Ancient Observations on Business Ethics: 
Middle East Meets West

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ABSTRACT. Drawing on a small sample of writings from distinguished philosophers and poets living in the Middle East in the period from the eighth to the first century BCE, it is shown that a variety of business practices provided familiar examples of how people ought to act and live, morally speaking, to enjoy the best sort of life and to be the best sort of person. The writings reveal that we share a common heritage and humanity with people living 20 to 28 hundred years ago, and that some of the observations are as important and useful today as they were when they were originally made.

KEY WORDS: business ethics, ancient ethics, ancient business

Introduction

It is an interesting historical fact that the Age of Avarice, as I call the last quarter of the 20th century, simultaneously produced perhaps the most blatant self-consciously self-serving corporate behavior under the general rubric of globalization and the most prolific development of academic and non-academic literature on business ethics. To a large extent, the recent growth of the field of business ethics seems to have ridden on the tail of the growth of unbridled greed and notorious failures of moral leadership accompanied by widely publicized business failures. What is even more interesting to me is that when, roughly in the fifth and fourth century BCE, thoughtful people in the Middle East began to reflect on the nature of a good life and/or the life of a morally good person, unscrupulous and avaricious businesspeople provided a wide array of familiar examples of bad lives and bad people. It is fair to say that to some extent, 20 to 28 hundred years ago, the growth of the literature and field of ethics itself seems to have ridden on practically the very same tail. While it would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that without crooked businesspeople there would have been no need for the institution of morality or the study of ethics itself, it is not an exaggeration to say that such people were such familiar figures in the daily lives of the ancients that advocates for a good life (philosophers, poets, dramatists) could safely invoke the images of such people knowing that their listeners or readers would get the point.

In this essay, I am going to provide a small sample of the kinds of images and examples of bad and good business behaviour that were used by some relatively well-known and unknown ancient writers to help their contemporaries find a better life and become better people, morally speaking. The review is necessarily brief, but if it begins to reveal our common humanity with people across a vast amount of time (in human terms) it will have served its purpose. Regarding the theme of this conference, my story is rather more about the Middle East 20 to 28 hundred years ago meeting the West today than about the East today meeting West today, although, what is east or west, or even today for that matter, depends on one’s perspective. From my home in British Columbia, Hong Kong is west and Paris is east.

Readers should be aware that for most of the ancient writers, especially the presocratics, we often have only bits and pieces of their thoughts, sayings and/or writings. There are fragments purported to

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be actual quotations, but often liable to be paraphrases or rough approximations of the philosophers’ actual views. Often enough there is no way to confirm or disconfirm authenticity, and even when authenticity is relatively well established, there is often considerable controversy concerning the most appropriate interpretation of a fragment in its original language and the most appropriate translation of the original text. Add to these problems the number of centuries of reproductions, errors of omission and commission, and commentaries by more or less well-informed, well-intentioned (the main reports we have of the views of some philosophers come from hostile critics) and well-resourced researchers, and the difficulty of producing an accurate account of the work of our ancestors becomes clear. For reasons that will become clear as we proceed, I owe a particularly heavy debt to the translations and analyses of R. D. McKirahan.

Straight dealing leads to observable payoffs

The poems of Hesiod of Ascrā (late eighth and early seventh century BCE) provide some insight into the lives of people of his generation and their assessments of what is good or bad. They lived in a world that was regarded as intelligibly ordered and fundamentally understandable, although filled with divine influences ranging from the purely mysterious to fairly anthropomorphic Olympian gods. The connotative range of the concept of divinity for ancient Greeks was significantly different from its range today. Anything imagined as immortal, ageless and capable of independent motion or power was regarded as divine. Hence, for example, when the sixth century BCE Milesian philosopher Thales posited water or Anaximander (sixth century BCE) posited some indefinite but spatially and temporally unlimited stuff as the ultimate building material of the world, that material would have been regarded as divine. Anaximenes (sixth century) is reported to have believed that the ultimate building material was air or “dark mist”, and “gods and divine things” originated from that material (McKirahan, 1994, pp. 31–48).

The following passages from Hesiod’s Works and Days provide the earliest account that I have found indicating that straight dealing leads to prosperity and crooked dealing leads to disaster, i.e., in contemporary terms, there are greater profits to be made from morally good than from morally evil practices.

“Those who give straight judgments to foreigners and citizens and do not step at all aside from justice have a flourishing city and the people prosper in it. There is Peace, the nurse of children, throughout the land, and wide-seeing Zeus never ordains harsh war for them. Famine and Disaster never attend men of straight judgment, but with good cheer they feed on the fruits of their labors. For these the Earth bears the means of life in abundance... But for those who have thoughts of evil violence and cruel deeds, wide-seeing Zeus son of Kronos has ordained justice. Often indeed the entire city of an evil man suffers,... Famine and Disease together, and the people perish. Women do not give birth, but houses are diminished...” (McKirahan, 1994, p. 14)

According to Barney (2004, p. 2), this poem was “a very early and canonical text for traditional Greek moral thought”. In Hesiod’s view, as articulated in this poem, a “just man is above all a law-abiding one”, and the driving motive of the unjust is greed. “The unjust man”, Barney wrote, “is motivated by the desire to have more [pleon echein]: more than he has, more than his neighbor has, more than he is entitled to, and, ultimately, all there is to get”. In a wonderfully succinct summary remark, Hesiod wrote, “...if one knows and is willing to proclaim what is just, Zeus far-sounding gives him wealth”. Interestingly enough, in this remark the poet did not see a need to add any particular sort of action to knowledge and talk.

Unobservable payoffs to unobservable souls

Pythagoras of Samos (c. 560–480 BCE) is one of history’s most extra-ordinary people, brilliant,