Saimaa University of Applied Sciences
Faculty of Business Administration Lappeenranta
Degree Programme in International Business

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# Report of a practical thesis – Introduction to ethics for a BBA student

Thesis 2013

# Abstract

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Introduction to ethics for a BBA student, 25 pages
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The objective of this practice-based thesis is to introduce and familiarize its reader with the basic concepts and principles of ethical thinking. The motivation to write such a paper stems from the authors personal observations that, both himself and his peers, were expected to be able to do challenging moral decisions, without having any real theoretical knowledge to support these decisions with. The thesis aims to improve the reader's moral decision making skills. This short introduction to moral philosophy could also hopefully be utilized as teaching material for future BBA students.

The chosen method for conducting such a thesis was to do a brief, booklet-like introduction to moral philosophy. The necessary information was collected from various books, speeches and articles. This information was then converted to an easy to understand package.

This thesis will not give solid recommendations or results, as the topic moral philosophy rarely gives out exact answers to specific problems. However, the most common approaches to moral and ethical problems are discussed throughout the thesis, alongside with their strengths and weaknesses.


Keywords: moral philosophy, ethics, business, BBA, introduction to ethics

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# 1 The starting point of the thesis

During the authors studies it was often felt that the ethical side of business and management was not talked in enough, if it was talked at all. This is quite problematic for many reasons: mostly because ethics is extremely deeply intertwined with human societies and actions. Since Saimaa University of Applied Sciences couldn't provide its students with courses that dealt with topic, the author chose to self-learn the basics of ethics by write my thesis about it.

This created the initial motivation to start the reading process and made the authors ambitions to write his thesis on of a meaningful topic concrete. Luckily this motivation remained all the way until the very last days of writing process.

# 2 The purpose and the goals of the thesis

*"Studying ethics is senseless if it doesn't lead to a better life" - Aristotle*

The goal of the thesis is to provide the reader with an improved capability to think and act in morally challenging situations, as well as to spark an interest towards ethical thinking in general. In the thesis, these goals are not achieved by giving out rules or laws which to live by, but rather by studying and critically contemplating the most prominent philosophical theories of the field alongside with one's own understanding of ethics.

The thesis includes the basics of normative ethical thinking and the core concepts of the field. Approximately half of the thesis is intended to familiarize the reader with the role of ethics in human societies, as well as to teach the reader the basic concepts of ethics. In addition, there are three goals: to provide the reader with useful tools for ethical thinking, to provide the necessary vocabulary for discussing ethics with other people and to spark a general interest towards ethics and ethical thinking.

Influential ethical concepts will be also discussed and used in various examples in order to show the differences between ethical viewpoints. These viewpoints include the following: virtue ethics, which views ethics from the viewpoint of

one's character and the virtues that one possesses. In addition to virtue ethics the thesis discusses the concepts of consequentiality and deontology, which view ethics from the consequences of an action and from absolute commandments respectively. These three very different views are discussed and compared in order to convey the message, that there are multiple different ways of looking at ethically challenging situations, and that these views are rarely compatible with each other. This will hopefully improve the reader's capability to think and to reflect his or her own set of ethics in a rational manner.

## 3 Delimitations of the thesis

Moral philosophy, also known as ethics, is inconceivably vast topic, with thousands and thousands of books written about it through the age of human civilizations. As such, it requires a careful selection process in order for the thesis to be consistent and understandable.

One of the very first delimitations of the thesis is the topic of meta-ethics which seeks to understand the nature of ethical statements, judgments and attitudes. It is left out due to its complicatedness and generally unsuitable nature for this particular thesis. The afore mentioned complicatedness of the topic also would require vast amount of studying and research before an actual thesis on the topic could be done, indeed, such undertaking would be better suited for a master's thesis or such. However, meta-ethics will be referred to in the thesis when it is appropriate.

The topic of applied ethics, which deals on how to achieve a moral out coming in a specific situation, was emphasized at the expense of applied ethics, which include topics such as professional ethics, business ethics and organizational ethics.

Discussing these topics would require more research and knowledge that is feasible for a bachelor's thesis. Also talking about applied ethics without understanding the basics of ethics is shortsighted at best.

Descriptive ethics will also be intentionally left out from the thesis. The nature of descriptive ethics is that it studies people's beliefs about morality and as such it would be unsuitable for the thesis in question.

Value theories which deal with the questions such as: how, why and to what degree people value things, persons or ideas, is only briefly discussed in the thesis. The reasons for this are the following: value theories are relatively complicated and going through them in a comprehensive manner in a bachelor thesis would be unwise. Also doing so would contribute very little to the overall topic of the thesis.

As mentioned before, the forms of normative ethics discussed are limited to consequentiality, deontology and virtue-ethics. The reason for this decision was the fact that these three represent the most prominent approaches in the field. This makes the choosing them a logical choice.

The use of demanding technical terms and deeply philosophic approach was also avoided since the purpose of the thesis is to introduce the basics of ethics in a brief and comprehensible form. This of course limits the depth of the text, which is acceptable considering that the thesis is intended to work as a short introduction, rather than a comprehensive look into the topic of moral philosophy.

## 4 Relevance of the topic

As mentioned before, ethics play a crucial role in almost all aspects of human societies, business life being no exception. Studying the basic concepts of ethics gives the reader a better understanding of the human societies as well as business life.

As the people working in business life gets constantly more culturally diverse, the need to be able to reflect and to understand different ethical convictions and ideas grows in importance. Knowing the most influential ethical ways of thinking is likely to make it easier to understand different values and the thinking behind them.

Lastly, ethical skills could be considered as a fundamentally basic human skill, which all individuals should be able to think about and discuss in a rational manner. If a person is familiar with the basic ethical concepts and approaches and their strengths and weaknesses, he or she might be more inclined to think and value these approaches in a more of a rational manner. This hopefully translates in to more consistent and improved ethical views, both of which are important characteristics of a respected leader and a manager.

## 5 Theoretical framework

It was deemed best to study various books concerning ethics, and philosophical thinking in general, in order to get a good and comprehensive basic understanding of the topic before the actual writing process started. These books were chosen based on two factors: their reputation and the.

The books studied included the following topics: introduction to ethics, ethics in business, introduction to philosophy and introduction to conceptual thinking and history of philosophy. The comprehensive list of used sources can be found in the list of references.

It was felt that getting a thorough understanding of the philosophical mindset was crucial if this thesis was to be about basics of ethics. This is the reason why the aforementioned books, which were essentially about the basics of philosophy, were studied. They made understanding the complicated and the nuance filled word of moral philosophy much easier, which proved to be extremely helpful concerning the writing process.

It was also interesting and beneficial to learn about the different views there are, and were, to ethics and to moral situations in general. Reading about these different views improved the overall quality of the thesis by making it more diverse in its thinking, which hopefully translates into a better reading experience for anyone who picks up the actual work.

As a whole, the books that were chosen proved to be valuable, insightful and enjoyable reading. The author couldn't help but to notice that the writing style in

these books, especially the one displayed by Bertrand Russell (1950), influenced the authors own approach to writing and thinking alike. Considering Russell's considerable literary skills and the influence he has had to western philosophy, one can't help but to think that this is a very good thing indeed.

The research material is not much referred in the actual product since it was judged that having a thesis like approach, which relies heavily on references, is not a proper way to approach a guide for moral philosophy. By its nature moral philosophy is not very descriptive science: emphasis is on pondering over proclamation. The style of the thesis reflects this view and it is made to provoke thought, rather than to quench ones thirst for simple, objective answers.

## 6 Working methods

As mentioned before, the goal of the text was supposed to be informative and spark the reader's interest toward ethical thinking in general. Because of this, the writing style was done in a more of a philosophical style, where the emphasis is on the searching and pondering of questions, not so much on giving exact answers. This made it possible to govern multiple complicated topics, which otherwise would have taken hundreds of pages.

The actual thesis writing process started in late 2012, in order not have to write or think about the topic in a hurry. The first books about philosophy were studied in the late 2012, as it was assumed that learning the very basics of philosophical thinking will take time. This assumption proved to be correct, as many of the topics proved to be quite challenging. This was mostly for two reasons: the author was not very familiar with the mindset required for such thinking and the issues discussed in the books were complicated in their own right.

The preliminary framework for the thesis was created in the beginning of 2013. Over the period of five months the framework underwent considerable changes, but the main idea of providing a simple, understandable introduction to the basics of moral philosophy remained.

During the time period of late 2012 to early 2013 multiple documents, short-films, seminars and talks about ethics and their role in societies were studied. These are not mentioned in the references, since most of them were something that did not directly contribute to thesis writing process.

However, the less strict schedule allowed me to thoroughly think about the topics, instead of simply transferring the knowledge from the books straight into the thesis.

## 7 Findings concerning the final product

It is a sincere hope that if Saimaa University of Applied Sciences ever considers including the study of ethics to BBA students curriculum, they will consider this practice-based thesis as an option for teaching material. It could provide a good material for courses such as ethical leadership, corporate social responsibility and basics of business. Perhaps this thesis could also be used in various leadership courses, since learning about one's own values and ethical views can improve one's capability as a manager.

Regardless of whether the material is actually used as a teaching material, writing it and doing the research necessary was highly enjoyable. It could even be so that writing about the topic in question helped the author greatly in his future studies and career.

## 8 Conclusions

The results, as mentioned in the actual product, are different from those found out in a typical BBA thesis. Giving objective, absolute results is near impossible when considering the vast and highly subjective topic of ethics. However, in spite of not giving any solid dogma to live by, the thesis proved to give its reader a good introduction to the basic principles of western ethics. Learning about these basic principles will not only give the reader an improved capability to act and think in moral situations but also help their understanding of professional ethics, such as business ethics.

Without having a basic understanding of ethics, it is quite questionable to assume that one could comprehend more complicated systems of applied ethics, such as business ethics. Keeping this in mind, this thesis tries to ensure that its reader is at somewhat equipped with basic knowledge of ethics, before they enter the business world.

If the aforementioned assumptions prove to be correct, then the thesis performed as expected and can therefore be considered to be as valuable asset to understanding human societies and businesses which take place within these societies.

## 9 The evaluation of the process and own professional skills

Writing about topic such as ethics was, and still is, a daunting task. Not only is the topic inconceivably vast and complicated, but it is also very much unknown to the author. Indeed, understanding one's own ignorance of the topic is the first step. This meant that the very basics of philosophical and ethical thinking had to be studied. Luckily there are many respectable books available that can introduce an amateur to the interesting and complicated world of philosophy.

After getting rudimentary background knowledge of the topic, which incidentally took staggering three months, the author was able to start asking the relevant questions about the topic. Indeed, the whole thesis was based around these questions. After formulating the questions, the process of finding the answers started. This proved to be quite difficult and time-consuming as question like "ethics as a skill" have no simple, widely agreeable answers. Multiple books had to be consulted In order to find satisfying answers to question like this.

When it comes to author's own professional skills, it has to be stated that choosing ethics as the thesis topic was extremely beneficial. Even though it did not directly provide the author with accountancy-like skills, which are easily translated to working life, it did provide a more consistent, clear and rational value systems. Having a moral backbone such as this is extremely important in someone who hopes to manage or lead by an example. If this assumption proves to be correct, then one could assume that writing such a thesis did provide the author with fundamentally valuable working life skills, which

transcend borders and cultural differences. In other words, with skills which are expected from a Bachelor of Business Administration specialized in international business.

## 10 List of references

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# Introduction to ethics for a BBA student

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# 1 Preface

The goals of this booklet are to provide the reader with an improved capability to think and act in morally challenging situations, as well as to spark an interest toward ethical thinking: both in private and professional life. These goals are not achieved by giving out rules or laws which to live by, but by studying and critically contemplating the concepts of moral philosophy, one's own understanding of ethics and the definitions of good ethics. The topic is approached from the viewpoint of the most influential western moral philosophical views.

In order to provide the reader with the basic tools and understanding of the topic, the booklet will discuss some of the most common concepts and theories concerning ethics. However, these topics will only be mentioned very briefly as this booklet mainly focuses on the practical applications of ethics, rather than its theoretical aspects.

Through the process of questioning and pondering on their own values, the reader will hopefully be left with a more consistent personal value system. After all, if ethical conceptions are well thought-out they are not just a randomly acquired collection of inconsistent norms and habits. Instead they can be a coherent and uniform entity, which can provide the individual with a solid framework to live their life by. Or in other words: with a moral backbone.

As Professor Mikko Yrjönsuuri (1996) compellingly states in his book: action based on a deeper understanding of a subject tends to yield more favorable results than its uninformed counterpart. This statement rather perfectly summarizes the worth of thinking of ethics thoroughly, or any other topic for that matter.

As mentioned earlier, the grand goal of a coherent personal ethics is approached, at least to a certain degree, through the reflection of one's own values. The chosen method to do this is to ask questions and consider about their possible solutions, as well as to ponder the reasoning behind these solutions.

Even though this booklet is intended for business administration students, who are likely to work in business life once graduated, it does not specifically concentrate on the business ethics or on the professional ethics. This is partially because there are vast amount of books, seminars and courses available on the topic, which are far better in their analyses of applied ethics than this booklet could ever hope to be. However, the main reason for mostly ignoring business ethics and concentrating on ethics as a whole is the notion, that the basic ideas and methods of ethical thinking are the very foundation on which applied ethics such as business ethics rest on.

It is rather obvious that if one does not understand the basics, there is very little hope to understand the intricacies. Furthermore, it could even be argued that it is negligence of the worst kind to ask; what it is to be a good manager, before asking what it is to be a good human being.

## 2 What is ethics?

Moral and ethics are sometimes discussed as if they were interchangeable terms, but in this booklet the two terms are treated as two separate concepts with separate meanings. According to Yrjönsuuri (1996), moral refers to the behavior of the individual and the conceptions of right and wrong, and of good and evil, which arise from situations where choice is necessary. Ethics on the other hand, refers to how the individual justifies his/her moral actions on a grand scale.

It should be clarified that ethics are not to be confused with social conventions or laws, though they do have a lot in common. Ethics stand for something far more personal, something that transcend external social pressures and guides one's life as an individual as well as a member of a group, whether the group is a nation or a football club. These ethical guidelines are not static, as anyone who has studied history will be able to point out. As an example: most, if not all, modern people would abhor the concept of slavery and witch burning, which in their day were seen as just and necessary acts.

In addition, ethical guidelines are also prone to change as an individual ages and learns; every encounter with new people, ideas or situations has the

potential to change ones view on their ethics. This is an extremely powerful notion: it gives an individual the capability to understand that their current thoughts on what is good and what is evil and how moral choices ought to be made are likely to change over time. The simple fact that there are thousands and thousands of different ethical convictions, most of which conflict with each other, calls for the ability to reflect and judge between these different ethical norms. A coin toss is simply not sufficient to decide whether something is right or wrong or how to do moral choices.

So, how should we decide between conflicting ideas? Should we think about them in a rational manner or should we go by what intuitively feels right? Or perhaps we should follow society's norm or our habits?

This decision is by no means an easy one, many people struggle with this particular question through their entire lives. One could even say that this abundance of various ethical guidelines is almost like being in a supermarket of ethics, where all the shelves are overflowing with different views and with loud advertisements blaring through the sound-system, trying to persuade the shopper to adapt their supposedly superior ethical ideals. In this situation some shoppers might be inclined to pick up a familiar brand of ethics which their parents always used to buy, whereas some might pick up a neatly packaged product which is endorsed by their favorite artist.

A careful reader will notice that both of these choices don't seem to have much of a thought behind them. The first one is dictated by our habits, or our parent's habits to be precise. As comforting and convenient these acquired habits might be, just the fact that they are familiar makes for a poor criteria. In this case, one might be tempted to argue that this is the way we've always conducted our thinking and it is therefore a good way. The problems in such thinking are kindly pointed out to us by the enlightenment philosopher David Hume (Oliver 1999), who in the 18-century quite brilliantly noted the so called is-ought problem. In short, Hume noted that it is very difficult, if not impossible; to derive what ought to be from what is. This idea is often referred as Hume's Guillotine since it severs the assumption of what ought to be from what is, by pointing out that there rarely seems to be any sort of a logical connection between how things are and how they ought to be.

On the other hand, the decision based on artist's endorsement relies on authority. The problem relying on authority is that the degree of one's popularity does not determine to what degree their arguments are valid. Hence, the argument made by the artist has no more value than an argument made by your neighbor, provided that the argument remains the same. This is especially good to keep in mind when a supposed authority tries to impose his/her values, ethics or behavior models on you.

So, now we have understood that there are some problems in adopting ready-made ethical approaches. Has this brought us any closer to finding a good way to adopt ethical ideals?

This question cannot be answered with great certainty. However, we have now understood that not all ideas are created equal. If an idea proves to be inconsistent, illogical or otherwise harmful, it can be discarded. This of course does not directly tell us what to pick as our values but it certainly makes the selection process slightly easier by ranking out the unfit-ideas.

## 3 Why should I study ethics?

*"We ask what is it to be a good manager, teacher, or parent, but neglect to ask: what is it to be a good human being?" - Alasdair MacIntyre*

As mentioned before; we all have personal ethical guidelines, some of which we share with other people and some of which are possibly quite unique. Whatever these ethics might be, the way they influence our actions and thoughts is not to be underestimated. Through this might strike some as a bit excessive, ethics do guide our lives to a great degree. They influence our decisions on who our friends are, where we work and what we do in our past time. Our society, habits, and our day by day interactions have been and still are shaped by our shared perception on what is good, what is acceptable behavior and what is worth pursuing in life.

A part of these values have been transformed into laws, social rules and habits, which we tend to take as granted in our modern society. This notion places great value on ethics as one of the crucial foundations of any civilization, and

through understanding it we can better our understanding of societies, organizations and ourselves as individuals, citizens or parts of an organization. As mentioned, having a consistent and well thought-out ethical code gives a individual a solid framework which to live by.

## 4 Mastering ethics – ethics as a skill?

One way to look at ethics is to think it as a skill that can be practiced and eventually mastered, just like any other skill. This view can be quite persuasive as it is rather obvious that certain situations require careful ethical thinking and reflection. As mentioned before, a simple coin toss will not do. After all, not many people would give credit to a manager who, in a bad economic situation, decides to fire an under-performing single mother by letting a coin toss decide it. Doubtlessly, there should be some careful thinking involved when dealing with problematic moral situations. If we choose to think ethics as something that can be practiced, then surely it would be worthy of practice, given its important role in human societies.

However, ethics are not a skill equivalent to skill like baking; there are no formulas or recipes in moral philosophy which yield absolute answers to ethical questions, although such constructions have been tried during the long history of philosophical ethics (Oliver 1999). Unfortunately, they have ignored the fact that unlike physics or mathematics, ethics are not founded on premises that all people can agree on. One plus one does rarely equal two in ethics, nor does it in human interactions in general.

This places ethics in an interesting position between the classical distinction between sciences and humanities; between hard facts and arts. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible to give out exact answers to important questions like: how should we live our lives or how the society ought to act.

Through the ages various philosophers, religious and political leaders have given their views, rules and recommendations on what constitutes as good ethics and how a person ought to act in general. Some of these views are hopelessly outdated whereas some of them are still as relevant in the modern time, as they were when they were first written over two thousand years ago.

The ideas of Socrates and Aristotle are excellent examples of the latter; they still have the power to stir powerful thoughts and emotions within a modern human.

It is then up to the every individual to learn about these different views, both relevant as the irrelevant, in order to be able to prepare themselves for ethically challenging situations. Since as mentioned before, it is a skill worth learning.


## 5 Characteristics of different approaches to ethics

As most people have noticed, different individuals have different ways to approach morally difficult situations. For the purposes of this booklet, we assumed that all these different approaches are equally valid, provided that they are consistent with their values and methods.

If all (consistent) ethical approaches are equally valid, then it is up to the individual to choose which system to adopt. It is therefore useful to have some sort of an understanding of those different approaches.

Let us presume there to be three different people, with three different views to an ethically challenging scenario. The first one would look solely at the consequences of an action and then judge the action based on whether those consequences were good or bad. The second one would refer to his or her absolute moral code: whether it is the "do for others as one would do for oneself" or any other variation of the golden rule. The third one would look at the problem from the perspective of characteristic, in other words he or she would ask the question: "How would a good person act in this situation or what does this action tell about me as a person?"

A philosopher might call these three different views consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics, respectively. They are usually referred to as "the big three" of moral philosophy, the views that have had the most influence in the western world in the past two thousand years.

It is worthwhile to recognize that all of these approaches have their own distinctive strengths and weaknesses.

## 5.1 Consequentialism

As the name suggests, consequentialism is mainly concerned with the consequences of an action, it is the "end justifies the means"-approach to ethical dilemmas. Consequential ethics has its roots in 18th century England (Oliver 1999) and perhaps the most famous branch of it is utilitarianism. Utilitarianism can be understood in a following way:

The benefits of an action - the harm caused by an action = the value of the action

A utilitarian would argue that the best option is simply the one that produces the best/most valuable results. At first glance, this method of calculating might appear simple but calculating the benefits or the harm caused by an action might get extremely difficult in scenarios where many people are influenced by an action. It is also very difficult to put an exact value on things such as pleasure, shame or suffering. For example: how should a human resource manager know how much inconvenience and downright mental distress is he or she causing by firing someone?

What further complicates this approach is the unanswered question of who (or what) should be included in these calculations. For example, should animals and their wellbeing be taken into account when doing utilitarianistic calculations? How about those people who have been not born yet, should we include people born in 2085 to our calculations as well?

In short, even if a utilitarian manages to understand how to flawlessly calculate the outcome of a moral action, he/she still has to figure out whose benefit and/or suffering needs to be included in these calculations. Ethical theories like this have been notoriously difficult to implement in real life, especially so in business life where an action could influence thousands of people in various ways.

## 5.2 Deontology

Where consequentialism approached ethics from the perspective of consequences, deontology approaches ethics from the point of view of absolute rules. Sometimes described as rule-ethics, deontology traditionally pays little heed to the changing situations or the results of an action.

Perhaps the most noted representative of deontological ethics is Kantianism, named after the famous 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant argues that an individual should act in a right way, not because it has good consequences or because it feels just, but because it is right (Yrjönsuuri 1996).

In the very core of Kantianism is the idea that ethical principles should not be tailored for individual needs. In other words: ethical principles should transcend the individual and be universal in a sense that they apply to everyone, everywhere and at all times. Kant argued that only such ethics which are not dependent on our feelings or our environment are the ones that are truly worth following. Kant even argued that an action is only truly ethical when it arises from the sense of duty one has towards their own ethical convictions. These convictions, Kant proposed, can be achieved through rational thought.

Arguably Kant's greatest contribution to moral philosophy was the so called categorical imperative, which can be used to test whether and action is right or wrong by seeing whether the principle behind that act is suitable to become a universal commandment. In his day Kant created three different imperatives, a slightly modernized version of the most popular first categorical imperative would be as follows:

*"In moral situations, act only in a way that you would one day hope to became a universal law." – (Yrjönsuuri 1996)*

For example, lying might be convenient, and even necessary, at times but wishing it to become a universal law would create a world where trust among people would become nearly impossible. Hence, by rational judgment, lying does not pass Kant's test as a principle worth following and is therefore prohibited. This simplicity and universality of Kant's categorical imperative has partially contributed to deontology's success as an ethical structure but as a whole, Kantianism fails to be without its own set of problems.

A common example is the so-called inquiring murderer-problem. It proposes that: (if asked) one must reveal a known murderer the location of his future victim. Speaking the truth would be mandated by the categorical imperative, since lying is not acceptable as a universal law.

This problem arises from the astounding strictness that the categorical imperative requires. According to Kant there is to be no compromise or leniency when it comes to moral judgment. This makes the categorical imperative not only hard to follow but also very unpleasant to implement in business-and private life alike. After all, an ethical system which is essentially black and white is unlikely to fare well in a world of business, which is full of different shades of gray.

## 5.3 Virtue ethics

Virtue refers to a positive personal quality or a trait which is believed to be a crucial part of a morally outstanding person. The definition of what are these said traits has been and still is a matter of great debate, but perhaps the most well-known of these virtues is the golden mean, which appears both in western and in eastern philosophy. The golden mean simply states that the point of greatest virtue lies roughly in the middle of two excesses: between cowardice and recklessness, and between self-deprecation and pride. These traits, virtue ethicists argue, are the source of righteous moral behavior. This is also the premise of an influential moral philosophy called virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics, which is commonly associated with the founding fathers of western philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, has a notably different approach to ethics than its counterparts. Whereas deontology and consequentialism focus only on the nature and outcome of an action (for example lying), virtue ethics takes a more comprehensive approach by looking at both the action and the character of the decision maker as a whole. A virtue ethicist would ask: what does a decision to lie tell about one's character and moral behavior as a whole? Can a person, who lies for small social gains be considered a respectable or a virtuous person?

The way that a person's life unfolds depends greatly on that person's characteristics. From the virtue ethics point of view, these characteristic also

define the individual's moral choice. For example, a man who strives to be kind and generous should, if he follows virtue ethics, strive to be kind and generous in the moral situations he encounters. In other words: he should practice his chosen virtues.

From a business perspective, an organization and individual alike would find subscribing to virtue ethics quite easy. Most companies already have core-values which, if applied, form the basis for an ethical system which closely resembles the classical form of virtue ethics. This is to say that if a company has a core value of being fair towards its customers, then it has to reflect its moral actions to this standard of being fair. These values form a point of reference to which the companies and individuals actions can be compared to. This gives virtue ethics a distinct edge over the more strict approach of deontology.

As mentioned before, the problem with virtue ethics are the virtues themselves. What are they and how are they defined? A typical modern approach to this question is that these virtues are handed out to us by our culture and to lesser degree by our society, and their existence does not need any further explanations. However it should be noted that the current perception of virtues is not necessarily the right one.

## 6 Is there a compromise?

*"The business of business is business" – Unknown*

This short quote, commonly attributed to economist Milton Friedman, sums up the widely shared perception of corporate social responsibility in the 20th century. Times have arguably changed since then, but the quote is something that some people in business life still subscribe to.

Surely we can agree that most people are willing to compromise in their values, sometimes for positive reinforcements like money and/or social status, and sometimes for the fear of punishment, whether it is social judgment or financial losses. Yet we feel that there ought to be some integrity, some backbone in a respectable person.

The situation is therefore quite complicated; people seem to have a need to strike a compromise between conflicting interest of their personal convictions and the pressures of their environment. This conflict is especially apparent in business world, where the bottom line for the company tends to be profit, and achieving that profit might include some ethically questionable acts. This can lead to a very troubling conflict between personal and company interests. However, certain types of compromises have to be done in order for the company to succeed and the individual to succeed alongside it.

So, where do we draw the line of moral compromises? Or do we need to draw the line in the first place: are we allowed to do anything for money or do abhorrent things to avoid punishment?

Some people pay little heed to such ethical question, disregarding them as trivial, naive and even downright harmful to their working life. Such attitude is quite surprising as it shows two things: the indifference towards personal integrity and true individuality and the aforementioned quote-like jaded and cold attitude towards business life in general.

It could be proposed that, contrary on what the bankers on Wall St. seem to believe, a monetary reward does not automatically justify a morally unjust action. Nor does the fear of punishment render morally reprehensible thing acceptable. Moreover, it is highly questionable to base ones moral decisions purely on external influences. In such situation that person would have become a victim of the circumstances, merely a puppet moved by the strings of the two puppeteers; reward and punishment, with little or no ability to make autonomous decisions. Could this sort of a person consider himself as an individual with moral backbone? Could this sort of a person consider himself even as a truly free-willed individual?

One could argue that personal values should, within feasible limits, be independent from the rewards and punishments imposed by the surroundings, as pointed out to us by Immanuel Kant (Yrjönsuuri 1996). This autonomy of ones values, even if it is not absolute, renders the individual greatly independent from the surroundings; he or she is not merely pushed around by the employer or peer-group, but is an independent and a truly free willed

individual capable of making well thought out and independent moral and ethical decisions.

However, the question of how much we should compromise our values still remains unanswered. Sadly there are no objective answers to questions like this, nor are there for ethical questions in general. This grayness of moral landscape makes it difficult to state exactly how much person should compromise, if at all. As always, the decision can only truly be made by the individual. Who now hopefully is, through the contemplation of the previously discussed topics, armed with better knowledge and skills to deal with these complicated and difficult moral situations.

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## 8 Further reading

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