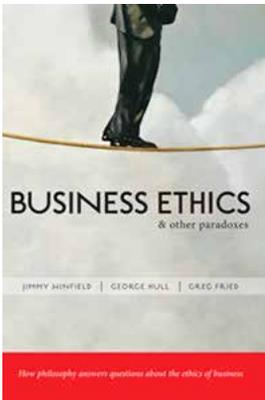


BOOK REVIEW

Reading on a jet plane: *Business ethics & other paradoxes*

■ Jessica Lerm ■



On a recent trip from Johannesburg back to Cape Town, I used the two or so hours of flight time to get stuck into *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes* (J. Winfield, G. Hull & G. Fried, 2014, Cape Town: Fairest Cape Press), trying desperately to drown out the sound of the overly friendly man's voice, from two rows behind me, who shared with his companion – and indeed the whole cabin – the story of his eldest son's recent wedding. Even the crying baby near the front of the plane eventually gave it up when she realised that she was no match for this orator. And then, the flight was over, we were back in the Mother City, and passengers were eager to disembark. Engrossed as I was in my book, I remained seated, reading, as the other, more impatient passengers stood and started the slow shuffle towards the exit. One of these passengers had drawn up next to me, and peered over my shoulder to see what I was so interested in. I immediately recognised the Orator's voice as he announced, to me and to the plane in general, "*Business ethics!* Who would write a whole book on *that?*! I've been in business for 30 years and I've never had to worry about 'business ethics'. It's simple: do the right thing." And then, thankfully, the queue started moving and he was off the plane before social etiquette required that I respond to him.

I am grateful that I was spared a conversation with the Orator, for several reasons, but foremost among which is that nobody likes to be told that they are wrong, especially not in a public place like an aeroplane. And the Orator certainly was wrong, in more ways than one. Firstly, the Orator is mistaken if he thinks that he has "never had to worry about 'business ethics'". I suspect that, in making this claim, the Orator was appealing to the popular misconception that ethics simply is not the business of business. Of course, this is the same idea alluded to by *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes's* tongue-in-cheek title: it is paradoxical, as many assume, that business might be ethical, because the two notions are apparently antithetical. But, as is explained on the very first page of the book, this is merely an *apparent* paradox: business can very well be ethical – and, indeed, it *should* be. The Orator is mistaken if he thinks he has never had to worry about ethics in 30 years of business (and he appears to have admitted as much when he went on to

explain how “simple” it is to “do the right thing” in business – the *ethical* thing, that is). Ethical challenges are part of our daily lives and if business makes up part of our daily life – indeed, comprises the large proportion of many of our daily lives – then we will of course face ethical challenges in business.

The second way in which the Orator is mistaken, is in his claim that, “It’s simple: do the right thing”. While he is correct that we ought all – businesspeople included – to “do the right thing”, it is often far from clear or “simple”, what “the right thing” is. Take, for instance, the case of whistleblowing, to which *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes* devotes a chapter (Ch.12). What does one do when one is torn between the apparently morally correct action of remaining loyal to one’s place of employment and the apparently morally correct action of reporting one’s company’s illegal practices to the authorities? In a case like this, the right action to take is not at all a “simple” or straightforward matter. And that, I might have told the Orator, is why a “whole book” has been written on the subject of business ethics – because we need it. Not all of us (very few of us) are born ethicists and so we need a little guidance to find our ways through the ethical tangles that can confront us in our daily lives, which include our business lives.

In particular, what we need is a clear, accessible, but nevertheless careful and rigorous, treatment of ethical issues likely to be met by a person in business. And on that count, *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes* more than delivers. Jointly the book’s three authors have a background in commerce as well as philosophy, and the philosophical approach is put to good use as the authors offer chapter after chapter of careful analyses and detailed arguments – an impressively large proportion of which is original work by the authors. The greatest value of the book, however, is its accessibility: even as it surveys the sometimes complex and quite technical literature of business ethics, *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes* is wonderfully clear and within the grasp of an audience even with no background in either commerce or philosophy. With this in mind, it is the ideal book for a university student of business ethics. Although *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes* does not specifically pitch itself as a student textbook, it is clear that the book has been written with this aim in mind. So, it is as such that I review *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes*: as a book written primarily for use by convenors and students of a course in business ethics.

According to the blurb on the back cover of the book: “Since no list of rules or standards of best practice could cover all our ethical dilemmas, we have no alternative but to think them through for ourselves”, and *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes* does precisely this: it presents the reader with an argument for one ethical position rather than another, and then goes on to assess that argument, sometimes tweaking the original argument as it goes along to, charitably, give it the best possible shot. This, of course, is the philosophical approach, and its great benefit is that it not only imparts relevant information to the reader, but also imparts to the diligent reader a *skill*: the skill of critical thinking. Better critical thinkers will hopefully be more ethical people (and more ethical businesspeople, in particular), but critical thinking is a skill much more broadly valuable than just in the realm of ethics. Critical thinking skills will benefit their possessor in all areas to which

he or she applies his or her mind, and so a better critical thinker will make not only for a more ethical businessperson, but ultimately for a shrewder businessperson too. This is the value of philosophy to business students, and the careful student of *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes* will cultivate critical thinking skills by being led by the book to think through ethical issues for him- or herself.

However, this is something of a double-edged sword. I do suspect that some readers will complain that *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes* frustratingly offers more questions than it does answers. The book does not set out to make substantive ethical claims, such as the substantive ethical claim that, for instance, South Africa's controversial Black Economic Empowerment policies are morally permissible (see Ch.10), and this may well be disappointing to a reader who *just wants to know what's right*. Rather, the book sets out to guide the reader through thinking through such issues *for him- or herself*, by presenting the reader with relevant, popular arguments, and examining possible responses to them. And, any ethical action performed on the basis of the agent's personal conviction that it is the right thing to do, arguably demonstrates much greater integrity than the same action performed just because the agent once read in some book a while ago that it was right. That the onus is in this way left on the reader to make up his or her own mind on the basis of the arguments presented may be frustrating, but it is part and parcel of philosophy. *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes* is an unashamedly philosophical work (as its tagline reads: *How philosophy answers questions about the ethics of business*) and, as I have argued, this is one of the book's major virtues.

Even with this virtue in mind, however, the abstract, philosophical nature of the book will be difficult for some students of business to handle. Although the philosophical content of *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes* is commendable, I do think the authors could have done their likely audience – students of commerce, not of philosophy – the favour of using examples and illustrations more clearly applicable to business. For instance, one of the main points of discussion of Chapter 8 is the far-fetched, hypothetical case of “Cynthia” who trains “Pablo” as an assassin. Bearing in mind that Chapter 8 covers *advertising*, it may be difficult for readers to see how an assassin and his trainer are relevant topics of discussion. I must, however, temper this complaint concerning the perceived relevance of some illustrations with the observation that several other examples employed in the book make reference to the local, South African context – which I know my students would appreciate.

Apart from the relevance of some of the book's examples, I do also worry that – well-written as the book is – certain sections of certain chapters may run the risk of being too philosophically thorough, more so than the purposes of a business ethics student would require (here I think, for instance, of the complex discussion of happiness in Chapter 9). It is, however, the course convenor's prerogative how much of and in what order the chosen sections of a book will be prescribed to students. In particular, I would not recommend that students begin by studying the first four chapters of the book, which cover the bases of philosophical argumentation, as this abstract, formal material will, I suspect, be heavy going for a business ethics student; rather, I would recommend starting

with the more concrete, real-life-applicable chapters of the book, and referring students to the relevant portions of chapters 1–4 only as the need arises. I think this is the best way for a student to get the most out of this rich, thought-provoking book.

I would not hesitate to use *Business Ethics & Other Paradoxes* as the prescribed book for a philosophy course in business ethics, and I would also recommend it to a seasoned businessperson, like the Orator, who may have an overly simplistic view of the relationship between business and ethics, and who might benefit from the rigorous philosophical treatment of the subject that this book offers.