

CONVERGENT ETHICS ANALYSIS:
TOWARD A NEW NORMATIVE SYNTHESIS

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Annual Meeting
Society for Business Ethics
Vancouver, British Columbia
August 6, 1995

A recent issue of Business Ethics Quarterly presented pro and con arguments about the feasibility, likelihood, and/or desirability of linking empirical and normative concepts and methods used in business ethics research (Business Ethics Quarterly, 1994). The same general kinds of issues appeared, though less directly and explicitly, in an earlier special issue that described various empirical methods used to investigate ethics issues in business (Business Ethics Quarterly, 1992). The spirited discussions found in these two collections suggest that empirical scientists and normative philosophers are exploring, though gingerly, the possibility of melding their approaches so that the resultant methods would reveal more about the nature of business ethics problems than a separatist, go-it-alone policy.

This paper explores one aspect of that larger argument by proposing a set of **convergence theorems** that can form the basis for bringing business ethics philosophers and empirical scientists closer together. In fact, it is argued that these theorems constitute a normative commons already largely accepted by both kinds of researchers as a starting point for their respective investigations. Therefore, an integration of normative and empirical methods, which was advocated by some authors in the Business Ethics

Quarterly discussions, is close to a present reality rather than a condition or state to be achieved in the future by the field of business ethics. Building on these convergence theorems can lead to the possibility of establishing a New Normative Synthesis to guide business ethics inquiry. In effect, the convergence theorems represent contact points that encourage a harmonization of the findings from established ethics theory and the social and natural sciences regarding the normative dimension of business operations.

Convergence Theorems

Business ethicists from philosophy and the social sciences, in spite of theoretical differences, share certain normative orientations about business. These common elements draw into a single inquiring tradition the best efforts of scholars from different disciplinary orientations. At some point (or perhaps at several such points) their thoughts converge in shared understandings, which are presented here as "convergence theorems." These theorems---they could also be called "a normative commons"---register the central gains and accomplishments of a half-century's inquiry into the moral links between business and society. Collectively, they stand at the center of present-day understanding of business's ethical and social responsibilities to humankind and to the ecosystems on which life depends. Figure 1 diagrams the logical connections that bind them together.¹

¹ It will become evident as each of the theorems is identified that they are arrayed on a continuum of agreement-disagreement or acceptance-doubt. So that Theorem Seven, at one end of the continuum, has fewer advocates than does Theorem One, at the other end. Thus the continuum in a rather interesting way constitutes a yardstick of scholarly development and normative convergence regarding questions of business ethics.

Theorem One: Business is an inherently normative activity, calling for moral evaluation and judgment of its operations, motives, decisions, policies, and goals.

All parties who seek answers to ethical issues in business accept this theorem, either explicitly or by the implicit assumptions that guide their inquiry. The view is rejected that business can be fully understood as a self-contained, socially-isolated, value-neutral, solely-instrumental activity. A complete list of confirming citations of this theorem would fill several paragraphs and for that reason they are not included. However, standard textbooks in business ethics or business and society, which by definition and common practice record the conventional wisdom of the field, give ample evidence that this theorem is universally accepted; for recent representative examples, see DeGeorge (1990), Weiss (1994), and Peery (1995).

Theorem Two: Business and society are unavoidably linked together in functional ways, so that what one of them does directly affects the other, posing the possibility that each will suffer harms and/or experience benefits stemming from the other's activities. The reciprocal moral responsibilities owed by business and society to each other stem from their interlinked nature. Business is both in and of society, while society penetrates deeply into every aspect of business operations. Their respective fates are tied to what each does and how it is done. (Preston & Post, 1975; Carroll, 1989; Wood, 1990; Frederick, Post, & Davis, 1992)

Theorem Three: Business's societal impacts are divisible and variable among identifiable groups (called "stakeholders"), whose interests cannot and should not be disregarded or discounted by those who direct and carry out business operations.

This theorem translates the generalized principle expressed in Theorem Two into the specific interactions and transactions that occur as business firms go about their daily activities. Many people both adjacent to and far from the center of business operations may be drawn into the orbit of business influence, and when that occurs business incurs a moral responsibility of greater or lesser magnitude for those impacts which may be either beneficial or harmful. This stakeholder theorem has become the focal point of much research and theorizing by business ethicists and business and society scholars (Freeman, 1984; Brenner & Cochran, 1991; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Clarkson, 1995), while others have expressed doubt about its accuracy in characterizing the corporation's basic purpose (Langtry, 1994) and about the factual basis and the normative assumptions on which stakeholder theory is erected (Maitland, 1994).

Theorem Four: The workplace is an arena saturated with values and ethics and these are a function of several factors: a company's history of dealing with ethical issues, the organizational structure (whether hierarchical-and-closed or horizontal-and-open) relating managers and employees to one another, prevailing ethical attitudes expressed by the company's organizational leaders, the kinds of personal values brought into the workplace by employees and managers, and the

actual (observable) response of organizational authority figures (i.e., managers and professionals) to ethical issues that arise during the workday. This theorem is equivalent to acknowledging the presence of ethical work climates as a part of any given business firm's culture. It is intended to counter the myth (widely held among cynics, skeptics, and amoralists) that business work goes forward in a moral vacuum. (Waters, 1978; Waters, Bird, and Chant, 1978; Waters and Bird, 1987; Victor & Cullen, 1988; Cohen, 1993; Weber, 1993)

Theorem Five: Moral measures, standards, principles, and criteria are required to judge and evaluate business performance that impinges upon the moral interests and needs of stakeholders and society generally. Economic, financial, technical-engineering, and accounting measures by themselves are incapable of generating the kinds of insights and information needed for understanding business's normative impacts on others, and vice versa. Just as other disciplinarians develop and apply criteria of market performance, financial success or failure, technical effectiveness, or legal compliance, so too have business ethicists developed and applied standards and principles that permit an assessment of business's normative behavior. Any measurement and evaluation of business performance that omits these moral methodologies falls short of telling the entire story of business's function and its import for society. (Freeman & Gilbert, 1988; Business Ethics Quarterly, 1992)

Theorem Six: The moral interests of business, corporate stakeholders, and society at large are a function of acquired experience within human communities, where normative meanings may vary in time and place but where they converge toward the sustenance and expansion of life's potentialities. Human values, including the values found in typical business firms, simultaneously register the uniqueness of diverse cultures while being expressive of common existential human needs (e.g., basic sustenance, physical and social security, community and societal linkages, etc.). Values grow out of an individual's and a society's life-affecting experiences and therefore they rest on an experiential base. Likewise, they mirror and express the specific organizational and institutional patterns of a society, thus constituting communitarian-like normative directives for citizens, businesses, and other institutions (Rokeach, 1973; Hofstede, 1980; Etzioni, 1988; Selznick, 1992). For some ethicists, such experience-and-community-based moral orientations are believed to span cultural boundaries to constitute inherent or universal human rights (Donaldson, 1989; Frederick, 1991).

These six theorems rest securely on a conceptual, theoretical, and methodological platform built by the combined efforts of business ethics philosophers and social scientists. Even if one were to go no further than these six commonly accepted principles of ethics inquiry, it would be possible to claim that the empirical scientist and the normative philosopher have found ways to integrate their respective approaches to questions of business ethics. However, it would also be possible to argue that in spite of the impres-

sive advance these six theorems stand for, they leave some of the toughest ethics challenges untouched and unresolved. Therefore, a seventh convergence theorem is needed to close some of the gap between empirically-observed business operations and normative principles. Its addition recruits knowledge from the biological and natural sciences, thus expanding the range of sciences brought to bear in understanding ethics issues in business.

Theorem Seven: Business acquires moral standing in society by carrying out a socially-vital economic function, but reliance upon that function alone provides an incomplete justification of business values, behavior, and operations. The basic economic activity of providing goods and services to sustain and expand the life of individuals and societies justifies the existence of business as an institution. Without this vital function, life everywhere would falter and eventually fail. Moral issues arise at every point in this economic process of production and distribution: What will be produced? How will it be produced? How much will be produced and how fast? For whom will production be? How will distributive shares be determined? These classic economic issues have long been debated by economists, philosophers, business people, politicians, a host of social scientists, and the general citizenry. While some have argued that the economic function alone is a sufficient moral justification for business activity and for management's promotion of stockholder interests (Friedman, 1962, 1970), many others have insisted that economics per se, albeit vital and important, is not enough.

Theorem Seven expresses the views of the latter group.²

Within business ethics circles, Theorem Seven's moral issues have been studied and analyzed in the classic manner of the philosopher. The entire conceptual array---but principally including theories of rights and distributive justice, with an occasional bow in the direction of utilitarian concepts---has been brought to bear. The usual outcome has been to morally discount economic activity per se, while insisting on the primacy of rights and justice and condemning a sole reliance on consequentialist utilitarian analysis and outcomes (Bowie and Duska, 1990). A revival of virtue ethics has been added to this general philosophic approach in recent years (Solomon, 1992), along with a revisionist version of social contract thinking (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994). Clearly, the main thrust has been from the normative, not the empirical, side of the aisle.

Now, though, some intriguing initiatives that support Theorem Seven are beginning to emerge from---of all places---the natural sciences, which are perceived by many to be the ultimate refuge of value-free empiricism. In turn, this new thrust has been echoed in a revisionist movement in the field of economics and a rising concern about the environmental dangers of business growth. Each of these developments will be described briefly.

² Note here that "business" is defined in this paper as the act of performing basic economic functions, regardless of the kind of institutional order that may exist in any given society. Thus, "business" may occur within a profit-oriented market economy, a government-regulated command economy, a mixed pluralistic economy, or any other variety of economic system. The premise of Theorem Seven is that a society's surrounding institutional systems (political, social, ideological, religious, et al.), which are thoroughly intertwined with business, provide the customary values for judging and evaluating the moral character of the business function.

The limitations placed on economic and business activity by thermodynamic forces has been stressed by a small but persistent band of economists led by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1971). Their argument is that some of the most basic physical processes in the universe---primarily, the first and second laws of thermodynamics---place human economic operations within a large trap or vise from which there can be no ultimate escape but only a temporary reprieve. All economic production creates large-scale economic wastes (pollution of all kinds), larger in volume than the beneficial output itself. The clear implication is that business-driven economic activity cannot be allowed to go unchecked without bringing environmental ruin to the earth. Recent advocates who have noted these thermodynamic limits include Henderson (1991), Frederick, (1992, 1995), the several authors in Burgenmeier (1994), and Shrivastava (1995). Shrivastava proposes a concept of "ecocentric management"---he means ecologically-centered, not economically-centered management---as an offset to the environmental risks of unlimited economic growth. By going beyond even these thermodynamic perspectives and incorporating recent discoveries from quantum physics, chaos theory, and molecular biology, Margaret Wheatley has developed new and advanced views of organizational leadership (Wheatley, 1992). In all of these accounts, natural science insights have begun to inform normative inquiries into the nature and effect of business activities.

From the field of biology come other related insights. In a recent Ruffin Lecture, David Messick (1994) combined a biological-evolutionary theory of altruism with a social-psychological theory of social categorization to argue that some of our most current

vexing business ethics issues---racial discrimination in mortgage lending, and racial and gender discrimination in hiring---are an outcome of both biological and social forces. His thesis is that biologically evolved helping behavior (i.e., altruism) has become linked to ingroup-outgroup distinctions (or sociocultural categories) in ways that produce discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, powerfully reinforced not just by cultural custom but by biological tendencies as well. Messick (1991), who is a social psychologist, builds on the early theories of biological altruism initiated by the biologist, Robert L. Trivers (1971).

Another leading social scientist, James Q. Wilson (1993), has proposed the existence of a human "moral sense" that is beholden primarily to the evolutionarily-adaptive, biologically-driven helping and supportive practices of the earliest human families. Wilson hypothesizes that moral attitudes evolved as a direct function of the need of biological parents to nourish and protect their offspring, and that this "moral sense" was (and has been, even today) only gradually and hesitantly extended beyond the family orbit to wider groupings. (The similarity to Messick's position is obvious, as well as the implications of both views for the normative expressions found in modern organizational life.) Wilson's views parallel those of still other scientists who, drawing upon new knowledge from genetics and biology, now project a picture of human moral behavior that owes much to evolutionary forces and processes (Wright, 1994).

These several natural science perspectives suggest that, in addition to the classic analysis of the normatively-inclined philosopher, greater understanding of the moral (and immoral) forces at work in business can be had by listening to empirically-inclined

scientists and their followers. Not only can the normative nature of economic processes (as posited by Theorem Seven) be clarified, but the non-economic sources of moral judgments and orientations can be expanded beyond the conventional explanations. Happily, little is put at risk by moving in this new direction since much of presently accepted wisdom would remain intact.³

Theorem Seven puts at least some business ethicists in the uncomfortable and unfamiliar position of having to admit that business's economic activities and motives should be given moral standing because it is only through such operations that needed goods and services can support life for individuals and whole societies. This favorable view of economic processes is not entirely unknown among students of business and society relations: Archie Carroll (1979, 1989) includes economic practices as one of his four indispensable dimensions of corporate social responsibility, and Max Clarkson (1988, 1995) believes that economic behavior gives business a prime claim to moral

³ A reviewer of the first draft of this paper expressed doubt about the number of science-based scholars who might be involved in, and who might be genuinely qualified to carry on, the kind of convergence analysis posited by this paper. There is something to be said for such a skeptical view, primarily because not many scholars have ventured into this domain of inquiry. However, one finds a burgeoning---indeed, a torrent---of literature in physics, cosmology, biochemistry, biology, and related fields that speaks, sometimes directly, to normative questions facing business and business scholars (Kieffer, 1979; Dyson, 1985; Barrow & Tipler, 1986; Coveney & Highfield, 1990; Sagan & Druyan, 1992; Wilson, 1992; Brockman, 1995). The principal authors cited in the body of the paper---Georgescu-Roegen, Messick, Shrivastava, James Q. Wilson, Wright, and Frederick---along with two popularizers of natural science perspectives---Henderson and Wheatley---can rightly be dubbed as pioneers in bringing these views into the realm of business inquiry. Additional sources and references can be found in the bibliographies of each of these books and articles. In sum, there is no shortage of relevant scientific knowledge, only a scarcity of scholars willing to explore these new dimensions.

standing (although he goes on to advocate a broader concept of business morality). So too has sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1988) accepted economics as one half of his socioeconomic model, the other half being a qualified form of deontological morality. Similar ideas have been advocated by other socioeconomists (Coughlin, 1991). On the other hand, Diane Swanson (1995) maintains that the field of corporate social performance has failed to reconcile economic interests and duty-based moral principles within a comprehensive model of normative business behavior. She advocates building an alternative model based partly on Frederick's (1992) theory of business values (which, as noted above, rests on natural science concepts) and partly on social psychological explanations of executive behavior (Swanson, 1992). Finding a morally justified place for the economic motives, behavior, and goals of business firms and their managers---rather than treating economic activity as a necessary but unsavory aspect of business operations---will not be easy for many business ethicists.

Theorem Seven clearly rests on a moving platform of evolving knowledge derived from the social sciences and the natural sciences. It is too early to predict the widespread acceptance of this combined science-and-philosophy-based approach by business ethicists, particularly among those who are uneasy about uniting the empirical sciences with normative inquiry (Donaldson, 1994) or who doubt that a full integration is possible (Weaver and Trevino, 1994). Nevertheless, if Swanson (1995) is correct that business and society theorists have not and cannot reconcile economics and morality, given their preconceptions and assumptions, and if business ethics philosophers continue to reject

Theorem Seven's economic-based moral justification of business behavior, given their preconceptions and assumptions, then the pathway to future business ethics inquiry is obscure indeed. What all groups of scholars---of whatever disciplinary stripe, empirical inclination, or normative commitment---seem to accept is that economics alone is an insufficient moral guide for business. Rooting that moral guide within a blend of biology, physical process, sociocultural institutions, and philosophic precepts may in time unite these disparate approaches and create a New Normative Synthesis.⁴

The seven theorems, taken collectively, potentially comprise a kind of normative commons or an agreed upon set of precepts for analyzing moral issues within business firms. Possibly, they can serve as the beginning point for a unity of discourse on business's moral and social responsibilities. If so, they would conjoin traditional philosophic inquiry and a theory of business morality that is derived from naturalistic and sociocultural sources.

⁴ A second reviewer made the eminently reasonable suggestion of providing "more applications of the ideas of the convergence theorems." While space limitations of the paper have restricted this possibility, some notion of the theorems' applicability to prominent issues of business ethics can be sensed if one relates the theorems in serial fashion (one by one) to such well known episodes as Bhopal, the Valdez oil spill, the third-world marketing of Nestle infant formula, and the more recent collapse of Barings Bank. In each case, the forcefulness of the theorem's moral principle becomes clear, as well as the theorem's relevance for evaluating the ethical issues involved. The extent to which observers converge in their normative judgments about the episode would then provide some validation for the moral principles embedded in the theorems.

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