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# **TEACHING ETHICS IN ORGANISATIONAL BEHAVIOUR: A HUMEAN VIEWPOINT**

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## ABSTRACT

*Problem Statement:* Concepts of ethics have rarely been easy to teach in the organisational behaviour curriculum. The philosophical bases of ethics are often abstract and prone to multiple interpretations and dilemmas. The changing global environment of organisations adds complexity to the interacting values that people bring into the workplace. To redress the situation, this article represents the stance of David Hume on human morality and proposes an original nexus of his concepts for application in the teaching and learning of ethics in the field of organisational behaviour.

*Method:* Based on the literature, we develop a conceptual model from a thread drawn between Hume's influence on the Scottish Enlightenment and accordingly the current complex business environment which was fostered in part by the economic models espoused by his Enlightenment associates. The concepts are presented as a matrix and relevant examples are explained in this context.

*Results:* Pointing out the challenge of the global rifts in organisational morality, we relate the fable of the traveller from Hume's writings and make the point that the Humean nexus, now distilled from the elaborate reasoning of Hume, provides educators and managers alike with a helpful centre of gravity around which to develop analyses of decisions and actions in order to gain moral perspective that transcends time and place.

*Conclusions:* Business ethics lessons have sometimes been abstract and emotive in organisational behaviour education but the empirical concepts of Hume in this new form have the potential to be useful and agreeable for many.

## KEYWORDS

Hume; morality; organisational; ethics; education; nexus; behaviour

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As his life drew nearer to the end, the philosopher, David Hume, declared one of his later works, a treatise on human morality, to be his most important (Hume, 1990; Norton, 1993; Back-

haus, 2009); which is a little known fact, but for those who noticed and wondered about his remarkable sentiment of the importance of understanding from an ethical perspective, a tantalising line of enquiry has opened up. Think of Hume's vast intellectual contribution and the scope of human endeavour to which he turned his renowned empirical mind (Hume, 1754; Hume, 1758; Hume, 1875; Hume & Hendel, 1953). For him to ultimately point back at the understanding of human morality as the most significant thing is poignant, indeed, and should have been generative of further thought and development. But there has been little attention given to Hume in business ethics education since his passing. This is remarkable because of the impact of the Scottish Enlightenment on economic thinking then and since (Sally, 1999; Hooker, 2004; Pauchant, 2009; Stumpf, Holt, Crittenden & Davis, 2012). Hume was a big contributor to the Enlightenment; a mentor and colleague of Adam Smith, for example; but it is Smith's underpinning work that, to this day, receives on balance more recognition (a lot for a philosopher, at least, in the business world) as a legacy of that time.

There is much to learn from revisiting Hume's point of view as his heritage is strongly aligned with commerce via the Enlightenment with its chronological and strategic connections to the Industrial Revolution. Thinkers like MacIntyre (1985) have lamented the general failure of key Enlightenment ideas to make the promised enhancements of ethical understanding in modern commercial society (Korkut, 2012). This paper, therefore, aims to summarise Hume's own summary of human morality and contextualise this into modern organisational behaviour and ethics education. Through literature review and an original conceptualisation of Humean morality in matrix form with related analysis, the relatively pure and pragmatic construction of ethics that Hume conceived is explained. First there is a consideration of teaching organisational ethics, then a review of Hume's thinking about human morality, including a nexus of factors from his favourite treatise, and this is aligned with a future perspective on the teaching of organisational ethics.

## **2. DO WE TEACH ETHICS; OR DO ETHICS TEACH US?**

Now, these are some good questions for philosophers and educational administrators. First, do teachers ever actually teach ethics? Or is the subject matter itself, primed with the student's choice to learn, that is most instructional? Of course, a transmission-only view of education is outmoded. A bit of both teaching and learning is obviously happening multi-dimensionally in any educational setting (Caron, Berner & Chabot, 2012). We might consider additionally whether

the learners' and teacher's personalities are so imbued by the values stemming from birth rights and socialisation that we can expect exponential resistance to learning. Once we have our ethical foundations in life, like our basic personalities, this could be argued to hardly ever change. What impact does ethics education have in such a crystallised situation? For instance, what can personal learning tools such as the Enneagram teach us (Kale & Shrivastava, 2003)? What additional light is offered to personality and self-insight? These questions can extend to a whole organisation; the founders and the subsequent critical events and strong leadership all contribute to a broad ethical tone that stays embedded for long periods, perhaps, indefinitely (Dean, Beggs & Fornaciari, 2007). Who can confidently claim that a course in business ethics delivered for members of an organisation is guaranteed to successfully change the organisation's ethical foundations? In tertiary education, with its voluntary enrolment and fragmented offering of courses, the dissemination of business ethics education is further dampened by the fact that, perhaps, one or two people from any single organisation are in the face to face or online classrooms in any given term. They return to their organisations possibly (but not certainly) changed by their learning, and then confront all the cultural and psychological resistances of co-workers who have not had the same opportunity to learn any new points of view about ethics. The critical mass is small to start with and may never reach the momentum required to ensure a good business ethics understanding infiltrates into the places it is most needed (Saat, Porter & Woodbine, 2010).

Consider the notion just mentioned of 'good' business ethics. This is a judgement of social value, perhaps, an aesthetic appeal. There is inherent value in the beauty, harmony and balance of the concept. But this value is quite different to the equally important utility of the same notion. Whether it is an object or an idea, any item has a combination of usefulness and aesthetics at its core. We will return to this issue as we delve further into Hume's ethics in the next section.

For now, the question concerns the role of ethics in the teaching of organisational behaviour. Lévinas (Peperzak & Lévinas, 1993; Wirzba, 1995) arrives at a view that ethics itself is a sort of resistance emerging from the other which is an integral part of the education exchange. In a business ethics classroom (any other class for that matter too), the teacher as an 'other' does have to present a point of view and it becomes an ethical position in that context. Such perspective may certainly be ignored or misinterpreted by most of the 'others' in the classroom but some will dutifully take what is presented and reprocess it in such a way that something helpful appears to be learned. It is essentially dialogue between oneself and the 'other' in reciprocal exchanges that comprise the teaching and learning relationship, therefore, a relational and social view of ethics can be seen to be the essence of education (Creed, Zutshi & Ross, 2009; Waddock, 2010). Aside from a strictly philosophical and theoretical approach, can the teaching of ethics be anything but

dialogical between self- teaching and self-learning?

In addition to a number of philosophers providing their perspective on this matter (Husserl, 1960; Brandt, 1972; Hegel, Miller & Findlay, 1977; Peperzak&Lévinas, 1993), in the organisational behaviour literature, other analyses have been made of the duality of self and selflessness in business ethics(Friedman, 1962; Rand &Branden, 1964; Smith, 1993;Zutshi, Creed &Sohal, 2009; Zutshi, Creed, Sohal& Wood, 2012). It is timely to look at Hume's perspective on this issue. As it happens, Hume advocates for an integrated view of morality in a compelling nexus of aesthetics and utility in the context of both self and the other.

### 3. HUME'S NEXUS OF MORALITY

David Hume was influential during foundational moments of the Western Industrial Revolution as its effects spread around the world (Sally, 1999). As an agnostic thinking and writing in a period where such a position could have been detrimental to his prosperity and livelihood, but at the same time, when independent thinking was on the rise, it is notable that Hume ultimately finds a human centre in his philosophy. It is warming that he arrives empirically at the identification of universal moral factors that stand up to changing times and circumstances. It is certainly refreshing to find that the core of the Humean morality is solidly founded in pragmatic utility and that it also incorporates the aesthetics of humanity; two areas that should feature equally in sound business ethics (Waddock, 2010).

There is a fable at the end of Hume's *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding & Concerning the Principles of Morals* which he presents as a dialogue (Hume et al, 1991). Not unlike the Arabian stories of Sindbad and other stories from antiquity, it describes a traveller who tells a story of his journeys to a strange and distant place. In this land the traveller discovers individuals and a society that he finds compelling, worthy of praise, and filled with thoughts and deeds of great virtue. But the society also generates tensions for him when he notices behaviours and rituals that he finds abhorrent. Vicious acts and impulses leading to murder that go unpunished, in fact, seem mostly accepted by this strange society. On the whole, however, great works of art and rich intellectual pursuits are prevalent, along with magnificent achievements in architecture. While the traveller spends some time in this land and enjoys its virtues immensely, he ultimately becomes so unsettled with the dark side of it that he feels compelled to leave and return home; hence being in a position to relate the fable as he does.

Hume ultimately reveals that the strange land is intended to equate with Ancient Greece, a place highly revered and respected amongst modern scholars. We are invited to consider how we can rationally laud such a society when we clearly revile against the uncomfortable things the society accepted as part of its moral fabric. The point is that moral standards change with time and circumstance. Ethics therefore has to be explainable in a way that caters for the changing situations otherwise it really cannot be taught at all. Likewise, the premises on which ethics is based must be open to scrutiny, criticism and change or proponents of ethics for the current times risk attitudes and behaviours which are not dissimilar from those of the armchair philosophers and anthropologists who operated in the not-so-distant past.

A functional and relevant ethical framework must cater to the vast differences in standards that human beings exhibit. Such a framework needs to be grounded in reality rather than reliant on quick or easy explanations and/or explanatory models. For Hume it is too relativistic to just accept the present social consensus of morality. However, and still applied today, business ethics often becomes just that. Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of emotivism describes this situation in modern society (MacIntyre, 1985). Emotivism, being the acceptance of the general social consensus as the appropriate moral standard, is a helpful starting point for lawmakers but is not a full critical analysis of the major ethical bases of human actions (Wishloff, 2005). Hume's fable of the traveller neatly illustrates the shortfall of emotivism. The things in a society that are either illegal or highly distasteful must certainly be avoided if one is to function in that society, but once we step into another, separate social setting, we will confront a different set of standards. Emotivism is observed among global business executives as they encounter widely different social standards in countries around the world. The dilemmas are apparent when a US company, for example, is operating in another country where child labour is routinely used. It has been and still is common for local customs concerning children to go completely unnoticed (Burra & Qureshi, 1990; Ennew, 1990).

Business executives may be observing what they know of the laws in a country where they are operating, but ignoring the moral consensus of the country concerned, or even their home country (Zutshi, Creed & Sohal, 2009; Donleavy, 2012). Such practices can lead to the uncomfortable situation (and sometimes share price driven panic) of claiming moral high ground at one turn and participating in moral digressions at another. There are many well documented moral dilemmas observed in global business operations because the social environment varies so considerably. Recently, discussion has arisen around commonly accepted business myths in the international business environment. To illustrate, Tipton (2008) indicates the critical issues of cultural misrepresentation in commonly perpetuated stories which are not based in fact. Over-

simplification or falsification of facts as culturally-informed practice becomes a serious ethical issue in international business, especially when the emphasis should be on having appropriate concepts that reflect local situations and apply well to business at any level.

Any model of ethics has to be able to endure the transition to different worlds and do so pragmatically for the purpose of a better understanding of ethics in organisational behaviour. David Hume's approach consciously and systematically arrives at such a position, a nexus summarised in Table 1, and is explained in the subsequent sections.

**Table 1.** The Humean moral nexus

<i>Decision to act in a certain way</i>	<i>Useful for</i>	<i>Agreeable for</i>
<b>Self</b>	<i>Yes or No? Why?</i>	<i>Yes or No? Why?</i>
<b>Others</b>	<i>Yes or No? Why?</i>	<i>Yes or No? Why?</i>

Table 1 is a concise representation of the factors of morality analysed in detail in Hume et al (1991). A nexus of decision factors converges in any situation and should be considered to identify moral absolutes or, more commonly, moral dilemmas. By using positive or negative responses in each quadrant and ensuring one explores why, the dilemmas can be considered with a simple and clear focus upon the salient factors of analysis. In essence, Hume says for any decision before us it is necessary to think first about the consequences in terms of utility and aesthetics – is it useful and/or agreeable? Second, we should think about these outcomes in relation to ourselves and also for others. A moral imperative would be if, upon response to a decision being analysed in Table 1, it is concluded that every quadrant would yield all positive or all negative responses. And that is it; a nexus of analysis that can be applied to situations across time and contexts.

Notably, there are very few absolute moral imperatives on this basis, which is consistent with findings about moral dilemmas in business ethics (Maclagan, 2012). Most decisions or actions within the nexus would display mixed responses, thus indicating some pragmatic balancing that the decision maker needs to do in order to claim to be acting morally in the circumstances. What the nexus contributes is an underpinning rationale that endures beyond the swings and shifts of emotivistic, relativistic conclusions.

To illustrate, we will revisit the global child labour problem mentioned a few paragraphs earlier, but this time through the Humean moral nexus. Tables 2a and 2b dissect the issues summarily through, first, the view of a US company operating a factory within US borders and, second, an expansion of the analysis to a country where child labour is used commonly. Like Hume's story of the traveller, these two worlds are quite different but the fact of the company (as traveller)

needing to be cognisant of both worlds raises the ability of the moral nexus to shine its consistent light across the issues to assist managers to make moral sense of the conflicts.

**Table 2a.** Global child labour issue for the US analysed in the Humean nexus.

<i>Employ un/low paid child labour in a US factory</i>	<b>Useful for</b>	<b>Agreeable for</b>
<p><b>Self</b> <i>(the organisation, staff, shareholders)</i></p>	<p><i>No. Illegal, may harm staff, not socially acceptable thus would hamper business functionality.</i></p>	<p><i>Mostly No. Might help achieve some business objectives, but it is not the accepted way in the US. Understood to be exploitation of children. Adds stress to individual kids, denies childhood.</i></p>
<p><b>Others</b> <i>(local community, interest groups, politicians)</i></p>	<p><i>Mostly No. Widely known to be illegal in the US. More children and families would be harmed than helped.</i></p>	<p><i>Mostly No. General public dislike of the practice. Despite diverse community standards, most agree it is better to offer children a playful childhood.</i></p>

The next step is to consider the same basic issues but in the context of a US-owned factory of the same company operating in a developing nation with a known track record of accepting child labour practices. To avoid stigmatising any single country, the example is fictionalised with a basis in facts related to an unnamed country.

**Table 2b.** Global child labour issue for a non-US country analysed in the Humean nexus

<b><i>Employ un/low paid child labour in a US-owned factory operating in a developing nation.</i></b>	<b>Useful for</b>	<b>Agreeable for</b>
<b>Self</b> <i>(the organisation, staff, shareholders)</i>	<b><i>Often Yes.</i></b> <i>Helps local factory establish, provides income for local people.</i>	<b><i>Mostly No.</i></b> <i>Adds stress to kids, denies childhood. Most elders given a choice would prefer their children not have to struggle.</i>
<b>Others</b> <i>(local community, interest groups, politicians)</i>	<b><i>Often Yes.</i></b> <i>Helps children support their family and elders. Helps broader economic development aims of politicians.</i>	<b><i>Mostly No.</i></b> <i>While some sentiments are that children should contribute to family and society by working, many adults would like the option to give their kids a break from hard work.</i>

So, this concise analysis explains with some precision why there is a factual moral difference between organisational acceptances of the practice in the two countries. Table 2a shows mostly negative responses, which is closer to a moral imperative in US organisational culture to avert children from labouring in a factory. Table 2b shows a few positive responses which means there is less of a moral imperative in this differentnational organisational culture to protect children from working in the factory. This Humean overview explains why it should not be surprising to find widely different perspectives on the issue. The point is that the factors of analysis remain consistent thus making the model accessible, perhaps, useful and agreeable, for managers and, by extension, ethics educators. Now, the solutions to the defined problem, as always, are not made easy but the underlying values and the empirical strength of Hume’s rationale is solid. Moral imperatives can be quickly determined and differences between societies explained with a course for analysis well defined.

Axiomatically, the question of whether the nexus canbe highlighted and taught in organisational behaviourcan be tested through its own lens. Hume has provided an empirical equation based upon both deontological and teleological principles juxtaposed (Backhaus, 2009). Will the greatest good for the greatest number of people (self and others) come from a widespread

understanding and application of the nexus? Equally, will the nexus be appreciated for its simple, accessible (able to condense a lot of philosophical data into something understandable) design? The answers to these questions reveal what Hume would regard as the moral outcome of the consideration. We invite the reader as an individual to answer those questions using the format in Table 1. In practice, individuals may arrive at slightly different answers, but the compilation of viewpoints ultimately will allow a social consensus to emerge. Such consensus will be resistant to the common trap of emotivism because the most concise factors of an ethical analysis form the basis of the consensus. What is moral within and beyond the current time becomes the essential basis of the analysis rather than a reactive and context sensitive approach.

#### **4. CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF TEACHING (HUMEAN) ORGANISATIONAL ETHICS**

Despite the rich legacy Hume provided, his intellectual connection with modern commerce and his emphasis upon morality have not been strongly noticed in contemporary organisational ethics literature. By creating the nexus of Hume's morality and profiling key examples as beginning steps, we suggest that organisational ethics education itself can benefit from the resultant perspective. In his own conclusion, Hume et al (1991, p.217) opines,

*It may justly appear surprising that any man in so late an age, should find it requisite to prove, by elaborate reasoning, that personal merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others. It might be expected that this principle would have occurred even to the first rude, unpractised enquirers concerning morals, and been received from its own evidence, without any argument or disputation.*

To you, me and Hume the understanding and thus the teaching of ethics develops convolutions, complexities and philosophical dilemmas that obscure the essential point, that it is not especially difficult to have an appropriate moral perspective. Now, with this moral nexus distilled from the 'elaborate reasoning' of Hume, organisational behaviour educators and managers alike have another helpful centre of gravity around which to develop analyses of decisions and actions in order to gain moral perspective that transcends time and place.

The future of the construct rests in ongoing application of cases like the ones discussed in this paper but also many other situational analyses. Qualitative and interpretive methodologies will continue to yield feedback from the field about the applicability and relevance of the nexus.

We have our own projects underway applying action research methodologies. As the debate continues regarding organisational ethics, its rightful place, and the things about it that are able to be taught or learned, we expect to be reviewing more dissertations about past thinkers such as Hume. We find that wise foresight from the past has a profound and exciting application in the future of organisational behaviour education.

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