Interpreting Ethical Polyphony

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Focus: Transatlantic Dialogue in Corporate Social Responsibility

Editorial introduction: interpreting ethical polyphony

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A modest project seeking to present some distinctly European perspectives on business ethics during the annual meeting of the Society for Business Ethics (SBE) in Atlanta in 2006 was conceived at the 2005 European Business Ethics Network (EBEN) meeting in Bonn, Germany. Responding to an earlier call from SBE, the initial plan was to offer an annual panel at which voices from both EBEN and SBE might be assembled in the spirit of collaborative scholarship. For the inaugural panel – with gratitude to the additional, adventurous participation of the editors of this journal and of Business & Society Review (B&SR) – we have the opportunity to share with a wider audience not only the written output of the resulting platform (Borgerson 2007, Jones 2007, Spence 2007), but also the considered responses to these papers from members of SBE. This paper will briefly contextualise the origins of that platform; then it will illustrate strands of the original papers to which the authors here (De George 2008, Phillips 2008, Thompson 2008) respond; and, finally, it will reflect critically on the polyphony adduced.

The project’s objective originated in support of the larger vision of the SBE’s Committee on International Collaboration, chaired by Daryl Koehn and Laura Hartman. The committee was formed to foster global collaboration and participation by SBE members in international venues as well as to encourage participation in the SBE by international colleagues. This committee was also asked by the SBE Board to explore activities in several areas in support of programme chairs at successive annual meetings, including the creation of sessions with a particular focus on comparative global issues. In an effort to support and to enhance that agenda, this first panel was convened to provide exposure of SBE attendees to several perhaps-yet-unheard perspectives on one particular topic relevant to SBE members (corporate social responsibility), while also simultaneously offering participative opportunities on the annual programme to colleagues from further afield.

The panel was European to the extent that the four participants were each engaged in academic practice at universities in Europe (if, indeed, the United Kingdom may be regarded as a part of Europe) at the time the panel was assembled in the Fall of 2005. Panellists were asked to address, explore and present the European perspective on corporate social responsibility. In facilitating the panel, we intended that perspectives serve as an effective polyphony; they were revelatory rather than deterministic and exist in common with another work including this notion in its approach to presenting material (Hartman 2005). The focus is ‘to encourage readers to open their minds to a variety of opinions’, not to persuade readers that there is any right answer to these issues, ‘but instead to ensure that all stakeholders’ perspectives are considered’ (pp. v–vi). In fact, we

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did not define from the start – nor in fact do we define now in the contextual midst – the nature of the ‘European perspective’ on corporate social responsibility. The scholars, through their work, certainly speak for themselves and no one would claim, we would hasten to add, do they do so with one voice. The polyphony to which we refer, therefore, presented itself fully in the presentation of their commentary and perspective, and is indeed enhanced by the critical review that follows herein. In ‘European and American Perspectives on Corporate Social Responsibility,’ Robert Phillips tackles the epistemological possibility of such perspectives we adduced. In his argument, he suggests that globally comparative perspectives may mean more when informed by critical management studies (CMS) rather than according to the potentially infinite casuistry of a politically or geographically defined parameter. Phillips claims that a taxonomy of ethics based on geography says nothing. Kindly, perhaps, he does not take issue with the European-ness of our panel, notwithstanding its nationally varied constituents.

Although each of the responses is, of course, more comprehensively enjoyed and appreciated when read in tandem with the original catalysing theorists, they were indeed crafted by the authors to stand alone as functioning moral arguments. We will provide but a brief introduction, suggesting context within the conversation, but leaving the fuller detail of the argument to the individual authors and direct readers of the B&SR issue immediately preceding this volume for greater explication. In addition, having elicited comments for this volume on the perspectives offered previously, we do not wish to find that we are now presenting as introductory notes Anglo-American comments (given our personal locales) on the American responses to the original European perspectives. A simple dialogue (as opposed to a trialogue) is complicated enough. For the benefit of those who have not yet seen the subject panel papers, the original panel consisted of presentations from academics Janet Borgerson, Campbell Jones, Laura Spence and Dirk Matten (from whom no final paper was published by prior arrangement).

Janet Borgerson’s (2007) paper, ‘On the harmony of feminist ethics and business ethics’, asks us to consider strands of feminism as neglected in the present imperfect pursuit of corporate social responsibility. To this end, Borgerson suggests in a progressively focused genealogical discussion the indicative traits and interpretations which may be considered to constitute a relevant feminist discourse. This includes a qualitative discussion of distinctly feminist concerns carefully contrasted in reference to a clear discussion of some strands which are regularly conflated – such as the (potentially repressive) ethics of care. The paper suggests that mainstream business ethics and corporate social responsibility literature both tend to actively misrepresent and passively foreclose discussion of these discourses. In the second part of the paper, Borgerson adduces in exemplary counterpoint an analysis of three prominent feminist ethicists. The work of Claudia Card, Margaret Urban Walker and Iris Marion Young are acutely sampled as a means of demonstrating the value of feminist ethical insights for the purposes of analysis, articulation and intervention in the development of theory and practice. For anyone unfamiliar with these names, Borgerson’s exemplary and indicative analysis makes a stimulating and compelling prompt to immediate, wider reading.

Campbell Jones (2007) offers a discussion of Jacques Derrida as his contribution to the European perspective in his article, ‘Friedman with Derrida’. Possibly anticipating the performative question that necessarily seems to follow all interpretive research (Scapens forthcoming), Jones elects to contrast Derrida and Milton Friedman. The paper proceeds to mediate Friedman’s axiomatic claim for corporate social responsibility (‘the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits’) through deconstruction. In his detailed reading of Friedman with Derrida – the intertextuality of this opening indexation is analysed – Jones follows the subtle nuances of the axiom genealogically as it developed through a number of iterations from Friedman’s work in the 1950s. This results in an analysis of Friedman which suggests that his conclusions for corporate social responsibility are
inconsistent and at odds with themselves. Further, Friedman evidently does not know what are the social responsibilities of business; in addition, it seems to be the case that he is unaware of this position. Jones articulates a case for deconstruction as a sound ethical basis of an essentially anti-foundationalist critique of ethics in commerce and corporate social responsibility.

In ‘CSR and small business in a European policy context: the five ‘C’s of CSR and small business research agenda 2007’, Spence (2007) has methodically nurtured the special interest domain of ethics and corporate social responsibility in small to medium-sized enterprises, while many of us remain apparently mesmerised by the pornographic excesses of the constituents of the large indices. Spence asks us instead to consider that this evident bias of research agenda may lead to an imbalanced view of the underlying, rather than headline, state of business ethics and corporate social responsibility. Spence patiently elaborates a multifarious call to turn some of this attention away from the sacred monsters and carefully articulates a quantitatively compelling rationale to justify looking at corporate social responsibility both in these SMEs and specifically within the European context. Trans-national corporations have an essentially parasitic relation with the media as a consequence of which public discourses are disproportionately overwhelmed with the exaggerated excesses represented by this handful of firms. While not drawing direct comparisons with these trans-national corporate excesses, it becomes clear from reading this paper that EU-based SMEs have the potential to participate substantively in the overall development of corporate social responsibility as actors and employers on an individual basis as well as by reference to their positions in the supply chains of the trans-national firms. Inherent issues of scale and context, Spence argues, indicate a difference in how scholars approach such research sites.

The responses appear in full in this issue and thus it is superfluous to offer anything more than a guide to the papers which respond to this polyphony. However, and again without our intervention or direction, three distinct and different authorial approaches are taken as the basis of discussion. Robert Phillips, mentioned above, essentially addresses his concerns by reference to a reasoned defence of pragmatism and performativity. In taking this position, in calling for attention to the issue of practical relevance, Phillips provides this polyphony on business ethics with a rejoinder to what, in the cognate field of social interpretive accounting, Robert Scapens (forthcoming) has named the ‘so what question’. Phillips opens by questioning the basis of our perspectival project. He is unconvinced by the possible relevance of our implied ethical taxonomy based, as it is, on apparent geography or culture. More extensively, the inherent non-performativity of Jones and Borgerson takes Phillips in the direction of a critique informed by critical management studies through strands carefully elicited from Fournier and Grey (2000) and closing with a potentially telling reference to a fragment of conversation from Alice in Wonderland.

Richard De George (2008) directs his response principally to the work of Jones. His title goes some way to organising our expectations of his position in advance: ‘An American perspective on CSR and the tenuous relevance of Jacques Derrida’. In his comments, De George offers his discussion of Jones contextualised by an extensive and authoritative philosophical genealogy in which he reinterprets the relation between ethics and corporate social responsibility from a unapologetically and self-acknowledged American perspective. This section alone is a commendable and lucid representation of the philosophical arguments with regard to the basis of ethics in business: corporate social responsibility informed by a virtuous clarity and scholarly authority rarely offered in such summaries. It is a tacitly deconstructive exercise masterfully delivered in apparent stylistic counterpoint to Jones’s elaborate undermining of Friedman.

In ‘Gender equity and corporate social responsibility in a post-feminist era’, Lindsay Thompson takes a third approach in focusing her discussion on Borgerson. Thompson willingly acknowledges Borgerson’s cogent delineation of the value of feminist ethics as a vehicle for enriching and refining the domain and practice of business.
ethics. Notwithstanding, Thompson considers what remains unexamined, or arguably neglected in the subject paper which is, again possibly influenced by pragmatic concerns, the specific moral claims of gender equity in business and in employment. Thompson develops a case for including gender equity more explicitly among the corporate social responsibility priorities of international business, arguing that the principles of gender equity themselves constitute compelling moral claims; further that extant models of cultural commerce are unimpeachable in their structural and systemic bias towards creating both advantages for men and disadvantages for women. Finally, Thompson challenges the corporate fiction arguments which are perceived as inherent in both Borgerson and Jones, reasserting that businesses and corporations are moral agents with duties to adopt gender equity as a priority of corporate citizenship and social responsibility.

Contemplating this polyphony as a single work, it is we suggest palpable that these six authors march to different drums. To claim that one of these drums is however distinctly European and (to put Aristotelian logic to good use) the other drum is thus not European is problematic for us, as we are a categorically divided voice. Certainly, Phillips’s claim that it makes more sense to read Borgerson and Jones as critical management studies has some salience; but CMS is a well-developed special interest group at the Academy of Management, which is by no means a uniquely European constituency. De George nominally grasps the nettle by claiming to write not only an ‘American’ response, but one which questions the relevance of deconstruction for the interests that we are all addressing. Thompson’s response is arguably highly congruent to the subject of feminist concerns; but many postmodern variables of feminism (Claudia Card’s corporate fiction argument in Borgenson for example) are itemised for resistance.

It is synthetic to impose a geographical structure to ideas, and yet we tend to perform this overlay habitually in order to catalogue and categorise. The value of exploring alternative formulations by region is unimpeachable and certainly – for scholars, in the main – one of the central tenets of our professional growth and evolution. It is also certainly convenient to be able to identify an American or European perspective on corporate social responsibility so that we can presume to anticipate what to expect from those particular stakeholder groups or better understand their thought processes. It is similarly extraordinarily valuable to identify the differences between these perspectives. With some disappointment, perhaps, the desirability of an end result does not implicate its inevitability. Just as each of us does not necessarily – possibly not at all – represent the perspectives of our entire gender, neither does any of us as scholar represent the entirety of any particular perspective of our region. On the other hand, as scholars, we are perhaps better equipped to investigate and then represent those perspectives than most. We assert that the product of the efforts of these six esteemed scholars makes a commendable and erudite contribution to scholarly perspectives on the yet unresolved issues that we face in our individual academic practice.

The authors, thus, pragmatically agree upon this provisional closing. Given the scope to argue endlessly in a trite pseudo intellectual either/either argument (Gershwin & Gershwin 1936), our accord convenes artificially on the metaphor of a woven tapestry. The opening promise of interpretation is something that is left, in deconstruction, with individual readers.

For those who wish to review the original bases of the polyphony, they appear in Business & Society Review, Volume 113. In addition, we have continued this cross-continental conversation through the second annual European Perspectives panel at the SBE meeting this past August 2007. This most recent panel explored ‘Applied Ethical Research Methodologies’, seeking to address whether varying perspectives exist in answering the question of how we engage in research ethically. Is it simply a matter of aligning the modalities of our academic proposals with the requirements of the increasingly powerful departmental ethics committee? Or is that merely a pragmatic, managerialist reaction which prompts more ethical questions than it apparently answers? The European scholars invited to address the
issues discussed a range of participative action research programmes, indicated for contexts where the results of the research will be fed back into the community where it is undertaken (Reason 1988, 1994, 2005), considered to be structurally and comprehensively sound. In the end, the panel sought to find the potential for transnational co-operation through ethical methodology. We hope to again publish the resulting conversation.

We are duly grateful for the patience and forbearance of authors, reviewers and panel attendees, and aspire to a greater, richer understanding of each other, our students and ourselves as we continue the process of polyphony through these and other efforts.

References


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