

Case Histories in Business Ethics
Edited by Chris Megone & Simon J. Robinson
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After Enron, cynics would be inclined to dismiss business ethics as an oxymoron. However, this timely book, edited by a philosopher and a theologian, refutes this lazy assumption and makes a convincing argument for the vital role of ethics in business and its integral part in decision-making. The contributors are drawn from a disparate array of backgrounds and their contrasting perspectives gives the reader access to a span of interpretations on ethics in business.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part considers theoretical approaches to business ethics. Chapter one, by Sir Adrian Cadbury, entitled, 'Ethical decision-making in business' is slightly discursive with, for instance, the author anecdotally citing his grandfather's campaign against the Boer War. More contemporary is the author's observation that, 'Shelving difficult decisions is probably the least ethical course of all.' Given Sir Adrian's experiences 'downsizing' at Cadbury's it would have been instructive if this observation had been developed. Conversely, the author draws on his expertise drafting codes of best practice to make a number of telling observations on the nature of such codes.

Chapter two, by Chris Megane, is not a light read. It has the daunting heading 'Two Aristotelian approaches to business ethics'. Sternberg's approach to business ethics is quoted at length. Her robust defence of maximising owner value and her criticism of 'social responsibilities' are tightly argued. She also launches a measured criticism of 'stakeholder theory' for being the new orthodoxy that destroys accountability. The second half of this chapter considers 'Aristotelian virtue theory and ethics'. The reader is introduced to the 'Nicomachean Ethics'; the ultimate good -*eudaimonia*- and the *acritic*: someone who reaches the correct decision, but fails to do it.

The relevance of this theory to the modern business context is established, but Churchill's comment on it all being Greek is brought to mind.

Part two comprises seven chapters on 'Topics and case histories'. These chapters vary in length and in quality. However, the first chapter in this section is an excellent analysis of the dialogue between business and NGOs and the legitimacy of the stakeholder approach in conflicts. Entitled, 'Shell, Greenpeace and Brent Spa: the politics of dialogue', the author is Emmy-award winning reporter and producer, Jon Entine. He perspicaciously observes that, 'Brent Spa reaffirms that the simplistic distinction between 'progressive' action groups that purportedly fight for the little guy and so called 'evil' corporations is a caricature that disguises a more textured reality.' This accurate evaluation is a valuable counterweight to, the largely unaccountable, NGOs that are prone to displays of self-righteousness. Entine observes acutely, 'In this media driven age, clever 'green' and 'progressive' companies and 'public interest' groups sometimes act like the old hard-line corporations they ridicule.'

Chapter four, 'Whistleblowing: The new perspective' argues in favour of promoting a 'whistleblowing culture'. The worst examples of the 'current culture' are listed and

this 'culture of silence' is rightly criticised: it is costly and undermines public confidence in organisations, businesses and governments. However, the danger of promoting a 'sneak culture', which are all too real, are not broached.

Chapter five, 'The Rick and Bianca case history' is a brief description of an ethical conflict, contributed by 'Public Concern at Work'. This provides a succinct exercise to access, what the editors term, a 'quasi-experience' in ethics through the stimulation of a case history.

Chapter six is a detailed exposition of the 'Challenger Flight 51-L' tragedy. The engineering design problems are explained, as are the failings of the managerial systems and the pernicious influence of politically driven 'over ambitious targets'. The author, Simon Robinson, concludes by noting the irony that too much public scrutiny served to undermine safety. This was because the management structures were riven with conflicting interests that prevented transparency and the necessary checks and balances from being implemented.

Chapter Seven, 'Pain and partnership' by the trade unionist, John Edmonds, laments the effects on the UK economy of neo-liberal economic policies. He argues for a greater emphasis to be placed on training and partnership between managers and employees. In his view, Britain needs to be inspired by the decidedly unfashionable European social democrat model of economic management,

Chapter nine is a fascinating case history on perhaps the most famous instance of alleged unethical corporate behaviour: 'Nestle baby milk substitute and international marketing'. The author, Simon Robinson, is a theologian and he rightly draws attention to the inequality in power between multinationals and consumers in the less developed world. The case history dissects Nestle's marketing strategies and the global criticisms that they provoked. The WHO Code on marketing is described, as is Nestlé's eventual and, perhaps, slightly disingenuous embracing of 'social responsibility'. The author concludes with a number of stimulating thoughts on stakeholding and the social responsibility of business. He also notes that this case demonstrates that multinationals, and by inference all business, cannot afford to ignore the debate on ethical behaviour; the alternative is to risk a brush with campaigners willing, and able, to tarnish the most carefully crafted corporate image. The final chapter, 'The role of case histories in business ethics' is a justification of case histories in 'behaviour change' and in the acquisition of *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Chris Megan contends that case histories contribute to the acquisition of *nous* (intellectual perception) and that they can be used to 'affect the character development of the student.' Stripped of the philosophy this chapter is perhaps a tad self evident and possibly superfluous. However, as a general defence of the case history method it is cogently expressed and argued with impeccable Aristotelian logic. 'Case studies in business ethics' offers readers an introduction to theoretical approaches to business ethics. The theory is challenging, but with perseverance, informative and rewarding. The seven case histories are also stimulating, instructive and likely to lead to the acquisition of *nous*.

