Applied Ethics and tertiary education in South Africa: Teaching Business Ethics at the University of South Africa

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This article explores how Applied Ethics, especially Business Ethics, is taught at the University of South Africa (Unisa). This discussion refers to the content of a particular Unisa module, Theoretical and Applied Ethics, which serves as an introduction to Bio-medical Ethics, Business Ethics and Environmental Ethics. The fundamentals of this course are: defining ethics; providing methods for moral decision-making; describing the role of ethics in a particular field and addressing common dilemmas in a specific context. The intention is to empower students to identify issues they are likely to face in the workplace, and to grow in confidence in their ability to make sound moral decisions when required to do so. The aim of this article is to contribute to the ongoing discussion between tertiary institutions about how the teaching of Business Ethics can be promoted, how moral decision-making in the workplace can be encouraged and what role theological ethics can play in this regard.

Introduction

The collective term Applied Ethics usually refers to the perceived need to integrate theoretical and practical ethics (Beauchamp *et al.* 2014:1–35; Rossouw & Van Vuuren 2010:3–10, 99–137). Practitioners seek to apply ethical theories to particular life situations or problems. Critical reasoning and/or meta-ethical understandings are brought to bear on contemporary social problems and personal moral dilemmas:

> Applied ethics has to do with the interrelationship of morality with real-life issues, such as the environment, the family, the media, economics, health care, business management and the legal system. Ethics itself is concerned with the analysis and application of moral norms and values. What is right and beneficial for us and our society? What is truly valuable and worth having? (Ally *et al*. 2011:268)

However, as noted below when the Describe-Evaluate-Consult-and-Act (DECA) method is discussed, ethical decision-making should not simply be understood as a top-down process of applying ethical theory to moral problems in business. This conviction is based on the importance of theological praxis (the mutual interplay between theoretical formulation and practical experience) and is borne out by our experience of teaching ethics in tertiary educational institutions (Groome 1980:135–206). Once ethical theory and values are applied to real-life issues, resulting in decisions and actions, a bottom-up evaluation of this ethical theorising is also necessary. This evaluation includes individual moral convictions, communal insights and the lessons of moral experience and action. Both ethical theory and the insights arising from experience should be subject to critique and should be taken into account in the decision-making process (Kretzschmar 2011:68–72).

This article focuses on the teaching of Applied Ethics in fields such as Business Ethics, Medical Ethics, Environmental Ethics and Professional Ethics. As this is a relatively new field of study and teaching, academics from the philosophical, religious and theological disciplines within universities are often drawn upon to develop and assist in teaching courses to students or learners from other disciplines, such as Business Management, Medicine, Engineering or Accountancy. Increasingly, professional qualifications, such as for auditors and accountants who wish to register with the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA), include at least one module in Ethics as part of their Bachelor's degree.[1]

Furthermore, the many ethical problems currently being experienced in sectors such as government, medicine, banking, business and labour have evoked various responses. Legal prescriptions include the *Sarbanes-Oxley Act* of 2002 that was passed in the United States of America. Another response is that of the formulation of corporate governance codes or recommendations that now have to be studied and implemented in some countries. For example, the Cadbury Report, entitled *Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance*, was published in the

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1.See for instance the qualification criteria as set out by the following university programmes: University of the Witwatersrand (n.d.) and Stellenbosch University (n.d.).

United Kingdom in 1992 and the King Report on Corporate Governance was issued in South Africa (King I in 1994, King II in 2002 and King III in 2009). Especially within the economic sciences, where philosophical, moral, religious and social issues have often been ignored in the curriculum, there is now an urgent need to address a range of ethical issues. This article seeks to investigate how some academics have responded to this challenge and outlines the way in which Business Ethics is being taught in a particular module at the University of South Africa (Unisa). However, space does not permit a detailed discussion of the field of Business Ethics, nor a comparison of the various approaches adopted in the teaching of Applied Ethics worldwide.

The growth in courses in Business Ethics worldwide

The question can be asked: Why the worldwide growth in Business Ethics? Offering Business Ethics as a subject is not unique to Unisa. This trend has gained importance at tertiary institutions around the globe. This growth in interest stems from the perceived need for some form of education in Business Ethics to be part of the education of business people. The role that business plays in the world today has changed significantly; business is not limited to local or national commerce. With the rise of globalisation and the expansion of business across national and continental boundaries, the influence of business on different aspects of life has increased exponentially. Take, for instance, the role of business in democratic countries and its influence on shaping governmental policies and structures. In many countries, business has gained the power to influence political and economic policy, which has a direct bearing on the environment and on the lives of individuals, families and societies.

The impact of business on the environment is similarly striking. The devastating British Petroleum (BP) Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 raised renewed questions about the responsibility of business to ensure environmentally sustainable – and environment-friendly – business practices. The drop in share prices during and after the oil spill affected economies and lives around the world. In South Africa, examples such as the proposed hydraulic fracturing ('fracking') of shale deposits in the Karoo and acid mine drainage are raising similar questions (Durand 2012: 24–33; McCarthy 2011:1–7). Business is not simply about making money; it touches the environment, it affects communities and shapes people's lives. The ethical framework within which business has to operate is therefore of paramount importance (Rossouw & Van Vuuren 2010:31–38). The rise of Business Ethics as a course of academic study does not answer all the questions, but the deliberate attention given to both ethical theorising and practical application in such courses seeks to address this worldwide concern.

Only a few examples of courses offered in different parts of the world are mentioned below. Possibly the best known is that of the Harvard Business School (n.d.) in the United States of America. Courses in Business Ethics are also offered at the Centre for Business Ethics, hosted at Bentley University (n.d.) and the online course www.e-businessethics.com, which is offered by the Anderson School of Management, University of New Mexico (n.d.). These courses focus on the importance of business ethics in the workplace, whilst guiding students on how to develop and implement business ethics programmes at various organisational levels. Time will tell whether the teaching of courses such as these will have any significant effect – will people apply their knowledge of ethical theories to the workplace? And, if so, what impact will this focus on practical ethical issues arising from the workplace have on the formulation of ethical theory?

In Europe, many books on Business Ethics have been published over the years (e.g. Chryssides & Kaler 1993; Crane & Matten 2010; Connock & Johns 1995; Von Weltzien Hoivik 2002). Courses are offered at many institutions, for instance the University of Cambridge's (n.d.) Judge Business School and the Essex Business School at the University of Essex (n.d.). Using Crane and Matten's book (2010), *Business ethics: Managing corporate citizenship and sustainability in the age of globalisation*, the latter course offers an introduction to the theoretical concept of Business Ethics, particularly as it pertains to codes of conduct, ethics across cultures and the implications for ethical misconduct in the workplace. This course aims to empower students to study both the individual and social aspects of Business Ethics (University of Essex course n.d.).

Teaching Business Ethics at tertiary institutions in South Africa

South Africa, too, has seen an increase in the growth in the number of Business Ethics courses, especially at several universities. One good example is the Centre for African Ethics (established in 1998 as the Unilever Centre of Ethics), at the University of Natal (now the University of KwaZulu-Natal [UKZN]). The aim was to assist with the formation of '... ethical competence among the people, social structures and organisations' in South Africa (Burgmans 2004:6). This centre is located within the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics at UKZN. Stellenbosch University's Unit for Business Ethics and Public Integrity, located within the Centre for Applied Ethics in the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, predates the Unilever Centre by 8 years. The programme at this institution is focused on managerial-level Business Ethics. Its teaching and research specialise in '... the broad area of Business Ethics, corporate governance, professional ethics, leadership ethics, sustainability, and integrity management' (Centre for Applied Ethics n.d.). The Centre for Business and Professional Ethics at the University of Pretoria, established in 1997 under the umbrella of the Department of Philosophy, offers degree and short courses specifically aimed at those who are already active in business or who aim to enter the business world. These courses focus on practical ways of implementing codes of ethics and building a work environment with a moral frame of reference (University of Pretoria n.d.).

South Africa seems to be following the global trend of emphasising both ethical frameworks and theories, and the application of ethics in the business context. It is interesting to note that in South Africa this discipline is often located in the faculties of Arts and the Humanities, especially within the disciplines of religion, theology and/or philosophy. This has also been the case at Unisa. In the next section, we will provide the reader with a comprehensive overview of the module. We will also seek to address the common educational problem of how to encourage students to internalise and apply ethical theories and convictions, and not simply to regard the module as an exercise in theoretical study.

Teaching Business Ethics at the University of South Africa: Background information

In 2000, colleagues in the Department of Philosophy (located in Faculty of Arts, now called the College of Human Sciences [CHS]) decided to embark on the development of several modules in the field of Applied Ethics. The intention was to offer these modules across disciplines and faculties within the University. Key areas included legal, business, medical and environmental ethics. Dr Paul Voice was tasked with writing the study guides that would be used as teaching material for these new modules. However, the relatively small number of philosophers could not cope with all the work related to developing and teaching these modules. Pieter Coetzee approached colleagues in the then Faculty of Theology, especially from the discipline of Theological Ethics, to assist in the teaching of these modules. Worldwide, philosophers and/or theologians have often been approached to teach modules of this kind, necessitating not only the development of new modules, but intellectual engagement between colleagues influenced by many philosophical and/or religious approaches. At that stage, Business Ethics, Bio-medical Ethics, Environmental Ethics and Legal Ethics were offered as separate modules.

This raises the question of why the subject of Applied Ethics, especially the fast-growing field of Business Ethics, was not already offered by theological disciplines. A number of reasons can be cited. Firstly, Theological Ethics or Christian Ethics, and its various applications to Church and society, was then taught within the Faculty of Theology. This made it difficult administratively to offer new modules within degrees offered by other faculties. Secondly, within the Bachelor of Theology (BTh) degree, the stress on rationalisation on the part of the management of the University meant that few new modules could be designed or offered. Indeed, it was necessary to restructure the BTh degree and significantly reduce the number of modules traditionally offered by the seven theological disciplines: Old Testament, New Testament, Systematic Theology, Theological Ethics, Church History, Practical Theology and Missiology (Kritzinger & Kretzschmar 1999:240–257). At a time when disciplines needed to protect their academic interests in the face of increased rationalisation – which sought to reduce, even eliminate, modules with small numbers of registered students – multidisciplinary approaches and new modules were not encouraged . Thirdly, the predominant research focus within the discipline of Theological Ethics was on the many socio-political changes taking place within the country at that time. Nevertheless, certain members of the discipline of Theological Ethics, including Len Hulley (1998) and Louise Kretzschmar (2002), had published a limited number of articles and/or chapters in the ever-growing area of Business Ethics.

During the period from 2003 to 2004, the Faculty of Theology was dissolved into the College of Human Sciences. As a result, Theology lost its faculty status. Despite recommendations to this effect – in the light of the economic viability of the theological disciplines and the high research output of theologians – the management of the University declined to group the many theological disciplines within a School of the new College. This resulted in a marked degree of fragmentation and loss of academic and administrative coherence. Some degree of cooperation has been retained through personal relationships and the formation of ad hoc groups. For example, the BTh and BTh Honours task teams have dealt with matters such as curriculum changes and quality control. On a more positive note, cooperation with other disciplines, departments and colleges or faculties became much easier administratively.

Two other developments affected the interdisciplinary teaching of Applied Ethics. One was the drive to merge smaller departments. The management of the College of Human Sciences prevailed upon the discipline of Philosophy to join the then Department of Systematic Theology and Theological Ethics in 2010. In January 2012, the then Department of Practical Theology was instructed become the fourth discipline to join this Department due to the policies of centralisation and rationalising small departments within the College. A second was the new emphasis on multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary (MIT) teaching and research that had previously been discouraged.

How did all these degree and departmental structural changes affect the teaching of Applied Ethics? Following extensive discussions, the teaching of Legal Ethics was taken over by colleagues from the then Faculty of Law. When the various Applied Ethics modules were rewritten in 2007, they were incorporated into a composite module, entitled Theoretical and Applied Ethics (PLS2116). Students were required to choose one of three options: Bio-medical, Business or Environmental Ethics. Theologians and philosophers were involved in the development and delivery of the Business Ethics and Bio-medical Ethics options, whilst the Environmental Ethics option was offered by colleagues from the discipline of Philosophy. In late 2009 and early 2010, a further revision resulted in PLS2116 becoming PLS3701, still consisting of the three options: Bio-medical, Business and Environmental Ethics. The total number of students (for both semesters) who registered for this module was: 522 (2010), 950 (2011) and 793 (2012). Of these, approximately 50% to 70% completed the Business Ethics option.

A key factor in the teaching of Applied Ethics is that of disputed areas of tuition. Who is competent to teach Applied Ethics? In the case of Business Ethics, for instance, would it be experts in business, or experts in moral philosophy or moral theology? In this regard, a number of scenarios can be sketched. Firstly, academics from disciplines such as law, business or medicine could complete some studies in ethics and be regarded as moral experts within their own disciplines. At the other extreme, philosophers and/or theologians could teach the module on behalf of disciplines such as business management and accountancy. This second scenario was the case at Unisa for several years. The module was taught as an elective (optional) module on behalf of several departments within the College of Economic Sciences. A third scenario would be that of team-teaching, where academics from the relevant disciplines combine their practical and moral expertise to both write and teach the material together. We return to this point below when discussing a dialogical approach.

Recently, the College of Economic and Management Sciences (CEMS) instituted a new 'signature' module, entitled 'Greed and sustainability' (SUS1501). Initially, work on this module commenced without the involvement of the academic staff from the disciplines of Philosophy and Theological Ethics involved in the teaching of the Theoretical and Applied Ethics module. Following consultations, colleagues from these disciplines are now part of the process of delivering and revising this new module. It will be interesting to see what is achieved through this interdisciplinary co-operation.

The current Theoretical and Applied Ethics module (PLS3701): Themes covered in the Business Ethics option

Outline of the module

Unisa uses the open and distance learning (ODL) model. Customarily, Unisa requires that students master both a study guide (extensive written lecture notes in book form, published by Unisa Press) and a prescribed book, in this case *Business Ethics* (Rossouw & Van Vuuren 2010). This focus on study material remains current, although Unisa is increasingly adopting digital approaches and online methods in its tuition model. Information about other recommended books is supplied to students in a tutorial letter. Students' competence and ability to achieve the required outcomes of the module are tested in written assignments (cumulative assessment) and examinations (summative assessment). Students are required to: demonstrate an understanding of the key concepts, problems, theories and arguments; demonstrate the competence to analyse and evaluate complex normative arguments; and develop a critical ethical attitude to assess others' ethical choices as well as their own ethical position.

The main subheadings or themes covered in the guide are outlined in Figure 1 (Ally *et al.* 2011:191).
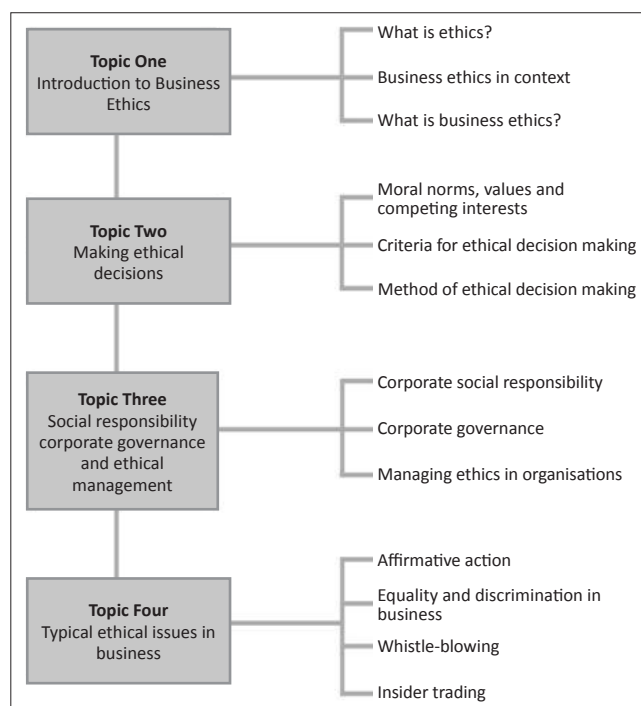
Source: Ally, M., Bentley, W., Cloete, M., Kretzschmar, L., Olivier, D. & Van der Berg, E., 2011, *Theoretical and Applied Ethics: Only study guide for PLS3701*, University of South Africa, Pretoria, p. 191

FIGURE 1: Outline of the Business Ethics module.

Over the years, the study guide has been edited and revised several times, by a number of people. Revisions were initially effected to the Business Ethics section by Kretzschmar and Painter-Morland, and more recently, by Kretzschmar and Bentley (from the discipline of Theological Ethics) and Ally (from the discipline of Philosophy). Revisions by the theologians focused on several matters, including: content; making the text more readable and accessible, given that the students would be drawn mainly from the economic sciences; providing additional examples of the link between ethics and business; referring to the global and local context within which business is pursued; the importance of moral character and community; and the inclusion of a number of illustrative diagrams, charts, tables, cartoons and newspaper reports within the text. Finally, more attention was given to methods of decision-making, and a revised version of a method used in the undergraduate teaching of the introductory model in Theological Ethics (CMM1501) was added to the study guide and variously applied by the different writers.

It is our view that in any future revision, more time needs to be granted to the various authors to produce a comprehensive rewrite which capitalises on the value of the insights of different authors, without students being confused by a variety of writing styles and approaches. By focussing on some of the more recent challenges within the broader social, economic and environmental context, both locally and globally, a text that is even more informative and challenging could be produced. Additional Business Ethics issues could be raised, such as the relationship between business and government (with specific reference to tendering and nepotism), the growing wage disparities

between the workforce and management, the 'greening' of business, and the moral accountability of role players in business, government, labour and the trade unions. A revised text could further make more use of narrative and example, and supply appropriate graphics to evoke not merely the rational aspects of the students' consciousness, but also their moral imagination, will and agency. If this could be done in consultation with some of the academics who teach in the different disciplines within CEMS, it would be a huge advantage. Further recommendations are noted below.

The four topics and the Describe-Evaluate-Consult-and-Act method

As in the schematic representation Figure 1, the Business Ethics section of the module focuses on the following four topics.

Introduction to Business Ethics

Ethics – and Business Ethics – is a very broad field, and it is not possible to deal with it fully in a semester that effectively includes less than 3 months of teaching time. The first topic therefore provides only a basic introduction to the field of Business Ethics. Ethics is defined, with specific guidance provided on what constitutes a moral problem. Business Ethics is then located in three tiers of business, namely the macro-level, meso-level and micro-level of business practice. As a unifying platform, the concept of the triple bottom line, referring to the economic, social and environmental bottom lines, is used to explain the wide range of Business Ethics. This threefold emphasis is sometimes referred to as profit, people and planet.

It is suggested that business at all levels has certain underlying moral responsibilities. Firstly, in their endeavours, members of the business community need to ensure that the business is financially viable, so that it gives financial security to those who depend on the business for their wellbeing. Secondly, business carries a responsibility towards the community in which it operates. This social responsibility means that besides providing employment, business also needs to be aware that its activities should contribute toward the building of community, and in no way jeopardise the wellbeing of the community. Thirdly, by accepting their responsibility towards the natural environment, business people can prevent the exploitation of nature and its resources and promote environmental wellbeing.

Making ethical decisions

The second topic in this Business Ethics module focuses on the ability to make moral decisions when faced with ethical problems or dilemmas (cf. Ahner 2007:128–152). Students are introduced to a model or framework which can be applied to resolve moral problems. The framework was developed at Unisa and is called the DECA method. The DECA method is an adaptation of the See-Judge-Act approach to moral decision-making (Ally *et al.* 2011:272), which encourages the student to apply ethical theories to practical business

problems and also to reflect on previous decisions and actions (Kretzschmar, Bentley & Van Niekerk 2009:83–96). The DECA steps are outlined below.

Describe: The first step is to describe the ethical problem or dilemma. (The differences between a general moral problem and a specific moral dilemma – and the complexities of the meanings attached to the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' – are not discussed in detail.) The student is encouraged to view the problem as objectively as possible. By taking a step back, describing the dilemma and naming the different options available, the student takes the initial steps towards identifying the nature of the dilemma. They may thereby already start formulating an understanding of what the best possible response may be.

Evaluate: The second step for the student is to evaluate the ethical problem and possible solutions that were introduced in the first step. The student does this by applying three different ethical criteria – deontology, teleology and virtue ethics – to the ethical problem that has been identified. All three of these traditional approaches to ethical decision-making are used to introduce students to their important insights and to encourage the questioning of a narrowly pragmatic and consequentialist 'win-win' approach.

By using the deontological approach, the focus is on whether the proposed solution can be considered to be right in terms of laws, codes, moral norms and values (principles). For example, if the learner is faced with a situation where a family member submits a tender for a specific project to be undertaken by the company the student is working for, the student will be guided by civil laws regarding nepotism, the processes required for ethical tender practices, and corporate codes of conduct. At a deeper level, the importance of the criteria of moral norms (obligations) and values is emphasised.

The student further evaluates the problem using teleological criteria. Here the key question is not simply: How can I benefit? but rather: Are the consequences and goals or the proposed solution morally good? Based on the above example, the student can deduce that although their family member may benefit financially in the short term from tender abuse, contravening the guidelines directing tenders as set out in civil and company law exposes the family member to disciplinary action with the possibility of being dismissed and/or charged with fraud. This assumes that proper accountability procedures are in place and are being implemented. The outcome of this line of action will thus not be morally beneficial. Furthermore, the long-term effects of tender fraud are practically and morally extremely negative for the communities and societies where it is practised. In short, unethical practices do not contribute to the common good or stable societies.

The student also evaluates moral problems and proposed solutions in light of virtue ethics. The question that needs to be asked is: Would a good person do this? This is perhaps

the most difficult part of the evaluation process, as our understanding of personal virtue is often subjective, amongst other things shaped by upbringing, religious association, culture and the personal adoption of specific norms and values. Integrity, fairness and responsibility are some of the key virtues that need to be rooted in personal character for this third form of the ethical criteria to be practically applied. It would therefore be prudent for the learner to know and understand the importance of virtue ethics and how it can aid them in ethical decision-making. The ongoing formation of character and the application of moral courage are essential if moral competence (personal behaviour and ethical leadership) is to be developed.

Consult: The third step in the decision-making process is to consult. 'This step is important because no one person has all the answers' (Ally *et al.* 2010:272). Even if the student is under the impression that they are able to make a moral decision with regard to the dilemma they are facing, it is always better to obtain another perspective. This may take the form of advice from an appropriate superior, colleague, or friend. If the person has particular religious convictions, seeking guidance from spiritual leaders and meditation or prayer is also relevant. Discussing the options available with another person will assist the learner to make sure that they have not missed anything in the process of moral decision-making, and to ensure that their conclusions are not overly influenced by personal biases or self-interest. Through the process of consultation, students will ensure that they have not only thought through the problem, but also that they are willing to ensure that their decision is affirmed by others who may approach the problem from a different perspective. This step therefore includes the important element of communal wisdom.

Act: Once the consultation process is complete, the student is encouraged to implement their decision in practice. This forms the last step, namely to act. The learner is now ready to engage the issue with confidence, if seeking to act in a morally defensible manner.

As mentioned earlier, the DECA method is not simply the 'application' of theory to practical issues. Nor does the use of this method mean that all problems can be solved entirely at this point. Responding to an ethical dilemma may raise new questions, which will lead the student to invoke the process again.

Summary: As indicated below, the model assumes that decision-making is an ongoing process. Decisions and actions can be reviewed and revisited by starting again with a more accurate description of the problem. This means that the process is both deductive (implementing the practical implications of the ethical evaluation) and inductive (reviewing one's understanding of the various ethical criteria on the basis of the experience gathered in the process of consulting and acting).

Figure 2 is a schematic representation of the DECA decision-making method, as provided in the study material (Ally *et al.* 2011:65).
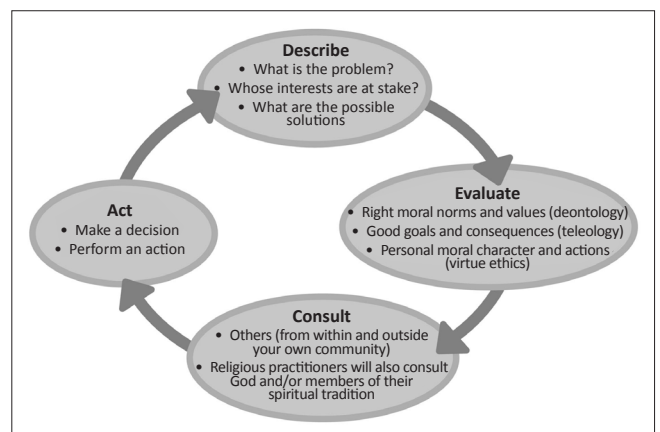
Source: Ally, M., Bentley, W., Cloete, M., Kretzschmar, L., Olivier, D. & Van der Berg, E., 2011, *Theoretical and Applied Ethics: Only study guide for PLS3701*, University of South Africa, Pretoria, p. 65

FIGURE 2: The Describe-Evaluate-Consult-and-Act decision-making method.

Social responsibility, corporate governance and ethical management

The third topic of the Business Ethics course focuses on the social responsibility of business, corporate governance and ethical management. In this section of the course, accountability takes centre stage. It should be noted here that according to the structure of the module, it is argued that personal moral competence (in the form of knowledge, skill, commitment and character) should both precede and follow organisational moral accountability. Moral individuals in management can certainly influence the moral ethos and activities of a business. In terms of social and environmental accountability, it is important that business decisions are seen to be accountable in terms of both internal processes and external expectations. This section is mostly theoretical, with the aim of helping the learner understand that forming part of, or owning, a business does not lend itself to individual or corporate freedoms without moral responsibility and accountability. Being in business means that one has to focus on and factor in methods that will ensure accountability and the ongoing moral operations of one's business enterprise.

Typical ethical issues in business

The fourth topic of the module focuses on the practical application of the DECA method to common business problems. The moral issues originally chosen for this course were: affirmative action, equality and discrimination, whistle blowing and insider trading. In each discussion, the terms are defined and then discussed with reference to the DECA method. The aim is for the students to gain a good understanding of how to identify a dilemma – however complex it may be – and to understand and apply the DECA method. When students are faced with their own dilemmas in business, this method should come to the fore naturally, as a tool to resolve moral problems.

The overall aim of teaching Business Ethics in this way is to strike a balance between the students' gaining theoretical knowledge and adopting practical decision-making and reflective tools that will assist them in the workplace.

Philosophical and theological approaches to teaching Business Ethics

We have already noted the complexities of content and approach in teaching Business Ethics in various contexts. We will now discuss two possible approaches to teaching Applied Ethics: the descriptive and the normative. Normative approaches can stress the law, codes of conduct and/or more broadly based moral norms and values (Moon & Bonny 2001:22–37). A principle-based, dialogical approach, in which more than one ethical value system is discussed, is advocated.

Descriptive approach

A descriptive approach to Business Ethics is one in which the ethical teachings or actions of particular individuals or groups are outlined, but not evaluated. It seeks to identify and explain ethical worldviews, moral norms and values and resultant actions as accurately as possible. It thus amounts to a form of value clarification. Usually, the aim is to withhold an evaluative assessment of the phenomena being discussed. The advantage of this approach is that it seeks to provide important, accurate information and promotes greater understanding of a range of ethical worldviews in a non-judgemental manner.

This approach also has its weaknesses. Firstly, no completely objective approach is possible. The moral views of a lecturer or writer will intrude in the selection and ordering of data, and in comments about the various teachings and practices. These may not always be obvious to a student who is not well versed in moral philosophy and theological or religious ethics, but others in the field will easily detect such assumptions and preferences.

Secondly, a purely descriptive approach avoids questions of meta-ethics and decision-making. Because it seeks to be non-evaluative, it does not enter into a debate about what can be regarded as good, right, or wise action with respect to life in general or a particular business issue. Within the field of Applied Ethics, this is not helpful. What is required is moral clarity and guidance as to what decisions and actions are morally correct or, at least, morally defensible. Furthermore, because of the pluralistic nature of contemporary South African society, we are faced with a conflict of ethical norms and values. Moral education therefore requires that students be equipped to understand and evaluate the different moral (and immoral) approaches that they will come across in their studies and workplaces. Different approaches to ethics, for instance, the religious ethics of Muslims or Hindus, or a secular ethic, need to be elucidated and evaluated in order to advance moral understanding, critical thinking and moral competence.

Normative approaches – compliance and principle-based

An emphasis on legal prescriptions, for example against theft, insider trading and corruption, is an important normative element, because the proliferation of illegal actions is highly detrimental to individuals, business and society. However, this emphasis alone is insufficient, as it is a somewhat narrow understanding of a normative approach, and it further avoids the necessary questioning of whether a law is moral. Similarly, an emphasis on obeying company codes of conduct, whilst important as a guide to professional conduct, is also limited, since it is based on a compliance model. Codes cannot cover every circumstance, nor can they prevent immoral actions on the part of determined individuals. Finally, these laws and codes need to be implemented, not merely discussed.

For a normative ethic to be effective, these civil laws and business codes of conduct need to be complemented, or better still proceeded by personal and communal adherence to moral principles – norms and values. A normative approach is preferable to a descriptive one, because it seeks to assess the value of the attitudes or actions of individuals and communities, and commends certain of these as being right and good. It is normative because it places a value – positive or negative – on particular practices, and it attempts to ground these assessments on ethical norms and/or values.

Because ethical decisions and actions are required in a business setting, evaluative judgements need to be made. Unfortunately, the word 'judgement' is all too often thought to be necessarily 'judgemental', in the same way that dogma (teaching) is associated in the minds of many with 'dogmatism'. However, in our view, there is a space for ethical dialogue between the extremes of relativism, which denies the existence of universal values, and a narrow, uninformed 'judgementalism'. It is necessary for any student or practitioner of ethics to consider which ethical (or unethical) norms and values they subscribe to, why they do so, and whether their approach can be defended on generally acceptable ethical grounds. This leads to the question of whether there are any generally accepted ethical norms. Prozesky (2007), for example, argues for a 'global ethic of well-being' that is drawn from a wide range of moral sources. Kretzschmar (2008, 2010) has pointed out both the similarities and key differences between Christian, African, Western and secular ethics and spirituality. In other words, the difficulty with the normative approach is to determine which norms and values are to be upheld, and to ask from whence these norms are derived. As already alluded to above, this becomes a complex process in a pluralistic context, since individuals derive their norms and values from different sources. Exposure to this debate or dialogue is nevertheless an essential aspect of the study of Applied Ethics.

What contribution, then, can Philosophical and/or Theological or Religious Ethics make to the teaching of

Applied Ethics? Briefly, three arguments can be advanced. Firstly, as ethical worldviews and convictions, whether religious or secular, certainly influence attitudes and actions in the workplace, it is best that these be placed on the agenda rather than operating surreptitiously.

Secondly, by addressing the issue of whether a particular religious tradition or secular ethic can make a critical and constructive contribution to Applied Ethics, individuals can be motivated to act as responsible citizens and members of a business community. If one is speaking or writing within a particular tradition, the process of arriving at commonly agreed upon norms is easier. Thus, the book by Childs (1995), entitled *Ethics in business: Faith at work*, and a recent article by Fourie (2012:46–60) are written from the perspective of Christian Ethics. Books and articles like these are a valuable source for members of this tradition or those who operate in social contexts where a significant number of Christians are present.

Thirdly, philosophical and religious perspectives remain relevant to a wider, more pluralistic context. For instance, Stackhouse, McCann and Roels (1995) supply a broad range of religious, philosophical and contemporary sources to promote ethics in business. Shutte (2001) undertakes a detailed discussion of the value of Ubuntu in a South Africa context and Schweiker (2005) addresses the nature and importance of religious ethics for society.

If one is teaching at a state university, with colleagues and students who adhere to different philosophical and/ or religious traditions, drawing from only one source or tradition is inappropriate. Therefore, in the PLS3701 study guide, the sources of several different norms and values, including family, culture, different religions, the media, education and philosophical reasoning, are noted. Students may be adherents of: a particular religious tradition (e.g. Christianity or Hinduism), a particular philosophical system (e.g. that of Aristotle, Kant, Adam Smith or Karl Marx) or an ideological position (e.g. capitalism or black consciousness). To advance their education, they need to be introduced to a range of perspectives so as to better understand their own worldviews and those of others, rather than making decisions on the basis of a superficial understanding or an invalid prejudice.

We therefore advocate a dialogical approach that seeks to understand different moral value systems and the contexts in which they developed. In such an approach, elements of different value systems can be compared, and similarities and differences noted. Further, such an approach asks why individuals or groups are committed to particular value systems. Meta-ethical questions such as: 'Why ought people, society and the natural world to be valued at all?' and: 'Why ought morality and business to be integrated?' are addressed in Philosophical and Theological or Religious Ethics (Kretzschmar 2012:27–68). This approach encourages students to participate actively in the process of evaluating

which particular value system may be preferable and why, and it highlights the connection between morality and economics. This dialogical discussion is not taken very far in the PLS3701 module, given the limitations of an introductory module. However, as noted throughout this article, students are challenged to reflect on what they consider to be right, good and wise, and whether these beliefs issue in actual ethical decisions and actions.

Conclusion

This article notes the wider context in which Applied and especially Business Ethics is taught elsewhere in the world and in South Africa. It outlines the key features of the Theoretical and Applied Ethics module currently in use at Unisa. It argues that teaching Business Ethics introduces students to some of the main features of what constitutes a moral life and a professional ethic. Finally, it argues that Philosophical and Religious Ethics play a vital role in introducing students to essential meta-ethical issues, the importance of an internalised morality and the practicalities of ethical decision-making and life in a business context.

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Authors' contributions

L.K. (University of South Africa) was the project leader of this research article and serves as the Head of Discipline for Theological Ethics in the Department of Philosophy, Systematic Theology and Practical Theology. W.B. (University of South Africa) served as a part-time lecturer in the same department in the field of ethics and assisted L.K. (and others) in the writing of study material. They jointly wrote this article, based on a paper they presented on the topic at the Joint Conference for Theological Societies held in Pietermaritzburg, 2012.

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