Radical business ethics: a critical and postmetaphysical manifesto[1]

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Business ethics, as it is understood and practised generally, lacks a component of radicality. As part of the contemporary 'return to ethics' it displays an undesirable conservatism and blocks off possibilities for systemic alterity. I argue that a normal and 'apologetic' business ethics should therefore be supplemented with a radical or utopian business ethics. Put differently, business ethics should not only contribute to more responsible business practices, more morally sensitive business managers and more ethical organisational cultures, but should also facilitate social hope via hermeneutic strategies aimed at changing the way we think about ourselves, our economies and the roles and responsibilities of business as such.

Business ethics – saviour or co-conspirator?

When the American Declaration of Independence was signed, so Derrida explains, there were no official Americans to sign it. The signature at the bottom of the declaration had to '[open] up a line of credit for itself, its own credit, from itself to itself' (Derrida as quoted in Bennington 2001: 204–205). In this sense, the declaration was enacted *outside* of law, by *outlaws*. In the same way, when business ethics declared itself an independent field of study, there were no business ethicists to declare its independence. To be fair, there were executives and philosophers considering moral issues in business, but there were no official business ethicists. This allowed business ethics to erupt onto the scene as the 'other of business', or 'the other *in* business' (business beyond the normal practice of business). As such it constituted a hopeful Derridean messiah, that is the arrival of a 'not yet' that functions as precondition for social hope within a deconstructionist discourse.[2]

There is evidence to suggest that business ethics is exactly a *messianic* figure today (or at least, that it is perceived to be a *messianic* figure or event). The line of credit opened up *for* business ethics *by* business ethics has paid off. Although business ethics is frequently referred to as a young academic field (Boatright 2000: 1, Arnold *et al.* 2010: 559), it has grown in leaps and bounds. In terms of prominence, business ethics is an academic rock star (in addition to being a money spinner): almost every university teaches students in the economic and business sciences a compulsory module in business ethics; conferences and journals multiply; and on the practical or 'real-world' front more and more companies invest in (or 'have developed an appetite for') ethical risk assessments, ethics training, ethics offices and ethics officials.

But probably the crowning achievement in business ethics' young career is being nominated as 'the solution to the global financial crisis'. Ever more scholars, critics and business executives look to business ethics for solutions. For instance, in a recent edition of *Newsweek*, Fareed Zakaria (2009:

38) warns that capitalism can only fulfil its proper function when it is grounded in ethics: 'No matter what reforms we put in place, without common sense, judgement and an ethical standard, they will prove inadequate'. The Ethics Institute of South Africa's former CEO, Willem Landman, proposes that the current global crisis, a 'crisis of trust' to use his terminology, can only be weathered when we invest in business ethics, and in ethically founded corporate governance. According to Landman (2008), ethics can no longer be viewed as a 'soft topic' in the business environment.[3]

But if we are to place our trust in business ethics, if it is to provide solutions to our global economic woes, one must ask what exactly business ethics *does*? What can we expect from business ethics, and what should we expect? Is business ethics, in the final instance, a credible messiah? These questions are particularly important if one takes seriously the possibility that business ethics might aggravate rather than solve the problems left in the wake of global business. As Piet Naudé warned at a BEN-Africa conference in 2006, business ethics might just as easily help in 'sharpening the teeth of the tiger',[4] comforting the conscience of business as distributive injustices proliferate globally.

In this article I argue that business ethics, as it is understood and practised generally, is *not* the messiah, and that we should expect *more* from it. We should expect from it a sense of radicality, in addition to its piecemeal reform of business organisations. My argument starts off by situating business ethics within a more general (socially inflated and particularly un-*messianic*) 'return to ethics', an ideological shift Alain Badiou (2001) warns against. I continue to demonstrate that the kind of business ethics practised as part of this 'return to ethics' is an apologetic one, inadequate if our ultimate aim is social justice. Finally, I propose that apologetic business ethics be supplemented with a radical version of business ethics which challenges 'economic necessity' and facilitates the arrival of something systemically new.

The general return to ethics

The birth and rise to prominence of business ethics forms part of what Alain Badiou (2001: 2) calls 'the contemporary return to ethics'. It is not only in business that we observe a renewed enthusiasm regarding ethics. On the contrary, philosophy and public opinion busies itself with a host of 'ethics-es', including 'the ethics of human rights', 'communication ethics', 'biomedical ethics' and 'environmental ethics', each accompanied by a variety of institutionalisations, from professional codes of ethics to ethics panels and ethics commissions. This general explosion in ethics is rooted in two idea-historical events or shifts.

The first historical motivation for an increased investment in ethics is the failure of radical politics. Mortified by the consequences of socialist revolutions, the contemporary consciousness resigns itself to accepting and policing existing societal structures. If our dreams of realising a just and utopian society must end in authoritarian and totalitarian violence, as many believe today, then the best we can do is smooth out the creases within the status quo.[5] An ethics of 'rights' is the preferred tool for achieving this smoothening out of existing structures and institutions. As Badiou (2001: 4–5) explains:

> The return to the old doctrine of the natural rights of man is obviously linked to the collapse of revolutionary Marxism, and of all the forms of progressive engagement that it inspired. In the political domain, deprived of any collective political landmark, stripped of any notion of 'the meaning of History', and no longer able to hope for or expect a social revolution, many intellectuals, along with much public opinion, have been won over to the logic of a capitalist economy and a parliamentary democracy . . . Rather than seek out the terms of a new political order of collective liberation, they have, in sum, adopted as their own the principles of the established 'Western' order.

The second historical motivation for a return to ethics is the gradual settling in of a postmetaphysical intellectual climate. The death of God and the dialectic of Enlightenment has left in its wake multiplicity and an accompanying political reluctance. From here the politically correct consciousness operates in terms of multiculture and tolerance. As Žižek (2006: 240) points out:

> What we get, instead of universal truth, is a multitude of perspectives, or, as it is fashionable to put it today, 'narratives' . . . stories we tell ourselves

about ourselves, and the ultimate goal of ethics is to guarantee the neutral space in which this multitude of narratives can peacefully coexist, in which everyone, from ethnic to sexual minorities, will have the right and ability to tell his/her story.

But the ethics that acts as surrogate for universal truth, the meaning of History and radical politics is a specific (and limited) kind of ethics. It is an ethics emphasising human rights and difference, an emphasis that follows from a specific understanding of what it is to be 'human', and of the relationship between Good and Evil. Ethics, today, functions primarily in the service of a human being whose fundamental characteristic is the ability to suffer, to experience pain and humiliation (Žižek 2006: 240). Put differently, human beings are, in the first place, the potential victims of Evil (Badiou 2001: 8). In a sense then, today's ethics is an ethics which reverses the conceptual hierarchy Good/Evil. The ethics that sustained radical politics was an ethics focused on identifying 'the Good'; Evil (inequality, poverty, suffering) in this context was the absence or lack of realisation of 'the Good'. Today, however, ethics prioritises Evil by identifying the myriad ways in which human beings are caused suffering, humiliation and exclusion; the Good, then, is the absence of these forms of Evil.[6]

From this conception of 'the suffering Human', and from the proposed relation of Good to Evil, it makes sense that today's ethics must focus on rights and on difference. In effect, rights are ways of preventing the different forms of suffering that have been identified, just as the freedom to own one's 'differences' is a way of preventing exclusion and humiliation.

Two more important consequences follow from an ethics centred around rights and Evil(s). First, focusing on rights has meant that the moral order has been neatly separated from the economic order. After all, rights are powers and privileges 'wrested from the state, not the economy' (Rorty 1999: 244), providing only *access* to economic goods, and protecting against being deprived of what one has already accumulated. In other words, rights are added or allowed only 'on top of' economic realities deemed as 'necessary' – for instance competition, markets and the logic of Capital (Badiou 2001: 30–31).

Second, the focus on forms of Evil has made of ethics a loosely related band of single-issue and terrain-specific movements. This means that ethics materialises in the form of, for instance, anti-racist, feminist and environmental movements, or in the form of terrain-specific 'practices' such as communication ethics, biomedical ethics and ethics for engineers. But whether ethics is issue- or terrain-specific, the implication is the same – the Evils we face are separate and distinct, to be tackled by distinct and specialised teams. The limitation of this approach, according to Žižek (2006: 250), is the following: 'they are "single issue movements" which lack the dimension of the Universal, that is, they do not relate to the social *totality*'. Single-issue movements lack the ability, therefore, to address *systemic* problems – problems relating to a system as a whole.

Of course it would be unfair to dismiss in its entirety the kind of ethics I have been describing. No doubt it has had many successes, eradicating and alleviating suffering on a variety of fronts. At the same time, it is only reasonable that we also investigate its costs. In the last instance, the ethical discourse that dominates philosophy and public opinion today is conservative and nihilistic. In addition, it is intolerant towards real difference, and fails to cultivate the infinity or immortality that sustains humanity.

It is conservative as it only confirms and strengthens what already exists. Inequality, poverty, unemployment and the anarchy of production are deemed to be tragic but unavoidable – it is either the Will of God or the necessary price of economic efficiency (Rorty 1999: 203, Badiou 2001: 31). Of course, this attitude results in part from a rights-discourse, but it also follows from the privileging of Evil. As Badiou (2001: 13–14) notes:

> if the ethical consensus is founded on the recognition of Evil, it follows that every effort to unite people around a positive idea of the Good . . . becomes in fact the real source of evil itself . . . Such is the accusation so often repeated . . . : every revolutionary project stigmatized as 'utopian' turns, we are told, into totalitarian nightmare. Every will to inscribe an idea of justice and equality turns bad. Every will to the Good creates Evil. This is sophistry at its most devastating. For if our only agenda is an ethical engagement against an Evil we recognize a priori, how are we to envisage any

transformation of the way things are? In reality, the price paid by ethics is stodgy conservatism. The ethical conception of man . . . prohibits every broad, positive vision of possibilities . . .

Even the 'concern for others', the cornerstone of today's ethics, is conservative. One would expect that a concern with 'the Other' would facilitate a productive relationship in which both 'us' and 'them' are mutually enriched by coming into contact with new ways of thinking and being. Yet the Other with which ethics is concerned is only an other recognisable within the ideological coordinates of what exists. What this means is that only 'the *good* other' is tolerated, that is pro democratic and pro free-market others (Badiou 2001: 24), those others whose difference incorporates a respect for differences.

But judging contemporary ethics as 'conservative' is not enough, according to Badiou (2001). The resignation in the face of necessity, and the inability to name and strive for the Good that characterises today's ethics, should also be interpreted as nihilism (Badiou 2001: 30). By accepting economic necessity, and by prohibiting any positive project or emancipatory politics, ethics dooms the subject to impotence, and makes the play of necessity the 'objective basis for all judgements of value' (Badiou 2001: 32).[7]

What gets lost when practising this nihilistic ethics is the infinite or immortal dimension of 'being human', as well as 'truth' as a relation to the totality, and as the arrival of the novel. Practising an ethics based on man's ability to suffer means reducing 'Man' to its animality.[8] Our ability to experience pain is, after all, an ability we share with animals, so that a culture in which the most prized rights are human rights is nothing other than a 'spiritual animal kingdom' in which human rights ultimately function as animal rights, the social world lacks any spiritual substance, individuals interact as 'intelligent animals' using reason only to promote individual interests and pleasures, and ethics protects the quality rather than the dignity of human life (Žižek 2006: 245, 241). Against such a degradation, Badiou (2001: 14) insists that 'Man, as immortal, is sustained by the incalculable and the un-possessed. He is sustained by non-being'. Therefore, '[t]o forbid him to imagine the Good, to devote his collective powers to it, to work towards the realization of unknown possibilities, to think what might be in terms that break

radically with what is, is quite simply to forbid him humanity as such' (Badiou 2001: 14).[9]

Closely related to man's immortality, and also lost in the ethical campaign against Evil (and, in effect, against non-being) is what both Žižek (2006: 245, 246, 250) and Badiou (2001: 32) refer to as 'truth'. This 'truth' is not a neutral and accurate account or representation, but a precarious commitment that relates to all and to the social totality, a choosing of sides, the appearance of incalculable novelty that flies in the face of established knowledge and of consensus. The acceptance of necessity, tolerance of superficial difference (the aspiration towards neutrality or a middle path) and limiting ethics and politics to single issues and specific terrains inevitably cancels out any possibility of such truth.

To sum up: ethics, today, has acquired an inflated status due to a lack of truly political projects and a concern with difference. The ethics that results, prioritising Evil through rights and tolerance, implies nothing less than conservatism (social stagnation), nihilism and a foreclosure on the possibility of the novel or the impossible. Given that this judgement is broad and vague, it is still necessary to demonstrate that these criticisms are also valid for Business Ethics.

Apologetic business ethics

A large part of what is written and practised as 'business ethics' today could be labelled 'apologetic business ethics'. I am referring here to ethics courses aimed at business management students, and to the practice of business ethics within organisations that follows from, and attempts to apply, ethics regulation (including ethics management prescriptions in the King Report on Governance for South Africa, and the US Federal Sentencing Guidelines). The definitions, associated argumentation and functions of business ethics as found in these terrains demonstrate the shortcomings Badiou (2001) warns against – it is conservative, nihilistic and closes off possibilities.

The popular South African definition of business ethics already alerts us to this fact. In their widely used textbook on the subject, Deon Rossouw and Leon Van Vuuren define business ethics as 'ethics applied to business' and as a practice aimed at

'identifying and implementing standards of conduct that will ensure that, at a minimum level, business does not detrimentally impact on the interests of its stakeholders', and, at an optimal level, that business 'will enhance the interests of all who are affected by [it]' (Rossouw & Van Vuuren 2005: 4). This definition seems balanced enough. Although it starts off in a nihilistic fashion, describing minimal business ethics as a way of preventing suffering, it does include the positive goal of 'enhancing interests'. Yet this positive goal is no less nihilistic than the minimal goal – 'enhancing interests' is not the same as 'naming and striving towards the Good'. It is quite evident that the interests that are to be enhanced amounts to 'the Good' only as it is defined by and limited within a free-market context. The interests that are to be enhanced are therefore the interests attributed to one as a *supplier*, *employee*, *investor* or *consumer*. In other words, the *others* business ethics is concerned with is the *Other* as he/she has been interpellated into the existing free-market universe. Even when business ethics directs our attention towards the cultural other, it is frequently only in order to measure his or her usefulness in relation to the pre-existing goals and principles of the economic order.[10] The positive goal of business ethics therefore clearly implies accepting, as necessary, the societal structure we have inherited. In this sense, business ethics has no business striving towards an undisclosed or un-possessed Good, and can only endlessly ratify what is given.

But business ethics not only resigns itself to this structure. Frequently business ethics acts as a vehicle for the ideological defence of free-market capitalism, reinforcing the accepted idea that capitalism is the best of all possible worlds, both because it corresponds with an innately selfish and competitive human nature (the metaphysical argument), and because it delivers better results than any other conceivable economic system (the pragmatic argument). The best example of such a defence is probably Robert Solomon's apologetic text 'It's good business', in which he argues that '[b]usiness ethics is not an attack on business but rather its first line of defense' (2004: 37). According to Solomon, business is inherently good. It has done more than any other system to alleviate poverty, while simultaneously improving quality of life by meeting consumer needs.

In addition, it promotes freedom and individuality, and provides everyone with the opportunity to better their existence through effort and intelligence. The foundation of business is therefore ethical – its basic goals are 'prosperity, freedom, fairness and individual dignity' (Solomon 2004: 37).

Within this apologetic framework, business ethics has three functions. First, it is meant to remind participants in business – ensnared in the daily business of business, that is profit, strategy, survival – of the bigger picture and the ethical goals of business, the service it is supposed to render society. In this way business ethics functions to integrate business firms into society, and to legitimate business as such (Jeurissen 2000: 822). Second, it aims to correct problems within the system. These problems are either rules or practices that are counterproductive measured against the ultimate aims of business, or human failures – misuses of an inherently good practice that result in harm. Indeed the field of business ethics was constituted in reaction to such failures. As Arnold *et al.* (2010: 559) note: 'The field of business ethics emerged as a species of applied ethics . . . with the explicit intention of using philosophical reasoning and ethical theory to provide normative guidance for business policy and public policy regarding business'. Finally, business ethics is a means to an end, representing principles and practices convertible into profit in the long run. To quote Solomon (2004: 38): 'The most powerful argument for ethics in business is success. Ethical businesses are successful businesses'.[11] On the basis of these functions, one is justified in concluding that (apologetic) business ethics subordinates ethics to business.

Once again, the criticism levelled against business ethics here does not amount to wholesale dismissal. To do what apologetic business ethicists do is both useful and important. Capitalist business is the status quo, and promises to remain so indefinitely. It would be negligent not to promote ethics within this framework. Yet limiting business ethics to the above functions would be equally negligent. The apologetic business ethicist does little to address the ways in which a late capitalist and globalised free market also inhibits individuality and freedom. He or she deems unimportant the fact that business frequently creates needs rather than reacting positively to the spontaneous needs of free individuals. He or she

ignores the existence-impoverishing effect of genera-lised commodification. He or she mourns but accepts the widening gap that competition and self-interest create between a small super-rich class and a massive impoverished class. Finally, apologetic business ethics implies approval for a system that has perfected the production of waste. An apologetic business ethics, useful as it may be, cannot begin to address these empirical failures (or dialectical contradictions) within the established economic universe. What is needed, therefore, is something more, some sense of *radicality*.

Before elaborating on what this *radicality* might entail, let me address the conceptual vagueness that the term 'apologetic business ethics' introduces. One might interject as this point and ask, 'Who exactly falls into the category of apologetic business ethicist?'. For instance, if Levinas explains that the face of the other opens up a relation of responsibility, does this not suggest an emphasis on suffering, and in turn, does this not make of Levinas an apologetic or nihilistic ethicist? Given this kind of classificatory difficulty, one might infer that the opposition between apologetic and radical ethics lacks complexity, and will only serve to divide business ethicists.

The vagueness notwithstanding, I contend that the term is still useful. It focuses attention on a specific and very real practice of talking about and deploying ethics that subordinates ethics to business. Literature most frequently employed within an apologetic framework will include guidelines for managing ethics within companies, and seminal organisational texts that identify ethics and values (or a values-based corporate culture) as the basis of succesful business. One could think here of *Corporate Cultures* (1982), *In Search of Excellence* (1982) and *Built to Last* (1994), to mention a few. It will also include textbooks that balance ethics theory with discussions on corporate challenges, including doing business across national and cultural boundaries, globalisation, fraud and corruption.

But using the term 'apologetic business ethics' does not amount to separating goats from sheep. 'Apologetic business ethics' does not refer to a collection of texts and authors, but to a practice that maintains and even strengthens the existing framework of business through the application of ethical concepts. To my mind, therefore, it is conceivable

that Levinasian or Derridean concepts and themes be deployed within an apologetic discourse, without it following that Levinas or Derrida are fundamentally apologetic ethicists. Indeed, it is more probable that Levinas and Derrida be used for radical purposes, as done by Letiche (1998) and Roberts (2001) who use Derrida and Levinas, respectively, to challenge the uses of ethical codes in business. Yet this probability does not discount the possibility of recruiting Derridean or Levinasian concepts for apologetic purposes.

One also has to bear in mind the inevitable domesticability of radical work. Arguments and concepts containing radical content can and often will lose their radicality as they become embedded within the established business vocabulary. The idea of 'corporate culture' is one such example, as I will explain in the next section.

In short, 'apologetic business ethics' has vague conceptual boundaries and does not constitute a hard and fast distinction between texts that are fundamentally apologetic and texts that are fundamentally radical. To my mind, this vagueness does not delegitimate the use of this term. Instead, acknowledging its vagueness means describing more usefully the interaction between ethics and hegemony.

Radical business ethics

Returning to the idea of radicality in business ethics, I am proposing that apologetic business ethics be supplemented with a radical business ethics. Naturally, I am not the first to suggest radicality in the field of business ethics. Richard Lippke (1995), for instance, proposes a radical business ethics explicitly linked to an egalitarian theory of justice, and critical of the basic structure of advanced capitalist societies. In turn, Bevan & Corvellec (2007) argue for the realignment of business ethics in accordance with an Other-centred Levinasian ethics. A realigned business ethics would take the form of a managerial ethics that is 'open towards the Other, without conditionality', and '(un)prepared for and impassioned by the radical difference of the Other' (Bevan & Corvellec 2007: 208). Also, the attempts to think of organisations as 'communities' could be interpreted as a utopian or radical gesture within the field of

business ethics. As Martin Parker (1998) notes, the emphasis on community or organisational culture is often accompanied by a narrative of 'increasing globalisation and social fragmentation'. In its quest to help create and sustain ethical organisational cultures, business ethics therefore becomes a means for counteracting ideological tendencies such as isolation and 'anomie' (as Habermas labels the loss of meaning resulting from our late capitalist system).

The radicality I propose for business ethics differs from the above-mentioned versions of radicality in the following ways: first, I do not link radical business ethics to a comprehensive and clearly articulated 'theory of justice', as Lippke does; second, the potential agents of radical business ethics are not (only) managers, as in Bevan & Corvellec's (2007) managerial ethics, but anyone who participates in thought experiments around business and organisations; finally, the radicality I propose does not centre around organisations or organisational cultures. Although organisational culture could be a fruitful utopian avenue, it has already lost most of its radical content, and appears to have become an ideological surrogate for radicality.[12]

What I am suggesting is in line with what Spivak (2001) calls a 'practical politics of the open end'. Using Spivak's metaphor, one could compare normal business ethics with brushing one's teeth, or with exercise – that is with daily maintenance. This kind of maintenance is important, but will not suffice when surgery is needed, just as surgery could never make superfluous daily maintenance. A practical politics of the open end, or a practical *ethics* of the open end, requires both maintenance and 'surgery'. To quote Spivak (2001: 399):

> there has to be both these two kinds of things . . . each bringing the other to crises. Because quite often this tooth-brushing style of daily maintenance politics seems to require acting out of line. On the other hand, the massive kind of surgery, surgery-operation-type politics . . . seems to deny the everyday maintenance of practical politics. When each brings the other to productive crisis, then it seems to me you have a practical politics of the open end: neither is privileged.

It should be clear why business ethics needs a dimension of radicality, an 'open end'. The existing socio-economic order presents us with systemic failures,

evils or injustices which normal business ethics might detect, but cannot solve. This is the empirical argument. At the same time, there is also a formal or philosophical reason for insisting on radicality. This is Badiou's contribution. Contemporary ethics and the self-perpetuating nature of globalised neoliberal capitalism represent a negation of the infinite possibilities that are a by-product of our humanity. Badiou's point, although formulated quite differently, is in line with the basic premise of so-called iconoclasts of the Judaic tradition. Social hope or justice, so theorists like Adorno and Derrida believe, lies in the refusal to accept as final any formulation of 'the Good'. Already in *Dialectic of Enlightment*, Adorno & Horkheimer (1989: 23) associate hope with 'the prohibition against calling on what is false as God, against invoking the finite as infinite, lies as truth. The guarantee of salvation lies in the rejection of any belief that would replace it: it is knowledge obtained in the denunciation of illusion'. An apologetic business ethics, unfortunately, does just that by reinforcing the illusion that 'what is' represents the best of all possible worlds. By discrediting genuine otherness, by campaigning against heterogeneity and non-being, apologetic business ethics represents a profound loss of hope.

It is ironic, then, that the argument in favour of radicality should be exactly the argument so often incorporated in the denunciation of radical or utopian politics. This is the argument, most notably associated with Isaiah Berlin, that denounces radical or utopian politics for its static or finalist character, that is for the 'morally repulsive visions of a closed world' it offers (Cooke 2004: 414). While this argument has always been a thinly veiled attack on socialism (or communism) in favour of capitalism, today it is more appropriate as an attack on the existing neoliberal capitalist society (although not necessarily in favour of socialism, but in favour of something else, something different or 'new').

What remains to be answered is what such 'radicality' entails. One could start by explaining what it does not entail. It does not entail that business ethicists act as the instigators or agents of political revolution. Radical business ethicists, as I regard them, are not naive revolutionaries or harmless hippies. Although a radical business ethicist might sympathise with the socialist ideal, a political revolution of

the communist kind is both improbable and dangerous. In addition, it would require presenting a blueprint, that is a contamination of 'the Good' by framing it in terms of the values and principles of the present. The Good, as we have already noted, lies in the unforeseen and the unforeseeable.

For this reason a radical business ethics is comprised of strategies for facilitating alterity, for introducing 'the new' into our existing thinking and our existing institutions. In order to achieve this, a critical attitude and a postmetaphysical vocabulary is best suited, as both emphasise the plasticity of 'what is'. The radical business ethicist is critical of business, acknowledging its empirical failures. He or she regards these failures, not as coincidental human errors or tragic necessities, but as the most probable outcome of a system based on commodification in the interests of profit. In addition, the radical business ethicist, impressed by a postmetaphysical vocabulary,[13] refuses to believe that free-market capitalism represents the logical and desirable (final) destination of a linear and progressive history. Instead, free-market capitalism is regarded as a contingent and historical phenomenon, enjoying no necessary historical status. In the same vein, no appeal is made to an 'essential human nature' that economic systems could correspond to – instead of an essential human nature, the radical business ethicist subscribes to the notion of historical and contingent selfdescriptions.[14]

The tools of radical business ethics

Against this critical and postmetaphysical backdrop, I suggest radical business ethicists participate in at least three strategies for facilitating the arrival of 'the new', namely critical negativity, imaginative redescription and the facilitation of events. As has been noted, the radical business ethics I refer to does not constitute a single or unified 'method'. In addition, it cannot be linked to, or associated with, a single author, theorist or school of philosophy. Instead, it denotes a broad and diversified activity. It is a collection or constellation of contributions that display an 'openness' sufficient to allow for radical or systemic change in the constitution and functioning of

business organisations, and/or the politico-economic framework that sustains it.

It should also be noted that I have not 'invented' a new and radical way of practising business ethics. At most I am registering already existing hopeful tendencies within the field of business ethics, grouping these tendencies together and providing a context within which to understand their relevance.

The strategies I will elaborate on below are, therefore, merely three examples of the kinds of contributions that I deem 'radical'.

Critical negativity

The first strategy, inspired by Theodor Adorno, is critical negativity. Adorno (1973), in agreement with Hegel, favours negativity or non-identity as the engine of knowledge and of history. Moments of tension or contradiction in any system inspire progress and prevent our political and epistemological systems from becoming static and reified. In contrast, the Enlightenment has always attempted to rid systems of negativity. In the process, the Enlightenment sets up (false) and dangerous totalities. These totalities are dangerous to the extent that they repress individuality and deny freedom. The individual becomes a fixed element whose meaning is completely determined by the totality. Critical negativity is an attempt to counter this identity drive inherent in Enlightenment thought:

> A negative dialectics is focused on the moment of negation, demonstrating that what appears to be a seamless conceptual totality is in fact scarred by antagonisms . . . as an anamnestic operation whereby totalities are broken up, identities criticized, continuities disrupted, and concepts dismantled. A negative dialectics aims at defending the particular against false identification and, ultimately, to release it . . . (Hammer 2006: 101–102)

What this means for business ethics is that the business ethicist contributes to radical social change, not by sketching alternative and ideal systems or societies (i.e. more totalities), but by identifying and diagnosing the flaws or contradictions within late capitalism. In other words, business ethicists should demonstrate how our existing system undermines its own basic premises or objectives, even if all participate in it ethically. Confronting the contemporary

consciousness with these flaws and contradictions increases the likelihood that alternative descriptions or understanding of 'self' and 'society' penetrate reified thought.

An example of such critical negativity is D.W. Haslett's (2004) article 'Is inheritance justified?'. In it, Haslett demonstrates how the practice of inheritance, so often thought of as an essential element of capitalism, actually contradicts the capitalist ideals of 'distribution according to productivity', 'equal opportunity' and 'freedom'. Inheritance represents distribution irrespective of productivity – someone receives wealth that he or she did not 'earn' through productive activity. Also, through the transfer of wealth that inheritance allows, opportunities are distributed unequally – those with more wealth have access to more opportunities. Finally, according to Haslett, abolishing inheritance would mean an increase in freedom. Haslett (2004: 144) argues that wealth has a diminishing marginal utility – the more one has, the less urgent the needs one can satisfy when wealth increases. Therefore, if wealth were more evenly distributed – for instance, if inheritance were abolished – then the overall marginal utility of wealth would rise, and, in turn, more freedom in the broad sense would result.

This position has the potential to fulfil the role of Badiou's and Zizek's so-called 'truth'. It is clearly a thought or belief that flies in the face of existing knowledge. At the same time, it addresses itself to all, or to the socio-economic totality. If it were taken seriously, if it were to inform policy and the nature of our institutions, it would change society as a whole. In other words, it problematises and destabilises 'what is'.

Imaginative redescription

The second strategy, inspired by Richard Rorty, is that of experimenting with alternative vocabularies.[15] 'Vocabularies' refer to different ways of describing the world. They are akin to Wittgenstein's language games, and refer to a set of concepts and distinctions, and the rules for their combination, associated with a specific 'form of life' or purpose. Vocabularies, therefore, serve a specific purpose and cannot be judged veridically, that is in terms of the accuracy with which they depict 'the world'. Instead,

they can only be judged pragmatically, in terms of their usefulness relative to a specific purpose. Rorty's version of radicality consists of redescribing a variety of phenomena (be it the world, the self, or the practices of ethics and philosophy) from a pragmatic perspective, hoping that these redescriptions (useful, he believes, for their ability to facilitate change) will 'catch on'. This type of redescription is the key to moral progress, in Rorty's view:

> The best answer to [questions surrounding the possibility of moral progress in the absence of universal reason], I think, is that individuals become aware of more alternatives, and therefore wiser, as they grow older. The human race as a whole has become wiser as history has moved along. The source of these new alternatives is the human imagination. It is the ability to come up with new ideas, rather than the ability to get in touch with unchanging essences, that is the engine of moral progress. (Rorty 2006: 372)

Rorty's conception of moral progress is specifically postmetaphysical, and centred around the imagination: 'Moral progress is not, on the pragmatist view, a matter of getting clearer about something that was there all the time. Rather, we make ourselves into new kinds of people by inventing new forms of human life. We make progress by having more alternatives to consider' (2006: 373).

With regard to business ethics, Rorty denies the relevance of traditional moral theory or 'moral reasoning skills'. Instead he propagates 'moral imagination' or 'moral sympathy' – the ability to 'envisage possibilities for human life that never crossed [our] minds' and '[imagining] what it must be like to be someone quite different from [ourselves]' (2006: 376). Rorty explicitly links this kind of imaginativeness with utopian thinking:

> If [none of the executives of the great multinational corporations] are dreaming up idealistic, utopian scenarios for the formation of a moral decent global society, it is unlikely that such a society will ever come into existence. Perhaps the business ethics community will provide an environment in which such dreams are encouraged. (Rorty 2006: 379)

In practising imaginative redescription, Rorty sets an example that radical business ethicists should follow. Instead of 'raiding' alternative vocabularies to see

how, for instance, African or Muslim values could make us better Western capitalists, we should be exploring these vocabularies in order to destabilise our capitalist thinking and institutions. An example would be the kind of thing done by E.F. Schumacher in his 2004 essay 'Buddhist economics'. What Schumacher achieves is an experiment in which we are not attempting to reconcile a Buddhist vocabulary with modern economics, but in which we imagine what economics would look like if it were informed by Buddhist descriptions of work, mechanisation, material wealth and natural resources. The result is a vision of work and society which is qualitatively different from our own society. To cite one example, Schumacher (2004: 182) proposes that 'Buddhist economics [is] very different from the economics of modern materialism, since the Buddhist sees the essence of civilisation not in a multiplication of wants but in the purification of human character'. In short, what descriptive experiments intend is to make the other appear *as other*, rather than allowing the other to become an impotent reflection of 'the same'.

The facilitation of events

The third strategy, inspired by Žižek, is the identification and interpretation of 'acts'. These 'acts' refer to events of world-historical significance, that is events that rob our institutions and our ideological allegiances of their credibility, and that redefine what we hold to be 'possible'. These events allow for a momentary 'gap' in which re-description can take place: 'By means of what [Žižek] calls "the act" . . . we erupt into non-compliance, disturb ideology, and loosen its hold on us' (Kay 2004: 5).

The 'act' is an event that destabilises the coherent picture of reality or society we have fabricated through signs and images. In other words, the 'act' brings us into contact with the inevitable insufficiency of our descriptions of reality. In doing so, the act forces us to re-symbolise, to restructure reality. The result of such 'acts', according to Žižek, is the following:

> The act proper is the only one which restructures the very symbolic co-ordinates of the agent's situation: it is intervention in the course of which the agent's identity itself is radically changed. (Žižek 2001: 85)

Unfortunately, 'acts', as opportunities for radical change, are easily 'missed'. For example, the most recent 'global financial crisis' represents such an event, a gap for re-symbolisation that calls us to rethink the status quo, to rethink the 'possible'. However, this opportunity for de- and re-symbolisation has to a large extent been missed – one reason being a lack of radical business ethicists willing to identify events, and to facilitate redescriptions.

Conclusion

To summarise: the radical business ethics I am promoting here has the aim of protecting business ethics as a space in which ethical considerations trump business considerations, and in which ethics can act as medium of critique to transform business and the political and economic framework that acts as its condition of possibility. Put differently, promoting a radical business ethics means guarding against a conservative and nihilistic ethics in business, as well as a business ethics reduced to a mere management tool or 'soft control'.

One might argue, however, that in addition to first being enacted by *outlaws*, business ethics (at least the radical version of it) threatens to become 'monstrous'. According to Derrida, this is the fate of the kind of social hope offered by an iconoclastic and messianic deconstuctionist discourse. When we invite the new into our thinking and our institutions, we invite and affirm the unpredictable arrivant, and that which we cannot safeguard against. This gesture is 'monstrous' to the extent that monsters are 'that which appears for the first time and, consequently, is not yet recognized. A monster is a species for which we do not yet have a name' (Derrida & Weber 1995: 386). The monstrous risk of poststructuralist social hope is mitigated, however, by the fleeting nature of any such monstrosity: 'as soon as one perceives a monster in a monster, one begins to domesticate it, one begins . . . to compare it to the norms, to analyze it, consequently to master whatever could be terrifying in this figure of the monster' (Derrida & Weber 1995: 386).

In the same vein, if business ethics ever constituted 'monstrosity', then the hopeful monster of business ethics has long since become a corporate pet. The more it is analysed and discussed, and the more it is embedded in better practice documents such as the *Third King Report on Corporate Governance* (2009) and the *US Federal Sentencing Guidelines* (2010), the more it loses its utopian quality. Not too long ago, for instance, few if any companies articulated their moral standards in a so-called 'code of ethics'. Today one would be hard pressed to find a large company without one, and it is equally difficult to find the ethical and transformative thrust that originally accompanied the idea of codes of ethics. Similarly, the idea to manage corporate cultures in order to encourage a 'natural' moral responsiveness to the needs of those affected by and affecting a company originally meant humanising corporate environments, revitalising a sense of community, and even rethinking the nature of business. However, since it has become common wisdom and consequently included in regulatory requirements, it has lost its 'genuine shred of content', becoming routine and innocuous, seen merely as a means for controlling employees and protecting shareholder interests, rather than as a medium for moral innovation.

The above movement from radical ethical idea to routine business control is natural, even desirable. Radical ideas that are not transformed into practical applications, that are not embodied in initiatives for the piecemeal reform of business, remain impotent. The upside is that these ideas (including *ethical organisational cultures*, *triple-bottom lines* and *integrated reporting*) are taken up in the corporate common sense, even if their utopian quality dissipates. At the same time, this domestication does not signal success or the end of the road for business ethicists, whose responsibility it (also) is to safeguard the radical and event-like space that is business ethics. This is achieved by reminding practitioners of the original intent of once radical practices, and by generating and facilitating new radically ethical ideas and practices.

'To what end?', one might ask. The radical business ethicist has no particular vision or destination in mind. In a sense, radical business ethics is a campaign against stagnation, in favour of movement. Organisations, the corporate environment and capitalist society as a whole display manipulative, constraining and self-perpetuating features. By focusing on the contingency and the ultimate malleability characteristic of the self, of organisations and societies, radical business ethics wishes to counter these tendencies, that is to inspire a reawakening of what Deleuze and Guattari call 'the body without organs', which roughly translates into the refusal to accept an endlessly self-reproducing, closed and unjust world, and an affirmation of a future that is open.

Notes

1. The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of KPMG Services (Pty) Ltd or KPMG Inc.
2. The *messianic* must be understood here in Derridean terms. For Derrida, the messianic does not refer to 'waiting for' a specific messiah, or for the arrival of a determined or specified other. Instead, it refers to 'an experience open to the absolute future of what is coming, that is to say, a necessarily indeterminable, abstract, desert-like experience that is confided, exposed, given up to its waiting for the other and the event' (1994: 90). The messianic, therefore, constitutes a hopeful and welcoming attitude towards an unpredictable or indeterminable other or event. Derrida claims that our entire (human) existence is characterised by this kind of experience, this kind of openness. For instance, in linguistic interactions, even before another person speaks, we are implored to trust what they are about to say, that is we are required to be open towards the unpredictable future (unpredictable future linguistic utterances) (Hart 2004: 59–60). In fact, our every interaction (with ourselves, with others, with systems and institutions) implies this openness. The reception that business ethics has received, in academia but also in regulation and in business management, suggests that it is (was) an *other* or event, an unpredictable future state of (business) affairs that has been received with messianic openness.
3. The references in this article to the South African context (i.e. to South African writers, ethicists, textbooks, or regulation) are a reflection of my own situatedness. However, I am convinced that the state of affairs I describe, and the recommendations I make, are generalisable.

4. The paper was later published as Naude, P.J. 2007. 'In defence of partisan justice: What can African business ethics learn from John Rawls?', *African Journal of Business Ethics*, 2:1, 40–44.

5. Acceptance of existing economic structures, that is of capitalism, is presented here as an anti-utopian gesture. Accepting, defending and promoting business in a capitalist framework would therefore mean 'giving up' on utopian dreams. However, Fredric Jameson argues that even the most ideological and anti-utopian phenomena (as many neo-Marxists regard the free market) must contain a 'genuine shred of content' in order to enact its ideological purpose (Jameson 2000a: 142). Put differently, acceptance of the capitalist status quo also represents a form of utopian thought, as the market is deemed to be a mechanism which concentrates upon itself all necessary labour in order for freedom to flourish around it (Jameson 2000b: 392). Yet if a defence of capitalism is a form of utopian thought, then it is a utopian idea that has lost its utopian-ness, much like a 'dead metaphor' that has been integrated into descriptive language.

6. The equivalent in the business world is reporting on ethical performance (or on ethical risk) that is limited to stating the absence of serious 'misconduct', for instance fraud.

7. It is important to note the difference between positive and negative nihilism in a postmodern discourse. Positive nihilism is the kind of nihilism associated with the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Gianni Vattimo. This nihilism does not entail a hopelessness resulting from the denial of meaning. It is a commitment to creating meaning (or revaluing value, in the Nietzschean vocabulary) in the absence of readily discoverable meaning – meaning extrapolated from an accessible and normative structure of Being. Against this kind of positive nihilism, Alain Badiou identifies a form of nihilism that is passive and conservative – a nihilism that denies hope by making 'what is' or 'necessity' the measure of all meaning and value.

8. This is not the point at which this text/article deconstructs itself through a return of repressed metaphysics. Badiou's distinction between man and animal, based on man's 'immortality', does not constitute a normative and essentialist structure of Being (an essential human nature). The immortality referred to here is not a discoverable essence, but the capacity for differential self creation (for redescription, in the Rortyan sense).

9. It is not my intention to enter into the human/animal debate here. Derrida (2002) has convincingly argued that the history of Western philosophy has been characterised by a prejudice against animals, and as part of this history, 'man' has constituted itself (autobiographised itself) through the ignorant and even violent hermeneutic distinction between humanity and *the animal*. This singular, 'the animal', is an *asinanity*, to Derrida's mind. I admit to this, and admit to participating in *asinanity* by duplicating, mentioning, quoting, and in doing so affirming and reinforcing both Badiou's and Zizek's *asinanity*, that is the *asinanity* of referring to 'animality' or a 'spiritual animal kingdom'. At the same time it should be noted that Derrida and Badiou are not on opposite sides here. Badiou's *asinanity* is committed in the same spirit as Derrida's work. Badiou's goal is to open up hermeneutic possibilities, in the same way as Derrida's critique of the singular 'the animal' is done to take into account 'a multiplicity of heterogeneous structures and limits' (2002: 415–416) beyond what is called 'human'. In liberating these 'differences' beyond what is called 'human', the intention is also to liberate autobiographical possibilities, that is to open up new hermeneutic possibilities.

10. Compare a recent article on the relationship between Islamic banking and ethical banking (Saidi 2009). In this article, Saidi (2009: 43) provides evidence of the recent financial success of so-called 'Islamic banking', making it a 'major competitor to conventional banking' and a *model* worthy of emulation. The model provided by Islamic banking represents a significant alternative to business as usual – its emphasis on sustainability (financial and social), its prioritising of the welfare of society and the environment, its focus on *needs* rather than *demand*, and its stakeholder approach make it a hopeful form of organisational difference. Yet the purpose of the article is not the facilitation of radical otherness, but rather the strategic taming of difference. Accordingly, on the basis of its business success, Saidi (2009: 47) states that it is 'no wonder that established banking giants are learning from Islamic banking on the trick of growing and maintaining their market share'. This strategic taming culminates in Saidi's (2009: 49) suggestion that descriptive names such as 'Ethical Banking' or 'Interest-Free Banking' replace the proper name 'Islamic banking' for branding purposes.

11. Compare also Boatright's (2000: 3) assertion that a concern with ethics flourishes to the extent that companies believe that 'good ethics is good business'. Similarly, Young & Hasler (2010: 38) advocate managing ethical risk as 'ethical values underlie a firm's ability to accomplish enterprise objectives'.

12. One of the symptoms indicating that the potentially transformative ideal of 'ethical organisational cultures' has (already) been hijacked, is the manner in which it has been assimilated into a 'control' vocabulary. The idea of corporate culture is intended to represent an alternative mode of organisation, a recognition of the human side of organisation, and a move from 'organisations as tight structures of control to organisations as loose networks of consent' (Parker 1998: 71). Yet it has quickly been swallowed up into a control discourse, i.e. as a form of 'soft control' needed in order to balance out 'hard controls', but still serving the ends of control. Culture management has become a way of maintaining control while (attempting) to manage or reduce a sense of alienation. Hence, governance and compliance now necessitates an 'audit' of soft controls, to verify its effectiveness in controlling the behaviour of employees – an obvious deviation from its intended purpose.

13. Metaphysics, according to Richard Rorty, is a vocabulary or a language game that employs the following dualisms: appearance/reality, made/found, contingent/essential; sentiment/rationality, finite/eternal. The aim of the metaphysical language game is to secure knowledge of the last term of each dualism – in this way it can identify a non-human foundation on which to ground human practices and beliefs (Rorty 1999: xii, 47, 51, 54). A postmetaphysical vocabulary, in contrast, reconciles itself with contingency, and subscribes to the idea that language games are arbitrary descriptions of the world that we cannot compare with an ultimate reality. The best we can do is to compare language games with one another to judge their usefulness (rather than their 'truth' in a representational sense) (Rorty 1990: 6–7, 21). Other advocates of a postmetaphysical vocabulary, in the field of business ethics, include Mollie Painter-Morland. Compare, for instance, her rejection of 'metaphysical' corporate codes that attempt to 'mirror some foundationalist truth about reality' (2006: 353).

14. According to Rorty (1999: 27), 'Pragmatists . . . do not believe that there is a way things really are. So they want to replace the appearance-reality distinction by that between descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful'.

15. It should be noted here that Rorty's work also displays nihilistic tendencies, especially in his description of man as a 'suffering animal'. In line with nihilistic ethics, the central moral ideal of Rorty's (1999: xxix) pragmatism is 'devising ways of diminishing human suffering'. In various of his writings, however, he also promotes radicality.

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