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A Companion to Business Ethics

Edited by
ROBERT E. FREDERICK
Bentley College
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Although the world of business is continually changing, some things in business seem to have stayed more or less the same for as far back as one might care to look. One is the desire to make a profit. Another is concern about ethics in business. From the code of Hammurabi to the latest issue of *The Wall Street Journal*, the record shows that worries about greedy, deceptive, and unjust business practices are common. Whether it be in Mesopotamia or Manhattan, there have always been people who tried to make a dishonest buck, and there have always been other people who complained loudly about it. This is vaguely comforting in an odd sort of way, maybe because it is reassuring to know that there are some constants in human nature.

It is worth noting, however, that even though the unethical business practices people worry about have remained very much the same over the years, the concerns they have had about those practices come in at least two distinct varieties. These two different kinds of concerns derive, in turn, from two different traditions regarding the essential nature or character of business. The first tradition, which is foreshadowed in the writings of Aristotle and reaches its ultimate expression in Marx and his contemporary heirs, takes business to be an inherently unethical activity. As Aristotle puts it, retail trade is “justly censured” and “unnatural.” For Marx, the relation of capitalist to worker is necessarily one of “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.” Thus, for these writers and the tradition they represent, it is inevitable that those who engage in business are ethically stained. Further, as long as one remains in business, nothing can be done to remove the stain, no matter how hard one may scrub.

In this tradition, then, the main concern is to avoid being ethically tainted by business activity. Aristotle’s solution is straightforward – just don’t engage in business beyond the absolute minimum necessary to keep one’s household going. Since virtue can be attained only if activities destructive of virtue (e.g. business) are shunned, let the help take care of the details. For Marx, the situation is more complex, and more desperate. Capitalists and workers are bound in an exploitative relationship by the coils of history. Individuals can do nothing to escape; social revolution is the only way the bond can be broken. Without a complete overthrow of the existing means of production, society is condemned to exist forever in a capitalist purgatory, where ethics is just another device that the powerful selectively use to see to it that their interests prevail. Only the ingenuous – or the ignorant – hope for better.