

# 1 Introduction: Ethics, the Very Idea?

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ethics [*ethiks*] (n. pl.) scientific study of morals; system of morality

Ethics? I suppose the most common definition of ethics is the attempt to build a systematic set of normative prescriptions about human behaviour, codes to govern everyday morals and morality. In that sense it is a modern science that claims to be able to replace the holy books and traditions that supposedly guided our ancestors. That is to say, under the name of ethics philosophers and others have attempted to use the tools of reason to generate rules which should guide our judgement in particular and general circumstances. This project should, it seems, be the crowning glory of the rational scientific method and (if successful) would no doubt precede an era in which human unhappiness and cruelty would be substantially reduced, if not eliminated. If in doubt about our conduct, we could refer to a comprehensive dictionary of ethics, a code book, to discover what we should do, to whom and why. Otherwise, what would be the point of all this thinking, talking and writing?

However, the project of ethics (like so many others which began with grand ambitions) seems to have spent an awful lot of time going nowhere. As all of the authors in this volume suggest, though for very different reasons, the idea of foundational ethical codes is one that cannot (and perhaps should not) be taken very seriously. For a start there are considerable problems in deciding what ethics contains, or rather, in deciding what content *should* fill the very contentious definitions I gave above. The tension between theorizing what people should do (prescriptive ethics) and explaining what people actually do (descriptive ethics, the anthropology of moralities) is a fracture that threatens the project from the very start. To begin with the former, if we stick with the notion that ethics is about producing prescriptions – ‘golden rules’ – then we immediately notice what a variety of rules philosophers have already presented us with. Aristotle’s suggestions about the virtuous character, Kant’s ‘act as if your action were a general rule’, the utilitarians’ insistence on calculating the happiness of the greater number, Rawls’s thought experiments about social justice, and so on, are by no means commensurable arguments that could somehow be ‘solved’ by reason. Indeed it seems that philosophers have drained oceans of ink over many years debating the relative merits of various frameworks and yet come no closer to any final

adjudication. In any case, why should we listen to them? There are many 'reasonable' attempts to formulate ethical prescriptions which have nothing much to do with philosophy – religious movements, everyday conversations, political pronouncements, soap operas, mission statements and so on. Given this huge range of claims, and sources of these claims, one might well conclude that the search for the ethical 'one best way' is likely to be fruitless.

Yet if we move to the seemingly more solid terrain of description, of trying to explain everyday moralities, matters are no better simply because it is by no means clear how such description should be done. Descriptions are not innocent of theoretical prejudices after all, and there is simply no common agreement as to what sort of thing us humans are, and hence what would constitute a good description of us in the first place. Are we creatures of structural, cultural or linguistic determination? Are we the creations of one or many supernatural beings? Are we free agents who socially construct the worlds around us? Should we attend to speech acts, situated accounts, discourses, materials, concepts or historical contexts? Should we rely on sociology, anthropology, geography, cultural studies, history, psychology or biology? In sum, since we don't seem to agree on what being human means, then how could we agree on a description of what being human does? Again, as I suggested for philosophy, the recent history of the human sciences would seem to attest to a necessarily inconclusive conclusion.

But none of this confusion has stopped academics, and everyone else, talking and writing about ethics. Indeed it seems that the last few years have seen an active surfacing of ethical issues across a wide range of disciplines and, in terms of this volume, in management and organization theory in particular. I want to suggest a few reasons why this might be the case.

The first is the most general justification and has little to do with organization studies in particular. It is my perception that the general 'state of play' in the theoretical areas of the human sciences – that is to say debates around postmodernism, social constructionism, relativism and so on – has explicitly moved ethics to a new centrality. The recent writings of (amongst others, and in diplomatically alphabetical order) Bauman, Derrida, Foucault, Giddens, Habermas, Haraway, Irigaray, Levinas, Lyotard, Said and Sedgwick, together with the political philosophy of Rorty, Taylor and MacIntyre, all broadly support a turn to foregrounding questions of judgement. To put it simply, if there are no foundational grounds for epistemology or ontology then we either stop writing altogether or provide ethical-political reasons why we believe our writing is important. This is not to say that we will therefore discover foundations for ethics either, but simply to say that ethical-political claims of some sort are made – perhaps have to be made – to account for any saying and hence the possible reasons for making that saying. Of course, this should be seen not as a 'solution' to the various crises of the 'post', but rather as a recognition that the relativist point has been made forcefully and, if we still want to carry on doing intellectual work, we should attend carefully to our reasons for justifying it.

Apart from this general background of social theoretical undercurrents

there seem to be a few reasons specific to organization studies that make this a key issue at the moment. One is the increasing importance of ethical issues in conventional organization studies and management science: debates around equal opportunities policies; gender, age, disability and ethnicity issues; social cost accounting; politically correct marketing; environmental responsibility; community involvement and sponsorship; business scandals; whistle-blowing; consumer redress; corporate governance; and so on. All these and other issues are being addressed in a huge explosion of material, particularly in the USA, on business ethics and corporate social responsibility. Many of the ideas and problems in these new textbooks, journals, newspaper articles and courses are also informed by a renewed moral emphasis from theorists and theologians of both right and left who have begun a critique of market-based liberal individualism and the enterprise culture in favour of 'back to basics' moral values based on notions of community, responsibility, citizenship and so on. In sum, ethical issues seem increasingly central in much writing about organizations and their social and natural environments.

Adding to this, or perhaps the cause of this, is the cultural or humanist turn in theories of organizations themselves. Many authors – evangelical gurus, TQM advocates, HRM writers – have been proposing for some time that the abstract and dehumanized rules of the bureaucratic organization are simply no longer appropriate. The search is on for ways to energize and capture the commitment of organization members. In an older language, this might be about moving from McGregor's 'theory X' to 'theory Y', or perhaps, more cynically, about replacing the Taylorist stick with the internalized carrot of false consciousness. According to this story, the well-motivated organizational member will have strongly felt values that can cope with the unsettling effects of rapid market change and the varied culture clashes of a global business context. This, of necessity, means that the engineering of beliefs becomes the task of the visionary manager. Moral-ethical principles are hence at the heart of this intervention – the belief in an organizational mission that supposedly replaces mere rule following. I am not necessarily suggesting that this is what is actually happening in organizations, but simply declaring that this new language of beliefs and values is symptomatic in itself. If managers are now being persuaded to act ethically, does this mean they were not previously? Do these ethical principles have any effect on practice and does this have emancipatory possibilities for the humanization of work organizations? More broadly, and perhaps the hardest question of all, are global liberal capitalism and these 'new' ethical business principles even compatible in organizational terms?

The final reason for a concentration on ethics is a simpler problem to pose. What are organization theory and management studies for? Over the last twenty years there has been a huge rise of 'management' and 'business' teaching and research within universities across the globe. Some of the teachers and researchers would like to think that they were providing a critical or liberal education and not merely being, in Baritz's phrase, 'servants of

power'. Can this self-image be justified or is management education simply a performative feature of modern societies in which the development of technician means obscures debate about ethical ends? If management educators are doing something worthwhile, what is it? Are they pursuing worthwhile, ends or merely developing social technologies (what Marxists would call ideologies) to lubricate the wheels of late capitalism?

Taking all these problems and issues together it seemed to me that a book on the ethics of organization theory would be particularly timely as an intervention into many current areas of debate and teaching. This volume hence draws together a wide range of social theoretical standpoints – Marxism, poststructuralism, feminism, institutional theory – together with empirical materials from organizations and attempts to think these issues through across a range of substantive areas – marketing, accounting, human resource management, the natural environment, management education and so on. Whilst there is a common agreement amongst the authors on the paucity and irrelevance of much contemporary business ethics, there are wide divisions about how, to put it rather cryptically, we should describe theorizing and theorize description. In a sense this could be said to come down to a debate between those who wish to foreground empirical contexts – whether local, institutional or historical – and those who prefer the close examination of 'texts' informed by contemporary social theory.

This is by no means a simple binary, but it has structured my organization of the volume as a whole. As a result, the chapters themselves are broadly arranged in three parts. The first part – 'Theories' – contains five chapters which, in various ways, foreground a particular form of thinking. In order, these are on analytic philosophy; Marxism; and feminism; followed by two chapters which deal with poststructuralist thought in rather different ways. The second part – 'Practices' – contains five more chapters on, respectively, human resource management; marketing; accounting; governance; and the environment. Though these chapters are, of course, explorations of theory, they are also examples of how we might take a particular organizational theme and subject it to critical scrutiny from the standpoint of a concern with the ethical. The final part – 'Implications' – contains chapters that take up general issues which follow from a concern with the ethics of organization. Again in order, these are on how the ethics of management practice might be studied; the consequences for management education; and finally whether a concern with ethics is itself an ethical position. I will now briefly summarize the concerns of the chapters, before making some short general remarks about the book.

Chapter 2 is written by Tom Sorell, the only professional philosopher in the book and the co-author of a text on business ethics. His central concern is to question the viability of business ethics in terms of its ability to communicate to business people themselves, but without 'overrationalizing' the ethics of business. In other words, how can business ethics find itself an audience that is prepared for some criticism of its practices, or that is capable of underpinning something like a professional code of conduct for

management? Sorell notes how little business ethics has achieved in the world of business, partly because of its US bias but also because of its dominant focus on big organizations – on transnational corporations and not on the small firms which make up the majority of business organizations. The chapter goes on to suggest that, in pragmatic terms, a revised form of stakeholder theory might allow for a business ethics that is not simply ‘beyond the fringe’. Sorell’s cautious assessment of the future of business ethics is mirrored in his analytic carefulness with grand language, and his disavowal of abstract philosophy in favour of an applied ethics, or a reflexive politics, that can make sense to the actors involved. In a way that prefigures a major divide between the authors in this volume, Sorell is not particularly interested in epistemological or ontological issues, in the problems of objectivity or realism. Instead the issue becomes one of intelligibility, of the possibilities for persuading key actors that there is an issue here in the first place and of making business ethics into a viable project.

The following chapter is concerned with illustrating how Marxism, particularly humanistic Marxism, provides a way to theorize the ethics of capitalist organizations themselves. Edward Wray-Bliss and myself prefer to stress the writings of the early Marx on agency and creativity, and are hence suspicious of the economic determinism, or structuralism, which is associated with Marx’s later writings. In suggesting this, however, we are setting ourselves up to ‘open’ Marx to this kind of reading and would certainly resist any suggestion that a ‘true’, ‘correct’ form of Marxism can be gleaned from his writings, or indeed the authoritarian practices of certain subsequent ‘Marxists’. We then move through a series of key concepts – labour, alienation, the working class, revolution and socialism – in order to explore our reading of Marxism as, in some sense, an originary project for questioning contemporary capitalist organizations. Marxism can then be seen as an ethical project based on understanding the material and multiple bases of oppression and resistance within modernity. Importantly it is also an utopian vision which might be used to guide action toward desired goals, though for us an utopianism which must always be tempered by self-reflection on our own standpoint as academics and hence ‘knowledge producers’. In other words, we suggest a continual questioning of where knowledge comes from, including our own, and whose interests it serves. Though we clearly have differences over the place that humanist language might have in such a project (see my concluding chapter for an illustration of this) this chapter serves to illustrate something about the continuing importance of engaging with Marxist thought if we are to be able to understand, and perhaps change, capitalist organizations.

Joanna Brewis’s chapter, ‘Who Do You Think You Are?’, continues this theme by exploring the strengths and limitations of a feminist critique of contemporary patterns of organization. Brewis’s chapter begins by introducing liberal, Marxist and radical feminisms – all of which she characterizes as largely reliant, though in different ways, on a code-based ethics. Like Marxism, there is a sense in which feminism can be articulated as a

fundamental ethical project for critiquing organization, but (again like Marxism) it is a project that often relies on essentialism combined with forms of authoritarianism. In other words, it is possible to suggest that feminism might deny an openness to ethical alternatives because it relies heavily on already having defined the guilty and the victims. In order to begin to escape the solidities of a feminist ethical code Brewis suggests that a reading of Foucault's later writings allows us to recognize our inescapable location in discourse – patriarchal discourse for example – yet also encourages a kind of responsabilization of the self. Of course, when Foucault writes about 'the care of the self' he is neither denying discursive constitution nor celebrating individual agency. The point is rather that he is setting thought against essentialisms. Controversially, Joanna Brewis illustrates this through empirical examples which deny a feminist interpretation of women as 'victims' of sexual harassment. Rather than accepting easy finger pointing, she suggests, an ethics can only be approached as a reflexive practice, of gender for example. Such a practice should not be seen as relying on a metaphysics that would allow us to think of 'freedom' or 'constraint' as somehow outside the social context in which they are located. To care for oneself would involve not merely accepting an existing configuration of power, but neither would it be sufficient to imagine that one could heroically overturn one either. The reflexive fashioning of the self that follows might be a less ambitious project than required by many feminists (or indeed Marxists) but it avoids reliance on ethical codes, and prefigures many of the poststructuralist arguments in the two chapters that follow.

Hugh Willmott's chapter is the first of two that engage with poststructuralist arguments. In a sense, it can be argued that contemporary intellectual fashion has moved away from analytic philosophy, Marxism or feminism and towards a range of poststructuralist (or posthumanist, postfoundationalist) positions which are so characteristic of French thought over the last twenty years or so. 'Towards a New Ethics?' rehearses this move in arguing against humanist and foundationalist versions of ethics. Following the influential work of Zygmunt Bauman, Willmott explores the problems with codes of ethics for organizations and the way in which they can be articulated as preventing moral reflection, rather than encouraging it. Distinguishing between prescriptive, normative and analytic forms of ethical argument he suggests that poststructuralism can be seen as a contribution to normative ethics, though in a negative sense. This is done by questioning the basis of a structuralist or humanist ethics, and therefore (like Brewis) by suggesting that the idea of an ethical 'code' is itself the problem. The bulk of the chapter then discusses Ishiguro's novel *Remains of the Day* as a literary case study which illustrates many of the issues that Willmott wishes to engage with. In exploring the complicity of Stevens, the butler, with his employer's fascism, questions of 'professional' rule following, of duty, are counterposed with Max Weber's heroic individualist ethic and Bauman's formulation of the 'moral impulse'. Whilst Willmott clearly does not 'resolve' such a dualism – between structured codes and individual morals – he pushes us into

questioning it. Importantly, he also questions why our modern insecurities about ego lead us into needing an/other for our assertions about ethics. A poststructuralist and posthumanist ethics would instead stress our connections with nature, with others, with that which is denied through foregrounding a particular form of ethical life. In that sense, Willmott proposes that a 'compassionate questioning' of dualisms – including that of 'ethical/unethical' – might be the best form of defence against authoritarianism.

Chapter 6, the concluding chapter of the 'Theories' part, again follows broadly poststructuralist lines. Hugo Letiche's method is more obviously 'textual' than Willmott's – involving as it does a close reading and rewriting of three authors – but his radical suspicion is certainly similar in intent. Letiche begins with a lecture given by Jacques Derrida, a key figure in poststructuralist thought. Derrida takes as his topic the relation between law and justice, or more precisely, the way in which speaking of justice as a law is itself an injustice. As with the tension between codes and morality discussed in the previous two chapters, this then becomes an issue of the relationship between concepts. The necessary singularity of justice to an/other is counterposed with the generalized collective violence that law – or ethics – must rely on. Letiche then moves on to discuss Zygmunt Bauman's depiction of the immorality of legislating ethics, and his 'solution' to Derrida's dilemma. For Bauman, the only way to rescue any sense of a 'postmodern ethic' in our fragmentary times is through refusing the easy acceptance of ethics as a solvable problem which can generate rules to constrain conduct. This results in an existential suggestion that what he calls the 'moral impulse' is the precondition for any form of being with others. Following the writings of Levinas, Bauman argues that recognizing, perhaps cherishing, this fundamental relation can provide for the possibility of a more genuine 'age of ethics' than the modern absolutism of certainty that preceded it. Throughout this exposition, Letiche shows how Bauman's position is based on deep assumptions about what it means to be 'really' human which are themselves not subjected to the kind of radical doubt that Bauman wishes to claim inheritance of, and that Derrida's writing exemplifies. Letiche therefore moves to introducing the work of another French philosopher, Gilles Lipovetsky, as a description of postmodern society which does not assume some existential substrate to all 'really human' action. Like Bauman, Lipovetsky describes postmodernity as the saturating experience of consumerism and radical individualism, but (unlike Bauman) he does not assume there is anything else than our shared experience of these forms. If there is an optimism in Lipovetsky's writing, it is the possibility of a 'third type of organizing' – one based, rather like Brewis's reading of Foucault, on a radical hedonism of the self. Not of course, Letiche concludes, that this resolves Derrida's paradox – how can we know justice? But then perhaps 'knowing justice' means always continuing to worry about such a question.

The following five chapters each take organizational functions or issues and debate the possibility of their ethics. Again, to reiterate my earlier point, this does not mean they are somehow atheoretical, but that they attempt to

engage with an ‘ethics of’ something, rather than demonstrating an ‘ethics with’ (or ‘ethics through’) a particular conceptual framework – as the previous five chapters do. Karen Legge’s chapter on human resource management sets itself up to adjudicate whether contemporary HRM practice is ethical according to four ethical frameworks – Kantianism, virtue theory, utilitarianism and contractarianism. Because of her engagement with ‘classical’ ethics, it might also be a helpful chapter for those readers who are uncertain about the different logics of these ways of thinking. Her answer is in two parts. First, it depends what you think HRM is – whether it is a new ‘soft’ humanist practice or a ‘hard’ form of relabelled management control. Secondly, it depends on how you interpret the different frameworks since it is by no means obvious that following a particular ethical code provides rules of evidence that would allow you to come to a self-evident conclusion. However, Legge’s strategy of using a combination of empirical evidence and analytic philosophy, broadly suggests that utilitarianism comes out best. But again, this does depend on which version of utilitarianism you prefer. Yet Legge recognizes that the power of such an adjudication, of which ethics and which HRM, is that it exposes the impossibility of answering questions framed in such a manner. As I suggest in my concluding chapter, utilitarianism is in a sense the logic of organization, and the dominant theme in Legge’s chapter is that the problem is not simply HRM, but contemporary capitalism itself. Whether there are alternatives to contemporary capitalism might take us back into Marxism again, but it (at least) encourages a re-evaluation of the boundary between ‘ethics’ and ‘politics’ where business is concerned.

In Chapter 8, John Desmond uses historical evidence and contemporary theory to look at the moral neutrality which is achieved by marketing. Again engaging with Bauman, Desmond uses the term ‘adiaphorization’ – a term which refers to the process of making something value-neutral. It can be argued that marketing is a dominant technology in contemporary society and organization, and one that has often justified itself on the basis of a story of liberating consumers from constraints, yet it achieves its effects through distancing, objectification, effacement, disassembly and so on. In other words, marketing itself stands as an example of the practical separation of face-to-face responsibility from the effects of the division of labour. Hence, despite its ostensible focus on liberal individualism and free markets, as a technology it effaces the face of the consumer. Just as Weber and Bauman described how bureaucratic forms of organization, characteristic of modernity itself, enable means to efface ends, so Desmond illustrates how marketing allows ethics to always be somebody else’s problem. Indeed, despite the recent turn to social and relationship marketing, the practicalities of professional moral distancing still continue unhindered. The story of green marketing, or as it was cynically labelled by some, ‘greenwash’, neatly illustrates how a simulation of concern can itself be used to further spread market relations into new social spaces. How then can marketing be escaped? Since it seems that our very senses of moral community are often being shaped by marketing technologies, it is increasingly difficult to imagine a space ‘outside’ within which we

could claim that justice and responsibility were genuine. Hence, Desmond concludes, the prognosis for an 'authentic' ethics does not look very promising – but then perhaps it never was.

'Ethics and Accounting', by Rolland Munro, continues the theme of investigating the 'effects' of using particular organizational technologies. Like Desmond, Munro is concerned to explore the general conditions of possibility that make (in this case) accounting a viable way of re-presenting organization. However, unlike Desmond, he wishes to suggest that we should consider ethics as a form of social technology too. Generalizing the metaphor of accounting, that is to say, providing an account of something, suggests that post-Kantian conceptions of ethics have been concerned with accounting for the self to the self. Yet this is clearly an odd kind of accountability since there is no external visibility here, simply a reflexive process of setting the self up to judge the self. In a way then, it might initially be possible to suggest that accounting is more 'neutral' than ethics, that it somehow allows for unbiased representations of truths about the world that can then provide clear guidance for organizational actors to strategize. But, of course, given the complicity of accounting in clearly political decisions – coal pit closures for example – and the rise of a 'social cost' accounting which is, in some way, supposed to clarify the stakeholders involved in specifying costs and benefits, it is increasingly difficult to accept that accounting is no more than a refined scientific method with numbers. In any case, as Bauman's arguments about the Holocaust and ethical distance amply illustrate, neutrality seems to effectively add up to the denial of responsibility which is itself a problematic position. Yet Munro does not leave it here, but goes on to explore the sense in which it is the very separation between people and technologies, between people and accounting, or between people and ethics, which is the problem here. The idea that any 'real', 'authentic' humanity could somehow be distilled 'before' technology is convenient, but flawed. The technologies themselves provide the very evidence that allows the self to be both constituted and interrogated. So the question then becomes reframed as how technologies make the self, and how any and all forms of technology rely on a process of 'obviation' (a term similar to adiahporization) which makes some matters relevant, and others recede into insignificance. For Munro, a poststructuralist radical suspicion must include being suspicious of the technologies of fashioning the self, and hence questioning the will to be drawn to account, to oneself or others.

Chapter 10, on governance, begins as a challenge to both the abstractions of business ethics and those of poststructuralists. Glenn Morgan sets himself against what he sees as abstract philosophizing – perhaps like that exemplified in the previous chapter – and instead sponsors concrete analyses of how things like 'markets', 'exchange', 'ownership' and so on are produced in real social contexts. In that sense he wishes to radicalize contemporary institutional theory in order to produce empirical descriptions which are comparative in their intent. The epistemological basis of such an approach is social constructionist since the assumption is that there is no foundational

basis for understanding the logic of the structures of governance and regulation within contemporary organization. This allows him to demonstrate that there are always alternatives, that things could always be otherwise because they often have been, that 'rules' are not timeless but matters of negotiation. This is then an ethics of denying the inevitability of the one best way of market capitalism, through practising a 'descriptive ethics' of comparison. The chapter moves through four domains of the institutionalization of rules – property rights, governance structures, conceptions of control, and rules of exchange – in order to demonstrate that there is a wide variety of ways of formulating such matters. Morgan concludes from this that it is always a dangerous generalization, both empirically and politically, to assume that there are any inevitable tendencies within modernity such as those that Bauman claims to identify. In practice, modern organization exemplifies an interplay between local and distant controls, between the local negotiation of face-to-face morality, and the institutionalization of abstract rules. For ethics then, as for practice, there can never be a formulation that is independent of these interplays. Yet, as Morgan honestly admits, his version of institutionalism is driven by the desire to sponsor and strengthen more communitarian, or mutualistic, ways of fashioning markets, properties and so on. Interestingly, through an argument which is largely hostile to abstraction, Morgan ends up by folding the ethical into the social in the same way that many of the other authors in this volume do. Though for different reasons, the key problem again becomes the claim to a separation between abstract ethics and everyday conduct.

The final chapter in this part underlines the problems with this claim even more forcefully, and also neatly illustrates how conceptions of the natural environment – the ultimate non-human limit – are inseparable from matters of their social construction. Stephen Fineman's 'The Natural Environment, Organization and Ethics' begins by further exploring Tom Sorell's 'alienation problem'. In order to 'capture' the environment for management purposes both romantic and scientific versions of the green problem need to be translated into a language of 'means'. Yet, since the green problem is itself socially constructed through other interest groups who are often developing a generalized critique of consumer capitalism, it is difficult to see how an expansion of stakeholders to include rivers, trees and the planet can possibly impact on management action in anything other than a trivial manner. Yet again, the effects of 'adiaphorization', or 'obviation', that are defining of formal organization seem to disqualify the possibility of environmental ethics ever being more than merely a marketing or accounting problem. As Fineman neatly shows, using empirical materials, the green agenda is effectively too abstract and general to be of concern to practising managers, apart from as an agenda item that can be neatly packaged and dealt with. The tendency is hence for an understanding of the problem of 'greening' to become reframed as another way of doing 'business as usual'. Management rationality, the demands of satisfying stakeholders, the very structure of decision-making and responsibility in meetings all conspire to ensure that

radical moralizing about the environment is unlikely to have a great deal of effect. As with all the other chapters in this part, Fineman refuses to assume that there are any easy solutions, or indeed that an environmental ethics could be considered independent of social contexts. Yet he refuses to conclude with quietism, suggesting that a continual questioning of ends, though perhaps not always under the alienating rubric of business ethics or global salvation, may itself help to change the context within which managerial decision-making takes place. In a sense, like Morgan, this would involve education about different modes of regulation, not an all or nothing project of pitting a heroic ethics of saving the world against an uncaring management and organization.

The final part – ‘Implications’ – contains three chapters which explore the general consequences of engaging with the ethics and organization problematic. The first, by Tony Watson, is an exemplary illustration of how a descriptive ethics of management might operate in practice. It is, in that sense, an exploration of the implications for management research that follow from understanding management and organization as already ethical through and through. Following a broadly ethnographic methodology, Watson illustrates how management and managers can be seen as always and already members of moral communities. In a Durkheimian sense, this is a matter not of inserting ethics into the social, but rather of recognizing that values, arguments, attitudes and opinions are the stuff out of which organizations are already made. Hence the abstractions of analytic philosophy, or the neatness of the case study, are replaced with everyday conversational materials within which managers engage with the practicalities of moral dilemmas. Watson’s material is therefore shaped primarily by a framing already given by his respondents – as his subtitle anticipates. Importantly, this is a framing which echoes many of the problems discussed in this volume: the tempting certainties of the language of the bottom line; the permanent problem of accounting for a moral self; and the means–ends dilemma of Bauman’s bureaucratically engineered Holocaust. What Watson’s chapter illustrates most clearly, however, is his sympathy with management and his refusal to engage in the abstract condemnations of a prescriptive ethics. Rather than echoing a vision of the general effacing of morality, this is instead an attempt to speak with the voices of managers, and then perhaps to hope that both ‘they’ and ‘us’ might then use that material for our own further reflections.

Chapter 13, by Peter Anthony, also engages with implications – in this case those for the practice of management education. Again like Watson’s, his chapter is positioned as a counter-argument to some of the more philosophical or critical-theoretical formulations, including those in this volume. Expressing a broad affinity with a materialist Marxist standpoint on exchange and a Durkheimian emphasis on the embeddedness of morality, he sets himself up against postmodern abstracted ‘idealism’ and prescriptive critical management. Both, though arguably for different reasons, end up being irrelevant, unreal and elitist by ignoring the everyday material basis of

patterns of exchange and the practical moralities of management. Instead, he suggests we should base a descriptive study, not a prescriptive sermon, on what managers actually do. Drawing on Hume's problematizing of the relationship between 'is' and 'ought' allows Anthony to suggest that, though a move to 'ought' is not disqualified out of hand, it is one that should (note the underlying imperative here) be made carefully and only after much reflection. In part this is also an acknowledgement that the concrete basis of production and exchange will not be changed by mere management education, however strident, but the reflexiveness of managers might. So, like Watson and Fineman, Anthony suggests that a careful, and sympathetic rather than scornful, study of the morality of everyday practices might allow both academic and student to learn through reflection. Whether we like it or not, managers are key figures in modernity, and educating this 'barbarian elite' should be undertaken with the same care and attention that we would expect other forms of moral education to exemplify.

My concluding chapter is concerned with exploring the 'set-up' that has produced the project of business ethics, and this book itself. I also use this opportunity to try to synthesize some of the arguments made by the various authors in this volume. When I began telling people that I was working on business ethics, they often responded by suggesting that this was merely a way of taking a moral high ground, of being disdainful of the unethical behaviours of others. Rather like being a vegetarian, the assumption is sometimes that this practice is itself an implicit criticism of carnivores. So, one of the agendas behind this concluding chapter is to discover in what sense attending to ethics is itself ethical. I begin by suggesting that the tension between moral philosophy and pragmatic managerialism is a trap which is impossible to resolve within its own parameters. Business ethics is, in that sense, a contradiction in terms because, as most of the other chapters attest, it embraces a division between ethical rules and the moral life which is so deeply problematic. I then try to suggest that this 'trap' is mirrored in sociological diagnoses of modernity itself and briefly illustrate this with reference to formulations of nostalgia and modernization in the works of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. However, rather than simply staying within this tense dualism, I then go on to propose that it might be possible to redescribe the problem in terms of modern and postmodern epistemologies. Being radically sceptical about the problem of knowledge might suggest that the search for 'ethics' is itself a flawed one, and I try to show just how flawed by interrogating the concepts of 'decision' and 'judgement' until they collapse under their own logic. Along with Willmott, Munro and Letiche I conclude by suggesting, paradoxically, that being 'against ethics' is perhaps itself the only position that might allow us to believe in the possibility of justice.

Broadly however, it seems to me that being 'against' ethics – as an imposed code – is what all the contributions to this volume offer. Whether this is because of the practical or epistemological problems with ethics, the general conclusion seems to be that we should try to be deeply suspicious about the project of business ethics itself, though of course not necessarily therefore

embrace nihilism. The critical engagement with Zygmunt Bauman's exemplary work that runs through so many of the chapters seems to indicate a convergence on this kind of scepticism – though there is also a deep divide over how it should be expressed, and perhaps how radical it should be. In a way this becomes a question of what we are prepared to take as foundational: institutional differences, patterns of exchange, the practical realization of management, the structure of organizing; or, more minimally, some kind of 'moral impulse' as a precondition of being human; or, perhaps most minimally of all, the indeterminate flows of language. The 'problem' of ethics presents itself differently depending on what we accept that we can know, and hence what status these 'knowings' might have in our arguments. Finally, I want to point to the curious status that this volume has: neither business ethics, management science, sociology, anthropology nor philosophy. It occupies an unusual terrain, and I think hence has a strange strength and flavour. But, if we are all sceptics now, then for readers and writers to be sceptical about notions of academic discipline (think of the restraining connotations of this word) is a powerful way to generate knowledge and knowing in more creative ways. So, in that spirit, I hope you find the book useful for your own knowings.