



Radical, Relevant, Reflective and Brilliant: Towards the Future of Business Ethics

Laura J. Spence¹

Published online: 6 October 2022

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

In this essay, I reflect on the world in which the Journal of Business Ethics has flourished at the occasion of its 40th anniversary. I take inspiration from five essays in this special anniversary issue, covering broad themes of the centrality of business ethics to global and local challenges, a fresh look at the age-old conundrum of whether business is antithetical to ethics, the highly prescient issue of new technologies, a vigorous set of arguments for new empirical approaches in business ethics and some convincing reflections on the important role of the academic subject of business ethics in wider perspective. I couple the ideas from the essays with my own perceptions and learning, having had the good fortune to be part of the field since the 1990s. From the starting point of the past 40 years, I look to the future and identify the need for business ethics to be radical, relevant, reflective and brilliant. I believe that we are up to the task, if we continue to be open to new approaches and perspectives, enthusiastically and meaningfully embracing the diversity of our field to elevate the contribution we offer.

I should declare a huge fondness and appreciation as well as long-term role as a critical friend of the Journal of Business Ethics. Like so many colleagues, JBE has been closely entwined with my career thus far. I published my first ever journal article in JBE in the late 1990s (Spence, 1998), have been on four guest editorial teams for special issues published herein, was the founding section editor for Small Business and Social Entrepreneurship in 2004 and have been consulting editor working in support of the section editors and editors-in-chief since 2017.

Turning Back the Clock?

Taking the opportunity to look back to the world into which the Journal of Business Ethics (JBE) boldly stepped in 1982, it quickly becomes clear that in the 2020s, though the details are different, we are far from living in the unprecedented times which we are prone to claim. The world faced global health disasters then and now, with AIDS and COVID-19. Over the years there have been massive technological shifts, via the birth of personal computing and mobile telephony (1982 was pre-internet days), to the explosion of powerful artificial intelligence, everyday virtual working, and the internet of things. We have witnessed the complete restructuring of industries and their business models, for instance the launch of MTV and CDs in the 1980s to the overwhelming dominance of streaming and self-managed musicians launching their own careers via social media and the attention economy in the current decade. The delivery of news shifted in the 1980s, with global news service CNN just beginning, and the world in the 2020s rapidly adjusting to personalised current affairs coming from the devices of individuals anywhere in the world to each of us directly. In global politics, many countries were—and still are—reconfiguring themselves after independence from their colonial rulers. The (European) cold war and South African apartheid were starting to show cracks, though none of these dark phases of history can be considered over. Peace has tragically been an elusive condition at least somewhere in the world, then, now, and at all times in between. While there have been some improvements overall, poverty, injustice, displacement of people, misogyny, racism, inequality, and climate change were the subjects of protest in the 80s just as they are forty years on.

✉ Laura J. Spence
Laura.Spence@rhul.ac.uk

¹ Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, UK

Into the fray in 1982 emerged the Journal of Business Ethics, joining the long-standing Business & Society magazine which started primarily for businessmen (sic—different times) in Chicago with impressive foresight in 1960,¹ and hot on the heels of the Business and Professional Ethics Journal which launched in 1981. The latter began with possibly the most well trodden though now faded business ethics case to date as its opening article; the Ford Pinto scandal (De George, 1981). JBE was timewise a little ahead of Business Ethics Quarterly which launched in 1991, and Business Ethics: A European Review in 1992 (since renamed Business Ethics, Environment and Responsibility). The opening editorial by founding editor Alex Michalos (1982) sets out clear intentions that the Journal of Business Ethics “will provide an open channel of communication that will allow people with diverse views, opinions, knowledge, insights, prescriptions and proscriptions to make their case and that will allow the other side (any other side) to respond. Hopefully, some light of truth will be generated from the heat of debate”. When R. Edward Freeman and Michelle Greenwood took over the editorship in 2016, they quickly established a commitment to broadening the intellectual base of the journal while underlining the essential focus on ethics across the board (Greenwood & Freeman, 2017) and deepening ethical analysis (Greenwood & Freeman, 2018). When Ed Freeman moved on from his editorial role, Michelle Greenwood and Gazi Islam proceeded with the commitment to explicitly acknowledge “ethics as a foundation upon which social life is built” (Islam & Greenwood, 2021, p. 1).

A Place for JBE: Looking to the Future

The scene then, is set, for understanding the context in which JBE has matured into a powerful component of the business, management, ethics and society academic arenas. Nice as it would be to think that JBE has changed the world, it would realistically be a surprise if any academic journals in the social sciences were able to transform social practice. Humbly, it should be acknowledged that despite all the deep thinking, serious debate and carefully crafted words written about business ethics during JBE’s lifetime, ethical tragedies where there is business culpability have repeatedly occurred. As a reminder, these include but are far from limited to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the financial collapse of ENRON, Arthur Andersen, Parmalat, and Lehman Brothers, the health and safety tragedy at Rana Plaza, the Volkswagen emissions scandal, the Kobe steel quality scandal, and

a slew of shameful labour conditions in supply chains up to and including forced labour such as Nike, Foxconn/Apple, and Boohoo. The list, sadly, is endless. For a moment, there was serious reflection in some parts of the world about the failure of business education to attend to ethical issues after the 2008 financial crisis, and the United Nations Principles of Responsible Management Education continues to put welcome pressure on the presence and quality of *teaching* business ethics. Forty years in, this reflection on progress made in *researching* business ethics and future paths to take could hardly be timelier.

The five collaborative essays in this 40th anniversary celebration of the Journal of Business Ethics learn from the past and look towards the future of business ethics. Each essay is comprised of a collection of separately authored commentaries that have been brought together to create dialogues around essential issues in business ethics. Like the journal itself, they cover a breath-taking range of topics. I don’t think many people fully realise just how incredible this is. The journal’s stated subjects of interest extend (and this is the smallest taste only) from feminisms to finance, critical management studies to corporate governance, behavioural business ethics to global issues, economics to the environment, the humanities to Human Resource Management.² The authority captured by this range of subjects which retain specialist credibility through the editors, reviewers and authors that attend to them, is indeed something to celebrate. This accounts for the amazing range of viewpoints captured in this special issue, to which I will now turn.

In my view, over the last decades, business ethics scholarship has made real strides in terms of facing up to global problems, in short some of those intractable grand challenges which, notwithstanding noble attempts via the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals, are proving very resistant to our collective efforts. Thus, in our first essay on Ethics at the Centre of Global and Local Challenges with contributions by Böhm et al. (2022), we see commentaries which tackle those global challenges (issues such as climate change, poverty, and inequalities), as well as understanding the necessary (humble) refocusing on local perspectives within these. Tanusree Jain, Arno Kourula and Suhaib Riaz start by positioning ethics at the centre and reframing grand challenges to be ‘grand *ethical* challenges.’ In Steffen Böhm’s commentary among others, climate, and ecological emergencies, perhaps unsurprisingly, are a particular focus. Positioning business as part of the natural environment, Böhm leads us to acknowledge the impossibility of economic growth, and the necessary challenge to the logic of capitalism. Boudewijn De Bruin also takes seriously the responsibility of business ethics to be relevant to the climate

¹ For a review of Business & Society’s first 60 years, see a celebratory special issue with editorial by Jill Brown et al. (2022).

² The frequently updated list of sections and editors can be found at <https://www.springer.com/journal/10551/editors..>

change disaster, demonstrating the importance of ethics proactively engaging with law, business, and politics in the legal case against Royal Dutch Shell by the Dutch branch of Friends of the Earth. These approaches chime closely with calls by Deirdre Shaw, Michal Carrington, and Louise Hassan for more research on new models of consumption and inclusion of marginalised consumers in our business ethics research. Nelarine Cornelius draws our attention to the problem of inequalities and sharpens the possibilities of the capabilities approach by highlighting the works of Mahbub ul Haq. Laurence Romani continues the conversation with an important reminder of the—often overlooked—role of cultural differences in business ethics studies. She argues convincingly for a shift towards understanding our ethical relationship to the ‘other’ in cultural studies, encouraging a more reflective approach to our stance in business ethics, and respect for contrasting positions. Charlotte Karam and Michelle Greenwood take up the challenge of reflecting on the contributions of feminism to stakeholder theory and business ethics. Feminist analysis in business ethics is both successful and yet lacking visibility. The great work that exists in our field deserves much more recognition and incorporation in wider research than it currently has not least because of the contribution that can be made in understanding power, exploitation, and oppression. Such a contribution could hardly be more meaningful to future business ethics research seeking to be relevant, though it does require some scholars to step out of their familiar comfort zones. I have faith that the sheer brilliance of some of the feminist business ethics work, and the value of its contribution, will prove irresistible. There seems little doubt that in the future, business ethics must be central to addressing grand and local challenges, both societal and environmental, wherever business has a role to play. Business ethics as both relevant and integral to the socio-political-environmental context must surely be a foundational assumption going forward.

One enduring—and to me at least—painful feature of business ethics is the seemingly indestructible perennial challenge to whether business can be ethical or whether business and ethics are antithetical. This is of course the terrain of the business case for business ethics, or corporate social performance, or strategic CSR, or creating shared value, or whatever is your preferred moniker. However, being jaded by the arguments on my part does rather beg the question of why this dispute is so enduring. Fortunately, some of the authors in this collection Dacin et al. (2022)—continue to be ready to push beyond the embedded tropes of the debate in the second essay focussing on the question of: Business versus Ethics? Discussion of evolving emphases within legal perspectives using the example of business and human rights helps David Hess to illustrate nuance in the relationship between business ethics and hard and soft law. Jeffrey Harrison’s arguments relate to the engagement

of business ethics with the strategy of the firm, while Sheila Killian promotes the possibility of ethics within certain business models. The commentary by Tina Dacin and Julia Roloff pushes for a more reflective and critical engagement with the contribution of social ventures, small- and medium-sized enterprises, charities, public sector organisations and other market players outside of the private business entity. For the record, my own view on business versus ethics is that it is a non-question. Business is part of the social world and therefore subject to ethical mores, norms, and values. If we sign up to arguing that being ethical is profitable, then we have also signed up to justification for dropping ethics when it is unprofitable, in the same way that an unsuccessful marketing campaign would be ceased. Until we reach beyond the business case (Kaplan, 2020) and enter a ‘post-business case’ world, however, I appreciate the value that the arguments made in this essay continue to have.

With contributions by D’Cruz et al. (2022), the third essay in this collection, Technology, Megatrends and Work, tackles challenges instigated by new technologies, and the business ethics issues which come along with and within them. Hannah Trittin-Ulbrich and Kirsten Martin open the discussion by reflecting on how business ethicists should tackle researching digital technologies, recommending a human-centred approach. Shuili Du turns the focus to artificial intelligence (AI), developing an understanding of corporate social responsibility 3.0 which incorporates the complexities of AI. In the next commentary, Glen Whelan engages with the future of work, which rests notably on the availability of new technologies, and not least the big tech industries themselves. Continuing the conversation on this high-tech world, the commentary by Ernesto Noronha and Premilla D’Cruz discusses the precarious work carried out and facilitated by digital technologies, such as via the gig and platform economy. As K. Praveen Parboteeah goes on to point out, in the global economy labour standards can be low and human rights at risk, as encompassed in the conversations on decent work led by the International Labour Organisation. He argues clearly that diversity and equal opportunity issues across the board are critical and will continue to be so, including ageism, religious affiliation, and spirituality. New technologies have indeed shifted working patterns and simultaneously opened up new opportunities for progress and traps for exploitation and marginalisation. The 24 hour news cycle and personalised reporting means that impressions—sometimes inaccurate ones—get to citizens and consumers quickly. Relative transparency is a good thing, I would argue for business ethics, and has allowed participation in debates across the board. When social movements like #blacklivesmatter, #metoo and #timesup become part of public discourse, some progress is being made, and that counts. Business ethics must remain part of the vital conversation on how to embed ethics early on in technology

development and avoid a retrospective refit that will inevitably play catch up in protecting individuals.

Important as theory is, many of the emerging questions in business ethics also require empirical answers. The point is well made in the fourth essay by Babalola et al. (2022) that it is time to focus on Bringing Excitement to Empirical Business Ethics Research. Interestingly, the lacunas are different in the various sub-disciplines, perhaps reflecting the home disciplinary biases. It is a common feature of business ethics research that we have welcome visitors from different parts of the university (who perhaps publish once or twice in JBE alongside their publications in other disciplines). Some are so entranced by business ethics that they stick around, bringing the emphasis of their distinctive orientations with them. In this way, the Journal of Business Ethics has accumulated authors with backgrounds from right across the social sciences, humanities, and some from the arts and applied sciences. The variety of disciplines present can and should continue to impact the empirical research published. For instance, in the fourth essay we see contributions from the perspectives of leadership by Mayowa Babalola and Suzanne van Gils. They call for much more cross-over in leadership and business ethics, drawing on a wider range of approaches and critiques. Matthijs Bal and Lucia Garcia-Lorenzo discuss the business ethics and psychology approaches, seek to encourage radical new perspectives and the inclusion of difficult and challenging topics of study. Omrane Guedhami, Hao Liang and Greg Shailer reflect similarly on business ethics and finance and seek to stimulate novel and innovative empirical work. Charles Cho argues for the importance of contributions from accounting—social, critical, or traditional to address ethics issues head on. The authors in this essay all call for a more adventurous approach to our empirical research, getting into corners of the social world as yet poorly observed and understood, using new and innovative methods, continuing to improve the quality of approaches used and being ready to engage with critical perspectives outside of the mainstream.

Business ethics can be understood and contribute in many ways. In the final essay, on The Ethics and Politics of Academic Knowledge Production, authors Burrell et al. (2022) look to education, the transition between industries, the publishing industry itself and the very assumptions we make about what constitutes ethics and business ethics as an academic subject. The Journal of Business Ethics is an utterly invaluable resource for teaching business ethics with articles on every subject one may wish to teach. Andrew West opens the essay with a discussion of the institutionalisation of business ethics in learning and education. Then we hear about the personal journey between consultant and academia of Christopher Michaelson, related to Plato's allegory of the cave, and the need to see and understand the world of business ethics beyond our narrow confines, urging a more

serious engagement with the arts and humanities to achieve this. Scott Taylor offers a reflective and historical account of the peer review process, its perils and what can be done to tackle some of its embedded inequalities. Michael Hyman extends thinking on ethics as an embedded and articulated part of JBE work in the next commentary, with a particular reference to marketing ethics. In the following section, Julie Nelson encourages business ethics to be more proactively informed by feminist economics, shining another light on the importance of understanding and learning from our respective partner disciplines. Finally, Gibson Burrell takes on the task of reframing ethics in a novel way, understanding ethics as para-ethics, looking at codes of ethics in political context.

The Journal of Business Ethics is itself of course part of the industries of academia and publishing. It is a massive, profitable enterprise within the Springer Nature Group (starting originally with Dutch company Kluwer Publishing), run mostly on the work of volunteers with their labour freely given. Concern about, and attention to, the ethics of publishing is arguably one of the things that has changed since 1982, with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) formed in 1997 and becoming a central point for academic journals to engage with ethical issues. It so happens that former editor of JBE Deborah Poff has also previously been closely engaged with COPE as a Chair and Trustee. Ethical practice within publishing and acknowledging and addressing the challenges openly and proactively is, in my experience, a highly vital element of the Journal of Business Ethics today. Processes are not perfect, editors, authors, reviewers and employees are human, and the global COVID-19 pandemic brought home like never before how important it is to be responsive to individual needs and priorities while also maintaining consistent procedures and standards.

The Future of Business Ethics Needs to be Radical, Relevant, Reflective and Brilliant

Business ethics and JBE have come a long way in the last forty years and there is a phenomenal amount of which to be proud, but we have by no means travelled far enough. There is still an extraordinary amount of work to be done in the future, for us and our colleagues across the business ethics community, in both scholarly and practice terms. For me, the essays are very clear. Business ethics needs to be: radical in terms of the phenomena, theory and methods we engage with; relevant to practice, the global north and south, across disciplines and organisational forms, incorporating those most marginalised; reflective of the place of our research and practice in changing the world, and the role we ourselves have as researchers and teachers; and business ethics needs to be brilliant, of the highest quality, so that any danger that our contribution may be overlooked or misunderstood is

evaded, and the robustness of our claims is self-evidently legitimate.

These commentaries and collective essays say a good deal about the Journal of Business Ethics on the occasion of its 40th anniversary. It seems to me that collectively the journal is vibrant, varied, challenging, creative and ferociously determined to keep ethics and business ethics at the heart of the debate, even while insisting on its dissection, interrogation and enlargement. Simultaneously continuing to learn from the past, reconfiguring and opening the doors to new theories and approaches for the future. The Journal of Business Ethics, perhaps now more than ever, does not offer a unitary version of business ethics truth. The editorship, authors and reviewers are more distinctive in their perspectives than they have previously been. From my point of view, this diversity within business ethics—which remains a critical work in progress—is a success story in the making. In contrast to the all-white North American male authors in the first edition [with the exception of Deborah Poff's book review (1982)], every issue today tells an entirely different story, by diverse authors. Nevertheless, there remain a myriad of barriers to dismantle to enable more equal access to all in publishing. One enormous challenge in our field and something still to be seriously tackled is overcoming the hegemony of the English language in global public debate and scholarship.³ This remains a goal for the future.

While the highly selective list of business ethics scandals included earlier is a grim reminder of where things go wrong, we must also acknowledge positive developments in business, which business ethics scholarship at least runs alongside and may at times have directly or indirectly influenced. These days, it is a struggle to find a large multinational company that does not have a code of ethics, sustainability, social responsibility report or the like. Some countries are legislating for required reporting on corporate social responsibility, modern slavery, the gender pay gap or similar. The research showing how limited these reports are in value is rigorous, but I count it as a win that such reports exist, because they must represent some level of conversation and acknowledgment that business ethics is *relevant* to business practice. We are not yet in a 'post-codes of ethics' world, so they are still needed. There is also acceptance of looking beyond corporations—junior scholars particularly, it seems to me—are far less enthralled by multinational corporations than their senior colleagues. This bodes well for the future given the rich variety of business forms, not least micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, non-profits and informal businesses. The existence of legal forms for hybrid organisations which have an avowed commitment to

ethical, social or environmental goals alongside their commercial ones is also a success story.

Many of the commentaries in this special issue turn to the importance of being relevant to practice, and this is another area where future advances must be made—embracing practice as a necessary part of business ethics scholarship. JBE has a growing practice section and part of Ed Freeman's editorial legacy is the R. Edward Freeman Journal of Business Ethics Philosophy in Practice Best Paper Award. The literature on research impact is burgeoning, and much more needs to be understood about translating research to practice, and vice versa, and co-creating practical research and scholarly practice. Nevertheless, practice is now an accepted part of business ethics scholarship and that is a positive turn.

Theory, too, is primed to come of age. A pitifully narrow pool of theory has received a disproportionate amount of the attention in the past, and it is questionable how much can be gained from the oftentimes small incremental advances. You only have to look, to see a wealth of different theories enriching business ethics, often over a period of decades already, though there is much opportunity to develop this in the future. These include but are not limited to theories of ethics developed outside of Europe and North America, feminisms, postcolonial theory, indigenous theories, intersectionality, queer or critical disability theory. In addition, theories outside of business and ethics literatures continue to offer valuable new perspectives to our studies. Too few people are properly registering and engaging with the changing theoretical terrain, but it is highly valuable and there to learn from, elevating business ethics research to the next level.

To return to the starting point, we are not living through unprecedented times, and it is a tragedy that so many problems persist, and individuals suffer, disproportionately those who are already marginalised and disadvantaged. But for each generation, the business ethics challenges are felt anew, and the opportunity to do better than before must be realised. For the first forty years, the Journal of Business Ethics has been a small part of the journey of positive social, ethical and environmental change. There is no clear endpoint, but the more voices that constitute the dialogue, the better the quality of the conversation and the greater chance to be heard by each other and collectively. With the support of us all, the Journal of Business Ethics can continue to help shape a better world.

The Journal of Business Ethics is a huge collaborative project. The collective, mostly voluntary labour poured into it by so many people benefits the business ethics field and beyond. I want to record my thanks here to the past and present: visionary Editors-in-Chief; dedicated Section Editors; generous Editorial Board members; inspirational contributing and aspiring authors; supportive and diligent reviewers; professional administrative and managerial Springer staff

³ This is a phrase pertinently used by Charlotte Karam in a debate on academic journal publishing.

around the world; and to our fellow business ethics journals and business ethics societies.

In short, thank you to the many thousands of people who make up the *Journal of Business Ethics* and the yet more who constitute the wider business ethics community within which it proudly sits. It is my hope that the scholars of the future will benefit still further from this lively scholarly community and participate in the continued flourishing of business ethics research and practice.

References

- Babalola, M. T., Bal, M., Cho, C.H., Garcia-Lorenzo, L., Guedhami, O., Liang, H., Shailer, G., & van Gils, S. (2022). Bringing excitement to empirical business ethics research: Thoughts on the future of business ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05242-7>
- Böhm, S., Carrington, M., Cornelius, N., de Bruin, B., Greenwood, M., Hassan, L., Jain, T., Karam, C., Kourula, A., Romani, L., Riaz, S., & Shaw, D. (2022). Ethics at the centre of global and local challenges: Thoughts on the future of business ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05239-2>
- Brown, J. A., de Bakker, F. G. A., Bapuji, H., Higgins, C., Rehbein, K., & Spicer, A. (2022). Building on its past: The future of business and society scholarship. *Business & Society*, 61(5), 967–979.
- Burrell, G., Hyman, M., Michaelson, C., Nelson, J. A., Taylor, S., & West, A. (2022). The ethics and politics of academic knowledge production: Thoughts on the future of business ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05243-6>
- D’Cruz, P., Du, S., Noronha, E., Parboteeah, K.P., Trittin-Ulbrich, H., & Whelan, G. (2022). Technology, megatrends and work: Thoughts on the future of business ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05240-9>
- Dacin, M. T., Harrison, J. S., Hess, D., Killian, S., & Roloff, J. (2022). Business versus ethics? Thoughts on the future of business ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05241-8>
- De George, R. (1981). Ethical responsibilities of engineers in large organizations: The Pinto case. *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, 1(1), 1–14.
- Greenwood, M., & Freeman, R. E. (2017). Focusing on ethics and broadening our intellectual base. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 140, 1–3.
- Greenwood, M., & Freeman, R. E. (2018). Deepening ethical analysis in business ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 147, 1–4.
- Islam, G., & Greenwood, M. (2021). Reconnecting to the social in business ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 170, 1–4.
- Kaplan, S. (2020). Beyond the business case for social responsibility. *Academy of Management Discoveries*, 6, 1–4.
- Michalos, A. (1982). Editorial: Purpose and policy. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 1(1), 1.
- Poff, D. (1982). Book review: Is networking for you? A working woman’s alternative to the old boy system by Barbara Stern. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 1(1), 73–74.
- Spence, L. J. (1998). On effective interdisciplinary alliances in business ethics research: Discussion and illustration. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 17(9), 1029–1044.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.