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## **Book Review: Questioning Morals and Moral Questions in Organizations: Review and Response**

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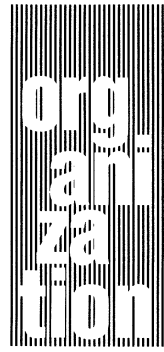
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## Book Reviews



### Questioning Morals and Moral Questions in Organizations: Review and Response

*Memory as a Moral Decision: The Role of Ethics in Organizational Culture*, Steven P. Feldman. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2004. 249 pp. \$29.95, ISBN 0765805863 (pbk)

Steven Feldman's introduction is prefaced by a short remark from William James extolling the importance of prayer to the establishing of a self that is responsible to the 'higher tribunals'. From there on it becomes increasingly clear that Feldman's task is to direct us toward such higher tribunals. In the preface Feldman advises us that he establishes a theory of moral tradition, designed to investigate the historical and cultural context of moral commitment. It should be clear that this is theorizing with definite auspices: the religious beliefs that Feldman 'professes' (and Weber's caustic remarks on the *professing* of religion in his essay 'Science as a Vocation' are, I think, worth recalling here) are as central to the enterprise as they are absent. They are central in the grounding of the book as a moral project while they are absent because they are never spelled out clearly as a set of specific commitments.

Feldman's moral project addresses the disjuncture between the individual and the collective consciousness. In organization terms, it addresses the troubled cultural links connecting conceptions of free individuals and constraining organizations. There is a world we have lost in which collective memory of the past disciplined projects for the future, in which guilt played a central role, serving to index cultural unity, coherence, closure and continuity. Feldman asserts that these are the properties that are missing not only in modernity but also in contemporary organization theories. In other words, what he advocates amounts to a nostalgic, religious functionalism. Moral life is essentially a religiously *disciplined* activity: it is expressed both through repression and ambivalence; the normative sources of its order are embedded



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in culture; they are transmitted through central values, inducted through socialization, and represented symbolically in what cultural authority permits and prohibits.

Tradition is singular—a living culture, a monad, stressing continuity, harmony and authority. Tradition is antithetical to business schools where the emphasis is on change and innovation rather than continuity. Hence, by their nature, Feldman argues, business schools undermine the ethical bases of professional practice. ‘The moral treasures of our defining traditions are being lost through an indifference to the past and what it has to offer’ (p. 29). God has been replaced by Rationalism.

Part 2 of the book traces these themes to Barnard and Dalton. The Prophet of the Cult of Rationalism in Organization Theory is Chester Barnard, who installs executives as the cult’s chaplains. Dalton releases managers from any obligation to heed moral ‘sermons’; lacking a moral compass, at best Dalton’s ‘men who manage’ can only aspire to be efficient nihilists in the compromises they make, remembering nothing other than expedience.

In Part 3 we meet two new sets of moral failures. First are critical organization theorists, who remember only that they distrust the past and hope for the future as a place where social construction can be emancipatory rather than constraining. Like radical Quakers, they would abandon all claims to a priestly caste and remake traditions inherited from the past—like a dead weight on the brains of the living, to borrow a memorable phrase from Marx—with a creed based only on participation and the bearing of witness through resistance. Criticism, not commitment, and freedom from control by any hierarchy—these are seen to be the watchwords of critical organization theorists.

Second in line for condemnation by Feldman in Part 3 are institutional theorists with their celebration of mimesis based on tradition. If Feldman had examined a wider range of institutional studies, he might have appreciated its conservatism. As it is, however, his focus is on Vaughan’s study of the Challenger disaster, in which mimesis was all too clearly coercive. Real traditions, he maintains, seduce with their ritual and certainties—they do not require coercion to press-gang their members. Hence, a culture arose that stressed passivity and fear.

Part 4 switches focus to ethical relativism. First for the critical axe is Foucault and those he inspired. At issue is their destruction of ‘the idea of what the sacred signifies: a deeply personal commitment to faith in revealed truth’ (p. 139). The phrase is revealing: it allows the idea of tradition that informs the work to be glimpsed as something normally confined to the pulpit. The ‘truth/knowledge’ offered by ‘time-honored organizational traditions’ (p. 148) that stress continuity is preferred to the emancipation of relativistic accounts of power/knowledge, accounts that forget, or perhaps never properly knew, their history. If they did, he argues, they would realize that the Enlightenment was an attack on traditional authority, not authority *per se*, and thus that belief can be positive. Indeed, against the Enlightenment attack, Feldman would reinstate the centrality of tradition for organizations in general, not just the Christian church. Well, this hardly resolves the moral issues, unfortunately: obeisance to tradition is an insufficient guarantee of morality without some inquiry into the content of the tradition, what it includes, condones, excludes and attacks. Plenty of unsavoury organizational



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traditions are associated with 'Christian humility' (p. 151). Being Christian and having humility, historically, has been no antidote to launching barbarism, militarism, and nationalism. (Readers may think of manifestations of these traits from their preferred political leaders. There are many contenders in the English-speaking world at the time of writing.) The usefulness of tradition, suggests Feldman, is its historical anchoring of organizational culture and symbolism. Through these we can establish 'the hairline difference between legitimate authority and power, a difference completely lost in Foucault-inspired organization theory' (p. 152).

In a discussion of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's gulag, we are asked, '[Are] the similarities between employees and prisoners in democratic societies more important than the differences? I think not. One must forget the prisoner's guilt to think it so.' Guilt, however, is an effect of judicial processes, not a state of being. To assume that an absolute moral authority marks the outcome of judicial processes is most peculiar—especially in the context of the gulag. It reminds me of early histories of Australia that spoke pejoratively of the 'convict stain' on our identity, due to our continent's having been initially settled by the excess population of a harsh penal system—in the world's first gulag. Guilt means nothing other than the organizational mechanisms that produce it. Still, to paraphrase Bob Dylan, if you've got God on your side, then no worries:

. . . faith is not even conceived of as a possibility in the modern-postmodern debate between realism and relativism . . . postmodernism must repress the idea of faith, because the mere idea of being beyond doubt is contradictory to the postmodern vision of cultural 'openness' . . . belief can be doubted: Faith cannot. (p. 162)

What is needed, we are subsequently advised, is

. . . a counter-enlightenment that resurrects the capacity of individuals, organizations, and societies to commit themselves to collective standards of moral order and thereby reduce the scourge of criticism to a secondary tool of refinement rather than a substitute for moral culture itself. (p. 178)

We need to be committed Christians, believers in resurrection, if we are to be capable of good business ethics because we must believe in divine revelation and retribution—only faith can keep us pure—although criticism may be a useful occasional scourge.

Readers may find the call for counter-Enlightenment somewhat surprising, and Feldman concedes that it looks unlikely. Instead, a surprising repository of tradition is posited in one short paragraph: 'I see no other possibility than the universities . . . The moral leadership must come from the universities.' The actually existing and hugely variable organizational conditions of existence in 'the universities' are not even glossed. If one desires passionate invocation against much past and present organization theory, while requiring pieties and moral certainties clothed in analytical sophistication, this is the book for you.

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## Response to Clegg

In *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller (1958), the main character Willie Loman (pronounced Low Man) kills himself by automobile. The story teaches that modern capitalism is related to organization man's self-hatred. Willie Low Man is empty, void of moral character. When materialistic supports and status achievements fall away, Willie (standing in for modern man/woman) has no internal resources left to bear the loss and is compelled to kill himself for the insurance money in one last stab at 'success'.

Professor Clegg reviews my book *Memory as a Moral Decision* as if Low Man's loss of moral memory is not a problem in modern organizations. Indeed, Clegg sees man/woman's *internality* only in terms of the external; more exactly, he sees the idea of the moral soul as an unfortunate fraud created by religious and cultural imperialists intent on gaining political power inside-out through mind control. This reduction of ethics to politics is a defining feature of modern culture: when belief in cultural ideals became passé, man/woman was left free of their repressive weight; the inevitable result was that all cultural ideals came to be seen as arbitrary constructions of power. But when we rid ourselves of cultural ideals, we are left with Low Man, not the inherent innocence of the free individual or the shared ideals of democratic citizens. Low Man (imagine Kozlowski or Skilling) tends to steal without end and uses the democratic process as just another pork belly upon which to feed not only his materialism but his insatiable ego as well.

In *Memory as a Moral Decision* I argue that cultural shallowness is the central problem in modern organizations and nowhere are the consequences as devastating as in moral character. Moral character changes over time, but if it changes too quickly it has no credibility in the minds of others or in one's own. Hence, the way an individual, group, organization, community, or society experiences its moral commitments over time is a measure of its moral integrity. Does it maintain, improve, and transmit its moral values to new members establishing a moral identity without which it cannot even mount a moral opinion, let alone participate in moral decisions? Or does it, like Kafka's (1971) man of the mere present, find itself morally immobilized between the contradictory forces of the past and future? I argue in *Memory as a Moral Decision* that our relationship to the past is key in providing the moral traditions that help us grasp those future possibilities which are part of our historical context. This is our moral starting point and provides us with the capacities for moral reflection and moral judgement and from which we develop morally as persons. These traditions are anything but singular. They can be more accurately described as 'continuities of conflict' (MacIntyre, 1984: 222) where overlapping, but inconsistent and contradictory ideas and ideals represent an ongoing argument about what is right and good.

Religion is a voice in these debates and part of our historical context. Clegg's caricature of my respect for Christian social ethics reflects his seemingly complete rejection of religious moral teaching, not my position on the relation between Christianity and professional ethics. I do not argue for specific moral positions, but argue for the importance of the chain of moral memory as a context for moral deliberation. Clegg criticizes me both for being



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unclear about what moral values I am promulgating and for promulgating Christianity. His statements seem to contradict each other, but for Clegg they are the same thing. He is frustrated that I argue for the importance of moral commitment without stating my own, so he (wildly) assumes anyone who writes positively about 'truth/knowledge' or 'faith' must be advocating Christian belief. He insists on discovering (projecting) 'my' moral commitments so he has a target to attack. This is the critical intellect: it 'finds' itself only in attacking something else. This interminable dissection is the essence of modern/postmodern culture. In my book I attempt to find a way out of this endless transition by remembering the role moral traditions played in social life before man/woman decided Reason—constructive or deconstructive—was all that was needed to create the perfect world now. Knowledge of tragedy and the trade-offs we all must bear as part of being human were devalued along with the moral traditions that addressed these painful realities. I do not advocate a rejection of rationalism and individualism, but a check on them by strengthening moral memory. I reject radical criticism in all its forms as the answer to excessive rationalism.

It is difficult to see what kind of internal life the critical project in any of its forms seeks. Clegg writes:

Guilt, however, is an effect of judicial processes, not a state of being. To assume that an absolute moral authority marks the outcome of judicial processes is most peculiar . . . Guilt means nothing other than the organizational mechanisms that produce it.

Legal guilt is the result of judicial processes; psychological guilt and social guilt are not. Clegg reduces the sociology of law to the mechanisms of power. But a social organization that was reduced to relations of power would be no more than what Hobbes described as the war of all against all. Even in the United States, where competitive forces overcome civilized relations all too often, truthfulness, courage, and justice can be found in everyday life. Indeed, even Enron produced whistleblowers. Social organization cannot exist without moral practice based on shared (and enduring) moral values. These values are internalized in the process of socialization. When we violate these values we experience guilt. Guilt *is* a state of being. It reflects one part of the mind condemning another for violating its own internalized standards. Critical theory as practiced in organization studies has a simplistic view of the human soul (which Plato characterized as containing 'a little human, a lion, and a many-headed, shape changing beast' (Annas, 1999: 135)), if it finds one at all.

Even law reflects more than mechanisms of power; it involves cultural values and conscience. Cultural values cannot be reduced to power relations because they have a partly autonomous history. Whistleblowers most often wind up worse off but speak out from conscience nonetheless. To call these cases acts of power misrepresents the memory of moral values, crisis of conscience, and struggles with guilt inherent in moral whistleblowing. Critical organization theory has much work ahead to do justice to the chain of moral memory, the complexity of the human soul, and how both complicate the simplistic reduction of all human experience to externalized relations of power.



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**Steven P. Feldman**

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## Making Sense of Change

*Making Sense of Organizational Change*, Jean Helms Mills, foreword by Jean Bartunek. London: Routledge, 2003. 256 pp. £23.99, ISBN 0415369398 (pbk)

This interesting text offers a longitudinal analysis of change management processes in Nova Scotia Power, a Canadian electricity generator and supplier that was, in common with a number of European utilities, privatized during a period of economic and political management that the author characterizes as the Reagan–Thatcher era. In offering this analysis the book also offers a critical review of the academic field concerned with change management and a critical appraisal of the activities of management consulting organizations and their (often) universalistic and prescriptive approaches to the problems of organization and change. Mounting this attack on the theory and practice of change, the author calls upon a critical reading of Weick's account(s) of sensemaking in organizations.

Fittingly for a book concerned with such an analytical approach, the text itself is clearly meant to be read as a product of the author's own sense-making processes. Indeed we are informed that the narrative of changing presented in the text was developed from research that employed a 'grounded theory' approach—although we should note that, for some at least, this fact will cast a long shadow over the analysis. In addition it is worth noting that the text also demonstrates sensemaking processes on a more personal level insofar as it seems to recount the author's own conversion from 'orthodox' consultant (and servant of power?) to critical, academic, commentator. This rounded approach to sensemaking gives the text a multi-layered concern with politics, organization and identity and ensures that Helms Mills's analysis adds to our appreciation of change management (a) as an organizational activity that is shaping and reshaping all our lives and (b) as a field of academic inquiry that structures our understanding of such organizational processes—although not always for the best.

Yet despite this general endorsement and despite the supporting commentary of Karl Weick, which appears on the back cover, I do have reservations regarding certain aspects of the argument and analysis. Acknowledging Helms Mills's impatience with linear modelling, I will nonetheless enumerate my concerns:

(1) The text, we are told, is based upon a longitudinal study that benefited from unique and privileged access both to organizational members and to company documentation. Yet despite this promise of analytical depth, Helms Mills's narrative is not especially rich. Indeed the text struggles to narrate the