Editorial Essay

Reflections on Editorial Leadership: Looking Back…Moving Forward

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We take the opportunity in this editorial that marks the end of our tenure, to offer some reflections on our experiences. It is an occasion for looking back, for reflection on the scholarship and practice of business ethics, and for celebrating some of the outstanding work that is being done in and for the journal.

LOOKING BACK

We started our editorship with an agenda, which we set out in our opening editorial (den Hond and Painter 2022). We tend to believe that one of the reasons why we were entrusted with the responsibility for the journal is that the Society for Business Ethics (SBE) board that appointed us endorsed our agenda, or at least, that it shared some of our ideas on how the field may be enriched and developed. What was our agenda? We aimed at fostering and expanding the "pluralism and welcoming of multiple perspectives" in the pages of the journal, while—obviously, no editor would claim otherwise—"maintaining the rigor and quality of its editorial review process" (2022, 1). For us, these were not empty words.

Celebrating plurality of orientations was our priority in order to enhance creativity and innovation in developing the field of business ethics research, while still maintaining precision, rigor, and robustness. It meant expanding the variety of perspectives, disciplines, and genres represented in the journal. Whether authors pursued the articulation of their ethical stance through analytic philosophical argumentation, by drawing on African, European, Asian, or South-American philosophical perspectives, or through empirical analysis, we believe that as editors, we were safe hands for all of these papers, as exemplified by the diversity of topics, figures, and

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perspectives published under our editorship and in the present pipeline.[1] Some of these articles indeed may have been experienced as "texts of bliss"—we used the expression by Roland Barthes in our opening editorial—to the extent that they "create discomfort, elicit a state of loss, unsettle assumptions, and mess with the reader's consistency of taste, memories, and values" (2022, 2). We do believe that every journal has the responsibility towards its present and future community to upset, question, renew, invent, and 'push,' so as to avoid getting too comfortable within its well-established confines.

It was in this context that we chose to refer to Rorty in our opening editorial, in the conviction that business ethics can and perhaps must be more than an academic discipline, a 'science,' that claims, from a "view from nowhere" (Nagel 1986) or a "God's-eye point of view" (Putnam 1981), the capacity and prerogative to develop reliable knowledge of its object of interest in both descriptive and normative terms. Along with Rorty, we advanced the belief that there should be room also for the poetic and the political in the field of business ethics.

The art review section was an attempt to stimulate the development of vocabularies and imaginaries beyond the tried and trusted. Not everybody appreciated the section. Some colleagues were concerned that its entrées would negatively affect the journal impact factor. Such concerns were misplaced, since art reviews are not citable items that count for the journal impact factor (and neither are book reviews). Others found the section just irrelevant. But not everybody. Usage data from June 2024 suggested that the art review section had caught on: the number of downloads of art reviews was in roughly the same order of size as those of book reviews. Should reading not be more important than the endless circulation of citations? We do believe so.

Some questions also remain regarding the relationship of business ethics theory to practice. We see business ethics not as 'applied' but as 'practical' ethics, addressing problems grounded in the concerns and needs of business firms as well as other kinds of organizations, and the societies in which they operate. We might refer to several of John Dewey's works for the assertion that inquiry begins and ends in the here and now of experience, and to William James for insisting that it should make a difference that matters. But then: A difference for what? And for whom? Our stand is that the academic practice of business ethics, writ large, should be reflective about, and conscious of, what it is actually *doing* when advancing its claims, theses, and findings.

Understanding business ethics not only as 'ethics *in* business,' but also as 'ethics *of* business' (Islam and Greenwood 2021) implies that business ethicists serve an agenda that includes the well-being of all forms of life (humans, nonhuman animals, ecosystems, etc.) and their material substrate on planet Earth. It also implies that we, business ethics scholars, turn the antenna inwards, to question whether we treat not only each other, but all other others (as with Levinas's Third), with fairness, respect, and most of all, care.

In her book *Inclinations*, Adriana Cavarero (2016, 10) offers a reflection on what she describes as "a postural geometry of ethics," critiquing the predominance

[1] It should be emphasized, though, that a fair share of the articles published under our editorship and in the present pipeline were curated and accepted by the journal's associate editors.

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of a 'vertical' posture, to the exclusion of adopting a posture of 'inclination' towards others. She pictures vividly the evolution from us crawling on all fours, towards elevating ourselves to being 'upright,' thereby allowing our gaze to objectify the world around us. The stance that has emerged as salient, is that of the transcendental subject and, in ethical terms, the principled agent who gazes down at the world from an elevated plane of moral righteousness and certainty that are informed mostly by deontological principles or 'rational' deliberation. Despite the gains that such evolution inevitably offered, from Cavarero's perspective, a lot has also been sacrificed. We have lost touch with the world in which others, both human, animate and inanimate, demand a caring response. In her analysis of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Cavarero reflects on the predominance of 'I' statements, which, if too prominently present in our analysis, crowd out whatever does not neatly fit the ideal-types that Enlightenment rationality dictates. This 'strong I' position undermines diversity and inclusion—whether in terms of gender, culture, sexual orientation, or epistemological position. We therefore hoped to foster an environment more inclined to care, and to be responsive towards all others.

Have we been successful in the pursuit of our agenda? That is not a question for us to answer. It is fair, however, to say that our agenda turned out to be more controversial than we expected it to be. Our tenure has been characterized by numerous vigorous debates, which certainly made the blood flow, as the title of our first editorial suggested. Whether the "blood approves," as E. E. Cummings[2] would have hoped for—for some, yes, for other less so.

CHALLENGES TO THE FIELD

We sketch three challenges to the field that we believe deserve broader reflection and discussion. It is not our intention to interfere with the project and agenda of our successors.

Belonging to a Community

In his analysis in *Margins of Philosophy*, Jacques Derrida (1982) plays with the notions of the 'proper,' 'property,' and 'proprietary.' He calls us to question our ideas around ownership in the first place, but also our own understanding of what is the 'essence' in our identities and how this may influence how we respond towards others. If what we consider our 'property' is closely bound up with sense of self, it would inevitably lead to turf-battles and exclusions. Instead, what is properly human, from our perspective, is our capacity to relate. Or, put in the terms of Mollie's native country South Africa's moral ethos, ubuntu, an ethical failure is simply a failure to relate (Pérezts et al. 2020). It is some business ethicists' failure to relate that emerged as a central concern for us over the past four years. We sought a belonging that is open, transparent, respectful, and caring. In fact, a belonging that is always suspicious of what it means to 'properly' belong.

[2] From the poem [*since feeling is first*] by E. E. Cummings (https://poets.org/poem/feeling-first).

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When we say that *BEQ* 'belongs' to SBE and serves its members, we thereby acknowledge the history of effort that its founders and members have put into building and sustaining the community and supporting its intellectual life by means of thought-leadership and publication outputs. In Lockean terms, one may even say that the amount of labor that has been invested into building this community and serving *BEQ* as a publication outlet, merits this sense of it being the 'property' of the Society. And there is nothing wrong with that until the point that it eclipses the fact that *BEQ* not only serves SBE—through the revenues it amasses, for example—and its membership, but over and beyond these also the broader community of all those who self-identify with the field of business ethics.

Those serving the Society in official capacities have an important role in supporting the journal and communicating its members' academic interests. This should, however, never interfere with the editorial independence of the editorial team, nor with nurturing the business ethics field beyond those who 'properly' belong to the SBE. Carefully considering appropriate ways to relate, and to take proper care of all involved, remains an ongoing task. Many are already doing this, and to them, we owe our thanks.

Dealing with 'Disciplines'

Each field of academic practice has a tendency to engage in identity work. It develops an answer to questions of the boundaries of the field. What is 'in,' and what should be kept 'out,' are questions that are never settled, for once, for ever, for all. But there are always two kinds of positions in the effort to answering questions of identity. Extending from the argument in an article written by Paul Hirsch and Daniel Levin, in 1999, it can be said that one position is that of the "validity police." The validity police are inclined to be restrictive in their view of what is 'in' and what should be considered 'out'; they advance discipline. The other position can be characterized as that of "umbrella advocates." Umbrella advocates are more permissive of concepts and boundaries being fuzzy, and more open to the possibility of a plurality of plausible interpretations. While advocates of the former prefer working with "definitive" concepts, the latter prefer "sensitizing" concepts (Blumer 1954). The two positions are in a dynamic and dialectic relationship; fields of academic inquiry develop over time as a function of the ongoing interaction between the two positions, and both must be nurtured.

If, however, the tradition in which these mindsets and practices have developed, transforms into a discipline that takes a more or less definite form, and becomes too firmly institutionalized, then it runs the risk of becoming a liability for the very purpose and ambition of that tradition. Interestingly enough, there seems to be a development in the publishing landscape that calls into question some aspects of disciplinary traditions.

Changes in the Publication Landscape?

Much can be said about changes in the landscape of academic publishing. Open access, transfer agreements, DORA (the Declaration on Research Assessment), increasing numbers of submissions (notably from parts of the world beyond North America and Europe), the persistent difficulty of finding committed reviewers—all

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that, and more. These are well-known issues. But for the field of business ethics, there is another trend to consider. Based on impact factors emerging from citations between 2017 and 2021, that is, articles published before our tenure started, the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) decided to downgrade *BEQ* from a level 4 to a level 3 publication in its *Academic Journal Guide*.[3] The down-ranking of a business ethics journal is a blow to the whole field, as is the fact that there is no longer any business ethics or sustainability-related journal at the highest level on the CABS list. This development led to a great deal of speculation as to how this might have been avoided, but from our perspective, it is an occasion for bringing to the fore another emerging feature in the publishing landscape.

We believe it signals a challenge to the field to reflect on its priorities and passions. Many members of our community are philosophically trained and, as such, typically do not cite as widely as organizational studies scholars do, nor do they typically write for practitioner audiences. Some in the community are in the business of sophisticated argumentation, rather than in guiding policy direction. As a community of scholars, we may choose to protect this and maintain the status quo. The implication, however, is that we remain working a direction that is pulling away from what CABS are suggesting should be priorities. For example, in its *2024 Academic Journal Guide*, CABS introduced additional "contextual metrics" that may influence the future ranking of journal. For instance, "align[ment] to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, citations to policy documents, collaborations between academics and non-academic stakeholders, the extent of international co-authorship, and the gender composition of editorial boards" are all becoming relevant.[4]

We attempted to move into this direction, not because of CABS—we formulated our agenda prior to being aware of their policy adjustment—but because we found it important, for example, to become more inclusive along a range of dimensions, including the gender balance in BEQ's editorial board. Increasing representation based on gender, race, and geographical origin may be a first step, and this is incredibly difficult in and of itself. But even when this can be accomplished, it does not necessarily guarantee diversity of thought. We certainly endeavoured to include more women on the editorial board, as well as broaden its geographical diversity, but found this to be a challenging task. One cannot undo structural inequality and systemic exclusion in decades, let alone just a few years. Yet one has the duty to always move in the direction of justice, and we hope the new editorial team will gain further momentum in this regard.

STEPPING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

We stepped down, after four years, because for us, what is properly ethical—that is, being inclined to relate to others and include diverse perspectives—no longer

[3] CABS based their 2024 ranking decisions on data collected on articles published in 2017–21 from the following sources: (i) the Journal Citation Reports™ (JCR™); (ii) the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR); (iii) the Source Normalised Impact per Paper (SNIP); and (iv) the CiteScore.

[4] https://charteredabs.org/academic-journal-guide/.

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matched with what we experienced as editors of the journal. Turf-battles between philosophical positions and ensuing gossip-mills, which treated the journal as the 'property' of some, made it impossible to relate. Instead of following the responsible and response-able route of formal engagement with the editorial team (which also includes its associate editors) to enquire about some editorial decisions, some individuals chose other means of expressing their dissent.

In explaining our resignation in December 2024, we find it helpful to think about it as our own version of "leadership of refusal" (Bell et al. 2024). Despite the sensitivities this may cause (perhaps even *because* of it) we need this to be known, and we believe that some good may come from sharing this perspective. Sometimes, as Emma Bell and her colleagues (2024) powerfully helped us to understand and now articulate, the best response to a status quo that seems resistant to change, is to refuse to engage on its preconceived, preordained, and seemingly unchangeable terms. We chose no longer to serve in a role in which it seemed impossible to institutionalize the fairness and respect business ethics scholarship articulates so powerfully conceptually, within the publishing practice of the journal itself. A preoccupation with impact factors, with disciplinary purity, and with academic hubris are undermining the normative commitment and the possibility of values-driven practice within business ethics.

Therefore, in response to the current status quo within the *BEQ* journal landscape, we chose not to serve the last year of our five-year term. Daniel Hjorth also announced that he was stepping down with us. Refusal can be done response-ably, though, which meant that we all agreed to serve the journal for another six months to facilitate a smooth transition to the new editorial team and to take care of all the authors and reviewers with papers in the pipeline. In this way, stepping back is also a way to move forward meaningfully. As Bell et al. (2024) explain, there is always the option to embrace one's own, very much embodied style of leading through connection, relationality, affectivity, and humor. To follow one's own inclinations intuitively and simply respond to what is in front of one, as authentically as possible. We remain committed to doing so, each in our own particular way.

For us, being in a senior editorial role was first and foremost a labor of love, a relational capacity centered on care, which relied on the systemic force of relationality that went far beyond the individuals in the most senior positions (Painter and Werhane 2023). In the pursuit of our agenda, we received much support, and we thank each associate editor, editorial board member, reviewer, and reader who served with diligence, kindness, and fairness.

JOURNAL AWARDS

We want to be clear that the early end of our tenure certainly does not signal any 'bad blood' between us and the journal, the Society, its Board, or its members (after all, there are many that we consider close friends and collaborators). Quite the contrary is true: there is so much to celebrate! This final editorial offers us the chance to thank and celebrate the excellence in the community, and the generous service rendered to our scholarly practice.

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The journal has the tradition of celebrating excellence by handing out awards for, respectively, an outstanding article and an outstanding reviewer. Both awards are handed out during the SBE conference. The committee for selecting an outstanding article published in the 2024 volume of *BEQ* comprised Anne Antoni, Daniel Arenas, and Jeff Moriarty. They selected a winner and two runners up from the associate editors' nominations. The winner is the article by Chao Chen, Oliver Sheldon, Mo Chen, and Scott Reynolds, "For the Sake of the Ingroup: The Double-Edged Effects of Collectivism on Workplace Unethical Behavior' (*BEQ* 34[4], 570–604). The committee commented that the article's conclusions are supported by a huge amount of data collected in different settings and in multiple countries. Its analysis is symmetrical in adding to our knowledge of the causes of both good and bad behavior in organizations, and it offers actionable advice to managers. The runners up are Andrey Bykov's article "A Sociological Perspective on Meaningful Work: Community Versus Autonomy (*BEQ* 34[3], 409–39) and Vikram Bhargava and Pooria Assadi's article "Hiring, Algorithms, and Choice: Why Interviews Still Matter" (*BEQ* 34[2], 201–30). We join the committee in extending our congratulations to the authors.

The winner of this year's outstanding reviewer award is Sandrine Blanc, associate professor at INSEEC Grande École, Paris. Sandrine's contribution to reviewing for *BEQ* merits celebration, not because she necessarily did the largest number of reviews, but because of the standard and spirit she displayed in her reviewing. We want to underscore the fact that taking on reviewer duties is a very special kind of service: to both the author, the editor, and the readership of *BEQ*. It is an opportunity to learn, and share—not to self-promote, chastise authors, or lecture authors or editors. Fair reviewers help the field to avoid building silos or advancing insularity by being open to other perspectives. This service requires generosity and fairness, and promptness, as the timing of publications affects our authors in profound ways. If one needs to decline an invitation to review due to other duties or priorities, one should do so quickly and help the editor find someone else. All of us are, in the end, together in this pursuit of publishing quality work.

CONCLUSION

Enough has been said about the past, the future lies ahead … In a world increasingly suffering from conflict, division, destructive leadership, and, inevitably, violence of all kinds, understanding how businesses of all shapes and sizes may protect and nurture values is a task to which the field of business ethics has much to contribute. The grand challenges that are articulated in the broad ESG (environment, social, and governance) arena raise perplexing questions that should be intellectually exciting to pursue. Our hope is that the business ethics community, which extends far beyond the Society for Business Ethics, will embrace the work that lies ahead with equal amounts of passion and fairness.

Since many business ethicists work in business schools, we have an important role to play in articulating what responsible management education means in the world today. We believe an ongoing discussion, also with our schools' leadership, is

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needed on whether or how much one should care about citation metrics, impact factors, and journal rankings. Some careful consideration should be given to how this is affecting academic careers, especially for young scholars on tenure and promotion paths. We would also like to appeal to the senior scholars among us to actively engage with our institutions to underscore the importance of journals pursuing normative work, despite rankings and impact factors. We owe it to our younger colleagues and to society to not let number-crunching undermine thinking and ethical practice.

We close by expressing our sincere thanks and appreciation to all who supported and worked with us—Joanna; the associate, book review, and art review editors; the editorial review board—and by wishing our successors, Jeff and Danielle, the wisdom they will need and the support they deserve.

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