Discourse and descriptive business ethics

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Watson (2003: 168) claims that 'although increasing academic attention is being paid to business ethics, the ways in which ethical consideration come into activities and decisions of organizational managers have been examined in a very limited way'. This article contributes by suggesting an interesting way to study moral managerial decisions is studying these decisions in their discursive context. This paper examiners why and how discourse analysis can aid descriptive business ethics.

In this article, first it will be claimed that the internal dynamics within organizations render methodological individualism in business ethics hard to defend. Therefore, describing the moral side of a company by describing the moral part of managerial decision-making provides just a fragment of the whole picture. Somehow, the business *context* wherein managerial decisions are made also contains important moral information. Causalities that transcend individuals are proposed as a unit of analysis in empirical moral research, namely discourse. It is suggested that an interesting method for describing (moral) decisions of managers is looking at the way managers talk about their reality. After describing what is meant by discourse in this article, it is suggested how discourse analysis could be used in descriptive business ethics. Special attention will be paid to genealogical discourse analyses, and to the study of storylines and metaphors to reveal moral sides of managerial decision-making.

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Studying (moral) managerial decisions

Before discussing the moral description of managerial decisions, first it should be explained what is meant by 'descriptive ethics'. Descriptive ethics is about the factual description and explanation of moral behaviour. It is therefore a non-normative approach in ethics; it tries to describe without taking a moral position.[1] This contrasts with normative approaches like applied ethics: prescriptive ethics. A warning from Beauchamp (1991: 34) is warranted however: 'It would be a mistake to regard these categories as expressing mutually exclusive approaches'. It will be made clear that the normative and non-normative approaches can never be purely distinguished. The distinction, however, is useful for a better understanding of the different areas of business ethics.

Descriptive ethics in current business ethics is often centered on concepts like choice and the moment of decision-making (Parker 1998). The decision is to some the end-point of business ethics, because it is, as Parker (1998: 291) writes, the moment where judgments are translated into some kind of practice. That is the point where ethics can determine behaviour. Many scholars who believe strongly in using one of the classic moral theories within business ethics (see Soule 2002: 114/115, for several important contributions),[2] focus on managers and how they should make individual choices. Implicitly it is assumed that the conscious decisions of managers determine what actions organizations undertake. Society and human behaviour are viewed as the outcomes of conscious (moral) decisions; the

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functioning of organizations is seen as the outcome of (conscious) managerial decisions. Thus, if managers get good moral advice (and abide by it), the organization will behave in a good moral sense. This is why the part of business ethics that leans heavily on classic philosophical ethical theories has clear affinities with choice-based decision theories. As March (1997: 10) writes:

> The study of how decisions happen provides a setting for a cluster of contested issues about human action. The first issue is whether decisions are to be viewed as choice-based or rule-based. Do the decision-makers pursue the logic of consequence, making choices among alternatives by evaluating their consequences in terms of prior preferences? Or do they pursue a logic of appropriateness, fulfilling identities or roles by recognizing situations and following rules that match appropriate behavior to the situations they encounter?

Even though the durability of the choice-based view in the literature is impressive, there is – and always has been – much critique, especially from rule-based theorists, who generally deny the principles of choice-based theorists. They argue that the logic behind decision-making processes is fundamentally different. Rather than rational, anticipatory, calculated, consequential action, they argue that decision-making is the result of a logic of appropriateness, obligation, duty and rules, whereby decision-makers can go against their conscious preferences (March 1997: 17). Within choice based theories these routine rules are regarded as established in a conscious rational process. To rule based theories the underlying logic of decisions however is completely different, and goes much further than routine decisions.

Within choice-based theories, the process of weighing alternatives is based on values, i.e. individual preferences over alternative outcomes. Facts and values are often clearly separated. Values come into play after the process of information gathering. Prescriptive ethics traditionally focuses on this moment. The prevailing notion is that ethics and the non-ethical language that describes and explains situations and events belong to separate domains. However, as will be argued in the rest of this section, it is questionable whether moral decisions determine behaviour, especially for organizations. If they do not, descriptive business ethics is not satisfactory when studying only the moral part of decision-making.

Values play a role in complex ways; so complex, in fact, that we are, for the most part, unaware of it. In that sense, systematic reflection on values can determine only a small part of our behaviour. When managers make decisions, all kinds of (unconscious) values play a role, but so do many other things. Klamer (2000: 2) writes:

> Even the purchase of an ice-cream may involve a negotiation among many different little and big values. Because I like to follow my senses I might indulge yet because I also value being healthy I may refrain. Or I may have an agreement with my partner to reduce my weight and so have to factor the value of being trustworthy ... And if I have decided to enjoy myself that very moment, will I care about whom to give my business? How much do I value the values of a socially minded and therefore high-cost company that I will pay extra for its product? Do I care about the esthetics of the place? Does it matter who the other customers are? No algorithm will do justice to the complicated process that constitutes the purchase of an ice-cream.

Managers will almost never base decisions only on what they perceive as explicit moral values or arguments (Bird & Waters 1989). No one's actions are based on only conscious decisions solely based on explicit moral values. Yet, many values play a role in every decision, and many of them are unreflected. Describing the moral side of a company by describing the moral part of managerial decision-making provides just a fragment of the whole picture. Somehow, the business *context* wherein managerial decisions are made also contains important moral information (Butterfield *et al.* 2000). This is also what rule-based decision theorists argue.

Managers have a hard time identifying the ethical dimensions of their decisions in the first place. Donaldson & Dunfee state (1995: 87): 'Managers are situated in a web of (sometimes) conflicting loyalties and duties – some legal

(contractual and otherwise) and others personal (e.g., friendships, familial obligations, and so forth)'. Part of the problem in most cases is the problem of causality. Often the causality of a situation of managers is so complex, that the outcome of a (moral) choice cannot be known at the moment of making a decision, making it very hard to 'know' for managers what is the right thing to do. Managers, as Jackall (1988: 12) noticed, face series of intractable dilemmas that often demand compromises with traditional moral beliefs. Jackall (1988: 13):

> The moral dilemmas posed by bureaucratic work are, in fact, pervasive, taken for granted, and, at the same time, regularly denied. Managers do, however, continually assess their decisions, their organizational milieux, and especially each other to ascertain which moral rules-in-use apply in given situations. Such assessments are always complex and most often intuitive.

At the core of some theories in business ethics (especially choice-based) that concentrate on studying moral decisions is a methodological individualism. Methodological individualism states that behaviour of an organization is always reducible to the behaviour of the individuals that are members of the organization. As March & Olsen (1989: 4) write, within such a perspective, the behaviour of an organization is the consequence of the interlocking choices by individuals and subunits, each acting in terms of expectations and preferences manifested at those levels. Outcomes at the system level are thought to be determined by the interactions of individuals acting consistently in terms of individual behaviour, whatever they may be. Methodological individualism is inclined to see moral phenomena as the aggregate consequence of individual behaviour. The world, in this view, is in large part the outcome of choice. And in decision-making, processes are viewed in terms of (complex) interactions among elementary events or actors.

Methodological individualism, however, has often been criticized (March & Olsen 1989, Bauman 1993); it simply does not explain many social phenomena around organizations. The impact of the consequences of our combined actions can often not be traced back to individual decisions. This leads to some problems for business ethicists: routine decisions, all morally acceptable from an individual standpoint, can lead to disastrous outcomes. The world is not shaped by conscious individual decisions; the organizational world is not simply a sum of individual decisions. Especially in the organizational world, individual (moral) decisions are, at best, a tiny part of the whole picture. Bauman (1993: 18) states: 'Sin without sinners, crime without criminals, guilt without culprits! Responsibility for the outcome is, so to speak, floating, nowhere finding its natural haven'.

Many good arguments about economic, natural or social forces, for instance, can be presented to argue that institutions (not in the sense of organizations or buildings, more in a sense of collective ways of thinking, feeling and doing) determine, in large part, the decisions and behaviour of people (e.g. Foucault 1977). There are dynamics that transcend individuals and these internal dynamics transcend individual behaviour and decisions. What managers think, feel, intend or want is not all-important because many supra-individual causalities have to be taken into account. Organizations have their own dynamics. For descriptive ethics, it is therefore important that we do not only focus on (moral) decisions by individuals. To study moral managerial decisions, the context is of crucial importance. Within the body of work on managerial decision-making (e.g. Shapira 1997), this has often been acknowledged before (e.g. O'Connor 1997). Also, most business ethicists seem to agree on the importance of the business context within business ethics, both for description and prescription. To give just one example, Soule (2002: 116) states: 'An adequate moral strategy needs to be relevant to the context of commercial life'. However, how the contested concept of context should be understood turns out be problematic. In the rest of this article, causalities that transcend individuals are promoted as the unit of analysis in empirical moral research, namely discourse; discourse is used to describe the context of managerial decision-making. Discourse theory allows us to represent

decision-making in considerable complexity: 'It takes seriously March's suggestion to study decision-making in the context of human life' (O'Connor 1997: 318). Discourse analysis offers a contextual perspective in which decisions are made, a perspective that many managerial decision theories lack.

Language and morality

In past decades, discussions on the nature of truth have profoundly affected social research. Instead of assuming a given world 'out there', waiting to be discovered, attention is being drawn to processes and ways through which the world is represented in language. The access we have to a reality outside language is highly problematic. Language does not simply report facts; it is not a simple medium for the transport of meaning. What is meant by, and the effect of, the words 'I want to do business with her' depends entirely on the context in which these words are spoken or written. Du Gay (1996: 47) states:

> The meaning that any object has at any given time is a contingent, historical achievement . . . theorists of discourse argue that the meaning of objects is different from their mere existences, and that people never confront objects as mere existences, in a primal manner; rather these objects are always articulated within particular discursive contexts.

Perhaps it is the case, as some philosophers claim, that what exists in the world is a necessity (independent of human beings or language), but things can only be differentiated through language. The world itself does not give meaning to objects; this is done through language. In other words, although things might exist outside language, they get their meanings through language.

This view of language implies the possibility of describing the business context as a discursive construction. The meaning of anything always exists in particular discursive contexts; meaning is always contextual, contingent and historical. For business studies, language is not just seen as reflective of what goes on in an organization.

Discourses and organizations are one and the same. 'That is, organizing becomes communicating through the intersection of discourse and text' (Putnam 2000: 225). Our so-called 'organizational actions' are embedded in discursive fields and are only recognizable as practices through discourse. Organizational discursive practices exist only in the organizational surroundings and practices they are part of.

There have been many interpretations of discourse and discourse theory (see Alvesson & Karreman 2000). In daily language, for example, a discourse can be defined as conversation. Within the social sciences, the concept has a wider meaning. In this article, a discourse is defined as 'a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities' (Hajer 1995: 44). For example, psychiatric discourse brought the idea of an unconscious into existence in the 19th century (cf. Foucault 1977, Phillips & Hardy 2002: 3). Discourses contain groups of statements that provide a way of talking and thinking about something, thereby giving meaning to social reality. Discourses are not 'out there' between reality and language; they are not just a group of signs – they refer to practices that systematically form the objects we speak of. Discourse is not just a 'way of seeing – a worldview – but is embedded in social practices that reproduce the 'way of seeing' as 'truth'. Discourses are constitutive of reality (de Graaf 2001). What is and is not true, the things we discuss – these cannot be seen outside discourse; they are internal to it. By looking at what people say and write, we can learn how their world is constructed. The concept of discourse is often used to overcome oppositions like 'action and structure' or 'individual and structure'. As discourses, as used here, institutionalize the way of talking about something, they produce knowledge and thereby shape social practices. Social interactions cannot be understood without the discourses that give them meaning. Discourses function as a structure to behaviour; they both enable and constrain it.

Over the last two decades, organization studies have given much attention to language and discourse. Putnam & Fairhurst (2001) give a good overview of the developments in the area of discourse theory in organization studies. Alvesson & Karreman (2000) discuss the variety of ways in which the concept of discourse is used in organizations studies. For more on discourse analyses, one could mention Dijk (1985) and Titscher *et al.* (2000). Metaphors have been studied extensively (e.g. Yanow 1992, Alvesson 1993, Palmer & Dunford 1996), as have concepts such as trope (e.g. Skoldberg 1994), symbolism (e.g. Morgan 1986) and narrative (e.g. Wilkins 1983, Deetz 1986, Boje 1991, O'Connor 1995, 2000, Czarniawska 1997, Dicke 2001).

The field of business ethics, however, does not pay much attention to (some form of) discourse theory. Among the exceptions are Parker (1998) and Shapiro (1992). Also, Cheney & Christensen (2001) discuss corporate rhetoric (not internal discourses, but communication that is directed to outsiders of the organization) on corporate social responsibility from a discursive perspective. Descriptive ethical research in the tradition of Jackall (1988), Bird & Waters (1989) and Kunda (1992), looks at what and how moral issues are an issue in the daily life of managers. How do managers talk about ethics and what moral issues do they encounter? Furthermore, in the rare so-called genealogical discourse analyses (Foucault 1977), the role of power is central. Building on the work of Foucault, some researchers (Clegg 1989) within organization studies have shown how discourses, with their inherent worldview, give some an advantage over others, which has obvious moral implications.

Like meaning, values are immanent features of language. Language is not a neutral means of communication, the use of language contains normative commitments. When we give meaning to something, we are also valuing it. Even though a Durkheimian view is clearly not endorsed here (with an emphasis here on language instead of institutions), there is a parallel. To Durkheim social institutions, collective ways of thinking, feeling and doing are not empty but full of values (values give meaning to relationships). In similar fashion, discursive practices are not empty; they are filled with values. By giving something a name, we highlight certain aspects. But in that same process, all other possible qualities are placed in the background or even ignored. Values, causal assumptions and problem perceptions affect each other. In our daily lives, we jump so often between normative and factual statements that we do not realize how much our views of facts determine whether we see problems in the first place. But when we study our discussions more carefully, we can see that the 'is' and 'ought' are intertwined. Seemingly technical positions in discourses conceal normative commitments. Discourses make more than claims of reality – they accomplish what Schön & Rein (1994) have called the 'normative leap' or the connection between a representation of reality and its consequences for action. Within most versions of discourse theory, the strict dichotomy between facts and values ceases to make sense. Facts and values here are not treated as ontologically different; discourse theory treats them as different sides of the same coin. The 'is' and 'ought' shape each other in countless ways. Language is thus neither neutral nor static in communicating meaning. The awareness that language does not neutrally describe the world is important for business ethicists. Subtle linguistic forms and associated symbolic actions shape our convictions and presuppositions (Twist 1994: 79).

Discourses contain the conditions of possibility of what can and cannot be said. The fact that a moral question arises in business is as interesting as what question is asked, as is the fact that many moral questions are not asked. Every question that is asked gets some form of an answer which has consequences. Every (non-) decision of any manager in any company is a social activity and affects people's lives (Hackley & Kitchen 1999: 23). In a specific discourse, different moral questions are raised than in others. As soon as managers of soccer clubs start to talk about soccer as a 'product' (a relatively new development), a new world opens up around the same old game with new opportunities, managerial problems and new moral issues (Hawkes 1998). Discourses do not only help us understand that a certain moral

question is asked, they also give us the spectrum of possible solutions to moral problems being raised, i.e. what is or is not seen as a viable solution to a specific moral problem. It can be suspected that the framing of moral questions by managers (Schön & Rein 1994), differs from moral questions framed by professional ethicists. Where moral philosophers frame moral questions for managers based on their philosophical discourses, managers (needing a 'tractable morality', see de Graaf 2005) frame their moral questions on a daily basis.

Although Aristotelians and pragmatics like Dewey (1948) intensely consider deliberation and conversation, there are clear differences with the discourse theory as described above. Aristotelian ethicists are usually looking for virtues to be named, virtues that are good. Most discourse theorists although, want to stay away from anything associated with essentialism. Instead of looking for virtues for individuals, discourse theorists want to problematize the central role of individuals (at least the central role of individuals in research). Individuals are part of organizations; they operate in discursive contexts that determine (at least in great part) their behaviour. Discourses thus focus more on context than on individuals and their virtues. The extent to which individuals are influenced by their contexts gives rise to extensive discussions about their autonomy and freedom. These discussions (interesting as they are) are here left aside. What is important is that the behaviour of individuals is, at least to a high degree, influenced by the organizational entities in which they work. And that affects the morality of managers. Jackall (1988: 192) concludes:

> ... because moral choices are inextricably tied to personal fates, bureaucracy erodes internal and even external standards of morality not only in matters of individual success and failure but in all the issues that managers face in their daily work. Bureaucracy makes its own internal rules and social context the principal moral gauges for action ... Within such crucibles, managers are continually tested as they continually test others. They turn to each other for moral cues for behavior and come to fashion specific situational moralities for specific significant others in their world.

Discourse analysis and descriptive business ethics

An interesting additional method to traditional ones of describing moral decisions of managers, is looking at the way managers talk about and view reality: describing their discourses. Instead of looking at the moral agents or the organization as a moral entity, one can study an organization's internal discourse. In that sense, individuals are neither central to, nor the proposed objects of, study (methodological individualism); the object of study is discourses. By describing discourses of managers, moral aspects come to the fore.

How does research with discourse theory work? A researcher conducts discourse descriptions or analyses, the basis of which are texts (the material manifestation of discourses). All verbal and written language can be considered. A discourse analysis shows which discursive objects and subjects emerge in social practices, and which conceptualizations are used. Consequently, what is left out in social practices also emerges. It is not the purpose of discourse analysis to retrieve what the authors exactly meant or felt when writing or speaking, or what interests they had. Discourse analysis is not a search for meaning, empirical or otherwise, of texts. The analysis focuses on the *effects* of the texts on other texts. They are described by studying the language practices among similar language practices. Hajer (1995: 54) states: 'Discourse analysis investigates the boundaries between . . . the moral and the efficient, or how a particular framing of the discussion makes certain elements appear fixed or appropriate while other elements appear problematic'.

A discourse analysis inquires into forms of problematization and offers a narrative about the production of problems. Why is something considered a problem (or not)? It does not concentrate on answering the problem at hand. In other words, when doing a discourse analysis, one can establish the limits of what can and cannot be said in a particular context, what Foucault (1977) called 'the conditions of possibility' of a discourse. A discourse analysis can identify the rules and resources that set the

boundaries of what can be said, thought and done in a particular (organizational) context or situation. Mauws (2000: 235) states: 'Thus, if we are to comprehend how decisions are made . . . it is by examining the conditions of possibility in relation to which these statements are formulated, that is, the often implicit institutionalized speech practices that guide what is and what is not likely to be said (Bourdieu)'. By conducting discourse analyses in the field of business ethics, the contextuality of ethics is taken seriously. It gives content to the vague notion of 'putting moral problems into context' (Hoffmaster 1992: 1427).

Discourse descriptions do not only help us understand that a certain moral question is asked, they also give us the spectrum of possible solutions to the moral problems being raised, i.e. what is or is not seen as a viable solution to a specific moral problem. A problem definition inevitably predisposes certain solutions, and vice versa (Wildavsky 1987, Rochefort & Cobb 1994, Kingdon 1995, Eeten 1998: 6). Compare this with the following quotation from Schön & Rein (1993: 153):

> When participants . . . name and frame the . . . situation in different ways, it is often difficult to discover what they are fighting about. Someone cannot simply say, for example, 'Let us compare different perspectives for dealing with poverty,' because each framing of the issue of poverty is likely to select and name different features of the problematic situation. We are no longer able to say that we are comparing different perspectives on 'the same problem,' because the problem itself has changed.

Asking a (moral) question assumes knowing what would constitute an answer to it.

Studying managerial decisions of bankers

In Holland the three largest banks dealing with private businesses are ING, ABN-Amro and Rabobank. Each of the three banks would argue that they differ from each other. Rabobank, for example, is a co-operative, not listed on any stock exchange. Therefore it does not have to satisfy shareholders and, according to Rabobank, this means more than just a different legal way of doing business. Rabobank claims that (partly) because they do not have to make a profit to satisfy shareholders, they treat their clients differently. And they claim to care more about the local economy than their competitors do.

One of the many ways in which the three banks could differ, are the decisions they make towards requests for a loan by business start-ups. The problem with a business start-up for banks is that they pose a higher risk. Many new companies go bankrupt in the first year of their existence.

By understanding how bankers make their choices with respect to start-ups, a discourse description can render visible the discursive formation within which bankers speak. It can identify the rules about the limits of what can and what cannot be said within a banker's discourse. A discourse analysis can first of all try to make clear how the banker sees himself, what his identity is. Then it can try to show how the identity of the banker is matched to a situation in which a loan for a start-up is decided. It has good opportunities to find rules that managers apply that are not financial norms, and that the bankers themselves are not consciously aware of. Maybe the manager sees himself and his business as something essential to the economic development is his region, which could lead to favourable impressions of business start-ups. Or maybe he is young and trying to make a fast career within his national bank organization, and is very concerned with avoiding big financial risks for his local bank, because the national bank is judging him very heavily on avoiding 'mistakes'. This example would lead to very stringent decision rules for business start-ups. A discourse analysis could also compare banks in that way. What are the similarities and what are the differences between the identities of local bank directors? Rabobank claims that it pays much attention to the region a specific bank office is located in. Is that reflected in the way the local bank directors talk about start-ups and the decision process about whether to give them a loan?

A discourse analysis by De Graaf (2001),[3] a study on bankers' conceptualizations of their customers, concluded that there are five different

discourses about customers among Dutch bankers. These discourses contain many aspects about the job of a banker and conceptualizations of their customers. The discourse descriptions give valuable information about the context of managerial decisions. It is shown how bankers in the discourse of Rabobank make more favourable decisions towards giving loans to business start-ups: they use a discourse where helping to start a business is seen as a moral question; others do not. The latter will ask themselves moral questions about start-up company loans but look primarily at the financial risk, and ask themselves primarily financial questions.

As stated before, in discourses factual and valuational statements are intertwined. Different ways of looking at the factual world lead to different valuations of it and vice-versa. The moral problems managers have are always embedded in a context. Morals are always situational. In talking about values, bank managers from a discourse wherein the relationship with the customer is a commercial one, immediately start to talk about fraud and how to prevent it (de Graaf 2001). Moral issues seen by bankers – the treatment of start-ups, environmental issues, using the bank to improve the region, dealing with sponsor money, having a customer in financial difficulty, whether to treat clients differently, when to be completely honest to customers, how to negotiate with customers, etc – are indissolubly tied to factual images a banker has of his customers. The moral questions and the factual images are part of the same discourse. By giving the best discourse description possible, the differences in moral stances between discourses become apparent by contrasting them.

Genealogical discourse analyses

Foucauldian genealogical studies are a special form of discourse analysis. Within his so-called archeology, Foucault (1970, 1972) looked for specific forms of 'problematization', how the subject and knowledge were connected. Within archeology, by using a grammar in its descriptions that replaces the subject with consciousness by a subject as the receiver of social meaning, static concepts are made fluid in a historical process. Within genealogy, Foucault (e.g. 1977) looked for the way forms of problematizations are shaped by other practices. Shapiro (1992: 29) states:

> Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. Committed to inquiry, it seeks endlessly to dissolve the coherence of systems of intelligibility that give individual and collective identities to persons/peoples and to the orders that house them by recreating the process of descent within which subjectivities and objectivities are produced.

The role of power is now central. There is considerable power in structured ways of viewing reality. Power is not defined as a feature of an institution or person but relationally. Building on the work of Foucault, some researchers within business studies have shown how discourses, with their inherent worldview, give some an advantage over others. See, for example, Clegg (1989).

As soon as the power concept comes in, it should get the immediate attention of business ethicists. To reveal the forces or power of a discourse, genealogy has to go back to the moment in which an interpretation or identity became dominant within a discourse. Habermas (1984) tried to improve conversation. Genealogists, on the other hand, are suspicious of all conversation because they recognize that systems of intelligibility exist at the expense of alternatives.

A genealogical discourse analysis within business ethics can analyze how power and knowledge function in discourse and organizations, how the rules and resources that delineate the limits of what can be said are working. Foucault (1977, 1984) has shown how power works through 'subjectification'. Every discourse claims to talk about reality. In doing so, it classifies what is true and what is not, what is permitted and what is not, what is desirable and what is not, and so on. Truth and power are closely related. As Foucault (1984: 74) stated: 'Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which induce and which extend it': a 'regime of truth'. Power is not just repressive; it is always productive.

A genealogical discourse analysis can reveal some of the ways power functions and can thus add to the understanding of the meaning of decisions in organizations. It can follow back in history the traces of a discourse and reveal the contingencies of a current discourse.

Storylines and metaphors in business ethics

Discursive practices are morally shaped in many ways and discourse theory offers several possibilities to study how. One is studying storylines and metaphors in discursive practices. When one has a certain worldview and uses a certain discourse, one takes a position within discussions in terms of the particular concepts, metaphors and stories of that discourse. For business ethics, it is important that a discourse analysis can show how forces in language influence moral positions by looking at the role metaphors and storylines play within a discourse. Discourse analysis can also gain insights into the structure, dynamics and directions of conflicting discourses, like narrative strategies.

Stories play an important role in people's lives; in large part, they give meaning to them (Watson 1994). If you want to get to know someone, you ask for a life story. Stories are about what is important and what is not. Philosophers like Johnson (1993) or McIntyre (1991) would go so far as to argue that stories are central to creating human understanding: 'I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'' (O'Connor 1997: 304). Fisher (1987: xiii) claims that 'all forms of human communication need to be seen fundamentally as stories'. It is therefore not surprising that stories are also important to studies of the organization. Herbert Simon argued that stories allow decision-making to take place. Many scholars agree that stories contain much information about an organization and are efficient at conveying information (Roe 1994: 9). Boje (1991: 106) argues: 'People engage in a dynamic process of incremental refinement of their stories of new events as well as ongoing reinterpretations of

culturally sacred story lines'. 'In sum people do not just tell stories, they tell stories to enact an account of themselves and their community' (Boje 1995: 1001).

The assumption in this article that meaning is produced in linguistic form fits well with exploring stories. Stories are simply one type of linguistic form. Stories are elements of a discourse with certain characteristics. Stories are especially important for ethicists: they contain values (ideas about good and bad, right and wrong); they are about good and evil. Within stories, the 'is' and 'ought' are closely connected. Even if they seem to give simple factual descriptions, an enormous implicit normative power lies within narratives. Hayden White (1980: 26) writes: 'What else could narrative closure exist of than the passage of one moral order to another? ... Where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too'. According to White, the events that are actually recorded in the narrative appear 'real' precisely insofar as they belong to an order of moral existence, just as they derive their meaning from their placement in this order. It is because the events described conduce to the establishment of social order or fail to do so that they find a place in the narrative attesting to their reality (Ettema & Glasser 1988: 10). Or, as Randels (1998: 1299) put it, 'Worldview narratives not only describe particular understandings of business, but have important normative considerations. They are not merely stories, but construe how we do, can, or should view the world, and how business people and corporations act, can act and should act'. A narrative analysis can therefore shed light on how different moral positions relate to each other. It shows how narrative structures (partly) determine moral positions and identities, and how they thereby influence the actions of individuals and organizations; and how internal dynamics of a discourse can influence the moral position that is taken.

Scholars have pointed to the moral significance of metaphors in business studies and in many empirical organizational discourse analyses, the role of metaphors has been brought to the fore (O'Connor 1995, 1997, 2000). Weick (1979: 50),

for example, pointed to the operational consequences of metaphor. Just like stories, metaphors are important to business ethicists because of the (often implicit) moral baggage they carry. Describing metaphors in discursive practices can bring clarity to how metaphors, in part, morally shape discursive practices, i.e. how morality is embedded in discursive practices.

The status of business ethics

When values are an integral part of any discourse, they are an integral part of the business ethics discourse. The thesis that meaning is constructed by and through discourse has implications for the notion of ethics itself. It is, as Hackley (1999: 38) notes, 'inseparable from ways of talking about and doing ethics and ethical things'. The descriptive ethics of the researcher comprises a moral component; descriptive ethics contains values itself and does not just mirror reality (cf. Willmott 1998: 80). Business ethicists' studies play a role in what Foucault called 'the regime of truth'.

It was often concluded in business studies literature that 'independence' and 'accountability' of employees were good for a company in a business sense. At the same time, business ethicists concluded they were good in a moral sense. Within companies, it is important who speaks of morals, what their viewpoints are and whose interests are represented. In a nutshell, how is ethics turned into a discourse? How do the forms of problematization of managers fit with forms of problematization of business ethics? The Foulcauldian question becomes: to what extent is business ethics used as a power tool to discipline workers? This is what Bauman argues too. He accuses organizations (bureaucracies) in our society of 'instrumentalising' ethics to achieve the goals of the organization rather than ethics being the systematic reflection of the goals of the organization. When opinion within a management discourse is that employees steal too much from the company, they can hire 'integrity consultants'. These consultants do not evaluate the goals or the products of the organization, nor do they look at whether employees are treated kindly. Instead, they are used to discipline employees with the use of an ethical discourse.

Conclusion

When managerial decisions are examined, somehow the business context must be included in the analysis. First in this article, problems with choice-based theories of managerial decisions were discussed. Also, methodological individualism turned out to be problematic. In this article, causalities that transcend individuals were the proposed unit of analysis in empirical moral research, namely discourse. After discussing discourse theory, the conclusion is that (the different forms of) discourse theory can help studying managerial decisions in many ways. It was shown here what a discourse analysis within business ethics could look like. Special attention was paid to genealogical studies, stories and metaphors.

Here, both language and the subject are proposed to be treated as contingents instead of looking for essential, deep criteria or fundamentals. Starting from the assumption that the 'world out there' is constructed by discursive conceptions and that they are collectively sustained and continually renegotiated in the process of making sense (cf. Parker 1992: 3). The role of language in constituting reality was seen as central. It is through discourses that we view and value things. Therefore, the specific discourse a manager is in has many consequences. When we describe how bank managers talk about their customers, the description says a lot how the banker treats customers. In the same profession, managers treat clients differently. This is interesting for clients, managers and, not least, business ethicists.

Notes

1. As will become clear, a purely non-normative description is never possible.
2. Utilitarianism is often used, for example, in cost-benefit analyses. It 'is a powerful theory that certainly fits in well with our moral intuitions, particularly within the context of the business community' (Kaptein & Wempe 2002: 74). Bob

Solomon applied 'virtue ethics' to business ethics (Solomon 1992). Solomon came up with four basic virtues for companies: honesty, fairness, trust and toughness. Scholars who use some sort of integrity approach, such as Kaptein & Wempe (2002), usually try to find the right mix between the three classic moral theories. Scholars like Ronald Green (1994) take a more deontological approach: they define clear moral guidelines and principles to which companies always have to adhere. A theorist like Freeman, with a 'fair contracts' approach, reflects the assumptions and methodology of the modern liberal Rawlsian theory of justice and property rights (Sorell 1998: 26). The stakeholder approach, like the one by Donaldson and Preston, has some affinities with utilitarian notions. Like the utilitarian moral theorists, stakeholder theorists struggle with the following problems: whom to identify as morally relevant? How to accommodate conflicting interests? And what to do with moral claims that are incomparable? Answers should lead to a situation that is best for all. Contract theorists, such as Donaldson & Dunfee (2000), do not so much get their inspiration from the classic moral theories, but make use of other classic philosophers like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau.

3. In this case, Q-methodology was used as the research method. However, other methods like narrative analysis or ethnography could be used as well for discourse analysis (cf. de Graaf 2005).

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