

Bringing Ethics to the Non-Ethical: Can International Business Overcome its Past?

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In this article, we offer a theoretical contemplation of the nature of international business (IB), turning to its historical development and evolution to question its (un)ethical underpinnings and consequences. We see possibilities for alternative interpretations of IB, grounded in: the perspective from which it is viewed, i.e. the state, the firm, or the stakeholder; consideration of the internationalization and globalization of markets and of industries, respectively; interpretation according to either a deontological or a utilitarian paradigm. From a selective standpoint, we present a contemporary image of power imbalance and socio-economic exclusion within IB, and propose the need for reconsideration of an 'ethics of IB' by reference to Aristotelian philosophy.

Field of Research: Business Ethics

1. Introduction

In this article, we refer to historical development and contemporary theories of international business (IB) in order to identify a number of tensions inherent in seeking an ethical dimension to IB. We see these as grounded in:

- The perspective from which IB is viewed; that of the state, the firm, or the stakeholder
- Consideration of two key aspects of IB; the internationalization and globalization of markets and of industries, respectively
- Interpretation of the ethical dimensions of IB from either a deontological or a utilitarian perspective; the first directed towards thinking on duties and intentions, the second towards action and its consequences.

We highlight a shift of focus over time, from the state to the firm as the central player in IB, and we contemplate the significance at the present time of business and government in determining the direction in which contemporary IB frameworks develop; for what purpose, and to what ends. We posit that, whilst there are attempts to address the perceived need for ethics in IB, these have a limited influence. We see the focus on firms and upon an instrumental notion of their 'good' as militating against embedding ethics at the core of IB, in the sense of pursuit of a 'common good' for humanity in general.

In this paper, we seek to engage critically with 'the new rules of eligibility, engagement and wealth creation, which are now defining the global economic game by which individuals, companies and nations must earn a living and make profits in the future' (Brown and Lauder, 2001: 100). These 'new rules' refer to:

The declining power of national governments

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- The mechanisms through which organisations compete on a global playing field and in so doing ‘transfer the risks involved in making a profit in volatile market conditions onto their employees’ (Brown and Lauder, 2001: 108)
- Wealth creation in a situation where not everyone is given the opportunity to participate, since ‘it is still possible for companies to “profit” from low-skill, low-wage operations, even if this means a significant deterioration in pay and working conditions of a large section of the workforce’ (Brown and Lauder, 2001: 121)

Our consideration of the implications of these leads us to contemplate the nature of governance within the institutions of IB, and to posit the need for reform. Drawing upon a selective range of literature; from both mainstream and critical perspectives; in order to discuss IB practices and consequence, we argue that much of what constitutes the field of ‘business ethics’ remains bounded by the rationality of managerialism and the ‘common sense’ of day-to-day business practice (c.f. Hartman, 2005; Mellahi and Wood, 2003).

We consider the possibilities for a new ethics of IB informed by critical reflection on practice, by reference to Aristotelian philosophy and the concept of *phronēsis*; generally translated as ‘prudence’ or ‘practical wisdom’.

2. Ethics and theories of IB

In the space of this article, we cannot address the full range of theories of IB in detail, but we draw upon selective examples from a range of sources in order to highlight several key issues:

- International business has developed from an historical basis of exploitation of political, economic and military strength differentials
- Contemporary IB theories are grounded in the continuance of these differentials as a source of competitive advantage for the ‘good’ of the firm
- Reliance upon such theories renders IB inherently ‘unethical’ in relation to the good of society at large at a global level.

In relation to its historical antecedents, Czinkota et al. (2005) describe how IB has been used as a tool of governmental policy throughout history; whether as an enabler of development, or as an instrument of coercion and control. Classical theories of IB were built around the concept of the nation state as the main actor in trade exchanges, and upon an assumed imbalance of power relationship between nations, with regard to the distribution of physical and financial resources. In these theories, the underlying notion of ‘good’ was that of benefit to the individual nation state. For example, the mercantilists (c.f. Vaggi and Groenewegen, 2002) considered the main objective of international transactions to be in contributing to the prosperity of a nation, according to the amount of its reserves of precious metals. Here, countries should seek to increase these reserves through generating high exports and reducing imports, whereby an increase in the prosperity of one nation would result in consequential losses for others.

Adam Smith (1776) identified the limitations of mercantilism, arguing that the key to sustainable economic development lay, not in protectionism but in free trade and open competition. Whilst Smith’s thesis remained underpinned by the notion of the ‘good’ defined from the point of view of the nation state, he saw the possibility of all states gaining some form of advantage; exporting goods which they could produce

more efficiently than any other, whilst importing those for which another country held 'absolute advantage'. Smith believed that free exchange would lead to a reduction in poverty and would stimulate social and moral improvement. However, as he promoted open competition, Smith considered that governments should undertake to provide educational, judicial, military and other institutional frameworks that would not be profitable for private enterprise. Smith's writings, along with others (Torrens, 1815; Ricardo, 1817), paved the way for an era of free trade and economic expansion in the nineteenth century. Whilst the notion of 'good' underpinning these theories was that of the nation, as entity, and of social and moral improvements for groups relative to their own previous state, they did not see as problematic any notion of inequality of wealth distribution across groups and between nations.

Whilst IB has a long history, recent developments in the fields of industrialization and globalization, advances in transportation, and the growth of multinational enterprises (MNEs) have led to an increase in its economic, social and political significance. During the second half of the 20th century, the central focus of IB moved from products to services and from country-based to firm-based theories. The period was exemplified by the growth of multinational enterprises, which in literature was reflected by a preoccupation with consideration of industries and markets. Accordingly, the definition of 'good' as centred on the nation state has been replaced by one that places the firm as the main actor in IB transactions. Contemporary theories, such as Linder's (1961) country similarity theory and Vernon's (1966) product life cycle theory, seek to enable the firm to achieve the highest possible returns for its financial shareholders. Similarly, global strategic rivalry theory (e.g. Krugman, 1981; Lancaster, 1980) outlines a variety of ways in which MNEs can seek to gain advantage over their competitors. In these theories, the ethical imperative is that of profit maximization for the global players and their shareholders, whereby any negative impact on societies is not addressed. This does not mean that negative social outcomes are not acknowledged. In his theory of national competitive advantage, Porter (1990) recognises the existence of inequalities between and within nations and sees them, not as a problem to be addressed but, as a potential source of competitive advantage and a necessary condition of industry globalization.

Dunning's (1993) 'eclectic theory' states that successful foreign direct investment (FDI) by the firm is based upon the combination of three conditions: ownership advantage, location advantage, and internalization advantage. The second of these points to the need for the continued existence of economic inequalities between home and host countries, such that those who are used as labour by global companies will, by definition, attract a low level of earnings. This translates into them having a relatively low level of purchasing power and, as a result, they lack the ability to buy those products and services that they might wish to. Central to these discussions is the impact of the globalization of markets and of industries, respectively. Theories of the effective globalization of markets rely upon the notion of economic convergence, and hence of consumer buying power and buying behavior. On the other hand, those of the globalization of industries depend upon continuing variance in factors of production between countries, enabling economies of scale to be achieved through country selection in order to drive down the costs of doing business.

The ethical dimension of IB exemplified in contemporary literature might best be summarised in the words of the economist Milton Friedman (Friedman, 1962: 133), who stated that, '(t)here is one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition, without deception or fraud... for corporate officials to make as much money for their stockholders as possible'¹.

Our brief and, necessarily, selective overview of IB theories leads us to the conclusion that, neither at its roots nor in more recent conceptualizations, is a broad deontological ethics embedded in notions of IB. Any ethics that can be seen are those of a narrow and exclusive utilitarian perspective, directed towards the benefits for the few rather than addressing the exploitation of the many.

3. Issues in IB practice

Beyond the selective examples of IB theory referred to in the previous section, contemporary literature from a broader arena presents a range of viewpoints on IB practices as supportive of some wider good, through stimulating economic growth and development (e.g. Dollar, 2006; Dollar and Kraay, 2004; Legrain, 2002), and as contributing to an ever-greater socio-economic divide between a super-rich global elite and an impoverished multitude (e.g. Banerjee and Linstead, 2001; Frenkel, 2001; Kingsnorth, 2003). We would assert that the majority of literature that underpins IB teaching directed at practice falls within the former grouping, being by and large uncritical.

Whilst IB textbooks may provide passing reference to issues of 'slave labour', environmental change, and political corruption (e.g. Hill, 2005), the predominant discourse is one of offering models and 'recipes' for managers and organisations seeking to engage in international business whilst 'managing ethical behavior across borders' (Griffin and Pustay, 2005). In the field of production – particularly of items with low technical specifications – competitive advantage is seen to be derived primarily from low labour costs. Whilst mainstream marketing and strategy literature recognises the existence of earning differentials between populations and acknowledges this exclusion for sectors of societies, extant inequalities are viewed as 'opportunities' for achievement of competitive advantage by firms that exploit them through becoming 'transnational' (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1998).

In the mainstream literature, issues of poverty and economic inequality are not addressed from an ethical perspective and '(t)he low-paid are not central, but neither are they marginal. It is they whose labour keeps the system up and running. And on a global scale, the low-paid means an enormous mass of people' (Eagleton, 2004: 20). Beyond the mainstream, a body of writings now exists which challenges the fundamental principles of unconstrained growth and development. Naomi Klein (2000) identifies the problematic nature of the tension between the unifying effects of global markets and the social fragmentation of global production, due to their different impacts on socio-economic structures. But, for some, globalization offers the only solution to the problems of social and economic exclusion and impoverishment. Philippe Legrain (2002) considers that, subject to supranational constraints to

eliminate the excesses of corporate and individual greed and exploitation, a totally free market is the only course for future development.

4. (Un)ethical international business?

From the perspective of those in the 'developed' world, questions are raised about the ethicality of working practices, for example, in 'sweatshop' factories (e.g. Palley, 2002; Young, 1991). However, as Kristof (2002) points out, for some, 'sweatshops are the only hope... the American campaign against sweatshops could make (Ahmed's) life much more wretched by inadvertently encouraging mechanization that could cost him his job. "Carpet-making is much better than farm work", Ahmed said, mulling alternatives if he loses his job as hundreds have over the last year. "This makes much more money and is more comfortable". Referring to critiques of life in Kenyan factories 'from the comfort of a first class university in Europe', Muga (cited in Cairns, 2005: 49-51) comments that 'Here... we consider anything that provides employment for our millions of school-leavers as pure and undoubted manna from heaven... all that counts is that thousands of young Kenyans who would otherwise be despairing and turning to prostitution and crime, are now making the same sort of money as most clerical and other such lower-level white collar jobs pay... the EPZ workers... come at the end of a long production chain and have a much easier time than the agricultural workers'.

These examples show that what might be seen by some as illustrations of 'unethical' business practices may evoke very different responses in those directly affected, facing very different choices about work and life in general. Here, we would point out that whilst our presentation of the various examples above may be read as implying that we consider them either 'right and moral' or 'wrong and immoral', this is certainly not our claim. We present them only to raise questions in the reader's own mind. Additionally, we acknowledge that, in recent years, there has been both large-scale protest against the status quo of IB; launched in Seattle in November 1999; and development of a range of business initiatives that offer more balanced trade practices; e.g. the fair trade movement and the more controversial Product Red (Elliott, 2006). However, we would argue that these have, to the present, had a minimal impact in relation to the sheer volume of IB undertaken.

5. Institutional frameworks of IB

Since the mid-20th century transnational frameworks of IB have been developed. These are administered at a global level by supranational agencies; like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank. Their aims and objectives and founding principles are generally indicative of an intention to promote economic integration through an inclusive and developmental intervention in IB, benefiting both producers and consumers. However, since the 1980s the major driving force behind the WTO, IMF and the World Bank has been that of neo-liberal free market economics. Critics of these organisations (e.g. Klein, 2000) point out that the contemporary 'free market' is anything but free, and show that they have acted over the past two decades to reinforce developed world hegemony through enabling expansion of the activities of MNEs whilst, at the same time, failing to address structural problems of unequal access to, and restricted practices within global markets. Stiglitz (2002: 13) points out

that the 'IMF and World Bank became the new missionary institutions, through which these ideas were pushed on the reluctant poor countries that often badly needed their loans and grants', such that developing countries that wish to 'better access international capital markets must follow their economic prescriptions, prescriptions which reflect their free market ideologies and theories', with '(t)he result for many people (being) poverty and for many countries social and political chaos' (2002:18).

We have thus far highlighted differences between how the most effective global markets and industries are conceptualised, how new forms of production may be viewed as dehumanising or as enabling development, and how the gap between the rhetoric and actions of supranational agencies is perceived by many. We recognise that there have been attempts to reconcile the different driving forces and priorities that characterise these variations through development of the concept of business ethics (e.g. Mellahi and Wood, 2003; Michalos, 1995) and the drive for a new 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) (e.g. Gurney and Humphreys, 2006; Whitehouse, 2006). However, some remain sceptical both of the implementation of CSR (e.g. Frynas, 2005; Roberts, 2003); seeing it as being about 'managing perceptions and making people... feel good about themselves' (Frynas, 2005: 582); and of prescriptive approaches to development of something called business ethics (e.g. Jones et al., 2005; Parker, 1998).

In the final sections we draw upon Aristotelian philosophy and its relevance to the issues of 'governance' in order to consider an alternative ethics of IB.

6. Beyond contemporary IB practice – Drawing upon Aristotle

Based upon our considerations of the different perspectives on IB, we posit that the current economic model of global production and markets leads firms to see the search for ever-lower costs of production as a prime driver. When the work process can be physically detached from the market, jobs will be moved across the world in search of the most efficient operational base. As forms of decision-making on global workplace location develop that are based upon recognition and maintenance of economic differentials, we disagree with Baumann's (1998) notion that the rich no longer need the poor, and posit that they need them as much as ever, but can detach themselves from them, in terms of geographic proximity and registration in the conscience.

Like Jones et al. (2005); as well as such diverse supporters and critics of globalization as ex-WTO advisor Philippe Legrain (2002), former World Bank economist Joseph Stiglitz (2002), and critical journalists Paul Kingsnorth (2003) and Naomi Klein (2000); we posit that a new ethics of IB requires, at a minimum, some reconstitution of the existing frameworks and institutions. Drawing upon the Aristotelian concept of *phronēsis*, we offer one option for such ethics, based upon a re-humanising of organisation, such that the proper purpose of business is seen as serving the ends of humanity rather than of itself. Aristotle considers *phronēsis* to be the most important of the 'intellectual virtues'; the ability of 'man to be able to deliberate about what is good and advantageous for himself', and to be 'capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man' (Aristotle, 2004: 150). In contemporary social science, the concept of *phronēsis* is subject to discussion and development (e.g. Birmingham, 2003; Clegg, 2006; Clegg and Ross-Smith, 2003),

most notably by Danish academic Bent Flyvbjerg (2001, 2003). In relation to IB, we find one reference to *phronēsis* (Hartog and Frame, 2004), but here, it is presented, not as a model for critical analysis, but as an instrumental approach to dealing with interpersonal issues within the context of 'business as usual' practices.

Flyvbjerg (1998, 2001) challenges the notion that contemporary democracy is transparent, inclusive and conducive to the realization of a 'common good', and that decisions made by politicians and business interests are rational. He posits that politicians and managers approach complex problems such that 'power *defines* what counts as rationality and knowledge and thereby what counts as reality' (Flyvbjerg, 1998: 227, emphasis in original). Here, the exercise of power determines not only what problems are brought forward for consideration, but also how they are conceived and presented. Flyvbjerg argues that the 'democratic' process is most likely one of exclusion and the pursuit of self-interest by powerful individuals and bodies. He proposes (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 60) a new focus on complex social issues, through application of a phronetic approach in which the following value-rational questions are addressed at the outset:

- Where are we going?
- Is this development desirable?
- What, if anything, should we do about it?
- Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?

Flyvbjerg considers that a truly democratic process of governance requires transparency and accountability, and development of dialogical communication that incorporates all stakeholder perspectives and draws upon all relevant and effective media. This dialogue must acknowledge the mediating processes of power and rationality. Flyvbjerg's writing lays the ground for consideration of what types of social institutions we require in order to move towards a new democracy.

Drawing upon Flyvbjerg's conceptual framework, Jentoft (2006:1) proposes that thinking on problems involving complex societal issues requires early and open consideration of the implications and impact of political and policy decisions in the broader realm of community and society. He states that 'the concerns, principles and goals of the management process are matters of preference and choice, and hence political struggle' and that 'the name of the game is changing, as "management" is increasingly being replaced by the broader concept of "governance"'. It is in seeking ways of enacting a new form of management that involves consideration of a broad range of social values and ethical stances that Jentoft calls for a phronetic approach.

In Jentoft's text, we find a resonance with the Aristotelian concern for what is 'good or bad for man'. In relation to complex and possibly ambiguous problems; that involve deliberation on social, economic, ecological and other implications of their resolution; Jentoft sees the answer to what is 'good' as a matter for negotiation within the framework of a truly democratic society. Jentoft's governance perspective 'emphasises the interaction between the state, the market and civil society, recognising the strengths and weaknesses of each and the need to draw on their respective capacities' (2006: 9), 'inviting a more reflexive, deliberative and value-rational methodology than the instrumental, means-end oriented management concept' (2006: 1). Jentoft recognises that problems are not always what they appear to be, often stemming from outside the context that they are made visible within, and

he urges the approach of 'scouting outwards', in terms of geographical, disciplinary and chronological contexts. In relation to the third context, and to Flyvbjerg's (2001) fourth question, above, he asks, 'Are future generations sacrificed for the benefit of the present one?' (Jentoft, 2006: 2). Jentoft's text is based upon analysis of the relationships between the range of affected actors, policy makers and society at a regional level, in relation to fisheries policy. However, we consider that the questions he raises and the approaches he advocates might be applied in a broader geographical context in relation to issues of IB, moving it beyond the 'instrumental, means-end oriented management' we find advocated in many of the texts.

7. Final Remarks

In this article, we have provided a brief overview of the historical antecedents of contemporary international business and shown that the field is grounded in notions of competition, self-interest and exploitation. We have illustrated how this philosophy underpins much of the present day mainstream literature and theories of IB. In challenging these mainstream approaches and introducing more critical approaches, we have sought to indicate that there is still no easy answer to what is 'ethical' or 'unethical' in IB. Rather, we posit that consideration of any question of ethicality requires an understanding of context, of the different values and rationalities of the range of involved stakeholders, and some means of taking account of these. If there is to be a significant challenge to the current power imbalance outlined in Brown and Lauder's (2001) 'new rules of eligibility', then we posit that there is a need for the opening up of truly democratic discourse on the nature of IB, with a particular emphasis on Flyvbjerg's (2001) phronetic question: 'Who wins and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?'

We propose that Aristotle's concept of *phronēsis*; and its contemporary development in the works of Flyvbjerg (2001, 2003) and Jentoft (2006); offers theoretical possibilities for a more humanistic IB project based upon emergence of a new form of democratic governance that either brings about fundamental change to the practices and institutions of IB or, at the very least, leads to radical restructuring of the existing institutions.

End-notes

¹ We acknowledge Jones et al.'s (2005) critique of selective use of this quotation from Friedman, in which they point out that he goes on to challenge business's ability to engage successfully with projects that should rightly be initiated by democratic governments, and the legitimacy of any such involvement. However, we would suggest that this presents a 'cop out' for business, and that there is no reason why businesses should not be capable of determining what is socially desirable.

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