"We're Not the Bad Guys": An Argument For Consilience Between Business Schools and the Liberal Arts

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Abstract

Many in American society see a career in business as morally suspect. Nowhere does the perception of illegitimacy appear more strongly than in the liberal arts institution. This paper presents an argument for the morality of business. Drawing from both deontological and teleological frameworks, it is suggested that there are numerous virtues associated with the practice of business under the capitalist economic model. Because a career in business can be a noble and moral calling, the paper concludes by exploring two methods for achieving greater integration between business schools and the liberal arts.

There appears to be a widespread perception in society that business is ethically suspect and that those who engage in business are morally flawed. Simply put, business and its proponents have become the bad guys (Hood, 1996). It was not always this way. Social movements of the 1960s appear to have generated a strong and significant undercurrent of skepticism about the role of business in American society. Many Americans, in response to such problems as racial injustice and environmental degradation, held corporations largely responsible and began to view business as a corrupt, amoral institution in which a few greedy individuals profited at the expense of the broader community (Hood, 1996).

Mass media and investigative journalism continues to place great emphasis on catching greedy corporations in the act of polluting the air, water, or land, selling shoddy and overpriced products, exploiting workers and their families, and sacrificing the public health, safety, and welfare to make a few more dollars. The effect of mass media portrayals of business on public perceptions of business conduct has been profound. For example, in 1965 almost 60% of Americans believed that businesses made a reasonable profit whereas 24% thought businesses made too much money. By 1975, the trend lines had reversed with more Americans calling profits excessive rather than reasonable. Further, by 1992, 64% of Americans rated the moral and ethical standards of small-business owners as excellent or good, but only 31% said the same about business executives (Bowman & Ladd, 1993).

Negative perceptions of business are not limited to the popular culture. Many within the walls of academia also regard business and business schools with suspicion. Not only do academics from other disciplines question the moral legitimacy of business schools, but they also question the notion that business is even a legitimate area of study. Often those within the liberal arts are, in fact, openly hostile to business studies. A recent text by Micklethwait and Wooldridge

(1996) indicates that some of this contempt for business and, in particular, management scholars and consultants might be warranted since management theory appears to lack intellectual foundation. Further, Micklethwait and Wooldridge argue that because management theory is often poorly stated, insensitive to its impact and consequences, methodologically sloppy, and a slave to fashion, those in other disciplines frequently regard business scholars as, at best, imposters in the temple, and, at worst, charlatans and amoral con artists.

We argue in this paper, however, that the foundations upon which the practice of business is conducted is ethical and that a career in business can be morally enriching. In the next section, an argument for the morality of capitalism and its supporting structures is developed. In addition, three under examined virtues of business as practiced within a capitalistic economic model will also be explored. The last part of the paper presents several ways in which the study of business and the activities of business schools can be better integrated with the liberal arts.

The Morality of Business

Previous conceptualizations of the morality of business have primarily been framed within a religious context. Theologians have argued that capitalism presents a number of ethical difficulties and, in fact, suggest that this economic model is seriously morally flawed (Novak, 1981, 1996; Vogel, 1991). Historically, theology held that moneymaking was morally suspect. In particular, profit was seen as a zero-sum event: one's gain had to be another's lost. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, "he who sells a thing for more than he paid for it must have paid less than it was worth or be selling it for more ". Consequently, moral standards for an economic system that depended on profit could not be established.

A second concern for many theorists regarding capitalism was that it reduced individuals to abstractions - anonymous buyers and sellers, whose claim on each other were determined solely by the market (Weber, 1958). In addition, religious leaders have argued that capitalism corrodes the human and Christian ties that are believed to bound men and women into communities (Naughton & Lacznik, 1993; Vogel, 1991). The Catholic Church, in particular, took the position that while work was a fundamental dimension of man's existence, business as conducted under a capitalistic economic model treated man simply as an instrument of work and not in accordance with the true dignity of his work (Novak, 1981; 1993). That is, capitalism treats man not as the subject and maker, the very purpose of the whole process of production, but simply as one means to an end. In essence, then, capitalism was thought to be morally flawed since it fails to recognize mankind's innate dignity (Naughton & Lacznik, 1993).

Even today, some business theorists continue to express concern over how employees are treated within capitalistic structures. Handy (1997), for example, suggests that there continues to be a need to redefine exactly what is meant by the term "company". According to Handy, the old language of property and ownership no longer serves us in modern society because it no longer describes what a company really is. Essentially, the old language suggests the wrong priorities, leads to inappropriate policies, and screens out new possibilities. Further, Handy argues that the idea of a corporation as the property of the current holders of its shares is an affront to natural justice because it gives inadequate recognition to the people who work in the corporation and who are, increasingly, its principal assets. To talk of owning other people, as shareholders implicitly do, might even be considered immoral.

While any economic system which fails to appreciate, recognize and value mankind's inherent dignity will present moral difficulties, business need not be that way. Several reasons why the conduct of business can be considered ethical and morally enriching are suggested in the next section.

Arguments for the Morality of Business

Using the new language of business and giving voice to the idea of the primacy of labor, it is possible to construct a position that provides insight to the moral legitimacy of business as practiced within a capitalist economic model. The arguments to be made can be developed from both teleological and deontological frameworks.

Teleological Framework

Teleological ethical principles suggest that what is right or ethical is developed from a focus on society as the unit of analysis and stresses the consequences of an act rather than the intentions behind it (Fritzsche, 1997). From a consequentialist position, there can be little disagreement concerning capitalism's ability to generate greater material gain for a greater number of people. Market economies have produced more wealth and greater economic security for more individuals than even its most ardent early supporters ever dreamed possible (Friedman, 1962; Landes, 1998; Yergin & Stanislaw, 1998).

A second aspect of the "greatest good" component of the teleological framework can be grounded in the position that business under a capitalist economic model not only created the greatest material gain for the greatest number of people but that it also created the greatest amount of political gain--freedom. No other economic system has proven even remotely so compatible with liberty and democracy. Friedman (1962) and others (Landes, 1998; Novak, 1993) make the argument that capitalism is a necessary condition for political freedom.

Friedman suggests, for example, that economic arrangements are important because of their effect on the concentration or dispersion of power. The kind of economic organization that provides economic freedom directly, namely competitive capitalism, also promotes political freedom because it separates economic power from political power and in this way enables the one to offset the other. In other words, the market greatly reduces the range of issues that must be decided through political means, thus minimizing the extent to which governments need participate in all activities. By removing the organization of economic activity from the control of political authority, the market eliminates a powerful source of coercive power. Hence, current business practices are a check to political power and its abuse.

Deontological framework

Deontology refers to moral philosophies that focus on the rights of individuals and on the intentions associated with a particular behavior rather than on its consequences (Fritzsche, 1997). In the past a clear and consistent challenge to the moral legitimacy of capitalism has been the claim that, while capitalism appears to have increased the material and political good for the greatest number of people, ultimately its underlying motives of greed and self-interest were bad (Hosmer, 1996). However, we argue that these past interpretations of the motives (intentions) underlying capitalism reflect an outdated reading of the self-interest concept. In other words, it is suggested that the issue of motives need not be the moral "Achilles heel" of capitalism. There are three reasons why capitalism can be considered moral from a deontological position.

First, with the advent of the Protestant reformation, it is possible to speak of business ethics since Protestantism held that the correct use of wealth was precisely to increase it for the glory of God (Vogel, 1991). In essence, the reformation made it possible for a successful business person to be an ethical individual as well. Moreover, the reformation made it possible to propose a positive relationship between engaging in ethical behavior and earning profits. This relationship, in turn, is central in any attempt to firm up a deontological argument for the moral legitimacy of contemporary business systems. Essentially, business can be moral because there is no trade-off between virtue and prosperity. In many cases, virtue and prosperity are mutually reinforcing.

A second issue, which builds off the notion that the successful businessperson could be a good human being, is the fact that what makes capitalism unique is its claim to have developed a mechanism through which it was possible for an individual to acquire wealth that not only did not harm others, but actually benefitted them. This mechanism was, of course, the market. Wealth accumulated through the market does not lessen the total volume of available goods and services; the consumer is no worse off for having exchanged his money for a commodity than is the merchant who now has fewer goods and more money. In short, business is moral since the gaining of wealth (profit) is earned through performing a socially useful function. The morality of capitalism then rests on a fundamental notion that profits, earned as the result of some contribution to the society, are just and fair and reflects behavior in which others should engage. Capitalism has created a win-win situation and changed the equation from a zero-sum one to non-zero sum.

Third, the moral legitimacy of capitalism and its supporting structures may also be established through a reexamination of the self-interest construct--in particular, the conception that self-interest is immoral. It is a mistake to equate self-interest with greed or other negative intentions. Rather, it is suggested that self-interest might also encompass moral interests, artistic and scientific interests as well as concern for the well-being of one’s family and community. Moreover, it is important to recognize that the pursuit of self-interest is as different from the pursuit of spite as it is from the pursuit of altruism. The argument for the morality of self-interest is supported by recent research on the evolution of cooperation.

Recent research within evolutionary psychology suggests that human nature may, in fact, be directed towards cooperation and that progress in human society is the result not of benevolence, but the pursuit of self-interest (Ridley, 1997). It appears that humans have learned that what is in the individual’s self-interest is often and frequently a tendency to freely cooperate. The great paradox appears to be that it is the human tendency towards self-interest that has established the cooperative strategies (Diamond, 1997; Pinker, 1997). The human brain, while built by selfish genes, expresses its selfish tendency in a manner by which people engage in social, trustworthy, and cooperative behaviors (Bonta, 1997). Further, humans appear to come into the world equipped with predispositions to learn how to cooperate and to discriminate between the trustworthy and the treacherous, to exchange goods and services, and to divide labor.

The great contribution of capitalism is that it draws upon this innate tendency and allows mankind to be and do what its genes have designed it to do. That is, capitalism allows and helps societies to build institutions in such a way as to help them draw out our instincts towards cooperation and exchange (Bonta, 1997). Consequently, just as trade between countries is the best recipe for friendship between them, so exchange between enfranchised and empowered individuals is the best recipe for cooperation. The morality of business is discovered in the fact that it helps encourage social and material exchange between equals and this is the raw material of trust. Trust, in turn, is the foundation of virtue. Thus, business rather than being seen as something vulgar, Philistine, and morally suspect has many virtues to include its enhancement of cooperative tendencies. Below three virtues are discussed that are often overlooked when describing capitalism and business practices.

Unexplored Virtues of Business

Business as conducted under a capitalistic economic model evidences a number of virtues (Naughton & Lacznik, 1993). However, quite frequently its virtues of creativity, community building, and industriousness are ignored and/or unknown. To further develop and enhance the argument for the morality of business, these three virtues are explored in greater detail.

Creativity

Work lets us feel creative. According to Harold Kushner (1996), work is a participation in God’s activity to create. Further, work can be a way of serving God and becoming even a little like God through the creative process (Naughton & Bausch, 1996). For example, Tracy Kidder (1981), in his book about computers, "The Soul of a New Machine," describes the feelings of engineers who had just finished designing and building a new computer. They speak of self-fulfillment, a feeling of accomplishment, and creation; one engineer even imagines that this must have been how God felt when he looked at the world he had made and pronounced it good.

Capitalism with its focus on the creation and distribution of goods and services elevates work to a higher level than had previous models. Further, it is through invention and innovation--a process that extends from the laboratory to the factory floor to the delivery truck to the retail store--that business within a capitalistic framework makes a key social contribution. The market's demand for new and inventive ways of satisfying needs and wants helps mankind demonstrate and utilize its innate creativity (Chapel, 1993). Capitalism has been a spur and great encouragement of man’s capacity to be creative.

Building Community

Work creates society (Novak, 1996). In essence, society is a great historical and social incarnation of the work of all generations (i.e., the Great Wall of China). Moreover, work serves to add to the heritage of the whole human family. In no place does there exist a more clear relationship between work and society than in the public for-profit corporation.

There is a growing realization that a public for-profit corporation is a lot more than just a piece of property (Handy, 1997). With the idea of "company as community" comes the understanding that organizational members are not just human resources, but they are citizens with both rights and obligations. Further, when an organization becomes a community the nature of the relationships with other stakeholders' changes from command and control to a shared sense of duty and an integrated sense of connection to one's fellows.

To a large extent, the recent "corporate soul" movement is a reflection of the growing realization of work and company as community. In particular, spirituality at work or "corporate soul" is about a set of values that are lived out and against which everything is evaluated. These values include helping employees feel connected to others, helping others to find themselves or success, creating humane organizations, and finding authenticity (Brandt, 1996; Mirvis, 1997).

Industriousness

Theologians have argued that work is a good thing for man (Vogel, 1991). Work is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy, but because it is something worthy. That is to say, work is something that corresponds to man's innate dignity, expresses this dignity and increases it (Novak, 1996). Moreover, when man works he not only alters things and society but he develops himself as well: he learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself (Chapel, 1993). In fact, it is this kind of growth from work that is of greater value than any external riches which might be garnered as the result of external rewards (Maslow, 1970).

Growth at work is most likely to occur when man has a part in the process of production (John XIII, 1961). When man has some ownership of capital, he is likely to be most fully human. Private ownership of capital as provided in the capitalistic model most fully enhances man's dignity and can put man more fully in control of his destiny. Thus, not only is being active and industrious a positive impact on man's dignity and well-being but no economic system can have a more powerful or greater impact in this regard than can capitalism.

Because capitalism and business have so many virtues and can be established to be moral through any number of dimensions, business programs, particularly those programs in the liberal arts institution, need to do a much better job signing out their values and virtues. The next section presents an argument for why business educators should seek greater connectivity with the liberal arts. Further, two methods for achieving the called for integration are examined in detail as well.

An Argument for Consilience

A key premise of this paper has been that business is moral and that a career in business can be a noble calling - counter to popular perception. On the other hand, training in the liberal arts has long been assumed to be a virtuous and noble path. Newman (1941) indicates, for example, that a liberal arts education seeks to cultivate the life of the mind and impart knowledge to the student that would instill a love of truth and promote intellectual discipline. Marsden (1994) supports this long running assumption of virtue by suggesting that a liberal arts education should help students develop an ability to consider metaphysical notions of the human person and philosophical notions of justice and dignity.

We argue that because virtue is abundant in both areas, business programs have the potential for making rich contributions to the liberal arts just as the liberal arts can and have made significant contributions to business education. Unfortunately, past inabilities to integrate business schools with the liberal arts has kept them from their full potential. If business education is to escape its narrow boundaries and make a larger contribution to the intellectual life of its stakeholders, it must be academically defined in part by the liberal arts context in which it finds itself. In turn, the liberal arts context must be open to business education. Ultimately, this paper calls for consilience (a joining together) between these two compatible but often warring traditions. That is, business education must be infused with the principles of liberal education and liberal education must be open to engage business education.

There are a variety of ways in which academia might successfully integrate liberal arts with business instruction (Harrison & Akinc, 1998). Two techniques will be discussed in this paper. The first technique can be called business education as liberal learning. Business education as liberal learning explores several ways in which narrowly defined functional courses can be cross-departmentalized to encourage greater cooperation and interaction between business educators and other members of the university community. The second approach can be identified as business education as service. It involves practical attempts to help students utilize theories from the classroom in service to their surrounding communities. Both techniques are designed to increase the opportunity for students to utilize conceptual and analytical skills in service to humanity. In particular, it is hoped that business education as service would help students move beyond an instrumentalist orientation towards a more disciplined sensitivity to human suffering.

Business Education as Liberal Learning: Cross-Departmentalizing

By proactively engaging with other disciplines and departments, business programs participate in a "give and take" relationship that 1) educates institutional members with regards to the virtues of business, 2) demonstrates the abundant potential a business education has to offer, and 3) further enhances the business programs' potential for advancing the mission of the overall university through the acquisition of interdisciplinary resources. Moreover, while the humanities offer insight into the human condition concerning thought and relations, the curriculum of business programs brings to the liberal arts an applied context in which the humanities can be studied and practiced.

Several opportunities for alliances between business programs and the humanities are readily apparent. Chief among these opportunities is the study of economics. Before the proliferation of business programs in academic institutions, the study of trade was the domain of the economics department. Through the lens of the humanities, the economics department studied--and continues to study--the exchange system as a complex of social, cultural, historical, and philosophical interactions.

Nevertheless, the economics offerings of business programs would be enhanced by adopting a broader view of their educational objectives. The primary failing of business programs is that they have overemphasized the social-scientific objectivity of economics at the expense of the humanities' subjectivity (Piper, Gentile, & Parks, 1993). By pressing beyond the application of mathematical formulas, the managerial economics course has the potential to explore the virtues of capitalism from a more qualitative perspective. Formulas merely transform data into information; judgement is still required for information to become intelligence.

Other areas of the humanities--namely, philosophy, history, arts & letters, and languages--also offer considerable opportunity for business programs. The study of philosophy, for example, seeks to understand the principles that underlie thought, knowledge, and conduct. An understanding of these principles is as equally vital for the student of business as it is for the humanities student. Yet, philosophy--even management philosophy--is rarely incorporated into the curriculum of business programs. The exception is generally a course on business ethics. While including business ethics in the curriculum is a positive step, two liabilities still exist. First, by establishing a course called "business ethics," the school sends the message that ethics is something different from what is being taught in the other courses (Naughton & Bausch, 1996). Second, a course on business ethics only touches on a small part of what the broader study of philosophy has to contribute to business programs. Recognizing that many management theories and practices have their conceptual origins in philosophic thought, philosophy should become an instilled fiber of every business course.

Another area of the humanities that has much to offer business programs is the field of arts & letters. While one is much more likely to find a business course titled "management science" than one is to find a course titled "management art", the educational objectives of the business curriculum has much in common with the art curriculum. The study of art relates to the human ability to create. These creative forms take on many different media, including graphics, sculpture, music, and dance.

One art form that receives special note is literature. Literature has the ability to portray the lessons of humanity in profoundly powerful ways. While "classical" literature is seldom found on the reading lists of business courses, there are some interesting exceptions. For instance, Harrison and Akinc (1998) discuss a management education course that has included classical readings (e.g. "The Art of War & "The Prince") with the sole purpose of, "exploring the arts and literature to discover what lessons can be learned about working with and managing people in both personal and professional situations". According to Harrison and Akinc, a key benefit of the integrated readings was a significantly improved ability to think analytically and critically - skills that should benefit future leaders tremendously.

The arts not only encourage a more cultivated appreciation of human creativity, but they encourage creativity. In most business programs, creativity is acknowledged as an important factor for organizational success; however, creativity is typically not taught through any purposeful curriculum. In recent decades that have brought rapid social, economic, and technological change, business leaders--many of them former graduates of business programs--have been scornfully criticized for their lack of vision. The humanities department would remind us that the arts are nothing, if not visionary. Consequently, if the nurturing of vision is to be a realized educational objective, business programs must find equal space for the management arts as for the management sciences.

Still another opportunity that shows promise for an alliance between the humanities and business programs is the field of languages. The study of languages imparts a taxonomy of discourse and helps reveal the essence of a people's culture. The globalization of the economy necessitates that businesses employ a workforce capable of communicating across cultural boundaries (Adler, 1986). Therefore, to be employable, students must be exposed to the locales, languages, and cultures of the world. Business programs should take the initiative in forging alliances with geography, language, and cultural studies departments to better prepare students for the global workplace.

In sum, the humanities examine what it means to be "human" in a civilization. With all their formulas, models, and frameworks, business programs tend to de-emphasize what it means to be human in the context of work organizations. This observation is evidenced by the themes that pervade the popular "Dilbert" cartoon strip. When it exits, this lack of "humanity" is most readily detected in the liberal arts institution where the study of the humanities is the centerpiece. Therefore, to overcome these negative perceptions, business programs must form educational alliances across departmental boundaries and integrate the humanities into its curriculum.

Business Education as Service: Service-Learning

A prominent part of most liberal arts institution's mission statements--as well as the mission statements of other universities--is community service. Because of the applied nature of business programs, they are in an advantageous position to advance this mission. Nevertheless, business programs have too frequently viewed themselves as "business" schools, overlooking or ignoring opportunities to apply their knowledge, skills, and values toward community ends. Hence, business programs need to more effectively manage their relationships with external stakeholders --especially with community stakeholders that further the liberal arts objective of service to humanity.

One specific approach to managing this external connection is through service-learning. Service-learning is an educational vehicle that simultaneously pursues the objectives of providing service to community stakeholders while achieving learning objectives. Within the parameters of a course, students are assigned the task of serving a community stakeholder, e.g., public agency or nonprofit organization. As students provide service, they are guided by faculty to reflect on the lessons being learned regarding the service experience and the content of the course.

Service-learning experiences are designed to raise students' levels of social consciousness. As they perform service for populations with whom they may not regularly come into contact, students begin to recognize and, hopefully, appreciate the breadth and depth of problems that exist in their community. Moreover, students gain a more accurate identity of who they themselves are and what they have to offer their community by way of addressing those problems.

From a pedagogical point of view, service-leaning can be used as an instructional method across all disciplines. However, service-learning has particular advantages in the business curriculum (Morris & Maranville, 1997). Through service-leaning, students have the opportunity to learn from hands-on experience at planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. Students make application of management knowledge and skills as they attempt to address the community stakeholder's needs through the production of products or services. Further, students make practical use of theories to understand human and organizational behavior in the process of organizing and producing. One of the most potent lessons in a management course can be the observed relationship between organizational mission and individual action. The concept of an organizational mission can be quite abstract. Nevertheless, students experience how the liberal arts institution's mission is translated into actual results.

As business programs employ service-learning as a pedagogical method, they create a symbiotic relationship with the community stakeholders being served. While stakeholders receive the benefits of the direct services performed by students, students receive invaluable exposure to acts of social responsibility. In turn, as students learn from reflection on the service experience, stakeholders are also the recipients of added learning as students share their insights. In this way, business programs are able to constructively contribute to a liberal arts education.

Conclusion

In this paper, it was argued that capitalism and the practice of business have been--and continue to be--treated as morally suspect by theologians, theorists, and the public in general. By association, business education has been viewed through this same critical lens. This critical view of business and business education is, perhaps, most prevalent in liberal arts institutions where the humanities is the primary curricula. To maintain competitiveness, these institutions tolerate the presence of business programs but, at the same time, question the correspondence between the curricula of these programs and the institution's mission. Through this paper, we present teleological and deontological arguments for the morality of business and identify three virtues--creativity, community, and industriousness--inherent to the practice of business. It is hoped that business programs will draw upon their ethical foundations to more effectively support the liberal arts and seek to better integrate themselves with the larger educational context they are located within. In seeking integration, there are a number of tools available to business programs. Two especially promising techniques include: business education as liberal learning and business education as service. Through these two approaches, business programs are able to share the inherent virtues of business, while supporting the liberal arts mission and creating valuable educational partnerships.

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