

*From the Editors*

## Three Models of Impactful Business Ethics Scholarship

What makes a great business ethics article? What are the distinctive attributes that differentiate the best contributions to *Business Ethics Quarterly* from the other terrific work published in the journal? To determine the answer, I reviewed all of the *Business Ethics Quarterly* Best Article Award finalists and winners during my five-year tenure as Editor in Chief. By doing so, I was able to identify three different models of high impact scholarship.

Before discussing these models, however, it's important to be clear regarding what types of scholarship are published in the journal. Business ethics scholarship is distinctive in that it explicitly embraces value pluralism. Economic, or monetary, value is essential in business and in markets exchanges, but it is one of many important values that need to be taken into account. Values such as justice, democracy, liberty, fairness, care, respect, integrity, environmental sustainability, and legal compliance, among others, are also important in business and in market exchanges. If management, marketing, and business scholarship more generally focus primarily on monetary value (i.e., revenues or profits), scholarship in philosophy and theology tends to neglect or ignore monetary value. High quality business ethics scholarship is grounded in recognition that monetary value along with many other values are essential to the practice of ethical business and to the cultivation of ethical markets.

Now, to be clear, *any* article published in BEQ will need to be well-written and up to date with respect to current scholarship. The article will need to situate itself within existing knowledge or debates, and engage the most salient scholarship. With respect to empirical scholarship, the data must be sufficiently rich to support the interpretations offered, analyses must be clear and applied with precision, and limitations of the study clearly articulated. But this is true of any elite journal. At BEQ, authors must also show how they are significantly advancing existing theoretical understanding of key elements of business ethics, corporate responsibility, or sustainability scholarship. My review of the Best Article Award finalists and winners over the last five years reveals that this can be done in one of at least three distinctive ways.

### THEORETICAL ILLUMINATION

First, authors can provide conceptual and/or normative clarity to problems that have been historically under-theorized. In this way, authors can engage in *theoretical illumination* of areas where there are gaps in understanding (e.g., Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma 2014; Warren, Peytcheva, and Gaspar 2015). As an illustration, consider the debate over corporate responsibilities for human rights where there has been considerable disagreement about whether firms should use leverage over other actors in their spheres of influence to promote respect for human rights. Wood (2012)

provides one of the first and most sophisticated theoretical analyses of this issue. He argues that leverage is a source of responsibility when several factors are present: There is a morally significant connection between the company and a rights-holder or rights-violator, the company is able to make a contribution to ameliorating the situation, the company can do so at modest expense, and the threat to human rights is substantial. As a second illustration, consider the ethics of employee termination. What constitutes an ethically appropriate dismissal? Scholars and practitioners alike can agree that termination that results from downsizing or the restructuring of a business should be respectful, but what does that entail? Sophisticated ethical analyses of these issues have been lacking. Kim (2014) argues that severance pay is a reparative gesture that aptly expresses agent-regret and in most cases properly expresses respect for the employee in the context of involuntary termination. Both Wood and Kim advance our understanding by illuminating subjects that were previously undertheorized.

### ALTERNATIVE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

A second model involves the application of novel theoretical perspectives to problems that have previously been analyzed from competing or alternate theoretical perspectives. In this way, authors can provide *alternative theoretical perspectives* on previously analyzed problems (e.g., Alzola 2012; Dempsey 2015; Goodman and Arenas 2015; Orlitzky 2011; Preiss 2014). For example, Smith and Dubbink (2012) respond both to “moral particularists” and to contemporary business ethicists who object to a substantive role for moral principles in practical business judgment on the grounds that principle-based moral judgment is overly abstract, noncontextual, and impersonal. In reply, they provide a contemporary Kantian analysis of moral judgment in business that is distinct from both naïve Kantian analysis and moral particularism.

Alternative perspectives can also be more radical insofar as they seek to upend conventional theoretical wisdom and replace it with an alternative framework. In an example of this type of scholarship, Jones and Felps (2013) defend an alternative neo-utilitarian objective for the firm. This is a radical departure from orthodox finance and management scholarship regarding shareholder primacy and the purpose of the firm. In order to advance a refined version of normative stakeholder theory that addresses the criticism that stakeholder theory lacks sufficient specificity, Jones and Felps articulate a single-valued objective function for the corporation that they describe as “stakeholder happiness enhancement.” They argue that adapting such a perspective would allow managers to make principled choices between policy options when stakeholder interests conflict.

### THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

In a third model of business ethics scholarship, authors link different theoretical domains or constructs to reveal gaps in understanding, tensions, or contradictions in existing scholarship. Through this kind of *theoretical integration* authors point

to limitations of existing research programs, often highlighting the need for cross-disciplinary research, in order to both identify weaknesses in current understanding and constructively develop solutions to the weaknesses identified (e.g., Hannah, Avolio, and Walumbwa 2011; Schreck, van Aaken and Donaldson 2014). Such constructive engagement with existing research streams facilitates the development of new theoretical insight and understanding.

In an illustrative example of this type of research, Wettstein (2012) points out that corporate social responsibility scholars have ignored the contemporary debate on business and human rights, including recent United Nations initiatives. Indeed, CSR scholars were largely absent from the consultations that resulted in the development and adaptation of the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework on business and human rights. At the same time, the business and human rights literature has not engaged management scholarship in ways that would help to understand how to effectively incorporate human rights protections into business policy. Wettstein argues for an integration of research streams in ways that would promote sustained focus on firm involvement in the promotion and protection of human rights.

Each of the three models discussed here has in common the idea that impactful scholarship in business ethics provides a sustained and original theoretical contribution. In combination, the models illustrate a diversity of strategies for accomplishing this goal. Each of the strategies is also compatible with a variety of methods including conceptual analysis, normative theory development, quantitative methods, qualitative methods, and historical methods. The models are not an exhaustive inventory of successful strategies for producing impactful business ethics scholarship; however, they do represent models of scholarship that have proven successful for many BEQ authors over the last five years.

Denis G. Arnold  
Editor in Chief

## REFERENCES

- Alzoa, Miguel. 2012. “The Possibility of Virtue.” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 22(2): 377–404.
- Dempsey, James. 2015. “Moral Responsibility, Shared Values, and Corporate Culture.” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 25(3): 319–40.
- Garcia-Ruiz, Pablo, & Rodriguez-Lluesma, Carlos. 2014. “Consumption Practices: A Virtue Ethics Approach.” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 24(4): 509–31.
- Goodman, Jennifer, & Arenas, Daniel. 2015. “Engaging Ethically: A Discourse Ethics Perspective on Social Shareholder Engagement.” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 25(2): 163–89.
- Hannah, Sean T., Bruce, J. Avolio, & Walumbwa, Fred O. 2011. “Relationships Between Authentic Leadership, Moral Courage, and Ethical and Pro-social Behaviors.” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 21(4): 555–78.
- Kim, Tae Wan. 2014. “Decent Termination: A Moral Case for Severance Pay.” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 24(2): 203–27.
- Jones, Thomas M., & Felps, Will. 2013. “Stakeholder Happiness Enhancement: A Neo-Utilitarian Objective for the Modern Corporation.” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 23(3): 349–79.

- Orlitzky, Marc. 2011. "Institutional Logics in the Study of Organizations: The Social Construction of the Relationship between Corporate Social and Financial Performance." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 21(3): 409–44.
- Preiss, Joshua. 2014. "Global Labor Justice and the Limits of Economic Analysis." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 24(1): 591–616.
- Schreck, Philipp, van Aaken, Dominik, & Donaldson, Thomas. 2013. "Positive Economics and the Normativistic Fallacy: Bridging the Two Sides of CSR." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 23(2): 297–329.
- Smith, Jeffery, & Dubbink, Wim. 2011. "Understanding the Role of Moral Principles in Business Ethics: A Kantian Perspective." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 21(2): 205–31.
- Tashman, Pete, & Raeli, Jonathan. 2013. "Who and What Really Matters to the Firm: Moving Stakeholder Salience beyond Managerial Perceptions." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 23(4): 591–616.
- Warren, Danielle E., Peytcheva, Marietta, & Gaspar, Joseph P. 2015. "When Ethical Tones at the Top Conflict: Adapting Priority Rules to Reconcile Conflicting Tones." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 25(4): 559–82.
- Wettstein, Florian. 2012. "CSR and the Debate on Business and Human Rights." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 22(4): 739–70.
- Wood, Stepan. 2012. "The Case for Leverage-Based Corporate Human Rights Responsibility." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 22(1): 63–98.