



Business Ethics: Moral or Amoral? An Analysis from the Perspective of Kantian Ethics

Stefania Vignini¹, and Gianfranco Rusconi²

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the phenomenon related to business ethical purposes from a different perspective, using the philosophical lens developed by Immanuel Kant. This work is also oriented to identify the most important research topics related to business ethics through the combination of a different framework.

The present paper intends to offer a conceptual contribution to the ongoing debate on the theme of ethics in corporate social responsibility, highlighting the main problematic aspects that emerge from the analysis of the literature and the observation of reality in the light of the philosophical framework of Kant. This paper, therefore, examines and applies the deontological view of Kant and his distinction between the ‘categorical’ and ‘hypothetic’ imperative.

This ethical view is useful to prevent instrumental acceptance of ethical codes and sustainability reports; in fact, during the making of the work, several well-known practices are presented, which are far from behaving in a moral way (i.e., General Electrics, Lehman Brothers, and so on).

Keywords: Business Ethics; Corporate Social Responsibility; Kant's Categorical Imperative; Kant's Hypothetical Imperative

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¹Stefania Vignini, PhD; Department of Management- University of Bologna. Email: stefania.vignini2@unibo.it

² Gianfranco Rusconi; Emeritus Professor Department of Management – University of Bergamo. Email: gianfranco.rusconi@unibg.it

Introduction

Ethics deals with customs, i.e. human behavior³. The term is derived from the ancient Greek ἦθος (translit. *êthos*), i.e. “character”, “behavior”, or, less probably, from ἔθος (translit. *èthos*) i.e. “custom”, “habit”.⁴

Some people are morally autonomous and always behave in a manner that is deemed to be proper by the broader community. Others obey a so-called code of ethical conduct because they believe it is the right thing to do or because they are required to do so. Ethics brings together a set of values and norms that a person can refer to in their choices to discern and prioritize what is good and what is bad. Ethics is linked to different philosophical interpretations, some of which are particularly used in business ethics (Donaldson & Werhane, 2008).

A first perspective, called consequentialism, evaluates the concepts of good and evil with respect to the consequences of a certain choice, both for the individual (ethical egoism) and for the collective (utilitarianism), with philosophical authors of reference such as J. Bentham and J.S. Mill (see Beauchamp et al., 2004, Donaldson & Werhane, 2008). The second, called deontological (or normative) and associated with philosopher authors such as I. Kant, J. Locke, and J. Rawls (see Beauchamp et al., 2004, Donaldson & Werhane, 2008), looks not only at the consequences of certain choices but also at the inner motives behind them. A third perspective related to values looks at the intentions, means, and consequences behind a certain choice (Ferrell & Fraedrich, 2021). A further view is that of justice, in which good and evil, unlike utilitarian logic, are evaluated on the basis of consequences linked to the principles of truth, fairness, and impartiality (Cavanagh et al., 1981). Another view is procedural, according to which a choice is considered good if it is formulated in the context of a decision-making process with clearly defined and transparent rules (Wiley, 1995; Carroll & Meeks, 1999; Rosthorn, 2000; Flanagan, 2003; Heath & Norman, 2004).

Also worthy of note is the branch known as Virtue Ethics, which, starting from the thought of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, has influenced business ethics in the works of Solomon (1992), centering the discourse not on permissions and duties but rather on the continuous strengthening of the character and attitude towards virtuous and excellent behavior on the part of those working in the business.

The application of the thought of various philosophers to business ethics obviously has consequences with respect to the different basic theoretical approaches, as for example, can be seen in the difference between utilitarianism and deontology and the internal differences within these same views.

Western reflection on ethics originated in particular with authors such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and was later expanded on by Scholasticism (St. Thomas Aquinas), continuing with the moral thought of various philosophers such as Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Spinoza, and others. This paper considers, in particular, the figure of Immanuel Kant, who attempted to define the rational presuppositions of man's moral action, referring to a concept of ethics that is completely disengaged from any external purpose, but rather based on a rigorous sense of duty: real ethical behavior as a “categorical imperative” as opposed to “hypothetical”, i.e. purpose-bound.

³ *Ethics in Dizionario di filosofia*, at treccani.it. URL consulted on 18 September 2022.

⁴ Montanari, F. *GI - Vocabolario della lingua greca*, Third edition, Loescher.

With Kant's original deontological vision in mind, this paper aims to research, investigate and evaluate the “critical” aspects of management as proposed in light of that application of Kant constituted by “Kantian Capitalism” (Bowie, 1991; 1998; 2002), considering its consequences on the conformity/ethics relationship. Consider that Kant's influence on that branch of ethical theory known as deontology is so strong that some writers simply refer to deontology as Kantianism (Bowie, 2002). These considerations on ethics also offer a conceptual contribution to the ongoing debate on corporate social responsibility.

Bowie (2002) pointed out the shortcomings of the business ethics literature in the application of Kantian theory. This paper takes its cue from that deficit, starting with the expression used by a Nobel Prize-winning economist who reminds us that modern economics derives essentially from morality: “*Not only was the so-called ‘father of modern economics’, Adam Smith, a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow, but the subject of ‘economics’ was for a long time seen as a branch of ethics*” (Sen, 1987, p. 6).

The paper is divided as follows: Section 2 discusses the literature on the topic; Section 3 sets out the philosophical framework; Section 4 presents various bad practices of companies claiming to be ethically oriented. The examples are gathered from a variety of sources. Finally, Section 5 offers some concluding remarks.

1. Literature on ethics/corporate social responsibility

This work starts from the observation emerging from the literature that there is a close connection between ethics and corporate social responsibility. In this regard, one can consider examples such as the pyramid model of Carroll (1991) or others, like the one presented by Schwartz and Carroll in 2003 that brings together three aspects – economic, legal and ethical – used as a conceptual framework in management studies.

The first studies on corporate social responsibility date back to the 1930s (Barnard, 1938; Clark, 1939), “as corporations suffered from adverse public opinion” (Bakan, 2004, p.24), and as the “best strategy to restore people's faith in corporations and reverse their growing fascination with big government” (Bakan, 2004, p.24).

In fact, the paternity of the modern concept of social responsibility is attributed to Bowen, who conceptualized the responsibility of the businessman in 1953, establishing a fundamental premise for the consideration of this issue. Bowen (1953) sketched out his first, very general definition of corporate social responsibility, which included only the responsibility of “businessmen” to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those courses of action desirable in terms of our society's goals and values.

Social responsibility generally suggests that an entity, organization, or individual has an obligation to act for the benefit of society, but there seems to be no agreement on its definition. Among other things, Fisher (2004) highlights the confusion associated with the indistinct use of the terms social responsibility, business ethics, and morality.

It is widely believed that the literature on corporate social responsibility remains highly fragmented (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). One reason for this fragmentation is that scholars examine corporate social responsibility through different disciplinary and conceptual lenses (Carroll, 1999; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Waddock, 2004).

Some authors have suggested that corporate social responsibility is nothing more than an “empty shell” given the varying substantive content (Mark-Ungericht & Weiskopf, 2007). Dahlsrud (2008) presented no less than 37 definitions of social responsibility. Matten & Moon (2008) also propose an "implicit-explicit" framework to define social responsibility by focusing on differences between countries, particularly between the U.S. and Europe. Aguinis & Glavas (2012) review the literature on corporate social responsibility based on reading 588 articles and 102 books, and book chapters. Sheehy (2015) also presents a definition of corporate social responsibility, concluding the paper by stating that defining it is nevertheless an important and urgent task.

Notwithstanding the rich literature on possible definitions of social responsibility, there is no doubt that Friedman's 1970 article is often cited as rejecting corporate social responsibility that is not merely maximizing profit and shareholder value, in accordance with the law and current custom: moreover, it does not deny the role of morality even if only as an external limit to profit maximization.

Garriga & Melé, well underlining that the field of corporate social responsibility presents not only a panorama of theories but also a proliferation of controversial, complex, and unclear approaches, attempting to delve deeper into the situation and, "mapping the territory", classify the main theories of social responsibility and related approaches into four groups: instrumental theories (focused on the achievement of the profit motive through socially responsible behavior; political (focused on the responsible use of business power in the political arena); integrative (focused on the integration of social questions) and ethical (focused on the right thing to do for a good society).⁵ Based on the analysis of the work of Garriga & Melé (2004), four visions of corporate social responsibility can be identified:

- Instrumental theories, approaches: maximization of shareholder value; strategies for competitive advantages; cause-related marketing (Porter & Kramer, 2002; Hart, 1995; Hart & Christensen, 2002; Prahalad & Hammond, 2002);
- Political theories, approaches: Corporate Constitutionalism; Integrative Social Contract Theory, Corporate citizenship (Davis, 1960; Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994, 1999; Andriof & McIntosh, 2001);

Integrative theories approaches to Issues management, Public Responsibility, Stakeholder management, and Corporate Social Performance (Ackerman, 1973; Preston & Post, 1975; Carroll, 1979; Wartick & Mahon, 1994; Swanson, 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997; Berman et al., 1999; Ogden & Watson, 1999; Dhaliwal et al., 2011);

Ethical theories, approaches Stakeholder normative theory, Universal rights, Sustainable development, and The common good (Freeman, 1984; Evan & Freeman, 1993; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; World Commission and Environment and Development; Alford & Naughton, 2002; Melé, 2002; Signori & Rusconi, 2009; Ims et al., 2014).

With regard to the topic under consideration here, ethical theories are particularly suited to the analysis in this paper because Kantian deontology applied to business is deeply and radically based on uncompromising ethics.

⁵ On pp. 63-64, Garriga & Melé (2004) present a table summarising the different approaches and theories of social responsibility.

Here a first question arises: can the company be conceived as a "moral subject" with its own ethics, distinct from the ethics of the individuals working within?

There seems to be no consensus on this aspect in the literature. There are those who recognise the corporation as an autonomous moral subject, comparable to a metaphysical entity. French (1979) wrote that the corporation is an "autonomous moral subject" because it has an "internal decision-making structure" whose choices are qualitatively different from those of the individual persons, managers and shareholders who participate in the decision-making process. The company pursues its own goals, which do not coincide with the personal motivations of the individuals, responding as such to a precise moral responsibility, as if it were a person.

Ladd (1988) argues the contrary, stating that like all "formal structures" (following an idea of Max Weber), companies are inherently self-referential and impermeable to an ethical discourse that goes against their purpose: external rules (laws, regulations, etc.) with rewards and sanctions are the only way to force them to accept ethical behavior that goes against their purpose. With regard to the position of the individual persons, even in this case, they are overwhelmed by the structure, which cannot be rebelled against except by leaving it or destroying the structure itself.

Another part of the literature tends to deny the possibility for the company to be an entity independent of its subjects (Sciarelli, 1999b). The actions of the company are decided and implemented by individuals and therefore depend on their moral values (Caselli, 1998). In other words, while not an autonomous moral subject like the human person, the company represents a system with more or less moral connotations. Corporate ethics are secondary ethics, as it is the result of the actions of each individual in the company, who is influenced not only by their own personal values and beliefs but also by those arising from the corporate organizational culture that they are an integral part of. However, it must be emphasized that even scholars who deny the moral subjectivity of the corporation find themselves recognizing that the actions of individuals are to some extent influenced by the corporate mission and philosophy, which may guide personal actions towards adopting certain principles rather than others. Ethics concerns the set of values that are part of the corporate culture that shapes decisions on corporate social responsibility (Samson & Daft, 2003; Hemingway & Maclagan, 2004).

Once it has been established that it is necessary to talk about ethics (and consequently social responsibility) to the company as such, one of the most common questions is whether this process should start from within the company itself or come from outside. In this sense, the code of ethics represents an instrument at the disposal of companies, through which they can externalize their mission, declaring their responsibilities (Matacena, 1993; Rusconi, 1997). In this, it is widely accepted that the assumption of social responsibility becomes more well-founded and solid if it is the result of a corporate choice and not just behavior imposed by others, as if to say that mere compliance with the law cannot be considered socially correct (Di Toro, 1993; Sciarelli, 1999a). This does not imply the futility of regulating the presentation of reliable codes of ethics and social/sustainability reporting, as the latest developments in the area of social responsibility indicate. Of note in this regard is the Non-Financial Statement (2014) required by the European Union and transposed into Italian law in 2016. This document relates to companies of a particular nature and size, and an update was recently proposed by the European Commission (Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council, 21 April 2021)⁶.

⁶ On the link between the first social balance sheets and the Non-Financial Statement see Rusconi, (2021). Furthermore, the standards of the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG) published on 23 November 2022 must be added.

2. A Philosophical Framework: “critical” insights from Kantian Capitalism

As seen in the introduction, the ethical philosophies used in the application to business mostly refer directly to ancient, modern or post-modern thinkers. To frame this, one can follow Donaldson & Werhane's (2008) classification of these philosophical visions:

- a) Consequentialists, in particular utilitarianism, starting with Bentham and J.S. Mill.
- b) Deontologicals, divided into Kantian and contractualists (Locke and Rawls).
- c) Based on virtue ethics (Aristotle, St. Thomas, McIntyre).
- d) Pragmatists, applied more recently to business ethics (James, Dewey, Rorty).

According to the philosopher from Königsberg, morality always stems from categorical imperatives, i.e. they do not propose “ifs”, hence do not admit hypotheses, but rather demand precise action based on duty per se, i.e. with no other purpose than “duty for duty's sake”.

Kant thus identifies two types of imperatives: the hypothetical imperative and the categorical imperative. The hypothetical imperative is that which commands an action in view of a benefit.

The categorical imperative is expressed in various formulations. The first considered here concerns the principle of generalization, which defines behaving according to a maxim that can-be applied to everyone as being an action that in itself is ethically necessary (an action is moral if it can be universalized). Second, the categorical imperative requires avoiding reducing your neighbor or yourself to a mere means to any other end. The principle is also affirmed that action must be generated by one's own personal self-legislating will and not imposed from outside.

According to Kant (1785), the moral law has three precise characteristics: it has a formal meaning (it does not focus attention on what we should do in each specific situation, but focuses on how we should generally behave); it requires compliance with duty (the law of reason must be implemented unconditionally); it needs inner conviction (the moral side of the action does not exist in the action itself, but finds its meaning in the underlying intentions).

Kantian ethical philosophy is closely aligned with the deontological strand (Donaldson & Werhane 2008), which considers the reference to unbreakable and absolute principles to be paramount and fundamental. In particular, the Kantian approach bases these principles on an immediate, purely rational awareness, thus becoming extremely formal and general, devoid of any reference to concrete content or specific facts and actions.

In Kant's ethical thought, absoluteness and formality (as opposed to concreteness and specificity) are moreover shown to be extremely synergistic. For example, the maxim of the categorical imperative to only behave in a manner that is generalizable reinforces its absoluteness and uncompromising nature.

Fundamental works applying Kantian ethics to business ethics are those of Bowie (1991; 1998; 2002) and Beauchamp et al. (2004). These authors propose so-called “Kantian Capitalism”, founded on the application of the categorical imperative to business ethics, with the following aims:

- a) Build an economic system in which the economic-egoistic view is overcome thanks to the Kantian idea that in every rational being, there is immediately an absolute moral

principle to be respected, also showing that in the end, this can also be useful for company profitability (Bowie, 1991).

- b) Initiate industrial relations based on the human person as the overriding value, applying another categorical maxim that dictates that the human person should always be treated as an end, never as a means, thus laying down certain imperative principles that for Bowie can also serve for efficient, effective management that is in keeping with human dignity:

1 “The business firm should consider the interests of all the affected stakeholders in any decision it makes.

2. The firm should have those affected by the firm's rules and policies participate in the determination of those rules and policies before they are implemented.

3. It should not be the case that, for all decisions, the interests of one stakeholder automatically take priority.

4. When a situation arises where it appears that the interest of one set of stakeholders must be subordinated to the interests of another set of stakeholders, that decision should not be made solely on the grounds that there is a greater number of stakeholders in one group than in another.

5. No business rule or practice can be adopted which is inconsistent with the first two formulations of the categorical imperative.

6. Every profit-making firm has a limited, but genuine, duty of beneficence.

7. Every business firm must establish procedures designed to ensure that relations among stakeholders are governed by rules of justice” (Bowie, 2002, p.9).

However, if it is to be consistently Kantian, the application of the categorical imperative to business management in the two cases indicated above (a and b) must take very good account, both of the distinction between *conformity, and goodwill connected to duty in and itself* and, linked to the previous point, of the difference between the *categorical imperative* (ethics in and of itself) and the *hypothetical imperative* (linked to the achievement of a purpose).

With regard to goal a), according to Kantian Capitalism, a behavior may conform to a moral rule for various reasons, but it is only authentically moral if it is independent of any factual situation, including the absence of sanctions or the lack of common consent.

According to this paper, this perspective can therefore have important “critical” implications, especially when operating in a market with strong (more or less fair) competition or legislation with deficiencies, lack of substantial enforcement of consumer, employee, or competition rights, not to mention the problems of greenwashing in the various forms of socio-environmental reporting.

In this view, any behavior motivated with a purpose extrinsic to the moral law or benefit is considered not truly moral. Compliance with the moral law must not be motivated by a benefit, but the latter must only be a side effect. Being socially responsible is a duty in itself, irrespective of the fact that it is also a forward-looking corporate policy and may include economic benefits.

Beyond the rigidity and possible limitations in the philosophical foundation of the Kantian position, which implies a disinterested duty motivated solely on the basis of self-awareness of rational beings, even those who do not share it could not but observe the soundness of socially responsible behavior linked to respect for moral law in and of itself.

One also wonders to what extent the Kantian application to management is fully congruent with Kant's thought. Indeed, Bowie (1991) states that “meaningful work” in the Kantian sense, linked not to an economic-egoistic vision, but a “committed altruism”: “...is more likely to raise profits. I suggest that a firm should take as its primary purpose providing meaningful work for employees” (Bowie, 1991, p. 1).

From a strictly Kantian point of view, and even beyond Kant's thinking on economics, the achievement of success through responsible behaviour can only be seen as a kind of useful side-effect of a good application of the categorical imperative, but it is not the condition for fully implementing ethics, which has been seen to be independent of the results achieved.

As a conclusion to this section, it may be noted that for Bowie's "Kantianism", it remains to be clarified whether and to what extent something like corporate success achieved through responsible behavior is linked to a full ethical awareness rather than to comply with principles that benefit long-term competitiveness. This second vision of responsible management can certainly be useful for all stakeholders, but in the Kantian view, it would be more a compliance with a hypothetical imperative rather than an absolute ethical duty.

3. Implications for research and practice (narrative approach)

As stated earlier, business ethics is a trending topic. Many companies are producing codes of ethics for the specific purpose of promoting responsibility, not least because they find that social responsibility pays off (Van Lwijk, 2000). However, Bakan (2004) states that even with ethical intentions, companies are invariably tempted to act in their own interest to the exclusion of other stakeholders (Parker, 2014).

Hence the research question of this paper: are or are not all companies that seem to act according to a strong ethical logic actually morally motivated?

The research methodology in this work follows a narrative approach (Stewart, 1997) that is well suited to qualitative analysis (with reference to phronetic research: Dunne, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1995; Flaming, 2001; Flyvbjerg, 2004; Kinsella & Pitman, 2012) and also with the help of interviews in newspapers and on the web.

The Italian sociologist Gallino (2005) made his contribution on the topic of corporate social responsibility, or rather, corporate irresponsibility, by offering a simple yet comprehensive definition: "A company is defined as irresponsible if, aside from elementary legal obligations, it assumes that it does not have to answer to any public or private authority nor to public opinion regarding the economic, social and environmental consequences of its activities" (Lab. lavoro, 2017). Gallino focused on certain corporate scandals, the consequence – according to the author – of the irresponsible actions of those companies that subordinate their management to success at any cost.

As the Enron case has shown (Baker, 2003), it should also be reiterated that the publication of ethical codes and the drafting of social reports cannot be sufficient to qualify a company as socially responsible (Owen et al., 2000; Bakan, 2004; Rusconi, 2018). Both the papers by Graafland (2002) and Kok et al. (2001) present the case of Shell as a very interesting example for understanding the choice between profits and principles. Continuing, Bakan (2004) reports on some irresponsible actions by a selection of large multinationals. For example, the systematic way in which General Electric – one of the world's largest and most respected multinationals –

committed a series of violations of environmental protection, workplace safety and misleading advertising regulations over a period of 11 years (1990-2001) is emblematic of how in those cases compliance with the law was seen as a mere matter of corporate profitability subordinated to a cost-benefit analysis: the profits achievable from the illegal activity were compared with the amount of the penalty, calculating the probability of being discovered and found guilty (Bakan, 2004, p. 97).

With regard to the China Labour Watch association, which documented the working conditions in a Guangdong factory, a well-known newspaper (La Repubblica) wrote:

"Young people between 14 and 16 years old work in every department. The working day starts at 7.30 am and ends at 9 pm with two breaks for lunch and dinner, but overtime is mandatory. In the peak months of April and May...the normal shift is from 7 am to 11 pm, with a Sunday off only every two weeks... The monthly pay is 757 yuan (€75), but 44% is deducted to cover room and board. Room and board mean dormitories in which 16 workers are crammed on metal cots and a canteen where 50 workers were poisoned by rotten bamboo shoots. In the factory, managers maintain a climate of intimidation, including physical violence... A month's salary is always kept by the company as blackmail: if a worker leaves, they lose it" (La Repubblica. it, 19 May 2005).

The same newspaper stated a few days later that the same inspections by some multinationals at these companies proved to be little more than a "farce", as they were announced so far in advance and at the same time the so-called "instructions for deception" were distributed to the workers, i.e. false answers on working conditions specifically written by the department heads (La Repubblica. it, 23 May 2005).

The example of Benetton, a multinational clothing company based in Ponzano Veneto, in the province of Treviso, is also quite telling. In 1994, following some unethical incidents involving other companies in the textile and clothing sector, the company adopted a code of ethics in line with the Fair Trade Charter issued by the I.L.O. The Benetton Group's Code of Ethics read as follows:

"The Group's activity is guided by the principles contained in the Code and the Group is committed not to enter into or pursue any relations with anyone that does not agree with its contents and spirit" and that this "is valid throughout Italy and abroad".

The company, therefore, launched an ethical campaign against labor exploitation in accordance with core labor standards. However, in 1998 the company was accused of employing child labor (children under the age of 14) in a factory in Turkey. The company defended itself by claiming that it was not aware of this fact and that it would – once verified – take action according to its code of ethics.

The year before the subprime mortgage crisis erupted, the 2007 Annual Report of Lehman Brothers read as follows:

"We effectively managed our risk, balance sheet, and expenses. Ultimately, our performance in 2007 was about our "One Firm" sense of shared responsibility and careful management of our liquidity, capital commitments, and balance sheet positions. We benefited from our senior-level focus on risk management and, more importantly, from a culture of risk management at every level of the Firm. (...) Our reputation is critical in maintaining our relationships with clients, investors, regulators, and the general public, and is a key focus in our risk management efforts."

British Petroleum also reaffirmed its commitment to environmental protection in its 2009 Sustainability Report, before the environmental catastrophe on the Louisiana coast.

The shocking case of Rosarno, Calabria, was brought to light by an investigation by The Ecologist and subsequently taken up by The Independent, which revealed how in southern Italy the harvesting of oranges destined for the production of a well-known brand's soft drinks relied on the slavery of undocumented migrants from Africa, often after reaching the Italian coast following a dangerous crossing. Coca Cola allegedly reacted by simply cutting its ties and cancelling its contracts with the Calabrian orange companies, in defence of its image as a “clean” multinational. Also in 2010, the National Labor Committee accused the Chinese manufacturer KYE of slavery for recruiting 1,000 student workers nominally between the ages of 16 and 17, but often actually under 15, who were forced to work for 15 hours a day, seven days a week. There were also apparently many women between the ages of 18 and 25 working under similar conditions and who were paid 65 cents an hour. Even when presented with official data, KYE continued to insist that working conditions at its sites were perfect.

These cases, which are well known in the media and are also now cited in the literature on social responsibility, basically concern the inconsistency between—ethical codes/social responsibility documents and actual conduct. It is a question of considering how Kantian ethics and Kantian Capitalism can, whether one agrees with them or not, contribute to a better foundation of a truly ethical motivation, beyond the image offered.

Of course, the cases mentioned are only general examples related to this research question, and there are clearly excellent or otherwise compliant organizations in terms of ethics and responsibility. Moreover, it should not be overlooked that in recent years the engagement of advocacy associations, N.G.O.s, etc., and some supranational authorities (starting with the United Nations, Global Compact, etc., and the European Union in particular) may certainly have contributed to improving the situation, not to mention that some emerging countries, such as China and India, have greatly improved their economic situation. However, the fact remains that the risk of abuse, gaslighting, and greenwashing is ever-present, and not only in the for-profit world.

4. Final observations

Respect for ethical values can help achieve a balance between economic and social responsibilities. However, the formal adoption of moral or ethical values should be increasingly functional to the conscious fulfillment of social responsibility, i.e. an increasingly ethically motivated adherence to rules and standards, not contrived or mere passive “adaptation”.

This, therefore, seems more topical than ever considering the risk of also being faced with organizations that engage in irresponsible behavior despite the fact that they have Codes of Ethics, Codes of Conduct, sustainability reports, and so on, and advertise the many social initiatives they are engaged in on their institutional websites.

In the previous section, we saw cases of companies that seem to have a socially responsible posture, but which, in fact, conduct themselves in a manner that is anything but moral, sometimes even socially irresponsible.

The above considerations can easily be linked to Kant's thought that behavior, apparently dictated by a supposed morality, may, in fact, be driven by motivations that are not necessarily moral in themselves. The Kantian demand for a self-founded and totally disinterested morality can

thus constitute a bulwark against various forms of immoral degeneration or simply resulting from the use of ethics for reasons of pure convenience or fear of sanctions.

Based on what was presented by Garriga & Melé (2004), the Kantian vision applied to business management can thus be framed from the perspective of ethical theories, in which, as Bakan (2004) puts it: “Corporations are now often expected to deliver the good, not just the goods; to pursue values, not just value; and to help make the world a better place” (p.44).

This analysis of Kantian Capitalism, regardless of whether it is completely accepted, therefore contributes to never forgetting the risk of dissolving discussions on responsibility, ethics and success into a vision based not on sound morality, but on convenience for the individual and/or one community to the detriment of another. Good fruits are now nevertheless being seen (Social Development Goals, Non-Financial Statement, Sustainability reports, labour, environmental and transparency laws, Environmental Social Governance Indexes), but a lack of full ethical awareness and a reduction of initiatives to mere compliance, if not exploitation and even manipulation, would be extremely detrimental both to the economy and to the spread of good human relations and civic sense.

In conclusion, the contribution made by this paper could be summarised as follows: in today's complex and unstable world, in order to be able to do good in one's core business it is necessary for social responsibility to be increasingly based on an awareness of ethics per se, whether based on Kantian thought or some other source, philosophical and/or religious. This is the only way to prevent economic, environmental, and political turbulence from sometimes leading to immoral or purely exploitative behavior, which could worsen the way of life for everyone in the long term.

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