A Polyphony of Pioneers: Introduction to the Business Ethics Pioneers Project and to Eight Interviews

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Business Ethics Pioneers Background

In July 2019, while preparing for the Society of Business Ethics annual conference in Boston, Pat Werhane—Emerita Professor at The Olsson Center for Applied Ethics at the Darden School of Business, University of Virginia and at the Driehaus College of Business, DePaul University—along with Gretchen Winter and Joan Dubinsky at the University of Illinois, developed a plan to record the voices of senior colleagues in the field of Business Ethics. Within a matter of days a unified research question was developed: “What can we learn about the discipline of Business Ethics from those individuals who originated the current business ethics movement?” In the interests of a comprehensive consistency, an interview template of questions was devised. Pat and others envisaged interviews of approximately fifty minutes. Between August and December of 2019, some twenty Business Ethics Pioneer Professors were recorded. Eight of these interviews have been distilled for presentation in this polyphonic Special Issue of BPEJ. The population of business ethics pioneers has expanded beyond academia, and the project now involves the oral histories of Ethics and Compliance Officers as well as ethics teachers. These introductory comments here are limited to the academic participants featured. This Special Issue is thus one output from a single strand of the Business Ethics Pioneers project as signposted in Bevan and Goodpaster (2020). The interviews published in this collection were selected and edited with the assistance of BPEJ Editor Daryl Koehn. I am grateful to Daryl Koehn and Pat Werhane for their comments on previous drafts of this appreciative introduction.

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Technical Acknowledgements

The interviews presented here took place in 2019. Professor Freeman and Professor Werhane were recorded at Darden in December; the remaining six professors (Bowie, Ciulla, De George, Donaldson, Nielsen, and Velasquez) were interviewed at the Society for Business Ethics (SBE) conference hotel in Boston in early August 2019. All eight interviews here followed the template of interview questions, more or less. Any variation is made clear in the course of the transcripts. As to the interviewers: Freeman was interviewed by Werhane, and Werhane was interviewed by Professor Andrew Wicks. The in-house videographer at Darden was Mr. Kyle Niehoff. The Boston interviews were undertaken by the core research team consisting of Werhane and Winter and Mr Tom Cunningham (producer/director/editor with Big Questions Productions Inc.) who assisted with questions and who supervised the videography of the remaining six.

The raw interview data for these interviews was first generated by text transcription software, in which a soundtrack is translated to a word/text file. I acknowledge the assistance of Mr. John Tubbs at the University of Illinois for the original transcripts. Graduate students at DePaul University and at the University of Illinois, including Mr. Alex Kogen, gave assistance with tidier versions. These texts were then read through while playing back the interview, so that terms of art and named authorities were correctly rendered in the final texts. Acolytes of AI may care to note that voice-to-text software available in 2019 is not pre-loaded with names and terms familiar to the academic business ethicist’s ear. For example, ‘Kuhnian leap’ is rendered into text as “Cooney and Leap,” and a name like ‘Rousseau’ is rendered as “who saw.” Remedial cleaning up required persistence. We can all be grateful to Daryl Koehn and Greg Swope for both a keen eye and depth of subject-knowledge which allowed meaningful data to emerge. The author acknowledges the kind attention of the individual interviewees for their patient collaboration in confirming the texts that result. Also thanks to Tom Cunningham for access to ‘Pioneer’ research artifacts, including schedules and questionnaires.

Research Methods

The interviews presented here were organized by the research team as a ‘purposive’ sample. Purposive suggests clearly “the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses” (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016: 2). Here the research is specifically aimed at a population of identified business ethics professors. This non-random technique requires no underlying
theories or a fixed number of participants. The researchers set out to identify participants who are willing and able to provide information by virtue of experience and knowledge in the required field (Bernard 2002).

A second consideration was ‘convenience.’ That is to say, an approach which involved non-probabilistic and/or non-random sampling where the members of the selected (purposive) population meet practical criteria: ease of access, convenient geographical location, being available for a specific time window, and a willingness to participate in the research (Dörnyei 2007). Convenience was predicated in the first place on the interviewee attending SBE Conference 2019, and thus being available for the interviews scheduled in Boston.

A questionnaire template was employed to guide interviewees through a range of questions with the intention of covering a consistent range of relevant topics. The template included the following indicative items for the research team to explore in the course of the interview.

- What brought you to the field of business ethics and/or corporate responsibility and compliance?
- What initially did you expect to accomplish?
- What were your initial goals and expectations?
- What did your university or organization think that you would accomplish in this new role?
- Did your goals and expectations change over time? If so, how?
- Looking back, what has been your contributions to the field, and for practitioners, what have you accomplished?
- What theories have you developed and contributed to the academic field?
- About what aspects of your career in ethics are you the most proud?
- What were some of the initial big questions that you faced as an academic or practitioner in business ethics?
- What questions and issues do we still face today?
- In your opinion, is doing business ethics a new profession?
- What questions about ethics and corporate responsibility have we been able to deal with coherently?
- What issues and questions will we need to address in the next twenty years?
These interviews were conducted conversationally, and the texts do not read like formally prepared academic papers. Undoubtedly fuller context is available from the video archive (once that is available). The result is a synthetic, textual sample of oral histories from these eight experienced business ethics pioneers. Citations have been added in the course of preparing the Special Issue to assist readers who may be interested to inquire further.

Finally, the participants here were all familiar with at least one member of the research team for every interview. Familiarity can affect or bias the responses to questions. Thus, beyond the shared homogeneity of the Business Ethics Pioneer label, there is no intention to draw scientific or statistical conclusions. These quantitative limitations having been fully acknowledged, it is still possible by reference to elementary Grounded Theory (Glaser 1998) in the parsing of these eight interviews to elicit or interpolate some themes in common. As the basis of this introduction, rather than as a specific preview of the content at a participant by participant level, we may consider four of these evident and overlapping themes each of which is explicit in the each of the interviews. Firstly, the pioneer of business ethics concept or label; secondly, approaches to pedagogy; thirdly, meta-philosophical questions; and finally the clear dedication to a practice of engaging in and with the community. A short, if inevitably circular, discussion of these four themes will conclude this introductory essay.

**Business Ethics Pioneers**

Business Ethics is an interdisciplinary subject applied largely and widely in the field of management, and in particular with respect to the conduct of commercial organizations and an array of stakeholders. Academic contributions to this “hybrid discipline” (Wicks, Thompson, Werhane, and Bowie 2021: 489) of teaching, learning and research come from a wide range of disciplines. Initially—as evident in the course of the responses—these disciplines included the faculties of law, theology, and philosophy. Relying on Ciulla (2011) for my history of Business Ethics, it is clear from Taeusch (1926) that philosophy—and especially pragmatism—has been there contributing to the field for at least a century. Taeusch opens with the observation that “most of the first-rate philosophers were mechanics, merchants, officials, scientists, educators, their theories being derived from practical pursuits” (Taeusch 1926: 3) Furthermore, he notes:

The development of professional consciousness and a sense of business responsibility in recent years is marked by the publishing of codes of ethics, the establishment of practice committees, and the endeavor to contribute through such professional and business groups to community
welfare and social advancement. The opportunity offered to philosophy is unlimited. (Taeusch 1926: 4)

On that basis, employing a notion from systematic theology (Tillich 1951) for the purpose of discussion, we find two possible types of truth. One is a ‘literal’ truth, perhaps analogous with an analytic truth in Leibniz, which is necessarily true or tautological: for example, a triangle has three sides. The other is a ‘symbolic’ truth, which offers insights that cannot be tested empirically and offers no epistemological certainty. Within the scope of such a notion, (i) literally, or originally, pioneers are spade-carrying mechanics or foot soldiers; (ii) symbolically, or figuratively, a pioneer is one who goes ahead to prepare the way, one who begins an enterprise or one who initiates a course of actions (Little, Fowler, and Coulson 1970). Plausibly then, and in the course of reading more fully, there are some characteristics that can be applied to the code of pioneer.

These Pioneers are not only individuals, but members of an initially inchoate team: that characteristic comes across variously from each of the interviews. There is a distinct collegiality in the field revealed here, and a coherent history is immanent in the breadth of these recollections and responses. As the Social Issues in Management special interest group of the Academy of Management (SIM) is mentioned in passing—see Bowie, Ciulla, De George—similarities and differences between SBE and SIM arise as a potential focus of interest also for organizational sociology and management education.

Taking 1980—being the date of the first official meeting of SBE at the American Philosophical Association (sbeonline.org 2021)—as its starting point, the SIM precedes the Society of Business Ethics as a group by a decade or so. In a consideration of the evolution of SIM, Hambrick and Chen (2008) propose a generalized socio-political model to explain the emergence of a new academic field. They draw on Merton’s (1973) exploration of the rise of sociology as a field, in which he suggests three distinct and overlapping phases of development: (i) the differentiation from other/ existing fields of scholarship and practice; (ii) legitimacy building within suitable institutions; and (iii) re-consolidation with other disciplines. These thematic phases may be informatively superimposed upon the development of Business Ethics and SBE from the histories that follow. These interviewees move almost seamlessly across all three phases as though performing to Merton’s orchestration. Hambrick and Chen, keen to develop the idea of an admittance-seeking social movement, suggest that it is additionally plausible to add a mobilization and coalescent phase to Merton’s tripartite progress. This fourth distinction is suggested as a means of explaining
how a critical mass (such as in this case the evolution of SBE) might accrue from the mutually derived energy of the participants. Again, such a coalescence is tangible among the pioneers gathered here; and the label of normalizing or *admittance-seeking social movement* seems apt to many of the tropes that are evoked in discussion. It also suggests a valuable lens through which to consider and value the pioneers, and their contribution to the gestation of SBE and the birth/rebirth of business ethics as a regularizing practice.

### Approaches to Pedagogy

Pedagogy (as a critical and reflexive practice [Cunliffe 2004] central to Business Ethics pioneering) is also immanent and explicit in these interviews. An obvious, if not always present influence, is the Catholic place or context, if only by reference to the venerable and saintly names of the institutions that are included. Reading more widely, we find it a simple matter to find this tendency emphatically agreed and iterated: “Jesuit Universities have been training responsible professionals since the 16th century” (Aguado, Alcañiz, Retolaza, and Albareda 2016: 12). For the interest of those not fully aware of Catholic teaching, a rationale for the Society of Jesus’ involvement in education is explained by Diego de Ledesma in the late sixteenth century, as encompassing four different categories.

1) involves providing students with the necessary technical skills and knowledge to excel in the professional field of their choice.

2) establishes the link between the prosperity of individual students and the promotion of the common good.

3) commits to educating the whole person—body and spirit, intellect and emotion—as every human being is considered to be connected to the rest of the human family and to the environment, while the last category

4) provides a new window to a transcendental view of the human being, based on the Catholic tradition.

In following these four categorical outcomes, Kolvenbach (2001) suggests that Jesuits have made a beneficial contribution to the students, as well as to society at large. Certainly the first three are familiar in their intent from many a business ethics text book. Additionally, in a paper entitled “Moral Economy and the Jesuits,” reference is made to a Scottish professor John Mair (1467–1550), who while teaching at the Sorbonne, formulated a principle along the following, equitable lines. Where two people agree to a contract such as a commercial loan, and each one benefits from it, then such an agreement is more in accordance
with pietas (mercy) than in an alternate situation in which only one party stands to benefit from the deal (Vismara 2018).

While taking no issue with the historical veracity of these various assertions, we can also find distinctly echoed in each interview the practical pedagogy of the Nicomachean Ethics (Aristotle 1926 [circa 350 BCE]). We see professors engaging and continuing to engage with the field in dialogue and seeking a practical solution by recourse to an applied process of techne, episteme, and phronesis. This process seems to translate almost effortlessly as a set of principles from 350 BCE, through the Jesuits, on to contemporary, secular pragmatism, and to the practice of our pioneers.

Each of our interviewees touches on the value of cases in teaching business ethics. Cases take students into the field of action where they can explore nuances critically and dialogically.

**Meta-philosophical Questions**

Under this loose or broad category, the most commonly inscribed among the interviews is some version of the question that asks whether or not business ethics is an oxymoron. For philosophers this can be characterized as a meta-philosophical question (Rorty 2011). It has been explored extensively by many of us in the classroom for the benefit of playful undergraduates. Invariably it involves other issues: the moral agency of the corporation; personal/individual freedom(s); rights and justice; the naturalistic fallacy; the separation fallacy, and so on. Ron Duska offers one indicative and comprehensive tour of these arguments demonstrating his choice of philosophical and empirical evidence in coming to a practical answer. He thereby reminds us of another common theme among the pioneers: systemic complexity (another potentially meta-philosophical question).

"Business cannot serve only itself. It is thoroughly intertwined in almost every aspect of contemporary life, It operates within an economic system that takes over huge portions of our time, interests, and lives. (Duska 2000: 127)

As we have touched on pragmatism, a whole swathe of meta-philosophical issues arise in Posner’s problematization of morality and legal theory. In something of an albeit entertaining extinction of the subject, Posner asserts (contrary to Taeusch, above) that moral theory provides no basis whatsoever for moral judgments. This is logically a tenable perspective for a legal scholar and judge. On the other hand, he dismisses such authors as Ronald Dworkin, Thomas Nagel and John Rawls as dangerous, academic moralists whose work is “prissy,
hermetic, censorious, naive, sanctimonious, self-congratulatory, too far Left or too far Right, and despite its frequent political extremism, rather insipid” (Posner 1998: 1040). Rorty, for his part while not agreeing entirely with Posner (Rorty 2007) sees the two Peters (Singer and Unger) in similarly disparaging terms as moral entrepreneurs.

They are professors of philosophy, but that is not what is really important about them. And it is not that they have sort of especially sophisticated philosophical views; what makes them interesting is that they are what Posner calls “moral entrepreneurs.” They are saying that there are people or animals out there whose interests you are neglecting. This kind of attempt to enlarge our sense of community, or a sense of who counts. . . Such attempts are the engine of moral progress but not particularly related to philosophy. (Rorty 2011: @ 1 hour, 7 mins.)

Hence rhetorically, moral progress may be distinct from philosophy in this demonstration of a separation thesis, which would be unlikely to play as correct for our pioneers. They, in any event, do not make it onto Posner’s nor Rorty’s lists, conceivably because their philosophical views are stimulating. In pragmatism, meta-philosophical questions—like the oxymoron of business ethics—are generally to be excluded or avoided. Such questions are of little practical use, as they are always particular and undecidable. In Rorty’s approach, the gift of pragmatism is simply that “helps you stop asking the unhelpful questions” (Rorty 2003).

For Kaptein (2019), moral entrepreneurship is an essential, valuable, antecedent component of ethical leadership. He locates the label ‘moral entrepreneur’ as originating in the sociology of Becker (1963) for whom such individuals are people who create and/or enforce new norms. So the pioneers could either be moral entrepreneurs or not: that would lead to meta-philosophical discussion. By Kaptein’s values, both stakeholder theory (see Freeman) and moral imagination (see Werhane) are two distinct, key concepts to have developed ‘entrepreneurially’ in the business ethics field, as well as more widely in organization studies marketing, human resource management, and operations management.

**Practice**

From pragmatism to practice—if that can be any kind of logical progression—there is an opportunity to identify this as the strongest of the four codes here under review. It is clear from the interviews that only helpful and contingent questions occur among the pioneers, and equally clear that they are immersed
in an energetic practice of deliberate relevance. Business Ethics scholars aim not only to address important issues of business practice. Through a palpable engagement in the field as demonstrated in the interviews, they are looking “continually for new sources of insight and wisdom that can both enrich our discourse and improve our ability to generate ideas that have a positive impact on business practice” (Wicks et al. 2021: 489).

Whether this practice is Aristotelean, Jesuitical, pragmatic, morally entrepreneurial, or something else that has not been mentioned is a matter for separationists to endlessly ponder, assuming that doing so would be useful. As recently observed:

Many philosophers who write about business ethics are drawn to the field through an interest in, and engagement with, practice. Linking philosophical concepts to practice, emphasizing the usefulness of theory, locating the source of morality in practice as opposed to strictly abstract theory, and revising beliefs in light of experience and discourse/argumentation—these are themes that run through pragmatist thought and are bound to seem familiar to many business ethicists. . . . Many of us may have been working along these pragmatist lines in business ethics all along without realizing it. (Pouryousefi and Freeman 2021: 593)

Provisionally, we can accept at least that ‘pioneer’ is a valuable label as these interviewees meet both the literal and symbolic criteria for the word. It has been constructive—if only from a social scientist and management education perspective—to consider the pioneers and the evolution of SBE as a social movement, and at the same time entertain these oral histories as valuable evidence in tracing the gestation and institution of business ethics as a discipline.

It could be more philosophical—or at least more in line with Nietzsche or Deleuze—to consider it rather as part of the continual re-establishment of business ethics as a discipline. There is certainly evidence for an attentive and processual approach in each of the interviews. Everything valuable needs repeating: as observed elsewhere by Gide “all things have been said already; but in as much as no one listens, you must always begin again” (Gide 2008: 5, author’s translation.) Other interpretive positions may identify clearly codes associable with parrhesia; Michel Foucault’s (2001) deconstruction of a practice of fearless speech and truth telling.

Reverting to the techne, episteme and phronesis from my home discipline (critical accounting), there is at least similar and analogous attachment to practice always being considered as a dynamic, repeatable, and disciplinary norm:
If we want to close the gap between academic thinking and practical problem solving, we should not go too far. If academics become rather like consultants, focusing only on solving practical problems, we are likely to lose the innovative thinking which leads to greater creativity in the long run. (Scapens 2008: 918)

Each of the Pioneer interviews demonstrates a dedication to such necessary relevance of practice. I thoroughly commend reading the interviews—multiple times, even—and enjoying the resulting polyphony and rich, intersubjective complexity of business ethics practice.

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**References**


