Chapter 12

Voicing Possibilities:
A Performative Approach to the Theory and Practice of Ethics in a Globalised World

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ABSTRACT

Business ethics is witnessing the emergence of new activity-based, communicative approaches to ethics theory and pedagogy that go beyond the conventional normative-descriptive distinction. The authors call this emergent approach "performative ethics" and recognise it as a fundamentally innovative new orientation towards theorising and teaching ethics. They apply this notion of performative ethics to the topic of sustainability, and illustrate their discussion using "Giving Voice to Values" (GVV). GVV is an innovative approach that focuses on implementing ethical values and how they might be expressed at multiple levels of organisational life. The challenge of intergenerational sustainability requires a multilevel orientation to the practical expression of core values in a globalised world. To illustrate this, the authors present three short case studies and explore them from a GVV perspective. They show how GVV can be applied, both theoretically and practically, to the task of expressing and acting on shared values for developing sustaining and sustainable personal, organisational, and global futures.

INTRODUCTION

What if we asked theory instead to help us see openings, to provide a space of freedom and possibility? (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 7)

One of the distinguishing features of contemporary life is the increasing interdependence between the personal, the local and the global. We see this in the links between the local workplace and international economies, in individual consumer choice and its impact on the global environment and the links between personal ethics and the capacity of our planet to provide healthy and sustaining environments. The interconnectivity of contemporary worlds means that the expression of our values and ethical commitments plays a central role in shaping the social and natural environments that sustain us. However, this very connection between the local and the global is challenged by the growing passivity and sense of powerlessness that people feel in influencing the social environments they live in (Ritzer & Atalay, 2010). In particular, globalisation challenges our capacity for ethical behaviour and moral imagination because it is so difficult to see the network of impacts our choices and behaviours have on others. The vast networks of global supply chains, bureaucracies and regulatory systems that serve the purposes of government organisations and multinational corporations seem not only impervious to ethical concerns but also to actively contribute to the deadening of our ethical sensibilities. This is nowhere more evident than in the impact that our economic choices and behaviours have on social and environmental sustainability.

Ethics underpins both personal and collective human action for achieving the purposes that we aim for and the futures that we hope to build. With the increasing globalisation of organisational relationships and their impact on natural and social environments, there is a need to develop more sophisticated conversations about how our values can be expressed, from the personal all the way up to the global level of doing business (Collier & Fuller, 2004). This web of relationships is a multilevel phenomenon in that values find expression in our intrapersonal life, our interpersonal relationships, organisational work, community involvements, political and economic life and in the global network of associations that each of us contributes to. How then can we connect the practical expression of our ethical commitments with this multilevel web of work and organisational involvements? How can we situate the "how" of building values-based working lives within the "how" of building sustainable and sustaining organisations and global economies?

This challenge calls for a commensurate change in how we understand and teach ethics. In this chapter we propose that just such a change is occurring and that it needs to be recognised and further explored. This new approach, which we call 'performative ethics' (Edwards & Kirkham, 2014), has been emerging over the past several decades and is associated with a focus on such things as communicative dialogue, discourse, conversation, reflexivity, imagination and performativity. While several authors have used the term performative ethics to refer to various kinds of action-based approaches to teaching ethics (Hamington, 2012; Tudway & Pascal, 2006), theoretical aspects of identity and diversity politics (Butler, 1997; Tarin, 2009) or ethical performance (Parker, 2005; Weinstein, 1994), we follow the lead of Edwards and Kirkham (2013) in proposing performative ethics as a unique genre of ethics theory and practice that is separate from, and complementary to, the more usual domains of normative and descriptive ethics. We will describe this approach in more depth in a later section, but for now we suggest that performative ethics complements existing ethical theories and pedagogies with concepts and methods that are concerned with possibility, innovation and creativity as expressed in the communications and conversations that are the site and source of organisational and community life. To illustrate how a performative ethics can contribute to the

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