

# Book review

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**Title:** *Developing Business Ethics as Academic Field*

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Business ethics is a young and evolving academic field in which purpose and scope, place in the academy, and relationship with the business fraternity are just some of the issues that are hotly debated. Deon Rossouw's book, *Developing Business Ethics as Academic Field* (2004), speaks to these and other issues relevant to the current and future development of this relatively new field. Rossouw is to be commended for producing this text, aimed at making a contribution to the discourse on business ethics in Africa and, for academics and those teaching and researching in the field, providing a most useful addition to the literature.

Rossouw focuses on identifying key "areas of intervention" necessary for the development of business ethics as academic field, especially in Africa, where the field is less developed than in the USA or Europe. Such development requires a research agenda in five areas pertaining to business ethics, viz. its scope, research, teaching, institutionalisation, and interaction. Rossouw uses the introduction to clarify certain terms and concepts. He articulates his understanding of the term *business ethics*, following De George's 1991 distinction between the terms *business ethics*, meaning academic enquiry into the field, and *ethics in business*, meaning other discourse on business ethics. Likewise, he clarifies the difference between business ethics as an academic field and business ethics as a social practice. The former clearly involves academics, the latter, many different entities (business leaders, organisations, etc.). He also usefully provides the five defining characteristics of an academic field, clarifies the term *development* in

such contexts, and argues for the research agenda referred to above. On the basis of this, each area is discussed in one of the five chapters of the book, where Rossouw effectively synthesises the relevant literature, and provides guidelines and frameworks pertinent to the development of business ethics as an academic field.

The first chapter, *The scope of business ethics*, outlines the area of enquiry, clarifies terminology (e.g. business ethics; ethics), and argues the importance of a multifaceted and multidisciplinary approach to business ethics. It also gives a clear account of the two main approaches to the purpose of studying business ethics and their component sub-approaches. In an effort to avoid negative connotations and their associated polarising effect, Rossouw opts not to classify these as "*descriptive*" versus "*normative*", but rather refers to the "explanative stream" (a rather awkward term meaning *explanatory*) and the "evaluative stream." The former includes the social scientific, the managerial and the organisational "currents," the latter, the ethical guidance, ethical control, and ethical development "currents." The two streams clearly reflect different approaches to business ethics: the one more heavily descriptive, the other, more inclined to the normative. Rossouw argues that, rather than viewing the two streams as antagonistic and mutually exclusive, business ethics would be better served by seeing them as mutually dependent and complementary. To this end, he urges business ethicists to be flexible ontologically and methodically, and to avoid absolutising the fact-value distinction, given that it is "possible to rationally justify claims about facts, as well as claims about values" (2004:18).

Chapter 2 deals with the significance and necessary contribution of research to the field's development. To boost the academic importance and credibility of business ethics, and to avoid the pitfall of remaining "an infantile academic field," research must firstly be informed by and anchored in existing theory, and produce new theory. In addition, ontological and methodological issues deserve attention. Rossouw convincingly argues for a "rich" ontological perspective, one that considers both the economic setting and the moral agents, as well as their relationship. He rightly advocates a flexible approach rather than methodological rigidity, an approach that uses "triangulation of methodologies," and where specific methodological choices take account of the sensitivity inherent in ethical issues as a research subject. For Rossouw, it is important that the researcher recognises that ethics is embedded in economic activity, and that, in so young a field, there will be sources of ambiguity, such as a lack of agreement on the definition of key terms. Rossouw has carefully navigated between the demand for empirical, quantitative research in the field and the equally pressing necessity to move beyond a mere positivist stance on what constitutes viable and valid research. He makes a convincing case for the relevance and importance of including qualitative research, provided that it demonstrates methodological and theoretical rigour.

Those who teach business ethics will find the discussion in Chapter 3 both thorough and helpful. Here Rossouw examines the possible purposes in teaching business ethics, their presuppositions, and possible teaching strategies for each. Academics could well find it useful to consider which of the three positions (cognitive competence, behavioural competence, and managerial competence) most closely resembles their own purpose and, hence, curriculum and pedagogy in teaching this discipline. Rossouw is meticulous in documenting the purpose, emphasis, content focus, possible pedagogy, required outcomes, and assessment practices for each of these three positions. He furthermore anchors each approach in its theoretical

foundation. Most significant of all, Rossouw argues against viewing these three positions as irreconcilable; such an antagonistic view will adversely affect the development of business ethics as an academic field. Instead, he advocates a complementary approach, where each position draws on the other two, while acknowledging that each has strengths and weaknesses. For Rossouw, this inclusive approach is mandatory, and avoidable only if we choose to teach business ethics "merely as a form of applied ethics within Philosophy" (2004:51), where the cognitive competence position would justifiably be used on its own. This raises an interesting question and one much debated in the literature: What exactly is applied ethics and, if it is a field, which disciplines are included in it, and are those areas actually sub-fields? Would business ethics then be a field or a sub-field? While this cannot be explored here, it is interesting that Rossouw seems to take for granted that business ethics is a field, and makes no reference to the applied ethics field controversy. That said, the last section of Chapter 3 considers the pedagogical requirements of each of the three positions, systematically outlining the relevant teaching strategies for particular outcomes. This is extremely useful to teachers of business ethics, in that it suggests a wide range of possible options, and urges teachers to combine these strategies in proportion to the way they combine the various approaches to teaching purpose.

It is in Chapter 4 that Rossouw clearly demonstrates his ability to move deftly between the academic arena with its concerns for research and teaching, and the more practical demands of the business world. He submits that critical and rigorous interaction, dialogue, and constructive engagement between academics in the field, irrespective of their differences in theoretical and methodological orientation, play an important role in developing business ethics and broadening perspectives, as does engagement across disciplines. Such interaction, desirable at both national and international levels, should, however, not fall into the trap of "unhealthy incestuous relations" (2004:67). More tricky is

interaction between academics and business practitioners. Clearly, for business ethics to develop, it must consider the relevance and applicability of its teaching and research to the practical business environment that it purports to study. Thus, while the interaction is important, it may be infrequent, unsatisfactory, or even hostile, and some fear that such interaction may mean co-optation of business ethics as a servant of business, with a resultant loss of “critical edge” (2004:69). As a way forward, Rossouw succinctly analyses the possible difficulties in such interactions, and provides practical guidelines for improving relations between business and academia. Academics would do well to draw on his insights and experience in this area.

The final chapter, on institutionalisation, clearly shows that, without the latter, the field cannot survive. This is a critical issue. Institutionalisation of business ethics presents some difficulties, and Rossouw, who is no stranger to the academic environment, is well able to outline these. The challenge is complex, given the multidisciplinary nature of business ethics, the normative-descriptive divide, and the disagreement about its purpose. Rossouw proposes two solutions: institutionalise business ethics in all the disciplines in which it is studied (economics, management, philosophy, etc.) or “formulate general and generic guidelines for institutionalization that apply to business ethics both as it is being done within and across existing disciplinary boundaries” (2004:76). The latter is his preferred choice. He argues that business ethics cannot become institutionalised unless it becomes “visible” in the academic environment, is given credibility as a legitimate area of enquiry, and is “heard” by those it intends to speak to.

Overall, Rossouw has provided a succinct, thorough, and well-researched text. Arguments are clearly articulated, and chapters developed logically and systematically. The style is very much academic, and would not appeal to a more popular audience, as do some of Rossouw’s publications. However, such an audience is not the target for this book. While one might wish that Rossouw had perhaps given a little more

discussion to the foundations of his particular conception of ethics, and some consideration to the rationale for accepting business ethics as a field rather than a sub-field of applied ethics, one may also note that such issues were perhaps too far outside the parameters of this particular text. Rossouw achieved what he set out to do, and has indeed made a valuable contribution to literature in the field, and to the further development of business ethics as an academic field, especially in the African context.