

## Introduction

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Business ethics is a work in progress. It preceded the industrial revolution as a set of values honored by organized crafts, but became a subject in its own right only after industrialization in the nineteenth century irremediably shifted the basis of wealth distribution from political to economic control. Struggles for workers' rights came front and center in the twentieth century, as alternative economic systems arose out of and institutionalized extreme ideological differences. These polarized disputes have now given way to intra-capitalist concerns about maximizing productivity and profit under a variety of circumstances, including in particular the stage of development of the broader economy in which a business is operating. In this context, business ethics is in danger of being reduced to a discourse about how best to fine-tune the assumed virtues of the capitalist system wherever it has taken hold. To the extent that this is the case, our learned memos will never appear on the agendas of corporate boards altogether preoccupied with other matters. One fall-back position is, of course, the business school, where future and even present executives come for knowledge upgrades which may include familiarization with the latest norms of good behavior in business settings. Because of its limited autonomy, however, the educational process needs to be supplemented with sanctions imposed not just by the market but, to the extent feasible, by appropriate laws and law enforcement. Such are the messages one finds, with varying degrees of emphasis, in the articles on offer in this special issue on work. All seven focus on business-related responsibilities in view of the rights of workers, of shareholders, and/or of society at large.

The first three articles are empirical studies by

psychologists who want to help management better understand and address worker dissatisfaction. They differ in that the first two drew samples from B-school students, the third on-site. They also differ in that these samples are in three different parts of the world: the Chicago area (Kickul), Singapore (Koh and Boo), and Israel (Vardi). Their methodologies, though not identical, are generally familiar to readers of this journal; and some of their conclusions are perhaps distinguishable only to specialists. But whether appealing, respectively, to a psychological contract, to organizational justice theory, or to ethical climate theory, they do have one important message in common. Each finds that *line workers* tend to perform better in an ethics-attentive environment and that maintaining this is a managerial responsibility.

The next two articles are by accountants, one in the U.S., the other in the U.K. Their topics, at first glance, may seem far apart. Together, though, they raise important questions about the responsibilities of *consultants* whose independence from the business by whom they are paid is imperfect at best. Nichols's and Subramanian's up-front concern is to show that arguments in favor of limiting executive compensation "lack a definitive basis." This they do with clarity and panache. Some, though, will find their approach too indifferent to the "back-scratching" inherent in remuneration decisions arrived at by CEO-appointed boards. For, they only point to but do not examine the ethical responsibilities of directors. Citron and Taffler move in the opposite direction as they urge auditors to act responsibly by calling attention to a firm's financial weaknesses under certain conditions. At issue is whether by including a U.K.-mandated "going-



concern qualification" where appropriate an auditor in effect utters a self-fulfilling prophecy. The evidence being to the contrary, they argue, the excuse is lame.

The last two articles address certain *workers' rights* and assess to what extent these can be protected by means of legal constraints. Murry et al., noting how genetic screening risks violating workers' privacy rights, see the failure of U.S. legislation to clearly regulate this practice as an impelling reason to treat this as a "human resource issue" calling for "preventive ethics" in the workplace. Sanyal, finally, welcomes the

inclusion of "social clause" labor standards in transnational trade agreements; but, enforcement being unreliable in the face of opposition from both firms and host governments, he urges companies to adopt standards unilaterally and commends those that have done so.

My thanks, finally, to all the reviewers who gave of their time and talent to help make these articles better than they already were.

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Section Editor: Work