

Making Sense of Modern Business Ethics

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This essay takes as fundamental that ethics is essentially about human flourishing. What makes an act practically reasonable, or moral, is that it leads to human flourishing; what makes an act practically unreasonable, or immoral, is that it leads away from human flourishing. This is a common theme from Plato through St. Thomas to, more recently, John Finnis, Basil Mitchell and Alasdair MacIntyre. This paper will discuss the application of this assumption to the academic discipline of business ethics. The first part of this essay argues for the unavoidability of business ethics. Craig Ehrlich, in his recent article, "Is Business Ethics Necessary?", pointedly argues that business ethics does not do any work. It provides no guidance for business practitioners that law and considerations of long-term profitability do not already provide. His argument suggests that business ethics has no real role in the practice of business. If it is the case that an action will be reasonable only if it is moral, the type of argument Ehrlich makes, a particularly modern one that separates law from morality, is problematic because "enlightened self-interest" itself becomes a moral category. Thus, a manager involved in business cannot on pain of irrationality ignore ethical considerations in making her business judgments. This conclusion, however, makes business ethics more complicated. As the work of Alasdair MacIntyre has shown, the sort of ethical universality taken for granted by modern ethics will not exist between those who do not share a conception of human nature. The second part of this essay responds to some recent work in business ethics utilizing the work of MacIntyre. Geoff Moore has argued that MacIntyre's analysis of virtue, practices, and institutions provides a useful way of understanding corporate character. Among other things, a good, or virtuous, corporation will be one that understands it exists to sustain a practice and for that reason will resist corrupting temptations to focus on external goods such as profits. If correct, Moore's argument would provide a standpoint from which to begin to critique corporation activities ethically. This paper argues that Moore underestimates the difficulty of establishing a cogent conception of a MacIntyrean practice in the context of contemporary business. Finally, the paper argues that recent theological analyses of economics business, for example, in the work of D. Stephen Long and Michael J. Naughton, provide a more defensible conception of business ethics because they operate from a particularized conception of human nature.