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Item Type	Article
Authors	O'Brien, Roderick
Publisher	American Scholars Press
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-06 11:02:54
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/188295

IMPLEMENTING BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN AN ASIAN CONTEXT: THREE STEPS TO INTEGRATION

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Abstract: This paper was presented at the conference on “Implementing International Business in an Asian Context”, held in August 2010 at the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines. Many of the participants in the conference were academics working in business schools in the Philippines, especially teachers in MBA programs. Other participants were drawn from the wider Asia-Pacific region. The conference enabled participants to exchange ideas and experience in two main areas: the first was the response of international business ethicists (especially teachers) to the changes resulting from the global financial crisis, and the second was to give specific attention to the Asian context for teaching and practicing international business ethics. As a presentation, the paper has been designed to contribute to immediate interchange, rather than serve as remote academic reflection.

Keywords: ethics, Asian context, business ethics, integration, international

INTRODUCTION

This meeting at the Ateneo de Manila University and organized by the Governor Jose B Fernandez (Jr) Ethics Center and the Center for International Business Ethics provides a timely opportunity to reflect on the issues facing teachers of business ethics and practitioners of business ethics. We gather from many countries, and we are sadly aware of the unethical practices of businesses in our different homelands. These problems become more complex as we do business internationally. Ethics is more than simply regulation, and even regulation becomes an uncertain tool across national boundaries. We need to find ways to teach and practice ethics in business which are both local and international, practical and yet without yielding from our values, and capable of speaking to business people and practitioners all over Asia.

I am grateful to those who have made serious efforts to arrange this seminar, and I am delighted to be invited so that I can learn from those who have come from many lands and regions. Of course, I look forward to our future co-operation if this is possible.

Integrating our Philosophies and Theologies

I cannot provide you with a statistical survey, but my experience is that many practicing and teaching ethicists, even in Asia, are likely to have a prior formation in Western (Graeco-Roman) rather than Eastern philosophies. One result of this is that the teachers are more likely to discuss (for example) virtue with a starting point from Aristotle rather than a starting point from Confucius.

Those who study in Catholic universities like the Ateneo de Manila University will find that Graeco-Roman philosophy has a special place. You usually study Plato to understand Augustine, and you usually study Aristotle to understand Aquinas. But you don't need to study Mencius, or the Upanishads. Yet this privileged place for Graeco-Roman philosophy can unfortunately lead to the exclusion or neglect of other

philosophies. Only a minority of authorities would give an equal place to non-Western philosophies. If there is a place for Asian philosophies, then it is usually as a supplement to Graeco-Roman philosophy, not as a core subject. This is particularly true for those who have taken philosophy as a preparation for studies in theology. Sometimes we have some local knowledge, or a deep cultural experience, of Asian philosophies and ethics, but this is not integrated. We operate in compartments.

I am not suggesting that we discard Graeco-Roman ethics. But we need to ensure in the future that Asian ethics find at least an important place in our work. We can look for the Asian ‘moral wisdom’ which provides the possibility for a genuine integration of philosophy and theology, of business and professional ethics, and of Asian life and experience. Even those who study ethics only from a secular standpoint can spend their entire academic careers studying ethics based in western philosophy. At most, there might be a single course, or just a couple of lectures, which provide a glimpse of Asian ‘moral wisdom’. Today, we can reverse the neglect of the past.

Such a suggestion cannot hide the difficulties: our conference title refers to our “Asian context” but the precise meaning of this might be disputed. What is ‘Asia’? Is it simply a geographical designation? Similarly, the content of the phrases “Asian ethics” and “Asian moral wisdom” is certainly not settled. At the very least, “Asian ethics” and “Asian moral wisdom” will include the great ethical traditions of China and India. These, and other more local traditions, have over centuries interacted with religious traditions from the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and with major philosophical and intellectual trends from Europe. Let us take an example. Here in the Philippines, we are giving renewed attention to the ancient ethical traditions of the local peoples, as far as they can be known. These traditions are carried in many forms, including songs and folk tales. (Eugenio, 2001: xxxv) To these must be added the gradual adaptations to Indic civilization, to Islam, to Christianity, and to a variety of modern philosophies. At this stage, it is impossible to find a perfect substitute for the word ‘Asian’, or for its many derivatives, and we are likely to continue to use them for some time in our shared future.

Integrating our Ethics

The great sages of our traditions were not narrow people. The interests of a single individual might range from politics to law to aesthetics to agriculture. But the specialization of our modern university departments and academic or professional journals means that we often think in very small sections of life. I am reminded of the humorous definition of an expert: someone who knows more and more about less and less, until she knows absolutely everything about absolutely nothing at all! In fact the promotion of expertise can sometimes block the development of the broad education needed to be truly an international person.

My own field of research is professional ethics. This is a different label to business ethics or international business ethics. But professional ethics has different journals, different categories, and a different vocabulary. Because the profession which I study is the legal profession, I am in a different field to people who study or implement medical professional ethics or accounting professional ethics or neighboring fields. It is only occasionally that we look over the fences to see the neighbors. Yet international accounting firms or international law firms already occupy an important segment of international business in their own right. And they relate to international entrepreneurs from the time of formation to the time of winding up.

There is possibly a fascinating case study – or even a movie script – involving the ongoing proceedings for the winding up of the Akai Corporation. The dogged investigations by the responsible liquidators, led by

Cosimo Borelli, seem to have brought the international accounting firm of Ernst and Young to its knees, forced the resignation of one of its partners, Edmund Dang, and led to police raids and prosecutions. The saga has not yet come to its conclusion (Rovnick, 2009). The case involved exotic locations such as Bermuda and New York, surely a good excuse for a movie script or a telemovie cum case-study.

So my plea today is for an integration of ethics. Surely there is a place for specialization and for the knowledge of particular occupations. At the same time, it is important that we do not become narrow. Many of us teach or research in universities, and one vision of a university, promoted by John Henry Newman, is that universities can break down boundaries (Newman, 1858: 134). Unfortunately, the structure of university departments and schools and academic journals sometimes means that modern universities entrench these boundaries. I would like to see fundamentally the same ethics consistently taught across universities and business, law, and medical schools, and implemented across governments, businesses, and the professions.

Surely ethics is not simply about legal regulation, but some practitioners often try to reduce ethical responsibility to mere compliance with legal regulation. Scholars and practitioners who are working in the field of legal ethics (for examples, for lawyers and judges) are usually regularly working with the distinction between law and ethics. In practice the boundary between law and ethics is not a distinct border, but rather an area of overlap. Familiarity with this shifting boundary can be a special contribution to our integration across disciplines.

Integrating our Ethics over Time

One of the issues in implementing international business or international professional ethics in the Asian context is the necessity for a reasonable grasp of Asian ethics. Business ethics does not suddenly become Asian by adding a quotation or two from the Analects. Nor does an assignment written by a scholar in China really become international because that scholar adds a text from the Hindu or Christian sacred scriptures. More integration is needed, although this must necessarily be a gradual process.

A particular feature of some ethical writing is to compare apples with oranges, not apples with apples. Thus, to compare the modern developed western business ethics with traditional Confucianism is not reasonable. Yet talking about the ancient traditions can lead us to do this. Surely it is reasonable to compare classics and classics. And it is reasonable to compare (for example) modern Catholic social teaching with modern Confucian social teaching as it is taught in the Republic of Korea. Fortunately, there is a growing body of literature in English and Chinese (and perhaps in other languages) which seeks to make genuine comparisons of classical Chinese and Western ethics (for example, comparisons of Confucius and Aristotle) and relevant comparisons of modern ethics. But these are only a beginning. For readers in English, the *Journal of International Business Ethics*, and the *Journal of Business Ethics* are worth consulting.

One feature which I have noticed is that when ethicists seek to come closer to the Asian traditions, they usually choose only the older, canonical traditions. These are familiar, and canonical texts are available, even in translation. But there are new and fascinating developments across Asia. Permit me to give you one example.

My study of the legal professions in the People's Republic of China has given me insights into the attempt to create a modern socialist spiritual civilization, which would underpin socialist ethics. This is a work in progress, and it is surely very interesting. Perhaps it will fade into obscurity, or perhaps it will make a lasting contribution to ethics in Asia. At this stage, it is difficult to say. Nevertheless, it is currently the official ethic of

a country which is both the location for vibrant international business, as well as the source of ever-growing business activity abroad. So I would suggest that socialist ethics could well be included in any research or teaching which examines the implementation of international business ethics in Asia. But so far, I do not know of any university outside the China mainland which teaches socialist business ethics or professional ethics. Separately, I have provided a list of source materials in English and Chinese on socialist ethics in case you would like to follow up this topic.

Moreover, in recent years the creators of socialist ethics have begun to incorporate selected elements from the Chinese classical traditions. The principal source has been Confucian ethics, although Daoist ethics may be influential in environmental ethics. This blending is bringing some of the richness of traditional 'Asian wisdom' to a modern, secular ethics. And because of the overlap between law and ethics, this development may also contribute to the development of 'rule by law' as well as 'rule by ethics' in China.

It is not essential or even possible for the ethicist to know absolutely everything. But surely the ethicist must have more to hand than a few classics of western or eastern philosophies, religions, and ethics. The task for the ethicist is then to integrate these for modern international business, so that ethics may be truly international and genuinely modern.

CONCLUSION

Now I would like to suggest to you the model of an individual who chose to localize himself in Asia. This year, 2010, is the 400th anniversary of the death in Beijing of the missionary from Macerata, Matteo Ricci. Studies of Ricci's life and work abound at this time. And we know that he was able to integrate into his own life a number of what would today be specialized fields. He originally trained in law, then in philosophy and theology, and in the natural sciences. He could turn his hand to cartography, musical composition, mathematics, or languages. He immersed himself in the Chinese language, and wrote dictionaries. He immersed himself in Chinese philosophy, and translated and commented on the classics. He also worked at understanding the current interpretation of those classics.

Today I wish to mention only one aspect of Ricci's work, his little essay on friendship Jiaoyou lun (交友论). Recently this work has again been translated into English, and I commend it to you (Ricci, 2009). It is, after all, a book about ethics. Perfect friendship exists between virtuous people who love virtue in one another for its own sake. Perhaps maxim 16, adapted from Cicero, could serve well as an example:

"Each person cannot fully complete every task, for which reason the Lord on High commanded that there be friendship in order that we might render aid to one another. If this Way 道 (dao) were eradicated from the world, humankind would surely disintegrate into ruin."

Today, I am delighted to have come from afar, and yet I am sure that I am among friends. Together, we shall seek together the path of virtue in international business ethics. I offer you my paper, knowing that it is imperfect. The three suggestions which I have made about integration may not seem so good to you. Of course, you are invited to offer me your criticisms, even if they are stern. As Ricci wrote in maxim 78: "A gift from an enemy is worth less than a beating from a friend."

I look forward to learning from the varieties of Asian experience which will be expressed at this seminar, and again I thank the organizers for the work in making this seminar possible. The unethical practices which we experience across the region stir us to do the best that we can together.

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