Ethical Attitudes of Students and Business Professionals: A Study of Moral Reasoning

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ABSTRACT. A questionnaire on business ethics was administered to business professionals and to upper-class business ethics students. On eight of the seventeen situations involving ethical dilemmas in business, students were significantly more willing to engage in questionable behavior than were their professional counterparts. Apparently, many students were willing to do whatever was necessary to further their own interests, with little or no regard for fundamental moral principles. Many students and professionals functioned within Lawrence Kohlberg's stage four of moral reasoning, the "law and order" stage. Individualism and egoism remain strong patterns in the moral reasoning of many professionals, but they influence moral reasoning patterns among students to a much greater degree.

How do business professionals and business students reason when confronted with moral dilemmas? Do they share the same basic moral reasoning or do they differ significantly? Is one group more sensitive to moral issues than the other group? This article has three goals: (1) To provide answers to the above questions on the basis of a questionnaire given to business professionals and students. (2) To examine these answers within the broader context of American culture. (3) To draw some general observations and conclusions regarding the moral reasoning of our respondents.

Individualism and the moral consensus

In a 1982 book by Darrell Reeck, entitled Ethics for the Professions, the author argued that American society needs a creative moral consensus, which is a shared judgment among good-willed and reasonable people about the moral qualities of a situation that moves each party toward deeper insight than she or he would have attained individually. This consensus would promote positive moral behavior and provide a general guideline for public morality. But Reeck went on to discuss the possibility that a certain consensus might be destructive rather than creative and then concluded that the emerging moral consensus in our society is destructive because it is based largely on egoism. An egoist judges situations by asking, "What's in it for me?" Although Reeck's book is directed toward the more traditional professions, he notes that business management is an "emerging profession" and, therefore, his analysis can be applied more broadly to the general business climate.

Reeck's analysis is confirmed by the recently published and celebrated book, Habits of the Heart, written by a team of five, with the final rewriting done by the best-known member of the team, Robert Bellah. The title comes from a phrase used by the French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville in his famous Democracy in America. Tocqueville described American individualism with a mixture of admiration and anxiety. The authors of Habits fear that this individualism may have grown cancerous.

Bellah and his associates trace three central strands of American culture: (1) biblical, (2) republican, and (3) utilitarian and expressive individualism. Their point is that we have abandoned much of the first two while individualism has marched inexorably through our history. John Winthrop is cited as a good...
example of the biblical emphasis in our history. Winthrop wrote: “We must delight in each other, make others’ condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body.” Although the Puritans were not uninterested in material success, their fundamental criterion for human success was the creation of a community in which genuine ethical and spiritual life could be lived.

Thomas Jefferson is said to embody the best of the republican tradition in American history. Jefferson’s belief in political equality was possible only in a republic where the citizens actually participated. He feared that “our rulers will become corrupt, our people careless” if the people became involved “in the sole faculty of making money.” Neither Winthrop nor Jefferson believed in a notion of formal freedom that would simply allow people to do what they pleased — for example, solely to make money.

The utilitarian and expressive individualism strand finds its expression in the lives of Benjamin Franklin and Walt Whitman. Franklin was the poor boy who got ahead on his own initiative. But for many of those who were influenced by Franklin, the focus was so exclusively on individual self-improvement that the larger social context hardly came into view. Although Franklin never believed it, the idea that social good would automatically emerge when each individual pursued his own interest had gained some acceptance by the end of the 18th century.

This utilitarian individualism became so dominant by the middle of the 19th century that it set off a number of reactions. Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne put aside this search for wealth in favor of a deeper cultivation of the self. But Walt Whitman is the best example of “expressive individualism.” For Whitman, success had little to do with material acquisitions. A life rich in experience, openness to all kinds of people, and a life of strong feeling, was what he perceived to be a successful life. “Freedom to Whitman was above all the freedom to express oneself, against all constraints and convention.”

Tocqueville described this individualism and isolation as severe threats to the future of American freedom. The authors of Habits are terribly concerned that this individualism is so pervasive that it threatens the very foundations of American society. “This is a society in which the individual can only rarely and with difficulty understand himself and his activities as interrelated in morally meaningful ways with those of other, different Americans.”

In popular parlance, the kind of attitude described by Reeck and Bellah is called “Looking Out for No. 1.” Some philosophers call it psychological egoism. Borchert and Steward note several features of this viewpoint. It claims that every act and every motive of every human being is ultimately selfish or egoistic. Also, those who hold this view are making a factual claim; that is, they are merely stating a fact, not approving or disapproving this behaviour. This is a crucial point for our upcoming analysis of the ethical views of business students and businesspersons. As we shall see, many of these people didn’t defend this attitude but seemed to conclude that “this is just the way things are and I have to live in this kind of world.”

Moral reasoning of business professionals and students

To discover the ethical perceptions of the business community, a questionnaire was sent to a broad cross section of business managers and other professionals. A total of 2267 out of 10,000 persons responded. Table I provides a profile of the respondents. This same questionnaire was later administered to 205 upper class students in a course in business ethics.