



Levinas, Weber, and a Hybrid Framework for Business Ethics

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Abstract

In this paper we present a theoretical hybrid framework for ethical decision making, drawing upon Emmanuel Levinas' view on ethics as “first philosophy”, as an inherent infinite responsibility for the other. The pivotal concept in this framework is an appeal to a heightened sense of personal responsibility of the moral actor to provide the ethical context within which conventional approaches to applied business ethics could be engaged. Max Weber's method of reconciling absolutism and relativism in ethical decision making is adopted to provide the synergy between personal responsibility and contextual realities, forging a coherent framework. The paper concludes by discussing ways that business could make way for the flourishing of ethics of responsibility in individuals.

Keywords Applied ethics · Business ethics · Responsibility · Emmanuel Levinas · Max Weber

Introduction

The recurrent and interminable ethical problems and failings in business is a testimony to the failure of business ethics project. (Bevan and Corvellec 2005, p.3, Brenkert 2010, p.703, Boda and Zsolnai 2016, p.93) Not only this failure highlights the “gap between theory and practice” (Beauchamp 2005, p.2) but has also led many to regard business ethics as mere window dressing by business (Jones et al. 2005, p.1), and not serving the purpose it is intended for. Business ethics has become an industry (Hyatt 2005) where ethics at the hands of business serves “to contain and deflect criticism from the institutions of capitalism, enabling business to bluff ethical, to present a caring front while carrying on exploitative and unethical practices as usual behind its back.” (Wray-Bliss 2011, p.34).

Whilst research in the field of business ethics is continually in search of better ethical models and principles, as well as more refined ways of applying such theories in business practice, the failure to derive ethical truths through application of rules and models, and the

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increasing realisation that “in the real world, judgement and discrimination are required to discern what should be done [as] principles themselves cannot do the work” (Kieran 1995, p.186) has raised “scepticism that philosophical theories even have practical implications or applications” (Beauchamp 2005, p.14) and has led scholars to call for a more fundamental re-examination of the field.¹ (Jones et al. 2005, p.3, Freeman 2011, p.xiii, Collste 2007, p.63, Cortez 2015, p.98) Business ethics as a discipline, warn Boda and Zsolnai (2016, p.102), is at risk of disappearing if it does not “go beyond the conventional reach of BE [Business Ethics]” and contribute to the “transformation of business”.

Such calls get added weight if we accept Vogel (1991, p.118)’s assertion that since business ethics has been trying to address the same problems over and over again, these problems must be “rooted in the nature of a market economy, if not in human nature itself”, and if indeed “[m]orality in business is no different from morality in any other sphere of life” (DeGeorge 2006, p.385), then it is the human nature rather than the nature of a market economy that we should turn to for possible answers.

In this paper, we heed the call of Wicks and Edward Freeman (1998, p.123) that organisational studies need to be reshaped in a fundamental way in order “to provide room for ethics”, by turning to Levinas and Weber, in an attempt to develop a new theoretical model for business ethics. Levinas called for a “Copernican revolution” in ethics (Levinas 1987, p.138) as he saw the application of theories and principles to human relationships as antithesis to ethics itself, a dehumanisation act. He demanded a reconceptualisation of the very notion of ethics in such a fundamental way that applied ethics as a field of practice would become meaningless. Through his work, we seek to invert the common sense understanding of business ethics as an applied and foundational discipline. Instead of seeing ethics as occurring within business, it is business that occurs within an ethics of relating. The same point can be made about managerial ethics: management is not first a science of a social science but an ethical practice as it involves a relationship between the parties (between the Same and Other in Levinasian terms), such that the Other is irreducible to the Same. In a sense through Levinas, we attempt to contribute towards a transformation of business through complementing the call for “imagining a good community within which business plays its role”² (Brenkert 2010, p.706) by bringing business within the fold of ethics of responsibility. If the higher purpose of business and economic activity is indeed human well-being and prosperity, “social cohesion [and creation of] ‘public goods’” (Enderle 2018, p.619), then there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution and utilisation of wealth. This moral dimension needs to be cultivated and given priority.³

¹ R. Edward Freeman writes: “*For too long, business ethics has been the captive of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Ethical theory to most business ethicists means the traditional trifecta of consequentialism (usually utilitarianism), deontology (usually Kant), and virtue ethics (usually Aristotle). While this has been quite useful in the academic beginnings of the field, it is high time that we begin to connect these now traditional texts and arguments in business ethics with other traditions in the humanities.*” (Freeman 2011, p.xiii)

Jones, ten Bos, and Parker write: “*Despite the fact that ethics has been hotly debated in philosophy throughout the twentieth century and has been one of the major sources of philosophical reflection up to the close of the millennium, the discipline of business ethics has insulated itself from these developments, either ignoring them altogether or misrepresenting them so that it looks as if twentieth century philosophy has nothing interesting to say about ethics.*” (Jones et al. 2005, p.3)

² Brenkert (2010, p.703) writes: “a major challenge current business ethics faces is the lack of an account of business organizations as they develop and change ... within social and political conditions”.

³ Since “business is not merely material and worldly; it is also spiritual and other-worldly ... [it] can and must take a stand for making human lives.... The needful trick is to put the first value [worldly value] in the context of the second [other-worldly value].” (Sandelands 2009, pp.95–96)

The hybrid framework we are developing here is a two-tier system, comprising Levinasian ethics of responsibility as the base, and conventional applied business ethics as the second tier. Weber's ethical philosophy is engaged and employed to argue that ethical decisions made through the application of any chosen normative theory in the field of business ethics need to be anchored in the moral agent's heightened sense of inherent and infinite responsibility for the others.

We will argue that whilst conventional business ethics has its use, without the fundamental ethics of responsibility, without fully situating business within social relationships, without taking "business ethics as practice" (Clegg et al. 2007), organisations should brace themselves for more of the same ethical failings.

We begin by a brief review of the field of business ethics as an instance of applied ethics. We will then examine the Levinasian perspective on ethics, understood as first philosophy, as a pre-originary unlimited responsibility for the other within one's relationship. This allows us to readily draw a contrast between the two, to conclude that from a Levinasian perspective, true ethics is not applied ethics in its currently understood form. We will then review Weber's solution in terms of a compromise between a relative and an absolute component in ethical decision making.

In proposing our theoretical framework, we argue that through it, ethical decisions made through the application of applied ethics, if carried out with an awakened sense of ethical responsibility for the others may provide the required assurance, though not a certainty, that the decisions made were right or at least made with the genuine intentions of the moral actor. The paper will conclude by discussing and pointing to ways through which our framework could be put in practice.

Applied Business Ethics

Applied ethics, in affirming meta-ethics, generally engages moral theories and principles in an attempt to provide an answer to specific moral problems, it is "the application of ethics to special arenas of human activity, such as business,...", (Childress and Macquarrie 1986, p.38) or in the words of Beauchamp (2005, p.3) "'applied ethics' refers to any use of philosophical methods to treat moral problems, practices, and policies in the professions...".

Unlike normative ethics, the primary concern of applied ethics is not theoretical rather practical. Ethical theories are used to provide the roadmap, the formula and the instructions that would enable us, the moral actors, to evaluate and determine the proper ethical course of action. As such, applied ethics entails both a content and a method or technique that is applied to the content.⁴ A good content, an ideal ethical theory or principle, is one that works every time, consistent and universal in its applicability. The ethical content indicates the tendency and desire to determine rules in order "to remove choice from the decision-making process to the point where decisions, moral or otherwise, need not be made." (Ashman and Winstanley 2006, p.231) Removing choice is removing uncertainty, which in effect diminishes the moral agent's responsibility for making the choice, because a wrong ethical outcome can easily be blamed on the inadequacy of the theory used rather than the failing of the decision making

⁴ The content component itself can be, a) internal, such as codes of ethics formulated for use within an organisation, b) external, such as philosophical theories or social laws, or c) a mix of internal and external.

agent. The method or technique component delineates how the content is used to arrive at an ethical decision or outcome.⁵

Applied ethics operates on the presumption that the determination of an ethical act and the subsequent ethical conduct needs to begin from the knowledge of what ethics is. One needs to know the ethical rules (the content) and the ethical tools (the method) to derive and determine the ethical good prior to the application of these rules. Ethics in this sense is derived from knowledge, from comprehension and through the cognitive power of the moral agent. In business, this means that managerial cognitive competence is expected to precede or accompany ethical competence of the manager. Ethics then is treated as “an optional supplementary to the knowledge of business management” (Aasland 2004, p.4) or an additional competence to a professional knowledge or skill, a layer that sits on top of the existing relationship between the parties and used as a method or means of regulating that relationship.

What is assumed in applied ethics then is that not only the field of inquiry pre-dates ethics, but that ethics is the application of already existing principles to the field of inquiry.

Business ethics, as a field of applied ethics, is generally defined as the examination and application of ethical principles in the context of business (Cortez 2015, p.98), a sort of an ethical tool kit⁶ for use by managers and employees. It seeks “to provide an explicitly ethical framework within which to evaluate business, ... activities”⁷ (DeGeorge 2006, p.385). There is often a twofold assumption here, firstly that business ethics is rooted in analytic philosophy (Glock 2011, p.225), employing logical techniques and inheriting features of scientific field, and as such “mainly concerned with questions of ethical principles” (Kieran 1995, p.182), and secondly that business and ethics are two separately constituted fields, each with their own first principles and that business ethics consists of the examination of one in terms of the other.⁸

Hence there needs to be business before one could talk about or apply ethics in business, and such ethics need to have been worked out prior to their administration or application. What is also taken for granted in the application of any ethical theories is the assumption that the ethical decisions made on the basis of theories, rules or norms can be predetermined, in the sense that any rational human being be capable of arriving at the same decisions. The ethical subject is expected to position herself as a disinterested observer or judge of the situation before her, even though it very much matters what theoretical approach she adopts.

Critiques of applied ethics are abound and for good reasons. On the one hand, the fact that moral theories and principles arrive at varying even contradictory decisions, has given rise to relativism or what Timmons calls “limited moral pluralism” where theory “lacks a measure of determinacy” (Timmons 2012, pp.102–103), making the whole idea of application of theories dubious. On the other hand, by becoming “a matter of discovering arcane principles that ground our decisions in certainty,” applied ethics has failed to realise that “ethics is neither

⁵ The common methods used can also be divided into three categories, a) Top-Down - where the moral agent applies a known and accepted ethical theory or principle to the situation at hand. b) Bottom-Up or Case-Based (also known as Casuistry) – where the facts and circumstances of the case at hand is considered and an appropriate moral principle is identified and applied, and c) Reflective Equilibrium (Coherentism) – where a number of ethical theories and principles are considered and reflected upon before their application.

⁶ See “Weston A A twenty-first Century Ethical Toolbox Oxford University Press 2001”, as quoted by (Trezise and Biesta 2009, p.44)

⁷ DeGeorge (2006, p.384) identifies three strands of business ethics; an ethics in business, business ethics as an academic field, and business ethics as a movement.

⁸ This is to view business “as ‘amoral,’ and thus the need for a separate discourse of ‘ethics’ in which to hold business morally accountable.” (Werhane 2005)

arcane nor certain.” (Hartman 2007, p.325) Indeed the quest for absolutism has degenerated morality into moralism. Appeals to less theory-oriented methods such as casuistry, pragmatism or feminist ethics, throwing in a dose of phronesis and turning to reflective equilibrium approaches to create a balance and more coherence between various theories, have all had their own share of the problems. These latter approaches that rely on the moral agent to arbitrate between principles, at the minimum raise the question of validity of an appeal to any principles in the first place.

Detached from business, ethics runs into problem as it is often taken as an instrument at the hands of organisations to promote brands and corporate image. It “becomes a specific part of a business and marketing strategy” (Parker 2003, p.202), a “public relations exercise” (Munro 1997), and used as a management problem solving tool. (Cortez 2015, p.106) Engelbrech argues that by becoming a means to an end, business ethics is “representing principles and practices convertible into profit in the long run” (Engelbrecht 2012, p.343).

Levinasian Ethics (Re-Thinking Ethics)

For Levinas, the central point in ethics is not a set of principles or codes of morality, nor would he consider knowledge of ethical theories as a necessary condition and requirement for moral decision making; indeed, for him, ethics is not about moral decision-making by an autonomous moral subject at all.⁹ His “ethics is the opposite of a moral system” (Corvellec 2005, p.33), neither involved in a Kantian concern about what ought one do nor about the calculations of the consequence of an action (Trezise and Biesta 2009), and not about “the cultivation of virtues”. (Bergo 2013) His “philosophy refuses to be assimilated as something that can be known in order to be applied” (Todd 2001, p.71), so his ethics has no content and no method of application. Levinas asserts that the very relationship with the other is “awakening thought to an order higher than knowing.” (Levinas 1993, p.3) He writes: “When I maintain an ethical relation I refuse to recognize the role I would play in a drama of which I would not be the author or whose outcome another would know before me...”. (Levinas 2011b, p.79) To settle for an ethical theory or principle, a method or technique of justification, determination or mediation, is a form of dehumanisation of the other person in the relationship, what he calls totalisation.¹⁰ Levinas conceives ethics as that which “provide[s] us a meaning without reference to the world” (Levinas 2000, p.137). Ethics then is not a matter of what or how to act ethically, but how to be. The subject neither has an immoral nature in need of rectification, nor an amoral one in need of infusion of ethics, rather she is inherently good. “We are human” Levinas writes, “before being learned and remain so after having forgotten much.” (Levinas 1993, p.3) In Levinasian sense then, it “is meaningless for someone to instruct me to have an ethical relation” or for me to “‘choose’ to respond ethically” to the Other. (Jones 2003, p.228) Rather ethics is the context within which the relationship between an I and the

⁹ Trezise and Biesta (2009, p.46) argue that “the model that is implied in the common approaches to the teaching of business ethics relies upon an understanding of ethical action as a process that follows from rational ethical decision-making by an autonomous moral subject... [it assumes] that ethics has a rational basis and that ethical action follows from taking the ‘right’ decisions”; in brief, “the idea that ethical being follows from knowing ethics rests upon a very specific set of assumptions about ethics and human action”.

¹⁰ See Levinas’ first major work, “Totality and Infinity” (Levinas 2011b)

Other, between I, a finite being, and what is otherwise than I, an Infinite,¹¹ can take place¹² without any sort of mediation by means of a theory or model. Levinas writes: “to think the other as other, to think him or her straightaway before affirming oneself, signifies concretely to have goodness” (Levinas 2001, p.106).

For Levinas ethics is the relationship between two individuals, and he takes this to be “a relation without a relation” (Levinas 2011b, p.80) to emphasise that for ethics to survive, the separation between the parties need to be maintained by avoiding the temptation to define it in terms of something else. To define ethics in reference to something else is to totalise the other, destroy the uniqueness, the otherness of the other, which destroys the intersubjective relation, destroys ethics and the very possibility of ethics. He would take applied ethics, a means of mediating and regulating the relationship through theories and concepts, a form of totalisation itself. Levinas asserts: “morality is not added to the preoccupations of the I, so as to order them or have them judged...” (Levinas 2011b, p.172) To resist or avoid totalisation of the Other, Levinas believes the relationship between the parties that is ethics, needs to take priority over the parties, it needs to exist first. From such a perspective then, there are a number of problems with business ethics understood as applied ethics. Indeed it could be said that various elements of applied ethics are fundamentally at odds with what Levinas takes ethics to be. In his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, he poses the question “whether we are not duped by morality”, (Levinas 2011b, p.21) in effect warning us against the illusion of morality offered by applied ethics. At the outset, he clarifies his position by reminding us that his project is not one of constructing some ethics, which would be self-defeating, rather he attempts to explain what ethics is. On his account, ethics is not something that is out there to be learned, a system of thought that could be mastered, nor a method of differentiating good from evil. It is not knowledge nor does it come from knowledge. “Ethics is otherwise than knowledge” (Critchley 2014, p.299). Since our lived experience in the world and our relations with other human beings is where meaning is formed, these relationships or “ethics is not a category of knowing, it is a condition for knowing...” (Vandenberg 1999, p.33). To derive ethics from rationality, ontology, epistemology or any other criteria, is to put the proverbial horse before the cart of ethics. Before we consider the content component of applied ethics, that is, before we begin to talk about what good is, or talk about the autonomy or heteronomy of the subject, before considering concepts and theories such as categorical imperative, utilitarianism, rationality, justice, virtues or any other form or method of ethical decision making, we should realise that all these are secondary, as they are built on top of our individual lived experiences, our relationship with the other person, on ethics.¹³ Before we have field of inquiry, we already have people in relation with one another and the world in which they live. Ethics refers to this “always and already” being in relation which is a pre-condition for both a field of inquiry and application of a set of principles. Ethics is the pre-cognitive responding out of which every cognition and affect emerge. It is in this responding in existing that business or other so called fields of “applied ethics” emerge. As Cortez (2015, p.102) points out, it is thus a myopic

¹¹ By “Infinite” Levinas tries to capture the otherness of the other person, her uniqueness. It is “a desire ...for alterity” (Levinas 1978, p.10).

¹² Perhaps it is best to say that ethics, as developed by Levinas, “is not really a relationship at all, but a certain vigilance with respect to any relationship” (Wood 2005, p.168).

¹³ As Bevan and Corvellec (2007, p.213) write: “Virtues, rules, self-interest or principles are all reductions, reasoned expressions of values, judgemental categories, preferences or modes of understanding that are egologically specific to whoever enunciates them. As such, they express only the ethical leanings of those who proclaim them.”

understanding of ethics and ethical to consider some issues to be ethical and others not ethical at all, because this is passing ethical judgement before entering the arena of ethics itself. Hence all issues, indeed even routine work, should be considered as ethical acts. In other words for Levinas, being ethical is the condition of my existence irrespective of the value of my actions. Such a position calls for a fundamental change in our understanding of the meaning of ethics, from that which is about differentiating wrong from right, to that which encompasses every activity of being.

For Levinas, true ethics is not applied ethics because the requirement of a content means that from the outset, applied ethics is set on the path to totalisation of the relationship and destruction of meaningful ethics. Ethics needs no content, no good and evil in need of differentiation. It is thus in need of no method or technique to effect such a differentiation. Indeed the Good is not even “the object of a choice for it has taken possession of the subject before the subject had the time...” (Levinas 1987, p.134). Such an assertion would only be meaningful if ethics is understood as “first philosophy” and as such arising in “passivity”, from the dimension of beyond, unsolicited and unintended. (Tajalli 2017, p.197) Levinas writes: “*Ethics slips into me before freedom. Before the bipolarity of Good and Evil, the I as ‘me’ has thrown its lot in with the Good in the passivity of bearing... The ‘me’ has thrown its lot in with the Good before having chosen it*”. (Levinas 2000, p.176).

Understanding ethics as first philosophy is to see that ethics is not founded on the sciences but that the sciences are founded on ethics. It is not that there is first business and then ethics but business as a human activity emerges out of ethics; out of the way in which people are in relation with each other and ethics itself is a form of being in relation. A manager for instance, does not first have a relationship with an-other and then superimpose an ethics onto this, but just by the act of being in relationship, is already within an ethical attunement. Such an attunement means moving from applied ethics “to an implied ethics” (Trezise and Biesta 2009) where business practices and relationships always already participate within a context of ethicality, a context in which totalising relations with the Other are not possible. It is to take ethics as an integral part of the way one lives her life, and live life in such a way that one need not weigh potential options, analyse situations or appeal to rules and methods to figure out how to be or how to act ethically. It is to see good as good in itself, and not something defined in reference to something else, and it is to be good and do good not as an outcome of some calculations but as a condition in which one feels obliged to act responsibly towards the other. Ethical attunement is a call to move beyond rational ethics into responsible ethics. It is to move away from reliance on an active decision making model, one based on available data and facts, to decision making that stems from realisation of our inherent responsibility for the other person.

For Levinas, the source of ethics is the call for responsibility for the other. An “unlimited initial responsibility” (Levinas 2000, p.138, Levinas 2011a, p.128) which is “beyond the reach of managerial control” (Aasland 2007) as its source lies outside the scope of management. This is a call that comes from within the self, preceding one’s freedom¹⁴ (Levinas 1998a, p.166), not a call for a future responsibility yet to be realised. Genuine responsibility “cannot be prescribed” (Mansell 2008, p.568). It is neither a matter of reflection and choice among alternatives, nor the consequence of my commitment¹⁵ towards others, and not a matter of

¹⁴ “Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made.” (Levinas 2011a, p.114)

¹⁵ The purpose of responsibility “is not mine: I do not agree to it, but I find myself responsible” (Manderson 2005, p.700).

“ethical correctness” (Levinas 1993, p.34). Rather responsibility is “an unconditional obsession with the Other” (Faldetta 2018), an obligation that chooses us because of our capacity to make a difference. Levinas defines “the good” in terms of such a responsibility, as the condition in which “the existence of the other is more to me than my own”¹⁶ (Levinas 2001, p.54). This is possible only when the relationship is one of love. A relationship of love is possible when the other in the relationship is unique, irreplaceable, infinite, when I see in the face of the other the face of God, when I realise that “[t]he other must be closer to God than I. This is ... the first given of moral consciousness”. (Levinas 1987, p.55) He asserts that ethics is moved by an endless obligation and responsibility for the Other, as the relation between the I and the Other “is knotted only as responsibility”. (Levinas 1982, p.97) To be human and act ethically, is to be responsible for the other, and for this “one need know nothing, learn nothing, ...” (Gehrke 2006) and have no need for techniques or theories. Rather, responsibility is the result of a “radical susceptibility”¹⁷ to the otherness of the Other. I do not choose to be moral and responsible, rather I am already morally committed to and responsible for the other person. For Levinas, “ethics contrasts with intentionality, as it also does with freedom: to be responsible is to be responsible before any decision”. (Levinas 2000, p.172) Ethics as first philosophy implies the straightaway recognition of the other as Other, that the Other is not just another “I”, but unique. This then, is the very first ethical event which is also the realisation of one’s infinite responsibility towards the Other.

The fact that “a certain ‘minimum of ethics’ is usually taken for granted”, may explain why unethical acts do not occur more often than they do despite the human and business sense of self-preservation and self-interest (Aasland 2007, p.223). This “minimum of ethics” may indeed be a vindication of Levinas’ claim to the priority of ethics and our inherent infinite responsibility for the other, without recognition of which, the relationship between individuals is doomed to failure and with it the possibility of a proper application of any ethics in the conventional sense of the word, such as that of business ethics, coming at a later stage.

Weber’s Approach to Ethics (the Cultivated Person)

A brief account of Max Weber’s solution to the problem of value fragmentation is instructive as a similar approach will be adopted in the development of our hybrid framework.

For Weber, rationalisation was a historical drive towards a world in which “one can, in principle, master all things by calculation” (Weber 1946d, p.139). His account of the genesis of the Spirit of Capitalism revealed how reason and rationality came to become autonomous and dominant in the lives of people, relegating ethics to the status of an option and a derivative. According to Grosby (2013, p.302), “we are in Weber’s debt for recognizing that rationalization of religious belief is but part of a wider process of the rationalization of many other spheres of life...”; which is a characteristic feature of modernity, where the dominant factors underpinning and regulating one’s conduct are “internal to the ‘rationality’ of each sphere” (Taylor 2007, p.2), that is to say, each sphere of human activity is governed by its own specific set of values and principles, giving rise to value relativism. In modern bureaucratic organisations, people “bracket, while at work, the moralities that they might hold outside” (Jackall

¹⁶ He also writes: “the only absolute value is the human possibility of giving the other priority over oneself” (Levinas 1998b, p.109).

¹⁷ Todd (2001, p.70) refers to “passivity [as] a kind of radical susceptibility.”

2009, p.4). A manager for instance, could operate under a very different set of ultimate values to those guiding her conduct at home, so what is not acceptable at home or church may indeed be quite right at work. This bracketing has also resulted in the subduing of the effects and potential influence of personal ethical considerations and personal responsibility for others in favour of adoption of applied business ethics theories and models.

In search of a remedy to value fragmentation and the resultant moral relativism, and knowing that ethical actions are rarely unambiguous, Weber came to call for a reconciliation of ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility so that actions are judged “not merely by their instrumental value but by their intrinsic value as well” (Weber 1949, p.24).

Weber saw the need for an element of non-rational in any rational decision making. Moral decision making he argued needs to rest on a solid ground, what he called “an ethic of ultimate ends”, “ultimate standpoint” or “ultimate value”, and a “mature person”¹⁸ or “cultivated man” is one able to reconcile this ethics with a more situational ethics, “an ethic of responsibility” (Weber 1946b, p.120). These two ethics, Weber writes, “are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine man” (Weber 1946b, p.127).

The “ethic of responsibility” is to provide meaning to the decision in terms of cause and effect and consequences of action, in a methodical, analytical, rational and calculative way, having an instrumental-rational orientation and giving a teleological aspect to the ethical decision making. Gane (1997, p.556) calls this, “decision-making on a responsible commitment to ultimate values.” So, one would start with the ethics of responsibility, aware of his responsibility for the consequence and the utility of his actions; until he reaches a point, a point the precise determination of which is left to the discretion of the individual concerned, where such consequences are not easily perceivable as instrumental rationality can no longer adequately identify them; after all, “it is not true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true” (Weber 1946b, p.123). Here the goodness of the action can only be validated by referring to the cause of the action; hence, what is required is a “passionate devotion to a ‘cause’, to the god or demon who is its overlord” (Weber 1946b, p.115).¹⁹ This is the point at which “the scientific investigator becomes silent and the evaluating and acting person begins to speak” (Weber 1949, p.60). An appeal, then, to this non-rational, to one’s “ultimate standpoint” and “ultimate value”, needs to be made.

Weber stresses the importance of one’s ultimate standpoint, by pointing out that the crucial element is “the quality of a man’s bearing in life which was considered ‘cultivated,’ rather than in a specialized training for expertness” (Weber 1946a, pp.242–243). It is the good intention that counts here and is the criterion of a good act, not the outcome of the act.²⁰ To have an ultimate standpoint is to organise our lives around a set of core values, those that have intrinsic value; and this, for Weber is important even if it means an “intellectual sacrifice” in the sense of having to return to the irrationality, albeit safety, of what one takes as an absolute (Weber 1946c, p.155).

The fact remains that instrumental rationality, in the sense of “ethics of responsibility” can only clarify available options and tell us what we can do, not what we should do. This latter task is left to our commitment to our ultimate ideals and values, because “only on the assumption of belief in the validity of values is the attempt to espouse value-judgments

¹⁸ Such a person “is aware of his responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul.” (Weber 1946a, p.127)

¹⁹ Weber asserts that “nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion” (Weber 1946a, p.135).

²⁰ Weber writes: “If an action of good intent leads to bad results, then, in the actor’s eyes, not he but the world, or the stupidity of other men, or God’s will who made them thus, is responsible for the evil”. (Weber 1946b, p.121)

meaningful. However, to judge the *validity* of such *values* is a matter of *faith*” (Weber 1949, p.55). Weber acknowledges the difficulty of arriving at a clear-cut ethical decision, writing that, “the problem is simply how can warm passion and cool judgement be forged together in one and the same soul?” (Weber 1946a, p.115). Indeed, a complete reconciliation between ethics of responsibility and ethics of ultimate value is not possible, and “their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion”; hence, at some stage “it is necessary to make a decisive choice” (Weber 1946a, p.152). Such a decision needs to be made with the knowledge that no ethical valuation and decision will be absolutely right, hence what matters most for the ethical actor, is “the subjective certainty that his attitudes are ‘genuine’” (Weber 1949, p.24).

Weber summarises the principle of his ethical philosophy as “the fulfilment of the scientific duty to see the factual truth as well as the practical duty to stand up for our own ideals” (Weber 1949, p.58). Moral evaluations need to be carried out “according to our ultimate standpoint, the one is the devil and the other the God ...[but importantly] the individual has to decide which is God for him and which is the devil” (Weber 1946c, p.148).

A Hybrid Framework

The theoretical framework of ethics being developed here derives ethical decisions and obligations from two levels of motives: Levinasian ethics at the base, what we consider to be the fundamental level of ethics where personal values and passions are at work, and the second level, where conventional approaches to business ethics are employed. The framework takes inspiration from Weber to provide synergy between the two levels in order to go beyond being either prescriptive or morally relative. However, unlike Weber’s model where an appeal to a taken for granted absolute is the last resort, in our hybrid model, the order is reversed so that ethical decision making begins on the basis of the absolute priority of the infinite responsibly for the Other. The weight of such a responsibility, if realised by the moral agent, would eliminate the need to resort to the second level decision making based on formulated rules or chosen principles. At the primary level, the inherent goodness of the moral agent if allowed to surface, compels her to act ethically towards the other. Levinas insists that this compulsion, this capacity to manifest one’s infinite responsibility for the other, without expectation of reciprocity, is an inherent feature of being a human being.

We agree with Bouckaert (2006, p.11) that the challenge in the field of business ethics is not only to “make business ethics operational, but also ... how to make it genuinely ethical.” The interminable failings and inadequacies of conventional approaches to business ethics underlines the fact that business ethics is not genuinely ethical, that is to say, it is not really at home of ethics. To address this homelessness, the framework not only appeals to Levinas’ ethics of infinite responsibility, it also relies on applied ethical theories where the exercise of infinite responsibility for the other is not feasible. These are situations where the “Third” (in Levinasian term) enters the fray, and other Others, or multiple stakeholders need to be taken into ethical consideration and hence, the issue of “justice” in decision making is raised.

We have been mindful of the fact that when speaking ethics in Levinasian sense, an ethics that arises in the face-to-face encounter, a non-transferrable, non-transitive ethics, an ethics that demands infinite primordial responsibility for the other, we are in accord with (Bevan and Corvellec 2005; Jackson et al. 2013) that ethics cannot be a matter of corporate ethics, but individual ethics, where decisions are made by individuals based on one’s private moral concerns and personal values (Watson 2003; Quinn 1997; Oddo 1997). Since an awakened sense of

inherent responsibility called for by Levinas is beyond the pale of techniques and instructions, our framework should not degenerate into a form of applied ethics for individual. As such, the framework should not be viewed as an attempt to offer some sort of an “ethics management” (Rossouw and van Vuuren 2003, p.389), “managerial ethics” (Bevan and Corvellec 2005) or “benevolent management” (Bruna and Bazin 2017, p.10), because all such efforts would result in what Bouckaert (2006) calls “the unavoidable paradox of ethics management”, and cloud the point that “it is the personal morality that makes ethical negotiations possible, not the other way round” (Bauman 1993, p.34). Personal morality, founded on inherent infinite responsibility for the other, cannot be subject to techniques and application.

We have taken Levinasian ethics as the fundamental and situated it at the primary level in the framework because to be human is to be responsible for the other, and for this we need not know any particular theory (Gehrke 2006, p.435). Moral phenomenon is “moral only if it precedes the consideration of purpose and comes prior to calculations” of good and bad, benefits and losses (Bauman 1993, p.11). So although resolution to most ethical situations confronted in business requires weighing of various options, all these situations still “presuppose the for-the-other of responsibility which was the starting point”, because the first and fundamental “exigency of justice is the love of the other man in his uniqueness”, which is the decisive factor. (Levinas 2001, p.108–109) Levinas acknowledges that determination of good, what he calls justice, is indispensable for ethical decision making. He writes: “Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematisation” (Levinas 2011a, p.157). However, “justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity” (Levinas 2011a, p.159), that is to say, justice “takes roots in the ethical relationship” (Faldetta 2018) and is kept in check by this prior responsibility.

The crucial point to note here is that Levinas does not see the appearance of multiple stakeholders as cause for a considerable confusion or compromise, because for him they are just other Others. He asserts: “the contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied about the diachrony of two: justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off.” (Levinas 2011a, p.159) Importantly, the appearance of the Third does not mean abandoning or relegating responsibility in favour of our rational faculty, because “this responsibility would be the very rationality of reason” (Levinas 2011a, p.160). Without the sense of personal responsibility at our core, our ability to judge and determine an ethical course of action would be impaired.

The second level of our framework is the application of a chosen normative theory, enabling the moral agent to provide meaning to decisions in terms of cause and effect and consequences of action in an analytical, rational and calculative way. This is the stage where we “pass from ethics to justice, from the relationship with the Other to the relationship with the third”. (Faldetta 2018) Judgements here are conditioned and criticised by rational facts or the prescribed approach of the chosen applied ethical model. The moral actor makes an ethical decision with the knowledge that the decision made may not be a moral one in the true sense of the word, rather the best that one could arrive at. She needs to appreciate that the only absolute, is her infinite responsibility for the Other. Any and all chosen decision making models are relative, and may indeed be wrong, however she needs to realise that at times, exercise of infinite responsibility is not practical or even possible. In such situations a relaxation of one’s infinite responsibility “to the second degree is needed, [because] in the just war waged against war [one may need] to tremble and shudder at every instant because of this very justice.” (Levinas 2011a, p.185) To quote Max Weber, this is the point at which the moral actor is justified in saying: “‘Here I stand; I can do no other.’ That is something genuinely human and moving.” (Weber 1946b, p.127).

Our proposed framework does not prescribe any particular normative theory or model to be used at the second level, because there is no one theory which is right. The choice of such a theory is left to the individual with the view that decisions made at this level reflect “the personal ethics of individual” (Pattan 1984) from the first level. In a sense, through our framework we call upon moral actors to become Weber’s “cultivated man as a well-rounded personality in favour of the technical expert” (Weber 1946a, p.73) who rather than blindly apply ethical rules, take it upon themselves to engage these rules within the bounds of their felt infinite responsibility for all. To act ethically, ethics needs to be the basis, the very fabric within which every decision and action is taken, including those arrived at through appeal to available normative ethical theories and models. Situating all actions and relationships within an ethics of relating, should provide an assurance, but not a guarantee, that personal decisions and justifications are made with an awakened sense of responsibility for others. Levinasian ethics, articulating and focusing on the lived experience of individual, where the encounter with the other becomes the seat of moral impulse, raising individual sensitivity to the infinite demand of responsibility for the other, makes us “aware of what we exclude with a normative theory” (van de Ven 2005). It creates the responsible context within which normative theories could be employed and as such, it conditions the application of these theories.

Levinas’ ethics has been criticised on a number of grounds. For example, for being “a cheap, romantic, and naive philosophy” (Burggraev 1999, p.34), “bad phenomenology” (Crowell 2012, p.580), an impossibility for business ethics (van de Ven 2005), for being at best applicable only in a one-on-one situation, or for being too utopian and too idealistic, “offered as a hypothesis – as a ‘what if?’” (Loumansky and Lewis 2013, p.32) However, we believe that a heightened awareness of one’s inherent responsibility in itself acts as a motivational force to guide one’s moral decision making through other means. After all, “to have an ideal of human self-actualization motivates us to better ourselves in order to approximate our ideal.” (Pattan 1984, p.18) “First we have to be moral” writes (Loumansky and Lewis 2013, p.30) because “only an absolute moral foundation can impart any worthwhile meaning to our lives.”

The proposed framework is not an attempt to supplant or replace applied ethics or reconcile personal responsibility with applied ethics, nor combine ethics and rationality into a “concept of ethical rationality” (Snyder et al. 2006), rather it is to highlight the required ethical underpinnings for the exercise of justice, and to emphasise that the effulgence of one’s indispensable prior responsibility for others could provide the added assurance that the decisions arrived at through normative theories are correct, or at least are made with the best and most genuine intentions of the moral actor. “Ethics can only serve as a guide” (Knights and O’Leary 2006, p.11), creating the ground work and condition for the moral agent to make ethical decisions.

Although we see a close affinity between our aim and Mansell (2008, p.575)s’, who saw “the necessity for a general framework of rules [...] within which an ethical interaction could occur”, we believe that to be faithful to Levinas, we need to envisage, not an ethical framework of rules but one within which rules or other ethical theories could find expressions. Ethics is not something one does, nor something one has, rather it is something one is.

Towards Business Ethics as Practice

The implication of Levinas’ views on ethics is significant because it means that ethics cannot be built on top of some foundations or pre-existing relationship, because to do so is to have already totalised the other person. To assume that there is already a business relation between

the parties, is to have captured and understood the other person in the relationship in terms of concepts and themes current and known in business. To see and treat the other as a consumer, a supplier or any other stakeholder, is to have already put the other within the confines of business rules. It is to assume that the other person in relationship is malleable to business rules and principles, it is to sacrifice one's obligation and responsibility for the other in favour of obligations to these rules.

Since “[b]usiness organisations are undeniably human affairs” (Cohan 2002, p.291), and as prior infinite responsibility for the other transcends any and all spheres of human activity, including that of business and organisational life, ethics cannot be in any specific act but is in the holistic act that constitutes the self as a moral subject. To be an ethical subject is to be responsible for the others in every moment of life. This calls for re-imagining and re-conceptualising business as an act of service to humanity first, in order “to make society better off” (Cohan 2002, p.291). After all, if “ultimately the business of business and of ethics merge in their common quest for excellence in the service of human needs” (Pattan 1984, p.18), then the corporation's “first and foremost objective is not to its shareholders, or to its stakeholders. It is to make, develop and deliver things, and to service people, communities and nations.” (Mayer 2013, p.4) Furthermore, since “any attempt to provide direction (eg. , firms should do x and not y) are at some level moral endeavours” (Wicks and Edward Freeman 1998, p.124), to offer service in the genuine sense of the word, managers need “to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do” (Svensson and Wood 2008, p.310) and not because it meets certain social expectation. Business practice then, needs to be viewed as embedded and enmeshed within ethics rather than in a perpetual struggle to adhere to some social contract. Indeed, we need to come to see “business ethics as practice” (Clegg et al. 2007) directed towards service for humanity.

We submit that an ethics of management may best be understood as management in ethics; and business ethics, as business in ethics; perhaps leaving management and organisations with the task of providing the conditions under which the relation with the other is not compromised, so that the face of the other is not covered up by the burden of bureaucracy and the demands of instrumental rationality. Conditions that would raise the self's susceptibility to the Other, allowing the “otherness of the other”²¹ to shine through the face of the other, raising the self's sensitivity to her inherent responsibility and obligation to oblige the “commandment of saintliness”.²² Once this is achieved, the ethics of right and wrong, that is applied ethics, could be used in various settings, perhaps with the full knowledge that we may get things wrong at times when applying the wrong theory or when theory is just not sufficient to address the case at hand.

From Theory to Practice

Our proposed theoretical framework poses the question of implementation. To put the framework into practice, we need a different approach for each level of the framework.

With regard to the second level, it could be said that the reliance on one's elevated sensitivity and awakened sense of responsibility for the other does not mean abandoning further research and development into normative theories and applied ethical models despite

²¹ Levinas also refers to this otherness as “Infinite” or “a desire ... for alterity” (Levinas 1978, p.10).

²² Levinas writes that a human being is a “being who has already heard and understood the commandment of saintliness in the face of the other man” (Levinas 1999, p.180).

their “unavoidable limitations and inherent contradictions” (Clegg et al. 2007, p.118). These theories and models, the fruit of around 30 years of development in the field of business ethics, should still be the subject of teaching and training at our educational institutions and organisations. The continual revision and refinement of such theories contribute to better ethical decision making, and according to Levinas this is “how ethics is put into practice”. (Aasland 2007, p.224) Their use however needs “to be re-constituted starting from the relation of responsibility towards the Other” (Faldetta 2018).

The primary level of our framework raises quite a different set of challenge, because a sense of responsibility that arises in passivity is an “ethics [that] cannot be taught, but only encouraged” (Trezise and Biesta 2009, p.50). The difficulty with Levinas’ philosophy of inherent responsibility is “in allowing ourselves to feel the moral weight of its implications” (Roberts 2001, p.124). It is to allow this responsibility to surface in our lives in order to exert its effect and influence in our decisions. Moral actions take place in a social context and organisations provide this context. (Trevino 1986) Organisational structures make a difference with respect to the exercise and development of moral character (Vriens et al. 2018, p.672) and contribute towards “neutralizing the disruptive and deregulating impact of moral impulse” (Bauman 1993, p.125). This is achieved by the “mere existence of a hierarchical structure” (Cohan 2002, p.290), or by the fostering of a climate of managerial self-serving and narcissistic behaviour (Roberts 2001, p.109, Child and Rodrigues 2003, p.239), or with the introduction of rules and codes that “substitute moral feelings with economic calculations” (Bouckaert 2006) that in turn “dilute responsibility” (Boda and Zsolnai 2016, p.93). To address such problems, business and management need to be more concerned with the task of devising means of removing the impediments that repress the moral impulse that comes from the encounter with the other, preventing the inherent goodness of managers and employees, their inherent ethical sensibility and responsibility, to readily surface in their practice. The impediments to the awakening sense of responsibility are various forms of totalisation of the other person in relation. Totalisation occurs when we see the other through the eyes of organisational rules and bureaucracy, through the prism of business goals and performance objectives. Indeed “for much of our lives we contrive means for avoiding this prior responsibility; by avoiding situations where we might encounter such otherness, by blinding ourselves to the consequences of our actions for the Other.” (Desmond 2007, p.228).

Once the totalising tendency to objectify the other person is replaced by the realisation of the uniqueness of the Other, once the dross of human heart is cleansed so that this uniqueness can be viewed in the face of the Other, the ethical deafness can be overcome, as our relationship will get a transcendent dimension, and our ethical nature, one of responsibility for the other person, will become manifest in establishing a relationship of love. Clearly much research is needed into identifying ways of removing the barriers to flourishing of individuals’ sense of responsibility. There is also a need for re-evaluation of some of our previously arrived at conclusions. We briefly point to a few of such conclusions below.

The diversity of human race does not change the humanity of an individual, nor is it indicative of the level of that humanity. To assert that “ethical values of business managers are embedded within their cultures” and is influenced by business norms, (Hood and Logsdon 2002, p.883) may need to be re-evaluated on the basis that although cultural and business norms could certainly impede the realisation of one’s responsibility for the other, they can neither absolve one from this responsibility nor manufacture it. To be human is to be responsible for the Other, and this responsibility is ready to be recognised in “the gaze of the stranger,…” (Levinas 2011b, p.77).

From the perspective of our framework, it is both wrong for multi-national organisations to accept ethical compromises under the guise of cultural relativism, and wrong to dictate universal codes of ethics that span cultural differences. Ethical compromises are wrong because people across cultures and boundaries are still under the influence of the same inherent sense of infinite responsibility. We suggest that acts such as corruption, discrimination, bribery or slavery are and have always been wrong, however cultural norms, traditions, psychological and situational variables, even the application of wrong or inadequate ethical theories, have the capacity to cloud the prior responsibility for the other person, allowing injustices and unethical acts to take place. Ethical relativism does not apply at the fundamental ethics of responsibility, in a sense, this level of responsibility is absolute, and although within the domain of conventional business ethics “no amount of empirical accuracy, including an infinite array of facts, can ever by itself add up to an ‘ought’” (Donaldson and Dunfee 1994, p.253), Levinasian ethics is where the “is” becomes an “ought”, indeed the “is” is already the “ought”. Although relativism can and does arise at the secondary level of our proposed framework, when one has no choice but to rely on her rationality and ethical theories to resolve situations and hence the decisions arrived at here may indeed be relative, they should be considered as acceptable because they have been formed under the influence of one’s moral impulse of responsibility for the others.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that the recurrent and interminable problems in business calls for a more fundamental reconsideration of the field of business ethics. To this end we developed a hybrid ethical framework drawing on Levinas’ articulation of one’s infinite and inherent responsibility for the others, to create the context within which ethical decision making could be made through the use of conventional approaches to business ethics. The hybrid structure of the framework is modelled on Weber’s approach to ethical decision making, bringing into synergy the absolute sense of responsibility one has for others, with the relative compromises that conventional business ethics theories necessarily entail.

Since inherent responsibility for others is the lot of each human being and cannot be manufactured through techniques, we believe that research and efforts need to be diverted to finding ways and means of removing the impediments that prevent this moral impulse to surface, providing the ethical context for decision making.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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