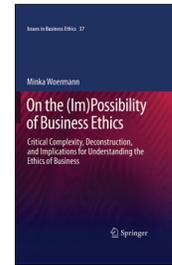


Book Review

On the (Im)Possibility of Business Ethics. Critical complexity, deconstruction, and implications for understanding the ethics of business

Reviewer: Rika Preiser
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With *On the (Im)Possibility of Business Ethics*, Minka Woermann presents us with a sword that cuts both ways through a number of diverse spheres. Not only does she set out to navigate a new course for business ethicists that is more in line with how business practice is situated in a complex world; however, she also successfully negotiates a theoretical balancing act by allowing very different theoretical positions such as postmodernism, and theories of complexity and deconstruction to be in conversation with one another. In the dialogue that emerges, a new understanding of business ethics as theory and practice is forged; however, simultaneously, a more rigorous and sophisticated interpretation of postmodernism and deconstruction is developed that ultimately forms the basis for a philosophical understanding of the notion of complexity. Moreover, *On the (Im) Possibility of Business Ethics* challenges traditional theories in the field of business ethics to reconsider the normative basis on which such theories rest, and exposes the limitations of reductionist strategies when considering that the practice of business ethics takes place in the messy sphere of the marketplace. The two-sided sword also exposes the fact that, when normative issues emerge, the traditional theory-practice divide is challenged.

Consequently, Woermann accomplishes much more in this book than what she originally sets out to do, which, as she states in the Preface, is to develop the notion of complex ethics (a task that points toward the “impossible” stated in the title of the book) and to apply the implications of this position to the field of business ethics (hinting toward

the “possible” in the title). With these two aims marking the main concern of the book, Woermann guides the reader in the journey from the impossible to the possible in a very systematic manner, making sure that all the pitfalls are uncovered, explained, and overcome in a language and style of writing that is accessible to a wide audience.

With these two concerns in mind, the book is structured in two parts. Part I (spanning Chapters 1-4) is concerned with developing a solid theoretical basis from where to reconstruct a new understanding of the notion of ethics in general that can inform alternative theories in business ethics in specific. Part II (spanning Chapters 5-7) explores the possibility of applying the theoretical ideals in the field of business ethics in general and of social corporate responsibility in particular.

The challenge of finding an alternative position to traditional reductionist theories from where a new relational understanding of ethics that is cognisant of how business practice is embedded in the real world can be launched is the main theme in Chapter 1. Woermann argues that a relational interpretation of ethics can emerge from a postmodern paradigm that acknowledges the complex and contingent contexts in which the practice of business ethics takes place. This daunting task of re-configuring ethical norms and value judgements that cannot “be grounded in a transparent, objective and predictable reality, nor be justified by an appeal to a priori normative categories” (3) is, of course, not unproblematic. Parting with transcendental categories and metaphysical positions from where norms can be justified

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implies that the process of deciding which norms are legitimate or not surrenders the objective position from where the legitimisation of norms can take place (10-11). With the loss of an objective foundation on which ethical norms can be grounded, a post-metaphysical understanding of normativity is challenged to find alternative groundings from where to justify non-foundational and non-essentialist norms; moreover, the notion of 'ethics' itself is compromised (25).

In an attempt to overcome the dilemma of discerning contingent yet universally acceptable norms, Woermann explores the possibility of grounding the process of legitimisation in the realm of practice where normative judgements could emerge as a result of being embedded in "everyday problems of real people living real lives" (26). Hence, Woermann introduces the possibility of developing a richer understanding of ethics by arguing that "(o)nly by simultaneously engaging in textual critique, and investigating the contexts in which our ethical decisions are enacted, is it possible to develop a productive reading of ethics" (26). Thus, as an 'ethics of practice' (27), which is underpinned by an affirmative reading of the postmodern condition, Woermann starts the case for developing her re-configuration of the notion of ethics by a simultaneous reading of complexity theory and deconstruction, which ultimately marks the novelty of her book for the field of business ethics, as well as for the study of complex phenomena.

By developing the notion of a 'complex ethics' (32) that informs the alternative position from where a self-reflective and critical ethics of practice can emerge, Woermann aligns herself with other complexity theorists such as her late colleague, Paul Cilliers, and the French complexity theorist Edgar Morin. By drawing on the work of Cilliers and Morin, Woermann highlights the fact that knowledge of complex phenomena (such as business organisations or ethical decision-making processes) can only produce models that capture contingent and partial information of such phenomena. Thus, our models (or ethical theories) are constituted by a normative engagement with complexity, and can be translated into what Woermann calls "the ethics of complexity" (32). This acknowledgement, in turn, challenges the ethicist to reflect critically on the assumptions that inform and frame any conceptual ethical paradigm, and exposes the fact that our knowledge and framing processes do not happen in isolation, but are, in themselves, complex phenomena, hence the "complexity of ethics" (32).

Woermann unpacks the notion of complexity by distinguishing a 'restricted' interpretation of complexity that coincides with reductionist approaches from a 'general' understanding of complexity that coincides with a relational and irreducible interpretation of complexity (33-34).

Woermann's discussion of 'general complexity' re-positions the underlying problems that emerge from studying complex phenomena as having philosophical importance, which allows her to draw links to some concepts and ideas in Derrida's work on deconstruction. In fact, the succinct introduction on "Features of Complex Systems" (34-40) is an excellent summary of complex phenomena, presented in a language that does not require prior scientific knowledge of the subject.

Most importantly, however, is Woermann's discussion on the notion of the 'provisional imperative' (45-47) that was initially developed by Cilliers (Preiser and Cilliers, 2010; Woermann and Cilliers, 2012), and which Woermann unpacks in terms of its practical implications for the study of business ethics. Ultimately, it is the provisional imperative and its related three virtues of 'transgressivity', 'irony', and 'imagination' (76-84) that make the impossible possible. Together with the provisional imperative, the three virtues allow one to develop non-foundational grounding principles whereby the challenges of inaction, relativism, and pluralism can be overcome.

The logic that informs the contradictory nature of the provisional imperative is then further deepened and enriched with Derrida's deconstructive logic. Woermann displays her mastery of these Derridean concepts in Chapter 3 by linking the notion of 'complex ethics' with Derrida's 'deconstructive ethics' (66-67). Despite the fact that some critics think that Derrida's work is not political and that there cannot be such a notion as deconstructive ethics, Woermann succeeds to prove the contrary; through her deep understanding and sophisticated reading of the deconstructive logic, she manages to link deconstruction (as informed by the logic of *différance*, in particular) to a general understanding of complexity, from where her notion of a complex ethics is afforded a solid grounding.

From this point onward, the impossible has been made possible, and the reader is guided through the realm of the practical in order to test the validity of the claims made in Part I. The application of Woermann's theoretical explorations forms the main concern of Part II and proves to be particularly tailored to suit the interests of business ethicists and those who teach the subject of business ethics, seeing that Woermann unpacks the implications of complex ethics for business ethics in general, and for social corporate responsibility (98) in particular. A significant application is demonstrated by the more radical interpretation of the concept 'responsibility' that Woermann develops. Traditional theories concerned with issues of responsibility assume a closed system where the initial condition is characterised as one with impartial relations supported by the stability of the social contract. By arguing that these assumptions do not fit the reality, the notion of social responsibility itself becomes re-defined when read in the light of a complex ethics. In the

last two chapters in the book, Woermann elaborates on the implications of her theory of corporate social responsibility, which is based on three components, namely corporate identity, relations between corporations and society, and the nature of corporate responsibility (126-136). A number of management tools and strategic tools of analysis (146-154) are offered that would assist both the business ethicist and the instructor in the business of engaging with complex ethical considerations in meaningful and constructive ways.

What Woermann demonstrates with exceptional insight and depth in *On the (Im) Possibility of Business Ethics* is the fact that it is not the forging of an alternative ethics that is able to embrace the complexity in the world in which we live and do business that represents the impossible; on the contrary, it is impossible not to do so when one realises that conventional business ethics theories are unrealistic and

unsustainable in light of the fact that they do not take into account the embedded nature of organisations and that no formalisation of such relations can codify and capture the moral fibre that constitutes these relationships.

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