AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIAITON FOR PROFSSIONAL AND APPLIED ETHICS

AUSTRALIAN ETHICS

DECEMBER, 2012

ETHICS: APPLIED AND PROFESSIONAL

- Business
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PRESIDENT'S REPORT BY STEPHEN COHEN: INTRODUCTION TO THE SELECTED PAPERS FROM THE 19TH ANNUAL AAPAE CONFERENCE

Stephen Cohen

Guest Editor: *Research in Ethical Issues in Organizations , Volume 9.*

The 19th annual Australian Association for Professional and Applied Ethics (AAPAE) conference was held at St. John's College at the University of Queensland, June 28-July 1, 2012, and was hosted by Rev. Professor John Morgan. This was the third time that John Morgan hosted an AAPAE conference. The Association is very grateful for his support.

The theme of the conference was 'Ethics, Values, and Civil Society: Ethical, historical, professional and political perspectives'. Papers from a wide spectrum of topics and approaches were presented. Presenters were invited to submit their papers for possible inclusion in a Proceedings volume of *REIO* (Volume 9). This is the first year that *REIO* has been the primary location for selected papers from the AAPAE conference; and this year *REIO* is the exclusive location for AAPAE conference papers. Of the papers that were submitted for refereeing for possible inclusion, seven are published in the volume.

In an essay drawn from his keynote address, 'Trust Me, I'm a Professional: Exploring the conditions and implications of trust for the professions', Daniel Wueste discusses the importance of trust in a profession's being what a profession is, and in a professional's being what a professional is. The essay argues that this critical element requires recognition that the role morality required of a professional should not be regarded as absolute, and that acute awareness needs to be paid to morality plain and simple, as well as to the purpose of trust in what the professional is.

In 'The nexus of employee safety, professional integrity and ethics: Applying stakeholder theory to university researchers', Susanne Bahn, Michelle Greenwood, and Harry J. Van Buren III call attention to the ethical perils of university researchers, particularly those who are less senior; and they point out that this aspect of ethical concerns about university research

PRESIDENT'S REPORT (CONT'D)

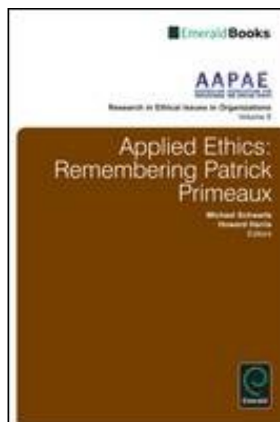
has been very much neglected.

Michael Segon, Chris Booth, and Tim O'Shannassy consider the literature about managers' propensity to take or to offer bribes, and their attitudes toward corruption in general in their organisations. Their essay, 'Australian and Malaysian managers' perceptions of unethical practices', goes on to compare the general findings in the literature with the authors' own survey of Australian and Malaysian managers' perceptions of these things.

> "This is the first year that *REIO* has been the primary location for selected papers from the AAPAE conference; and this year *REIO* is the exclusive location for AAPAE conference papers."

In 'Australian business leadership and the promotion of civil society in China', Michael Schwartz argues that Australian business should emulate Winston Churchill's use of moral imagination in May, 1940, in his determining Britain's reaction to Nazi Germany. Australian business should emulate this in recognising China's treatment of its citizens and foreign nationals, and reaching a view about how to deal with China. To date, Schwartz argues, this has not been the case, and Australian business' attitude toward China has, for this reason, not exhibited a laudable moral stance.

In 'The world of news since the end of *The News of the World'*, John Harrison explains the regulatory regimes for news media, particularly in Australia, and discusses whether there have been any significant changes as a result of recent appalling behaviours, in particular since the end of *The News of the World*. Along the way, he points out shortcomings and types of shortcomings in current and past regulatory regimes.



Judith and Michael Kennedy discuss the problematic procedure concerning organ donation, 'Controlled Donation after Cardiac Death'. In 'Politics of the new pathway to organ donation', they explain what is ethically problematic about this new – and unpublicised – procedure and how this procedure has managed to make it through current ethical review mechanisms, to the status of guidelines and protocol.

In their 'Values based approach to ethical culture', Michael Segon and Chris Booth explain the nature and appropriateness of a values-based approach to ethical requirements within an organisation. In this paper, which is part of a wider project, they then proceed to offer a case study as an example.

Research in Ethical Issues in Organizations

http://www.emeraldinsight.com/books.htm?issn=1529-2096

The 20TH ANNUAL AAPAE CONFERENCE

Fremantle, June 2013

Thursday 27th June — Sunday 30th June, 2013
University of Notre Dame, Fremantle.

The 20th annual AAPAE conference will be held at Fremantle on June 27th to 30th. The host will be the University of Notre Dame Australia.

The university has a strong commitment to the teaching of ethics across the curriculum.

This will be the first time the conference has been held in the West. Fremantle is a great location. Founded in 1829, it is a city with a well-preserved history and a rich mixture of cafes and old buildings.

The conference website will be up soon. Look out for the Call for Papers in the next few weeks. We have some excellent keynote speakers.

See you in Freo next June!

Keynote Speakers

Professor Raimond Gaita, Professorial Fellow in the Melbourne Law School and The Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne and Emeritus Professor of Moral Philosophy at King's College London.

Professor Christine Swanton, Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Auckland

Justice Neville Owen, Senior judge of the Court of Appeal of the Supreme Court of Western Australia. Formerly Chancellor of the University of Notre Dame Australia.

Conference Convenors

Please feel free to email with any queries about the conference or paper presentation.

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ETHICAL CONDUCT: WHAT'S PHILOSOPHY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Hugh Breakey

In the last issue of *Australian Ethics*, Peter Bowden challenged the relevance of ethical philosophy to applied and professional ethics, pointing out that many of the valuable practices that predominate the pages of the recent AAPAE book *Applied Ethics: Strengthening Ethical Practices* have little to do with ethical theorizing. Indeed, he goes so far as to argue that moral philosophy might be pernicious. Ignoring well-accepted empirical findings and encouraging endless disputations, it is nothing short of an 'intellectual handicap' for ethical decision-making in the 21st Century.

Here I take up the mantle of defending (albeit in a qualified form) moral philosophy's relevance to applied ethics – in particular with an eye to the practice of having philosophers involved in the teaching of ethics to professionals and budding professionals.

What I am not arguing, however, is that moral philosophers should have the *sole role* in teaching and developing applied ethics. Bowden is doubtless correct when he lists the many vital ways professions themselves can develop codes, roles and integrity systems, and how we can learn empirically about which measures, legislation, and practices work and which do not. While philosophers have engaged with some of these issues, many of them are completely ignored – whistle-blowing is perhaps Bowden's most important example here.

For these reasons, I accept that if philosophers alone are left to theorize, develop and teach professional and applied ethics, they can be expected to do a very limited job. Often, they will be unaware of some of the key modes of strengthening ethical behaviour, and ignorant of the empirical research on these. They may also be unfamiliar with the ethical issues that actually confront professionals, and of the difficult circumstances within which professionals negotiate solutions to them. Worse, they may know little enough of the actually existing social and institutional practices in a given practice that are working at promoting integrity – and which the philosopher's top-down policies might weaken.

That much admitted, is there anything left that ethicists *can* offer? I think there is.

First of all, philosophy can excel at describing clearly the sorts of features of actions and situations that call for moral concern. Local practices, spontaneous arrangements and shared identities are crucial in creating ethical behaviour – but they equally can be threats to it. Institutions can display group-think mentalities and they can promote their narrow self-interest, or even just the self-interest of the institution's leaders. For this reason, moral philosophy can be important precisely because of the external perspective it brings – forcing practitioners to face up not only to the views of their peers, but also to universal principles of proper conduct.

> "Local practices, spontaneous arrangements and shared identities are crucial in creating ethical behaviour – but they equally can be threats to it. ."

Second, moral philosophy is important because it can clear away some popular but potentially problematic philosophical viewpoints that some practitioners and students may already hold. Here I name (controversially!) three viewpoints that I tend to encounter:

1. cultural relativism: the view that morality is just whatever the local culture says it is,

2. psychological egoism: the idea that people only do whatever they think will make them happy, and;

3. religious necessity: the view that the only reason people can genuinely be moral is if they believe in God.

I acknowledge there is much that may be said in favour of versions of each of these theses. But in my experience these views can be held in a naïve and unreflective form where they create problems for those trying to teach and develop applied ethics. Teachers, in particular, need to be able to provide the basic arguments that may be given to a student who challenges course material by saying, 'It's all relative really, so why should we care what you say?' or 'This is naïve. People only ever do what makes them happy anyway.' There are powerful philosophical arguments against the simplistic versions of these views – but they are views that often arise as soon as people start thinking and talking about ethics.

Third, learning moral philosophy can help motivate – or at least energize interest in – moral behaviour. This is not to say that the first-principles arguments of Aristotle, Kant or Mill are better fillips to moral action than institutional structures or entrenched

ETHICAL CONDUCT: WHAT'S PHILOSOPHY GOT TO DO WITH IT? BY HUGH BREAKEY

See over for Peter Bowden's Response

cultural practices. But such theories can play an important supplementary role – consider, for example, the many people who become committed vegetarians after reading Peter Singer's books.

As a more general matter, though, I have found students can be quite excited when they are first exposed to a moral theory that seems to make sense of their previously unexamined moral intuitions. They find that a theory such as utilitarianism explains something about them, and who they are, and this plays a role in forming and concretising a moral identity for them. Thenceforth, they see themselves as utilitarians.

Fourth, Bowden draws an unwarranted distinction between argument and empirical evidence. Empirical evidence *plays a role in* argument (that is pretty much what it means to *call* something evidence). To be sure, Plato at the dawn of western thought instilled a proud tradition of armchair philosophy, working top-down from abstract, other-worldly principles to applied ethical conclusions with little engagement with history or anthropology. But it did not take long for his student Aristotle to develop the alternative tradition, where serious ethical thought is infused with evidence about cultures, practices and institutions, and about what works and what does not. If we think that empirical evidence is a vital way of ensuring our ethics is in touch with lived reality, then this does not mean we should avoid philosophy. Rather, it means we should engage with the sort of moral philosophy that is informed by genuine understanding of actual human institutions and how they operate. Far from being contrasted with the workings of actual social institutions, philosophy can itself study and improve our knowledge of these. AAPAE Members doubtless will be able to think of many instances of this – Professor Daniel Wueste's paper at our recent 2012 conference, discussing the construction of professional roles and responsibilities according to the purpose the institution in question serves, and the significance of factors such as trust and knowledge in this process, is an excellent example.

For these four reasons, I submit, moral philosophy has much to offer the teaching and development of professional and applied ethics.

Before concluding, though, I must respond to the important point Bowden makes about philosophical disputations. Philosophy might spark division because it raises the questions of 'Why be moral?' and 'What are the fundamental principles of morality?' And it is altogether possible that people who might be able to agree on the proper response to a moral problem might hold sharp disagreements on these deeper questions. If we needed agreement on first principles before we could start creating practices and institutions that treat people decently, we would all have died out long ago.

Another way philosophy focuses attention on disputations occurs because in teaching and thinking about different ethical theories philosophers need to differentiate those theories from one another, and an important mode of accomplishing this task is by considering cases where the theories give rise to different moral prescriptions. So, for instance, we are invited to speculate on fantastic cases that allegedly show stark differences between utilitarianism and deontology. And in general we philosophers spend much more time pondering the 'hard cases' about which there can be much fascinating and revealing disagreement, rather than emphasizing how much agreement there is on the overwhelming amount of ordinary issues people confront every day.

These are important points, but awareness of them can generate sensitive responses. These contentious matters rightly receive emphasis in philosophical theory for the plain reason that philosophers do not need to debate matters where there is little serious disagreement.

> "It did not take long for Plato's student Aristotle to develop the alternative tradition, where serious ethical thought is infused with evidence about cultures, practices and institutions, and about what works and what does not.."

But this narrow emphasis becomes less helpful when we turn to helping teach and promote ethical practices. There the focus should centre on the enormous amount of issues upon which there is wide consensus, and direct attention to the project of motivating and empowering individuals and institutions to do the right thing.

Finally, it is worth remembering that argument does not necessarily mean endless, confrontational disputation. Argument can also mean rational discussion aimed at persuading another person of the merits of your view, and being open to the merits of theirs. There are other ways of responding to moral differences, after all, that are not as civilised. Far from being a pernicious handicap, a world where consensus is rare, the ability to solve problems by giving and listening to another person's reasons is a precious one.

A Reply to Hugh Breakey

Peter Bowden

I accept all Hugh's four arguments. With possibly the exception of his fourth. Of course moral philosophy has added to our knowledge and comprehension of ethical behaviour. There will not be a teacher of ethics in any of the disciplines and professions across a university or college who has not read Plato or Aristotle, nor the many books on ethics put out by today's moral philosophers. He or she will have engaged in a struggle, often desperate, to come to grips with what is to act ethically, what is wrongdoing, how do they stop it, and finally can they – and if so how – teach these concerns in a course? The consultant or newly appointed ethics officer in the workforce will of necessity have examined the same sources, read many of the same books. And just as desperately wonder how to implement these principles in his or her organisation.

> "The newly appointed ethics lecturer or consultant will learn that there are no universally agreed principles of moral conduct..."

It will have been a time of much learning. Teachers of engineering, medicine, pharmacy, business, social work, etc., newly volunteering to teach the ethics course in their disciplines, or ethics officers in the workforce, will have much to learn. It will be a time of great fulfilment. Even enjoyment. They will nevertheless face problems. Taking the four benefits of philosophy that Hugh raises:

To obtain the first benefit, they will necessarily have read the moral theories. They may not come to the conclusion that Hugh puts forward: that "moral philosophy can be important (by) … forcing practitioners to face up …to universal principles of proper conduct". The newly appointed ethics lecturer or consultant will learn that there are no universally agreed principles of moral conduct. The arguments that he referred to, started by Plato and Aristotle, are still on-going. Two thousand three hundred years later we still not have agreed on the difference between right and wrong. We are still arguing. Richard Joyce, a well published philosopher, is one among many who portrays a negative picture: *The theories are plentiful, the convolutions byzantine, the in-fighting bitter, the spilt ink copious, and the progress astoundingly unimpressive*" (Philosophy *Today* , 2011).

Our ethics specialist then has a massive problem in deciding what they say in class or in the workplace. They have a choice from multiple ethical theories (fifteen according to one of Peter Singer's books). In essence, however, there are three major theories – deontology, utilitarianism and virtue. Each has multiple versions, and each is being still argued. The arguments, according to an article in the same Singer book, are described as "internecine warfare".

His second benefit is clearly a benefit. Let us assume that you, the reader, are the newly appointed lecturer or ethics officer. You will come to a conclusion on each of Hugh's points:

1. *cultural relativism*: the view that morality is just whatever the local culture says it is,
2. *psychological egoism*: the idea that people only do whatever they think will make them happy, and;
3. *religious necessity*: the view that the only reason people can genuinely be moral is if they believe in God.

You may reach a position on all three of Hugh's assertions. You might become, as I have become, an absolutist, the opposite of a relativist. I believe there is a right and a wrong in every human situation, no matter how ethically complex. But if you do reach a conclusion, you will realise that your conclusions will still be subject to dispute. Hugh states: "I acknowledge there is much that may be said in favour of versions of each of them". His statement is true. There are many current arguments against my absolutist position. If you read Plato's *Euthyphro*, you will realise that some of these issues have been argued for a very long time, and are still argued today. *"Is what is morally good commanded by God because it is morally good, or is it morally good because it is commanded by God?"*

> **The seven practices in Peter Bowden's original article are:**
>
> 1. Strengthening our ability to recognise when we ourselves have been unethical.
> 2. Steps to encourage us to speak out against wrongdoing.
> 3. Developments in codes of ethics that make them effective.
> 4. Policies adopted by private sector organisations to institutionalise ethical behaviour.
> 5. New programs for ensuring greater honesty in government.
> 6. Building action on empirical findings, not argument.
> 7. Teaching these practices .

Hugh's third position is that moral philosophy, and in particular ethical

A Reply to Hugh Breakey (Cont'd)

Peter Bowden

argument, can change behaviour. I have no disagreement. My position is that moral philosophers do not go far enough – they stop short, even exclude, many activities that can strengthen ethical behaviour. For example, each of the seven areas set out in my original article, if adopted, will strengthen ethical behaviour. Yet none of these practices, with a few exceptions, is taught in the schools of moral philosophy around the world, or set out in the major publications on ethics written by philosophers.

We come to Hugh's fourth point, the "unwarranted distinction between argument and empirical evidence". To this writer, the fourth is the same issue as the fifth point: "about philosophical disputations".

The first statement to make is that five of the concerns I have listed in the original article are based on empirical evidence. There is research that tells us these practices work. If promoted in ethics courses in our colleges and by ethical programs in our places of employment, they would bring about strengthened ethical behaviour. Irregular – but still improvement. Yet they are not endorsed by the vast majority of moral philosophers. Why not? I can only give a speculative answer– that philosophers have been educated with a preference for argument, and these findings are the result of applied research, that for the most part, comes from other disciplines.

Several philosophers (e.g. LeBlanc 1998; Vaughn 2008) assert that the philosophical position is to use argument as a basis for thinking critically. However:

1. Philosophical argument ignores a number of practices in other disciplines that can generate creative, forward looking thinking – the type of thinking that answers the question of *what should we do?* Principal among these is quantitative evaluation techniques, including rigorous methods such as statistical analysis. Philosophical argument also ignores approaches used to generate creativity in thinking, as well as techniques such as decision trees and influence diagrams used to assess the impact of adopting different courses of action.

2. Argument generates criticism. Almost by definition it requires a 'for' and an 'against' if an argument is to occur. As a method of thinking, it does not generate building on what has gone before. Arguments occur to destroy, or at least contradict, what has been developed so far. These pages, for instance, are an argument.

> **"Philosophical argument ignores a number of practices in other disciplines that can generate creative, forward looking thinking – the type of thinking that answers the question of *what should we do?*"**

3. Argument based critical thinking relies on inductive and deductive reasoning. In the long run, both types of thinking come down to observation – to empiricism. Strong empirical capabilities will generate strong arguments, but, I assert, empirical research is not a philosophical virtue. This may be the reason why philosophers have been arguing with each other for over 2000 years.

Ultimately, moral philosophy is a discipline which, although it assures us that it is the mother of ethical theory and practice, does not teach a full set of approaches to strengthening ethical behaviour, nor undertake the research necessary to assess and improve developments already underway.

On reflection, I now believe that it is the student of ethics in our schools of moral philosophy who is the bigger loser. Teachers and practitioners in ethics can search out these new developments themselves (although with some difficulty). Students, however, take ethics courses. Many, one suspects, hope to work at extending ethical practices as widely as possible throughout our communities. Instead, they have been given an incomplete knowledge of developments and capabilities in ethics work in government or the private sector. They have been turned out – for only a few – with the capacity to on-teach what they have learned so far. And that learning is circumscribed. It is also of limited value in the work day world.

Follow the Blog Wars!

For longer versions of these articles, and fuller examination of some of the specific issues, see the blogs at:

"What's a Philosopher doing in a place like this?" http://hughbreakey.blogspot.com.au/

"Whistleblowing ethics" http://whistleblowingethics.blogspot.com.au/

WHAT'S HAPPENING AROUND US? CAN HIGHER EDUCATION HELP? HOW?

By Dr. Theodora Issa, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia

There is no doubt that living and working in our contemporary society, that is characterised by the techno-economic ongoing and fragmentary development, we as individuals see ourselves struggle with such emerging issues identified by Arisian: lack of security, uncertainty, risk, stress, individualism, nihilism, relativism, and subjectivism. We might add to these: ambiguity and suffering as contended by Mansueto & Mansueto. Surely, the influence of uncertainty on individuals and business is huge (Lane and Klenke, 2004). Individuals might be feeling alienated in such a society.

Indeed, we are in the midst of a crisis of confidence in the leadership spearheading several of our domestic and global institutions. Parameshwar states that this is manifested in the spate of corporate frauds, corruption , the sense of betrayal engendered by downsizing, reengineering, new technologies , economic recession with growing unemployment. Add to these the expanding threat and counter threat of war by nations together with domestic and international terrorism. Add to all these issues what is identified by Andreaus et al., the presence of unethical actions and the lack of consideration of the social and ethical impact of economic and financial choices taken by business organizations and individual businessmen.

Such developments in this post-ideological period and post-modern society seem to threaten the very fabric of the society, by allowing individuals to stand alone, and to introduce change to or even reject the values that have hitherto defined the character of Western society. Figure (1) highlights some but not all the problems that we are facing – not only in the Western world, but rather these seem to be a hallmark of the global society as a whole.

> "we are in the midst of a crisis of confidence in the leadership spearheading several of our domestic and global institutions."

This is summed up by Andreaus et al., who through a literature review had emphasized the possibility that a lack of values lies at the core of the crisis and the amorality of business which needs to be confronted. Certainly, this trend, if left unchecked, might lead to grievous consequences for the society as a whole.

The question that poses itself here is: Have those leaders (such as CEOs or CIOs or CFOs of some of the companies such as Citibank, AIG, General Motors, Storm, Northern Rock, Goldman Sachs amongst others that made the headlines with the meltdown in 2008/2009) obtained their higher education degrees? And the answer would most probably be a resounding *'YES'* , with some graduating from some of the high-ranking higher education institutions. *WHAT WENT WRONG?* What was the gap between what those individuals learned at the higher education institutions and their actions when they became responsible in the contemporary business world?

To allow proper answers to such questions, let us recall earlier seminal literature that might assist us; where Bruch and Ghoshal posit 'The real gap was between knowledge and action.' – Yes, unfortunately, the majority of our higher education institutions would graduate students who *MIGHT* have the knowledge, but feel lost when in the real world – unable to act! The real problem was that even though they knew what to do, they simply did not do those things. Bruch and Ghoshal provide a phrase to describe the situa-

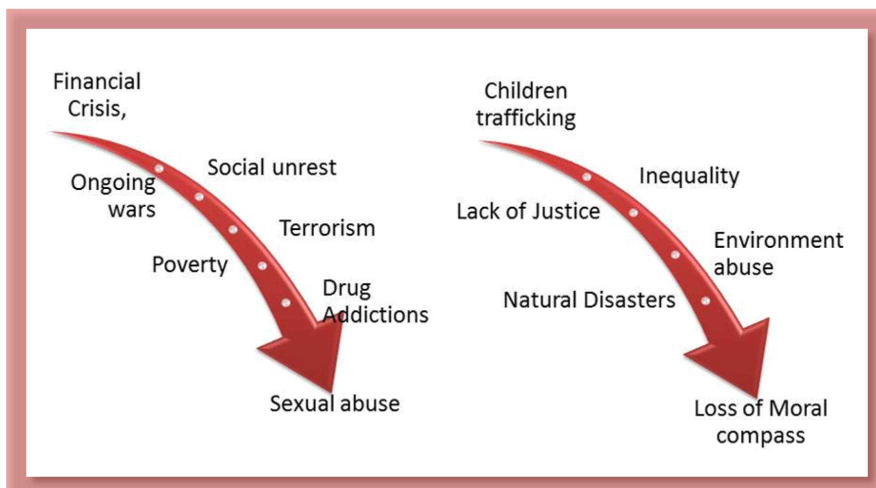


Figure 1: Problems that we are facing

tion as the pervasive ‘knowing-doing gap’ in companies. By the same token, Jeffrey Pfeffer and Bob Sutton of Stanford posed the question: ‘Did you ever wonder why so much education and training, management consultation, organisational research, and so many books and articles produce so few changes in actual management practice?… Why knowledge of what needs to be done frequently fails to result in action or behaviour consistent with that knowledge.’.

Well, in an attempt to respond, I take refuge in Ghoshal (2005), who posits that bad management theories are destroying good management practices. Further, Ghoshal 2005 argues that Business Schools do not need to do a great deal more to help prevent future Enrons; they need only to stop doing a lot they currently do. They do not need to create new courses; they need to simply stop teaching some old ones. But, before doing any of this, we—as business school faculty—need to own up to our own role in creating Enrons. Ghoshal goes on to argue that our theories and ideas have done much to strengthen the management practices that we are all now so loudly condemning.

I add my voice to other scholars, stating that organizations, including higher education institutions, need to discover their inner power to balance energies and transform themselves into more humane systems; that management should be recognised as the art of doing and getting done; that researchers in management should share the blame for the failure of businesses; to cease solving the ‘negative problem’ of containing the costs of human imperfections, which led to pessimism in management research; that management researchers recognize their social and moral responsibility towards business and management; that the existence of internal controls that ensure management in higher education provide assurance regarding reliability of their reporting in accordance with the generally accepted principles that include policies and procedures; that research into the role of executives’ perceptions of ethical issues needs to be implemented within the curriculum. We should be looking beyond the meltdown and downfall of the economy and morality, ceasing the blame game, and instead assisting in the shaping of tomorrow’s business leaders through the principles and practices of business ethics programs at the universities. Most importantly, employing individual’s self-control .

“Bad management theories are destroying good management practices.”

But how?

There is a way, and deriving from Issa, one approach would be to develop that which Weick and Sutcliffe describe as faculties to cope with errors and anticipate events before they occur, to develop capabilities for mindfulness, swift learning, flexible role structures, and most importantly, adapting a mindset of prevention to pre-empt the need for a cure. While Weick and Sutcliffe contend that human fallibility is like gravity, just another foreseeable hazard, well-developed skills to detect and contain failings in their early stages might be what is missing – skills which otherwise would allow a better understanding of how the different parties in the business world act together for the benefit of all.

Here lies our responsibility; we in higher education, we need first to cease treating our students as customers; they are a product, they come to us as ‘raw material’ and leave us as a ‘finished product’ where we add value to these individuals to their way of thinking, and most importantly to their character. Certainly, we in higher education need to develop such skills in our students. We need a mindset revolution in those students. We should cease to concentrate our teaching and learning on issues merely in relation to marketing, finance, human resources, production, or other theoretical subjects that will always direct our students to think of how to increase the bottom line. Instead, and in addition to the basic theoretical topics, we need to start to concentrate on sustainability, as in sustainable environment, sustainable economy, and sustainable society. As institutions of higher learning involved in the education of current and future managers and deriving from Crompton et al., we need to ensure that our students are transparent and participatory, and demand the same standard for others; they need to always ensure that communications embody the values that they seek to promote. I hope as academics we would be able to get above our individual achievements and goals, looking for and taking care of the most important stakeholder in our careers that is our students.

For a full list of references, contact the author at Theodora.Issa@curtin.edu.au

JULIUS KOVESI ON CONCEPTS AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Alan Tapper

It is widely assumed by philosophers that the main task of moral philosophy is to provide a general theory of morality. Moral philosophy will provide us with the correct distinction between right and wrong action, or between good and bad behavior, or between virtuous and vicious character. Right, wrong, good, bad, virtuous and vicious are the central concepts in morality. The job of philosophy is to sort out their meaning and relations. The central concepts are thus a very small set of so-called "thin" concepts.

Some virtues theorists object that this is an unduly narrow approach to the subject. They wish to introduce a richer repertoire, the repertoire of the virtue and vice concepts. For them the task of moral philosophy is to make sense of good and bad character and action in terms of the recognized range of virtues and vices, such as kindness, courage, fairness, honesty and justice. This is indeed an enriched approach – but is it rich enough?

We might go much further. Suppose we were to collect a whole lexicon or thesaurus of moral terminology. How rich would it be? Oddly enough, no-one seems to have done this. I have seen suggestions that it would be quite small. My own amateur attempts suggest otherwise. I have a list of 100 terms for morally wrong actions, including relative rarities such as buckpassing, whitewashing, stalking and racketeering, but not forgetting core concepts such as murder, theft, rape, fraud and assault. Admittedly, we seem to have fewer terms for good actions. But Edmund Pincoffs (in *Quandaries and Virtues*) showed that we have a rich repertoire of good and bad character concepts.

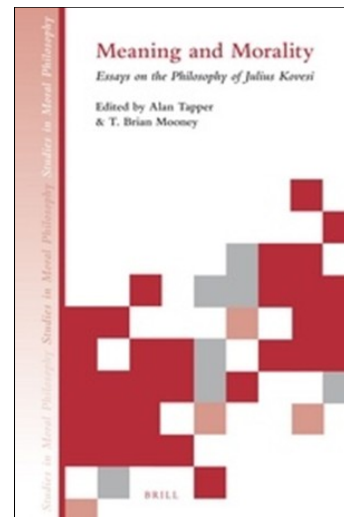
This approach might be deemed the "thick" method of doing moral philosophy. It rests on the indisputable idea that we already have a considerable stock of moral distinctions. But what work does it leave for moral philosophy to do? Does it reduce the philosopher to mere stamp collecting? In fact there is much to do, given this idea of moral philosophy. The central task is that of making sense of our moral lexicon. It requires that we interpret the meanings and relations that hold within and between these concepts. It also requires that we set these concepts in the wider context of our other concepts and of the social institutions and practices that employ these concepts.

> **"Suppose we were to collect a whole lexicon or thesaurus of moral terminology. How rich would it be?"**

In fact this "thick" approach is a widely practiced approach to moral philosophy, but one that lacks the status of the general theories and theorists. And few philosophers have attempted to put together a general account of moral concepts, as distinct from a general theory of morality. One exception is the Hungarian-born Australian philosopher, Julius Kovesi. In his 1967 book *Moral Notions*, Kovesi set out to explore how moral concepts are constructed, how they are used, and how they relate to our other concepts. His main general point is that they are in no way special except in that their content is moral content.

Kovesi's central idea was what he called the "formal element" of concepts. This idea is somewhat similar to what Wittgenstein meant by the "rule-following" aspect of how we use concepts in practical life. Similar, but not quite the same. A better translation of what Kovesi meant is "the reason why we have the concept". Concepts are formed because we need to make distinctions. We have a reason to make them. For example, the concept of manslaughter arises from our need to distinguish some kinds of wrongful killing from other kinds. Concepts thus structure what counts as a reason in our shared lives. Concepts are not just forms of rule-following. They have rational force.

Kovesi distinguished the formal element of a concept from its "material elements". The mate-



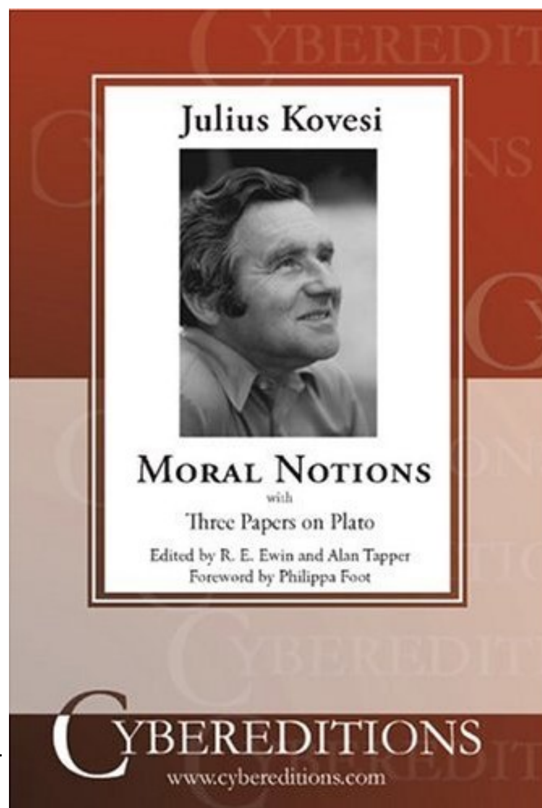
JULIUS KOVESI ON CONCEPTS AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY (CONT'D)

Alan Tapper

rial elements are the various ways in which the concept can be instantiated. There are innumerable ways in which murders can be committed. Likewise, there are innumerable kinds and examples of tables or games or plants or whatever. At present there may be only 118 known chemical elements, but it is important that the set is not closed – new elements may still be discovered. This openness is a general feature of concepts, Kovesi thought. And this implies that we cannot grasp the meaning of a term simply by listing instances or kinds of the term, even if the list is correct as far as it goes. We need to grasp not just what the list's members have in common but what would make some additional example a genuine or false example. And to grasp this we need to go back to the formal element, to the reason why we have the concept. A digital book has little in common with a paper-based book but it is still a book, because the formal element is the same.

Kovesi's argument was intended to break down the distinction between fact and value that has so dominated moral philosophy. Values enter into the formation of our concepts, while "facts" so-called play only a secondary role. There is no defined set of facts that accounts for the meaning of any given concepts. What gives our concepts meaning is the shared values that inform them. Values and reasons go together in structuring the concepts that shape our lives.

Kovesi's moral philosophy shows why we need a rich repertoire of concepts. Each concept has a role to play. Take one away and our capacity for moral functioning is to that degree weakened. Moral philosophy has to be "thick". What then of our "thin" concepts? Kovesi had an answer to that question. Some of our thin concepts, good and bad, serve as very high level discriminators. "Good" is the most general term of approbation. Other thin concepts play a role in moral reasoning. "Right" and "wrong" play a part when we are debating about an action that does not fall directly under any of our existing repertoire of concepts. In general the thin concepts play a supplementary role in moral thought, and not a central role, as many moral philosophers assume.



> **"Kovesi's argument was intended to break down the distinction between fact and value that has so dominated moral philosophy."**

Moral Notions had a strong influence on a few philosophers, and no influence at all on many. To those for whom his work mattered it seems to still matter. Amongst them are some well-known names: Bernard Harrison, Peter French, Bob Ewin, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Dennis Patterson. A collection of papers by these authors and others designed to re-introduce Kovesi's distinctive contribution to moral philosophy has recently been compiled by Brian Mooney and Alan Tapper, under the title *Meaning and Morality: Essays on the Philosophy of Julius Kovesi* (Brill, 2012). Alasdair MacIntyre once described *Moral Notions* as "a minor classic of moral philosophy".

The collection aims to make sure it is not a forgotten minor classic. http://www.brill.com/meaning-and-morality

"Making the right moves...."

AAPAE

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