

The Business of Ethics

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, FEB 20 2013

One of the challenges about teaching politics in a business school is that the students generally arrive in my class after two or three years of business school where they have been taught to chase profit. They have been taught the standard restrictions on their business actions, have probably completed a couple of classes of business law, and are getting set to enter their senior year and then depart for the USA and (hopefully) a job in the high-flying world of business. What they often lack, though, is a sense of business ethics as developed as their profit motive.

This is not to say that my students are unethical; far from it. Indeed, most of them have a firmly grounded sense of personal ethics and live as grounded, moral young men and women. However, there does seem to be a clear gap between the ethical rules they abide by in day to day life, and the ethical rules that they imagine guide the world of business, the latter being far more flexible, with most anything being allowed as long as there is a profit involved for the company.

In the last week I have taught two classes in two different courses that brought this contrast between personal ethics and business ethics to light. Alongside a POL 210 class on the Global South, I also taught a class on ethics in an International Business course. CEFAM being a small school, there was some crossover between the students in these classes and what was interesting, but also strongly disconcerting, to me was the shift in ethical stance that took place amongst those students in the two different courses.

In my class on the Global South I had students strongly committed to closing the gap between the North and the South, citing all sorts of moral imperatives to support their case. Yet a couple of days later I found myself in a classroom with some of the same students arguing that clearly unethical business practices (lying, cheating, nepotism) were all acceptable in a business as long as the bottom line was served. In one classroom I heard about a moral responsibility to develop the underdeveloped world, in another I heard about how marketing a toy that is known to cause eye injuries in children is fine as long as it is profitable.

CEFAM's best accounting students would have trouble to reconcile these two positions.

As a professor I am sure I have a responsibility to turn out future business leaders who will not only make the *profitable* choice but also the *right* choice in their affairs. Classes on the Global South open the eyes of students to the inequalities and the strategies that might overcome these inequalities so as to create benefits for the developing and the developed world, alike. Yet if ethical action remains reserved for only cases of extreme poverty, malnourished children or under-educated populations, then this new generation of business leaders is unlikely to achieve any real change at all. Doing right should not be something that is assessed on a case by case basis, but rather a way of life where it matters not at all whether a situation is potentially profitable.

Ethical action is the one investment that all business students should identify early on as likely to offer significant returns.

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