Beyond the Is and Ought: Approaching Normativity Through Phenomenological Insights

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This paper explores the ontological relationship between descriptive and normative by drawing on the perspectives of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger. Through Wittgenstein's concept of "grammar" and Heidegger's notion of das Man, we see that normativity shapes human perception and interpretation, making descriptive neutrality unattainable. Descriptions are always informed by norms and norms evolve by descriptions. This intertwined relationship has significant implications for business ethics, since ethical conflicts can now be reframed as lack of normative references. Ultimately, the paper proposes a perspective of moral perspectivism.

Key Words: normativity, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, is-ought problem, ontology, perspectivism

At its core, ethics navigates the complex terrain between describing the world as it is and envisioning how it ought to be. Traditionally, both philosophy and business ethics have approached the descriptive ("what is") and the normative ("what should be") as distinct domains, a division rooted in influential arguments such as Hume's "is-ought" problem ([1739–1740] 1978) and Moore's naturalistic fallacy (1903). This separation has influenced fields like business ethics, where it is often referred to as "separation thesis" (Freeman, 1994; Sandberg, 2008), maintaining that empirical descriptions of business practices and normative ethical judgments are essentially separate.

However, renewed scholarly interest in bridging this divide suggests that the gap between description and normativity may be more artificial than once assumed (Islam & Greenwood, 2021; Risi, 2020). This article advances an ontological argument that treats the descriptive and normative as inherently intertwined rather than separate. By drawing on the phenomenological insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger, I argue that our engagement with the world is inherently saturated with normativity, and that normative judgments, in turn, depend on descriptive frameworks. This co-constitutive relationship invites a rethinking of how ethics is approached, not only in philosophical discourse but also in practical applications such as business ethics. While other approaches, notably pragmatism

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and narrative ethics, also effectively challenge the descriptive-normative divide at the level of practice or justification, the ontological argument developed here, drawing on Wittgenstein and Heidegger, aims deeper. It seeks to reveal the *preconditions* for any ethical evaluation by demonstrating the *impossibility* of a non-normative perception or description at the foundational level of our engagement with the world. This provides a distinct grounding for understanding normativity in all its forms, including its manifestation in business ethics. This rethinking is particularly pertinent in contemporary contexts, such as navigating the ethical challenges of artificial intelligence development or corporate sustainability initiatives, where factual descriptions, technological capabilities, and normative goals are often deeply entangled and difficult to separate neatly.

For clarity, "normativity" in this article refers not primarily to explicit moral rules or obligations, but more fundamentally to the pre-reflective structures—the "grammar" (Wittgenstein) or background understanding ("das Man," Heidegger) —that shape perception, enable recognition of things *as* something, and thus guide evaluation and action within a shared context or "life form." "Description" refers to accounts of "what is," which, this article argues, are only possible within such normative frameworks. The explored "intertwining" is an ontological co-constitutivity: normative frameworks are presented not merely as influencing descriptions, but as the necessary preconditions for perception and description itself.

While the conclusions drawn here share affinities with pragmatist approaches that also challenge the descriptive-normative split (e.g., Dewey 1922; Rosenthal & Buchholz 2000) or narrative approaches to ethics (e.g., MacIntyre 1997), the argument presented builds on a distinct view on the ontological foundation of approaching normativity. It focuses on how normativity is embedded in the very structure of perception and being-in-the-world, an ontological level which is not always the primary focus of pragmatist concerns with justification, coping, or social practice.

First, I will outline the background of the descriptive-normative divide. Following this, I'll introduce key perspectives from Wittgenstein and Heidegger, examining their implications for rethinking the connection between descriptive and normative. Finally, I will explore the implications of this approach for the field of business ethics and ethical theory more broadly, proposing a framework in which descriptive and normative aspects are co-dependent in shaping our understanding and actions.

This article employs a methodology of conceptual and ontological analysis, drawing primarily on phenomenological interpretation. It critically examines the descriptive-normative divide by analyzing the underlying ontological assumptions through the lens of Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's philosophies of language, perception, and being-in-the-world. The aim is not empirical validation or the development of a specific normative ethical theory, but rather a fundamental rethinking of the *relationship* between description and normativity based on their inherent co-constitutivity in lived experience. This approach seeks to reveal the conditions of possibility for both descriptive understanding and normative judgment, arguing that purely descriptive or purely normative standpoints are ontologically untenable.

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BACKGROUND: THE DESCRIPTIVE-NORMATIVE DIVIDE

The descriptive-normative divide has long held a central place in ethical thought, notably shaped by David Hume's ([1739–1740] 1978) articulation of the "is-ought" problem, where he posited that normative statements—claims about what ought to be—cannot logically be derived from descriptive statements—claims about what is. This is-ought divide emphasizes a fundamental boundary between factual knowledge and moral claims, suggesting that no amount of factual description can directly yield an ethical prescription. G.E. Moore's concept of the "naturalistic fallacy" (1903) builds on this, cautioning against deriving moral obligations from empirical facts alone, and insisting that ethical principles cannot be reduced to merely factual terms. These concepts reinforced a significant strand of philosophical thought that emphasized the separation of facts and values, often treating the former as belonging to an objective, neutral realm distinct from subjective value interpretations (e.g., Frederick, 1994; Rosenthal & Buchholz, 2000; Weaver & Treviño, 1994). This tendency towards seeing values as purely subjective was particularly prominent in certain mid-twentieth-century movements, such as logical positivism and emotivism, where ethical statements were often characterized primarily as expressions of feeling rather than claims about the world (e.g., Ayer, [1936] 1946; Stevenson, 1944).

Friedrich Nietzsche strengthened this perception with his assertion that "There are no moral phenomena at all, only moral interpretations of phenomena" (Nietzsche, [1886] 1988: §108), reinforcing the notion that normative interpretations do not originate in the phenomena themselves but rather in the frameworks and perspectives we apply to them. This perspective has resonated across disciplines, particularly in the natural and social sciences, contributing to a widespread acceptance that empirical observation, free from moral judgment, offers a foundation distinct from value-laden perspectives. In this view, descriptive inquiries merely catalog "what is" without the normative imposition of "what should be," a distinction upheld to preserve the objectivity and value neutrality of scientific inquiry.

The concept of science as an impartial, descriptive endeavor has been critiqued, particularly by scholars who argue that science is far more entwined with normative elements than it appears and that there is no view from nowhere (Nagel, 1986). Paul Feyerabend ([1975] 1976) argued that science cannot be fully disentangled from value judgments; implicit values and priorities shape what questions are asked, how experiments are designed, and which findings are prioritized. Likewise, Hilary Putnam (2004) pointed out that scientific terms frequently carry both descriptive and evaluative meanings, as terms like "healthy" or "normal" imply normative ideals even while ostensibly describing factual states. From this angle, science is less value-neutral than it purports to be, shaped by human perspectives that color even the most objective-seeming facts (Weber, [1904] 1988).

In business ethics, a parallel debate about the separation between descriptive and normative perspectives has mainly unfolded in what is recognized as the "separation thesis." While Donaldson (1994) defended the separation, Werhane (1994) and Freeman (1994) argued for the necessary interdependence of descriptive and normative

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methodologies. Other scholars, including Harris and Freeman (2008) and Sandberg (2008), have continued to challenge the thesis in subsequent work. This thesis proposes that ethical evaluations of business practices are fundamentally distinct from the descriptive accounts of those practices, suggesting that while descriptions of business actions may be objective, assessments of those actions as ethical or unethical are inherently subjective. This divide has provided a framework to support the value neutrality of business practices, which ostensibly operate independently of ethical judgments.

Nevertheless, the separation theory has come under scrutiny within business ethics as well, with scholars questioning whether business can indeed remain free of normative implications. Critics argue that the practice of business is inherently evaluative, involving choices that reflect values and priorities beyond mere factual description. R. Edward Freeman's stakeholder theory (1984), for instance, emerged as a response to this critique, advocating for an approach that integrates ethical considerations directly into the practice of business by recognizing that the interests of various stakeholders—employees, customers, communities, and others—are legitimate parts of business decision-making (Freeman, 2000; Werhane & Freeman, 1999). In this way, stakeholder theory challenges the sharp division between descriptive and normative perspectives, suggesting that business ethics must acknowledge the value-laden nature of real-world business activities.

Within the German literature on business ethics, scholars such as Peter Ulrich (2008) and Thomas Beschorner (2013) similarly advocate for a more integrated view, arguing that business cannot be fully separated from its normative dimensions. For these scholars, business practices involve implicit societal norms and values and gain their legitimacy from them. Business operates within a social context that shapes—and is shaped by—normative considerations. While these various critiques effectively challenge the separation thesis on practical, stakeholder-focused, or social-contextual grounds, the phenomenological perspectives explored later in this article offer a more fundamental, *ontological* critique, questioning the very possibility of separating description from normativity at the level of perception and understanding itself.

The growing interest in connecting empirical research with normative inquiry (Islam & Greenwood, 2021; Risi, 2020) reflects a broader momentum to reevaluate the traditional boundaries between the descriptive and the normative. The descriptive-normative divide may be more artificial than initially thought, as human perception and evaluation appear deeply intertwined. As this article will argue, integrating descriptive and normative perspectives offers a richer, more nuanced understanding of both ethics and business ethics, where norms are not merely imposed on facts but are part of the fabric of how we engage with and understand the world.

The debate surrounding the descriptive-normative relationship in business ethics often revolves around stances favoring separation, integration, or dissolution (cf. Weaver & Treviño, 1994). While scholars like Werhane (1994) argue for the interdependence and necessary integration of empirical and normative methodologies, cautioning against notions of purity, and pragmatists effectively dissolve the

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dichotomy by focusing on practical consequences and social justification (e.g., Rorty, 1979; Rosenthal & Buchholz, 2000), this article proposes a different perspective. Grounded in Wittgenstein and Heidegger, it argues for an *ontological co-constitutivity* where the descriptive and normative are not merely integrated post hoc or dissolved pragmatically, but are inherently intertwined in the structure of perception and understanding itself. This ontological claim suggests that even models of integration may implicitly start from a separation that, at a fundamental level, does not hold.

PERCEPTION AS INHERENTLY NORMATIVE: PERSPECTIVES FROM WITTGENSTEIN AND HEIDEGGER

In the subsequent section, I'll briefly present two phenomenological perspectives that cast significant doubts on this separation on an ontological level and also offer a novel perspective on normativity itself. My motivation stems from the conviction that we have a foundational error in our understanding of the distinction between the descriptive and the normative. However, I believe that this thinking, along with other approaches to ethics and morality, is deeply rooted in a specific ontological framework that I aim to challenge and refute.

When writing about normativity using Heidegger and Wittgenstein, it is worth mentioning that both wrote surprisingly little explicitly about ethics (e.g. Heidegger, [1947] 2010; Wittgenstein, [1930] 2012). However, both explicitly recognize the way ethics (Heidegger speaks of humanism) is thought. Both share the view that there seems to be an insufficient understanding of the human condition and consequently the metaphysical roots of ethics. "Every humanism is either based on a metaphysics or makes itself the foundation of one. Every determination of the essence of man that presupposes an interpretation of being without questioning the truth of being, whether with knowledge or without knowledge, is metaphysical. … Accordingly, all humanism remains metaphysical. In defining the humanity of man, humanism not only does not ask about the relation of being to the human condition. Humanism even prevents this question, since, due to its origin in metaphysics, it neither knows nor understands it" (Heidegger, [1947] 2010: 13). Wittgenstein recognized the futility of wanting to evaluate human actions against something outside the human life form: "I felt the urge to run up against the limits of language, and I believe that this is the urge of all people who have tried to write or talk about ethics or religion. This running up against the walls of our cage is completely and utterly hopeless" (Wittgenstein, [1930] 2012: 19). While on the one side both share scepticism towards metaphysically grounded approaches to ethics, they also share views on what I would call a phenomenological approach towards normativity—norms/normativity understood in the most basic way: what makes us recognize, evaluate, and act. While Wittgenstein's own relationship with the term "phenomenology" is complex and subject to debate (see Knabenschuh de Porta, 2008), his exploration of "grammar" as revealing the structures of experience—explicitly stating "Phenomenology is Grammar" (Wittgenstein, [1933–1934] 2000: §94)—can be understood as a perspective focused on articulating immediate experience (Knabenschuh de Porta, 2008). It is in this sense of uncovering

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the grammatical structures that shape our recognition and evaluation that this article utilizes "phenomenological insights" from Wittgenstein.

Philosophical phenomenology, as proposed by Husserl ([1907] 1986), is a fundamental approach to thinking. It emphasizes the distinction between a sensually given experience and a perception of something as something (Krause, 2019). For instance, the perception of a white wall with a shadow necessitates implicit or explicit knowledge of the concept of a shadow. Otherwise, the wall would not be perceived as white but as white with a grey area. This illustrates the idea that is also behind phenomenological approaches: trying to have as little conceptual overcoloring of phenomena as possible, aiming to make aspects more accessible that are otherwise concealed by our concepts (or language).

Wittgenstein's Grammar and Life Forms

The concept of grammar in Wittgenstein's later work encapsulates his view that everything comprehensible falls within the "grammar" of a life form. Wittgenstein describes grammar as the set of rules governing what makes sense and what does not. He writes, "Grammar gives the rules according to which it is decided in advance what makes sense and what does not. … The rules of grammar distinguish sense and nonsense…" (Wittgenstein, [1930–1932] 1980: 46). Unlike descriptive statements, these rules are not mere reflections of the world; rather, they manifest themselves in use, in how meaning is constructed and understood within a given life form. Grammar, therefore, does not merely label or mirror reality; it defines the boundaries within which meaning itself is possible, determining what can be coherently stated and what falls outside of a language game's permissible expressions (see also Werhane, 1987, 1992).

This understanding of grammar as embedded in practice—where, for instance, organizational cultures and professional norms in business function as specific "grammars" shaping action and interpretation—directly connects to later philosophical discussions concerning rule-following skepticism (e.g., Kripke, 1982) and the challenges of grounding normativity within such communal practices. It suggests that the ability to follow a rule or use a concept correctly is grounded not in an abstract formula or mental state, but in participation in a shared "life form"—understood here as the bedrock of communal activities, language, culture, and ways of acting that constitute a community's fundamental way of engaging with the world—and its established communal practices—the very "grammar" Wittgenstein describes.

In this way, grammar forms a framework within which concepts like "right," "wrong," "truth," and "falsity" have meaning, but only within the life form's shared grammar. Grammar functions as a particular "mode" of perceiving reality, shaping what is intelligible within a specific context. Wittgenstein refers to this as "the way we look at things" (Wittgenstein, [1945–1948] 1984a: §331; [1929–1930] 1984b: §186). Importantly, grammar is not "universal" in the sense of an absolute framework; it varies across cultures, languages, and temporal contexts, each of which applies its own distinct set of rules to determine meaning. This variation is evident in practices such as language use, greeting rituals, or other social activities, all of which convey particular meanings within a cultural grammar.

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The very use of grammar presupposes its establishment within a community (cf. Fischer, 1987). However, since legitimation of meaning can occur only within a given grammar, grammar itself cannot be legitimized from outside itself. In other words, it cannot be "backed up" or justified by some deeper ground. This has implications for the nature of truth in Wittgenstein's framework: grammar can only establish a "truth (necessity) in play" rather than a "truth (necessity) of play" (Fischer, 1987: 76). Because grammar provides the framework within which truth is constructed, there cannot be an external validation or comparison to some other, truer account of reality.

While one grammar may differ from another, this difference does not imply that one grammar more adequately represents reality than another. For instance, the grammar governing one life form might render a statement true within that culture while making it incomprehensible or false in another. While it might seem natural to wonder whether one grammar could be more correct or comprehensive than another, such a comparison lacks meaning from within Wittgenstein's framework. Moreover, any attempt to justify a particular grammar would have to conform to the sense criteria established within that grammar. A sentence seeking to validate or critique a grammar would only make sense if it adheres to the rules of the grammar it aims to validate. Thus, the rules of grammar, as Wittgenstein states, "cannot be justified by a description of what is represented. Any such description already presupposes the rules of grammar" (Wittgenstein, [1929–1930] 1984b: §186). This circularity highlights the self-contained nature of grammar; what counts as meaningful or nonsensical within one grammar cannot be reconciled or evaluated by a different one. It's not that we are precluded from evaluating other grammars, but that we do so from within our own normative framework, and not from a neutral, "objective" one. Thus, while one grammar may differ from another, this difference does not imply that one grammar more adequately represents reality than another.

Consequently, Wittgenstein's notion of grammar reinforces the idea that language, meaning, and norms are constructs that do not allow for an external, universal perspective. Rather than existing as a static, objective structure, grammar is an active, constitutive framework shaping our perception and experience within the life form it underlies.

Heidegger's Perspective on the Relation Between Dasein und das Man

In the philosophical tradition established by Edmund Husserl, Heidegger focuses on clarifying cognition by grounding it in one's own ("je meinige") experience, referred to as Dasein, or "being-there." Heidegger's notion of Dasein encompasses the entity that perceives, thinks, acts, and engages in the world, such as the very act of reading this text. While one might be inclined to equate Dasein with the term "I," Heidegger cautions that this would be an existential error. The concepts of "I" or "self," as commonly understood, are constructs within Dasein and are already shaped by its structures (Luckner, 2001).

Heidegger introduces the idea of existentials, which are fundamental conditions that shape Dasein. These existentials form the basic structure of Dasein, enabling the

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range of possibilities it has for interacting with the world. One such existential aspect is being-with-others (Mitsein), suggesting that Dasein is always situated with others. This notion of being-with does not imply merely being physically present with other people. Rather, it means that other people inherently shape Dasein's existence and behavior in a deeper way. This concept is embodied in Heidegger's term das Man, roughly translating to "the they" or "what one does." Das Man structures Dasein by providing norms and expectations for behavior: "Das Man is an existential and belongs as an original phenomenon to the positive constitution of Dasein" (Heidegger, [1927] 2006: 129). In other words, Dasein exists partly as das Man, which informs its worldview and actions.

However, das Man does not signify the mere presence of other people or a collection of individuals. Instead, it reflects a kind of normativity, shaping Dasein without being reducible to individual actions. As von Herrmann explains, "Das Man is [therefore] a phenomenon that cannot be grasped by the means of 'traditional logic'" (von Herrmann, 2008: 347). Traditional categories such as genus or generality fail to capture its function, as das Man underlies the preconditions for thinking and acting. Heidegger critiques traditional logic for being "grounded in an ontology of the existent that is moreover still crude" (Heidegger, [1927] 2006: 129). By setting a framework within which all meaning unfolds, das Man makes possible the "leveling of all possibilities of being" (Heidegger, [1927] 2006: 127), because Dasein is already bound to interpret reality in terms of what is deemed meaningful by das Man.

This leveling effect of das Man leads to a "public sphere" where what is accessible, acceptable, or known is set by shared social norms. Heidegger writes, "Absenteeism, averageness, leveling constitute as the mode of being of das Man what we know as 'the public sphere … The public obscures everything and passes off what is thus obscured as what is known and accessible to everyone" (Heidegger, [1927] 2006: 127). Here, das Man regulates Dasein's interpretation of reality. In a business context, "das Man" manifests, for example, in prevailing assumptions, taken-for-granted routines, and the often-unspoken "rules of the game" that shape actors' understanding of situations and appropriate responses, forming the normative background against which ethical issues are perceived and judged. In this sense, das Man provides Dasein with a shared basis of meaning and judgment that structures its experience of the world. Although Dasein has the possibility to act differently from what das Man prescribes, even the notion of "acting differently" presupposes a reference to what is normatively expected or "normal" behavior. Thus, das Man shapes how Dasein perceives its reality—determining what is good, right, wrong, outrageous, or normal based on socially established norms.

Heidegger actually links das Man to ethics by suggesting that das Man offers a counter-image to individual responsibility: "What is said in Being and Time (1927: §§27 and 35) about das Man is by no means intended to be just a casual contribution to sociology. Equally, das 'Man' means only the ethically and existentially understood counter-image to the self-stone of the person … This relationship remains hidden under the rule of subjectivity, which presents itself as the public sphere" (Heidegger, [1947] 2010: 9–10).

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Interpreting Wittgenstein and Heidegger to Describe Normativity

Heidegger's understanding of normativity in das Man resonates with Wittgenstein's approach, as both thinkers argue against grounding normativity in metaphysical principles. Instead, they locate it within the shared frameworks of human life (see also Rentsch, 2003; Knabenschuh de Porta, 2008). Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger propose that norms are grounded in the structure of life itself: for Wittgenstein, this is the grammar of a life form, and for Heidegger, it is das Man.

For example, norms like "Tell the truth!" or "You shall not lie!" are typically valid within our life form. Efforts to validate these norms through metaphysical reasoning—whether by appeals to logical consistency (as in Kant's categorical imperative) or consequence—may appear plausible, but are ultimately misleading from Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's perspectives. Such attempts to justify the validity of recognized norms through external principles overlook their inherent grounding within the life form's practices. This reflects an anti-foundationalist stance: seeking justification outside the grammar is seen as misguided, as the grammar itself provides the conditions for sense and justification.

Trying to tie a norm for action to a universal principle risks rendering the norm's validity conditional on the principle itself, which can be challenged or doubted. The once-stable norm is destabilized by the principle's uncertainty, weakening its ability to guide action.

In this way, both Heidegger and Wittgenstein view the search for metaphysical justification as a "mental disorder" that distracts from a more authentic understanding of normativity. They each express this therapeutic critique: Wittgenstein asserts, "Our disease is that we want to explain" (Wittgenstein, [1956] 2013: 333), while Heidegger remarks:

> However, then there is really no absolute truth! Of course not. It is time that we *cure* ourselves of the consternation over this and finally take seriously that we are for the time being still human beings and no gods.… From the fact that there is no absolute truth for us, however, we may not infer that there is in general no truth for us.… What is true for us in this sense of truth is quite enough for a human life (Heidegger, 2009: 68, as cited in Braver, 2014: 230, emphasis added by the author).

Both thinkers shift the focus from seeking unobtainable absolute, metaphysical grounds for normativity (a quest Rorty, 1979, also critiques from a pragmatist angle) to understanding how norms function within the lived world. As Heidegger suggests, while we may lack "absolute truth," the truths available within our human context ("what is true for us") are sufficient for navigating life.

Both thinkers thus direct attention to the "everyday" elements of human life that are foundational for understanding (Edwards, 1990; Habermas, 1999; Mulhall, 1990, 1994; Rentsch, 2003; Taylor, 1991). Heidegger and Wittgenstein suggest that these foundational aspects of life—such as the guiding roles of Grammar and das Man—are often hidden in their simplicity. Heidegger describes a "tendency to conceal" in which the "remoteness of the near" makes what is most familiar and closest to us the hardest to analyze. He notes, "what is closest to us is actually the

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furthest away" for analysis and is "constantly overlooked" (Heidegger, [1927] 2006: §9; see also Thomä, 2013: 55). Similarly, Wittgenstein observes, "The most important aspects of things for us are hidden by their simplicity and everydayness. (You can't notice it—because you always have it in front of your eyes.) Man does not notice the actual foundations of his research. Unless he has noticed it once—and that means: what, once seen, is the most striking and strongest, does not catch our eye" (Wittgenstein, [1945–1948] 1984a: §129).

In sum, Heidegger and Wittgenstein both reveal that normativity is omnipresent, embedded within the practical, everyday realities of existence rather than metaphysical principles, making everyday life the foundation of normative orientation rather than abstract reasoning or absolute truths.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE IS AND OUGHT

Understanding the world is inherently a normative process, meaning that descriptions of the world are always intertwined with normative aspects. From both Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's perspectives, any view from a supposed nowhere—a nonnormative description of reality—is untenable at an ontological level (see also Taylor, 1991). While they arrive at this conclusion through different approaches, both Wittgenstein's grammar of lifeforms and Heidegger's concept of das Man illustrate the inextricable connection between descriptive and normative elements. Through this, both thinkers reject attempts to reduce ethics to a set of metaphysical concepts, instead portraying normativity as a fundamental part of human experience and perception. Descriptions, therefore, are not only colored by norms but depend upon them; perception itself requires a normative framework.

This connection is foundational in both thinkers' work. For Wittgenstein, descriptive statements are governed by the grammar of one's life form, or the shared norms and practices of a cultural and linguistic community. Language doesn't merely label objective facts; it shapes and gives meaning to what is perceived. For example, Wittgenstein's famous "rabbit-duck" illustration and other optical illusions demonstrate how perception is shaped by concepts, or grammar, as our minds interpret what we see according to pre-established norms. In this way, even a seemingly simple observation—seeing a shadow on a white wall—relies on implicit knowledge of concepts such as light, shadow, and depth. This understanding follows the phenomenological approach of Husserl ([1907] 1986), which underscores that perception always involves interpreting something as something, meaning that what we recognize, evaluate, and act upon is filtered through our concepts—or norms.

Similarly, Heidegger's concept of das Man emphasizes the social norms that shape Dasein (being-there or human existence) and, in turn, influence perception and understanding. For Heidegger, Dasein's experience is always conditioned by being part of a social world structured by das Man, or the shared expectations and practices that "one" follows. This does not imply that individuals cannot act independently, but that such independence always still remains bound by a framework of social norms; the very meaning of "acting differently" presupposes reference to what

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"one normally does." Consequently, das Man defines the possibilities of judgment and action, forming a social grammar that prescribes interpretation and behavior.

Both Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's views thus counter the notion of a purely objective description of the world, arguing instead that descriptions are constituted through normative frameworks. This perspective challenges traditional metaphysical approaches to grounding normativity, which often attempt to validate norms by appealing to universal principles or absolute values. Wittgenstein and Heidegger, however, maintain that norms do not require metaphysical justification; they are grounded in the shared grammar of life forms (Wittgenstein) or in the existential conditions of Dasein as part of das Man (Heidegger). Rather than requiring an external foundation, norms emerge through our situatedness within a community or life form. This perspective, shared by both thinkers, shifts the focus from seeking a justification outside of the lived world to understanding how norms function from within our everyday reality.

Norms, therefore, are constitutive of perception and thought, which in turn are the basis of description. To identify something as a particular object or situation, one must already understand it in a particular way; an understanding is shaped by norms that are already in place. For instance, perceiving something entirely new would be impossible if we had no conceptual framework to recognize it; we would have no norms or context through which to interpret it. Immanuel Kant captured this insight in his famous statement, "Intuitions without concepts are blind" (Kant, 1787: B75). Our recognition of this new then depends on descriptions that establish initial understanding. These descriptions—the way we talk about or frame the new—allow it to become comprehensible within our life world, thereby forming the basis for future understanding. In this way, norms are inherently descriptive, shaping what and how we recognize and interpret as "real" or meaningful.

To understand a given situation, we rely on a grammar of perception shaped by language, culture, and social norms. This lifeworld, or set of pre-existing norms, is not fixed; it can vary significantly among individuals, cultures, and contexts, influencing not only how we perceive a given situation but also how we might evaluate it. Consequently, this variability shows that differing perceptions of the same event are possible, influenced by language, narrative, culture, social milieu, and environment.

This emphasis on the irreducible role of context aligns with insights from moral particularism (e.g., Dancy, 2004; McDowell, 1979). Particularism challenges the sufficiency of universal moral principles for ethical judgment, arguing instead that the moral relevance of features is determined by the specific configuration of the situation. From the perspective developed here, the "grammar" of the situation dictates which features are salient and how they contribute to meaning and normative assessment, resisting codification into context-independent rules. Furthermore, this variability enables the reshaping of perception through narration, persuasion, or contextual framing; an event can be understood differently if presented within an alternate normative framework that feels more meaningful or relevant to the individual.

From this perspective, the existence of alternative grammars means that different descriptions can convey different interpretations without implying that one description

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is more true than another. In Wittgenstein's terms, grammar is constitutive of what we understand as real; there is no meta-perspective from which one can adjudicate between grammars as more or less "true." Instead, grammar defines the boundaries of what is intelligible or meaningful. A meta-grammar, or universal perspective from which all grammars can be judged, would itself require justification within a particular grammar, thus leading to a regress. As Wittgenstein succinctly puts it, "the conventions of grammar cannot be justified by a description of what is represented. Any such description already presupposes the rules of grammar" (Wittgenstein, [1929–1930] 1984b: §186). Heidegger similarly argues that das Man obscures the underlying interpretive framework that constitutes Dasein's understanding of reality, making it difficult to see how social norms mediate what we perceive as true or real.

Therefore, recognizing or interpreting anything as "something" presupposes a normative framework, what Wittgenstein and Heidegger describe as grammar or das Man. This embedded normativity is essential for an ontologically grounded understanding of what we do when we identify, evaluate, or orient actions. Through this lens, normativity is not an added layer upon a neutral perception; it is integral to the act of perceiving itself.

This perspective also has implications for understanding the naturalistic fallacy. While it remains true in a certain sense that one cannot logically derive normative conclusions solely from descriptive statements, this view overlooks the inherent normativity that shapes the descriptive statements themselves. For instance, within a life form that recognizes "chairs" as a concept, one cannot deduce from the presence of blue chairs that only blue objects qualify as chairs. Yet this does not negate the normative framework that allows the recognition of "chair" as a concept in the first place. Some descriptions, like "furniture" or "objects," serve as broader, more abstract categories but do not eliminate the normative element that makes recognition possible. Thus, rather than representing a divide, descriptive and normative elements are inextricably linked, rendering pure description impossible.

In summary, while it might make sense in certain contexts (see also Azola, 2011; Weaver & Treviño, 1994) from the perspective outlined, the descriptive and the normative cannot be separated on an ontological level. We experience the world through norms that constitute perception, interpretation, and action. This understanding of normativity rejects the traditional view of ethics as a system of metaphysical justifications, instead situating it within the life forms' shared grammar. In this way, normative judgments are not grounded in abstract principles but in the fundamental structures of human experience. This approach does not lead to moral relativism, where "anything goes," but to a perspectivism where norms are inherently contextual. The crucial distinction is that while multiple valid perspectives may exist, they are not limitless or arbitrary within a life form. Our shared grammar establishes boundaries, ruling out interpretations that are incomprehensible or nonsensical within a specific context. For instance, we can use the words "white horses are brown," but they would be meaningless within our established grammar. Our shared way of understanding the world—shaped by lived experience—prevents such a statement from being a valid description. This demonstrates that radical moral relativism, where "anything goes," does not logically follow from the perspectivist

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approach. While we can, and should, criticize our habits and norms, we need to provide reasons that are comprehensible within our life form. A simple statement that contradicts our shared grammar is not enough to change it (see also the argument against immoralism by Philippa Foot, [2001] 2004).

Perception is shaped by grammar or das Man, such that different descriptions can offer various but equally coherent perspectives on a single phenomenon, without implying an objective standpoint. This ontologically grounded view of normativity opens new ways of understanding ethical discourse as an intrinsic aspect of human perception and interaction, rather than a separate, detached domain of evaluation. While this perspectivism, grounded in shared practices, avoids a simple "anything goes" relativism, it acknowledges the genuine challenge of navigating situations where conflicting "grammars" offer seemingly incommensurable interpretations, particularly in pluralistic global or organizational contexts. The framework suggests, however, that resolving such conflicts lies not in finding an external, neutral standpoint, but through engaged dialogue, mutual learning, and the difficult work of crafting richer descriptions or narratives capable of bridging or reframing the divergent perspectives within the specific situation.

Ultimately, grasping this inherent connection provides a more insightful lens on normativity. It allows us to understand the deep, existential hold of norms—grounded as they are in our very form of life and perception—without resorting to elusive external foundations or reducing them to arbitrary preferences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR APPROACHING BUSINESS ETHICS

Having established the ontological co-constitutivity of description and normativity, the following section explores the specific consequences of this understanding for the theory and practice of business ethics. This article is framed by the premise that ethics is inherently aimed at guiding and evaluating actions. Traditional approaches to ethics in business typically emphasize one of three main strategies (or a combination thereof): focusing on the motivation behind actions (such as duty-based ethics in Kant, 1785; see also Bowie, 1999; Bowie & Reynolds, 2004), the consequences of actions (utilitarianism, e.g., Bentham, [1789] 2013; Mill, [1861] 2009), or the virtues of the individual acting (virtue ethics, e.g., Hursthouse, 1999; MacIntyre, 1997; Moore, 2012). However, as Philippa Foot's trolley problem famously illustrates, these approaches often yield ambiguity and conflict when applied to complex situations ([2001] 2004; [2003] 2009).

Despite the fact that we do take principles, outcomes as well as the person who acts into account—we accept them as reasons for an action in specific contexts—they individually fail when applied as general (normative) theories of "the good" when actions suggested by any one approach conflict with what we perceive as appropriate. Instead, what underpins and orients these strategies—and, more fundamentally, our actions—are the shared norms of the life form within which they arise.[1]

[1] This is not to say that these approaches are without value; for example, virtue ethics, which also focuses on the context-specific nature of judgment, gestures toward a contextual orientation by emphasizing practical

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Consider the principle of free speech, which is often upheld as a fundamental right. While it is a guiding norm, it may not provide clear orientation in all situations. For instance, in certain contexts, open and unrestricted speech may be seen as inappropriate or harmful. In some cases, the principle of free speech may need to be balanced against other principles, such as respect for others' privacy or the potential consequences of disclosure. This principle, taken alone, does not account for the situational norms and expectations that make an action meaningful or good in a given context. In other words: "the grammar of the situation" or "what one does here." Highly complex but common situations that have a relatively fixed set of norms, will not be recognized as causing ethical problems exactly *because* they have a fixed set of norms—they are *norm*al situations, it is clear what one does in such a situation. And because of normality being hidden, we don't even consider the actual normative complexity of those situations. Consequently, what is commonly referred to as an "ethical conflict" can emerge only when these normative frameworks are disrupted or unclear. Ethical deliberation becomes a process of descriptive refinement and selection, navigating between competing or even new ways of framing the situation, each rooted in our shared life forms (grammar/das Man). The decision for a particular description constitutes the specific judgment in that context with its implications for how to act.

This can be illustrated by layoffs during a corporate restructuring. The action itself is a single event, but it can be described through multiple, conflicting normative frameworks. From one perspective, the layoff can coherently be framed as "downsizing" to "enhance shareholder value" and "improve efficiency." This description is rooted in a certain grammar, where the action is a necessary and positive step for the company's long-term health. However, from another perspective, the same action can be described as a "betrayal" or an act of "corporate greed." Here, the action is viewed as unnecessary and negative.

These competing descriptions are not simply different labels; they represent fundamentally different normative perspectives on what constitutes a "good" or "just" action within the business context. Ethical judgment, in this case, is not about applying an abstract principle to a neutral fact. It is a process of navigating these divergent descriptions and committing to one as the most salient for the context. This example demonstrates how ethical evaluation emerges directly from our normatively structured engagement with the world, rather than being applied to neutral facts from an external standpoint.

This highlights the practical challenge of rule application in business. Even seemingly clear ethical codes or principles rely on an underlying, often implicit, shared understanding ("grammar") for their interpretation and application in novel situations. Ethical conflicts often arise precisely where this shared grammar is

wisdom over rigid rules. However, while it highlights the agent, virtue ethics largely leaves aside the ontological foundations of why and how a virtuous agent is able to perceive and act in a complex situation. Additionally, because it grounds "goodness" in the agent's character rather than a shared, public framework, the approach can struggle to provide a solid basis for external validation on what constitutes a "good" decision.

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lacking, ambiguous, or contested, making the mechanical application of rules impossible and underscoring the philosophical insights regarding rule-following limitations (Wittgenstein, [1945–1948] 1984a; Kripke, 1982).

The lack of normative orientation can arise from two distinct possible causes: either there are no established norms for the situation, or there are conflicting sets of norms that apply. Both of these factors underscore the significance of providing a detailed description in shaping normativity.

Normative clarity in ambiguous business situations relies not only on principles but fundamentally on narratives, examples, and the descriptive work of framing the situation through potentially competing normative lenses or "grammars." This addresses how the general normativity of perception connects to what we usually refer to as "ethical judgments": deliberation involves navigating these different ways of seeing. For instance, whether firing employees is primarily understood as, for instance, "efficient restructuring" or "breaking trust" involves choosing between descriptions that highlight different aspects, consequences, and implicit obligations. The ethical judgment lies precisely in this commitment to a particular, inherently normative description as the most salient for the context. The commitment is typically influenced by other convictions, for example, about the role of a firm in society, the purpose of work, or the nature of social obligations—all of which contribute to a normative framework that guides a particular perspective.

The "is" inherently shapes the resulting "ought," demonstrating that ethical evaluation emerges from within our normatively structured engagement with the world, rather than being applied externally to neutral facts. The reliance on a rich normative context also challenges critiques of moral relativism, which might suggest that if norms are context-dependent, "anything goes." From the perspective presented, normativity itself sets the limits within which descriptions and interpretations make sense: While the number "6" can be interpreted as a "9" when seen from a different angle, it would be incomprehensible to describe it as "2" within our existing normative framework. The grammar of our lifeform—our shared ways of understanding—makes certain interpretations possible while ruling out others. This doesn't imply an external, objective reality that constrains us, but rather that the rules of the grammar itself establish what is intelligible. Thus, a description that challenges the existing framework would need to offer a compelling normative perspective to be accepted as meaningful.

These perspectives suggest that business ethics requires an approach grounded in a sensitivity to the normative frameworks governing each situation. Traditional terminology such as "moral reasons" or "morally required/prohibited" is often ambiguous or unhelpful in business contexts because it fails to capture the behaviour that is normatively expected or refused. G.E.M. Anscombe (1958) argued that:

> [T]he concepts of obligation, and duty—moral obligation and moral duty, that is to say—and of that is morally right and wrong, and the moral sense of "ought," ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it (Anscombe, 1958: 1).

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Norms within a life form provide a framework that is as concrete as it is flexible. Norms guide our perceptions, judgments, and evaluations, forming the basis for actions. From a phenomenological perspective, business ethics could be more about engaging with the specific normative "grammar" of business contexts. This involves recognizing where norms are missing, unclear, or contradicting from the perspectives of various actors or probing the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying current practices. Instead of the attempt of applying abstract principles to a certain context, support comes through narratives, examples, and other concrete normative expressions aimed at clarifying or evolving the shared understanding. Crucially, this highlights that because justification operates within the grammar of a life form and lacks an external arbiter of "correctness," the normative weight of competing descriptions ultimately derives from their resonance and ability to compellingly guide action within that shared understanding.

For example, if a business seeks to navigate conflicting interests among stakeholders, the decision may hinge less on abstract principles than on how it aligns with the normative expectations of those stakeholders. In this sense, business ethics becomes an exercise in translating complex situations into meaningful, normatively rich descriptions that resonate within the business's unique cultural and social context.

Cultivating this sensitivity in organizational decision-making, while challenging, might be aided by specific interpretive strategies and heuristic questions. Rather than evoking universal principles, managers can become more attuned to the operative normative frameworks by focusing on:

- *Analyzing different interpretations of contexts*: Explicitly asking: What different interpretations (e.g., finance, engineering, marketing, community relations, environment, technical standards) are intersecting in this situation? What are the implicit rules, goals, and measures of success within each perspective? Where does the language used (such as "efficiency," "risk," or "value") carry different meanings or normative weight depending on the interpretations?
- *Deep stakeholder perspective-taking*: Moving beyond identifying stakeholder interests to actively attempting to articulate the situation from within their specific grammar or life form. How would they describe the problem, the stakes, and a "good" outcome? This requires more than empathy; it demands interpretive effort.
- *Deconstructing dominant narratives*: Examining the prevailing stories or descriptions used to frame the situation. Who is telling the story? What metaphors or analogies are employed? What aspects are highlighted, and which are obscured? Actively exploring alternative narratives can expose the contingency of the dominant framing and the normative choices embedded within it (Hosking, 2011).

These interpretive strategies do not offer solutions but function as practical heuristics. They encourage a more reflective and dialogical approach, helping decision-makers diagnose normative ambiguities or conflicts and engage more effectively with the descriptive-normative complexity inherent in real-world ethical challenges.

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Ultimately, the view presented here offers business ethics a model that embraces a practical, context-sensitive approach to normativity. In this model, business ethics does not strive for a universally valid moral judgment but rather seeks to cultivate sensitivity to the contextual norms that shape ethical understanding and guide actions. Such an approach values the subtleties of language, practice, and situation over the universality of abstract principles. By emphasizing the descriptive and normative interplay, business ethics can become a more dynamic and contextually responsive practice, oriented toward real-world ethical challenges rather than abstract moral problems.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the philosophical foundations and implications of bridging the descriptive and the normative. Examining the ontological perspectives of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, the co-constitutivity of the normative and the descriptive appeared, both shaping and being shaped by one another in our engagement with the world. In both philosophical discourse and business ethics, understanding this connection challenges us to reconsider normativity as an integral aspect of lived experience and context-specific practices. By focusing on the ontological co-constitutivity of description and normativity, this approach offers a more fundamental perspective than those focusing solely on integration or practical consequences, grounding context-sensitive ethics in the very structure of perception and understanding.

Wittgenstein's concept of grammar and Heidegger's notion of das Man offer frameworks in which normativity is constitutive of the very ways we perceive, interpret, and act within the world. Consequently, the search for a neutral or objective standpoint free from normative influence becomes illusory, as all perceptions are already saturated with the normativity.

For business ethics, this understanding of normativity opens new pathways for addressing ethical issues. Decision-making in business might benefit from the diagnosis of normative uncertainty, bringing more importance to descriptions that help to understand a situation or possible results from actions better. Rather than achieving moral clarity through rigid abstractions, a context-sensitive ethical approach in business leverages narratives, examples, and situational understandings to engage with ethical issues that are complex and multifaceted.

This article does not advocate for moral relativism, where "anything goes." Instead, it promotes a moral perspectivism, where ethical considerations are shaped by the particulars of each context but remain grounded in shared frameworks of meaning and understanding. The proposed view integrates normative and descriptive elements, recognizing that ethical understanding cannot be fully realized without attention to the contexts in which ethical decisions are made. This approach reframes business ethics as a dynamic, responsive practice that values context and the subtleties of human interactions over abstract moralism.

This perspective, however, faces challenges and limitations. Translating complex phenomenological insights into readily applicable tools for managers remains a significant hurdle. Furthermore, while this article argues its perspectivism avoids radical relativism by grounding norms in shared "grammars," the implications for

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deeply conflicting grammars require further thought. Future research could usefully explore heuristic methods for mapping or diagnosing situational "grammars" in business contexts, conduct empirical studies on how actors actually navigate the descriptive-normative intertwining in decision-making, and further investigate the practical resources (like narrative, dialogue, exemplars) needed to establish normative clarity in situations of ambiguity or conflict identified by this framework. For instance, what communicative practices, drawing on narrative and situated examples, prove effective in establishing shared normative clarity in situations of ambiguity or conflict? How can managers be sensitized to recognize and navigate the influence of their own and others' underlying "grammars" during decision-making and addressing conflicts? Furthermore, empirical work could explore how certain descriptions within organizations become dominant.

Ultimately, adopting an ontologically grounded view of normativity encourages us to see ethics not as an external layer imposed upon factual circumstances but as a constitutive aspect of how we engage with the world. By clearing away dichotomies that separate ethics from the everyday, we recognize that our world is already and inescapably saturated with normativity, demanding approaches to business ethics that engage directly with this lived reality and thereby help to shape it.

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