

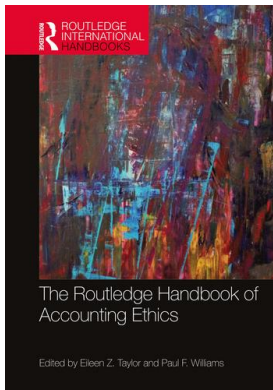
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In our time

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IN OUR TIME

Accountant ethics and historical relativity

Timothy J. Fogarty

Accounting scholars who focus their attention on the ethics of accounting practice do so in order to learn how it might be possible for the accounting profession to be better positioned in order to do good in the world. Each gathering of these scholars should pose the question why, after all the study of accountant ethics over many years that researchers have been at work in this area, good answers that would amount to progress have not emerged. The purpose of this chapter is to resuscitate the question and to offer an answer that is not really an answer but a provocation. Dialogue is important, and therefore the hope is to spur others into formulating their own positions.

Perhaps more than other forms of research, the study of ethics should remind us of the time in which we live. That which we consider correct, or even appropriate, is subject to change over time. Although transitions in the normative realm are gradual, and therefore imperceptible in the short run, they require recognition as a means of understanding the historical limitations of our scholarly efforts.

This chapter takes a much different approach to accountant ethics than is found in much of the literature. Rather than trying to isolate a single empirical regularity, an attempt is made to make the assumptions of our historical period more visible. This “30,000 foot” context is termed modernism and is contrasted to a previous period (premodernism) and a slowly emerging alternative (postmodernism). Since the transition from premodernism to modernism lies in the historical past, an intuitive appreciation of it exists. More attention is required for a future movement that is neither broadly accepted nor fully formed.

We live in a “modern age,” so “modernism” is a convenient way to describe a host of attitudinal and institutional circumstances that most of us accept without question as essential or commonsensical. This includes a secular state that is accountable to the public, professions that serve the public interest, capitalism as a dominant economic system that provides useful incentives and resultant allocations of resources, and a belief in inevitable progress. Bolstered by the scientific method, modernism has prevailed over earlier world orders based on religion, kinship, and primitive technical knowledge. Even in such an enviable position, modernism may not be sustainable. Accordingly, the possibility of a new way of knowing and being should be entertained. This chapter makes the case that sufficient “cracks” in modernism have appeared such that we may require a new template. In other words, we cannot expect to make “progress”

in the conventional sense because we are increasingly out of step with unrecognized or unacknowledged changes in our world.

This chapter is organized into two subsequent sections. The first identifies how the central notions of modernity shape the conventional knowledge about accountants' ethics. As modernism proves to offer an incomplete and increasingly unsatisfactory answer, ethics research becomes problematic. The second section shows that these are different pathways of approaching truth about this topic. To the extent that we can reset our research upon postmodern assumptions, there may be more promise for ethics research. In both sections, propositions attempt to summarize the salient aspects of the narrative. This will allow critics to focus on its specific elements.

Ethical inquiry as a modernistic enterprise

This section offers a number of propositions that collectively support the conclusion that the study of ethics is ill suited to the current era. The consequence of this section is to further the notion that research progress, as conventionally understood, should not be expected.

Accounting ethics attempts to establish itself as a field of investigation equivalent to any other. Accordingly, it seeks to deploy a grand theory from which to accumulate regularities about behavior. This approach assumes that a singular, measurable truth exists and that progress toward its revelation, albeit slow at times, is inevitable. At the same time, the process of inquiry is haunted by a yearning for a simpler time less marked by the arms-length spirit of the day whereby all human relations are transactional. This section discusses accounting ethics as a product of this increasingly weary age.

Debatable proposition 1: theory guides our work

Although a singular theory about the ethics of accountants has not emerged, strong presumptions about theory exist in the literature. These ideas limit the search of theory, as they simultaneously provide inadequate structure for its continuation.

As members of the business school, academic accountants are trained to adhere primarily to the insights developed in the mainstream economics discipline. For these purposes, we believe in a calculus of comparison between costs and benefits. We also maintain as a first-order premise that people will predictably respond if this balance is tipped. Our thinking is micro-marginalist, as we more or less are interested in prices, quantities, and steady state equilibriums.

Accounting researchers interested in ethics cross-fertilize their mooring to the economics mothership with an auxiliary tether to modern psychology. Since we are all interested in behavior, we subscribe to the psychological idea that people differ in their motivations, their information processing schemata, and their normative beliefs. Although psychology lacks the mainstream agreement present in economics, it provides a rich tableau of variables from which accounting ethics research can draw.

Together economics and psychology are the great theoretical contributions of modernism. Accounting ethics would seem well grounded at the intersection of these two traditions. After all, accounting practice generates profits in classic capitalistic ways, but accountants remain people whose interests are more diverse.

Grand as these theoretical sources appear from the perspective of the accounting discipline, they also leave much to be desired. First, one needs considerable faith to believe that either body of knowledge produces the predictions that we need. Both become less certain the more

we examine them. Both psychological and economic knowledge are continually undermined by the empirical evidence collected in their names.¹ Second, only by having been very selective within these disciplines can we even extract the uniformities that we invoke. For example, we need analytically to separate the micro-perspective from wider macro contexts for economic analysis. In psychology, we choose when to stress the cognitive and when to focus on the motivational. Furthermore, to what extent we choose to believe that people are influenced by others is highly inconsistent from one application to another. We think we have the theory that we need, but we do not.

Should we be so concerned that there is such reasonable disagreement in the places from which we look to borrow our theories? Could it be that by not knowing that we have choices, we are choosing badly? More likely, our failure to appreciate that we have been selective has forced us to overreach our theories. When our results are mixed, it is likely that we had the wrong expectations or the wrong data. Theoretical uncertainty introduces all sorts of explanatory possibilities.

The answer to why we have tended to make the choices that we have starts with our academic training. Few among accounting scholars did dissertations in accounting ethics, and we have not had the luxury of a lengthy period wherein we could survey the extant theoretical choices. Most of us undertook topics fairly far from this area. Our appreciation of economics and psychology is predicated upon the needs of these other topics. What we have available to us is skewed systematically by virtue of our theoretical lacunae. Accounting's use of psychological and economic theories is for manipulating behavior in the pursuit of ends that have not undergone any serious ethical scrutiny. The consequences for the people whose behavior is manipulated is largely unexamined.

First and more importantly, our work strongly promotes the primacy of the individual practicing professional. Despite the fact that accountants tend to be employees of firms for greater portions of their careers, we scarcely choose to characterize the firm as the actor of consequence. The focus on the individual allows us to imagine the meaningfulness of ethical codes as statements of the accepted social contract. It also facilitates a psychological orientation that helps us characterize shortcomings in behavior or attitudes as merely demographic variation or the result of flawed training.

Thus, we are in a situation worse than not having theory. We believe we have good theory and therefore we do not wander from it. The phenomenon that we see by using our theory seems like the only game in town. Thus, we talk in circles.

Debatable proposition 2: “normal” science will lead gradually to the next paradigm

Graduate school usually includes an introduction to Thomas Kuhn's (1962) book about so-called scientific revolutions. For most, this analysis provides a convenient rationale for the importance of what we are doing in the accounting field. Our research contributions, according to this line of thought, make modest contributions to the revising of what we believe. In this way, the path for the next and better paradigm is paved. Our “normal” work enables a future tectonic shift toward the truth.

Kuhnian interpretations of the history of the natural sciences provide lofty aspirations that crash when imported to the social sciences and burn when applied to accounting. The best one can do is to suggest that Pacioli's (Geijsbeek 1914) double entry protocols created a paradigm of sorts. This launched the normative debate over concepts such as “asset,” “income” and

“expense” that preoccupied accounting academics for many decades and can still be seen in the discourse surrounding accounting standard setting. Academic work in this area succumbed to a new orientation traditionally attributed to Ball and Brown (1968) or the early work of William Beaver (1968), in which accounting was more generically conceived as information that could be used to price securities or to compensate executives. The later incursion of principal/agent theory (Watts and Zimmerman 1986) into accounting further diminished the consumers of accounting data to robots maximizing their narrow economic interests. This economic orientation made moot questions about how people *should* behave. This refocused accounting research away from what should be to the consequences of what was and the possibilities of what could be.

The field of ethical study in accounting is constructed on the same scientific basics as any other. With the assumption that knowledge about ethics is obtained through the application of the methods of natural science, researchers sought to build a set of factual statements that could serve as the field’s foundation. The idea that the normative nature of ethics would not preclude the possibility of knowledge that was objective and independent of the actors allowed these efforts to proceed toward a set of reliable propositions about behavior. Although ethical knowledge was behavioral in nature and therefore would always be less deterministic than other fields of study, very little reason existed to doubt that ethical study could not develop as firm a footing as many other areas of study.

The lack of usable paradigm has also impaired the structure of development in accounting ethics. What study would the researchers of this field point to as consequential? The only contender proved to be Rest (1979), who applied the work of Kohlberg (1984), who, in turn, applied the work of Piaget (1932). The early work of Larry Ponemon (1990, 1992) and his associates showed us how this theory could be empirically rendered into bite-sized chunks. This nomination would soon devolve to the measure used, wherein ethicality came to be understood as one’s position on a scale of stage progression. The traction created by this work was one of convenience and opportunism rather than of original ideas or unique perspective. Despite an accumulation of evidence that the central ideas and measures of this legacy are flawed, they continue to be our ongoing paradigm.

Our decision to believe and to persevere with the notion that accountants are arrayed on a set of stages enables countless applications. Usually, ethicality is an independent variable that contributes to the explanation of some other behavior of interest.

When our paradigm is no more than a measure or a measurement approach, we cannot afford to question it too closely. Instead, we use it as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Without a truly unifying perspective, a thousand applications amount to little. Now that all the obvious studies have been done, where do we go?

Lacking real knowledge, we resort to metaphor and anecdote. This work is both entertaining and lively. Read the *Wall Street Journal*, paraphrase the atrocity, and tell us what it is just like. Enron launched hundreds of “ethics” papers, mostly written with an indifference to the ongoing progression of this literature. All the shenanigans revealed as part of the 2008 financial crisis brought on by the financial sector/housing market implosion kept up the effort. One should anticipate that our current pandemic will bring us more of the same. However, volume should not be confused with progress.

Debatable proposition 3: the study of ethics is a reflection of our times

More than any other field, ethical studies are grounded in a past that is becoming progressively more difficult to recapture. Ethical analysis, in holding out the existence of a correct behavior

or a correct attitude, conjures a time gone by when people adhered to such standards. Without such a realistic historical benchmark, the belief that ethical behavior is possible and is at all reasonable as a yardstick for conduct is difficult to sustain.

In the Western world, the simpler era when the standard of ethicality was established is commonly associated with organized religion. When religious faith was closer to the center of social organization, ethical action had a power and consequence for people that was unparalleled (MacIntyre 1984). This era preceded the rise of the independent and secular state, the growing separation of religion and the polity as an established doctrine, and the emergence of science as the dominant engine of social change. Nonetheless, drawing upon the normative power of the first period offers leverage against the limitations of the second period.

The characterization of the world that we now find ourselves in as corrupt and morally challenged appears *de rigueur* for ethical research. We have indeed lost our way, as evidenced by the thousand stories of countless individuals who violated the trust bestowed upon them, usually to secure some ill-gotten gain. Motivating ethical research has never been a problem; it does not even require the rash of frauds that occurred shortly after the turn of the century. We will never come to a moment when we should not expect another installment of the apparent triumph of greed and opportunism over fairness and trust. At no time within memory has there been inadequate evidence to establish that people are not as good as they should be. Each new episode helps us forget those that have gone before and perhaps redraw the materiality line at a less ethical place.

Whether people are worse now than they ever have been before is doubtful. Once one controls for more systematic linkages through the economy that makes few acts localized, we cannot be sure if in fact we are just seeing better reportage. More advanced technology also facilitates more interlocking financial connections, which magnifies the potential dollar amount of any dishonesty.

A good deal of our adherence to the purity of the past resides in our continuing loyalty to the classic model of professionalism. The essence of this arrangement is the expectation that certain occupations are differentially obliged to pursue the public interest. Professionals are required to sacrifice some degree of personal advancement and wealth maximization in order to further benefits that can be more widely shared. Thus, our outrage over deficits in the behavior of external auditors exceeds our reaction to the many business leaders who prioritize the welfare of stockholders over all other legitimate stakeholders. The social contract stipulations of classic professionalism harken back the image of the priesthood in that special behavioral stipulations are seen as necessary and right for those whom we have chosen to trust the most.

The golden era of professionalism never existed. People have always used their titles and their social memberships to enhance personal gain. What may have changed is the cloak that disguised self-interest and the transparency with which avarice is tolerated. Let us remember that the so-called “golden era” was also marked by systematic refusals to compete and by blatant employment discriminations that injured many deserving parties.

In sum, the spirit of the age has allowed much that the ethics academy does to slip within that which is now taken-for-granted. By banging the drum of a present crisis, we get intellectually sloppy. We invent a mythology and a history that fits our purposes. By not seeing assumptions and constraints, the work is unable to transcend the boundaries that we are now increasingly recognizing.

Debatable proposition 4: we know moral truth

Ethics research may be unique in its straddle between normative prescription and empirical detachment. In science, the observed association between a certain condition and a

resultant event holds, with a high degree of confidence, that the researchers' opinion about what association is preferable is not a major element. Unfortunately, the existence of a singular virtuous state that is established *a priori* pervades the accounting ethics literature. That the researcher has a preferred outcome is often very clear and unbalanced in its articulation. Although we appreciate the conflict that this creates with the norms of science, we excuse ourselves based on the obvious importance of improving our world with the correctness of our positions.

Accepting that moral indignation might produce the passion necessary to motivate the pursuit of our work, we still cannot conclude that it is more likely to produce good work. Believing to the contrary requires one to open the question about why any work is done. If one lacks the spirit rendered by evildoers that must get their comeuppance, will the work necessarily be inferior? The idea that one result is necessary and its opposite flawed is a dangerous precedent.

Confidence about what is right not only might be a source of bias but also essentially arbitrary. Many things are wrong, but we choose to react to only some of them. All organizations do some actions that may not be great offenses (perhaps strategic processes or being moderately inequitable), but they would not like them publicized beyond their boundaries. Every profession has similar "dirty little secrets" that enable corners to be cut and deviations from the letter of behavior to occur. Collectively we agree to "look the other way," essentially extending a belief that the efficiencies that are gained offset the harm that may be caused. Additionally, we argue that the extras earned by moderate forms of deviance are necessary additions to the incentives of key participants. Joining the club essentially entails a slight redrawing of the line between right and wrong, parsing perhaps in a technical sense when we want.

Over time, some environmental shift also occurs in our moral sense. That which once was considered wrong does not become right. However, that which used to be wrong gradually steps into a moral neutrality. Acts that used to be condemned, and therefore avoided by most, lose their strict and universal sanction. The reputational damage that used to be inevitable becomes less of a problem to endure or less certain to happen. The loss of stigma is an interesting conclusion in that it expresses the uncertainty that we feel about an act. Whereas before the circumstances were irrelevant as the reputational loss was automatic, we now enter a new place where we make consequences conditional on the specifics. The willingness to excuse tempts some to offset their behavior with exculpatory rhetoric that is occasionally successful. In fact, that which was once misbehavior of a grievous nature now becomes the basis for notoriety if not celebrity. Our sense of shame seems to have lost its power for self-accountability.

Our disgust about moral underpinnings extends to whom we nominate as heroes, as well as whom we choose to vilify. Whereas more that deserved vilification through moral approbation have escaped in the modern era, we have changed the nature of those that we celebrate. The rise of the CEO as modern cultural icon suggests a shift toward success as the ultimate exemption. We celebrate not those who deserved to do well, but those who did well even if it means overlooking some of the means used in the process. Business leaders who succeeded in capturing market share and bringing us products/services that enhanced our life as consumers we allow to immiserate workers and despoil communities. On the other hand, we can barely tolerate whistleblowers. Within professions, despite lip service to work–life balance, those held up for admiration are those who sacrificed the most for the client. Those who took principled stands against clients we admire only if doing so saved the firm additional costs and subsequently discovered embarrassments with the advantage of hindsight.

Our growing ambivalence about moral right has great consequence for ethics research. The need to demonstrate the value of ethics rather than establish that as a maintained hypothesis turns us away from concern over the nature of ethics. We move from dependent to independent variable when we feel compelled to associate certain levels of ethics with other outcomes for which there is more of an indigenous appetite.

Debatable proposition 5: we are in control

The major advantage of science is the increase in causal knowledge. In order to obtain desired results and avoid undesirable ones, we must appreciate their antecedents and have some understanding of the transformation process. Our lives have benefitted in countless ways from the accumulation of this knowledge. Each success of enhanced mastery calls for more to be sought and for more control over the previously unknown.

The greatest achievements made have occurred in those matters that are mostly reducible to their physical properties. The social realm has remained somewhat more resistant to strict causality. At best, here we have had to content ourselves with statistical associations that fall well short of causation. We suspect in many instances that a host of factors may be implicated in a certain result, but we cannot say how they combine. Nor can we rule out the relevance of other conditions that cannot be isolated or measured. Even that which we do know tends to be trumped by factors that might be called political correctness, allowing them to be disbelieved by many.

The business school is a classic example of how inadequate causal knowledge limits what we know. Observing the winners and losers in the market place, theories are developed that “explain” their differences. Strategy courses cheerlead the “obvious” superiority of the behaviors of the winners. “Monday morning quarterbacking” also renders that which had been plausible into the dustbin of history if it failed. However, in a dynamic environment, such prescriptions will prove unable to sustain an advantage. This method of anecdotal knowledge construction falls short when we try to predict the next set of winners.

Within the realm of business topics, those matters that transcend the individual are the most troublesome. When people get together, a dimension beyond psychology comes into play. This further reduces outcome certainty. When we transcend the small group or dyad, reaching the full organization, more complexity ensues. Our knowledge of how these associations constrain or encourage behavior is primitive at best and maybe nonexistent.

Whereas the maximization of profits has some degree of uncertainty, it seems very straightforward relative to ethicality. Ethicality is shared uncomfortably as an attribute dependent upon the agency of specific individuals but ascribable to the benefit of the organization or community. The extent to which ethical behavior is consistent with other objectives of the organization is uncertain unless one has a calculus that balances short- and long-term horizons. Thus, organizations lack control over how ethical their members should be and lack a specific target for how much good behavior is really desired. Research can pretend that these ambiguities do not exist by charging either individuals or organization with complete responsibility and by asserting that ethicality is never oversubscribed.

Debatable proposition 6: free will exists

The essence of ethicality is choice. The selection of an alternative more likely to injure others is typically condemned as unethical, especially if its selection results in personal gain. Here,

complete knowledge of results may not be needed if an individual either acts with reckless indifference to the prospect of collateral damage or has sufficient reason to believe that adverse consequences to others are made more likely by the action chosen. Without choice, an individual can rarely be blamed.

In a literal sense, choice would seem always to exist. Tempted to perpetrate a known evil, members of organizations can always refuse. Consequences might be extreme, including marginalization and dismissal. When incentives of an extrinsic sort are heavily aligned in favor of one alternative, choice may not exist in a real sense. While it is true that an individual does not have to pursue tangible rewards, their alignment is neither accidental nor incidental.

Choice also entails some degree of mental freedom. How one weighs both the likelihood and the size of consequences stemming from one's actions cannot be *a priori* impressions. Instead, they are the product of a sustained socialization effort. Herein, one could highlight the values that a person could have developed early in life, as they might have been derived from parents, teachers, and religious authorities. More likely, due to its topical relevancy and its temporal recency, a person is swayed by the training he or she has received on a formal or an on-the-job basis. Whereas a person always has a choice to defy what they are urged repetitively toward, the odds do not favor its exercise.

When people believe they have choice but a sustained effort was made to ensure the predictability of how they will choose, we need to examine the power exerted. If power is important, parties are not equal and free will is a myth. Power comes in many forms and is likely to be resisted if it is exerted in an overt or heavy-handed way. Power is most effective when it operates through knowledge and with the approval of the experts.

Free will is likely to gain more expression when the power that opposes it, or at least strives to keep free will in check, is viewed as illegitimate. As members of society, we surrender some of our action choices to those institutions that we believe to be legitimate. Therefore, free will is a product of how we form impressions of righteous power over ourselves.

Summary

In sum, our modern world has many features, including ways to foster our continuing support. Upon closer examination, some central tenets of modernity are quite debatable. Research on accounting ethics is a representative of modernity and therefore should reflect its tenets. If this foundation is cracking, progress in understanding the phenomenon is highly conditional.

New ways of thinking about ethics

Admittedly, we can never see the time in which we live with sufficient clarity. Only with the advantage of hindsight can we take stock with any sort of certainty. Therefore, slapping labels on eras has to be done with caution and reservation. The end of modernism and the onset of postmodernism might be helpful to some in situating the nature of these ideas. All one needs to believe, however, is that we need to find a bit of a reset for the study of accounting ethics. Perhaps these ideas are connected to getting past the fallacies discussed earlier.

Study what is said

We need to attempt to go beyond good and evil with our ethics research. Much of the problem with ethics research is that this has not been recognized as an objective. This is not to say that

you cannot possess predispositions and passions, but making it clear that you possess the moral high ground is problematic.

One way to do this is to recognize that ethics has been weaponized. Therefore, the lead is not turpitude but protestation of its absence. For example, while it might be tempting to declare professionalism either dead or neutered, one should not underestimate its ongoing rhetorical power. Professionalism is believed in and therefore will continue to be true, albeit in a post-modern sense. That occupational groups possess ethical codes and believe themselves special for ethical purposes will also be observed in the literature. Academics find the storyline of a social contract between professions and the larger society to be such a compelling narrative that they also will extend its life. We shall continue to see ethical research based on what can only be called romantic thinking about a mostly mythical past, but a better story is that their advantages accrue to those who can sell this, and selling it is easier when you believe it.

Expose that which is ersatz

A more pervasive cynicism is displayed by those who go further down this path. Rather than just question whether ethical action can be reduced to measurable variables, some problematize the possibility of ethical action by accountants. This follows the idea that the real has been effectively replaced by simulacra (Baudrillard 1988). Accounting ethics lacks substance because what accountants do exists only as signs, a secondhand derivative whose value depends upon convincingly substituting for the real. Work on accounting ethics therefore prioritizes the establishment and propagation of myth. Whatever theory we use should focus our attention on the symbols that are central to the semipermanent façades that allow unobserved self-interest in buffered cores to thrive. This works only because of a certain level of disengagement that can be documented throughout the professional socialization cycle, wherein the inferior currency displaces the real (see also Cory and Treviño 2017).

Assume it is all about the money

The success of capitalism at the end of modernity also needs to be recognized as the only template for ethical research. The bottom line on ethical research is the faith that capitalism can be reformed or at least tempered by the systematic ideation of sustainability. The pursuit of self-interest is both the engine of action and the ultimate condition of its probable downfall. We have overwhelming evidence of the thesis that advantage should be pursued ruthlessly by accounting professionals. That, or something close to it, is the premise of the business school, and accountants are not exempted. Ethical obligation and constraint are positioned at best in premodernity and will always be fighting a rearguard battle. The commodification of knowledge has mostly aligned against any meaningful ethical antithesis, since that would necessitate its own commodification. Ideas are now judged on their performativity (Lyotard 1984). Progressively, we see a hardening of an advocacy culture and the lessening of remorse for self-interest, with the former advanced in the name of democracy and the latter striking a blow for honesty. We are here to document how this is done, not to pointlessly bemoan its existence. That does not make us unindicted coconspirators.

Own your bias

Ethics research may have gone astray when it tried to copy the fake neutrality of mainstream accounting research. This desire mostly appears in what questions are asked and what questions

are ignored. If one's commitment to empiricism is too rigid, one passes up the opportunity to ask important and pointed questions even if the measures are only suggestive and mostly unconventional. These selections let everyone know what you value and what you want the world to know about. The problem shared by mainstream accounting research and bad ethics work is the belief that the availability of "good" data delimits exploration.

The quality of passion should not be strained. Without it, we might as well be content producing automatons. At the same time, we are obligated to pursue the objects of our bias in a way capable of convincing others that we buy into the boundaries of reasonable conversation, if for no other reason than to persuade those on the fence.

Let go of the illusion of control

Academic research is the effort to exert control over a phenomenon in the effort to describe it and to study its effect on another phenomenon over which a similar degree of control is claimed or demanded. Since the journey through modernity could be described as the growing confidence of such control, to the questioning of such control in many circles, consequences for the study of accounting ethics are likely.

A possible fundamental tension exists between the dominant social sciences discipline of the age, economics, and ethical analysis. Economics presumes selfish behavior and has great difficulties explaining the existence of altruism. The prospect of behavior aligned with a moral compass exists only as "noise" in economic analysis. Accordingly, ethical behavior exists outside the tight world of reactions to incentives and to signals. For the most part, ethical research can be seen as the effort to find the set of regularities that would move the effort into that which can be explained or predicted. Ironically, economics works well only without a moral logic, but the study of ethics wants to be more like economics.

If we were to relax the assumption that control was possible, the effort to understand accounting ethics could be repositioned. Ethics could have more free-standing existence since it no longer had to serve the superior rationality of the organization, the belief of which may be unfounded (Reed 1993). Accounting itself presents boundaries that are difficult to defend (Cooper et al. 2000). If accounting ethics are no longer subservient to totalities with cross-purposes, a clearer view might be possible. At that point when the domination of a mostly illusionary causality is abandoned, we can at least see whose interests are being served.

Seek freedom

Just as auditing's existence depends upon making things auditable (Power 1996), ethics existence in modernity is largely dependent upon a reproduction process that has skewed the meaning of ethical behavior. Accounting ethics has been captured by the accounting establishment while simultaneously pretending to be the result of a scientific process (see Bjorkegren 1993). Dominant groups sustain their position by naturalizing the status quo and deflecting attention from the problematic. We must resist the study of accounting ethics that have been made all too consistent with organizational interests. We also must be emancipated from our own vocabularies.

Speaking of liberation, our progression with late modernity also should renew our appreciation for the role of choice in ethical action. Modernity built a proverbial iron cage for people in that it prioritized organizational dictates and scientific regularities. So, too, accounting ethics research was imprisoned in rigid ideas about how it should be conducted and what questions it

should address. Choice always existed, but it was increasingly painted as a Hobson's one, tinged as it was by an industrial morality.

As accounting ethics scholarship realizes it is in late modernity, a renewed agency will be given to free will. The power of organizations and progressions to socialize individuals will be understood as much more contingent and circumstantial. Their diminishment as omnipotent actions will be partly attributable to the growing awareness of their purposeful efforts and their self-interest.

Summary

Left with the individual, what will research do? Perhaps explore the intuitive ideas about the contours of the good society. Here a fine line exists between that which is an unarticulated natural state and that which is a rationalization of consequences. Research must recast responsibility if we believe in free will lessening that which we now attribute to "systems" or to the vagaries of psychology. Perhaps all we can hope for is localized logic and individualized solutions. In a world where we should not presume that individuals cannot compute the natural thing to do, the expectation that universal laws exist to be discovered seems fanciful. When the literal is losing to the symbolic, ethical research needs to find and go with the flow.

Note

- 1 All of the social sciences are currently experiencing a crisis in confidence prompted by the "file drawer problem." Many major findings in psychology have failed to replicate when reexamined (Ferguson and Heene 2012). The failures of economics as a science are well known (Keen 2001).

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