Introduction

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In addition to his contributions to philosophical ethics and political philosophy, Norman E. Bowie is one of the founders of the more specialized academic field of business ethics. Along with a group of distinguished colleagues, several of whom have contributed to this volume, Bowie essentially helped carve out a dedicated academic space focused on the role of ethics in business, and this space has grown into a substantial academic field that flourishes today in a wide range of academic disciplines. A significant part of Bowie’s contribution to the field is embodied in his impressive and influential body of academic work. It is this body of academic research and writing that constitutes the subject of this collection of original scholarly contributions from a variety of notable business ethics scholars. Each contributor has engaged with something specific from Bowie’s body of writing, both demonstrating the relevance and importance of Bowie’s original work, and extending or challenging Bowie’s core ideas.

Bowie’s scholarship in business ethics has typically been written from a Kantian perspective. Drawing from the work of Kant himself, but also from the work of contemporary Kantian ethics scholars such as Barbara Herman, Christine Korsgaard and Thomas Hill, Bowie has developed a unique and generally consistent body of work on what he has termed ‘Kantian capitalism’. More specifically, his work addresses such themes as managerial ethics, moral motivation in business, corporate beneficence, meaningful work, and businesses duties regarding the natural environment. In this volume a distinguished group of business ethics scholars critically engage with Bowie’s work from a diverse set of philosophical perspectives.

Richard De George opens the volume with a reconsideration of Bowie’s conception of managerial ethics. In Chapter 1, ‘Bowie’s management ethics: an alternative view’, De George both acknowledges Bowie’s towering contribution to the field of business ethics and offers several challenges. First, he suggests that Bowie’s research stream is overly practical and ‘managerial’, and as such, perhaps does not adequately engage in more fundamental questions about the ethics of capitalism itself, or the moral justification of private property, or other assumptions about business practice that are essentially taken for granted, even by Bowie. De George also takes issue with Bowie’s embrace of
the ideas of stakeholder theory and corporate social responsibility, and calls for more specificity in Bowie’s articulation of business’s moral problems and Kantian solutions.

Bowie’s Kantian business ethics offers a counterpoint to other paradigmatic views of business ethics arising from utilitarianism or virtue ethics, other philosophical frameworks, or even Friedman’s neoclassical economics. Much philosophical debate in the field is comprised of challenges that one paradigm poses to another. Ronald Duska poses one such challenge in Chapter 2, ‘Revisiting the egoism question in business’, in which he employs Aristotle’s notion of ‘true egoism’ as a critique of Bowie’s rejection of the egoistic paradigm that undergirds his conception of Kantian business ethics. Duska suggests that a certain amount of egoistic self-interest is useful, and indeed necessary, in order to engage in the ethical question of how one ought to live.

Of course not all debate in the field of business ethics arises from the battle between different traditions within analytical philosophy; some critiques of philosophical paradigms employed in business ethics research are pragmatist in nature, as in Richard Rorty’s (2006) keynote address at the Society for Business Ethics. Such critiques implicate not only Kantians like Bowie, but Aristotelians and consequentialists alike. Yet in Chapter 3, R. Edward Freeman’s contribution ‘Bowie’s ethics: a pragmatist perspective’ makes an altogether different pragmatist claim: that Bowie’s Kantian Capitalism is actually itself pragmatist in nature. Freeman illustrates his point by walking through the tenets of Bowie’s Kantian business ethics and pointing out their inherent usefulness and adaptability in guiding managerial action, suggesting that Bowie’s philosophical project may not fall prey to the pragmatist critique.

What are the implications of Bowie’s conception of Kantian business ethics? And do all of the potential implications, when examined in their specificity, conform to Bowie’s suggestions? One of Bowie’s more notable claims about Kantian Capitalism is that ‘moral conduct has a beneficial economic payoff … if a business firm practices Kantian morality it is possible to increase profits’ (Bowie 1999, p.120). But Patricia H. Werhane, in Chapter 4, ‘Norman Bowie’s kingdom of worldly satisficers’, suggests that such assertions are not so simple. She raises a number of questions, illustrated with examples, which examine the application of Bowie’s arguments and their intended and unintended effects. Werhane concludes that Bowie’s Kantian framework is best understood as comprising a set of principles that serve as benchmark ideals.

Much work in the field of business ethics has been preoccupied with the issue of corporate social responsibility (or CSR). Proponents of CSR often take the moral imperative of business firms to engage in charitable or philanthropic activities as seemingly self evident, yet others (like De George, in this
volume) question the moral justification of CSR-related activities. In Chapter 5, ‘Corporate duties of virtue: making (Kantian) sense of corporate social responsibility’, Jeffery Smith presents a well-articulated explanation for the moral underpinnings of CSR, based on Bowie’s argument that business firms have an ‘imperfect duty of beneficence’. In grounding CSR in the duty of beneficence and offering a detailed account of what such a duty entails, Smith lays out an argument that provides a potential foundation for better understanding – and justifying – the moral obligation of socially responsible corporate activity. In so doing, Smith offers an example of a robust explanation of why business organizations have social responsibilities.

The financial crisis of 2008 resulted in trillions of dollars of losses to investors, contributed to over a million bankruptcies in the United States alone, and pushed unemployment rates toward 10 percent or higher in some regions. In Chapter 6, ‘Bowie’s Kantian capitalism, high leverage finance capitalism and The Great Recession’, Richard P. Nielsen provides an overview of the role that high leverage finance capitalism played in the crisis. He goes on to argue that Bowie’s deployment of Kantian ethics to business can explain why many of the practices that lead to the financial crisis are properly understood as unethical. Nielsen argues that had the financial services companies acted in a manner consistent with Kantian principles the financial crisis and subsequent recession would not have occurred.

As the global economy emerges from what has come to be known as the Great Recession, few issues present more of a challenge to modern capitalism than the issue of environmental sustainability. Anthropogenic carbon emissions are widely understood by the scientific community to be causing significant changes to the Earth’s climate, resulting in heat waves, desertification, crop losses, flooding, and the spread of infectious disease, that in turn have harmful impacts on human health and welfare. Overexploitation of natural resources, pollution and habitat loss are resulting in species extinctions and biodiversity loss and a reduced capacity for ecosystem services. The question of what distinctive obligations businesses might have to protect the natural environment in democracies was taken up by Bowie in an essay entitled ‘Morality, money and motor cars’ (1990) in which he defended the view that businesses have no distinctive moral obligations to protect the environment above the law, but that businesses do have an obligation not to interfere in the political process in order to thwart the aims of individual citizens. Bowie’s position has been criticized by other business ethics scholars (Arnold and Bustos 2005; DesJardins 1998), but in Chapter 7, ‘Citizens, Kant and corporate responsibility for the environment’, Marc A. Cohen and John W. Dienhart argue that Kant’s account of duties of right provides support for Bowie’s position regarding business obligations and the natural environment.
In *Business Ethics: A Kantian Perspective* (1999) Bowie defends an account of meaningful work grounded in a Kantian conception of agency in which workers are free to develop and exercise their rational capacities and to pursue their own conception of happiness. There are at least three distinct questions that must be answered in developing a robust account of meaningful work. First, what constitutes meaningful work? Second, given a particular definition of meaningful work, can employers actually provide such work? Third, is there an obligation on the part of employers to provide meaningful work to employees? In the next two chapters the contributors engage Bowie’s account and defend their own alternative views regarding meaningful work. In Chapter 8, ‘Worthy work and Bowie’s Kantian theory of meaningful work’, Joanne B. Ciulla argues that corporations are not well-suited for providing meaningful work to employees, especially in terms of the account of meaningful work provided by Bowie. Given these practical considerations she argues that businesses have no obligations to provide meaningful work either. Instead, she argues, employers should treat workers with dignity, thereby facilitating the possibility that workers may find meaning and value in their work. In Chapter 9, ‘Meaningful work’, Joseph DesJardins challenges Bowie’s account of the nature of meaningful work and instead offers an alternative view. In DesJardins’ view meaningful work is work that creates products and services that are good in the sense of satisfying human needs, rather than consumer preferences, and that contribute to human well-being and human flourishing. Arguably, the high leverage finance capitalism discussed by Nielsen in Chapter 6 would not meet DesJardins’ criteria for good products and services. While offering a distinct alternative to Bowie’s position, DesJardins’ position itself depends on the ability to provide a persuasive account of products and services that meet his definition of good.

For much of his career Bowie has argued that a Kantian moral personality is good for both employees and for business. Is a Kantian moral personality – not the caricature of a cold, calculating, rule maker popular among Kant’s critics, but rather a reflective agent whose actions are bounded by moral law, who demonstrates consistent respect for persons, and who acts within the rationally determined rules of an organization – a valuable quality in employees and managers, as Bowie has consistently argued? In Chapter 10, ‘Should every manager become a Kantian? The empirical evidence and normative implications of the Kantian personality in organizations’, Scott J. Reynolds and Carolyn T. Dang answer affirmatively. Reynolds and Dang provide a comprehensive survey of the social science literature that demonstrates that there is unequivocal evidence to support the view that three defining Kantian principles (the good will, a preference for rules and order, respect for others) are beneficial for both the individual agent and organizations.
In the concluding chapter Bowie engages each of the contributors, shedding further light on the Kantian project in business ethics and helping to advance the theoretical grounding of the many ethical dimensions of capitalism taken up by the diverse range of critical perspectives on his work included in this volume.

REFERENCES


