

Towards a Living Story Value Ethics

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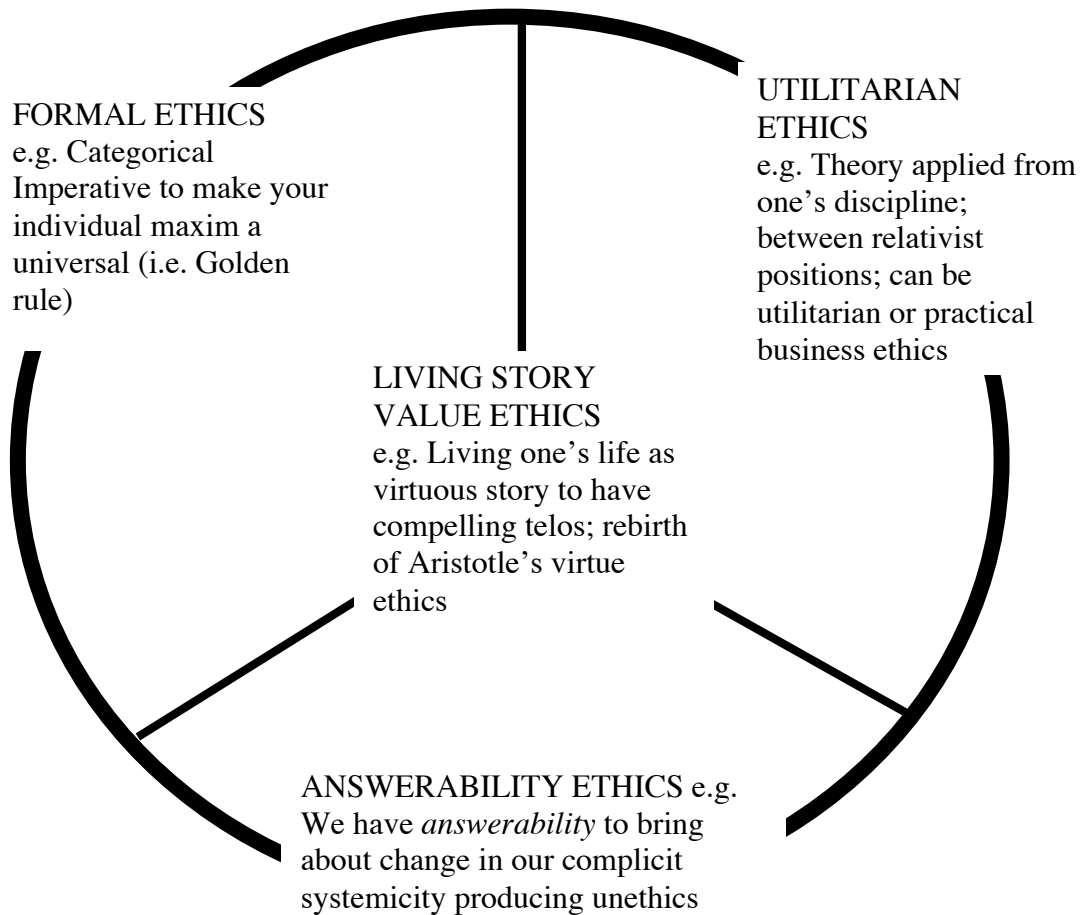


Figure 1: Interdependency of Four Types of Ethics

FORMAL ETHICS – Kant's – Do the right thing you would have others do to you. Problem it does not have a theory of changing systemicity that produces unethics; Media & Popular Culture industry has sold public on idea that white lies & turning the other way at cheating or theft is OK behavior. Kant's (1785) Categorical Imperative: "Act only according to the Maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." Flaw: will is not enough & leads to individualism; Kant's idealism becomes tool of Utilitarian Ethics codes.

BUSINESS UTILITARIAN ETHICS – Have a Code of Ethics, but business follow it only when practical. Shallow and superficial McEthics compliance; PR device to hide behind; Flaw is that self-centeredness takes over so codes become lowest moral life; e.g. Enron leaders said its right to lie & exploit when practical; most at Enron stood by & did nothing; Flaw – how can a society of isolated apathetic individuals bring about meaningful change?

ANSWERABILITY ETHICS (or CRITICAL ETHICS) - Bakhtin's (1991, 1993)

Answerability – understand the systemicity you are part of, and change it to stop reproducing unethics. This is working for individuality within a social movement for change instead of individuality (self-absorption).

LIVING STORY VALUE ETHICS – In ancient Greece, there was an aesthetic of living one's story as a virtuous path. In Aristotle's virtue ethics, choose the middle road (middle path between cowardly and rash is the courageous virtue). In living story (see Boje, 2008), one's living story is in relationship to a web of other's living stories, to living story of nature and community. "My living story is in fragments, and my encounters with others' living stories are equally fragmented" (Boje, 2008: 110). The problem is "We may not pay much attention to the weave of [living] stories in which we participate" (Boje, 2008: 97, bracket addition, mine). A potential way forward is to develop more interplay between Living Story Value Ethics and Answerability Ethics, and hopefully change the balance of the dominant ethical frames away from just Utilitarian and Formal ethics. Stephen Cummings (2000: 222) does a marvelous job of linking aesthetics and virtue ethics to story as it was in ancient Greece:

"One's life-task was to make his or her story, through the everyday act of living, as good or as aesthetically pleasing as it could be, in order to enable, eventually, a good and proper ending. Such a story would be woven into the development of the stories that made up the fabric of one's community."

These four ethical frameworks differ on two dimensions: individualism-individualistic, and universalism-relativistic.

INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS INDIVIDUALITY

Nicolas Berdyaev (1914) in *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, wrote ideas that got him sent to Siberia in 1922. He noticed the world is going to pieces because it relies on ideas of evolution, revolution, and rebellion. Revolution & Rebellion are hateful of the past, and a reactionary psychology.

Example: Downtown Urban 'Removal' in Las Cruces, New Mexico, of all that was old frontier, pioneer culture, all the adobe had to be town down in the Urban Renewal Revolution in 1960s & 70s combined with replication of bureaucratic modernist, uncreativity and the Great Depression generation's hatred of history. It's a revolt without the requisite creative imagination (Bakhtin, 1981), and no answerability for one's living story affecting those of other cultures.

Berdyaev sees evolution as practical (utilitarian) adaptation to economic necessity. He argues the real individuality is in creativity, born out of liberty, not obedience to necessity. "Love burns up all necessity, and gives freedom"; "Love is creativeness" (Berdyaev, 1914: 151).

When necessity becomes compelling we have individualism, not the answerability of individualistic creative acts to make a critical ethical difference.

"Individualism is the enemy of individuality" (ibid, 153).

UNIVERSALISM VERSUS RELATIVISTIC

Formal Ethics is universalism, making one's maxim a universal. In the postmodern condition, with so many perspectives, it is difficult to find much that is universal or to agree upon such matters. In the relativistic contention among perspectives there is plurality and a multiculturalism of differences. Utilitarian Ethics is the most relativistic, believing that anyone's individualistic perspective on ethics is OK as long as it meets the test of being economic necessity.

HOW TO DO ANSWERABILITY – ANSWERABILITY ETHICS + LIVING STORY VIRTUE ETHICS

1. Overcome the apathy of individualism where life is just one more social construction, disunity, and estrangement. Live one's living story answerably to other's living stories.
2. Learn the secret of united union → Communion of creative action.
3. Living Story Value Ethics has important interplay with Critical Ethics of Answerability.

KEY POINTS

1. Business Utilitarian Ethics is mostly bankrupt, and may threaten to bankrupt the USA. The Toxic Assets of Mortgage and Banking and the Wall Street bailout is happening today. Fortunately our Las Cruces bankers had more Critical Ethical sense.
2. Business Utilitarian Ethics texts often sell us the idea that individualism is the path to freedom, but it's an illusion of freedom, that led us into the tragedy of Enron's freedom.
3. Business Utilitarian Ethics is without content, without value when it comes to either Formal Ethics that strives for moral personal action, or Critical Ethics that strives for socioeconomic change.
4. When Business can living its living story as a virtuous path instead of one of necessity, it can find as well Answerability Ethics.
5. Kantian Formal Ethics has no intervention in the systemicity producing the unethical or the un-virtuous Utilitarian Business Ethics. Answerability Ethics and the Living Story Virtue Ethics provide accountability for intervening in socioeconomics to bring about ethical living story in relationship to other's ethical living stories.

DISCUSSION

I have been doing another intensive read through Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (edited by Terence Irwin). I got on this because I read in Linstead and Hopfl's (2000) *The Aesthetics of Organization*, an essay by Stephen Cummings (212-227). He links aesthetics to ethics, as a path for the excesses of business ethics (which is an apologetics for utilitarianism, greed, & unsustainability). Cummings is relying MacIntyre (1981) who is resurrecting Aristotle's virtue ethics, by calling it an aesthetics and to Foucault's later works, that also return to an aesthetics of life (again returning to ancient Greek culture).

What is interesting to me is this aesthetics approach to a new business ethics is rooted in storytelling. It is "a narrative understanding of life: (Cummings, 2000: 224). And, its related to antenarrative (a bet on the future that is before narrative coherence). This being-unto-the-future or antenarrative can be simply stated as living one's live as an ethical story at each moment of being (Bakhtinian notion, in my view). This means, to me, making choices to paths for the future that make it an antenarrative. And leave a history, in retrospect as an ethical aesthetically pleasing narrative. The three temporalities are in interplay as the narrative rudder, guides actions in the present, and make ethical antenarrative a future affect past and present.

Cummings (2000: 222) as I stated above, does a marvelous job of linking aesthetics and virtue

ethics to story. The problem I see is that ethics and aesthetics are linked up to be about finding that retrospective “good and proper ending.” I think there are implications for what my colleagues and I call “living story” being unfolding in the present, those relationships of our living stories to other’s unfolding living stories in whatever community we are in.

As you know I am looking at storytelling as interplay of retrospective, now, and prospective sensemaking. So I defined storytelling as the interanimation of retrospective narrative, now-unfolding living story webs of relationship, and antenarrative prospective sensemaking shaping the future (& reshaping past & present). And it seems that Cummings is privileging the retrospective, and ending the essay without developing what for me is antenarrative (prospective) sensemaking or the living story webs (often without beginning, just in the middle, no end in sight)..

This leads me back to an Aristotelian understanding of ethics in relations to aesthetics. I am looking through Aristotle's work on ethics (actually his surviving lecture notes), and sorting out how he approaches storytelling.

Aristotle says that virtuous ethics is happiness. By happiness he does not mean pursuit of selfish pleasure, or greed for wealth, or accumulating honors. It would seem that utilitarian business ethics has the pleasure and wealth view of happiness that Aristotle argues against. Aristotle is arguing against a universal ethics (anticipating Kant’s approach). Aristotle (p. 9-11, in Irwin edition, italics original) says:

1. *There are no universals for ordered series*
2. *There is no universal good across all categories*
3. *There is no single Idea across different sciences*
4. *Separation is pointless for understanding goodness*
5. *The eternity of the Form is irrelevant*
6. *[Disagrees with] The Pythagorean view*
7. *There is no Form even for intrinsic goods*
8. *Though goods are not homonymous by chance, the connection between their definitions does not imply the existence of a single Form*
9. *It is irrelevant to action*
10. *The sciences pay no attention to the Form*
11. *And they are right, for the Form is useless to the sciences*

Aristotle is firm in his stance against Universal Idea. He posits that there is happiness, and it is different for each person, and different in each field of arts and science. And of all the goods: “Happiness is most choiceworthy of all goods” (p. 15). And for this reason he says, “Happiness is virtue” (p. 20). Animals can seek pleasure, and wealth in itself is not happiness. “*Happiness is acquired by virtue, and hence by our actions, not by fortune*” (p. 22, italics, original). His advice is “to achieve happiness through some sort of learning and attention” (p. 22). My read is that it is through actions and choices that happiness is sustained. That would mean that happiness is not exclusively a retrospective act “we will go on living this way and come to an appropriate end” (p. 27).

Aristotle has good advice for storytellers. The “story-tellers” says Aristotle, “wastes their day on trivialities” and he calls them “babblers” because they are not temperate (p. 80). Here is the exact quote:

“... for lovers of tales, story-tellers, those who waste their days on trivialities, are called babblers, but not intemperate” (p. 80).

He calls for brave, truth telling in storytelling, and to devalue the boorish, vain, babbling, and cowardly storytelling. There is storytelling that is shameful, harmful, boastful, vain, and painful. There is storytelling that is fine, expedient, and pleasant. The truth-telling storyteller does not overstate, boastful, full of pretenses. The truth-telling storyteller can be moderate, but does not understate for sake of self-deprecation. I'd like to do wittier storytelling. The flatterer is excessive and the boor is just quarrelsome, ill tempered. The spiteful storyteller seems to enjoy others' misfortunes. "It is hard work to be excellent... to find what is intermediate" (p. 52).

What seems fitting is to call for magnificence in storytelling. There is certainly much vulgarity, and poor taste in boastful, show off storytelling. There is deficiency in much storytelling tell it like it is, and somehow cheapens the art. The magnanimous storyteller is "concerned for the truth more than for people's opinion" yet it moderate, telling less than the truth since a "display of strength against the weak" is vulgar (p. 102). A magnanimous storyteller "is open in [her] his speech and actions since [her] his distain makes [her] him speak freely" (p. 102, brackets mine), and does "not nurse memories, especially not of evils" but overlooks them, and "is no gossip... does not speak evil even of [her] his enemies, except [when he responds to their] wanton aggression" (p. 102 first bracket mine, next one in original).

"The magnanimous person seems to have slow movement, a deep voice and calm speech" (p. 102). While this is too male in its stereotype, his point is that a magnanimous person is not in a hurry, is not being hasty, and has a mildness of anger when confronting the right things in the right way, at the right time. In that sense, being a magnanimous storytelling means confronting unethical circumstance with a mildness of anger instead of being irascible (quick tempered & quick to let it go) or choleric (quick tempered to an extreme about everything to point of being quarrelsome & cantankerous), or being bitter by holding a grudge and never reconciling. There is a deficiency in storytelling, that of being boorish, objecting to every pleasurable story, and to taking time to relax and make a space for storytelling as being necessary to life (p. 114). And about jokes in storytelling, while wit is appropriate in confronting, "a joke is a type of abuse" especially in vulgar-buffoons, and for the "agile-witted" must is something more "cultivated" (p. 113).

CONCLUSIONS

A major problem with Business Utilitarian Ethics is the organization participant's focus is on the necessity of the present without an appreciation of the past, or developing a virtuous living story, or an magnificent antenarrative shaping the future. This relates to the idea of narrative being monological and retrospective, living story being either virtuous or utilitarian, and antenarrative (Boje, 2001) being that bet on the future, which can become answerable, virtuous, or unethical. Being magnanimous in one's storytelling is a way of being answerable to unethical practices.

Living Story Value Ethics is a supplementarity to the roles played by Formal ethics, Utilitarian Ethics and Answerability Ethics. In the postmodern environment of multi-cultural mobility, and fragmentation it is important to move beyond a Kantian Formal Ethics of individualism that does not intervene in the socioeconomics systemicity.

Living Story Value Ethics stands at the crossroads of the dimensions of individualism-individualistic and universalism-relativistic. To universalists all relativism is a bad thing. To relativists, universalism is a dogmatic quest for uniform values. The *raison d'être* for dialogism is to sort out the pluralism of ethical positions, to bring them into deliberative and conciliatory

interplay. In sorting out a Living Story Value Ethics, an organization can ask what stakeholders with contrary ethical frameworks (Formal, Utilitarian, Answerability) are expecting. In concert, living stories co-generate emergence in the now, and interplay with antenarratives of future potentiality. Living one's life as a virtuous living story moves that co-generativity into more ethical community.

“There are critical limits to answerability, to the thesis that reading narrative or listening to storytelling will persuade one to act” (Boje, 2008: 114). There is this huge assumption that dialogical participation in answerable storytelling and in deconstructing orchestrated official corporate narratives will result in ethical answerable intervention into unethical systemicity. Bakhtin's (1981) dialogisms (polyphony, stylistics, chronotopes, & architectonics) are in interplay. It takes more than polyphony to get one to the architectonic dialogism (defined as interanimation of ethics, aesthetics, & cognitive discourses). Bakhtin saw Kant's (1781) architectonics of how systems are organized from parts into wholes as too narrowly focused on cognitive rationality, and in need of both aesthetics and ethics. For Bakhtin the thing about story is its dialogicality of many points of view, and the limitation of narrative is its monologic (one-voice, one-view of the past).

“Some very intelligent people divorce stories of sweatshop working lives from their persona lives as shoppers, and from stories of fellow workers in the brotherhood of workers globally, whatever their plight” (Boje, 2008: 111). The limitation of Answerability Ethics is “many people do not accept guilt, blame, or complicity” (Boje, 2008: 111). We do not recognize that we live in a web of living stories, and it is this that allows utilitarian ethics to become compelling, more so, than Answerability Ethics.

Business is at a crossroads, where it is being called to move beyond Utilitarian Ethics. Utilitarian Ethics is style-less, an empty aesthetics, not a compelling story upon which to ground business conduct or strategy. One's living story is occurrent in a fabric of living stories, relativistic in their relationship with others. Without dialogical imagination the living story becomes individualistic, self-centered, and selfish. The social result is a community of apathy, bystanders without answerability, without the possibility of making life and organization a work of art.

Once upon a time, storytelling emphasized an aesthetics approach to the ethical life, to fashioning one's living story as artful. Utilitarian Business Ethics is artless, a dead petrified narrative of necessity without creative imagination or relational accountability. Walter Benjamin says (1936: 83) “*The art of storytelling is coming to an end.*” He means a storytelling where righteous human being confront themselves and each other. The confrontations are not happening because the competencies for discerning compellingness of others' living stories for one's own living story are not being seeded. Instead our education, media, and popular culture focuses on tidy narratives with simplistic linear beginning, middle, and end plots. And while coherent, these are not very artful in the postmodern condition.

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