

Vichaara

An International Journal of Management

Price : ₹ 500/-

Annual Subscription: ₹ 1000/-

Volume:9

August 2023

Number:1

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CULTURE AND ETHICS IN BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT

*The short study offers some reflections on features of the culture and ethics in business. It focuses on codes, conduct and rational decision-making in difficult cases. It is argued that this kind of approach offers a rather artificial, abstract and narrow conception of ethics. Deliberation is then given to what might be the inferences for learning and teaching of shifting importance towards a more surrounded conception of ethics in business, with a focus on the commitment and character of business practitioners and the specificities of the contexts in which they work. As Ruth Benedict, in her book *Patterns of Culture*, writes: “No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it amended by a certain set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking”. This alludes to the simple fact that the human is a culturally moulded reality. Any serious attempt to study human activities must consider this fundamental characteristic. We can therefore say that culture ‘creates’ the human and vice versa. If this is the situation, what will be the relation between ethics - the normative science of human action and culture? The scope of the present article is to trace out to some extent their interaction in business.*

KEY WORDS:

Culture, Ethics, Business, Character, Codes of Ethics, Society, Communication, Human Achievement, Conduct, Commitment, Context, and Human Personality.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a very important factor in shaping human personality and society. A new born infant with little resource for survival is almost totally dependent on the mother who nurtures and protects it. Ever since then the child keeps on interacting with more and more persons and environmental factors through all of whom it experiences and learns the customs, manners, beliefs etc., that is, the culture of his people and becomes an accepted member of the society. Statements like “Acculturation makes a person out of a human organism”, “Personality cannot be ripped out of its cultural setting”, and “All reality, as known, is a cultural reality, and all human experience is culturally mediated” are indicators of popular conviction about the significance of culture.

Since culture is life-ambience of people, its constituents like beliefs, gender roles, child-rearing practices, occupational patterns, economic outlooks, social-class relations, artistic-literary expressions etc., do considerably affect the quality and style of people's lives as well as contribute to the diversity and differences found among peoples of various cultures. A key factor that speaks about the quality and calibre of a culture is the ethical/moral values i.e., the ethos that are ingrained into it and realized in and through its multifarious expressions. In fact, 'ethics' which refers to the totality of normative contents considered to be valid by a given society derives from ethos. (The word 'morals' derives from mores, meaning the accepted norms, customs and manner of a society.) Hence ethics / morals is an integral part of a culture. While culture gives birth to its ethos and ethics, this ethics in turn becomes normative for cultural expressions and practices.

Characteristics of Culture

The word 'culture' comes from the Latin word '*colere*', which means to cultivate. Culture is a 'kind' of cultivation, i.e., all endeavours of persons and community to self-realization, which will create a particular atmosphere or environment. Accordingly culture can be generally described as "... a certain kind of environment as changed and shaped by man, and also the human activity that leads to the cultural pattern." As an environment it is not something natural. But as Malinowski observes, it is 'artificial and secondary', imposed on the natural environment. Culture refers to human achievement. As Niebhur notes, "A river is nature, a canal culture; a raw piece of quartz is nature, an arrow head culture; a moan is natural, a word cultural". It is not a singular achievement, but a totality. Accordingly, culture includes everything like language, art, religion, myths, customs, habits, beliefs, morals, social organizations, technical processes etc. Again, culture is not something belonging to an individual alone. It is a social heritage, belonging to all in that particular cultural sphere. Thus culture and social existence go together. Hence, its reality, as Niebhur observes, is *sui generis*.

Through communication (for which language is required), education, customs, habits, imitation etc., an individual appropriates the culture of his community. This process may be gradual; but it is simply a fact. Here we can see an important relation between culture and history-what is handed down is the tradition, belonging to the past and thus part of history. According to the interests of the individual, he appropriates this heritage. His encounter with

it can cause tension. However, the institutions of humankind are the crystallized forms of the objective cultures handed down the centuries. Unity of culture, unity of human history, and psychic unity of humankind were the key emphases of anthropologists of the nineteenth century. Today, plurality of cultures is an accepted fact. This plurality, however, creates cultural conflicts or tensions. Such tensions can be on various levels: personal (i.e., a person encounters other people of different cultures in different levels of life), communitarian (i.e., a community having a particular culture faces another with a different culture) or national (i.e., one nation with another).

What would be the basis of culture? It is nothing but the basic nature of the human, i.e., his/her self-transcendence. One transcends oneself by envisaging an end. An animal cannot act with an end and so its actions are stereotyped. According to Romero, 'to be is to transcend'. This transcendence reaches its climax in human freedom and creativity. The infinite universe as the dwelling place is a great incentive for the human being with the characteristic of transcendence. This is indeed human greatness whereby the human recreates life, recreates everything. From this re-creation and fashioning springs 'the cultural fount at which we need to drink'.

In short, culture is the product of human endeavour which influences human life in turn. Having traced out certain characteristics of culture, it is opportune to seek the relationship between culture and ethics. For this, we shall analyse culture in its content and form and thereby try to find out its ethos which will take us to the sphere of ethics. We can distinguish culture in its content and form. Content of a culture means the constituent elements or the aggregates with which it is composed. Some elements may be present in a particular culture and absent in another (eg. slavery, caste system etc.) Usually such contents in any culture can undergo changes; if changes are on the increase, we say there is progress of culture. In other words, the term 'progress of culture' is usually attributed to such quantitative increase. The content of culture is, to use a Greek word, its *eidos*, i.e. explicitly describable appearances of culture.

Form of culture mainly refers to the quality of culture, whereby the elements in it are interrelated in a particular way. Kroeber writes: "The form of culture may therefore be regarded as the pattern of interrelations of the contents that constitute it". Form of culture is its ethos. More than the specific ethics or moral code in a culture, ethos of a culture refers to its totality. Ethos, therefore, refers, as Kroeber further observes, "... to what would constitute disposition or character in an individual; to the system of ideals and values that dominate the

culture and so tend to control the type of behaviour of its members”. Ethos as quality implies its orientation or goal to be achieved. This is very closely related to the system of values, of which the ethicists speak.

Moments of Convergence

In our attempt to determine the nature of business between culture and ethics, it seems appropriate to seek the central areas of their convergence. One may note four principal moments here.

(a) Cultural as Ethical and Ethical as Cultural

As distinct from animals that are biologically, physically and instinctively determined, the humans have to work out their own possibilities for self-actualization. The stimuli open various possibilities, which, in turn, become the sketch-plans for human actions. There arises the problem of choice and so life is a composite of repeated acts of choice. Possibilities are realized not only in the environment (i.e., in the world) but in the person him/herself. Here the individual is responsible: he/she plans, finds the means, executes them and realizes the goal. Individuals of coming generations can follow the sketch-plans, patterns, or ideals of their ancestors, which were the products of repeated choice and became parts of the society as customs or mores (Ethics as systematic articulation of the ‘mores’ is the product of later philosophical reflection). Human actions, out of various possibilities, are cultural and at the same time ethical. Hence, the free and responsible human actions are both cultural and ethical; and hence the identification: cultural as ethical and ethical as cultural.

(b) Freedom as Keystone

According to Kant, the concept of freedom constitutes the keystone of the whole system of pure reason, i.e., of transcendental philosophy. Keystone is the stone which is at the summit of an arch and it locks together the parts of the arch in order to form a whole. Making use of the example of a keystone, we try to see the convergence of culture and ethics in freedom. Human action, as we have just seen, is both cultural and ethical. The principal element in a responsible action is the freedom of the individual, i.e., the ability for self-determination. Culture is the expression of human mind and spirit. This is possible only when the individual is free. Culture as the product of human creativity flourishes, only in freedom. Again, freedom negatively means freedom from, i.e., from all political, economic and other kinds of bondages. It is the function of the state, as a step towards the promotion of culture, to safeguard the freedom of the individual. Positively, freedom is self-possession, to be present

to oneself fully, to be self-sufficient. Only in this self-sufficiency does self-determination take place as a choice among various possibilities. Hence cultural actions and ethical actions find their original ground in freedom. Thus freedom becomes the keystone binding together culture and ethics.

(c) Value-relation

The notion of value is related to that of good and the latter is explained in relation to human faculties. As traditionally understood, good is the object of the will. Good can be seen as both end and value. Value consists in the character or quality of a thing for which it is prized or desired as in certain cultural products, standards or ideas which people prize or see as important for them and for others. It is something more than practical utility. Ethics is a codified system of moral values with regard to human action.

Now, culture can be explained in terms of value. According to Niebhur, the world of culture is that of values which are dominantly good for all men. One may even find a scale of values in culture, in which “man begins with himself as the chief value and the source of all other values”. Culture as a system of values opens its precise dimension: the ethical dimension. In every culture we see serious attempts for the promulgation, propagation and conservation of its values! Ethics is simply a reflective codification of values present in every culture. This value-relation is a moment of their convergence.

(d) Normative character

Both culture and ethics are normative. The word ‘norm’ comes from the Latin ‘*norma*’, which means ‘set square’. Ethics is normative in the sense that it enables us to make ethical judgment about human actions that they are right or wrong. In other words moral norms set the arena to fix good and bad actions.

Norm as seen in culture need not be expressed in propositional forms, i.e., it may be implicit and so understood without words. An individual, living in a particular culture, appropriates it in its various models; it becomes a social pressure for him. These norms can be articulated as laws, thereby human actions are determined or judged as right or wrong. Thus in normative character too, ethics and culture converge.

influence and dependence of culture and ethics

This mutual influence and dependence of culture and ethics sometimes give rise to certain unwarranted assumptions and/or practices. One of them is the view that ethics is

purely culture bound and relative and hence there cannot be any universally valid ethics. Another, particularly in an age when society is easily fragmented on the basis of race, religion, politics, social class etc. is that each group/subgroup may absolutize its cultural heritage and ideology and take a fundamentalist stand, militating against others. This in turn aggravates the fragmentation of the society.

Since culture is a strong conditioning force, taming people into its fold, there is the possibility that people, particularly vulnerable sections of the people, may become uncritically resigned to, or inadvertently subdued or simply conquered by, or have to helplessly tolerate, certain dominant but unfair and unjust elements of a culture. Such 'cultural elements' which victimize its own people and often cause tensions and conflicts in the society definitely need to be critically assessed and rectified. And that is very much a task of moral science.

Transition from Ethics to Culture

Ethics, as based on the moral experience of people of diverse cultures, leads to a new culture. This is the process of transition from ethics to culture. In its systematic reflection, ethics will promote only those values which are good for all; at the same time, it will refuse those practices which are not acceptable. Thus, in its attempt at producing a new culture, we can say, it is task oriented or future-oriented. Ethics as leading to a new culture, again, manifests their interaction.

Need of an Ethical Culture

According to Teilhard de Chardin, we live in a world of evolution, where it proceeds to the phase of socialization, i.e., evolution moves to the formation of humankind: 'after man, mankind'. Our century, as he sees it, undergoes the second phase of socialization, known as the phase of compression. Through our revolutions in communication media and technology, we form a "global village", which is a bewildering fact! Why? Humans belonging to many cultures - plurality of cultures are coming together and their encounters cause tensions or conflicts in different levels of their existence. Such tensions are at present expressed in various levels of life through fundamentalism, fanaticism, selfishness, frantic ideologies, consumeristic tendencies etc. They kill peace of mind of moderns, causing divisions and even wars. These are perversions of the present day culture due to lack of ethical vision. Albert Schweitzer already at the beginning of this century, noted that 'by denying ethical values

modern men were simply sinking. A culture without ethical values is therefore blind; in other words, it will be a curse for humanity in future, simply leading to collective extinction.

In such a context, the only solution is to promote an ethically well-founded cultural system. P. L. Ralph observes that ‘the real task ahead is not to create an industrial civilization but to create an ethical one’, where promotion of fuller, richer and abundant life will be the key issue. Such a culture may be universal, which must be deep rooted in particular cultures; the ethics here may be “meta-ethics, in the sense that it includes a value system: the most basic values and truths of every culture, at the same time, it is above all cultures. Only an ethical culture will produce the “good will” Kant has foreseen, or the ‘good conscience’, of which B. Häring speaks, or the ‘innocent heart’, Christianity presents. Its realistic cultivation is the exact point of interaction between culture and ethics.

Conclusion

This has been an attempt to seek the various ways of interaction between culture and ethics. Culture and its ethos take us to the realm of ethics and thus ethics has its foundation in the concrete reality of culture. Ethics and culture are concerned with human actions which are free and moving along the path of values; both enjoy a normative character in the sphere of human actions. Since ethics is a reflective systematization of the ethos born into the culture, certain cultural practices may be discarded and others may be accepted. As a result, a new culture will be born - i.e., ethics ‘breeds’ a new culture. A culture has perennial value only when it is ethical. In other words, human folk, with its cultural specificum, has a future as long as it is ethical. Thus culture and Ethics without culture ethics interact for the betterment of both. is sterile; culture without ethics is a curse. Freedom, the fountain of every culture, is not lawless; lawful culture is thus ethical.

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