Discourse and tractable morality

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When managerial decisions are examined, somehow the business context must be included in the analysis. In this chapter, causalities that transcend individuals are promoted as unit of analysis in empirical moral research, namely, discourse. Studying managerial decisions in their discursive context is an interesting way to study the moral side of these decisions. After discussing discourse theory, the conclusion is that discourse theory can help business ethics in many different ways. It is shown what a discourse description or analysis within business ethics could look like. Special attention is paid to stories and metaphors, and to the power effects of international anticorruption discourses.

**Keywords**
- Anticorruption discourse
- Corruption
- Discourse analysis
- Discourse ethics
- Discourse
- Genealogy
- Tractable morality
Discourse and Tractable Morality

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Abstract
When managerial decisions are examined, somehow the business context must be included in the analysis. In this chapter, causalities that transcend individuals are promoted as unit of analysis in empirical moral research, namely, discourse. Studying managerial decisions in their discursive context is an interesting way to study the moral side of these decisions. After discussing discourse theory, the conclusion is that discourse theory can help business ethics in many different ways. It is shown what a discourse description or analysis within business ethics could look like. Special attention is paid to stories and metaphors, and to the power effects of international anticorruption discourses.

Introduction
Watson (2003, p. 168) claims that “although increasing academic attention is being paid to business ethics, the ways in which ethical consideration come into activities and decisions of organizational managers have been examined in a very limited way.” This chapter contributes by suggesting an interesting way to study moral managerial decisions in studying these decisions in their discursive context. In the chapter "Discourse and Normative Ethics," the focus is on the normative side of ethics, here on descriptive ethics. Here I study why and how discourse analysis can aid descriptive business ethics.

In this chapter, first I claim that the internal dynamics within organizations render methodological individualism in business ethics hard to defend. Therefore,
describing the moral side of a company by describing the moral part of managerial
decision-making lends just a fragment of the whole picture. Somehow, the
business context wherein managerial decisions are made also contains important
moral information. Causalities that transcend individuals are proposed as a unit
of analysis in empirical moral research, namely, discourse. I suggest that an
interesting method for describing (moral) decisions of managers is looking at
the way managers talk about their reality. After describing what is meant by
discourse in this chapter, I suggest how discourse analysis could be used in
descriptive business ethics and give the example of bankers’ decisions. Special
attention will be paid to storylines and metaphors and to the power and conse-
quences of (business) ethics discourse by giving the example of international
anticorruption discourses.

Problems with Applying Classic Moral Theories Within Business
Ethics

Business Ethics and Classic Moral Theories

According to Van Luijk and Kimman, well-known business ethicists in the
Netherlands, business ethics is an institutionalized discussion about values and
norms that should contribute to formulating directions for action \[4\] or rules \[5\]
for managers \[6\]. In formulating those directions, classic moral philosophers are
often studied. Some scholars within business ethics therefore lean heavily on classic
moral theories, such as deontological, utilitarian and virtue “ethical theories.”
Peter French: “I am convinced that the primary problem of business ethics is not
to identify ways of applying the traditional moral theories and principles in order to
evaluate the actions of corporate managers. That, unfortunately, has been the
characteristic approach in the field” \[7\].

Solomon \[8\] is an example of a scholar using virtue ethics. Scholars who use
some sort of integrity approach, such as Kaptein and Wempe \[9\], usually try to find
the right mix between the three classic moral theories. Scholars like Ronald Green
\[10\] take a more deontological approach: They define clear moral guidelines and
principles to which companies always have to adhere. A theorist like Freeman,
with a “fair contracts” approach, reflects the assumptions and methodology of the
modern liberal Rawlsian theory of justice and property rights \[11\]. The stakeholder
approach, like the one by Donaldson and Preston, has some affinities with utilitarian
notions. Like the utilitarian moral theorists, stakeholder theorists struggle with the
following problems: Whom to identify as morally relevant? How to accommodate
conflicting interests? And what to do with moral claims that are incomparable?
Answers should lead to a situation that is best for all. Contract theorists, such as
Donaldson and Dunfee \[12\], do not so much get their inspiration from the classic
moral theories, but make use of other classic philosophers like Hobbes, Locke,
and Rousseau.
The Human Agent Versus Organizations: The Problem of Intentionality

Classic ethical theories happen to have in common the assigning of a key role to the human agent. The focus is on questions how individuals should act in certain, morally relevant situations. After all, the well-being of persons is the primary consideration of Western ethics; most philosophical ethics is about how to treat other human beings. Concepts like “responsibility” and “blame” play central roles.

Theories like utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics can be, according to Van Willigenburg:

...viewed as systematisations of the moral insights, intuitions and beliefs of all who share basic moral concerns and who, therefore, participate in a common search for answers to questions about how to treat each other, how to organise society and how to lead our lives.

Ethical theories try to construct a coherent and illuminative set of principles and rules. But clearly, not one of these theories’ systematisations can provide for the whole truth, though they all start from one or another part of folk morality that we find intuitively plausible and fundamental. Each systematic reconstruction will have its blind spots: areas where its principles do not readily apply or even lead to counterintuitive results. This is certainly the case when different levels of analysis are in play. An ethical theory constructed from the perspective of the individual actor will have difficulty accounting for the corporate context. [13].

The moral rules classical ethical theories prescribe can be used to advise individuals when making decisions. But classic moral theories were not designed for the corporate context. As Van Willigenburg notes, in the corporate context, different levels of analysis are in play. An important issue for business ethicists is thus to decide how far they can go in applying philosophical moral theories – meant for individuals – to organizations. In the famous words of Velasquez, “Although we say that organizations ‘exist’ and ‘act’ like individuals, they obviously are not human individuals. Yet our moral categories are designed to deal with individual humans who feel, reason, and deliberate, and who act on the basis of their own feelings, reasoning and deliberations” [14]. According to Velasquez, a corporation cannot be held morally responsible. It does not have autonomy. Velasquez is a so-called moral individualist. To him intentionality is essentially tied to consciousness. And the human kind of intentionality is necessary for moral responsibility. A related problem is how to punish organizations. Organizations cannot be put in jail and their souls cannot be damned. Many business ethicists who believe that organizations cannot be held responsible in a moral sense spend their energy on individuals within organizations, mostly the decision makers: the managers. Interesting and wide juridical and managerial literature exists on “who is to blame.”

Whether or not doing something intentionally is essential to being held responsible is an important question. After all, corporations are capable of doing considerable undeserved harm. And our organizations are complex: division of labor and expertise renders every action employees undertake a minor part of the overall task. This leads to problems in business ethics because of the intentionality condition.
“Sin without sinners, crime without criminals, guilt without culprits! Responsibility for the outcome is, so to speak, floating, nowhere finding its natural haven”[15]. There are some arguments that organizations can act intentionally whether or not it is seen as a human form of intentionality. These arguments, however, are not very convincing. There are many cases where the agent (the organization) has caused considerable harm (environmental pollution) that it clearly did not intend – as is required for moral responsibility on the intentionality condition. I am convinced that our ordinary (daily) discourse casts a considerable wider net than those business ethicists who defend moral individualism. I think that in our daily moral discourse, the fact that harm is done is more important than the intentionality condition and is therefore more appropriate.

The Outcome of Moral Choices

I argued that many scholars, who believe strongly in using one of the classic moral theories within business ethics, focus on managers and how they should make individual choices. Those business ethicists focus on advising individuals within companies: managers. Implicitly it is assumed that the conscious decisions of managers determine what actions organizations undertake. Society and human behavior are viewed as the outcomes of conscious (moral) decisions; the functioning of organizations is seen as the outcome of (conscious) managerial decisions. Thus, if these managers get good moral advice (and abide by it), the organization will behave in a good moral sense. This gives morality a chance to determine behavior. This is why the part of business ethics that leans heavily on classic philosophical ethical theories has clear affinities with choice-based decision theories. Within choice-based theories, the process of weighing alternatives is based on values, i.e., individual preferences over alternative outcomes. In most theoretical ethical discourse, the outcome of moral choices is given. The main problem it tries to address is how to choose between different actions and/or outcomes. But, because of the veer growing complexity of organizations, the distance between actions and outcomes is great in both space and time. Anthony Giddens therefore calls our society a risk culture. What is important here are the consequences these problems have for applying classical moral theories in the field of business ethics. Bauman notes: We can do harm to them (or they may do harm to us) inadvertently, by ignorance rather than design, without anyone in particular wishing ill, acting with malice and be otherwise morally blameworthy … It also renders impotent the few, but tested and trustworthy ethical rules we have inherited from the past and are taught to obey. After all, they all tell us how to approach people within our sights and reach, and how to decide which actions are good (and thus ought to be taken) and which are bad (and thus ought to be avoided), depending on their visible and predictable effects on such people. Even if we abide by such rules scrupulously, even if everyone around observed them well, we are far from certain that disastrous consequences will be avoided. Our ethical tools—the code of moral behavior, the assembly of the rules of thumb we follow—have not been, simply, made to measure to the present powers. [15]
Concerns for “Applied Business Ethics”

The point I am trying to establish is that context in ethics is important, especially in applied ethics. Sorrel: “I suggest there is a whole genre of applied ethics—‘armchair applied ethics’—that extends in an objectionable way the method of arguing a priori and by abstract counter-example that is justifiable in most of the rest of philosophy. In applied ethics, there is an obvious value to leg-work—leaving one’s armchair and finding out about the actual practice of business, medicine and law, including the questions that seem natural to practitioners, or urgent to them at different times” [11].

Every issue in daily management has its value implications. Managers, however, are often not aware of this – perhaps one of the reasons why applied business ethics as a field is not as evolved as applied legal or medical ethics. Managers in these fields deal daily with issues they perceive as morally relevant; naturally they are more prone to turn to philosophical ethics for help [11]. But when a discourse does not perceive an issue as morally relevant, the theoretical moral discourse runs a risk of being misunderstood and giving intractable advice. Even when business people find certain philosophical discussion interesting, they have a hard time relating it to their daily problems. The ethics are too far removed from daily practice. In other words, the discourses are too different. When talking about the same issue, ethicists and business people sometimes use different terms and concepts and talk “past each other.” This point is also important in relation to stakeholder theory. Social constructivists have shown that various actors are likely to hold different perceptions of what the problem “really” is [16]. Even if all the relevant representatives of all the relevant stakes are around a table, the question is whether they perceive and are willing to talk about the same problems, let alone the same solutions. “This does not mean that facts don’t enter the discussion. Ironically, participants seem exclusively preoccupied with getting the facts straight. They accuse each other of misinterpreting or simply ignoring crucial evidence. Many authors contend that these agreements about facts actually mask a conflict underlying ‘belief systems.’ These are sets of causal and normative assumptions about reality” [17]. Both discourses have valid arguments within their own rules, but somehow they differ fundamentally.

In an interesting article, Hoffmaster [18] presents some difficulties he has with “applied ethics.” By the latter, he does not mean the catchall term used to refer to activities such as ethics rounds and consultations, ethics committees, etc. The target is “applied ethics” in the sense of a philosophically based and motivated theory. While his article is about applied ethics in the field of medical ethics, some of his points are relevant in the field of business ethics. Let me briefly list his criticism here. What Hoffmaster calls “criticism,” I see as “special areas of concern” when applying philosophical theories to applied business ethics.

Hoffmaster makes a distinction between two kinds of criticism that can be leveled against “applied” moral philosophy, namely, internal criticism and external criticism. Internal criticism purports to show that moral theory cannot succeed on its own terms. External criticism points out that moral theory cannot account for the phenomena of morality [18].
A first internal difficulty of applied ethics is that many principles within applied ethics are too general and vague to apply determinately to concrete situations, leading to intractable advice; always a concern for any sort of applied ethics. Within applied business ethics, philosophical ethics can play a role. But the philosophical discourse within a field of applied ethics should also be close to daily (business) practices or it will suffer from what Sorell \[11\] calls the alienation problem: a breach between ethicists and practitioners. As Stark claims, based on his study of the business ethics literature, “Far too many business ethicists have occupied a rarefied moral high ground, removed from the real concerns of and real-world problems of the vast majority of managers. They have been too preoccupied with absolutist notions of what it means for managers to be ethical, with overly general criticisms...” \[19\].

All the major concepts in moral philosophy are heavily under debate. The proper use is never agreed upon.\(^5\) Which kind of use of a concept is valid in a particular moral dilemma? In the use of the concept “values,” when we study what is meant by “loss of values,” we see that people can mean completely different things. Although an analysis of concepts can clarify confusion around concepts, it can never establish what a concept “really” means, let alone resolve the disputes in which concepts play a role. “In any moral controversy, the question of whether and if so, how, a principle is to be brought to bear upon that dispute is itself contentious...” Disparity between the abstract semantic formulations of principles and the particular empirical circumstances they supposedly govern is a consequence of the inherently general nature of language\(^18\).

A second internal difficulty with applied ethics is that a multiplicity of principles is taken to be relevant to moral problems in the corporate context but when principles conflict, applied ethics does not offer a good way to resolve the conflict. This problem is often mentioned: for any one moral problem, several principles can be applied. Unfortunately, there is no accepted way of choosing one principle over another.\(^6\)

A third internal difficulty of applied ethics is that it is not helpful in addressing some crucial moral issues because these issues challenge assumptions upon which the theoretical edifice of applied ethics is erected. The assumptions of moral theories with long traditions make many managerial ethical issues difficult to address. Addressing them would challenge the assumptions of the existing theories. Noticeable in this regard for business ethics is the debate over who belongs to our moral sphere. What, exactly, is the moral status of a cow? Or, what is the moral status of the environment, when a bank director has to decide upon giving a loan to a potentially dangerous chemical conglomerate? A cow and, certainly, the environment are not autonomous moral agents. Of course, that does not necessarily mean that they are thereby excluded from moral considerations, but the moral status of nonhumans complicates moral discussions to such a degree that the new field of environmental philosophy is as of yet not able to do much more than map the problems this constitutes for our longstanding moral philosophies.
Turning to Hoffmaster’s external criticism, some theoretical moral theory is, in a number of respects, blind to actual moral phenomena. Therefore, applied ethics runs the danger of not appreciating the dynamic character of morality:

Because ‘applied ethics’ takes morality to be an autonomous theoretical system under which the flotsam of human experience is subsumed, it cannot account for the flux in that experience. It therefore cannot answer three questions that are central to our understanding of morality: why only certain issues come to be recognized as moral problems; how moral problems get categorized or labeled; and how and why moral change occurs. [18]

Elaborating on this last issue:

What induces and precipitates moral change? The salient moral issues of today are different from those a decade ago, let alone a century ago. ‘Applied ethics’ nevertheless remains impervious to moral change; it will deal with whatever moral problems are brought before it, assuming that the identification and characterization of moral problems themselves raise no difficulties and that moral problems can be dealt with independently of the contexts in which they arise. Yet, how, when and what issues become ‘moral’ are vitally important questions. [18]

The fact that an ethical question arises within a business is as interesting as what the question is; that many ethical questions are not asked is interesting as well. How animals are treated within Holland’s intensive food industry is a good example. The kinds of (moral) arguments used in favor of and against intensive animal husbandry have been around for as long as these practices have existed. Yet, during the crisis of foot and mouth disease, the arguments against intensive animal husbandry gained importance. Why is that? The philosophical moral grounds concerning animals had not changed. Being able to understand why issues are raised about intensive animal husbandry requires more than just studying classical moral theory. To understand these types of questions, the context of moral questions must be examined. There must be an understanding of the discourse in which the question appears. The arguments in the Netherlands about intensive animal husbandry can only be understood against the background of the recent outbreaks of bovine diseases like the foot and mouth virus and swine fever.

How and why moral questions are asked in certain contexts at certain times is important. “Answering that question requires a broader conception of morality than the identification of morality with philosophical moral theory, a conception that situates morality in social, cultural, and historical milieus” [18]. Discourse theory is well equipped to study precisely that context and show the working of ethics in practice. By making organizational discourse analyses, it pays attention to moral practice; it puts moral problems in context. I will elaborate on this in the next sections.

Hoffmaster states, “a theoretically-oriented applied ethics tends to focus on ‘big’ decisions and portray them in binary terms. By doing so, it ignores pragmatic strategies for responding to moral problems such as abiding time, compromising or cycling through competing values” [18]. When one leans too heavily on theoretical-oriented applied ethics, one’s morality runs the risk of being too abstract, of being intractable. On making hard moral decisions, Frohock writes: “Pain and guilt, rather than immorality and irrationality, plague therapy decisions” [20].
Moral decision-making is situational. When studying moral decisions, the context is of extreme importance. Due to the nature of language, abstract formulations derived from philosophical theories can easily lead to disparity with the circumstances in which a person has to make a decision [18].

### Language and Meaning

In recent decades, discussions on the nature of truth have profoundly affected social research. Instead of assuming a given world “out there,” waiting to be discovered, attention is being drawn to the language processes through which the world is represented. The access we have to a reality outside language is highly problematic. Language does not simply report facts; it is not a simple medium for the transport of meaning. The meaning and effect of words depend on the context in which they are spoken or written. Du Gay ([21], p. 47): “The meaning that any object has at any given time is a contingent, historical achievement . . . theorists of discourse argue that the meaning of objects is different from their mere existences, and that people never confront objects as mere existences, in a primal manner; rather these objects are always articulated within particular discursive contexts.”

Perhaps it is the case, as some philosophers claim, that what exists in the world is a necessity (independent of human beings or language), but things can only be differentiated through language. The world itself does not give meaning to objects; this is done through language. Stated simply, although things might exist outside language, they get their meanings through language.

This view of language implies the possibility to describe the business context as a discursive construction. The meaning of anything always exists in particular discursive contexts; meaning is always contextual, contingent, and historical. For business studies, language is not just seen as reflective of what goes on in an organization. Discourses and organizations are one in the same. “That is, organizing becomes communicating through the intersection of discourse and text” [22]. Our so-called organizational actions are embedded in discursive fields and are only recognizable as practices through discourse. Organizational discursive practices exist only in the organizational surroundings and practices they are part of.

### Discourse

The concept of discourse plays an important role in most post-positivistic research and has many meanings. Of its many interpretations (see [23]), here I define discourse as “a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” ([16], p. 44). For example, psychiatric discourse brought the idea of an unconscious into existence in the nineteenth century (cf. [24], p. 3, [25]). Discourses contain groups of statements
that provide a way of talking and thinking about something, thereby giving meaning to social reality. Discourses are not “out there” between reality and language; they are not just a group of signs. They refer to practices that systematically form the objects we speak of. Discourse is not just a “way of seeing” – a worldview – but is embedded in social practices that reproduce the “way of seeing” as “truth.” Discourses are constitutive of reality [26]. What is and is not true cannot be seen outside discourse; it is internal to it. By looking at what people say and write, we can learn how their world is constructed.

The concept of discourse is often used to overcome oppositions like “action and structure” or “individual and structure.” Since discourses, as used here, institutionalize the way of talking about something, they produce knowledge and thereby shape social practices. Social interactions cannot be understood without the discourses that give them meaning. Discourses function as a structure to behavior; they both enable and constrain it. Since discourses in our context institutionalize the way of talking about something, they produce knowledge and thereby shape social practices. Discourses contain the conditions of possibility of what can and cannot be said. The fact that a question arises in any business context is as interesting as the question asked (and the questions not asked). And every question asked gets some form of an answer (including no answer), which has consequences. Discourses help us understand that a certain question is asked, and give us the spectrum of possible solutions to problems arising from it, i.e., what is or is not seen as a viable solution to a specific problem. A problem’s definition inevitably predisposes certain solutions, and vice versa ([17], p. 6; [27–29]). Compare this with the following quote from Schön and Rein ([30], p. 153):

When participants . . . name and frame the . . . situation in different ways, it is often difficult to discover what they are fighting about. Someone cannot simply say, for example, ‘Let us compare different perspectives for dealing with poverty,’ because each framing of the issue of poverty is likely to select and name different features of the problematic situation. We are no longer able to say that we are comparing different perspectives on “the same problem,” because the problem itself has changed.

Over the last two decades, organization studies have given much attention to language and discourse. Putnam and Fairhurst [31] give a good overview of the developments in the area of discourse theory in organization studies. Alvesson and Karreman [23] discuss the variety of ways in which the concept of discourse is used in organizations studies. For more on discourse analyses, one could mention Dijk [32] and Titscher et al. [33].

The field of business ethics, however, does not pay much attention to (some form of) discourse theory. Among the exceptions are Parker [34] and Shapiro [35]. Also, Cheney and Christensen [36] discuss corporate rhetoric (not internal discourses, but communication that is directed to outsiders of the organization) on corporate social responsibility from a discursive perspective. Descriptive ethical research in the tradition of Jackall [37], Bird and Waters [38], and Kunda [39], looks at what and how moral issues are an issue in the daily life of managers. How do managers talk about ethics and what moral issues do they encounter?
Discourse and Values

Like meaning, values are immanent features of discourse. When we give meaning to something, we are also valuing it. Even though a Durkheimian view is clearly not endorsed here (our emphasis is on language, not institutions), there is a parallel. To Durkheim social institutions, collective ways of thinking, feeling, and doing are not empty but full of values (values give meaning to relationships). In similar fashion, discursive practices are not empty; they are filled with values. By giving something a name, we highlight certain aspects. But in that same process, all other possible qualities are placed in the background or even ignored. Values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions affect each other. In our daily lives, we jump so often between normative and factual statements that we do not realize how much our views of facts determine whether we see problems in the first place. But when we study those discussions more carefully, we can see that “is” and “ought” are intertwined. Seemingly technical positions in discourses conceal normative commitments. Discourses make more than claims of reality – they accomplish what Schön and Rein [40] have called the “normative leap,” or the connection between a representation of reality and its consequences for action. Within most versions of discourse theory, the strict dichotomy between facts and values ceases to make sense. Facts and values here are not treated as ontologically different; discourse theory treats them as different sides of the same coin. The “is” and “ought” shape each other in countless ways. Language is thus neither neutral nor static in communicating meaning. The awareness that language does not neutrally describe the world is important to corruption research. Subtle linguistic forms and associated symbolic actions shape our convictions and presuppositions ([41], p. 79).

As discussed, discourses contain the conditions of possibility of what can and cannot be said. The fact that a moral question arises in business is as interesting as what question is asked; as is the fact that many moral questions are not asked. Every question that is asked gets some form of an answer which has consequences. Every (non-) decision of any manager in any company is a social activity and affects people’s lives [42]. In a specific discourse, different moral questions are raised than in others. As soon as managers of soccer clubs start to talk about soccer as a “product” (a relatively new development), a new world opens up around the same old game with new opportunities, managerial problems, and new moral issues [43]. Discourses do not only help us understand that a certain moral question is asked, they also give us the spectrum of possible solutions to moral problems being raised, i.e., what is or is not seen as a viable solution to a specific moral problem. It can be suspected that the framing of moral questions by managers [40] differs from moral questions framed by professional ethicists. Where moral philosophers frame moral questions for managers based on their philosophical discourses, managers (needing a “tractable morality,” see [44]) frame their moral questions on a daily basis.

Although Aristotelians and pragmatics like Dewey [45] intensely consider deliberation and conversation, there are clear differences with the discourse theory as described above. Aristotelian ethicists are usually looking for virtues to be
named, virtues that are good. Most discourse theorists though, want to stay away
from anything associated with essentialism. Instead of looking for virtues for
individuals, discourse theorists want to problematize the central role of individuals
(at least the central role of individuals in research). Individuals are part of organi-
zations; they operate in discursive contexts that determine (at least in great part)
their behavior. Discourses thus focus more on context than on individuals and their
virtues. The extent to which individuals are influenced by their contexts gives rise
to extensive discussions about their autonomy and freedom. These discussions
(interesting as they are) are left here aside. What is important is that the behavior
of individuals is, at least to a high degree, influenced by the organizational entities
in which they work and that affects the morality of managers. Jackall \[37\]
concludes:

\[
... \text{because moral choices are inextricably tied to personal fates, bureaucracy erodes}
\]
internal and even external standards of morality not only in matters of individual success
and failure but in all the issues that managers face in their daily work. Bureaucracy makes
its own internal rules and social context the principal moral gauges for action ... Within
such crucibles, managers are continually tested as they continually test others. They turn to
each other for moral cues for behavior and come to fashion specific situational moralities
for specific significant others in their world.”

**Discourse Analysis**

How can we transition from an ontological and epistemological stance of meaning
that is always historically and socially constructed to a theoretical model useful to
empirical ethics research? De Graaf \[46\] has offered an example from postmodern
research where empirical corruption research is conducted based on Pierre
Bourdieu’s theory of social action \[47–50\]. By combining macro and micro factors
and everything in between, it is an example of how concrete corruption case studies
can be conducted. Contextual research in this way can establish dispositions that
can lead to corruption. Since dispositions do not always manifest, they cannot be
called “causes” in the strict sense of the word. What is important in this type or
research is the receptiveness of an individual to corruption, and whether the
receptiveness is triggered.

An interesting additional method to traditional ones of describing moral
decisions of managers is looking at the way managers talk about and view reality:
describing their discourses. Instead of looking at the moral agents or the organiza-
tion as a moral entity, one can study an organization’s internal discourse. In that
sense, individuals are neither central to nor the proposed objects of study
(methodological individualism); the object of study is discourses. By describing
discourses of managers, moral aspects come to the fore.

How does research with discourse theory work? A researcher conducts discourse
descriptions or analyses, the basis of which are texts (the material manifestations of
discourses). All verbal and written language can be considered. A discourse anal-
ysis shows which discursive objects and subjects emerge in social practices, and
which conceptualizations are used. Consequently, what is left out in social practices
also emerges. It is not the purpose of discourse analysis to retrieve what authors
meant or felt. Discourse analysis is not a search for meaning in texts, empirical or otherwise. The analysis focuses on the effects of the texts on other texts. Hajer ([16], p. 54): “discourse analysis investigates the boundaries between ... the moral and the efficient, or how a particular framing of the discussion makes certain elements appear fixed or appropriate while other elements appear problematic.”

A discourse analysis inquires into forms of problematization and offers a narrative about the production of problems. Why is something considered a problem (or not)? It does not concentrate on answering the problem at hand. In other words, when doing a discourse analysis, one can establish the limits of what can and cannot be said in a particular context, what Foucault [25] called “the conditions of possibility” of a discourse. A discourse analysis can identify the rules and resources that set the boundaries of what can be said, thought and done in a particular (organizational) context or situation. Mauws ([51], p. 235): “Thus, if we are to comprehend how decisions are made ... it is by examining the conditions of possibility in relation to which these statements are formulated, that is, the often implicit institutionalized speech practices that guide what is and what is not likely to be said (Bourdieu).” By conducting discourse analyses in the field of business ethics, the contextuality of ethics is taken seriously. It gives content to the vague notion of “putting moral problems into context” [18].

An Example: Bankers’ Decisions

In 2001, in Holland the three largest banks dealing with private businesses were ING, ABN-Amro, and Rabobank. Each of the three banks would argue that they differ from each other. Rabobank, for example, is a cooperative company, not listed on any stock exchange. Therefore it does not have to satisfy shareholders and according to Rabobank this means more than just a different legal way of doing business. Rabobank claims that (partly) because they do not have to make a profit to satisfy shareholders, they treat their clients differently. And they claim to care more about the local economy than their competitors do.

One of the many ways in which the three banks could differ are the decisions they make toward requests for a loan by starting businesses. The problem with a starting business for banks is that they pose a higher risk. Many new companies go bankrupt in the first year of their existence.

By understanding how bankers make their choices with respect to starters, a discourse description can render visible the discursive formation within which bankers speak. It can identify the rules about the limits of what can be said and what cannot within a banker’s discourse. A discourse analysis can first of all try to make clear how the banker sees himself, what his identity is. Then it can try to show how the identity of the banker is matched to a situation in which a loan for a starter is decided. It has good opportunities to find rules that managers apply that are not financial norms, and that the bankers themselves are not consciously aware of. Maybe, the manager sees himself and his business, as something essential to the economic development is his region, which could lead to favorable impressions.
of starting businesses. Or maybe he is young and trying to make a fast career within
his national bank organization, and is very concerned with avoiding big financial
risks for his local bank, because the national bank is judging him very heavily on
avoiding “mistakes.” This example would lead to very stringent decision rules for
starting businesses. A discourse analysis could also compare banks in that way.
What are the similarities and what are the differences between the identities of local
bank directors. Rabobank claims that it pays much attention to the region a specific
bank office is located in. Is that reflected in the way the local bank directors talk
about starters and the decision processes whether to give them a loan?

A discourse analysis by De Graaf [26], a study on bankers’ conceptualizations
of their customers concluded that there are five different discourses about cus-
tomers among Dutch bankers (using Q methodology, see also [52, 53]). These
discourses contain many aspects about the job of a banker and conceptualizations
of their customers. The discourse descriptions give valuable information about the
context of managerial decisions. It is shown how bankers in the discourse of
a Rabobank make more favorable decisions toward giving loans to starting
businesses: They use a discourse where helping to start a business is seen as
a moral question; others do not. The latter will ask themselves moral questions
about start-up company loans but look primarily at the financial risk, and ask
themselves primarily financial questions.

As stated before, in discourses factual and valuational statements are
intertwined. Different ways of looking at the factual world lead to different valu-
ations of it and vice versa. The moral problems managers have are always embed-
ded in a context. Morals are always situational. In talking about values, bank
managers from a discourse wherein the relationship with the customer is
a commercial one, immediately start to talk about fraud and how to prevent it
[26]. Moral issues seen by bankers – the treatment of start-ups, environmental
issues, using the bank to improve the region, dealing with sponsor money, having
a customer in financial difficulty, whether to treat clients differently, when to be
completely honest to customers, how to negotiate with customers, etc. – are
indissolubly tied to factual images a banker has of his customers. The moral
questions and the factual images are part of the same discourse. By giving the
best discourse description possible, the differences in moral stances between
discourses become apparent by contrasting them.

Storylines and Metaphors

One way to study how discursive practices are shaped is to look at storylines and
metaphors. Our own particular worldviews and discourses position us within discus-
sions in terms of the concepts, metaphors, and stories of that discourse. For business
ethics researchers, it is important that a discourse analysis can show how forces in
language influence moral positions by looking at the role metaphors and storylines
play within a discourse. Discourse analysis can also gain perspectives into the
structure, dynamics, and directions of conflicting discourses, like narrative strategies.
Stories play an important role in people’s lives; in large part, they give meaning to them [54]. If you want to get to know someone, you ask for a life story. Stories tell about what is important and what is not. Philosophers like Johnson [55] or McIntyre [56] would go so far as to argue that stories are central to creating human understanding: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ If I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” ([57], p. 304). Fisher ([58], p. xiii) claims that “all forms of human communication need to be seen fundamentally as stories.” Many scholars agree that stories are filled with information and are efficient at conveying it ([59], p. 9). Boje ([60], p. 106) argues: “People engage in a dynamic process of incremental refinement of their stories of new events as well as ongoing reinterpretations of culturally sacred story lines”; ([61], p. 1001): “In sum people do not just tell stories, they tell stories to enact an account of themselves and their community.” The assumption that meaning is produced in linguistic form fits well with exploring stories, which are simply one type of linguistic form, or elements of a discourse with certain characteristics.

Within stories, “is” and “ought” are closely connected. Even if they seem to give simple factual descriptions, an enormous implicit normative power lies within narratives. Hayden White ([62], p. 26): “What else could narrative closure exist of than the passage of one moral order to another?... Where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too.” According to White, the events that are recorded in the narrative appear “real” precisely insofar as they belong to an order of moral existence, just as they derive their meaning from their placement in this order. It is because the events described are or are not conducive to the establishment of social order that they find a place in the narrative attesting to their reality ([63], p. 10). A narrative analysis can therefore shed light on how different moral positions relate to each other.

It shows how narrative structures (partly) determine moral positions and identities, and how they thereby influence the actions of individuals and organizations. And they show how internal dynamics of a discourse can influence the moral position taken; this can also be used strategically. An example from a study by Bracking ([64], p. 44): “These attempts by members of the political elite to gain political ground relative to one another by attempting to fix the others’ behavior as ‘corrupt,’ entail ‘corruption’ acting as a signifier of moral detraction in a political discourse that pretends liberal reform but serves authoritarian power. Narratives like these often involve ‘illegal’ foreign exchange transactions... There is also a popular narrative of corruption acting as a moral censure of a rapacious elite.”

Scholars have pointed to the moral significance of metaphors in business studies and in many empirical organizational discourse analyses, the role of metaphors has been brought to the fore [65–67]. Weick [68], for example, pointed to the operational consequences of metaphor. Just like stories, metaphors are important to business ethicists because of the (often implicit) moral baggage they carry. Describing metaphors in discursive practices can bring clarity to how metaphors, in part, morally shape discursive practices, i.e., how morality is embedded in discursive practices.
The Power and Consequences of (Business) Ethics Discourse – The Example of International Anticorruption Discourses

When values are an integral part of any discourse, they are an integral part of the business ethics discourse. The thesis that meaning is constructed by and through discourse has implications for the notion of business ethics itself; It is, as Hackley and Kitchen ([42], p. 38) note, “inseparable from ways of talking about and doing ethics and ethical things.” The descriptive ethics of the researcher comprises a moral component; descriptive ethics contains values itself and does not just mirror reality [cf. [69]]. Business ethicists’ studies play a role in what Foucault called “the regime of truth.”

It was often concluded in business studies literature that “independence” and “accountability” of employees were good for a company in a business sense. At the same time, business ethicists concluded they were good in a moral sense. Within companies, it is important who speaks of morals, what their viewpoints are and whose interests are represented. In a nutshell, how is ethics turned into a discourse? How do the forms of problematization of managers fit with forms of problematization of business ethics? The Foucauldian question becomes, to what extent is business ethics used as a power tool to discipline workers? This is what Bauman argues too. He accuses organizations (bureaucracies) in our society of “instrumentalizing” ethics to achieve the goals of the organization rather than ethics being the systematic reflection of the goals of the organization. When opinion within a management discourse is that employees steal too much from the company, they can hire “integrity consultants.” These consultants do not evaluate the goals or the products of the organization, nor do they look at whether employees are treated kindly. Instead, they are used to discipline employees with the use of an ethical discourse.

There is considerable power in structured ways of viewing reality. Power in post-positivistic research is defined relationally rather than an institutional or personal feature. So-called genealogical discourse analyses of business cases and controversies analyze how power and knowledge function, how the rules and resources that set the limits of what can be said are working. By using a grammar in its descriptions that replaces the subject with consciousness by a subject as the receiver of social meaning, static concepts are in genealogy made fluid in a historical process. Within genealogy, Foucault (e.g., [25]) looked for the way forms of problematizations are shaped by other practices. Shapiro ([35], p. 29):

Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. Committed to inquiry, it seeks endlessly to dissolve the coherence of systems of intelligibility that give individual and collective identities to persons/peoples and to the orders that house them by recreating the process of descent within which subjectivities and objectivities are produced.

Foucault [25, 70] has shown how power works through “subjectification.” A practical example: Bracking ([64], p. 36) argues that “the formal definition of corruption used by international financial institutions … acts in practice as a strategic resource and signifier within World Bank political discourse, indicating
bad governance, illegitimacy and geopolitical position... Rather it is the wider strategic role that the concept plays as a disciplinary governance concept which is critical to donors’ attempted management of African politics and societies.”

Every discourse claims to talk about reality. In doing so, it classifies what is (not) true permitted, desirable, and so on. Truth and power are closely related. As Foucault ([70], p. 74) stated, “Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which induces and which extend it; a ‘regime of truth.’” Power is not just repressive; it is always productive. A genealogical discourse analysis within business ethics can reveal some of the ways power functions in discourse and organization, how the rules and resources that delineate the limits of what can be said are working. It can follow back in history the traces of a discourse and reveal the contingencies of a current discourse.

As an example of genealogical studies, let’s examine the evidence of power influences of international corruption discourses. Building partly on the work of Foucault, some have shown how discourses on corruption with their inherent worldviews give some an advantage over others. For example, Roberts et al. [71] have shown how the discourse on governance in the so-called Pacific Plan resulted in a technocratic direction such that a particularly narrow conceptualization of governance dominates. “In a direct reading of the Pacific Plan and the interventions it empowers there is ample evidence that governance (good and bad) is used in a disciplining way” [71]. As a result, most emphasis in the region was laid on institution building (offices of auditing, statisticians, and so on). “The definitions and modes of monitoring governance provide a framework through... which Pacific Island elites... are able to know and analyze their region... As the Pacific comes under the gaze of an expert calculus that frames forms of governing as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ the island nations and people are once again defined in terms of lack, with answers proffered by development experts” [71].

To reveal the forces or power of a discourse, genealogy has to go back to the moment in which an interpretation or identity became dominant within a discourse, like the Pacific Plan, in which case many alternatives for the dominant governance discourses are available. In fact, in some cases the alternatives effectively challenge the governance interpretations of the Plan. “The continual remake of governance occurs in several ways as social movements act to make strategic use of the term within the context of the Pacific Plan and beyond it” [71].

In so-called critical corruption studies, questions are asked about the consequences of the international anticorruption measures. Brown and Cloke ([72], p. 281): “Recently, together with several other commentators [73–78] we have been promoting the need for critical academic reflection upon the growing calls for an international ‘anticorruption’ crusade.” Why, then, has there been such an explosion of interest in corruption since the 1990s, and why is there such an apparent political commitment toward tackling the problem [79] when there is no evidence that corrupt behavior has increased? Brown and Cloke [79] argue that an important factor has been shifting geopolitical priorities after the end of the Cold War.
The effects of anticorruption measures turn out to be manifold, and toward much more than simply reducing the levels of corruption. “Despite the evolution of structural adjustment into a kindlier, cuddlier poverty reduction version, within the international financial institutions there is no serious commitment to address the issues of regulation and control so vital to any understanding or control of corruption that debilitates countries of the North, East, West, and South” ([80], p. 318). Once again, the importance of context is emphasized. Consequences of anything will always depend on the particular situation, so it is stressed. Brown and Cloke ([72], p. 282/283):

This lack of detailed, contextualized analysis of the implementation of supposed anti-corruption initiatives is, we would argue, reflected everywhere, rather than having anything to do with any uniqueness of Nicaraguan circumstances… we have also come across a series of major reservations expressed particularly by those whose evaluation of such activities stems from long-term research experience in the country concerned… Taken together, these points reflect our concerns that in too many cases what is referred to as corruption has been taken out of the context within which it occurs both globally (in terms of the interactions between North and South, the transforming influence of globalization etc.) and locally (reflecting a tendency to seek for global explanations for and solutions to a monolithic signifier named corruption, rather than more detailed considerations of the complex dynamics of the nature of multiple, interlinked corruptions within individual societies).

Most of the critical corruption studies are not against anticorruption measures per se, but what is labeled “corrupt,” what is not, and the effects thereof are critical. A special concern is what the negative consequences will be for the poor (e.g., [72]).

The intentions of anticorruption discourses are questioned as well. Some claim, for example, that such discourses reflect a post-Washington consensus seeking to reinvigorate regulatory institutions while maintaining blame for the failure of development in South American governments [81]. Another example: “Policy on corruption is deeply embedded within the wider constructions of global neo-liberal and free market economic governance [79, 82–84], where a clear divide between the political and economic and between the public and private spheres is expected” [64] – remarks similar to Roberts et al. in their study on the Pacific Plan. Kondos focuses on the meaning of favoritism using a set of Nepalese cultural practices, showing that “the favor” and therefore “partiality” as values are in accordance with Hindu cultural values. Yet he also explains how Western intellectuals tend to construct “favoritism” to mean corruption and its motives. As a result an ideological conflict in the field of political ethics arises from Western pressure to adopt the principle of “impartiality” in government [85]. Gupta [86] focuses on discourses of corruption in contemporary India, specifically, practices within the lower echelons of Indian bureaucracy and representations of the state in the mass media. He stresses vigilance toward the imperialism of the Western conceptual apparatus, questioning the Eurocentric distinction between state and civil society and the conceptualization of the state as a unitary entity. Some also see the use of (insincere) anticorruption discourse as a strategic tool to legitimize the invasion of Iraq ([81, 87]).

In some critical corruption studies we find criticism of ideologies, especially neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is not just blamed for promoting the interests of the
elite via anticorruption discourses; some even blame it for causing corruption. Whyte [87], for example, states: “Neo-liberalism creates a fertile environment for ‘corrupt’ market transactions to flourish, because it seeks the creation of limited space as a means of promoting entrepreneurialism and the pursuit of self-interests;” once again reminding us of Roberts et al. and the Pacific Plan. Paradoxically, the Enron scandal, which involved falsification of balance sheets, manipulation of accounting practices, and the creation of an image of financial health, showed the pervasive nature of corruption within corporate America – a hotbed of neoliberal thought. [88] states, “corruption is more than a simple, isolated crime committed for personal gain. It is a part of corporate and political, culture – more pervasive and acceptable among elites than we realize. In short, it is becoming institutionalized.” Others are very critical of almost all anticorruption measures – integrity workshops, national integrity system analysis, anticorruption commissions – in the sense that they are seen as parts of wider mendacious practices where people are subjected as supernumeraries to human development: “The anticorruption discourse and donor practice itself can cause perverse effects which aggravate cycles of deteriorating governance (discussed by various authors in Bracking, 2007)” ([64], p. 37). Just as we saw in the Pacific Plan example [71], it is often stated in critical corruption literature that the current dominating anticorruption discourse is too focused on technical solutions and the public-private distinction, resulting in too much attention to the public sector as the major cause of corruption. In short, the “anticorruption crusade needs to be shorn of its antistate bias” ([79], p. 291).

Conclusion

When managerial decisions are examined, somehow the business context must be included in the analysis. First in this chapter, I discussed problems with choice-based theories on managerial decisions. Also, methodological individualism turned out to be problematic. In this chapter, causalities that transcend individuals were the proposed unit of analysis in empirical moral research, namely, discourse. After discussing discourse theory, the conclusion is that (the different forms of) discourse theory can help studying managerial decisions in many ways. I showed what a discourse analysis within business ethics could look like. Special attention was paid to stories and metaphors. There is considerable power in structured ways of viewing reality, with power defined relationally rather than an institutional or personal feature. Most of the critical corruption studies are not against anticorruption measures per se, but what is labeled “corrupt,” what is not, and the effects thereof are critical. A special concern is what the negative consequences will be for the poor.

Notes

1. This chapter is largely based on [1–3].
2. I do not mean those scholars who defend the amoral model, like Von Hajek or Friedman, who believe doing business has nothing to do with ethics.
3. One could also consider Badarocco, trying to formulate norms on the basis of defining moments.

4. Facts and values are often clearly separated. Values come into play after the process of information gathering. Prescriptive ethics traditionally focus on this moment. The prevailing notion is that ethics and the non-ethical language that describes and explains situations and events belong to separate domains.

5. See Schermer (2001) for a very interesting study on the concept of autonomy in ethical theory and hospital practice.

6. When managers’ decisions depend on the conviction that they should treat a person not solely as a means to an end (deontology), or the notion of promoting the greatest good for the greatest number (utilitarianism), what should they do?

7. This raises doubts as to the rationality of moral decisions. When we study moral decisions, we can see that they do not conform to some philosophical ethical theory.

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