Why the Practice of Business Ethics Calls for a Due Regard for History

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In this essay I will examine four reasons why a due regard for history is important for business ethics. These are as follows: (1) In order to learn and to appreciate local cultural norms and practices; (2) In order to understand both how current problems developed as they have and how to envision the current responsibilities for past legacies; (3) In order to gain a lively sense of what is now possible and what is not and when what kinds of actions are called for; and (4) in order to monitor existing practices as they evolve over time.

Keywords: Ethics, History, Business, Contingencies, Responsibilities, Legacies

1. Introduction

Often we associate the practice of ethics with efforts to make judgments about how to act with respect to particular issues by invoking general, often universal normative standards — whether these are expressed in the form of principles, values, rights, rules, virtues, or ends. This is the approach to ethics modelled especially in the works of Plato, Aquinas, Kant, and Rawls, as well as in sacred texts like the Dhammapada, the Qur’an, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and Canon Law. An equivalent approach is embodied in the efforts to arrive at common normative standards for business practices as these are set forth in business codes like the SA 8000, the ISO 14000, Benchmarks for Excellence.

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