justify an exception by showing interest in the larger gains for the organization.

Many other ethical dilemmas are found that managers encounter in organizations. Managers make decisions mostly based on their ethical position and personal moral philosophy. However, assuming that managers tend to make decisions that result in the highest possible return for the organization would not be wrong, even if they have to temporarily abandon their individual moral values and principles.

Models of Management Morality

Morality refers to the values that society subscribes to and fosters. These values can have cultural, educational, personal, and religious sources (Hecter et al., 1993). Based on these values, morality is about knowing what is right and what is wrong. Parallel to the general definition of morality, management morality is management actions that do the right thing without being a function of personal profits or values. In other words, management morality shows management's high moral maturity, and this moral maturity is the foundation for managers' behaviors and attitudes toward ethical issues. The development of moral knowledge and maturity is an indication of ethical decision-making (Putri & Irwandi, 2017; Bernardi, 1994; Goolsby & Hunt, 1992).

Carroll (2000) suggested one model of management morality that consists of three sub-models: Immoral management, moral management, and amoral management. Such a classification of management morality helps one better understand and assess the ethical behaviors and motivations of an organization's members, including managers and other employees with no managerial responsibilities. Although moral and immoral management models are easier to define, amoral management is relatively harder to define as the behaviors and motivations under this model do not fit under the category of immoral management.

Immoral management is defined as a position not only deprived of ethical and moral principles or precepts but also implies an active opposition to what is ethical. The decisions and actions by immoral management do not conform to ethical or moral principles. Such a model holds the view that management's motives are selfish and only care for self- or the organizational gains (Coldwell et al., 2007). Immoral management is directly linked to selfish motives and exploitation for personal or organizational gain (Trevino et al., 2003). Moral management refers to adhering to ethical principles and precepts when making managerial decisions. The consequences of actions and gaining maximum benefits for the organization and management are also crucial in moral management. However, such results are obtained within the boundaries of sound ethical principles. Sikula and Costa (1994) defined moral management as a state of ethical and moral excellence and the practice and implementation of the principle of moral maximization. Lastly, amoral management is comprised of two distinct types: intentional amoral management and unintentional amoral management. Intentional amoral management refers to deliberately ignoring ethical principles when making managerial decisions. The main reason for this ignorance is that (intentionally) amoral managers separate the business world from the moral world; they believe that moral issues have no relevance to the organization or the business world in general. Unintentionally amoral management refers to cases where management casually or carelessly overlooks ethical and moral issues entirely (Carrol, 1987). The existence of a very fine line is important to note between immoral and amoral management. The main difference between the two is that amoral managers are indifferent to ethical and moral principles whereas immoral managers possess an active opposition toward ethical and moral principles.

Possibility of Ethical Management and Moral Judgment

The possibility of ethical management and moral judgment in managerial decisions has been a serious question in the business-ethics literature. As mentioned before, ethical management can be defined as managers within the organization employing ethical and moral principles in their conduct. The most common challenge to ethical management is the complete denial of the possibility for ethics and morality. However, this is not the main concern for defenders of managerial ethics. Ethicists have been so preoccupied with responding to general objections to ethics that they have neglected the specific objections to ethics in an organizational setting. They have not sufficiently considered that even if morality were to be generally ac-

cepted, the possibility for this to occur within organizations has remained a doubtful issue (Thompson, 1985). As discussed earlier, several conflicting theories exist on morality and personal moral philosophies. An individual being able to find oneself closer to more than one approach depending on the situation inhabited is also important to note. Parallel with discussions on the contingency approach, I cannot claim that a perfect consensus could be reached regarding which moral philosophy or theory best fits in organizational settings. However, although reaching common ground is not always possible, being knowledgeable about the moral theories and philosophies will most likely enable managers to develop a better understanding of ethical dilemmas and help them achieve greater progress in dealing with ethical problems. However, when coming to practicing what one preaches, a different and less objective picture is generally encountered. Increasing competition, shrinking markets, scarcer resources, economic paradigm shifts, and balancing stakeholders' expectations are among the many factors that force managers to make decisions in which the primary concern is the organization's survival and well-being rather than ethical and moral principles.

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