

People First!: Professional and Business Ethics Without Ethics

E. R. Klein

Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2003 (169 pages)

Thoughtful observers of our social world would have to acknowledge that the actions of business today are, in large part, not what they ought to be. What is particularly frustrating, especially to those whose scholarship is focused in the area of business ethics, is that this gap appears to have widened in the past twenty years despite considerable educational effort. This book purports to have *the* answer to making business ethics education “take.” Despite the undoubtedly good intentions of the author, however, the text will contribute little to doing this for the simple reason that from the outset of the work to its end there is a refusal to do any of the heavy philosophical lifting that is required to elevate morally our enterprises and our culture.

What is the author’s claim and how does she substantiate it? It is found on page 150: “My claim is that if management, at all levels, simply shows a fundamental respect for persons—themselves and others—while making any and all personal and corporate decisions, the business world, and the world *en toto*, will be a better place.”

Such a statement—if we are good, the world will be a better place—is true but hardly gets the job done. First of all, some justification for why the theory ought to be followed must be given. None is provided: “I will not argue for why one should respect personhood” (150). Such work, offering a firm foundation to ethics in general and to this prescription specifically, is “outside the scope” (47) of this text. For now, we are to assume that there is something solid holding up our edifice. Second, what we really need to know is why a fundamental respect for persons is not being shown. Why do we so lack goodness in business decision-making? Klein’s diagnosis, which I think her own work belies, is that ethical theory is simply too difficult to comprehend and apply. The solution is to give all of it up, from Aristotle to Kant and Mill, and subsist on the one principle given above.

What do the test cases in the book reveal about the possibility of this strategy? We read that Firestone’s actions, in failing to recall tires installed on Ford Explorers, were incredibly “short-sighted” (113). Exxon did not take the “precautions” (115) it ought to have taken in transporting oil through Prince William Sound. H. B. Fuller ought to have taken into account all the circumstances of the surrounding community when it went to Honduras. Exxon ought to have “courageously” (115) apologized and offered to pay for losses to the fishing industry.

Surely, ethical theory is being applied in these examples. The criticism of the decisions catalogued above seems to be that that they were imprudent failures to reflect elements of the virtue of prudence identified by Aquinas: foresight, caution, and circumspection. Klein’s insistence that Exxon pay for losses is similarly based on the commutative dimension of the virtue of justice, which requires restitution for damages.

The principle of “respect for persons” is not a sufficient guide for moral decision-making. Theoretical simplicity cannot do away with the need for practical wisdom, which is the result of the hard work of building character. Virtue matters, a point the author herself makes in contradiction of her thesis: “It seems it all comes down to the character of the characters involved” (133).

The book is not innocuous, however. When Klein finally (after 100 pages) gets around to considering who counts as persons, what we find in the page and a half (too minimal by far) she devotes to the question is positively disturbing. Personhood is determined by being able to demonstrate self-awareness. By this performance criterion of human personhood, if you bump your head and lapse into a coma you cease to be a human person. If you are severely mentally disabled (the definition of which is itself a problem), then you are not a human person. If you are a human baby developing in your mother’s womb, you are not a human person. These ideas have contributed to what Pope John Paul II has accurately called a “culture of death.”

How do such ideas arise? It was Aristotle who stressed the importance of avoiding little errors in the beginning: “The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousand fold.” Klein’s starting point is in the mind with ideas and not with things in reality: “I take the epistemological questions of justifiability to be more fundamental than the metaphysical questions about being and essence” (4). What if it is just this assumption that gives us the nihilism of our times and stands in the way of a renewal of moral understanding? What if the essence of moral being is to be open to the truth of real things and to live by the truth that one has grasped? If it is, then facile rejections of the ideas of the great metaphysical realists, such as is found in this work—“Aristotle has put a great deal of weight on the nature of human beings themselves. Unfortunately, there seems to be no one human nature” (30)—are to be looked at askance.

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Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context

Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee

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Glen Stassen, Professor of Christian Ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, and David Gushee, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Union University, have produced a thoughtful text on Christian ethics that models the complexity of ethics as an academic discipline. Roughly, they propose that Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, understood in what they call the grace-based prophetic interpretation and situated within Jesus’ life and proclamation of God’s kingdom (itself situated within the Christian Scriptures as a whole), should set the agenda for Christian ethics. The Christian ethical