

**NORMATIVITY AND DESCRIPTION:  
BUSINESS ETHICS AS A MORAL SCIENCE**

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Natural philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had a decisive influence in the movement that attempted to turn ethics into a natural science in Europe in the eighteenth century. The term “moral science” was then coined to design the study of human nature, which included not only philosophical studies about the person but also the empirical investigation of human behavior. Kenneth Boulding reports that when he was a student at Cambridge University, “economics was still part of the moral sciences tripos.” (1969: 1) Used in that sense, “moral science” still survives in Cambridge University and other Scottish universities.

Relatively recently, we have seen the development of a similar trend in the context of business ethics research. Known as “behavioral business ethics,” an emerging field revives the project of turning business ethics into a “moral science”. A recent special issue of *Business Ethics Quarterly* (Volumen 20 Number 1) has been completed dedicated to “this burgeoning field.” (De Cremer, Mayer and Schminke, 2010: 1). But there appears to be no robust link between this movement and the traditional scholarship in business ethics theory, which has been historically focused on the normative dimension of business ethics.

As an academic field, business ethicists have developed two traditions concerned with a cluster of issues on the moral responsibilities of individuals and business organizations. Social scientists study these issues in the empirical domain, primarily concerned with descriptions and predictions of human thoughts, emotions, and behavior as well as forms of “organizational behavior”. On the other hand, normative business ethics has been traditionally understood as part of a prescriptive domain, exclusively concerned with what people and organizations ought to do, which can be studied mostly in abstraction from human psychology and social facts.

There is a growing concern with empirical research in normative business ethics (e.g. Bowie, 2000; Freeman, 2008; Hartman, 2008) as well as a growing concern with the normative dimension of research on business and society (e.g. Ghoshal, 2005; Pfeffer, 2005). As Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe puts it,

“It is time for our field <empirical business ethics> to meet them <philosophers> and others, such as those in theology, who come from a normative tradition and likewise understand what they have to offer us in our pursuit to define ethical behavior.” (2008: 586)

Growing efforts attempt to bridge the gap and encourage potential collaboration between normative and descriptive approaches to business ethics research. They can be summarized in terms of the influential debate between the so-called autonomy thesis and the unity thesis. The purpose of this paper is to explore the plausibility of the very distinction between a normative and a

behavioral domain of research in business ethics and the examination of the aforementioned strategies for the collaboration of both traditions.

In this course of this paper, I shall argue that while accepting the fact/value distinction is legitimate, keeping normativity and description isolated from each other will lead us astray and hinder the progress of our field. I shall defend the claim that there is no absolute fact/value distinction in business ethics because the normative and the psychological are interpenetrated. Part of our descriptive vocabulary in management is indeed both factual and value-laden. Normativity is about reasons for actions, that is, considerations that count for and against actions in deliberation. But reasons can be normative only if they are considerations that agents can acknowledge and comply with. Hence, psychological facts impinge on normative theorizing by setting feasibility constraints. I shall argue that normative theorizing must attend to the psychological capacities that undergird normative response. And normative theories must be psychologically realistic. For it would be difficult to defend the normative validity of a moral conception if it did not have any contact with social and psychological facts, for example, if the sort of persons required for its realization were psychologically impossible.

I propose to organize the paper into six sections. In Section One, I would briefly summarize the history of business ethics as an academic field. In Section Two, I would develop the argument that the normative/behavioral divide is just a reflection of the old is/ought thesis. In Section Three, I would introduce and interpret the autonomy and the unity thesis in business ethics research. In Sec-

tion Four, I would critically examine both theses and argue for the entanglement of facts and values in business ethics research. In Section Five, I would sketch an argument about how the normative and the descriptive inquiry set limitations on each other. I would conclude Section Six with implications and suggestions for future research.

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