Globethics Repository



Whistleblowing in the Context of Zimbabwe’ s Economic Crisis

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Masaka, Dennis
Publisher	Business and Organization Ethics Network (BON)
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-16 19:12:18
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/168332

Whistleblowing in the Context of Zimbabwe's Economic Crisis

Dennis Masaka

Abstract

Whistle blowing is a topic that has taken center stage in philosophical discussions on business ethics in recent years. It continues to provoke debate among academics because of its continued relevance to the present prevailing situations the world over. The recent upsurge in cases of corporate wrongdoings in Zimbabwe has seriously reactivated a concerted debate on the moral justification of whistle blowing. The whistle blower is, however, faced with competing and conflicting moral values and imperatives that make his decision to blow the whistle a morally excruciating endeavour. It is the contention of this article that, despite employees' obligations of loyalty and obedience to their employers, whistle blowing can still be morally justified on the grounds that it aims at righting wrongs that have a potential to pose harm to the public. In view of this, therefore, the paper argues that whistle blowing ought to be encouraged rather than discouraged in the context of Zimbabwe's economic crisis.

Keywords

Whistleblowing, Business, Moral, Zimbabwe, Economy, Crisis

Introduction

Whistle blowing is a practice that has dominated contemporary philosophical discussions for decades. It continues to provoke debate among academics because of its controversial nature. It is controversial because the whistle blower has to content with personal, company and societal obligations. These obligations conflict. As a result, the whistle blower is confronted with conflicting values both personal and moral that make his decision to blow the whistle an excruciating undertaking. Conflicting moral values lead to moral dilemmas. This article explores the moral dilemmas faced by whistle blowers in an attempt to proffer moral grounds for whistle blowing in the context of Zimbabwe's economic challenges.

The term whistle blowing is going to be used in this article to refer to unauthorized exposure of immoral business practices at one's work place to authorities outside the organization and the public which the whistle blower is convinced to be a threat to public good and health. Such courageous undertaking to unearth incidents of corporate wrongdoings is necessary given the recent upsurge in cases of perceived unethical business practices in Zimbabwe. These unethical business activities include overpricing, sale of substandard commodities at exorbitant prices and sale of commodities that are injurious to the health and well being of the public because of, among others, their low quality and structural shortcomings. In view of the rampant increase in cases of immoral business practices in Zimbabwe, this article strongly argue for the moral justification of whistle blowing as a morally legitimate way of righting business wrongs. However, a significant promotion of whistle blowing in Zimbabwe can only be achieved if both the business sector and government jointly commit themselves to encourage it if it is primarily predicated on desire to further public welfare and well being. Such a commitment can be complimented by putting in place legal instruments that aim at the protection of whistle blowers in case of lawsuits, harassments, job loss and unjustified demotions. We, therefore, recommend that legal instruments be put in place in Zimbabwe in order to protect whistle blowers from reprisals and frustrations, and also to secure compensation for those who suffer victimization for revealing serious business wrong doings at their work places.

The possibility of Ethics in Business

A worthwhile exposition of whistle blowing can only be undertaken in the context of proper understanding of the 'business-ethics' dichotomy. Ethics studies moral obligations involving the distinction between right and wrong. Business ethics is a culmination of attempts to extend moral dimensions to business practices (Morscher etal, 1998:145). In this light, business operations have to be grounded upon a moral foundation if its practices are to be reliable and predictable. Hence, business ethics aims at promoting ethical conduct in business practices.

Skooglund asserts the importance of ethics in humanity's daily endeavours and interactions with business and otherwise. For him, an unethical person is very difficult to conduct business with in that one cannot risk trusting him and the commitments and promises he makes (Treviino and Nelson, 1995:290). Business is only possible if the ones who engage in it do so in a manner that shows respect for the well being of partners, clients and the society at large. A case in point is that of Zimbabwe where business malpractices are reported to be on a meteoric rise. People have lost faith in business in general given a plethora of cases of business misconducts that have beset Zimbabwe's economy such as hoarding of basic commodities, profiteering, overstating the virtues of products being sold and other forms of business cheating such as selling of substandard commodities. It is in view of the above, therefore, that we argue for ethics to be at the very center of business dealings in Zimbabwe. In the same vein, Vin Sarni believes that our lives should be grounded and led by a code of ethics. He rejects law as the sole and wholly sufficient standard, which guides and determines human conduct (ibid: 291). For him and others, ethics transcend the legal code in that ethics requires human beings to behave not only lawfully, but also in an

ethically acceptable manner. Thus, in some sense, ethics and law complement each other in order to bring about a society that abides by and respect moral and legal codes.

Critics of business ethics, have, however, argued that business and ethics have no common ground. The basis of their argument is that since the primary aim of business is to maximize profits, concern for morality in this endeavour is non-existent. Albert Z. Carr, for, instance, contends that business has its own moral standards peculiar to it (Shaw, 1999:15). In view of this, business practices ought to be evaluated only by those standards. He, therefore, rejects the attempts to legislate additional rules in the form of moral rules whose purpose is to ensure morally acceptable business practices. In this light, business is viewed as amoral meaning that ethics has nothing to do with business activities. Thus, the proponents of this view regard talk of ethics in business as a contradiction in terms. For Velasquez (2002:2):

Pundits sometimes quip that business ethics is a contradiction in terms because there is an inherent conflict between ethics and the self-interested pursuit of profit. When ethics conflicts with profits, they imply, business always choose profits over ethics.

However, there are other business organizations that pursue business practices that take into account public interest than outright obsession with the profit motive because doing so has long-term effects on the success of the business. The argument advanced by those who reject the possibility of ethics in business, therefore, seems to be flawed. The business world constantly interacts with societies that cherish ethical values. In this light, therefore, it would be absurd to argue that ethics and business do not mix. Man's life is shaped and regulated by ethical codes that are cherished by society and in the long run impact on his decision-making. Such an interaction between business organizations and human society ought to drive the society to insist upon business organizations to conduct their affairs in an ethically responsible and transparent manner and to take into account both the requirements of the public and their interests. However, "this does not mean that occasions never arise when doing what is ethical will prove costly to a company…Nor does it mean that ethical behavior is always rewarded or that unethical behavior is always punished" (Velasquez, 2002:5). For Velasquez, wicked business practices are sometimes beneficial to business owners than morally upright business conduct. However, it must be noted that commendable business practices are crucial for the long-term prospects and success of business and can ultimately give such an organization a competitive edge over those organizations whose ethical conduct are bad.

It is, therefore, our submission that failure to conduct business in an ethically responsible manner will lead to a lot of animosity and mistrust between business and society. Such an unfortunate scenario is detrimental to both society and business. Thus, Shaw (1999: 5) rightly criticizes those who advance the contention that there is no ethics in business for grossly misrepresenting reality. Therefore, the argument posed by the proponents of amoral business seems unrealistic for the reason that even though the economic goal of business is to maximize profit, business ought to be grounded upon a moral foundation if its promises and pronouncements are to be reliable and predictable. Even though it is a common conviction of many that the unavoidable measure of business success is the maximization of profits, such aims ought to be subordinated to the pursuits of genuine human goods, that is, health and welfare. Hence, it is the conviction of this article that business cannot be alienated from the society, which it provides with goods and services to satisfy their needs and wants. It is on this assumed relationship between the business world and a human society that upholds ethical values that this article intends to argue for the moral justification of whistle blowing in the context of Zimbabwe's economic challenges.

Whistle Blowing and the Obligations of Loyalty and Obedience

The relationship between whistle blowing and the obligations of loyalty and obedience presents a classic case of competing moral values. Competing moral values are the basis of what has come to be known as ethical or moral dilemmas. An ethical dilemma refers to a situation involving a choice between two opposing courses of action, where there are reasonable moral considerations in support of each course of action. This situation of conflicting moral choices calls for individuals who are courageous enough and prepared to make hard choices in which case they have to promote one or the other of the values, but not both.

Traditionally, a worker is supposed to work tirelessly and aim for the betterment of the firm's image. He is expected to carry out duties delegated to him by his employer and make positive contributions to growth and reputation of the firm and its business interests. For De George (1982:154), a worker must see himself as part and parcel of the firm and must be prepared to accept, as a sign of loyalty, being transferred from one branch of the firm to the other and refusing tempting packages offered by rival firms. In addition, he must be prepared to defend the products and services made and offered by his employer if they are being criticised by consumers for their shortcomings or structural defects. Such demands by companies pose very serious moral conflicts to the worker. Under normal circumstances a worker would not allow business misconducts that are likely to harm the public to take place without being exposed and reported. Failure to expose these business malpractices is in itself a blatant case of disloyalty and disobedience to the public. Alternatively, such a neglect of duty of beneficence (that is a duty to promote happiness) would make the employee morally complicit in the immoral practices that are taking place at his work place. Cases of immoral business practices, therefore, present excruciating moral dilemmas to the worker whether to blow or not to blow the whistle given these conflicting moral imperatives and the punishments he exposes himself to by blowing the whistle.

Sissela Bok views whistle blowing as an act of disloyalty mainly because the whistle blower's public exposure of alleged immoral practices in the business is a violation of loyalty both to the firm and his fellow employees. It is in light of this that Bok, in Beauchamp and Bowie (1988:294) remarked that:

…The whistle blower hopes to stop the game; but since he is neither referee nor coach, and since he blows the whistle on his own team, his act is seen as a violation of loyalty. In holding his position, he has assumed certain obligations to his colleagues and clients. He may even have subscribed to a loyalty oath or a promise of confidentiality. Loyalty to colleagues and to clients comes to be pitted against loyalty to the public interest, to those who may be injured unless the revelation is made.

Thus, for Bok, whistle blowing violates company and collegial loyalty while at the same time it helps to inform the public about business practices that are likely to be injurious to their health and well being. While Bok castigates whistle blowing for violating company and collegial loyalty, he also defends it. What is important in this case is to determine whether collegial loyalty has more moral weight than loyalty to public welfare. It is our conviction that loyalty to public interests must be given moral

prominence in situations where business malpractices are likely to pose a heavy blow to public health and well being.

The current economic challenges facing Zimbabwe presents a serious test case for whistle blowers. The challenges have manifested themselves in various forms. One prominent manifestation of the economic challenges is the shortage of basic human requirements on the formal market. These shortages are a result of complex economic factors (Bond, 1998) that include shortages of foreign currency to import fuel and electricity and essential goods and services to drive the engine of the Zimbabwean economy. Fuel and electricity are crucial in the production of commodities that humanity requires for their sustenance. The shortage of electricity and fuel has negatively impacted on the production of basic commodities and their distribution to final consumers. As a result, the market has been severely starved of people's basic needs such as sugar, salt, mealie meal and cooking oil. These shortages have led to the emergence of a vibrant 'black or parallel market'. As a result, the formal market has been overridden and overtaken by the emergence of the so-called 'black market'. 'Black market' is a term that is usually used to refer to the trading of commodities bought from producers, wholesalers and retailers usually at exorbitant prices outside the normal channels of marketing commodities. Black market traders are making super profits because they take advantage of the severe shortage of basic commodities by inflating their prices. It is an immoral business practice because it violates the moral code of conducting business in a manner that does not take advantage of the desperate plight of Zimbabwean consumers who are bearing the brunt of the worst economic crisis since independence in 1980. It is, therefore, morally imperative for a worker in an organization that is involved in business practices that are against public interest to expose and report them to relevant government bodies and the public in general.

Shaw (1999:282) views the obligations of loyalty and obedience to one's employer as morally suspect because they try to inculcate domination of the ethical sensitivities of employees and thereby prey on their autonomy and private lives. According to this line of thought, the relationship between the employer and the employee is, to a greater extent, influential in shaping the conscience and personal responsibility of an employee. It follows therefore, that an employee who works in an organization that does not cherish ethical values would tend to be corrupted in the way in which he takes issues of ethical relevance such as corporate misdeeds at his workplace. The environment in which he works in dampens his ethical sensitivities to the level that he becomes severely incapacitated to criticise glaring ethical misdeeds at his workplace. That being so, it would take a man of courage to go against the organization even if it means sacrificing his job, reputation and social standing. However, for Larmer (2002:161):

Loyalty does not imply that we have a duty to refrain from reporting the immoral actions of those to whom we are loyal. An employer who is acting immorally is not acting in her own best interest and an employee is not acting disloyally in blowing the whistle.

Loyalty that pacifies an employee to see no evil and speak no evil when glaring immoral business practices that are injurious to the public health and wellbeing are taking place is morally scandalous in that it demands a misplaced obligation of loyalty when the employee is, in fact, supposed to help the employer in avoiding actions that are likely to jeorpadise his future business prospects.

Threats to the institution of Whistle Blowing

The general reaction of employers to their employees who unlawfully expose and report ethical misdeeds is characterized by serious threats, both physical and verbal, directed at the whistle blower. These attacks on the person of the whistle blower is clear testimony that business organizations do not take lightly a worker who makes an unauthorized disclosure of supposed corporate misdeeds perceived to be harmful to the public. Thus, instead of a firm taking keen interest in the corporate misdeeds exposed by the whistle blower, it in fact fully undertakes to harass and humiliate the whistle blower for making unauthorized disclosure of perceived corporate misdeeds. Gene G. James, in Snoeyenbos etal (1983: 292), quotes James M. Roche as saying, in response to Ralph Nader's call for intensification of whistle blowing:

Some of the enemies of business now encourage an employee to be disloyal to the enterprise. They want to create suspicion and disharmony and pry into the proprietary interests of business. However, this is labelled-industrial espionage, whistle blowing or professional responsibility-it is another tactic for spreading disunity and creating conflict.

For James (ibid), Roche's remarks appear to be grounded on a seemingly wrong underlying assumption that an employee's obligation must only be to the firm he works for. This misplaced view of the obligation of employees to their employers led Roche to confuse whistle blowing and industrial espionage. Industrial espionage involves smuggling information from one company to benefit another company economically. Whistle blowing involves unauthorized disclosure of a company's inside activities that are potentially harmful to the public. For Roche, since both practices are injurious to firms, they are wrong. However, James argues that Roche's apparent lack of appreciation of the significant moral difference between industrial espionage and whistle blowing, and believing instead that the sole obligation of employees is to be loyal and obedient to an employer's directives is the central reason behind the prevalence of corporate wrongdoings and, consequently, the need for whistle blowing to provide checks and balances in the business world.

Roche's remarks also amounts to saying that an employee's obligation does not extend to the public to which he is a member. However, James notes some problems in such a view for the reason that organizations are authorized by governments to operate on the understanding that their operations should primarily promote and enhance public interest. In reality, however, most Zimbabwean companies continue to operate despite their anti-public activities such as selling substandard commodities at exorbitant prices, profiteering and parallel trading. This scenario is prevalent mostly in third world countries such as Zimbabwe where most of the companies are foreign owned corporations that are very powerful and influential. The host poor country's government is economically and politically incapacitated to challenge the business misconducts of these corporations because it fears that they will close down and pull out thereby causing job losses and suffering to the populace who depend on them for employment, products and services. Therefore, James's contention that government reserves the right to take corrective measures against offending corporations might be valid in some developed countries but not so in poor developing countries such as Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe's economy is, to a large extent, controlled by foreign nationals and corporations. Since the major sectors of the economy like mining, banking, tour-

ism and agriculture are primarily in foreign hands, government is greatly incapacitated to castigate and reign in on corporate misconducts in such vital sectors of the economy. As a result, cases such as externalization of foreign currency that is crucial for the importation of fuel, electricity and other national needs that are not readily available locally, and corporate corruption are rampant in Zimbabwe. This has led to a serious economic meltdown where most of humanity's basic requirements are in short supply.

However, in certain situation, corporate wrongdoings can be financially beneficial than morally responsible action. For instance, a retail shop, which trades in basic commodities which are in short supply, might instead release them to the'black market' where they fetch high profits for the owner as compared to the profit he gets if he were to sell them through the normal channels of marketing commodities. The owner might use these huge profits he realizes through these immoral business practices to open up other retail shops thereby creating more employment opportunities to the general public. However, James would say that the social benefits which immoral business practices can bring about could not be logically used to counter the practice of whistle blowing. It can be an argument against the moral justification of whistle blowing, one might say, if it is an acceptable position that maximization of profits is the sole obligation of corporations and that it is morally desirable as an end. W.D. Ross (1877-1971) in Boss (1999: 27) would say that the moral duty of nonmaleficence (duty not to cause harm) overrides the duty to maximize profits. He further argues that a nonmoral duty or consideration cannot override a moral duty and if we are faced with a conflict between a moral and nonmoral duty, we have to pursue the moral duty.

Since the duty or consideration to maximize profits is not a moral duty, we are obliged to do what is morally right, that is, to ensure that the operations and products of business organizations are not injurious to public health and well being. In addition, it would seem absurd for a firm that operates within a human society with a code of ethics and laws that regulate the conduct of business to allow such immoral business operations to occur. Whatever is immoral is immoral irrespective of the beneficial consequences it has to society and, therefore, deserves to be exposed and reported.

It must be noted, however, that upon his appointment as Zimbabwe's Reserve Bank Governor, Dr Gideon Gono established a Whistle Blower Fund in December 2003 (The Financial Gazette: 2/26/2004) that was primarily intended to give the would-be whistle blowers financial rewards for exposing corrupt practices in the business sector. This was done in response to the general corrupt tendencies and decay that has inflicted the moral fabric of Zimbabwe's business sector. Though the intention was good, it seems the fund has failed to make a practical difference to Zimbabwe' economic landscape for one major reason. It appears as if the fund was established in order to give a false sense of action and commitment (ibid) to Zimbabweans, foreign financiers and investors about Zimbabwe's seriousness in clamping down on immoral business practices and other forms of corruption. However, others would like to see the introduction of the Whistle Blower Fund as an admission of failure by the responsible authorities in ensuring that ethically sound business practices take place in the economy. In addition, paying whistle blowers for their courage to expose and report corporate misdeeds for the public good would mean that their act of whistle blowing assumes instrumental value in that they do so in order to get financial rewards. Whistle blowers must expose and report immoral business practices because it is the right thing to do not because of the accolades, financial and otherwise, they tend to get as a result of their bravery and courage to blow the whistle. Kant (1724-1804) would say that blowing the whistle because of the financial and celebrity status that accrues from such an action, though morally praiseworthy, is devoid of moral value because it does not proceed from goodwill. Kant is a deontologist because he believes that "duty, or doing what is right for its own sake, is the foundation of morality" (Boss, 1999:25). Blowing the whistle out of a sense of duty irrespective of motives, rewards or punishments and other expected outcomes brings about morally desirable outcomes. Kant would not accept the idea of coming up with financial rewards to pay up would-be whistle blowers for their undertaking to expose and report immoral business practices that threaten public interest because whistle blowing would lose its intrinsic worth and moral value and assumes an instrumental status, which, though morally praiseworthy, lacks moral value. Therefore, any desire by those privy to immoral business practices, that threaten public well being and welfare, to report them must be motivated by the desire to do what is right because that is the right thing to do.

It must be noted that the Zimbabwean government is heavily involved in the economy in that it owns parastatals and it also has significant claims in privately owned entities. These parastatals are also reeling from deep-seated corruption and corporate malpractices. In light of this, the government may not be fully sympathetic to and supportive of the efforts of whistle blowers to expose business malpractices to the public because it may be afraid that publicly acknowledging and supporting whistle blowing can inspire those employed by the government itself to expose unethical business practices when they discover them in government owned business organizations. Thus, the institution of whistle blowing stands threatened in that the management of firms are generally hostile to it and more so, the government's efforts to rid the business sector of immoral practices is stifled by a conflict of interests. Allowing its employees to expose cases of corporate misdeeds may be injurious to the reputation of the parastatal and the government in general. It is our conviction; therefore, that the central government might be reluctant to reign in on corporate misdeeds and corruption in business because it is also, in one way or another, responsible for the corruption and the attendant economic decay that has engulfed the country. For these reasons, therefore, the efforts of Zimbabwe's monetary authorities to stamp corrupt and immoral business practices come to naught.

Whistle blowing therefore is not as simple and uncontroversial as most people would like to believe. The would-be whistle blower has to take into account competing values in order to pursue one of the values and not both. These competing values are obligations to the employer, on the one hand, and to the public, oneself and his immediate family. Man is naturally selfish and normally acts in a manner that benefits himself and his immediate family and not for the benefit of the organization and public in general. Therefore, in the absence of legal clauses that seek to protect would-be whistle blowers, very few employees are prepared to sacrifice their jobs and their family's future for the sake of public health and well being. Though employees in Zimbabwe may be morally motivated to expose and report business malpractices at their work places to responsible authorities, lack of legal protection hinders them to expose immoral activities that have played a significant part in running down the economy of Zimbabwe.

A case in point is that of the proliferation of substandard products on the Zimbabwean market that include clothes and

electrical gadgets that are imported from China. The retail shops that sell these products do not inform consumers about the structural defects and short life span of these products perhaps for the sake of business prudence. Informing consumers about the defects and short life spun of these goods might lead to a serious slump in the fortunes of the organization. Hence, sellers of these products opt to remain silent about the shortcomings of their wares. However, consumers seriously feel shortchanged because they are charged exorbitant prices that are not commensurate with the quality and life span of the products they buy. These substandard products are euphemistically called 'zhing zhongs' because they mainly originate from China and more importantly because of their low quality. The convenient label 'zhing zhongs' given to these low quality and substandard commodities from outside has helped people to be wary of them and at most shun them altogether. However, because of the crippling economic situation facing most Zimbabweans, they are left with no choice but to go for these 'zhing zhongs' because high quality goods are far beyond their reach.

We argue, however, that employees for organizations that sell substandard products have a moral obligation to alert the public about the structural defects of these products before they find their way into the market. The government also has a moral duty to see to it that products that are fraudulently of low quality are not dumped on the Zimbabwean market in order to protect the interests of consumers. That would otherwise be a case of government complicity in immoral practices if it allows low quality goods to find their way onto the market either from foreign or local producers. Therefore, the silence of the government, Standard Association of Zimbabwe (SAZ) and Consumer Council of Zimbabwe (CCZ) while low quality products flood the Zimbabwean market in morally disturbing. The government, SAZ and CCZ must be at the forefront in monitoring the quality and safety of products that are marketed in Zimbabwe so as to protect the consumer from fraudulent business practices. However, CCZ must be commended for occasionally criticizing manufacturers, retailers, service providers and producers for engaging in unethical business practices by taking advantage of the current economic challenges facing the country to make super profits (The Sunday Mail, September 3-9, 2006:6). Failure to do so would morally drag the government, SAZ and CCZ into the immoral business practices that have spread like a veldt fire in the Zimbabwean economy. Hence, immoral business practices can be nipped in the bud if the responsibility of exposing business malpractices is not only shouldered by the whistle blowers but also by, among others, government, SAZ, CCZ and investigative authorities.

The reluctance of stakeholders in business to stem corruption and immoral practices in business is largely to blame for the failure of whistle blowing in Zimbabwe as an ethical practice to right a perceived business wrong. Gene G. James notes that corruption has permeated various facets of society (Snoeyenbos, 1983: 292). Corruption is a like a cobweb that entangled Zimbabweans within or without the business sector either by design or by default. It is to expect too much from a person of questionable moral standing to stem corruption. Corruption has become institutionalized in Zimbabwe that very few people in government, business and society in general still have the moral standing to crack the moral whip against perpetrators of business practices in their midst. Thus, the ubiquitous presence of corrupt tendencies in Zimbabwe's business sector is therefore partly to blame for the failure of whistle blowing to make a practical difference in an economy that has been heavily weighed down by immoral business practices.

However, despite the frustrations of the efforts of whistle blowers by their employers, their status in society is highly esteemed by those who expect to see business organizations operating in an ethically acceptable manner. Contrary to common belief, whistle blowing is a practice which is predicated on the presupposition that something grossly immoral has taken place and that there are good reasons to think that the public will be sympathetic and supportive of the whistle blower's undertaking to make right a business wrong. In view of this, it seems to be an error in reasoning to think that whistle blowing can take place even when nothing immoral has happened. Therefore, the negativity with which cases of whistle blowing are dealt with is morally unjustified and wrongly founded.

However, the heavy handed treatment that whistle blowers often expose themselves to by speaking out about abuses or questionable business practices at their workplaces can be properly understood from the perspective the business-ethics dichotomy. Most people in business believe that the morality of actions are relative to societies or life forms and, therefore, actions that we may regard as morally repugnant in the general society might actually be morally acceptable in the realm of business. So, the only relevant ethical standards to judge the morality of activities in business are actually the moral systems that govern operations of the realm of business. This position is called ethical relativism. It denies that there are universal and absolute standards of judging the morality of actions (Benedict, 1989). For Shaw (1999:14), "those who endorse ethical relativism point to the apparent diverseness of human values and the multiformity of moral codes to support their case." For that and other reasons, therefore, ethical relativists have argued that business is independent from the general society and should therefore be governed by a set of moral rules that are different from those of the general society.

In his famous essay, "Is Business Bluffing Ethical?" (Hartman, 2002) Carr put to test the widely held view that ethical standards are absolute and universally binding. He argues that business practices have an impersonal character of a game analogical to the game of poker that calls for both special skills and ethical standards that govern the conduct of those involved. Beauchamp and Bowie (1988:441) quote him as remarking that the "violations of the ethical ideals of society are common in business, but they are not necessarily violations of business principles." For him, some of the things that we generally regard as morally unacceptable in society are actually morally acceptable in the realm of business. If we are to accept cheating and deception as part of the game strategy of business, then they cease to be morally offensive. Carr would, therefore, defend organizations and individuals who deliberately exaggerate the virtues of the products and services they deal in, and hiding their defects as part of the game strategy of business. Once falsehoods that are characteristic of the game of business have become deeply entrenched in the participants, they cease to be falsehoods and assume the position of 'the truth'. Defenders of ethical relativism such as Carr are, therefore, strongly against prescribing more rules in the form of general ethics of society because they believe that business already has its own moral standards that are sufficient and effective in regulating its operations. These moral standards ought to regard deliberate deception and cheating as virtues that must form the heart of a competitive business environment.

However, ethical relativism has the intolerable implication that 'anything goes' in business as long as the participants are agreed to it irrespective of the effects to consumers who have not chosen to be part of the game of business. Those outside the

realm of business evaluate business practices from the standpoint of general ethics that insists upon trade practices that do not threaten public safety and well being. The supposed inconsistencies between the special ethics of business and the general ethics of society pose a serious moral conflict to the would-be whistle blower. Which ethics should he follow and respect? If we are to accept that the moral standards that guide human conduct in the general society override the special ethics of business, then those who expose and report immoral business practices in the public interest are morally justified in doing so.

Corruption and other forms of immoral business practices that are a common feature of many economies ought to be contained in order to ensure a stable and just social order where consumer rights are given the moral weight that they warrant. This is made possible if the standards of human conduct transcend occupational particularities and are absolute and universally binding, and not based on a shaky foundation of ethical relativism.

Kant is one philosopher who believed in the universal standards of ethical behavour as opposed to the 'when in Rome, do as the Romans' standards of human conduct. For him, moral criteria are categorical imperatives (Lawhead, 2007:369) in that they are absolute and unconditional irrespective of consequences. He finds a necessary "…connection between morality and reason precisely in this fact-that only a rational being can form a universal conception. Not only that, but only a rational being can act from respect for law" (Matson, 1987:392). Since being moral is the same as acting rationally, it therefore means that morality is not an imposition from without but a feature inherent in all rational beings.

As a deontologist, Kant regarded acting out of a sense of duty as the basis of morality. He is believed to be "the first philosopher to put duty at the very centre of ethics" (Norman, 1986:95). Traditionally, duty refers to the requirements imposed on a person by his occupancy of a particular position or office in society. However, Kant abstracted duty from its particular content and argued that it must be performed entirely for its own sake, not in order to promote human happiness or fulfillment. He noted the categorical imperative as the most important moral principle. Its first formulation states that: "Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will the universal law of nature" (Hartman, 2002:18). Thus, an action is morally right if we can will it to become an absolute and universal law of human conduct.

The upsurge in immoral business practices in the present day world that are primarily driven by the profit motive puts Kantian moral theory to a stern moral test. Kant would say that an action that proceeds from or is consistent with self-interested motives is immoral. He would, therefore, not only disapprove of the maximization of profits by immoral means, but also the instrumental role played by immoral business practices as well as morally improper use of employees, that infringes upon their autonomy, to achieve an equally immoral goal, that is, unjustified super profits.

An important question arises at this juncture. Should the maxim that underlies the practice of whistle blowing be willed to become universal law? It is our conviction that the maxim that underlies whistle blowing can be made universal law without any internal inconsistencies if it is solely done from a sense of duty. The second formulation of the categorical imperative that states that: "act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means" (Hartman, 2002:20) explicitly shows that an action can be regarded as having moral value if it respects rational beings as ends in themselves and not merely as means to some ends. Kant would, therefore, disapprove of all business practices that do not accord with the second formulation of the categorical imperative, among others, by using employees and consumers as mere instruments for profit making.

In addition, Kant would argue for the respecting of the freedom and autonomy that are characteristic of all rational beings. Since moral imperatives are self-imposed, it follows that a rational being is an autonomous being. Autonomy is the ability to think for oneself and to decide what to do by rational standards of one's own (Liszka, 1999:100). Autonomy, so conceived, leads to the development of an essential human capacity that has intrinsic worth and can obligate individuals to remain resolute to their principles despite unpopularity and extreme pressure from employers to remain quite about corporate misdeeds at their workplaces. In light of this, therefore, a worker who blows the whistle on immoral business practices that threaten public interest ought to do so from the sense of duty because it is the right thing to do. Such courage to go against all odds and the possibility of punishment from the employer is necessary if those who are privy to immoral business practices are to make a positive contribution to the respect of consumer rights the world over.

Moral Justification of Whistle Blowing in the face of Zimbabwe's Economic Crisis

Zimbabwe's economic challenges (Bond and Manyanya, 2003) have incited and excited debate on the moral justification of whistle blowing. Proponents of whistle blowing have advanced lines of argument to vindicate the contention that whistle blowing is morally justifiable. De George (2006: 306) cites freedom of speech as an inalienable right of humanity which they can make use of to expose corporate misdeeds "in whatever way, and in whatever forum, they desire". Freedom of speech involves unfettered expression of one's lines of thinking, viewpoints or ideas. It, therefore, entails that employers are not morally justified in stifling an employee's right to free speech. However, for, De George (2006:306), employees can only express their minds freely outside the premises of the organizations they work for. An employee has a right to write or speak about immoral business practices that are potentially a threat to public interest without fear of censor from his employers if he does that outside the parameters of the firm. However, a whistle blower ought to be justified beyond reasonable doubt that his accusations about immoral business practices are credible and true. Otherwise, if they are untrue, the firm has a right to sue him for tarnishing its image through spreading falsehoods or making unsubstantiated allegations (De George, 2006: 306). Thus, whistle blowers are only morally justified to report immoral business practices if they have good reasons to think that they are potentially harmful to the health and well being of the public.

It is our conviction that given the ubiquity and depth of corrupt tendencies and immoral business practices in Zimbabwe, whistle blowers ought to use their inalienable right of freedom of speech to expose immoral practices in the business sector for the benefit of the public. However, when freedom of speech is pitted against the obligation of loyalty and obedience, it gives rise to a serious moral conflict. This explains why cases of whistle blowing in Zimbabwe are very few despite the ubiquity of corruption and immoral business practices. Most employees, despite having the right to free speech, rarely overpower the shackles of loyalty and obedience to expose and report immoral

business practices at their workplaces to the public. As a result, loyalty and obedience seem to override an employee's right to free speech in his quest to expose and report business malpractices. Hence, the upsurge of corruption and immoral business practices in Zimbabwe is testimony to the unwillingness of those privy to these ills to report them given both the obligations of loyalty and obedience and also the magnitude of the punishment that is likely to be meted out to them if they blow the whistle.

Whistle blowing can also be morally justified on the grounds that the whistle blower, in exceptional cases, might find out that a firm's unethical business practices pose imminent danger to public health and safety (Shaw and Barry, 1995: 372). An employee, in this case, might be tempted to by-pass normal channels of protest within the organization even if they are efficient and effective. Usually, the bureaucratic wall of the organization is unbearably strong enough to frustrate a whistle blower's attempt to correct an immoral business practice at his work place. Bowie argues and rightly so, that loyalty is a prima facie obligation and therefore loyalty to an employer is not absolute. The same goes for an obligation of obedience to an employer. This means that an employee's loyalty to his employer can be overridden by a stronger obligation namely an obligation to society in general in certain circumstances. It must be noted, however, that a whistle blower might err in his assessment of the potential risk or danger to consumers as a result of use of a given product. Bowie, therefore, proposed conditions that must be met for whistle blowing to be morally justified. For Bowie, whistle blowing can be morally justified if it is predicated on the right motive (ibid). Whistle blowing must not be predicated on the motive to fix the employer or tarnish his image. It ought to be motivated by a desire to expose unnecessary harm, violation of human rights or activities that violate the set purposes or ethical codes of business organizations. Fortunately, most cases of whistle blowing presuppose that there is something to blow the whistle for, and that there are some reasons that others will be concerned and, therefore, rally behind the whistle blower's undertaking.

Critics have, however, argued against the above requirement. For them, an employee can be morally justified in blowing the whistle even if the real motive is a desire for revenge. The motive for blowing the whistle might not be important. What is important is whether the act of blowing the whistle makes a practical difference to the perceived immoral business practices in an organization. Further to that, establishing the motive behind blowing the whistle is a mammoth task. One can at best guess or assume what one's motive for blowing the whistle is. So, we cannot validly tell whether a given case of whistle blowing is predicated on an appropriate motive or not. In addition, it is doubtful whether any act of blowing the whistle can be predicated on only one motive. Various motives, combined together, may provide a very strong moral basis for blowing the whistle. For instance, selfishness, retaliation and desire to expose corporate deceit, unnecessary harm, profiteering and violation of human rights from a sense of duty, may all be combined to come up with a strong obligation to blow the whistle.

Bowie also proposes that the whistle blower must exhaust all available internal procedures for rectifying the perceived immoral business practices before making public disclosures (Shaw and Barry, 1995: 372). An employee's obligations of loyalty and obedience to his employer entails that the employer must be alerted of any immoral business practices taking place within the firm before it becomes public knowledge. Abiding by these internal procedures will help protect the firm from undue lawsuits, bad publicity and a soiled reputation, which are a result of blowing the whistle. Some critics have, however, noted that it is very difficult to exhaust all internal procedures before resorting to whistle blowing (ibid). Bureaucratic processes might frustrate the urgency of the problem and therefore dampen the scale and gravity of the immoral business practice. It is our conviction; therefore, that an employee is morally justified to blow the whistle if the perceived problem is likely to pose immediate harm to consumers even if it means bypassing channels of airing concerns within the company.

Whistle blowing has historically been assessed from Utilitarian calculations and a consequentialist approach whereby an action whose consequences are overall beneficial to the greatest number of people affected by it is rationalized as ethical. Mill (1808-1873) popularized Utilitarianism and like his predecessors, the basis of his version of Utilitarianism is the Greatest Happiness Principle that states that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (Shaw, 1993:51). Our actions ought to be geared at promoting the total balance of good over wrong for all the people affected by the action. We can, therefore, appeal to Utilitarianism to justify blowing the whistle on immoral business practices that are a potential threat to public health and well being. A Utilitarian would argue that an employee who is reasonably justified that morally scandalous actions are taking place at his workplace ought to report them since doing so promotes the well being of the public affected by such actions. However, the would-whistle blower faces a complex moral conflict as he tries to weigh the likely net benefits or disbenefits the employer against the likely net benefits or disbenefits to the general public. Utilitarianism provides a plausible a solution to this ethical problem by proposing that if the net benefits to the public outweigh the net benefits to the employer, then the whistle blower is morally justified in blowing the whistle because by so doing he will be promoting social utility for the greatest number of people affected by that action. The cocktail of punishments that awaits a whistle blower for exposing corporate misdeeds are morally insignificant compared to the maximization of net happiness for the greatest number of people affected by that action, a Utilitarian would say. Such personal sacrifices are necessary if we are to nip immoral business practices in the bud in Zimbabwe and other economies that are facing a similar problem.

For Larmer (2002:161), "…the employer who blows the whistle may be demonstrating greater loyalty than the employee who simply ignores the immoral conduct, in as much as she is attempting to prevent her employer from engaging in self-destructive behavour." The obligation of loyalty to employers must not prevent employees from exposing and reporting immoral business practices that pose a threat to public interest. Reporting these actions is actually a show of loyalty to the employer in that it gives the employer a chance to reform and mend his soiled image for the good of his future business prospects.

Some critics of whistle blowing have, however, expressed fear that whistle blowing can become too widespread and thereby become an abused practice if it is not regulated. James, in Snoeyenbos etal (1983: 292) quotes Philip Blumberg as expressing the fear that "once the duty of loyalty yields to the primacy of what the individual…regard as 'public interest', the door is open to widespread abuse". It is, however, doubtful whether Blumberg's view correctly reflects the situation on the ground about the prevalence of cases of whistle blowing in countries such as Zimbabwe. It has become somewhat a truism that corruption and immoral practices oils the Zimbabwean business sector.

However, it is quite surprising that employees with inside information about immoral business practices have failed to expose them for the benefit of the public. In light of this, therefore, Blumberg's fear that whistle blowing would become an abused practice is misplaced in that very few employees are prepared to wad off threats of punishment and job dismissals for the sake of public interest. The ruthlessness with which employers deal with deviant employees, makes the practice of whistle blowing a rare phenomenon. It is our considered view; however, that whistle blowing ought to be encouraged especially in the present day Zimbabwe where cases of corruption and immoral practices are on the rise.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this work was to argue for the moral justification of whistle blowing in the face of a marked increase in immoral business practices in Zimbabwe. We argued that, granted the possibility of ethics in business, and the business sector being a constituent of the wider society, it ought to conform to the moral standards cherished by the general society in which it is situated. On the basis of this supposed intricate interrelation between business and society, this article strongly argued that whistle blowing ought to be used as a means by which business practices are put under moral spotlight. We noted, however, that the obligations of loyalty and obedience to employers remain the most fatal hindrances to whistle blowers' attempts to expose immoral business practices that they perceive to be potentially harmful to public health well being. Though we acknowledge that employees have obligations of loyalty and obedience to their employers, these obligations should be treated as prima facie duties that can be overridden by stronger obligations to society in general. We, therefore, argued for the moral justification of whistle blowing if the perceived immoral practices are potentially harmful to public health and well being.

References

Benedict, R. (1989),"Ethics are Relative", in Gould, J.A. (Ed.), Classic Philosophical
Questions, Columbus, Merrill Company, pp.87-112.

Bok, S. (1988),"Whistle Blowing and Professional Responsibility", in Beauchamp, T. L. and Bowie N.E. (Eds.), Ethical Theory and Business, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, pp.292-303.

Bond, P. (1998), Uneven Zimbabwe. A Study of Finance, Development, and Underdevelopment, Treton, Africa World Press, Inc.

Bond, P. and Manyanya, M. (2003), Zimbabwe Plunge. Exhausted Nationalism, Neoliberalism and the Search for Social Justice, London. Merlin Press.

Boss, J.A. (1999), Analyzing Moral Issues, California, Belmont, Mayfield Publishing Company.

Carr, A.Z. (2002),"Is Business Bluffing Ethical?", in Hartman, L.P. (Ed.), Perspectives in Business Ethics (Second Edition), New Delhi, Tata MacGraw-Hill Publishing Company Limited, pp.100-107.

De George, R.T. (2006), Business Ethics, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, Pearson Prentice Hall.

De George, R.T. (1982), Business Ethics, New York, Macmillan Publishing Company.

James, G.G. (1983),"Whistle Blowing. Its Nature and Justification", in Snoeyenbos, M., Almeder, R. and Humber, J. (Eds.), Business Ethics. Corporate Values and Society, New York, Prometheus Books, pp.287-299.

Kant, I. (2002),"Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals", in Hartman, L.P. (Ed.), Perspectives in Business Ethics (Second Edition), New Delhi, Tata MacGraw-Hill Publishing Company Limited, pp.16-21.

Larmer, R.A. (2002)."Whistleblowing and Employee Loyalty", in Newton, L. and Ford, M.M. (Eds.), Taking Sides. Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Business Ethics and Society (Seventh Edition), Guilford, MacGraw-Hill/Dushkin, pp.158-163.

Lawhead, W.F. (2007), The Voyage of Discovery. A historical Introduction to Philosophy, Belmont, Thomson, Wadsworth.

Liszka, J.J. (1999), Moral Competence. An Intergraded Approach to the Study of Ethics, New Jersey, Prentice Hall. Madondoro, T. (2004), "Whistle Blowers, keep cops busy", in The Financial Gazette, Harare, Financial Gazette, 2 February.

Mill, J.S. (1993),"Utilitarianism", in W.H. Shaw (Ed.), Social and Personal Ethics. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, pp.50-57.

Morscher, E., Neumaier, O. and Simon, P. (Eds.). (1998), Applied Ethics in a Troubled World, Dordretcht, Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Norman, R. (1986), The Moral Philosophers. An Introduction to Ethics, Oxford, Clarendon.

Matson, W.I. (1987), A New History of Philosophy (Volume 11), Orlando, Harcourt Brace &Company.

Shaw, W.H. and Barry, V. (2001), Moral Issues in Business (8th edition), Belmont, Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Shaw, W.H. (1999), Business Ethics (3rd edition), Belmont, Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Shaw, W.H. and Barry, V. (1995), Moral Issues in Business (6th edition), Belmont, Wadsworth Publishing Company.

The Sunday Mail, (2006), Harare, Herald House, September 3-9.

Treviino, L. k. and Nelson, K.A. (1995), Managing Business Ethics. Straight Talk About how to do it Right, New York, Ulrich.

Velasquez, M.G. (2002), Business Ethics. Concepts and Cases, Delhi, Pearson Education, Inc.

Author

Masaka, Dennis. Great Zimbabwe University, Faculty of Arts, Department of Humanities, P.O. Box, 1235, Masvingo, Zimbabwe, Tele-Fax: (263) (039) 253504. Email: masakad2005@yahoo.com.

Dennis Masaka is a Philosopher at Great Zimbabwe University in Zimbabwe. He teaches Applied Ethics, Business Ethics, Moral Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion. He is co-patron of the Society for Applied Ethics at Great Zimbabwe University. Society for Applied Ethics affords the forum for students doing philosophy to present papers on applied ethical issues. He is also a member of the Philosophy Society of Zimbabwe.

He has a strong interest in carrying out research from the standpoint of philosophy on political and socio-economic issues that affect humanity in their daily endeavours with special reference to Zimbabwe.