

A Business Ethics Center Rethinks Its Role

Michael A. DeWilde

Grand Valley State University

ABSTRACT: This paper explores some of the reasons why we, as a business ethics center housed at a state university, are transitioning from being a largely neutral platform on business ethics topics to becoming an advocate for specific perspectives. Comprising the topics of interest are issues such as climate change, capitalism, and certain medical and public health controversies. Presented here are four main reasons behind this move: pluralistic arguments, moral “switching,” existential crises, and combating disinformation. Two examples regarding capitalism and vaccine mandates are used to demonstrate advocacy in practice.

Introduction

AS THE DIRECTOR OF A BUSINESS ETHICS CENTER HOUSED IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY, I am interested in exploring our pivot from being a largely “neutral” platform for the presentation of a wide range of views on business ethics topics toward advocacy for particular perspectives on issues such as climate change, shareholder capitalism, and certain medical and public health controversies. I put the word “neutral” in quotes to recognize that as the director I of course have selection and confirmation biases that have played into all of the work we’ve done—anything like absolute neutrality is impossible. Yet I retain it to signify that we have a) aspired to be inclusive of viewpoint diversity in our public-facing events, and b) for the most part and to this point staked out no particular position on the issues before us. But now we are moving to more explicit, if limited, advocacy, and with that comes a host of epistemological and public relations challenges; in what follows, I’ll put forward the four main reasons behind this move, as well as present two examples that I hope will clarify what advocacy looks like in practice.

Mission and Brief History

The mission of the Koeze Business Ethics Initiative (KBEI) in the Seidman College of Business at Grand Valley State University (Grand Rapids, MI, USA) is to examine the role and influence of business in public life; to promote inquiry into ethical business practices and education; and to be a leading resource for

business professionals, students, faculty, and administrators who seek to understand the relationship between business, the common good, and a life well-lived.

In 2014, the Business Ethics Center evolved into the Koeze Business Ethics Initiative as a result of a gift from the Koeze family—a legacy family business based in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Since then, we have sought to accomplish the above mission in a variety of ways. We've held conferences on the roles businesses might play relative to climate change, and on how eroding empathy¹ has affected the practice of management in business and in the health care industry. We've explored how recent discoveries in the neurosciences are affecting the ways ethics as a discipline can and should be understood and taught. We've devoted resources to developing a "Trustworthiness Index" for publicly held companies in Michigan, and we've worked with Jerry Davis at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan to publish on the evolution of social capital in Flint and Grand Rapids.² We've invited notable thinkers to comment on the future of capitalism. We've taken up issues of race and equity in our region by inviting the founder of CEO of Inclusive Performance Inc., Paul Doyle, to co-teach an MBA ethics and leadership course as well as be a regular speaker in other classes.

In all of this, only one main directive has come from the Koeze family: spend time and research devoted to women in business. We have responded to that request in two ways. First, by seeking to understand the current challenges and environments women in business face through meta-analyses of what recent research tells us about harassment, advancement, and maternity and family leave. Second, by holding public forums in which locally (and nationally) prominent women speak to these and other relevant issues.

As the director, I have been given autonomy to explore issues of my choosing. And while I regularly ask two people I trust and whom have ample academic and business experience (Jeff Koeze, CEO of Koeze, Co. and Diana Lawson, Dean of the business school) to audit my plans for the KBEI, neither of these two principals have ever approached me directly or indirectly to steer the course of the KBEI. My challenge, then, is not that I might feel compromised by donors or administrators, but the opposite: what do I do with all the autonomy? To be sure, we are dealing with modest resources; however, I have the freedom to invite guest speakers, sponsor and host webinars, pursue research, travel to conferences of my choosing, and hire interns with almost complete independence. What have I done with all this unfettered, well-supported freedom? What have been my guiding principles, my values, as I have picked and chosen my way through the endless goldmine that is business ethics? And how have they changed, if in fact they have?

The Idea of a University (to Coin a Phrase)

Initially, my guiding principles echoed those I bring to the classroom, which have their roots in traditional ways of thinking about the role of a university. If at its core the university is about the generation and dissemination of knowledge,

and if we get there by advancing and then subjecting our ideas to rigorous analysis from all comers and from all viewpoints, then why not pattern an outreach center within the university in the same way? Disciplines have welcomed disputation, argumentation, and evidence that both supports and undercuts their various positions, and of course Ethics more than most should welcome such careful examination, given how difficult it is to ground moral claims in absolutes. Faculty, on this reckoning, are loyal to nothing but the truth (or Truth), for our fidelity is not to our status but to our field and its contributions to the advancement of knowledge in the service of humankind.

To prove the KBEI worthy of such lofty ideals, I consciously set a course of inquiry and public presentation that suggested the KBEI be as open to as many viewpoints as we could accommodate on any given subject. We welcomed the civil clash of disparate findings, the public disagreements that might annoy, in the moment, their adherents and spokespersons but enlighten our audience. We would be the Switzerland of ethics centers, taking no position ourselves but that of offering a platform for those who would agree to amicably disagree. All involved could then thoughtfully consider what new knowledge could be won from the clash of the learned in the marketplace of ideas.

If I wax a bit poetic in the above description, it is not to denigrate any of our many excellent presentations and forums from the past years, but to begin to highlight how it is that I've come to consider being "Switzerland" at least occasionally problematic. At the very least, I was open to charges of intellectual dishonesty by pretending to be neutral when my choices of topics and speakers did reveal my own "advocacies." I countered this by pointing to the range of views I invited into the conversation that I myself disagreed with, but the reader can see the problem here—given time and resource constraints I still only invited *certain* opposing views. There is no escaping that critique, as far as I can tell.

The Future of Capitalism

Early in my tenure, I organized an event I titled "The Future of Capitalism." Hardly original, but a perennially important topic. I brought together four speakers representing divergent views on the topic for a panel discussion and audience QandA. The panelists included a young activist who referenced, sympathetically and passionately, the Zapatista movement from Mexico; a slightly more academic socialist; a "socially responsible" capitalist; and a free-market corporate capitalist from the Freidman school. The result was 120+ minutes of free-wheeling, contentious, occasionally informative, and, when the audience got involved, long-winded conversation. At the end of it, I felt satisfied with what I had wrought: a wide range of views represented in the public arena by knowledgeable partisans. Plus, a good-sized audience. Let a thousand flowers bloom, and then let each one of us make up her own mind on the merits of capitalism, now variously defined. I look back and think that the audience did in fact get an excellent overview of the subject. The KBEI took no position on capitalism itself,

and I suspect my thinking at the time was that it would have been injurious to our credibility and trustworthiness to have done so.

Principles and Pluralism

I was—and still am—influenced by a kind of traditional liberalism that has faith in public discourse, that believes (mostly) all beliefs should be encouraged in their expression, especially in a university, so that the “good ideas can drive out the noxious ones.” I understood the position I put the KBEI in not solely as one of “neutrality,” really, but more importantly as one dedicated to pluralism, the wonderfully Anglo-American ideal that diversity could in fact be unifying, not only or merely polarizing. Public debate on “hot topics,” perennial or not, informs, enlightens, and motivates responsible citizenship. Does that seem quaint, now?

I love the idea of pluralism. One does imagine the metaphorical table that increases in size as more and more perspectives are invited to it, as more and more of us in good faith listen hard to speech we find difficult, sometimes even disgusting, and seek to a) understand one another where we can, b) compromise where we must, and c) resist and constrain only in the most urgent—and rarest—of cases. And yet, when the pandemic hit and I moved many of my otherwise public events from in-person forums to a webinar format, this happened: I trotted out the old “What’s the Future of Capitalism?” trope once again, this time on the heels of much discussion of its role in both growing inequality and the concomitant threat to democracy, as well as its role in the generation of climate exigencies.

Many years had passed since that first, fairly wild free-for-all, and I invited exactly none of the panelists who had spoken at the original event. I invited two quite different speakers, both of whom I knew to be friendly to critiques of American-style free market capitalism (what is sometimes referred to as “market fundamentalism”). Fred Keller, a well-respected and much-chronicled local business owner who had used his business to make the case that businesses have not so much the obligation but rather the opportunity to be successful when taking on social and environmental problems traditionally reserved for government³. Joining Keller was Professor Jerry Davis, the well-known University of Michigan Ross School of Business professor whose critiques of corporate America include offering alternatives to traditional shareholder capitalism as well as arguing for how and why corporate America should change to meet the Sustainable Development Goals.⁴ The conversation this time was not as free-wheeling, and its clear message was that anything like maintaining the status quo was likely to leave most of us much poorer off, in terms economic, social and environmental.⁵

Background for Change

Why, this time around, was there no one to defend what a number of my students—undergraduate and graduate alike—still believe to be true, i.e., unfettered

free market capitalism with little to no regulation best represents the very pinnacle of economic systems thinking, insofar as it creates opportunity, wealth, and innovation unprecedented in human history? In response, allow me to bring in Aristotle by way of Michael Sandel. Like many others, I use Sandel's book *Justice* in a few of the classes I teach. I like the range and complexity of the examples he uses, his attempts to be fair to the philosophers he disagrees with, and his recognition, following MacIntyre, that we are enmeshed in a "thick narrative" of culture and history in which we have connections and obligations to one another that go well beyond the merely contractual. And I especially like Sandel's summary of Aristotle's ethics:

1. Justice is teleological. Defining rights requires us to figure out the *telos* (the purpose, end or essential nature) of the social practice in question.
2. Justice is honorific. To reason about the *telos* of a practice—or to argue about it—is, at least in part, to reason or argue about what virtues it should honor and reward (86).

Sandel knows the risk for even bringing up *telos* in the modern world, but he's careful to lay out his case and, most importantly for my purposes here as well as in the classroom, he stops us all in our tracks with a couple of questions. What are we really doing and why, and what qualities and characteristics (in ourselves, in those we work with or serve) do we really care about? I've had graduate students return after class discussions that demand we answer those questions in the context of business dilemmas and tell me that reflecting on those two questions changed their business, or changed their desire to be associated with their business.

My appreciation, then, has grown over the years for the power in this approach, and I began taking it more seriously as I thought about the work of the KBEI. Moving the KBEI to a position that I am here calling one of (limited) advocacy, was a culmination of many things, but I doubt it would have happened at all had I not asked myself—and had MBA students, especially, ask me—to speak to the *telos* of our center, to what I wanted to "reward and honor" as I planned its course. As I thought about those questions it occurred to me to try to account for at least four major phenomena. I'll lay those out before rounding back to how I answered the questions above as I put together the capitalism discussion and a vaccine mandate forum.

Four Phenomena I Can't Ignore

First, it is a strength of pluralism to recognize when it has done its work successfully. Inviting and considering, in a democratic fashion, a wide range of voices on topics of interest to all can lead a community to real resolution and change, not merely to endless "open debate." As a generalization that assertion makes me a little nervous, but the historical examples are convincing. We wouldn't hold a public forum on slavery or the ontological inferiority of women that recognized

and welcomed views that spoke in favor of any of the two practices or ideologies—we'd be rightly condemned for wasting people's time and, more seriously, for giving air to long-settled debates. The work has been done; the evidence of egregious harm and trauma has been established, the moral arguments regarding rights, dignity and consequences have been made, testimonials have been taken, and no reputable ethics center, no university, no one at all, would even think twice about revisiting any “pros” associated with those issues.

Pluralism—as good faith debate leading to action—is not to be confused with endless toleration of practices it itself has resolved through its own methods, methods whose results are then instantiated as laws, policies and social norms. What we can say here is that we, as a society, discovered the “truth” about these issues and acted accordingly to show an evolving sense of inclusivity, equality, protection and care, however imperfectly realized. Our ancestors were wrong to tolerate either of those practices, and having seen the truth of why and how they were wrong, we abolished them. Some things are simply wrong and no longer deserve a place at the table, *unless* for unfortunate reasons they rear their ugly heads once more and demand refutation.

Second, evolutionary biologists, primatologists, and psychologists have shown there is something to the idea that we have within us a “moralization switch,” a way of thinking that can be triggered both by emotions and reasons that can and do alter, over time, our sense of what counts as moral. Steven Pinker, taking up this notion for a popular audience, notes that within recent memory smoking went from being more or less cool to being treated as immoral⁶; conversely, use of drugs such as marijuana and even psilocybin are now back to being considered positively for all sorts of afflictions.⁷ Other examples where progress has clearly been made even where some stigma remains include divorce, illegitimacy, and homosexuality; on the other hand, practices that weren't even in the moral arena a decade ago now produce growing moral condemnation in many of us: overconsumption of meat, driving a gas-guzzler, or insisting on traditional gender norms.⁸

Reading through this material⁹ has helped convince me that being discriminating about what I promote as worthy of public consideration can play a role in moving people to a closer approximation of what I meant when I wrote in our mission statement: that we actually do care about the “common good and a life well-lived.” As the KBEI gives a platform for advocates of “smart growth” in the face of climate change, for example, or for the rights of LGBTQIA+ members to be served by businesses who might otherwise refuse them, we align ourselves with those who see those acts as signs of moral progress.

We do in fact recognize there are merits to arguments about, for example, systemic racism that outweigh opposing arguments (even if we still want to insist on nuance within the arguments and respect complexity and reasonable doubt). What I am suggesting here is that for the most part the “switching” reflects moral progress and not either randomness or neutrality. The KBEI has come down

on the side of the cognitive and neurosciences, as well as behavioral economics and evolutionary biology and psychology. Not naïvely, but as I have argued elsewhere¹⁰ new knowledge regarding morality is being discovered in those fields and we would be remiss not to incorporate it. “Switching” is but one example. Science can help us understand that moral progress is a) real, and b) inextricably tied to resolving many of the crises I’ll outline below.

Thirdly, I have come to agree with those who think we live in an era of existential crises unparalleled in history. One wishes to maintain some historical perspective here and not overstate how the crises of our own age surpass those of the past, but let’s lay them out: climate change, vast inequalities, authoritarian forms of government, resource depletion, population increases, racial and religious unrest, terrorism, disinformation campaigns abetted by algorithmic capitalism, pandemics, and the lack of political will and unity. I could go on. And I suppose it would be a fair criticism to say, yes, but all of those, except climate change, have been forever with us. Fair enough, but that one “new” crisis, all by itself, will exacerbate the others tenfold by 2030 if mitigation is not effective.¹¹

Were I pressed on the point I would say if no other reason than climate change, it is time for the KBEI (and all institutions, really) to take clearer, unambiguous stands on both mitigation and adaptation. Several years ago, I began inviting leaders in corporate and non-profit sustainability to monthly meetings sponsored by the KBEI. While instructive, they were perhaps most useful, as one director put it, as therapy sessions. Even four years ago, at least in our region, large companies were reluctant to use the phrase “climate change,” and often forbid their own directors to speak of it publicly. Perpetuating false consciousness or cognitive dissonance by pretending the consensus science is somehow not what it is (or as Bill McKibben has written, that we should somehow disbelieve our own eyes in the face of what is happening in nature)¹² is not what I want the KBEI to be about.

Finally, the growing disinformation campaigns of the right and the cancel culture-excesses of the left have served to compel me to undermine or at least address both excesses where I can. Jon Grinspan’s helpful Op-Ed in the *New York Times* points out that the sort of divisive, “broke” politics we have now are more “normal” in our history than the relatively quiet post-war period was meant not as an appeasement to those of us who read it (“don’t worry, we’ve been through this before and we’ll be fine, somehow”) but rather as a call to action (2021 NYT). If one cares about knowing at least something about “the truth” of the many topics we as an ethics center engage, and prize that truth as foundational to competent action and as an example to those who would engage us, then I am persuaded that all four of the ideas I’ve just laid out—pluralistic arguments leading to legitimate conclusions based on solid evidence and sound, corroborated thinking; the real possibility of moral “switching”; the numerous existential crises we face; and the importance of actively combating disinformation and “canceling”—lead me to reject being “neutral” in all cases. There is too much to

be done, and in too short a time, to use ongoing neutral debate, as critical as it still is, to shield the KBEI from taking its lumps in the arena.

Back to the Future of Capitalism

So why not, as I did in the first forum, invite a classic free market capitalism person to the webinar discussion? The short answer is because any honest, informed person will admit, as even the Business Roundtable has, that a) there is no such thing as truly “unfettered” free market capitalism and never was¹³ and b) the conversation has moved on to how and what kind of political economy can give us both prosperity *and* sustainability. Traditional shareholder capitalism has shown that it can barely fathom the questions of long-term returns that factor in social and labor concerns, the pricing of externalities, and stakeholder interests. Since it either can't or won't address those questions responsibly, and since those questions relate directly to the existential crisis we find ourselves in, I am not persuaded to allow it to reiterate views that now only poorly correspond to reality. By the same token it no longer seemed especially helpful to give time to arguments for communism when we had Prof. Davis's measured defense of Scandinavian-style mixed economies—again, a nod to practical realities.

When I thought about Sandel's/Aristotle's two questions in relation to the webinar, I took the first of them as asking me what the purpose of the KBEI actually is, of course, but then took the liberty of expanding that question to capitalism as well. The purpose of the KBEI is to inquire, in good faith, into the nature of any given subject at hand under the umbrella of business ethics, and to do so with the intent to inform participants so that they might make better choices about how they care for their own well-being, the well-being of those they may be responsible for, and then for the planet. By “better” I mean at the very least with demonstrably higher degrees of understanding of how business decisions affect the financial, physical and psychological well-being¹⁴ of all stakeholders and with a sense of what the likely outcomes might be. In answering the question of the purpose of capitalism I decided to look back to Smith¹⁵ and ahead to thinkers like Piketty¹⁶ and Reich.¹⁷ I came away comfortable with the idea that the purpose of capitalism is to honor and reward labor, innovation, and risk without destabilizing, alienating or marginalizing whole populations, in order to better distribute goods and services that are both necessary and edifying.

Question two from Sandel/Aristotle is about the virtues any practice should honor and reward. Again, I took a two-fold approach. First, for the purposes of the webinar, who had the virtues I was looking for? What were they? Though it often is hard to answer the question of what one really wants to “honor and reward” (the rhetoric of an organization often doesn't match what happens on the ground), especially for businesses, in this case the responses came fairly readily: intellectual depth, honesty and humility; demonstrated expertise; clarity, humor and passion; a willingness to consider opposing points of view; experience

talking about capitalism in the public eye. Keller and Davis were hardly the only two people qualified, but they were most suitable.

One measure of the success I was looking for from the webinar was how well the participants were able to then go on and answer the second question themselves, which is what qualities or characteristics capitalism, as they understood it, should “honor and reward.” Not surprisingly, their list did not include “ruthlessness” or “rapacity” or “cleverness” or the like, qualities which have been held, even by some ethicists, as morally permissible in the practice of capitalism. Instead listeners (community members, businesspersons, some faculty and students) were treated to a dialogue that centered on human dignity, on humans as ends in themselves who look for good work for noble purposes, and whose goals rely on interdependency and cooperation, even compassion, not rugged and cutthroat individualism. It didn’t have the same “entertainment value” as the first forum, but as a thought-provoking discussion that offered actionable recommendations, it was far superior. Precisely because our existential crises are more widely recognized and more widely held to be true, there is an openness to reasonable suggestions about how we might now both think and live differently. This time I was satisfied because we reached our audience with a positive message about the kinds of capitalism that could in fact help *build* a future, not make that future less likely.¹⁸

Vaccine Mandates Forum

I’ll wrap up with one final example of our work as it now reflects advocacy. Over the summer of 2021, I had had a number of conversations with business owners who were struggling with vaccine mandates. Should they mandate vaccines for their workers? What would they do if the government mandated vaccines and they had a worker rebellion? Employers wanted a safe environment, but they also wanted to retain their employees. This is the sort of dilemma the KBEI was supposedly built for, so I reached out to two experts—one from medicine, one from law—and hosted a webinar that sought to answer these questions.

Again, with reference to my two guiding questions, I did not invite a panelist who would be openly hostile to the vaccine, i.e., with the science behind it or its application. Like the work of the IPCC, I had already accepted the consensus science on the development of the vaccines after reading all I could access and interrogating every medical person I knew who was close to the pandemic. What did I want to “honor” in the conversation? The fears and legitimate questions of those who had yet to be persuaded by the vaccines’ efficacy, certainly, and the anxiety of employers dealing with a terrible dilemma. But not blatant motivated rationalizations that ultimately were little but expressions of anger. I would raise opposing points of view with my guests, and again let their expertise, thoughtfulness, humility and appeal to “justified true belief” based on evidence take us where they may. What we advocated for, I hope, was not even so much the mandating of vaccines across the board (it depended, we decided), but for the real

possibility of civil, informed conversation that encourages skepticism but does not shy away from clearly stating that there are still such things as facts, credible information and yes, even truth. That stance will be met with threats, as I have seen, but an ethics center that the fears the freedom it has to advocate will not fulfill any mission, let alone one as ambitious as ours.

Conclusion

As guiding principles for public institutions go, one could do worse than to include pluralism. But as I've argued here, pluralism does not imply endless consideration, endless debate. Fifty years from now a majority of Americans may consider a debate about the merits of traditional shareholder capitalism as misguided as we would one about the "merits" of slavery. There are times and circumstances that demand advocacy and action *along with* informed deliberation and the four phenomena I've pointed to in my argument—pluralistic arguments, moral "switching," existential crises, and combating disinformation—lead me to think differently about how the Koeze Business Ethics Initiative will fulfill its role and mission in the coming years. Aspiring to "neutrality," however well-intended, was never realized (it can't be) and in certain circumstances actually worked against our stated mission. Moving forward we will wear our advocacy more transparently without sacrificing, one hopes, intellectual and moral humility.

Notes

1. See the oft-cited University of Michigan meta-analysis by Sarah Konrath, et al., 2010.
2. Social Capital, Economic Diversity, and Civic Well-Being in Flint and Grand Rapids (gvsu.edu)
3. I.e., B-corps principles see: <https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/>.
4. See, for example, Howard-Grenville, Jennife et al. "Sustainable Development for a Better World: Contributions of Leadership, Management, and Organizations." <https://doi.org/10.5465/amd.2019.0275>.
5. Michael DeWilde, "Re-Imagining Capitalism for the 21st Century," YouTube, May 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOngz7RLUGM>.
6. Steven Pinker, "The Moral Instinct," *New York Times*, 2008.
7. See, for example, Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*.
8. Pinker, "The Moral Instinct."
9. Referring here to influential works by Haidt, Pinker, Sapolsky, et al.

10. Bringing Neuroscience into the Teaching of Ethics, News, Seidman College of Business, Koeze Business Ethics Initiative, Grand Valley State University (gvsu.edu).

11. IPCC. Sixth Assessment Report, Climate Change 2021: *The Physical Science Basis*. 9 August 2021. <https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/>.

12. Bill McKibben, “The Future is Electric,” *The New York Review*, Nov. 4, 2021.

13. Reich’s parsing of this in both *Saving Capitalism* and in *The System* details how this is so, but the list of credible criticism here in almost endless

14. Gilbert attests that states of health and happiness are both objective and yet subjectively experienced.

15. Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (New York: Bantam Classics, 2003).

16. Thomas Picketty, *Capital: in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2014).

17. Reich makes this argument in both his works: *Saving Capitalism* and *The System*.

18. DeWilde, “Re-Imagining Capitalism.”

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