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Postmodern Business Ethics - Is It Possible, Is It Relevant?

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INTRODUCTION

Ethics as a general philosophy and doctrine of good life and action has penetrated also the field of economic research. This application has been called business ethics. In the wide sense it concentrates on studying the practices of business life from the moral point of view. It criticizes, studies, and tries to give instructions.

ETHICS AND MORAL

Modernistic ethic doctrines explain that the typical feature of human action is its morality. Individual's action has a morally charged element, only an animal can be outside moral, human being is sentenced to morality. Ethics is a discipline which studies moral, classifying and evaluating it (descriptive ethics), or it can concentrate on giving instructions how to act in your life, normative ethics (ethics as a "discipline"). It has been said that moral is characterized by certain features, such as:

- incomparableness
- universalization
- idea of individual's welfare and happiness
- prescriptiveness
- autonomy

In the modern position of moral, it is seen to be incomparable in relation to and compared with all other action motives, principles, justifications and values. Morals differs from other valuation areas of life and is independent of them, but it also is more important than they are (see Airaksinen, p. 73).

The requirement for universality, i.e. generality, presupposes that judgements are not connected with any certain person or with his role. All people are bound by quite the same rules - and just this aspect is a typical feature of moral.

A principle is universal when it does not include surnames or certain descriptions, such as "the present managing director of Nokia" or "the best director in the world". The idea is that no reference is made to any special person but the aim is to reach the general.

Prescriptiveness, determination. The language of ethics not only describes things but, first of all, it orders man to do something, asks him to commit himself to something and demands to praise and condemn choices that have been made. Moral, for instance, condemns violent deeds and urges a person to honesty.

- Autonomy. The autonomy of moral means that moral cannot, without it leaving something behind it, be returned to any other sphere of life (to psychology or social activities), and moral judgements cannot be finally argued by using other judgements.

The theories of ethics have been classified e.g. in the following way:

- subjectivism
- objectivism
- intuitivism
- emotionalism

Business ethics can be defined as follows:

- a) it is a research branch which tries to describe and explain phenomena from the moral viewpoint (empirical business ethics)
- b) it gives advice and instructions about how to develop and change the practices of business life so that the human values would be materialized better than before in business life (normative business ethics)
- c) it studies the relations between the good/the bad and the right/the wrong, it means, applying the meta-analysis of moral conceptions, consideration of the phenomena of business life (meta-ethics of business life)

The background for this definition has been sought for, among

others, in Great Stories of ethics to which can be considered to belong e.g. the Kantian and the utilitarianism.

MODERN AND POSTMODERN - BACKGROUND FOR ETHIC ORIENTATIONS

The terms "modern" and "postmodern" have become common currency in intellectual debates concerning organizational studies. The postmodern is varyingly interpreted as an "epoch", a "perspective", or a new paradigm of thought. To begin with, we could distinguish "modernity" conceptualized as the modern age from "postmodernity" as an epochal term to describe the period which allegedly follows modernity. According to Cooper and Burrell (1988), modernism is "that moment when man invented himself; when he no longer saw himself as a reflection of God or Nature. The origins of the trajectory modernism are traced back to the notion in the Age of Enlightenment of "reason" which is considered to be the highest of human attributes. Despite the opposition to systematic and critical forms of modernism - the one championing the mechanization and the other seeking for emancipation in the living world - they share the commitment to an inherently logical social world constituted by reason. In systematic modernism the rational subject is the system itself, acting according to a cybernetic discourse where reason is a privileged property distinct from its parts. In critical modernism, on the other hand, it is the knowing subject who through experiencing a network of meanings, and thus the common sense of ordinary language, reaches the consensus of human understanding. In both positions, therefore, it can be found that the assumption is considering an underlying unity that provides legitimacy and authoritative logic (see Hassard 1994). In its most stark sense, postmodernism stands for the "death of reason". It has been said that we presently live our life in a postmodern society. This may be true, but what are those features that are considered typical of the postmodern mode of life and thinking? Are they:

Multiplicity of meanings. Our social life is seen to be loaded with multiple meanings. There is not only one "right" meaning which can be given to an event or a process.

The Death of Great Stories. Modernism is seen to consist of many great stories (e.g. communism in political life, enlightenment in history, abstract expressionism in visual arts, and so on. These "-isms" are said to be dead and buried, and in postmodernism there only exist short and fragmented narratives,

local "small stories" opposite to old superstories.

Fragmented reality. Our life is seen to consist of many fragmented parts which do not have any interaction with each other. In modernism these interactions were clear and evident, but now the whole society is non-transparent and extremely difficult to understand.

Simulation. Lyotard has presented this concept of simulation rather well. "... There are presently more genuine things and objects, everything can be produced by artificial simulation processes, nothing is "the real thing". Everything is just copies, the slogan is: "Buy a copy, not an original." Life in virtual reality is now possible; who would need "real" reality.

Living without objective values. It is not possible to set such moral norms to any person according to which he ought to act. Everything is allowed.

Other concepts that have been used are:

- multiplicity of meanings
- great stories
- fragmentarity
- ability to be simulated
- disappearance of one's own ego
- no absolute truth appears, only "perspectives"
- irony
- citations
- imitation
- relativism

Postmodern ethics denies the importance and relevance of great stories in the world of the 1990s. It wants to be ethics of metropolis where the values and action codexes are determined without objective valuation grounds on a relative basis. Values are both born and die socially. There is no objective measure for value, and there is no need for it. Freedom from the bonds restricting the creativity of ego is a value but not in the traditional sense.

When thinking in a postmodern manner, the ethics of metropolis, i.e. big cities, is microethics which, according to Lyotard's terms, inevitably goes past the macroperspective. Ethical rules and norms are defined through the social network of threads of the microlevel, by different subcultures. Any of the

"great men" of thinking, Kant, Hegel, Mill etc. does not dictate with a top-down technique those imperatives which the postmodern group ought to follow. The "top-down principle" has been compelled to make way to a horizontally forming set of principles which gets its power on the basis of the set's own functions.

Speculatively thinking, we may in the future even talk about virtual reality, virtual moral. In the uttermost case the ontology of moral has to be scrutinized from the viewpoint that the moral actor is a solidarily constituted collective subject of the virtual reality/network. Virtual reality offers an opportunity to an unpersonified moral subject, which like Nietzsche, can demand "perfect freedom because God is dead". It fits in perfectly with the unpersonified "network-self" the Cartesian principle "cogito ergo sum". A perfect solipsism comes true; as the bishop Berkeley has stated, "the outside world is only a idea in my mind". The relativistic solipsistic ontology represents the epistemological position to which also postmodernism has committed itself.

s postmodern ethics a good or a bad thing? If a person has a postmodern attitude this question may not be relevant. We can, anyhow, ask in which respect good or bad ethics, "anything suits", is a permissive attitude which is not bothered by rigoristic morality. People are not condemned because of different customs, appearance, race or complexion. The complexion is not even in network decisive, but other virtues. Postmodern ethics has, however, the weak points typical of the relativistic attitude. If a person has this kind of an attitude he does not anymore find criteria for the good and the bad. In such a case some charismatic figure (Hitler) starts to order what is good and what bad. Faith replaces critical scepticism and rational moral consideration. For its certain parts, the relativistic standpoint is unbearable, we cannot draw from it a programme which would fulfill the principle of universality and save people's welfare and guarantee their rights. The good is only the thing which I feel good. This justifies strong egoism and, along with it, oppressing of other people and even unscrupulous destruction of our environment. Postmodern ethics cannot offer the business ethics, not at least at this stage, any clear theoretical basis from which to start.

The postmodern attitude is the property of the inhabitants in metropolis, and yet, the biggest part of the world's population lives outside metropolis, in the countryside, in development

countries and in other very primitive conditions. In those places the postmodern attitude may not be possible but there ethical norms are regulated by the family, the god, the tradition etc. Postmodern business ethics is only possible in so-called new-technology firms where new working culture and customs are prevailing. A traditional firm, as for example Smith's engineering manufacture, operates according to the same ethics as it always done. The personality of the entrepreneur, the business idea, the business line, the manner how things have always been handled, dictates the basis and direction of the ethics of activities. The question whether there is economic depression or not, determines what the firm has to give to the society, as sponsor or as "good corporate citizen". If the firm has no money there is nothing to give away either. In a unilateral culture, the postmodern attitude cannot give any new, fruitful perspective, although it would be useful when analysing the phenomena of big cities.

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