

Ethical aspects of entrepreneurship

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Ethics is one of the features of contemporary civilization. It is widely discussed and elaborated upon; it may even be taught or otherwise introduced into one's life. One of the areas where ethics has become increasingly important is economic activity or, in broader terms, business. Business activity is the domain of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs). It brings about an array of both economic and social benefits. Such activity is performed by persons who differ in many respects (e. g. in terms of age, education, social background, etc.) and whose key purpose is earning profit. Thus, a two-part question presents itself: can an entrepreneur, a businessman, be an ethical person? Is there any room for ethics in their activity? The aim that the researchers have set themselves is to answer the question of whether it is possible to discuss the ethics of the profession of an entrepreneur.

The present article constitutes an attempt at entering into a discussion on the place of ethics in business activity. Deliberations based on a review of literature concerning ethics and entrepreneurship lead to a single conclusion – entrepreneur ethics should be discussed and potential future entrepreneurs should be taught ethical conduct.

Key words: ethics, entrepreneurship, codes of ethics

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have been witnesses to a new phenomenon occurring in the labor market of many countries. The phenomenon, named the SME (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises) effect, can be defined as every manifestation of business activity or every entrepreneurial attitude objectively manifested in a number of newly formed firms in the sector of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. This definition implies that due to the role of promoting self-employment, the SME effect might be an important solution (e. g. creating new jobs) for national economies.

We should note that business activity is also a very important social phenomenon. It supports individuals in their private and social lives and provides individuals with an opportunity for a career. It is a basis for more specific skills and knowledge possessed by individuals carrying out social or commercial undertakings (Dimitriadis 2008). Finally, it is particularly important for minority groups who remain outside the labor market (Dimitriadis 2008).

It is widely recognized that entrepreneurship constitutes an engine of economic growth in the developed and developing countries (Audretsch et al. 2006; Koellinger, Thurik 2012; Van Praag, Versloot 2007; Van Stel et al. 2005), as well as being a remedy against unemployment and a measure for the generation of employment (Ayyagari et al. 2011; Hart & Oulton 2001; Thurik 2003; Shane, Venkataraman 2000; Kuratko 2005).

Entrepreneurship also contributes to the improvement of living standards in a country: it secures social unity, prevents social marginalization (Dimitriadis 2008; Gruszecki 1994), and contributes to the creation of new technologies, products, and services. Furthermore, entrepreneurship changes and revives market competition, which in turn results in fundamental changes within an enterprise (Brzeziński 2007).

Business activity is undertaken by persons of various ages, education, and social or professional backgrounds. Therefore, their hierarchy of values is different; they represent various ethical standards (Bauman 1996).

The issue of entrepreneur ethics is extremely important, chiefly because it is entrepreneurs who form the managerial staff in SMEs and, as such, who manage people / employees, finances, and relationships between the remaining stakeholders. The entrepreneurs are the ones forming the so-called small business: they have a major influence over the reputation of SMEs and the profession of the entrepreneurs, and they shape the working comfort of the people employed in such businesses.

The aim of the following paper is to answer the question of whether it is possible to discuss the professional ethics of an entrepreneur or businessman.

ETHICS AND THE KANTIAN THEORY IN BUSINESS ETHICS

Generally speaking, although an ancient term “ethics” represents an extensive field of philosophy dealing with what is morally right or wrong, applying the one, homogenous definition of ethics seems to be a little reductionist or even impracticable approach. For instance, Husserl in his initial approach to ethics (when he criticized Kant’s separation of sensibility and reason) aimed for [“...a scientific ethics, which should provide evidence concerning the whole issue of ethics (formal and material), by established phenomenological means”] (Loidolt 2009). In turn, Geniussas (2009) asserted that in Heidegger’s ethical incongruity (anti- and ante-ethical tendencies) presented in *Being and Time* it might be discerned treating ethics as the second philosophy rooted in fundamental ontology.

Recently, a new meaning of ethics is observed and ethics with its modern branches (e. g. business ethics) are becoming one of the features of contemporary civilization.

Business ethics are relatively a new branch of ethics, but its assumptions are deeply rooted in deontological Kant’s ethics. With regard to entrepreneurship, the contribution of Kant’s ethics is invaluable because of: 1) treating business structures as human organizations, 2) safeguarding the interest of stakeholders by defending the “respect for persons” principle; 3) providing business ethics with tests to evaluate if the principles upon which an action is based are morally permissible. In other words, in business the Kant’s categorical imperative becomes a principle of fair play (Bowie 2002).

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BUSINESS ETHICS AND ENTREPRENEUR ETHICS

In publications concerning business ethics, it is often assumed that running a business is a profession and thus entrepreneur ethics are treated as professional ethics. Professional ethics may be defined as reflections on ethics encompassing the values and principles mapping out the behavior of people practicing a given profession. Professional ethics are thus a type of special ethics (applied ethics) as they are concerned with the rules of behavior in situations typical for persons practicing a certain profession (Karczewski 2004). The terms “special ethics” and “applied ethics” are used interchangeably and have the same meaning in this paper. One must bear in mind, though, that there is no precise distinction between special and general ethics accepted by everyone, and general ethics is occasionally also concerned with special cases (such as lying, murder, particular ethical virtues, etc.). We understand special ethics to be those types of ethical reflections that are not possible without reference to special empirical knowledge (e. g. knowledge of the particularity of a given profession). Professional ethics is not independent from general ethics, meaning that its claims may not come into conflict with the claims of general ethics (i. e. claims referring to activity as such). It should be stressed that the claim that professional ethics remains in accordance with general ethics does not entitle one to a presumption that there is a single theory of ethics accepted by everyone. This claim means only that if one wishes to exercise professional ethics (or any other special ethics), a certain ethical theory (of general ethics) must be previously accepted and, furthermore, an obvious claim that the assumptions of special ethics are not in opposition to this general theory must also be accepted (Ślipko 2005).

Such an approach does not seem justified though because business includes more than one type of activity and thus eludes precise definition. Although one might state that business ethics is the ethics of an entrepreneur (i. e. a person who is the owner of an enterprise and who manages this business), such a claim would exclude from the scope of business ethics the activity of enterprises that do not have a personal owner (e. g. state or joint-stock companies).

Another argument against treating business ethics as the ethics of the profession of an entrepreneur is that such ethics does not really formulate rules governing conflicts occurring in this profession as it is either concerned with other professions connected with the functioning of companies (e. g. managers) or defines general conditions that companies have the right to expect their society to meet. The second problem seems especially significant as to specify such conditions, ethical reflections may not be concerned with the activity of single companies, much less the practice of an entrepreneur, but must rather be based on a higher level of generality, making the whole economic and social system a matter of deliberation (Łyko 2006).

Some authors (Ryan, Sójka 1997; Gasparski 2003; Jedynak 1987) claim that only general ethical reflections of this type may lead to interesting conclusions. This view does not, however, seem obvious because the operation of an economic system is based on particular ethical and philosophical assumptions that are usually perceived to be obvious but may also turn out to be a source of ethical conflicts in conducting business activity.

ETHICAL ASPECTS OF BUSINESS ACTIVITY

In the literature, business activity is defined in various ways. For instance, according to Drucker's (1999) definition, business activity is a feature and behavior of an entrepreneur or enterprise, characterized by readiness and an aptitude for making decisions and solving new problems in a creative way. Business activity is also recognized as the process of creating something new and valuable through substantial time and effort, and it is accompanied by

anticipated reward and financial, mental, and social risk (Hisrich, Peters, Shepherd 2005). Business activity is also associated with the following features: an innovative approach, creativity, and an aptitude for taking risks (Dimitriadis 2008; Drucker 1999).

However, the most popular understanding of entrepreneurship treats it as an activity aimed first and foremost at generating profit. Thus, historically speaking, philosophical reflections on the ethical decency of growing rich may be considered to underlie business ethics. In contemporary literature on business ethics, the issue of the moral evaluation of work whose sole purpose is accumulating wealth is considerably thinly covered. This is because ethicists are quite in accordance with the following statement: work motivated by the need for profit is not considered to be morally wrong. "Business ethics" – as Robert C. Solomon puts it – "which at the beginning used to be merely an attack on capitalism and "the motive of profit" is now concerned with constructive study of the basic rights and manners of conduct" (Salomon 2002: 403).

Therefore, in business ethics, there is a view held that work leading to profit does not stand in opposition to human dignity. This belief is not, however, an outcome of contemporary ethical thought; it was already shaped in the period of the reformation, where for many centuries people had previously believed that working exclusively for the purpose of earning profit (e. g. engaging in trade) was dishonourable. T. Płuzański (1995), among others, has focused his attention on this point. According to Płuzański, since the end of the Middle Ages (the moment when the deeply rooted religious ideas about the place, role, and purpose of human existence declined), pursuing the goal of growing rich has become a common and widely accepted lifestyle. "Sublime ideas of Renaissance" – as the author puts it – "demanding the human rights to be acknowledged, appreciation of people's work and creative effort <...> – everything that was new western cultural content has been offered realistic supplementation in practice and socio-economic philosophy bluntly advocating common spread accumulation of wealth at all costs <...>" (Płuzański 1995: 195).

Even though Płuzański does not offer examples of philosophical theories that would propagate the cult of growing rich at any price, one might surmise that such socio-economic philosophies are, among others, the views of A. Smith and his successors. Not only did the philosopher believe that there was nothing wrong in accumulating wealth, he also believed that the sole act of striving for wealth led to unexpected and unpredictable but positive consequences for the whole society. "By pursuing his own interest" – as Smith put it – "he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it" (Friedman 1982: 128).

Currently, economists and ethicists also accept the view that growing rich is, in principle, morally correct behavior. Nevertheless, it is hard to accept a claim that it is absolutely decent, irrespective of the situation and regardless of the needs of others. The existence of exceptions to the rule of enrichment is a consequence of the fact that accumulating wealth (or, using the language of contemporary economists, generating profit) is a type of activity that often negatively affects other people. Although many authors stress that there is no conflict between the principle of the maximization of profit and ethical standards, such a conviction has been relevant for the economic and social reality of only the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. If we do not notice the negative consequences today, it is only because the principle of striving for profit at all costs has been severely limited. Although the principle of the maximization of profit had been pursued without any limits until the beginning of the 1930s (i. e. until the so-called Great Depression) and had been condemning millions

of labourers to live in destitute conditions, the owners of capital have now been forced to share part of the profit with those who generate the said profit. The mechanisms for the protection of employees, introduced in the thirties against exploitation by employers, were initially based on the fears of a recurrence of the crisis and a communist revolution that might have broken out in western countries. However, the rules underlying those mechanisms were, in essence, ethical principles (e. g. the rule requiring decent pay for performed work). The “social benefits” that employees obtained in the 20th century may be treated as an attempt to solve the conflict between the maximization of profit and the social costs emerging as a result of pursuing this principle.

It is also worth noting that the principle of growing rich is not usually treated as an ethical standard, though nothing stands in the way of deeming it to be such. In fact, at least two arguments may be presented that support the claim that a principle advocating that it is our moral duty to generate profit may be considered an ethical rule. Such a solution is, first of all, advocated by our lifestyle, which is possible only due to the development of the economy. If we attach value not to our existence itself but to a certain lifestyle, then the principle of accumulating wealth as a condition for respecting this value essentially becomes an ethical principle.

The second argument refers to the meanings assigned to work and wealth. In Protestant and Confucian societies, work is not treated exclusively as a means of satisfying certain needs but also as a purpose in itself and, thus, as an ethical value. This does not mean that there is a moral obligation to grow rich in those societies. However, if work itself is a purpose, the notion of profit acquires a new meaning: profit becomes not merely a prize but also an external expression, a sign testifying to the ability of serving the value in question.

On the other hand, many entrepreneurs who have achieved financial success claim that the sole need for growing rich would not be enough motivation for them to act.

In the literature numerous motives to start a business have been listed, e. g. creativity, willingness to attempt to be one's own boss or a desire to earn a high wage (Bernat et al. 2008; Czyżewska et al. 2009) and “need for achievement” (McClelland 1961). Moreover, motivation to achieve goals was found to be positively related to the entrepreneurial spirit (Collins et al. 2004).

These authors link striving for profit to the need for creation, obtaining new purposes, and the development of one's own company. This attests to the fact that even if we treat entrepreneur ethics as professional ethics, it would be difficult to deem the requirement of profit as a principle of this ethics. This view would be hard to justify both at an individual level (e. g. in accordance with a deduction: “because wealth being the property of an individual is a value in an ethical sense, the requirement of enrichment is an ethical principle”) and at the level of a system (“because enrichment being a social value is a value in an ethical sense, the obligation of a society is to create organizations and procedures that allow and initiate this type of activity”) (Ossowska 1985). At the most, one could formulate a certain forecast concerning the evolution of morality and ethics in the future, predicting that economic consciousness will increase in the future and the principle requiring one to multiply riches (i. e. develop in economic terms) will be accepted as a type of a moral standard.

Therefore, due to a limited scope of applicability of the principle of maximization of profit, one of the main notions in business ethics is the notion of freedom. The principle of freedom in business is not the same as the principle of the maximization of profit as it is related, first and foremost, to measures serving to generate profit. Moreover, it would be nonsensical to think of these two principles as being identical as that would mean that there

is freedom of choice in business as far as purpose of action is concerned but that the purpose is always profit. Undertakings fulfilling different purposes (e. g. charity-related ones) are not considered to be business activity in either economics or business ethics.

The free market (i. e. a market characterized by freedom) is sometimes treated not only as a necessary condition for the operation of the economy but as the downright basis of contemporary democratic systems (Kallera, Kondratowicz 2007). At the same time, market freedom is sometimes understood not only as absolute freedom to do anything that does not harm anyone but also as freedom to compete. Although, in a sense, competing is harmful to some market participants (i. e. the ones who are left behind by competition), the very possibility for entities to mutually limit one another is believed to be the morally correct basis of a free market. Competition is not always the only type of correlation between companies offering the same type of product. Such absolute competition excluding any possibility of cooperation would, as a matter of fact, be harmful: "Too much competition and not enough cooperation" – as G. Soros puts it – "may cause unacceptable injustice and instability" (Kołodko 1999: 133).

Is this stand, however, completely legitimate? It seems that it is legitimate in only a general sense as a claim that democracy or at least liberal democracy – a system ensuring a maximum scope of individual freedoms – may not function without a free market, which, in turn, does not exist without entities operating in it enjoying the possibility of entering into free competition with one another. On the other hand, it is obvious that freedom of competition has certain limitations because it is unacceptable to adopt unethical methods of elimination of competing economic entities, such as physical assault (property damage, arson, various forms of sabotage), blackmail, lying, etc.

Another argument is the claim that business entities cannot confine themselves to solely earning profit because they exist in a certain social environment that ensures safe conditions in which they can develop. This is the reason (based on the principle of mutuality) that companies are morally obliged to assume the so-called social responsibility of business (i. e. to act in favour of the general welfare). Seemingly simple actions intended to achieve someone's well-being in some area may in consequence lead to negative effects in other areas, which altogether may be far greater than the initial benefits. The second reason for the existence of such an obligation is the fact that companies can cause certain harms to their physical and social environment: pollute the natural environment, contribute to the discrimination of certain social groups through the adoption of some types of criteria for the recruitment of employees and not others, generate social costs connected with accidents in the workplace, etc. As far as entrepreneur ethics are concerned, it is believed that certain obligations toward the social environment are imposed on companies for this reason as well. However, such a view has had some criticism. According to Friedman (1993), business activity already exerts a far too significant influence on social reality and there is no reason for it to grow bigger as a result of encouraging enterprises to engage in social participation.

Until now, the obligation to limit profit on account of some other values, which is imposed on business activity, has been under discussion. However, one might also ask about the companies' right to take ethical action at the expense of profit. Does a company giving up a certain amount of profit for ethical reasons act ethically or quite the opposite? The question is fairly simple if a company gives up only part of its profit, but enterprises are frequently faced with a choice between ethical conduct and giving up their entire profit or even suffering financial loss. It seems that one may not ask companies going through a crisis to also take action in favour of the general welfare.

Although limitations to the principle of accumulating wealth appear to be a fundamental problem as far as entrepreneur ethics is concerned, in reality the issue is present in so many different contexts that general solutions concerning this principle are insufficient. Therefore, entrepreneur ethics encourages reflection on many special problems. It undertakes reinterpretation of some terms and ethical standards, especially the ones that are considered widely applicable and included in the so-called general ethics. As far as business activity is concerned, such standards may not be treated literally because such activity is based on certain rules of which the participants in the business are perfectly aware. The most typical example of such a rule is the moral obligation not to lie. Lying is perceived to be a moral evil in any circumstance (i. e. each lie is treated as evil), and thus some types of business activity or some actions that require a person to lie are treated as ethically suspicious.

The problems that business ethics are interested in may be divided according to the type of correlations causing ethical conflicts, which are situations where the principle of precedence of profit must be limited. Business ethics is thus concerned with the relationships between companies, between a company and its social environment, between a company and the client, between a company and the people employed by it, and, last but not least, between a company and the state authorities. Actions taken by a company result in consequences for each of these entities; therefore, entrepreneur ethics should offer rules ensuring that the interest of each party in these relationships is respected.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of the present article has been to answer the question of whether it is possible to think of professional ethics as entrepreneur or the businessman's ethics. The paper offers several approaches to this complex philosophical problem, which is widely discussed with reference to entrepreneurship or even more broadly with reference to the whole economy.

In conclusion, it may be stated that it is indeed possible and even advisable to discuss professional ethics, especially entrepreneur or businessman's ethics, primarily because this area is growing dynamically and shaping our reality. Apart from discussing the issue, it becomes necessary to undertake action as well, which should be aimed at a propagation of the nature of ethics or even regulation of certain standards. After all, the aim of professional ethics is to formulate principles that allow one to solve ethical conflicts in everyday professional work. Such principles are often collected in the so-called Codes of Professional Ethics. Professional Codes are collections of moral standards, which bring them closer to morality as it is presented by M. Ossowska (1985) (i. e. a collection of moral rules accepted in a given society).

One of the functions of ethical codes is educational (Staniszewska 2004). Each professional group accepts certain values and standards, which are the element of the identity of the group, so the acquisition of a professional identity by a person taking up a profession takes place, among others, by way of internalizing the values and ethical standards the group accepts. Ethical codes constitute a set of guidelines for young employees, which makes it easier for them to adapt to professional work. Taking into account the fact that the group of people setting up their own businesses is dominated by young persons and that the majority of students plan to start a company (Staniewski, Szopiński 2013), it is worth ensuring that a course on ethics is included in their educational plans and programs.

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Verslininkystės etiniai aspektai

Santrauka

Etiškumas – vienas iš šiuolaikinės civilizacijos požymių. Apie etiką plačiai diskutuojama, ji nuolat plėtojama; jos net galima mokyti ar kitaip diegti į kieno nors gyvenimą. Ekonominė veikla, plačiau prasme verslas, – viena iš sričių, kurioje etika tampa vis aktualesnė. Verslumas – svarbiausias dalykas smulkiose ir vidutinėse įmonėse. Jis nukreiptas į ekonominę ir socialinę naudą. Tokia veikla vykdoma labai skirtingų (pagal amžių, išsilavinimą, socialumą ir t. t.) žmonių, kurių svarbiausias tikslas – pelnas. Kyla dvejetainis klausimas: ar gali verslininkas būti etiškai orientuotas; ar jo veikloje lieka vietos etikai? Tyrėjai siekia atsakyti, ar įmanoma diskutuoti apie verslininko etiką. Straipsnyje gvildinama etikos vieta verslo veikloje. Svarstymai, paremti literatūra apie etikos ir verslininkystės santykį, veda prie išvados, kad reikia kalbėti apie verslo etiką, o potencialūs ateities verslininkai turi būti mokomi etinio elgesio.

Raktažodžiai: etika, verslininkystė, etikos kodas