

Graduate Employability and the Principle of Potentiality: An Aspect of the Ethics of HRM

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Received: 27 June 2011 / Accepted: 28 July 2012 / Published online: 17 August 2012
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Abstract The recruitment of the next generation of workers is of central concern to contemporary HRM. This paper focuses on university campuses as a major site of this process, and particularly as a new domain in which HRM's ethical claims are configured, in which it sets and answers a range of ethical questions as it outlines the 'ethos' of the ideal future worker. At the heart of this ethos lies what we call the 'principle of potentiality'. This principle is explored through a sample of graduate recruitment programmes from the *Times Top 100 Graduate Employers*, interpreted as ethical exhortations in HRM's attempt to shape the character of future workers. The paper brings the work of Georg Simmel to the study of HRM's ethics and raises the uncomfortable question that, within discourses of endless potentiality, lie ethical dangers which bespeak an unrecognised 'tragedy of culture'. We argue that HRM fashions an ethos of work which de-recognises human limits, makes a false promise of absolute freedom, and thus becomes a tragic proposition for the individual.

Keywords Recruitment · University · Ethos · Morality · Potential · Simmel

Introduction

Studies of the experience of HRM's ethics have predominately concentrated upon intra-organisational dynamics (Townley 1994; Legge 1995; Winstanley and Woodall 2000; Greenwood 2002). Legge (in Mabey et al. 1998, p. 15) talks of the privileging of the managerial stratum (Wood 1995, 1996; Huselid 1995) and the marginalising of the concerns of those on the 'shop or office floor', who are excluded or disproportionately represented in analyses of HRM and its ethics (e.g. Millward et al. 1992).

This paper introduces an aspect of HRM's expansion which is becoming increasingly noteworthy: practices of employability within universities. It focuses on the UK university sector that has witnessed the growth of an intricate and increasingly structured apparatus of job and internship recruitment. Employability, with its arsenal of ideas, images and practices, has become a stable channel for targeting the student body long before employment itself begins. Universities are now significant sites where HRM's ethics features as a compulsory experience for students trying to make sense of the value of their studies. This pressing question allows certain HRM discourses and practices to promote a vision of the future employee (talented, creative, dynamic, and full of potential) which students are encouraged to pursue if they are to secure access to highly valued positions.

We investigate how this ideal character is formulated as a form of directing students' understanding of employment. Including students in discussions of HRM's ethics is especially important because: (a) they are more susceptible and more vulnerable to HRM's moral imperatives; (b) they lack the sources of organised and collective political representation (to such an extent that student unions themselves are colonised by the concern with their members'

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employability); (c) they are faced with an unavoidable moral dilemma: the demands of employment deprive them drastically of possibilities of resistance, ironic distance and subversion (Fleming and Spicer 2003).

Today, students are under unprecedented pressure to acquire the ethos necessary to engage with HRM's moral programme. As Carl Gilleard, Chief Executive of *The Association of Graduate Recruiters*, explained:

Recruiters are under intense pressure this year dealing with a huge number of applications from graduates for a diminishing pool of jobs. Those of our members who took part in the survey reported a total of 686,660 applications since the beginning of the 2010 recruitment campaign. (Association of Graduate Recruiters 2010)

This represents a doubling of the number of graduate job seekers since 2009, leading to an average rate of 83 candidates for any job offered (Taylor 2011). Thus graduates face a demanding labour market with an increasingly complex set of ethical dimensions. To elucidate these dimensions, we introduce 'ethos' understood as a process of configuring a particular ideal character, rather than 'ethics' understood as systems of rules, rights or procedures. 'Ethos' becomes an analytical category through which we investigate HRM's intervention in the formation of students' self-understanding in relation to employment. We explore some of the channels through which HRM disseminates these claims and argue that the essential feature of this ideal character is based upon what we term *the principle of potentiality*: a representation of the human subject as capable of becoming always *more* than what she/he is, and of work as a process of freeing up, liberating and mobilising her/his inner qualities always ready to be actualised. On this basis, HRM represents future employment as an always hopeful, positive and inescapable imperative for self-fulfilment.

We analyse the dangers of this ethos of 'more' by introducing Georg Simmel's fundamental concept of the 'tragedy of culture' (Simmel 1997, 2010). We show that HRM's one-sided portrayal of work deprives students of the possibility of being their own moral agents not by claiming that they should submit to a negation of their individuality (Arendt 2006; Bauman 1989), but precisely through an overextended and unsustainable promise of its affirmation. Potentiality forms a subtle and dangerous ethical platform from which HRM seeks to legitimise its claims in respect to both work and life as a whole.

Simmel's Thinking on Ethics and Its Relevance to Business and Management

We turn to Simmel's last statement of his theoretical conception of culture and ethics (available in English only

since 2010). In these final essays, which he considered as his intellectual testament and most important formulation of his philosophy, Simmel discusses explicitly the relationship between ethics and culture. In this respect, Simmel's thought is unexplored in debates about ethics and management, yet it adds a new angle in the analysis of concrete ethical practices from a perspective articulating ethics as the encounter of the individual subject with his or her subjectivity. Simmel seeks to overcome an understanding of ethics as a mere process of adherence to purely external moral imperatives. He elaborates a view in which the individual is not confronted by a moral ideal always originating in a universal framework lying outside and above the person. Rather he explores how personal moral ideals, conceived as an obligation to the self, arise from within the vital demands of that individual life itself. In his last essay, he grounds this conception through two complementary categories: 'actuality' and the 'Ought' (Simmel 2010, pp. 99–154). These are the key categories through which Simmel addresses ethics as a permanent process in which an 'individual life' revolves around the tension between the limits of its 'actuality' and the open demands of that which always exceeds it, what he calls 'the *Ought*' (ibid.).

Simmel explores a dimension of ethical life that is rarely problematised in discussions of business ethics: the process through which a fundamental tension is set up within an individual life between its own ideal of full self-realisation (the inescapable, imperious 'Ought'), and the permanent insufficiency of its actual achievements. As we argue in this paper, HRM's deployment of the principle of potentiality represents a particular instantiation of this tension. In the domain of employability, HRM seeks to present potentiality and its actualisation as the inner necessity of the individual's own development. HRM mobilises the idea of individual potential, the idea that there is always something 'more' to be found within one's 'own vital powers', in an attempt to place its own imperatives in the interiority of the self so that this self becomes its own 'despot' (Simmel 2010, p. 105). Moreover, the confrontation between 'actuality' and the 'Ought' is where, for Simmel, the constant tragic character of the ethical lies. The tragic, in his understanding, is predicated upon a permanent conflict in which that which 'I actually am' can never be united with that which 'I ought to be', and upon 'my' enduring failure to resolve this conflict.

Important critical analyses have been preoccupied with deciphering the mechanisms by which HRM develops as a domain of practices and ideas through which business organisations appropriate the subjectivity of working subjects. In the three decades since it became part of the managerial arsenal, the domain of HRM has continued to proliferate a variety of means that belong both within

organisations but have also become dispersed into other spheres of social life. Townley anticipated this process almost 20 years ago when she argued that HRM consists of ‘seemingly disparate personnel techniques’ concerning ‘the operation of power and the day-to-day practices which constitute people’s experiences of work’ (1994, p. 1). In the intervening period, HRM has continued to inflate its repertoire along these lines. Townley focused her analysis through the lens of Foucault’s work on disciplinary practices and she was especially interested in the operation of HRM *within* organisations. In this paper, we heed her original message and investigate one aspect of HRM’s expansion beyond specialised departments within organisations and beyond institutional boundaries. In the case of employability, we explore one of the recent occurrences through which a segment of HRM practices lays claim to the ethical constitution of those who are not yet employed, but whose character it seeks to incorporate into its own programme.

The core trope HRM deploys in this arena is that of potentiality as an inner and innate property of the individual. Consequently, the individual appears not as empty or passive; rather it is posited as a ‘plenitude’ towards whose mobilisation the subject herself or himself is ethically obligated. The premise from which this ethical dimension operates is that the ‘self’ is permanently confronting its own interiority in the name of its own plenitude. Self-actualisation is not simply a process of realising the values and ideals of an organisation external to the ‘self’, but it is a call to realise those values and ideals which are purportedly internal to the subject itself. To this extent, the ethics of employability differ from, for example, Ten Bos’s and Rhodes’ ‘games of exemplarity’ (2003) which are premised upon the inner emptiness of subjectivity as defining the worker. From Bartleby, ‘puppets and robots’, to knowledge workers, management approaches the subject as an ‘empty vessel’ always awaiting to be filled by organisational values and morals (Ten Bos and Rhodes 2003, p. 419). The subject ‘appears as “man without qualities.” He is “a figure of generic being,” even being as such, being and nothing more’ (Ten Bos and Rhodes 2003, p. 407). From this premise, potency is interpreted as devoid of content. The conceptualisation of the subject in the job adverts presented below operates in the opposite register: potentiality is defined as an overabundance of qualities rather than ‘a clean sheet’ on which to inscribe the required characteristics’ (Ten Bos and Rhodes 2003, p. 404).

In Simmel’s understanding of the relationship between ethics and subjectivity, the individual is never empty. Rather, he offers a conception of the ethical process as part of personal life: ‘... the Ought of every moment [is] the heir and the bearer of responsibility of all that we have ever

been, done, and been obligated to’ (Simmel 2010, p. 154). HRM addresses graduates through the discourse of potentiality in order to insert itself surreptitiously precisely into this process; it seeks to make its ‘Ought’ the ‘Ought’ of the individual’s personal life. As Simmel explains, the question of actualising one’s potential becomes an obligation to one’s ‘self’: ‘Can you desire that this action of yours should define your entire life?’ (Simmel 2010, p. 151). In this sense, HRM’s positing of subjectivity as ‘full of potential’ faces us with an instance that is perhaps ethically more dangerous than the premise of an empty subject.

From Ethics to Ethos: The *Principle of Potentiality*

Complex systems of interaction between universities, public and private employer organisations, and students, around the theme of *employability* have led to its move from a relatively marginal concern in UK universities, to the centre ground of pedagogy and its obligations throughout the academic curriculum. In fact, it has become institutionalised as a comparative indicator for university performance. It is customarily now used to compile university league tables as an obligatory dimension for the justification of higher education (*The Times Good University Guide, The Guardian University Guide, The Independent Complete University Guide, FT Universities*).

This is notable because it brings into stark view HRM’s ability to expand out of its organisational habitat into the wider social body. For an inquiry into HRM’s ethics this is significant. This expansion occurs precisely as the dissemination of a system of ethical values to a new set of stakeholders (cf. Greenwood and De Cieri 2007). These values revolve around the possibilities of work and employment as a fundamental part of the meaning of students’ whole personal lives. How HRM addresses younger generations proves to be a particularly fertile site of investigation. It reveals the dynamic formation of an ideal ethos of work in an environment in which HRM is culturally free from its normal organisational obligations and constraints. Within the sphere of employability, HRM acts unrestricted by the formal context governing an employment contract. It expresses its ideas and images about subjectivity and work without censoring the measure of its demands.

To investigate HRM’s ethical apparatus in this new domain requires a conceptual basis. For this purpose, we propose the transformation of the category of ‘ethics’ into that of ‘ethos’. Jones et al. make an essential connection between the words ‘ethics’ and ‘ethos’: ‘Indeed, the very word ‘ethics’ comes to us from the ancient Greek word ‘ethos’, meaning character, and also meaning habits or dwelling place’ (2005, pp. 56–57). In the glossary of the

volume, they further qualify the term ‘ethos’ by showing how what unites every interpretation of the word since the ancient Greeks is that its meaning is essentially bound up ‘with the relationship between image and ideal’ (Jones et al. 2005, p. 158). What is at stake here is not merely an etymological exercise; rather the authors argue that ‘ethos’ grounds ‘ethics’, and that ‘ethos’ expresses something which is ‘ideal’. We take up this distinction and suggest that the concept of ‘ethos’ becomes an additional critical instrument in the analysis of HRM’s ethical claims.

In mainstream understanding (e.g. Foote 2001; Gravett 2003; Deckop 2006), HRM’s ethical problems appear as episodes, as self-enclosed acts within a formal system of principles and norms (inscribed in rules and procedures, or mutually assumed). When act and principle do not correspond, an incident occurs. This is the general strategy for understanding management morality in, for example, Bowie (1999), or Solomon (2004), through their use of Kant’s or Aristotle’s moral philosophies. A solution can be found either in a reapplication of existing principles, or in their extension to include a new contingency. In other words, *ethics* is understood as a system of rules and imperatives supposed to capture the ‘good’ in a static set of references against which judgements can be made. The ethical dimension of organisational systems appears in contained acts, and mainly when an act does not correspond to a principle and ethical shortcomings become visible. In a static conception of ethics, even the character of the worker appears as a fixed ethical template. The classic example is F.W. Taylor’s *Story of Schmidt* (1911 [2003]): Schmidt is set as a fixed reference for the ‘good worker’. He is an *ideal type* prescribing mechanical imitation. In fact, ‘Schmidt’ is himself constructed upon the principle of stable mechanical imitation of movements ordered by another agent: ‘you will do exactly as this man tells you to-morrow, from morning till night’ (Taylor 2003, p. 142, or cf. Ten Bos and Rhodes 2003). As Legge (in Mabey et al. 1998), Winstanley and Woodall (2000), or Greenwood (2002) have argued, the ethical dimensions of HRM are treated mechanically and naively in mainstream approaches, if and when they are recognised at all.

However, the focus can shift from the *ethics of the system* to the way in which the system seeks to construct the *ethos of the ideal employee*. The analysis then revolves around a different set of questions: *who* is the *ideal character* HRM constructs and appeals to? Through what *ideal images* (cf. Jones et al. 2005, p. 158) does HRM justify its principles and practices as ethical exhortations? This places HRM in a new light: how it operates when it is *not* in an ethical crisis. In our case, we ask how it works out the logic of its ethical justifications and how it promotes its ethics outside organisational settings. For example, what is the ethos of work in the following address: ‘Whether you’re a

quick thinker, a good talker or a creative spark, it’s your individual strengths we are interested in, not just what you’re studying’ (Ernst&Young, in *TT100* 2011, p. 135)? In statements such as: ‘what gets you going?’, ‘everybody has talent!’, ‘where will your ideas end up?’, employability discourses approach the relation between work and subjectivity very differently than Ford or Taylor. The demands for mechanical uniformity cease, to be replaced by new forms of address inciting the audience to a dynamic, open and personal ethical engagement with work and self, rather than bureaucratic obedience to impersonal rules. HRM produces a personalised ethos of work as if the latter were a relationship of the ‘self’ to its *own* continuous movement.

The current emphasis on individual potentiality enters precisely at this point: it seeks to name the very principle of this movement through a basic orientation towards work as an opportunity for *self-realisation* and *self-perfection*. It names the ‘self’ (in search of self-realisation) as the central character of work, both in the role of *positive mover* and *positive movement*. If we understand *ethos* as a dynamic principle then HRM’s ethics is no longer a matter of static systems of rules. Rather HRM appears as a subtle and dangerous process configuring future work as a totalising experience of life in which the self should mobilise itself in relation to its *potentialities*, and see work as the place for their *actualisation*. In the light of this ethos, work is not simply the production of ‘things’, but also the continuous reproduction of potentialities themselves.

The term ‘ethos’ therefore describes how the character of the future employee is prefigured in terms of a set of ideal values, customs and habits. ‘Ethos’ is also used as a heuristic category to identify the principle which underpins and sustains this concrete set of values. The images deployed in employability discourses act as an aspirational benchmark against which students should weigh their own future character. The concept of ‘ethos’ is not presented here as a substitute for ‘ethics’. ‘Ethos’ is a category that brings into view how HRM acts not only as a system of moral rules and regulations that seek to act *externally* upon the behaviour of individuals. Rather, we aim to explore how HRM seeks to insert itself within the personal, internal, process of self-interpretation and character formation of the subject. In this sense, the ethical process is not reduced simply to one event or act judged against a normative framework, but points to a constant and active moral engagement with one’s own manner of being, as we show through the illustrations below.

Graduate recruitment in universities consists of: complex career services, employability courses, training facilities, events involving successful alumni and interns and various forms of corporate recruitment campaigns on campuses (such as fairs, and open days). These practices rely upon a sophisticated and relentless arsenal of images

and slogans, materials, exercises and encounters mainly between elite corporations and academic institutions. They promote a vision of the future employee addressing the students' most pressing question: 'who should I be in order to gain access to such highly valued jobs'? This question underpins these materials and is distributed through various media. It can be found in print (periodicals such as *The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers*, recruitment brochures or weekly sections of major newspapers); in audio and video formats; and throughout the World Wide Web (from websites, to *YouTube* and increasingly also in the quasi-personalised sphere of 'instantaneous' social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter). On the one hand, HRM's extension in the world of higher education is widespread; on the other, it is substantially homogenous in thematic content.

To navigate this considerable material, we focus on a central dissemination device: job advertisements. As opposed to products and services, job advertisements have a different dynamic. They seek to align the respondent to the ethical programme they articulate; they invite self-scrutiny, the reevaluation of identity, and the espousal of prescribed values. They consist of images and texts whose interaction outlines an ethical programme reflecting the intentions of their authors with respect to the organisation, the nature of work offered, and most importantly, the nature of the human subject invited to consider them. They differ from other kinds of advertisements because of the ambiguity inherent in the relationship of exchange they set up. On the one hand, a job advertisement appears to 'sell' a workplace, a job in a desirable corporation by promoting the virtuous intentions of a potential employer. On the other hand, what the recipient of such adverts is asked to 'buy' is his or herself in an idealised, Utopian future. Thus, an inversion occurs: the recipient becomes the one who ought to 'sell' her or his character. The distinctive dynamic of the job advert is the juxtaposition of the actual self contemplating the advert, and the idealised self-portrayed in it: the viewing subject and the object of the advert become the same. The viewer is asked to look into a mirror of her or himself in a future, purportedly accomplished, state. The burden of the decision to pursue that future is placed upon the viewer.

Such adverts require a combination of analytical operations attending both to images and textual content. There are various frameworks available, such as Panofsky's (1955) or Koselleck's (1985, 2002). However, one of Barthes' analyses focused on advertising is more directly pertinent to this paper. In his *Rhetoric of the Image* (1977), he provides an effective framework for exploring this medium. We will deploy some of its aspects in the discussion below.

With regard to advertisements, the question of sources also requires systematic attention because they appear easy

to dismiss as ephemeral material. However, in university contexts, a series of sources have become established as quasi-canonical. One significant source, *The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers*, first published in 1999, addresses UK students and graduates. In 2010, it was 'compiled from face-to-face interviews with 16,114 graduates, ... who were asked the open-ended question, *Which employer do you think offers the best opportunities for graduates?*' (www.top100graduateemployers.com¹).

TT100 is representative of HRM's discourses in the sphere of recruitment and allows a survey of the themes central to its ethical dimensions. We have surveyed it since its publication, but focus here on a subset of five illustrative examples which encapsulate the themes highlighted in this paper. We analyse: (a) the primary form of the adverts (their linguistic and iconic structures, according to Barthes 1977, pp. 33–37); (b) we then identify the denoted and connoted messages around which they revolve (ibid., pp. 42–46); (c) finally, we distil the principle by which these materials articulate the *ethos* of the ideal future employee (ibid., pp. 46–51). At a primary level, these adverts are bombastic and excessive combinations of icons and linguistic material pursuing an intense, hyperbolic effect. Instead of dismissing them as mere trivia, as Barthes (1977, p. 33) argues, '...in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is frank, or at least emphatic.' So, the questions that immediately arise regard the serious conceptual and ethical denotations and connotations that these artefacts contain. What system of thought makes them possible? On what ground do they seek their justification? The next level of analysis aims to extract the key managerial concepts denoted: continuous 'investment' in personal 'growth', 'talent' and self-expression through work, the appeal to 'unique' and 'extraordinary' personal qualities, to the 'true self', to the 'whole personality', and the notion of a 'protective' and 'supportive' organisational culture. Finally, the analysis leads to the core principle connoted by these managerial imperatives. What emerges is a triad constantly reiterating the *ethos* of the future ideal employee: inner potential to be mobilised, work as a search for self-perfection, and work as self-performance in performative organisations.

The first example comes from 2010 and belongs to the legal firm Herbert Smith. This advert consists simply of a linguistic message. It revolves around the imperative exhortation: 'Invest in *yourself*. Do you want your legal training to turn you into a good lawyer or an exceptional

¹ The organisation that conducts these annual surveys is a consultancy called *High Fliers Research* (www.highfliers.co.uk accessed June 2011) that has been operating in this field since 1996 and whose annual study (entitled *The UK Graduate Careers Survey*) is the basis for a range of publications such as *TT100*.

talent?' (TT100 2010, p. 149, italics in original). Every word in the advert connotes, according to Barthes, the ethos of both the firm and the graduate applicant. Working for Herbert Smith is an 'investment'. This term, from the outset, denotes work as a process focused on the idea of a constructive use of the self, rather than a mere using up of the self in the service of another entity; it represents work not as a loss but as a *meaningful investment* in the full realisation of the self's possibilities. This is specified and emphasised in print by the word 'yourself' which is the largest. Moreover, this apparently simple message inserts in the relationship one of the key themes signalled above: that the aspiration of work is to go beyond a mere 'good' outcome and become an 'exceptional talent' as the only legitimate goal. Both 'exceptional' and 'talent' are tropes of ethical self-justification used by HRM to promote a particular conception of human resourcefulness. Two aspects denoted here need to be explained. First, the question suggests that a choice is offered, that it is up to the individual applicant to pursue the opportunity for self-development. The use of the pronouns 'you' and 'your' illustrates how this advert seeks to function as a mirror for the reader and make the ethical responsibility internal to the self. Second, this supposed choice implies that it should be considered in light of the reader's potential to become an 'exceptional talent' and not remain simply 'a good lawyer'. The message is therefore imperative, the answer can be only one: the development of '*my* exceptional talent' can be the only legitimate mode in which 'I' (any applicant) ought to approach work. This advert justifies such high expectations through their rationality as 'investment' in one's self-development. Moreover, it opens up an aspirational gap between merely 'good' and 'exceptional talent' as a stimulus for the continuous actualisation of personal possibilities. Finally, a training system is promised as supportive organisational context for this process.

The next example is even more emphatic. In 2009, Barclays Capital's advertisement is a simple blue page with the unequivocal linguistic message: 'M**IOCRITY? EXPECT EXCELLENCE', followed by the statement:

In our book, it's a dirty word. Average? Middling? Do not be so rude. At Barclays Capital, we believe the only acceptable way to do business is to strive for perfection in everything you do. The result? In just 11 years, we have grown from a new operation into one of the world's leading investment banks and there is nothing mediocre about that. EARN SUCCESS EVERY DAY. (2009, p. 95)

This uncompromising message glorifies the success of the company thus prescribing the ideal ethos of all those who work in it and setting a clear and absolute standard for those aspiring to join it: 'to strive for perfection in

everything you do.' The shift from 'we' to 'you' is the key in which the ethical message is conveyed. 'Perfection in everything you do' is justified by the rapid growth of the company. But perhaps more important is the connotation of the *possibility* of perfection itself. It is presented both as a horizon of possibility *for* the individual, and as a potentiality *of* the individual: 'earn success every day'. Thus the meaning of the entire advert is anchored in the absolute standard of perfection against which recruitment and selection processes ought to be expected.

A similar expression is developed currently by IBM. On a highly embellished website indicated by the advert published first in 2010, their standards are formulated as follows: 'Are you first? Green? Smart?'; if so, 'Join us. Let us build a smarter planet' (www-05.ibm.com/employment/uk/). 'First, green, smart' translate the company's wishes into ethical imperatives. The tone is commanding, elitist and unrestrained. The candidate has to be highly competitive and self-centred as an individual, yet at the same time be aware of collective ecological concerns. 'Are you smart?': a feeling of overconfidence in the estimation of one's self is also compulsory. To answer 'yes!' to all these questions is obligatory and self-selective.

Similarly, BAE Systems uses, in 2011, metaphors of ultimate natural performance around images of a dolphin, a panther, a harrier and a gecko as four of 'Nature's great performers' ('the ultimate sound system, land patrol, airborne hunter and acrobat', respectively). The central linguistic message anchoring these icons is: 'Outstanding performance is found in the natural world. And in ours. In fact, the perfect performance in nature is a great source of inspiration for our people, who are always looking to develop the most effective systems on earth. We are always looking to push the boundaries. Join us as a graduate or on placement, and develop your natural performance' (www.baesystems.com/Graduates/index.htm). Here too, the interrelated dimensions identified above are present in the powerful language of performance and perfection, combined with a common culture of continuous innovation and the pushing of boundaries, in which 'you' too can actualise 'your natural performance'.

These illustrations affirm the triad mentioned above: inner potential to be mobilised, work as a search for self-perfection, and work as self-performance. Yet this synthesis is not entirely sufficient; there is a further inflection in the formulation of the ideal ethos promoted by HRM that is necessary to understand the magnitude of its claims. To explore this final element, we add two more illustrations.

Ernst&Young's message in 2011 is 'Use what you've got to get where you want' (2011, p. 127). This is accompanied by two brochures. One, in high-quality print, is entitled 'Go from strength to strength'. The other, in small pocket format, is entitled 'A little book of strengths—What they are and why they matter to you' (Ernst&Young 2010b); it consists of six

iconic stories of self-realisation. Both brochures contain passionate texts addressing two central questions: ‘What are you going to do with your life?’ and ‘What does it look like when you find your strengths?’ (also on www.ey.com/uk/studentstories). The answers to these questions are key to understand the intense focus on the interiority of the ‘self’. This section of the main brochure is indicative:

We recruit graduates on the basis of their strengths. But what do we mean by ‘strengths’? Well it is more than ‘the things you are good at’. When we use our strengths, we do not just perform better—we also feel more energised and more like our true selves. As a result, we are more likely to enjoy what we are doing. (Ernst&Young 2010a, p. 28)

Central here is the reference to being ‘more like our true selves’, easily trivialised as cliché whilst being present throughout the text. This move connotes a subtle and powerful attempt to construct an ethical contract for which the binding principle is no more and no less than an ultimate commitment not simply to work as such, but to work as the full mobilisation of the self towards finding its true essence. But who is to make this promise? For whom is this ethical contract truly binding? It seems at first that it is the organisation making a promise—the brochures capture its voice and apparent commitment. However, what is actually asked is for the other, silent, party to this contract, to make the real commitment to participate in work as a full subject: ‘That’s why we encourage all of our people to bring their whole personality to work and develop new interests and abilities with every step’ (Ernst&Young 2010a, p. 2). What is at stake here is a fundamentally one-sided ethical bond: a human subject is asked to commit entirely its subjectivity, its totality, to work, whilst an organisation makes a conditional promise of employment based upon that total commitment. The former, if the challenge is taken up, is encouraged to stake and risk everything; the latter risks nothing—not even once commenting upon what happens to the subject who comes up against her or his limits. The relentless language of ‘strengths’, and the potential of individuals to overcome their limits, leaves out the concrete risk that limitations may put the subject in radical danger as an employee and as a person. The question of ‘my strengths’ combined with the pressure to always find *more* strengths becomes a one-sided burden of proof for the individual.

An essential aspect must be highlighted: the principle of potentiality functions on the fundamental basis that any discussion of the inherent limits of the human subject of work is silenced. This principle revolves around the logic of this silencing, namely as an active denial of human limits, which amounts to a fundamental denial of the very humanity of the student as audience. This important trait of

the discourse of potentiality can be linked to the category of ‘corrosion of character’ through which Sennett signals the dangers of success that befall his main characters, Rico and his wife, Janette (Sennett 1999, pp. 27–31). Access to abundant opportunities led paradoxically to a trap in which the permanent drift towards further possibilities actually deprived their personal and professional lives of a coherent direction or ‘lasting values’ (in contradistinction to Rico’s father’s life—Sennett 1999, p. 28). Their ethical predicament, borne out of their success, can also be understood through Thrift’s category of ‘fast subjectivity’, especially in the context of the rise of the ‘new performative economy’ (Thrift 2002, pp. 201–233). Notable in his analysis is the warning about the fragile nature of the ‘fast subject’ (ibid., p. 202). The incessant drive for *more* performativity, *more* innovation, *more* profitability, is, for Thrift, the engine of a business process underpinned by a culture of denial of limits. He questions its translation into an ethical imperative for the contemporary manager precisely because it renders fragile, almost to the point of collapse, any individual who has to carry the burden of an unlimited pursuit of personal and business performance.

A synthetic illustration of this ethical relationship should conclude this analysis. In 2009 (TT100, p. 185), in the middle of a simple black page, appears a single question: ‘Who am I?’ (at the bottom of the same page, the site nucleargraduates.com indicates the answer: ‘Explore the exceptional.’). This question is the crucial ingredient from an ethical standpoint. Through it, an apparently simple HRM procedure comes to pose the most fundamental problem of character. At the same time, it appears to make a fundamental promise. How can it be interpreted from the perspective of this paper?

We make a case that the underlying theme which unites all these examples is the *principle of potentiality*: a representation of the human subject as capable of becoming always *more* than what it is. Work is represented as a process of freeing up, liberating and mobilising the subject’s inner qualities always ready to be actualised. These recruitment materials and the overall apparatus of which they are part contain a promise made by HRM to transform work into a new kind of engagement between individuals and institutions, between private and public life, between work and non-work and between self-sacrifice and self-realisation. In its forms of address to graduate students HRM is in a powerful position from which to speak unopposed and unencumbered, in a one-sided monologue about its ethical programme. It seeks to make it impossible to resist. Who can object to the *idea* that work ought to be the central place where ‘I’ find and express ‘my’ essential humanity? The discourse of HRM is articulated in the language of what is considered to be an inalienable right today: to make one’s self what one wants

it to be. HRM makes the dangerous promise that through work any candidate can aspire to an always better future, a more fulfilled, self-realised self. It is through this promise that it attempts to captivate the imagination of future employees in a conception of work represented as a positive opportunity for *self-expression* and *self-realisation* rather than self-renunciation or repression. In these HRM practices, the ‘Self’ is reconceptualised as a source of immanent forces and energies, of potentialities which make the ‘Self’ *in itself* a store of human resourcefulness. The relationship between work and self is thus configured and presented as an ‘opportunity’: the self seems to be given the chance to work upon itself in order to release its own inner potential (also cf. Heelas 2002, p. 80). Creativity, innovation, knowledge, talent, drive and vision are always inner possibilities awaiting exploration and expression. All one needs to do is work hard, develop continuously, and take command of these innate possibilities.

The portrayal of potential as *innate* is a subtle shift from the previous uses of terms such as ‘actualisation’ or ‘fulfilment’ associated with Human Relations (especially in the work of Elton Mayo, cf. O’Connor 1999), the Human Potential Movement (cf. Tipton 1982), or Humanistic Psychology (Maslow 1954). In the adverts analysed above, the distinctive attribute of the human subject is that potential is predicated upon an *inner plenitude*, an *abundance of qualities* already possessed by the individual before entering employment. The way in which HRM uses this presupposition has a specific moral weight: by attributing innate plenitude to each and every individual, it acquires the platform from which it can issue the moral demand that the individual engages with its potential, that it takes control of its expression and mobilisation.

The Ethical Dangers of Potentiality

This final section draws on Simmel’s concept of ‘the tragedy of culture’ (Simmel 1997, 2010) and on the concept and moral exhortations of ‘more’ (Simmel 2010) in order to interpret the dangers inherent in HRM’s idealisations of potentiality.

In his last essay, Simmel brings together his thoughts on the nature of ethics as part of human existence (2010, pp. 99–154). The central idea supporting our argument is that ethics can never be entirely understood in static terms; rather ethics is part of the permanent movement of life (ibid., pp. 110–111). Thus normative, universal ethical systems are only a part of ethics, only moments in which the ethical is ‘frozen’ and made visible. To the contrary, Simmel understands the ethical as a movement of individual, subjective life, the continuous unfolding of human existence as an ethical process irreducible to mere episodes

in which an individual comes into confrontation or accord with an external normative system (ibid., pp. 105–106, 111). Moreover, Simmel stresses that the ethical life of individuals is also defined by a permanent and irreducible tension. Here his most powerful thought, characterising his entire work, is indispensable, namely, his conception of ethics as part of what he calls the ‘tragedy of culture’ (Simmel 1997, 2010). Simmel understood culture as always bound up with a separation between objectified cultural forms existing above individuals, and culture as the lived experience of the concrete human subject. The ‘tragedy of culture’ becomes in his last essay the synthesis of his understanding of the dangerous condition of ethics:

Creative life is constantly producing something that is not life, that somehow destroys life, that opposes life with its own valid claims. Life cannot express itself except in forms which have their own independent existence and significance. This paradox is the real, ubiquitous tragedy of culture. (Simmel 1997, p. 94)

How might the ethos revolving around the principle of potentiality be interpreted in this light? What dangers lurk behind its overwhelming positivity? The succinct answer is that through the idiom of potentiality, HRM produces a cultural object (the ideal ethos of the future worker) that becomes so rigid and overwhelming that it endangers precisely the cultural subject of which it seeks to speak so positively. This is the fundamental ethical danger in the principle of potentiality: it expresses a sense of moral urgency to be heeded by individuals without allowing the limits of this exhortation to appear.

The first step in explaining this danger is to re-read HRM’s call upon the human subject to work as a subject capable of becoming always *more* than what it is. The essential element, the operative ethical word, in this message is the word ‘more’. It appears in full force, for example, in Barclays’ 2010 graduate address: ‘See more. Be more’ (TT100 2010, p. 91). The word ‘more’ is intense because it has multiple functions in these exhortations. First, ‘more’ shows how HRM *posits* vigorously the existence of potential, how it affirms with enthusiastic certainty that in each person something ‘more’ exists which can and should always be actualised. Second, this affirmation is not simply neutral; rather it is always an estimation of the worth of ‘more’ as being *entirely good*. The call appears as a valid moral claim. By affirming ‘your potential’, HRM affirms its own ‘goodness’ encouraging the indubitable goodness of the generic character it configures. These two aspects of the word ‘more’ are visible in such statements. But besides them two rather threatening senses of the ‘more’ are also necessarily present. ‘More’, as the

predicate of potentiality, also implies in every occurrence and with respect to every individual recipient, her or his actual insufficiency. To aspire to ‘more’ means that what ‘I’ already am is never enough: ‘my’ present must always succumb to a ‘more’ perfectible, ‘more’ fulfilled future ‘me’. The principle of potentiality contains a moral paradox: it is based upon an evaluation of the concrete individual as always *insufficient*, whilst promising a future of abundant personal achievement. Thus a final operation of the word ‘more’ occurs in the displacement of the essential ethical question onto the individual. It obliges the individual to the profound and irreducibly personal *question*: am *I* truly the ideal resource of ‘more potential’? What if I do not possess this requisite excess of qualities? ‘Who am I?’, the question asked directly by *NuclearGraduates*, is not simply ‘positive’ and affirming; it is also the ground of a thorny, permanent anxiety.

In these interrelated senses, the category ‘more’ defines the way in which the ethical principle of potentiality characterises HRM’s intervention in graduate recruitment. The idealised ethos of the future graduate employee turns into an objectified dangerous form which relentlessly sustains its demands for ‘more’. However, HRM abandons the subject precisely when the real pressing question is asked. At this point, the individual is entirely on its own, confronted with the disquieting problem of personal limits and the prospect of having to face the impossible public answer: ‘No. I cannot be more than I am.’ What would that mean? What sort of working life can be envisaged if the dominant demand is to ‘be more’? The exhortation to explore one’s potentiality, despite its apparently democratic and egalitarian appeal (‘we are all talented’), is in fact a most profound principle of self-exclusion. It both hides this underlying call for self-selection, and refuses to hear the alternative position. Not only is it impossible to admit that one’s inner self is ‘average’ (see Barclays Capital’s message in the section ‘[From Ethics to Ethos: The Principle of Potentiality](#)’ section), that one is limited, but it is also impossible to recognise such limits without the burden of guilt. The burden of guilt is internalised by the subject in the recognition that one might not be good enough. ‘More’ places the self in a permanent antagonism with itself.

In this context, Simmel’s own use of the word ‘more’ provides conceptual consistency (Simmel 2010, pp. 14–17). On the one hand, he defines *life* (as concrete human existence) as a continuous movement which reaches into the future, life as ‘more-life’: ‘as long as life exists, it produces something living’ (ibid., p. 15). On the other hand, life also generates *objectified* contents of culture (such as the idealised images of perfection deployed by HRM) which stand over and against finite individuals as unassailable, permanent and infinite demands, what Simmel calls ‘more-than-life’ (ibid., pp. 14–17). The unfolding

of life itself, the process in which life first reproduces itself as ‘more life’ (personal, concrete life), is confronted by its own products, transcended by the very forms it generates, which become overpowering forms that are ‘more-than-life’. This is ‘the tragedy of culture’:

[Culture] produces objective creations in which it expresses itself and which for their part, as life’s containers and forms, tend to receive its further flows—yet at the same time their ideal and historical determinacy, boundedness and rigidity sooner or later come into opposition and antagonism with ever-variable, boundary dissolving, continuous life. Life is continually producing something on which it breaks, by which it is violated... (Simmel 2010, p. 103)

In regard to HRM, this tragedy appears most acutely in the way in which its discourses confront the audience with an image of an exaggerated, unlimited self that is made into an unbearable objectified moral ideal which crushes the very concrete self of any real subject. The impatient demand is that the student should always aspire to an impossible level of achievement, in other words, to always be ‘more-than’ herself or himself, to grow without rest. The burden of this responsibility is displaced onto the future working subject. However, it must also be made clear that, at the same time, HRM retains the right to judge when the moment of self-fulfilment has occurred. In these terms, the mobilisation of potential is without end. Every system of performance appraisal, or of training needs assessment, assures that ‘more’ potential exists (cf. Townley 1994), in a similar way in which the search for excellence or total quality are also endless. All judgements of potentiality *must* lead to the identification of ‘more’ possibilities, and every statement that stipulates that there is something ‘more in you’ must be received as a kind of consolation. No final decision could articulate in constructive terms the sentence: ‘you are now complete, perfected, finished’. Such a claim can only point to a dismissal and cessation of relationships. On the contrary, the ethics of potentiality permanently drives a wedge into the gap between the ‘actual’ as always less than the ‘possible’, allowing it to ask the subject: ‘unlock your potential’. ‘Unlock your potential’ is a command to the individual (‘you’) whose execution has to be taken as if the individual is *freed from* any constraints as well as being *freed for* her or his highest purpose (self-realisation).

To be always *more* than what one is, in order to be fully what one is, carries an additional ethical exigency: it obliges the person to a feeling of longing for ‘more’ inner potential. It inevitably generates forms of apprehensive self-examination *also outside* the disciplinary procedures of audit as analysed by Townley (1994). This is because the principle of potentiality is extended to suggest that the

subject is now self-determining, freely in charge of the endlessly unfinished project of self-actualisation. HRM advances a new and dangerous moral contention that work is a place of genuine freedom. But in fact potentiality operates precisely as an overbearing internalisation of a pressure which leaves the subject powerless to resist and take control of its own limits and real possibilities. It forces the subject to negate its own limits in giving a genuine answer to the question ‘Who am I?’. By claiming that the individual is somehow liberated to pose and answer this fundamental ethical question, HRM is exonerated from the responsibility to recognise the possible presence of limits in the relentless pursuit of potentiality. When one is repeatedly ‘assured’ one has always more potential, the internal struggle with the danger that one may not have it, with the anxiety of facing its own limits, becomes purely solitary, anxious and potentially destructive.

Thus, potentiality also implies a heightened and dangerous form of individualism. To achieve personal success or excellence ‘every day’ means to be permanently self-possessed, to avoid communicating insecurities and self-doubts, to be always constantly and aggressively preoccupied with oneself. The affirmation of personal potential occurs always at the expense of others: ‘Are you first?’, asks IBM. Therefore, others always have to appear second. This is yet another danger of this ethos: whilst appealing ‘equally to all’, it is implicitly generating more forms of individualistic hierarchy and elites. And the dynamo which is consequently set in motion does not have an end. The struggle to be ‘top’ requires what the accountancy firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers asks of graduate candidates: ‘Be the one who never stands still’ (TT100 2010, p. 211). Simmel had already arrived at a description of this condition in 1907, in relation to the peculiar nature of money:

... the agitation, feverishness, constant activity of modern life, which in money is provided with an unstoppable wheel that turns the machine of life into a *perpetuum mobile*. (Simmel 1990, p. 502)

In this vein, it is interesting how in the discourses of graduate employability ‘money’ is replaced by the ethical machine of potentiality and self-actualisation. The disappearance of monetary vocabulary from HRM’s messages is not unintended. The principle of potentiality is a far stronger ethical platform against which even economic insecurity is made to appear too crude a motivation to work. Simmel explained:

Modern times, particularly the most recent, are permeated by a feeling of tension, expectation and unreleased intense desires—as if in anticipation of what is essential, of the definitive, specific meaning

and central point of life and things. (Simmel 1990, p. 481)

Something far more important is said to be at stake in work: the full meaning and realisation of the students’ very humanity. In their excessive character, these artefacts seek to capture the imagination and dreams of young generations aspiring to the ethical ideals portrayed in them. Through a certain vision of ‘ideal work’, HRM seeks to focus students’ private fantasies beyond ‘mere economic rewards’ (work ought to be about something always ‘more than money’), whilst simultaneously sanctioning existing structures of power. This vision is, in Simmel’s sense, ‘tragic’ because it raises the spectre of success and of failure simultaneously. Employability systems surround students with a plethora of images and messages which revolve around a set of values that are not hostile or meaningless. These images invite students to assimilate them as part of personal self-understanding; whilst at the same time their unlimited quality threatens any possibility of such assimilation due to the imminent prospect of always failing to measure up to their demands. This combination almost certifies failure whilst the possibility of success is always deferred. HRM raises the principle of potentiality to a moral demand whose endless horizon generates in the subject a sense of her or his own inadequacy and helplessness and an awareness of her or his inability to master such a demand.

The tragic nature of the principle of potentiality emerges from its ambition: to provide an ethos of work to students on university campuses to which it is almost impossible to articulate an alternative. A fundamental closure occurs in the name of employability just at the time when education should be seeking to open up the horizon in which the question ‘Who am I?’ can be engaged genuinely. This question should always remain open, especially in academic work. To the contrary, the extension of HRM’s apparatus of recruitment into the sphere of higher education curtails the possibility of its remaining an open moral question. HRM reduces it to employability techniques for which it provides ready-made answers. Following Barratt’s call (2003), in contradistinction to this closure, perhaps this should be part of the ethos of the critical management scholar: to safeguard the very openness of this question and promote a genuine engagement of the students with what is at stake in it without the danger of anxiety or failure. Barratt cites Veyne in this sense: ‘the critic is someone who, “facing each new present circumstance, makes a diagnosis of the new danger”’ (Barratt 2003, p. 1081). To highlight the ethical dangers of the principle of potentiality was one of the main aspects that we have attempted to identify and explore in this paper in relation to HRM’s discourses of employability.

Concluding Remarks

In trying to engage with the broad thematic of HRM's ethics, we have focussed on one of the more recent and less explored domains into which it has made inroads. The recruitment campaigns organised by various corporate organisations in partnership with universities presents an opportunity to scrutinise the ways in which HRM constructs one of the elements of its ethical platform through the configuration of a particular ethos of the ideal future worker. The study presented here focuses on the graduate labour market, and on some of the elite corporations which advertise their schemes to it. It is important to recognise that the encounter between universities and corporate institutions around employability marks a specific aspect of the HRM domain. Whilst it cannot be generalised as a total representation of the field, it nonetheless allows a glimpse into some of the cultural mechanisms through which certain ideas are promoted on HRM's ethical agenda. The case of potentiality has been analysed through the category of ethos in order to understand the dynamic process through which it becomes a key trope for representing the relationship between human subjects and work. The principle of potentiality is, in essence, the exhortation that every individual ought to see itself as always capable of 'more'. The analysis of the trope 'more', incessantly iterated in HRM's calls to the future graduate employee, has shown that it is bound up with a series of ethical dangers deriving from the impossible promise it is making. Using Simmel's work, we showed that these dangers lie in the unlimited nature of the promise, in the compulsory context it sets up for students in search of employment, but also in the inherent abandonment of the subject to the inevitable consequences of the unsustainability of its ethical demands. The subject is forced to contemplate an overwhelming ideal ethos and engage in a tragic self-seeking journey always bound up with a looming prospect of failure to meet such expectations. In one of his journal entries, Simmel gives an essential description of the concept of the tragic in the sense in which we have used it in this argument: 'The amount of tension by which what destroys a life was necessitated by an innermost element of this very same life—this is the measure of the tragic' (Simmel 2010, p. 183).

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