

## Ethics education of business leaders. Emotional intelligence, virtues, and contemplative learning

Laszlo Zsolnai

To cite this article: Laszlo Zsolnai (2016): Ethics education of business leaders. Emotional intelligence, virtues, and contemplative learning, Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14766086.2016.1229468>



Published online: 07 Sep 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Ethics education of business leaders. Emotional intelligence, virtues, and contemplative learning**, by Tom E. Culham, Charlotte, NC, IAP – Information Age Publishing, 2013, 184 pp., \$45.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-62396-346-0, 978-1-62396-348-3 (e-book)

The book concerns one big issue: How can business schools educate future business leaders to make ethical decisions? This is really a challenge as business schools focus on one-dimensional rationality and cognitive intelligence. They teach the “Homo oeconomicus” model and related theories (agency theory, profit, or shareholder maximization) which promote individual, self-interested behavior. Not unsurprisingly business schools produce graduates who are more selfish and morally disengaged than non-business graduates (Grant 2013). Today, there is a strong imbalance in business education between teaching abstract, rational concepts, and providing opportunities for personal, moral growth. The whole person education is only a dream in business school settings (Illes and Zsolnai 2015).

Culham believes that it is erroneous to assume that human decision-making is primarily conscious and reason-based as suggested by the Western cultural tradition. Neuroscience and moral psychology show that unconscious processes and emotions play a much more significant role than reason in making ethical decisions. Consequently – Culman argues – business school should teach emotional intelligence and contemplative practices of the great meditative traditions. Ethical decision-making and functioning require becoming whole human beings by “integration of mind, body, heart, and spirit” (7).

Today, it is widely accepted that social and emotional intelligence has a critical role in success in business, especially in effective leadership. But business schools largely forget this fact and continue to concentrate on developing the cognitive intelligence of the students. Culman notes that the “reasons of the heart” (Vokey 2005) are much neglected. Hence, the sensitivity of students for intrinsic value of event and objects remains underdeveloped (29).

Culham emphasizes that the dominance of reason and the conscious thought over emotions and unconscious processes is part of the Western cultural heritage and is reflected in educational institutions, pedagogy, and the general approach to business in the West. He suggests that emotional intelligence coupled with the virtue ethics model should be part of business ethics pedagogy (54). He argues that “neuroscience has discovered that good decision-making depends on effective processing of emotions” and “working to develop emotional intelligence competency in the workplace can provide benefit for both employees and institutions” (54).

In his book, Culham explores *Daoist meditation practices* for emotional intelligence enhancing business education. He discusses the Daoist concept of virtue (“de”) and considers how this concept can inform business school ethics education. Also, he provides an overview of other crucial Daoist concepts including the inner cultivation with the purpose of apprehending the “dao”.

The main claim of Culham’s book is that *contemplation* can significantly *contribute* to the *emergence of mature moral functioning*. Culham criticizes the longstanding assumption of the dominant model of ethics education: that principled moral reasoning is the main guide for moral behavior and the best way to achieve moral progress is to use moral dilemma discussion and deliberative moral reasoning (107). This model epitomized by Kohlberg’s (1981) theory of moral development inspired business ethics education in the last decades, especially in the USA.

A new model of *integrative ethical education* was developed by Darcia F. Narvaez, a psychology professor at the University of Notre Dame, which integrates recent neuroscience and

psychological research and also informed by virtue ethics (Narvaez 2010). The model suggests that the individual should go through a personal transformation and achieve a state in which “ethical behavior is an unconsciously expressed trait as a consequence of having developed ethical expertise combined with the use of deliberative reasoning” (109). This view is consistent with the position of the celebrated neuroscientist Francisco Varela which states that “a wise (or virtuous) person is one who knows what is good and spontaneously does it” (Varela 1999).

Culham suggests that contemplative practices are “capable of regulating of emotions and result in a change that the emotional response of the individual is expressed spontaneously, effortlessly, or unconsciously” (115). In this way, “contemplation contributes to ethical behavior by regulating emotional impulses so that the individual does not have to exercise ‘free won’t’ as often and more often spontaneously does what is right” (115). This claim is widely corroborated by neuroscience research.

Culham emphasizes that learning ethics is a lifetime process and cannot be taught in a semester long course. He developed an ethical training program for the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. His program aims to provide a foundation of ethics for business undergraduates, focusing on developing self-awareness and knowing one’s self in relations with other people.

Culham’s undergraduate ethics program includes (1) introductory lecture on engaging in inner work, (2) an emotional intelligence survey, (3) an exercise to explore one’s purpose in life, (4) an exercise to assess one’s current strengths and weaknesses, (5) a short contemplative exercise in every class, (6) weekly journal experiences, (7) selection of competency for development by the students with the assistance of a coach, (8) an initial emotional intelligence report in the second week of the class, and (9) a final emotional intelligence report in the last week of the class.

Culham’s training program is impressive. However, one big question remains. Suppose that Culham’s ethics education program is successful. Can it be a guarantee that business graduates behave ethically and make ethical decisions in today’s complex business environment as the book seems to suggest? Perhaps they will be just better equipped to preserve their integrity in the turbulent and challenging world of today’s corporate business.

This problem is well discussed in Western Buddhism. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2001) argues that although Western Buddhism presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics, it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement. One should “let oneself go”, while “retaining an inner distance and indifference toward the mad dance of accelerated process, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances that do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being.”

Elements of Buddhist thought and practice are used in mainstream business. Global technology companies including Google are connecting to the power of mindfulness and meditation to drive happiness in their business functioning. They employ the advices of the famous Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh and other Buddhist thinkers on how practicing mindful meditation at the workplace help companies to improve their bottom line (Confino 2014).

“Doing things rights” without “doing the right things” in mainstream business may not contribute to final goal of achieving a more ethical and sustainable economy. Ethics requires us to do different things and to do things differently.


Another paradox of ethics education is that it most likely succeeds with those who are pre-disposed to become ethical persons in their daily work and life. Empirical research shows that business school students are not among them (Grant 2013). How can we persuade our students in business schools to dedicate themselves to serious ethical training? They may believe that it does not serve their best interest. They are wrong? Ethical training cannot change the unethical climate of today’s mainstream business. If there is a serious demand for ethical business graduates then it will effect the pre-selection and preparedness of business school students. Business

ethics education should go hand in hand with the ethical development of business organizations outside the business schools.

Philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt (1988) made an important distinction between the “first-order desires” and the “second-order will” of the person. First-order desires of the person determine his or her preferences while second-order will of the person determines his or her meta-preferences, that is, what kind of desires he or she has. Ethics education should try to change the first-order desires of the students and to develop their higher order will by providing them with good opportunities for engagement in ethics. Culham’s book is an important contribution to this task.

## References

- Confino, J. 2014. “Thich Nhat Hanh: Is Mindfulness Being Corrupted by Business and Finance?” *The Guardian*, March 28. <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/thich-nhat-hanh-mindfulness-google-tech>.
- Frankfurt, H. G. 1988. *The Importance of What We Care About*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grant, A. 2013. “Does Studying Economics Breed Greed?” *Psychology Today*, October 22. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/give-and-take/201310/does-studying-economics-breed-greed>.
- Illes, K., and L. Zsolnai. 2015. “The Role of Spirituality in Business Education.” *Society and Business Review* 10 (1): 67–75
- Kohlberg, L. 1981. *Essays in Moral Development. The Philosophy of Moral Development*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Narvaez, D. 2010. “The Emotional Foundation of High Moral Intelligence.” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 129 (2010): 77–94.
- Varela, F. 1999. *Ethical Know-how. Action, Wisdom and Cognition*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Vokey, D. 2005. “MacIntyre, Moral Value, and Mahayana Buddhism: Embracing the Unthinkable in Moral Education.” *Educational Theory* 49 (1): 91–106.
- Žižek, S. 2001. “From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism.” *Cabinet*, Issue 2. <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/western.php>.

Laszlo Zsolnai  
*Business Ethics Center, Corvinus University of Budapest and European SPES Institute, Leuven*  
 [laszlo\\_zsolnai@interware.hu](mailto:laszlo_zsolnai@interware.hu)

© 2016 Laszlo Zsolnai  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14766086.2016.1229468>