

[TITLE] Editorial musings on what makes the blood flow in business ethics research

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I

Editorial essays, such as this one, in which incoming editors to reputed academic journals present their views of a field, their strategy for a journal, and how they are going to impact an ongoing ecology of academic discourses, are a strange genre. Its authors traverse the tightrope stretched between change and continuity, seeking to inspire and renew without alienating the community on whose efforts the reputation of the journal is built and without compromising the reputation of that journal. We accepted the honorable responsibility of leading BEQ, because we admire its pluralism and welcoming of multiple perspectives, the rigor and quality of its editorial review process, and the high-quality work that results from that process. These are qualities to which we have committed ourselves and that we seek to advance.

We are well aware that the reputation of a respectable journal such as BEQ, has built up over time, as the result of the dedication and effort of many individuals: our predecessors, associated editors, reviewers, authors. It has thus become institutionalized; it has, over time, obtained a 'life of its own' (Selznick, 1949). In light of this, we see our role as being *primi inter pares*. On that same account, we are somewhat skeptical of the embellishment of the leadership of individual editors, a phenomenon that one may occasionally encounter in informal conversations. Editorial leadership is teamwork; it has multiple dimensions, including both gatekeeping and curating promising manuscript submissions to publication. Yet, and precisely because of institutionalization, the ability of editors—and their editorial essays—to influence authors' decisions on what they study, how they write, and where they submit their work can easily be overstated. Consequently, in preparing for the professional and functional aspects of their new role, prospective editors are well advised to read, for example, Baruch's et al. (2008) *Opening the Black Box of Editorship*, because of its considerate and practical advice. But alongside they also may wish to read Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, for example, as a reminder that the ability of leadership to make a difference in the unfolding of the events that make

up history can easily be exaggerated; the views, strategies, and plans of the generals of the various armies in the Napoleonic wars were, according to Tolstoy, largely irrelevant for the outcomes of their battles (cf. March & Weil, 2005).

With these opening comments in mind, we take the opportunity to articulate some of our beliefs and sources of inspiration, not as an agenda for instigating major change, but as a means of introducing ourselves.

II

We believe, for example, that research and writing can be among the most fulfilling parts of academic life, and that therefore our role as editors relates to maintaining publishing as a joyful endeavour. In many ways, writing can be and should remain serious fun. In other words, and even if at times writing can be hard work, it should also be an inspiring, gratifying activity such that it allows the blood to pulse more strongly and pleasurably through the veins of our authors and that its result interests and intrigues our readers. In this sense, we draw inspiration from Barthes' (1975) distinction between 'texts of pleasure' and 'texts of bliss'. A text of pleasure contents with tradition, it comes from a culture and does not break with it. A text of bliss, on the other hand, creates discomfort, elicits a state of loss, unsettles assumptions, and messes with the reader's consistency of taste, memories, and values. We believe the field of business ethics and its related disciplines can do with a bit more of this kind of bliss. Celebrating writing that accomplishes its contributions to theory requires a kind of patience with difference, and discipline in crossing boundaries. This holds not only for authors, but also for readers, reviewers, and editors.

As alluded to above, we perceive of the field of business ethics as having multiple beating hearts and many souls that animate it. Some parts of the ecosystem draw on the humanities, with a strong reliance on the discipline of philosophy, whereas for other parts the social sciences provide structure and animation. Keeping the blood flowing and the spirits soaring requires engagement with multiple disciplines and methodologies. BEQ has built its reputation as leading business ethics journal in the American context by carefully honing its commitments to scientific rigor, while maintaining an

openness to the full breath of new developments in the field, constantly pushing methodological and philosophical boundaries. In terms of orientation, the journal publishes articles drawing from both analytical and continental philosophy, and from both positive (or positivist), interpretive, and critical traditions. Topic-wise, the journal covers research on business ethics, CSR, sustainability, and a plethora of related terms (Figure 1), which coexist in an intricate, continually evolving ecosystem. This plurality in terms of orientation and topic allows for the making of important contributions. Yet, this situation also challenges writers, as they should not forget about and then speak past other parts of this rich tapestry of concepts and practices while engaging with their own preferred part. In this process, all disciplinary approaches and methodologies are important, as long as they remain open and accessible to others who may not be so familiar with their respective terminologies and preferences. In this way, a commitment to interdisciplinarity always requires the practices of translation, illustration, and even self-deprecation. After all, the 'disciplines' are simply in service of helping us to do what Business Ethics Quarterly has always been known for: offering significant and novel theoretical contributions to social scientific and philosophical theory in the broad field of business ethics.

***** Insert Figure 1 about here *****

It is this commitment to theory that we intend to instigate, support, nurture, and defend. Yet, we do not see theory as opposed to practice, but precisely as animated by it, emergent from it, and in critical relationship to it. It is this additional dimension of plurality that makes 'applied' work not only challenging but also meaningful. Many of us had to contend with being called a lesser philosopher, sociologist, linguist, etc., for the mere fact of being focused on the workings of practice. But as an interdisciplinary community we should perhaps cherish as a badge of honour our own status as parasites (Serres, 1982) operating within the holy disciplines. Drawing from the work of Serres, Gasparin et al. (2020) recently discussed the function of parasites in an ecosystem. The parasite is key to the health of the broader system on which it feeds, as it animates its defenses, while at the same time instigating the system's renewal in relation to its environment, as the parasite cuts away at the

system's excesses. Parasites shirk purity for the sake of practice and process. Seen in this way, there is value in remaining open to the reversibility of the parasitic life, i.e., to become the host to other parasites and, as such, not to guard too jealously what we consider to be our own disciplinary approaches and methodologies but to be open to co-contamination.

Therefore, we consider theory to be significant, novel, and interesting when it has the capacity to relationally engage along the various dimensions of plurality—orientation, topic, theory/practice. The hope is that our authors manage to find ways to pursue their interests beyond the self-interest of academic careers and impact factors—however relevant are these external goods associated with the practice of academic research (Macintyre, 1981)—and thus to maintain a sense of 'inter-esse' (Oosterling, 2014: 104). To fully participate relationally means exploring the 'inter-vidual', rather than maintaining the 'individual'; it means engaging with others that have similar interests (knowing the extant literature), while exploring what is interesting and novel (making a contribution) and aiming to reach audiences beyond the immediate circle of fellow specialists.

From our perspective, 'interesting' theory engages beyond straightjackets and intrigues through its reframings and disruptions. In this commitment, we take issue with the types of binary distinctions that may lead to rifts, dispute, polarisation, and—simply speaking—the perpetuation of blind spots and echo chambers. This would mean nurturing some of the in-between spaces, where much remains to be done to develop new thinking in our field. For instance, we would be interested in thinking in which the mind-body dualism gives way to understandings of the embodied mind, whether the approach is behavioral, philosophical, sociological, institutional etc. And we welcome analyses that steer clear of normative versus descriptive divides but instead seek to understand processes of valuation, whether in organisational ethics, CSR, or sustainability. Such analyses may also help us engage more meaningfully with critiques regarding business ethics' instrumental use in organizations, while at the same time not throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater in terms of underestimating the value of 'useful' theorizations.

III

All of the above is in line with the tradition of the journal. While seeking to cover a broad ground, BEQ has built its reputation as being what our eminent predecessor Bruce Barry articulated as “small, stylish, and scintillating.” To this, we would add that BEQ is also selective. The very fact that BEQ is a quarterly journal with only a small number of spots for contributions demands selectivity, precisely in order to maintain its style and scintillation. So, what would be the criteria for this selectivity? We believe that in terms of defining what makes a contribution important, interesting, and useful, inspiration can be drawn from Rorty’s (1991) distinction of three ways in which we can conceive of the Western philosophical tradition: as scientific, as poetic, and as political. We see these three ways as important dimensions or qualities in the full breath of business ethics research (and not just its philosophical pillar) and consider them, not as mutually exclusive, but as complementary and mutually reinforcing. Let us elaborate and try to explain, because each of these three conceptualizations may easily lead to misunderstanding.

Philosophy of Science has yielded much discussion on the way in which research should be done so that rigor and validity can be ensured. This has implications for methods and the way in which arguments are evidenced. Debate as to which approach offers the best way to conduct research, has allowed multiple paradigms to emerge. Whereas some proceed from positivist assumptions about truth, other approaches are more interpretative or critical. We want to make it clear that BEQ accepts any approach on this wide spectrum, as long as the work conforms to the highest standards defined from within its own paradigm. When properly done, its results—whether presented as ‘understanding’, ‘explanation’, ‘theory’, ‘knowledge’—are ‘warranted assertions’ (Dewey, 1938). This holds for both empirical and conceptual work. Making advances in the social scientific or philosophical theory regarding business ethics requires a logically consistent argumentation whose premises are grounded in what is held as valid knowledge. We consider this a necessary condition.

We have, for example, since the start of our term, too frequently encountered research that endorses faith in scientific method but fails to make a significant novel contribution. It is not uncommon to

encounter a manuscript that reports on the results of a research project that only make incremental advances on received understandings, such as when it—in the traditions of quantitative research—merely adds a moderator or a mediator to a model or tests an established model in a new empirical context, or when it—in the case of qualitative research—slavishly follows the standard template of a commonly cited approach or is merely descriptive of its data and empirical context (cf. Reinecke et al., 2016). Typically, the articles that are written from these research projects do little more than reporting of findings and conclusions. They are monological. We might say that they forget about the need to speak *with* an audience. Such manuscripts will routinely be desk-rejected (as, by the way, has been standing policy with our eminent predecessors).

Speaking with an audience may require that one helps others understand the particular ‘plane of immanence’ from which the research operates. As Deleuze and Guattari (1994) explain in *What is Philosophy?*, we simply cannot engage with each other properly if we don’t acknowledge that each of our approaches to explanation is a very specific attempt, limited in space and time, and informed by our own specific preoccupations. In fact, we would concur with as Deleuze and Guattari’s (2007, p.90) description of any form of agency as reliant on “all the attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alterations, amalgamations, penetrations, and extensions that affect bodies of all kinds in their relations to one another.” We are, after all, only ‘authors’ because of everything and everyone that we have related to over many years, yet these influences often function on the level on unarticulated assumptions. Writing is an opportunity to make them explicit for the sake of being dialogical.

This also means that we cannot rest assured that our own positions, whether as editors, authors, reviewers, or readers, are unassailable. Here, we find inspiration, for instance, in Dewey and Bentley’s (1949) *Knowing and the Known*, in de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (2000), and—more recently from among the pages of this journal—in Rosenthal and Buchholz (2014) or even Gustafson (2000). These and other publications offer nuanced critiques of subjectivity and highlight the struggle in dealing with the messiness of developing any sort of claim or stance. The ongoing task of being

dissatisfied with our attempt at finding the single best possible ethical stance is also well articulated in Derrida's (1992) articulation of the undecidability that lies at the heart of ethics. None of this means, of course, that one cannot and should not make ambitious claims, make ethical decisions, propose normative judgment, and defend these to the extent that their defense is reasonable (and otherwise work on revising them), but rather, that one does so with the awareness that one's work is never quite done (Painter-Morland, 2010). Ethics is conditioned in the fundamental impossibility of knowing for sure and the awareness that things may turn out different from how it was thought out, hoped, or feared.

But then, as Arendt (1971, p.435) articulated it, "There are no dangerous thoughts; thinking itself is a dangerous activity." It is in this spirit that we hope to encourage authors to take risks, to try our patience for working with a daring idea, rather than merely seeking evidence. As such, we are looking for manuscripts that go beyond stringing premises together towards a conclusion, by interrogating the way the premises are phrased, how they may be normatively defended, and how they may be refined or critically re-evaluated..

IV

Why would there be a need or demand for new vocabularies, for new articulations, explanations, and theories? They may be needed for various reasons. Because the world in which we dwell has changed. Because the problems that concern us have changed and new ones have emerged. Because the old metaphors have become worn out and no longer inspire. But also, and importantly so, because business ethics is animated (not only by explaining what is, but also) by helping us "to find out what may be, the possibilities now open to us" (Follett, 1924: xii), by a melioristic aspiration.

A word of caution is in place, however. We cannot assume that every single new concept, articulation, or vocabulary is as 'good'—that is, productive, helpful, plausible, inspiring, ...—as any other. Indeed, "some vocabularies are ... better tools [than other vocabularies] for dealing with the world for one or another purpose" (Rorty, 1989, p.21). It is in this regard, that we believe that Alvesson and Blom's (2021) critique of 'hembigs'—their neologistic acronym for 'hegemonic, ambiguous, big concepts'—is

relevant. They offer a timely critique of how certain concepts—they elaborate on examples such as leadership, strategy, and institution, but there are many more such concepts—may crowd out critical analysis and thinking as such. Although their critique addresses the field of organization studies, it has broader relevance for other, related fields, including business ethics. Instead of developing and strengthening the hegemony of these and other hemibigs, we hope that BEQ authors will challenge the assumptions that underpin them, and craft new concepts (cf. Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). Nevertheless, one should also acknowledge the danger lurking in such explorations, as experimenting with new concepts does not entail an embrace of obscurity or unreadable denseness. Herein lies the challenge: how to renew thought rigorously, yet playfully. And therefore, but mindful of the word of caution, we would like to encourage authors to push against the boundaries of language and to dare to relate critically, experimentally, or poetically to tradition.

It is in the poetic spirit of enriching and developing our vocabularies for business ethics that we are planning the introduction of a new section in the journal, later in 2022. We call this new section ‘ARS’, the ‘art review section’, whose first dedicated editor will be Daniel Hjorth (Copenhagen Business School). It will briefly feature an artist, a piece of their work, or an exposition, and make a point about how it is relevant for business ethics.

Why do we wish to institute such a section? We have multiple reasons, which ultimately animate the same intention. For example, if Putnam (2004) is correct, or if his hope is not too unfounded, that we are in the process of realizing a third, pragmatist enlightenment, and if enlightenment is properly defined as a novel way of thinking, one that stands back from both conventional opinion and the authority of revelation, and therefore dares to ask “Why?” (p.92), then there is space for those who “are willing to be nonconformist, and willing to advocate radical reform” (p.96-97). We want to create such space and stimulate such non-conformism, perhaps even the exploring of pataphysical science (Gasparin et al., 2021). Art can be a great source of inspiration. After all, “For hundreds of years, in fact, there have been men [*sic*] whose function has been precisely to see and to make us see what we do not naturally perceive. They are the artists” (Bergson, 1946, p.158). If we are to follow the method

of inquiry—instead of the methods of tenacity, authority, or a priori metaphysics (Peirce, 1877)—then we need both critical and creative thinking. Dewey, with all his references to ‘science’ as a model for (moral) inquiry, should be reproached for having adopted too frequently such a limited account of inquiry *and*, at the same time, be credited for having insisted on the relevance of affect and aesthetics to (moral) inquiry. In this sense, there is no significant contradiction between his *Logic* and his *Art as Experience* (Pappas, 2008), just a difference of emphasis. Acknowledging the qualities of affect and aesthetics in (moral) inquiry makes it possible to transition from a ‘spectator point of view’ to one that enables ‘seeing problems from the inside’ (Parmar, Phillips & Freeman, 2015). Artists can help us in this respect to see things differently, if not ‘from the inside’ than perhaps from another side, and thereby to enhance the moral imagination (Werhane, 1999) of both ourselves as writers and our readers. We can invoke Robert Musil’s *The Man ohne Eigenschaften*, when he suggests that “If there is a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility” (1995, p.10).

V

If a sense of possibility, a new vocabulary, is to be more than idle fantasy or inflated hot air, then it would need to be connected to the sense of reality, to practice. Therefore, Musil’s sense of possibility has a counterpoint in Rorty’s philosophy as political. In our interpretation, this political dimension refers to the melioristic ambitions of business ethics. The poetic dimension, taken on its own, may lead one to abstract poetry, verbosity, but when connected to the political dimension, it may become a proposal for intervention, inspired by and engaging with practice (cf. Pouryousefi & Freeman, 2021). It then offers a perspective that is emancipatory and affirmative rather than single-mindedly prescriptive or critical. In this understanding, research becomes perspectival in a second, additional sense: not only in the sense of being done from a particular perspective—as argued in section III—but also in the sense of offering a perspective onto, or towards, ‘what may be’.

"Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men [*sic*]" (Dewey, 1917, p.65). In the case of business ethics, this may seem like stating the obvious. Business

ethics has long been described as a domain of ‘applied’ ethics, since it aims to engage with the practice of business, either activity in business, or in developing normative standards for business. We are not convinced of the binary between theory and practice which lies at the heart of the notion of ‘applied’ work. In fact, we are skeptical of work that simply puts some theoretical idea ‘in the service’ of business. Some work in organizational ethics unfortunately generates mere normative boxes for business to check while pursuing ‘business as usual’. Other work shows relationships between variables without actually helping us understand why this analysis of what ‘is’ should inform how we ought to go about business. In our minds, such kinds of engagements with practice may be considered a worthwhile endeavor by other journals, but we believe in the possibility of moral progress and would like to challenge our authors to vigorously pursue this with us.

Our theorizing must be put to the test, by our colleagues, our students, and in and through our engagement with practice. All this cannot be satisfied with the obligatory, add-on discussion that specifies—as part of the final paragraphs of the conclusion section of an article—the ‘implication for practice’ or ‘managerial implications’ of its findings or argument. Instead, such implications start from the motivation for the question or issue that is being addressed.

We also embrace theory-development that takes account how the broader political economy shapes and informs normative discussions, and that seeks to engage meaningfully with social praxis. It is the way in which business ethics often operates in a vacuum and remains focused on micro (individual) or meso-level (organizational) ethical issues, that has led critics (e.g., Jones, Parker & ten Bos, 2005; Rhodes & Pullen, 2015) to challenge its commitment to real socio-political change. We therefore would like to challenge authors to not only contextualize their micro and meso-level analyses, but also to pursue topics that allow us to address the social, environmental, and development challenges that the world faces at this juncture. Without systemic change, our research will remain myopic in focus and superfluous in terms of impact. In this regard, it is also important to extend the reach of the journal’s analyses beyond its North American roots and its Anglo-European inspirations, towards other parts of the world.

Back to the strangeness of the genre of this kind of editorial essays. In the dual understanding that the field and its community expect such an essay—this essay—to offer a view, vision, or vista, and that such an essay—this essay—may momentarily inspire but at the end of the day is unlikely to make too much of a difference in the day-to-day habits that inform and make up the regular work of BE scholarship writ large, we took incredible joy and pleasure in its writing. Therefore, and beyond anything else, we hope to have the honor of receiving inspired manuscripts. As editors, it is our task to identify reviewers that can be good conversation partners for authors of manuscripts submitted to the journal, and to see through to publication those manuscripts that are the most promising in this respect. One should not bother to write, if one is not dissatisfied with the answers and insights that already are available; the task of making a contribution that advances understanding in a major way, is essential for even entering the review process. We are looking forward to a pleasant and productive collaboration with the wide diversity people in this field: readers, authors, reviewers, associate editors, guest editors, managing editor Joanna, and the staff at Cambridge UP. This may require of all of us a certain generosity, even (self-)sacrifice (Oosterling, 2014, p.110); these are central values to maintaining a truly vibrant intellectual community.

Acknowledgment

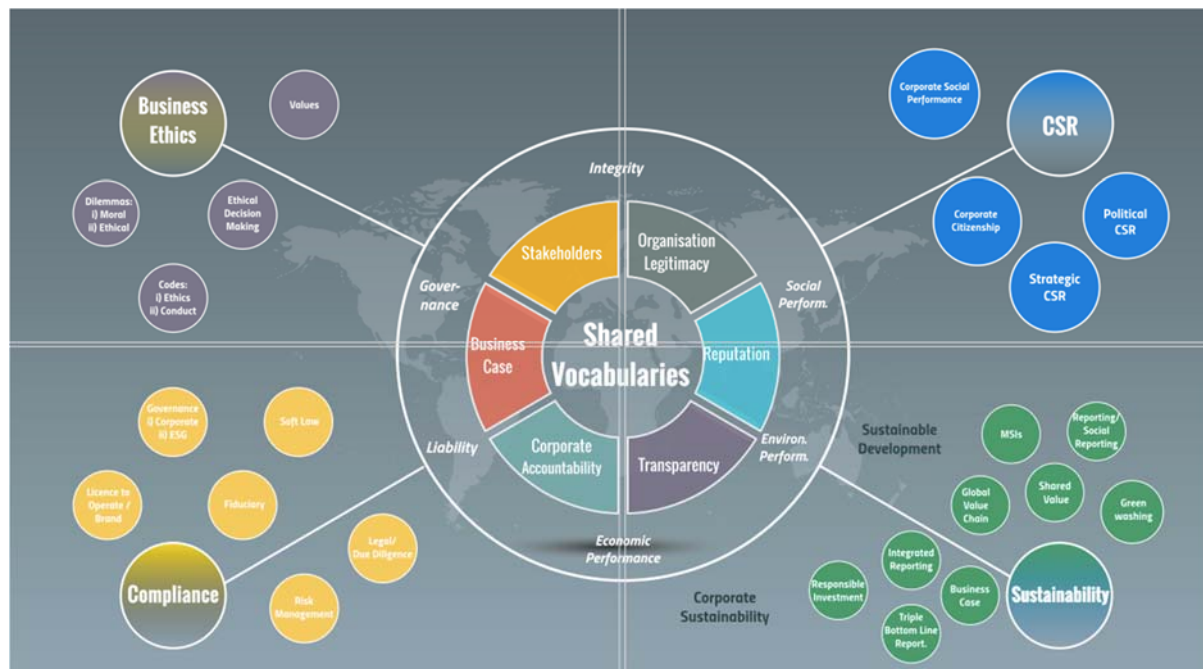
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Figure 1: Shared Vocabularies



[CAPTION to figure 1] The diagram is the result of a PRME project entitled “Shared Vocabularies” led by Nottingham Business School and IEDC-Bled School of Management on the request of the UN Global Compact Corporate Champions (Painter, Russon, & Karakilic, 2018). These practitioners explained that they were simply ‘lost in translation’, and needed some conceptual clarification, a kind of ‘dictionary’ of sorts.