



Justice, Identity and Managing with Philosophy

Damian Byers and Carl Rhodes

abstract

What follows is a record of a discussion between Carl Rhodes of the University of Technology, Sydney and Damian Byers, currently the Organization Development Manager with AstraZeneca Australia. The pre-text for this discussion was Damian's relatively unique professional background; while he has had a successful career in management, Damian has also worked extensively as a professional philosopher culminating in his recent book *Intentionality and Transcendence: Closure and Openness in Husserl's Phenomenology*. The text begins with a brief discussion of Damian's professional background and then moves on to consider the relationship between philosophy and management in terms of his own practice. The theme that runs through the discussion is that of ethics, leadership and human resource management in relation to the personal identity of people at work. This leads to a beginning explication of the practical implications of what it might mean to consider the notion of a 'just organization' in terms of identity.

Carl Rhodes: Many people who are involved in the academic study of management and organizations have turned to philosophy to inform their thinking. Some have even called for a 'philosophy of management'. In terms of management practice and the education of managers, this is much less frequently the case. Pragmatic managers are schooled in finance, economics and, perhaps, psychology. Even then it is more common for successful practical experience to be held up as the main source of learning. In this respect your own background is interesting in that you are formally trained in philosophy, have worked as an academic philosopher and have published significant scholarly work in philosophy. At the same time you now work as a senior manager in a major corporation. As a starting point to this dialogue, can you expand a little on your own background in philosophy?

Damian Byers: When I worked as an academic philosopher, my main areas of interest were in modern and contemporary European philosophy – Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida. I also developed an interest in the philosophy of economics, and I did some work in that area too, focusing on what could be called the epistemology and metaphysics of neo-classical economics. In terms of training, my PhD is in philosophy. I did a thesis on Husserl's phenomenology, broadly investigating the extent to which it remains, and the extent to which it goes beyond, 'metaphysics' in the sense established by Heidegger, and elaborated by Derrida and Levinas. I am in sympathy with the broadly Levinasian interpretation of 'metaphysics' – its impulses, motivations and

ethical significance. In the book that I wrote on the basis of that thesis¹, I try to show the extent to which Husserl does – and does not – belong to the tradition of Cartesian metaphysics which seeks to retrieve the possibility of science via the establishment, for once and for all, of an absolutely stable and secure foundation. My book spells out the way this aspiration drives the development of Husserl’s thought, reaching its conclusion in showing why it was that Husserl finally failed to establish phenomenology as ‘First Philosophy’. The point here is that this failure is not one particular to Husserl but, on the contrary, a failure of the very project of metaphysics itself. The value in the approach I have taken, I believe, consists in the fact that it allows one to bring to light the original sense of the philosophical and ethical aporias and problems that are these days so easily and readily repeated whenever ‘metaphysics’ is talked about. To me, it is no accident that the sharpest accounts of the problems associated with ‘metaphysics’ are to be found in Heidegger, Derrida and Levinas – all meticulous and deep students of Husserl.

However, given its motivations – which I think are deeply embedded in the human desire to establish stability and resolve anxiety – I don’t think that it is in any way easy to ‘overcome’ ‘metaphysics’ – at least as a psychological affinity, if not an explicit commitment to a philosophical system. I agree with Derrida² when he says in *Writing and Difference*, “The step ‘outside philosophy’ is much more difficult to conceive than is generally imagined by those who think they made it long ago with cavalier ease, and who in general are swallowed up in metaphysics in the entire body of discourse which they claim to have disengaged from”. This is what is also valuable about the study of Husserl, because it is possible to identify deep impulses within Husserl’s philosophizing that are very much counter to metaphysical motives – and I think that this unresolved and deep dissonance at the heart of phenomenology is what gives it its compelling drama, and in which its most valuable lessons for the possibilities for contemporary philosophy can be learned. This is what I try to bring out in my book – outlining the ways in which Husserl’s phenomenology is not properly summarized as simply yet more metaphysics. Ludwig Landgrebe, in his article ‘Husserl’s Departure from Cartesianism’³, points out that it is precisely the radicality with which Husserl pursues the project of metaphysics that leads him to abandon it as a ‘dream’ which is now ‘over’. Landgrebe claims that the shipwreck of metaphysics actually occurs within Husserl’s lectures on First Philosophy, during which the Cartesianism of the early phenomenology is gradually abandoned. I try to outline what phenomenology becomes once it takes its leave from the Cartesian project.

CR: Before we move on, I am aware that you also have extensive experience as a manager working in commercial organizations. Can you briefly outline your background in that respect?

1 Byers, D. (2003) *Intentionality and Transcendence: Closure and Openness in Husserl’s Phenomenology*. University of Wisconsin Press.

2 Derrida, J. (1967/2001) ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass. London: Routledge, 359.

3 Landgrebe, L. (1970) ‘Husserl’s Departure from Cartesianism’, in R.O. Elveton (ed.) *The Phenomenology of Husserl: Selected Critical Readings*, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 259-306.

DB: My background in management is somewhat varied. My first introduction to management issues came during the three years that I worked as an Industry Policy Analyst for the Australian Manufacturing Council – an arm of the Federal Department of Industry during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The main focus of work there was the development of sectoral industry policy to assist companies restructure in the face of the opening up of the Australian economy to the forces of global competition. From there I worked for what was then BHP Iron Ore, assisting in implementing productivity improvement initiatives in the main mine. That was followed by a short stint in a small consulting group, putting cellular work groups into older command-and-control settings.

My current role is as Organization Development Manager for AstraZeneca Australia. Fortunately for me, this role requires provision of organization development in what I see as the proper sense of the term. So, along with the usual OD accountabilities of management and leadership development, succession planning and talent management, performance management and ‘culture’, I also have responsibility for organizational structure, some aspects of strategic planning, and various other ad-hoc transformation initiatives. We sum up the principle accountability of the role as being to ensure that the organization identifies and acquires the capabilities required in order for the company to achieve its long-term objectives.

CR: In terms of this unusual juxtaposition of experience and the possibility of bringing philosophy to bear on management, a significant issue is that professional managers and professional philosophers belong to quite different language communities. Thus, if one were to work in a commercial organization and use a specialist language of philosophy, one would expect that this would not be taken on its own terms. Reactions could range from bemusement or confusion to accusations of aloofness and being out of touch with the ‘real world’. In this sense it seems to me that to bring philosophy to bear on management is not about discussing arcane debates and theoretical micro-points as might be done by philosophers in the academy, but rather establishing a way of thinking that can somehow connect with the practice of managing. As a person who has lived in the worlds of both the professional philosopher and the professional manager, what are your thoughts and experience in relation to how philosophy can inform the practice of management?

DB: For me this is a very important and difficult question to answer, for the reasons you articulate in your question. It is important to answer, for me, for not only do I believe that philosophy has a great deal to bring to organizations as they try and understand themselves, but because I myself do not want to fragment into two parts that become alienated and unreconciled with each other. Also, I agree very much with your point about language. I suppose this is why I have never tried to apply ideas from philosophy in any direct way to an organization.

CR: But of course, this does not mean that you have not done so in an indirect way. In terms of your own commercial work in human resources and organizational development, perhaps a key issue as it relates to your own philosophical position, is the role, deliberate or otherwise, that organizations take in respect to employee identity and personhood – for example through leadership or culture change programs that seek to

somehow modify a person's relationship both with themselves and with the organization.

DB: I started this type of work without much knowledge and with no formal training in management theory, and that's been a great strength in many respects, because all I had to go on was the concrete situation at hand in all its fuzziness, ambiguity and perspectival multivocality. Without any 'theory' to structure in advance what I was seeing, I had no alternative but to attend to the details at hand and to try to understand each situation 'from within'. This approach has helped me to come to see the importance of the particularities of each situation, and encouraged me to develop solutions or interventions that arise from within the local setting, rather than applying pre-formed solutions based on more or less spurious 'principles'. This has helped to make implementation more effective.

I suppose that the absence of 'management theory' actually created an opportunity for more strictly philosophical ideas to bear upon my work. Let me illustrate this a little by talking about my approach to leadership development.

One of my accountabilities in my current role is the development of leadership capability, specifically in our senior management group. In undertaking this task, I approached, and was approached by, a wide range of external providers of leadership development processes. What I became aware of was that quite a bit of what was being offered to organizations under the heading of 'leadership development' was, to my way of thinking, at the very limit of moral acceptability: what was sometimes being proposed was the adoption of a technology whose real mechanism of operation was the colonization of a person's interiority – a technology whose deployment could only take place through an act of violence.

The kind of narrative that is sometimes in play here assumes that what a person is can be changed by an autonomous act of willing allegiance; and what underlies this is the idea that it is appropriate within an organizational setting to offer people a model of self- and identity-formation without any question. There is often no sense in these discussions that what we confront here is the potential transgression of the boundary between the public and the private, the exterior and the interior; there is often no discussion of the point at which a person represents a limit to these potentially colonizing procedures.

CR: Of course in practice it's not only that this is acceptable, but for many organizations, such changes are seen as desirable or even imperative – as if organizations assume an apparently moral responsibility for making people 'better'.

DB: I don't think that this is a straightforward or simple issue; I don't think that it is obvious at which point in this procedure of 'encouraged identification' a prohibition is to be placed. Let me put my reason for this difficulty in the following way.

To a certain extent, the organizational discourse that we are speaking about here can – under certain strict conditions – be a positive one, continuous with the idea that human life involves a struggle in order to become what one truly ought to be, the idea that it is possible for people to remake themselves continuously according to some kind of ideal

of proper human being, such that in coming to conform to this ideal, the human being acquires the capabilities and powers required in order to live a genuinely good life. This is not a new idea at all; we see it at least as early as Plato, and it is also at the heart of Kant's view of morality. To the extent that organizational programs are continuous with such a project then it is possible that they have some merit.

However, the 'strict conditions' that I referred to above are, I think, based on considerations of justice – in particular, the conditions which define the 'just organization'. This is a difficult issue to define, and we don't have time to give it even the beginnings of a fair treatment here. All I can say here is that the way in which organizations make use of the idea of self-creation through acts of ongoing identification poses serious problems. I find it alarming that there is so little reflection within organizations and the 'expert' external providers of these technologies upon the ethical traditions involved, and the room that exists for the obliteration of any public-private distinction and the violation of the sacred interiority of individuals. I think that, no matter how problematic the public-private distinction is, it is nonetheless very important to keep in mind here, because it points to the ethical need to respect the hiddenness in which the absolutely incalculable dignity of the human being consists.

Although I'm not a behaviourist of any description at all, the way that I proceed professionally in the area of leadership development is actually to adopt a minimally behavioural position as the most transparent way of meeting the requirements of the organization on the one hand, and respecting the dignity and interiority of the individuals involved on the other. My somewhat pragmatic approach is best described by saying, to start with, that in organizations, it is peoples' behaviour that actually does the work – whether it be the behaviour which exercises its effect in the sheer transformation of material, or whether it is the behaviour that exercises its effect in its galvanizing of the energy and talent of others – leadership, in other words.

So, in terms the task of leadership development, my approach is to try to make the leadership behaviour expectations as explicit and thoroughly 'superficial' as possible. I try to get the organization to think clearly about exactly what kind of behaviours it requires – given the particularities of its business, its market, its competitors, its strategy – in order to achieve the performance outcomes, and the identity aspiration that it has set itself. This needs to result in a clear statement of required behaviours that is accessible without being trite or simplistic.

The organization does not lose itself in trying to think through – so as to manipulate – the depths of what it means to be a person – rather, a significant component of the work that the organization has to do in order to develop the capacities of its leaders is to get clear about what it requires; it is not about trying to change people. Leadership development comes in to play by way of helping people to understand, in the public sphere, what kind of behaviours they are manifesting in public and then they themselves can make choices about their involvement in the organization. People face a question: do I want to alter my behaviour, or do I want to leave? At the extreme, the organization might take its prerogative to force people out. But that is preferable, I believe, than trying to entice, inveigle, or manipulate changes in people's basic style or identity. By making its expectations explicit an organization is able to manage whilst still respecting

the privacy of the person. For me, this is what leadership development really amounts to – I totally reject those quasi therapeutic, ‘inward journey’ types of approaches to leadership development.

CR: In one sense you have highlighted the problems with a type of explicit organizational attempt at invasion of the self, but on the other hand people’s participation in an organization will affect them as a person irrespective of that which is done intentionally by an organization. The approach you described suggests that there shouldn’t be an intent to meddle in the private domain, but the question still is about what happens to people irrespective of such an intent, and then, whether an organization has any responsibility in that regard.

DB: Indeed, all I’ve talked about is being explicit about behaviours. What that hasn’t raised is, to put it crudely, whether particular behaviours might be deemed good or bad. Two things are important for me here. One is that all of the movements within an organization ought to be towards the realization principles such as explicitization, transparency, and the rule of law. To this we must also add: a statement of purpose, meaning, and value – and I believe that all of these must point to a desire on the part of the organization to recognize the uniqueness of the individual, through calling forth a creative contribution from each person, and providing each person with the space and structure in which to grow. Let me just note here that the provision of this space and structure is not the same as the promotion of a culture of mere congeniality or individualized subjectivism; on the contrary, an organization requires that this creativity and personal growth take place within the setting of the community or organism that an organization is. These principles lay out the basic conditions for the just organization – or in other words, the conditions under which the integrity of the individuals who work within it is respected.

Historically, those principles were intended precisely to preserve the incalculable and unrepresentable interiority of the individual, who was seen as answerable only to God in terms of who they were and what they did; how was this fundamentally constitutive relation to be respected? Through the establishment of a state or civil order based on these basic principles. So I think that a commitment to these principles – explicitization, transparency, and the rule of law – are very pertinent to the construction of the just organization. After that, there is the question of how practical reason is to be exercised within the organization – that is, a form of reason that holds for all members of the organization, and which identifies real possibilities for action. And all this has to be worked out within a recognition of the fact that it is not always clear how to define the boundaries of the organization.

To get back to the issue of leadership again, I think that explicitization is merely a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for justice here, because, in simply requiring that an organization make its expectations explicit, there is still the question of the ethical status of the expectations or directives that are being made explicit – and all kinds of behaviours can be made explicit. That is why I think that the second question is about what is it that characterizes a ‘just organization’. So, I think that you need to have an organization that is engaged in an ongoing reflection about the conditions of just organization and the extent to which it approximates those conditions and the action that

is taken when it sees that it identifies gaps between actual practice and the – always abstract – conditions for just organization; this about striving to be conscious – as an organization.

Of course I would never support the idea that you can be completely explicit or that an organization might actualize the pure principles of just organization; it's more about whether an organization is concerned about just organization and then what kind of dialogue and self interrogation within the organization is instigated and sustained with regard to justice, and the way the members of the organization might describe the organization in relation to that and how much room an organization gives itself and its members to be prepared to articulate a distance between that ideal and where it is today.

CR: What you are saying here suggests a relationship between ethics and critique – about questioning that which might be regarded as normal. This might regard ethics in relation to a capacity for reflective auto-critique.

DB: The funny thing about this is that many people criticize organizations that try too hard to get people to identify with them. They view this as an overtly appropriative movement, but the irony is that it is only when people do identify with an organization that they might take it seriously enough to engage in the sort of critique that you allude to.

CR: Of course there is also critique from the outside. If you think, for example of the recent issues at the National Australia Bank here in Australia. The public outing of the 'rogue trading' has led to significant organizational changes at the most senior levels and, as reported in the press, a concern for managing the culture of the organization so as not to enable such events to re-occur.

DB: Yes, but I think that it is important to see what happens in the future and whether they continue to engage in such discussions after the crisis is over. What I'm talking about is not an issue of 'problem solving' but rather an ongoing practice that accepts the perpetual anxiety of being an ethical entity. If you don't like that anxiety you might try to solve the ethical problem by trying to solve the anxiety problem. One way might be to follow Friedmanian suggestions and not worry about it at all, focusing solely on a stating a clear and apparently unambiguous decision principle such as the pursuit of shareholders interest in the simple form of profit maximization alone. This suggests that all ethical problems boil down to a problem to be subjected to a single decision procedure – in effect, the application of a kind of calculative algorithm which generates an answer and makes all indeterminacy and multivocity just go away. But I think that this is just wrong – in the name of honouring an ethical principle, it is really a strategy for refusing to take up an ethical form of life.

CR: Of course, it is also possible (if not common) that the pursuit of profit and performativity is a driving force in contemporary public corporations irrespective of the type of ethical justifications associated with Friedman. For some this might yield a simplistic conclusion that capitalist organization is inherently in opposition to ethics. To this extent, how would you characterize the relationship between organization based on

profit maximization and the ethics you describe? Is this necessarily, or even commonly, an antagonistic relationship?

DB: I think the response to this depends on one's fundamental position regarding the very meaning of ethics. It seems to me that to rule out a priori the possibility of ethical forms of life from certain situations just in terms of the structure of that situation – in this case, the location of an organization within a capitalist order – is to subsume ethics under the application of generalizations or general principles, because the structure of any situation is a function of a certain set of general principles that order and maybe characterize that situation.

Very briefly, I think that there are two kinds of problems with this. First, it is not clear anymore where one is to turn to find principles of this kind. The discourse of meta-ethics, through which such principles are usually generated, is highly problematic: the inclusiveness which must characterize such principles comes at the cost of meaningful or genuinely informative content which would be able to guide action in any clear way. And this characteristic is borne out by the fact that such principles, even where they are offered, come with their instructions for exemption. Even a Kantian approach confronts this problem, because purity of will can never be claimed with certainty, and because, given the infinite particularity of the situations from which a maxim is generated, the range of maxims subjected to universalisation is itself infinite; in principle, there is nothing to stop the generation of a different maxim for each and every different situation. This proliferation is an effective constraint on the extension of the maxim over any other than the actual situation out of which it is generated. Second, I think that the very picture of ethics as the application and following of rules that lies at the base of this view amounts to nothing less than a fundamental abrogation of an ethical form of life. In this I follow the road opened up by Levinas and Derrida (despite their differences) in their attempt to find a new possibility for ethics after the exhaustion of metaphysics. In very crude and simplistic terms, the view here is that ethics as the application of principles – utilitarianism is a classic example of this – is the reduction of genuinely ethical decision to the operation of a calculus which simply outlines in advance the answer to the question, 'what should I do in this situation?' By contrast, ethical decision takes up the burden of both the individual in their unrepeatable particularity as the one who decides, and the situation in its unrepeatable particularity – and hence its resistance to structure according to generalization.

These two reasons give an outline as to why I reject the claim that ethical life is a priori ruled out by the structure of certain situations. As an aside I simply add that despite the lack of comfort provided by the post-metaphysical view developed by Levinas and Derrida, their account opens up the possibility – indeed, the utter unavoidability – of the ethical situatedness of every human being, regardless of the situation in which they find themselves. In short, the ethical significance of day by day life within capitalist organizations can not be avoided – but also the possibility of 'salvation' is also at hand for every person within such an organization, even if it means the requirement to leave it. To me the ethical issue here is that of the way in which the individuals in an organization confront the requirement to 'maximize' profit, even, or indeed especially, in cases when such a confrontation is highly problematic and when the stakes are high. It is false to present 'profit maximization' as an undifferentiated determinant of organization decision, structure or behaviour. On the contrary, the principle requires

interpretation – in other words, organizations spend a lot of time developing strategy. And the process of strategy determination is as much about the creation of options as it is about making profit-maximizing decisions. Strategy is not only about organizational performance commitments – it is also about organization identity, and under the heading of identity organizations consider and make choices about the interior quality of the entity that it is striving to become. Part of the struggle that is experienced within organizations lies precisely in the attempt to bring ethical constraints to bear.

CR: So, in terms of this struggle, ethics might require a form of anxiety and doubt that does not necessarily result in the comfortable ‘sleep of the just’.

DB: Indeed; this is what I see as the problem with organizational cultures’ of ‘machismo’. They tend to marginalize doubt because doubt is seen not to be strong. An organization I used to work for had a statement of its core values and one of them was ‘bias for action’. It was as if they were promoting a bias against thinking – seeing managers in the form of some type of ‘action hero’ where virtue is seen in acting rather than acting rightly, even in situations where not acting might be the right thing to do.

CR: So, in relation to your comments on Levinas and Derrida, does that mean ethics starts with an end to certainty? That a lack of solid ethical ground might enable the dialogues that don’t strive to end-of-discussion solutions?

DB: It might keep you alive if you think about it! One problem with definiteness is that you actually never have it – you only ever possess it in the form of a wish, and those who mistake wish for reality are moving down the path of madness, closing themselves off from the world and from others. This is one of the great things about the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy can be read as a to and fro argument between those who think that they have taken the search for clarity a step further thereby producing a progression in knowledge, and those who generate critique and point out the ways in which this claim has not actually been made good. That’s the way that philosophy seems to move, in a process of putative gain, loss, putative gain, loss and so on. So you might then ask ‘what is philosophy?’, in one sense it seems to be the form of life that can live within this eternally deferred, anxious state. In a way that might mark philosophers out as somewhat peculiar psyches, this loss actually becomes a gain.

When it comes to organizations, to me it’s about how you can create the opportunity for an organization to remain conscious. In terms of this, what you lose when you gain certainty is nothing less than life itself, because once you have certain ground then the psychological sense of that is similar to the sense of a battle having been won or a great problem solved; it would then be pathological to continue to ruminate about that which was already done. So, psychologically, one leaves it behind and, having departed from the captured ground of certain foundations, begins to move on to other problems. The psychological shape is one of seeing things as having been ‘done’, ‘won’, finished and then forgotten. This is a difficult way to maintain an ethical sense.

If you are in an organization, it’s not just the organization’s future as a whole that is at stake – most people have very little direct impact on that. But for me as an individual, my soul is at stake in the way that I make decisions and conduct myself in the

organization, and in the way in which by identifying with an organization I come to take on its frameworks and its view of the world and, ultimately its view of what would count as evidence for something. I come to bear the marks of the organization within what I myself become – my life in the organization leaves its marks on me in ways that are not always obvious. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre⁴ says that bad faith will first decide what counts as evidence. That thought is so powerful, because one can talk about how open one is to change and dialogue, but one is only as open as one's notion of what could count as evidence for change or for commitment. Given that there's no evidence for what evidence actually is, in the end there's only ever a decision about the evidence of what could count as evidence. You can come to have your own view of what could count or be recognized as evidence corrupted by the extent to which you assume the identity of the organization – its frameworks for assessment and evaluation. That's why I feel that my own soul is at stake in working in an organization and that's why it's important to me to think about what I do as a manager in terms of keeping the organization ethically alive. Of course, and this brings us back to leadership, for me, it's about being open to possibilities for the future and open to uncertainty. It's also about being open to other people's contribution. In some respects organizations can be all about control of disorder but there needs to be a way of managing that does not allow the profusion of possible contributions to fragment and spin the organization out of its structural orientation.

CR: Coming back to the idea of self-reflection and critique, many people do this from a safe distance. Academic critique can be like this for example, as well as critiques that one encounters in the press. This is important in terms of the location of organizations in society more generally. But this is an interesting relation in terms of public-private distinction – so far our discussion has focused on the public only in organizational terms, but of course the public sphere of the organization is not just amongst those who work there. At least academically, this critique can often be largely negative and condemnatory.

DB: It is important, I think, that ethics in relation to organizations is subject to debate both within those organizations and more generally in the societies in which those organizations are located. The danger, however, is that such discussions can easily become disengaged and trite. I've always thought that much of what passes for ethical reflection on organizations by people not directly involved or affected by them can be incredibly shallow from an ethical perspective. Such hackneyed discussion is usually in the service of fairly definite and fairly simplistic quasi-political and easy ethical stances. So, someone might try to reduce a complex organization to a summary in a simplistic slogan such as 'people before profits', or they might claim that Organization X is a nasty organization because it makes petrol and that leads to pollution. Some even seek to extend class warfare into the early twenty-first century and just say that commercial organizations are 'bad' per se because they are run by a managerial class. Such discussions appear very much pre-fabricated and I don't find them to be in any respect illuminative; in fact, they distort and conceal the more fundamental and intractable

4 Sartre, J.-P. (1956/2003) *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. J. E. Barnes. London: Routledge.

ethical dimensions of organizations. It is too rare, in my view, to see any genuinely ethical reflection upon the being and the operation of organizations.

CR: Is this then what philosophy might be able to offer management?

DB: I think it's what philosophy can offer society, because these are the discussions that I think need to happen along the borders of organizations so that they can stay alive; discussions that go beyond the simplistic moralizing I was just referring to. But most of the time there is little discussion about what it would mean for an organization to be sensitive to the ethical significance of its activity. Taking up the idea that one becomes who one is through time and through action, through the life that one leads, you might think that this gives organizations their ethical power. Organizations cannot help but be involved in the domain of the ethical, because the people within them can't help bearing the organization's marks upon them.

This is not about proposing an ethics of rules – the trouble with this is that organizations are all about performativity, and that requires decision and action in the setting of the particular, a setting requiring interpretation – and hence personal accountability for those decisions and actions. And this interpretative space inevitably means that decisions and actions are always contestable – from many perspectives, including the ethical. I'm thinking here of Derrida's article 'Violence and Metaphysics'⁵ where he does a gentle yet deep criticism of Levinas. Derrida develops the point that although Levinas talks about violence, even within Levinas' own position what we see is the inevitability of violence in relationships. So, for me, the question is about being explicit about this and trying to bring the discourse of justice upon that inevitability.

CR: But this discourse of justice is not commonplace in organizations or in business ethics where the focus is more commonly on ethics and morality, rules and practice and so forth.

DB: I think that the placement of ethical discussions in organizations is still largely individualistic – we still haven't got beyond an individualistic sense of personal choice; it is as though we haven't moved on from a certain type of 19th century Protestantism. Another way of looking at this is that irrespective of an individual's intention, they grow and become in the world and in a set of structures that is beyond their capacity to represent, know or understand.

It is a myth to believe that individuals within organizations – or anywhere else – function in any fundamental way as rational free choosers. Following codes, and consciously exercising individual discretion occurs, but only against a background and within a milieu of influences and prejudgments that not only cannot be fully conceptualized, but which also bear the marks of a-rationality. So, I think it's important to see an organization in terms of what sort of a person one might become by engaging with that, and undertaking various acts of identification with it. In asking such a

5 Derrida, J. (1967/2001) 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass. London: Routledge.

question, what might be discussed in answering it might be gathered under the heading of ‘justice’.

As I was saying earlier, I have always been concerned about a culture which values managers who are high drive, outcome oriented, fast paced and quick to make judgments. Because, despite the need for speed, this is a mentality that is all about doing. I’ve seen this style emerge and crystallize in a rush to judgment about individuals, but I’ve also seen such behaviour create a shared anxiety and concern amongst others – including amongst other managers.

This is disturbing because quick assessments are about a leap towards definition of people on the basis on narrow perspectives or limited numbers of events. Such a foreclosure on the infinity of a person is what I am anxious about, and without putting in such terms, I think many others are too. What we are dealing with is the possibility for an injustice against individuals being perpetrated in the name of the organization’s performativity.

For me, it is the ability for people in an organization to discuss such issues that amount to an attempt to retain the value of justice; this is all about resisting, for example, the urge to solidify quick judgments into facts and thereby make things more manageable. As I see it, maintaining this resistance is the maintenance of a moral dimension to an organization. The unease that I have seen people display in the presence of this resistance is an unease about the eradication of the conditionality of judgments – a need to be careful in that a judgment is an act of definition that has a kind of endurance. The challenge is to keep open a space within organizations where talk about such things can occur – this is the poverty of a narrowly performative perspective on culture because it never seems to raise such issues.

CR: Of course we can’t imagine an organization where nothing ‘wrong’ ever happens, so, do you see the ethical issue as being the ability of an organization to engage in the sort of discussions you are exemplifying?

DB: There’s no way that programmatic or explicit structure can deal with this; I think it’s more about people’s ongoing engagement in relationships of trust, and that in turn requires the exercise of courage – a willingness to try to test alternatives and bring up issues and concerns in a way that preserves the integrity of the people involved.

This is about the mundane activities in the organization and the sensibilities that are brought to everyday issues. This is perhaps an organizational style that enables us to conceive of an organization as some sort of unified whole. This might be some post-metaphysical notion of organization – identity is not something just to be articulated, but ought to be thought more and an indeterminate flux, with the sort of statements and boundaries assumed in our discussion being merely provisional and pragmatically justified attempts to ensure a coalescence of ‘forces’ in the interest of achieving certain contingent and limited outcomes and purposes. I think that the fundamental experience that one has of an organization is one of flux and vagueness which we struggle to bring to degrees of confluence aimed at achieving certain objectives. In thinking about what the term organization names, one way of thinking about it is that it names the

undertakings intended to achieve coalescence. So in relation to what we've been talking about in terms of a just organization, organizations cannot make people support an organization or support a plan for ethics with directives, but they might be able to create a broad appeal for people to engage in ethical dialogues – to do so is not just a vague notion but rather something that is extremely palpable for people.

CR: I agree that such an ethics is palpable, but perhaps for managers, what is equally, if not more, palpable, is the ongoing pressure for financial performance under the constrictures of contemporary shareholder capitalism. When 'the going gets tough' what do you think might happen to the ethical dialogues you describe? Do they get forgotten, or are they more salient?

DB: This is simply the test that confronts every site of ethical decision. It threatens individuals as much as it threatens corporations. Of course there is no guarantee that an organization will remain true to its ethical responsibilities when placed under pressure to compromise. But neither is there such a guarantee in the case of individuals. If this was not the case it would be difficult to imagine why an ethical discourse might be required in the first place. An ethics that is rendered as a means through which to reinforce and comfort those who already believe that they have ethical answers (for themselves and others) prior to confronting the particularities of the situations they are in is dangerously close to a kind of sanctimonious moralizing. This is not the stuff of ethics as I understand it.

In the case of organizations, I think that what is decisive is the extent to which it – via the people who lead it – are prepared to recognize and confront the deep meaning of the enterprise that they are engaged in. To me this means understanding and taking responsibility for the destiny of the organization – not only in terms of what it is set up to deliver, but more importantly in terms of the ongoing constitution of its identity. Do the people who lead the organization have a vision of what they desire that identity to become? Do they accept responsibility for their (extremely significant) role in shaping it? Do they know what the current identity of the organization that they lead actually is, and where its inherent momentum is taking it? How do they preserve the space of 'care' for that identity? To me, the answers to questions such as these will show what choices emerge when, as you put it, 'the going gets tough'. Nothing is forced here. It is all to do with choice and, before that, imagination and courage.

CR: With those questions, perhaps we should close.

the authors

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