Call for Papers: Normativity in Business Ethics and Beyond

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Overview

The purpose of this special issue is to address fundamental questions about a possible deficit of normativity in management research, practice, and education - especially as it relates to the field of business ethics and its neighboring disciplines, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability. Questions regarding the role of normativity are familiar in many respects and have been the subject of long-standing debates in BEQ (e.g., with respect to the "separation thesis"). These questions are of renewed importance, if not urgency, against the backdrop of 1) the so-called grand challenges (George et al. 2016) and 2) the meteoric rise of dominantly descriptively and functionally oriented CSR and sustainability research and teaching.

By "normativity" in this context, we refer to explicit and implicit values-driven decision-making that is action guiding (i.e., prescriptive). The domain of the normative covers all forms of business decision-making, such as addressing systemic injustice, grand societal challenges, organizational narratives, institutional arrangements, corporate purposes, economic optimization norms, broader systemic design, and the decisions of individual managers. We seek different perspectives on the possible deficit of normativity in business, including alternative views suggesting that the problem is overstated or concern is misplaced.

Aims and Scope

We aim to take stock of the perceived decline in normativity in the field of business ethics (within which we include "micro" or individual-level behavioral ethics research and the neighboring fields of CSR and sustainability) and consider its implications for the field and beyond. Concern about the role of normativity in business ethics ranges over questions about the adequacy or usefulness of research that disregards normative considerations or implications, empirical research that does not come clean about normative presuppositions, empirical methods that squeeze out normative methods, and instrumental "business cases" that dominate ethics teaching. Fundamentally, these concerns reflect uncertainty, if not disagreements, about the identity of the field writ large.

Although we applaud the growing interest in business ethics - both as a field in itself and as the subject of research in other fields - we are concerned about recent developments, especially the apparent entrenchment of two camps in the field of business ethics. One is empirically oriented, investigating issues of CSR and sustainability of various kinds, often with largely managerial and instrumental intentions. The other is focused on normative issues, asking "what is the right thing to do?" and aiming to provide normative reflections and orientations for business. To be sure, there are echoes here of debates within the field that fuel or reject this bifurcation dating back decades (e.g., Donaldson 1994; Frederick 1994; Freeman 1994; Sandberg 2008; Singer 1998; Trevino and Weaver 1994; Werhane 1994), as well as of the foundational disciplines of philosophy and the social sciences.

Academic business ethics in its early days was largely normative (Seele 2016), but many believe that this dominance is decreasing. Although BEQ, as the leading journal in the field, is still largely dedicated to normative and conceptual publications, we observe that most academic CSR and sustainability as well as business ethics articles published in other specialist or mainstream management journals are now of an empirical nature and tend not to include normative considerations. What are the consequences of this development?

We invite submissions that revisit the earlier debates in BEQ and elsewhere about the role of normativity in business ethics, including the epistemological and ontological implications of the "separation thesis" today and prospectively. We are particularly interested in whether a lack of normativity hinders business responses to the "grand challenges" facing society. All agree that the world is facing immense ecological and social problems: climate change, a loss of biodiversity, global poverty, severe human rights violations, modern slavery, social and political segregation, gender inequality, health issues, and a rise of potentially harmful artificial intelligence systems. To what extent, if at all, might attention to these challenges be impeded by research and teaching that are purportedly normatively neutral or strictly descriptive by design? How can research and practice better reach action-guiding conclusions?

Thus the scope of potential submissions is broad, addressing the question of the role of normativity in both business decision-making and business ethics research.

Illustrative Topics and Research Questions

The Need for and Nature of Normativity

How, if at all, can normative business ethics be justified?

How do different traditions and philosophical frameworks (such as analytic philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutics, poststructuralism, feminism, postcolonialism, or African philosophy) contribute to our understanding of normativity?

Do facts show that normativity is diminishing in research about CSR, sustainability, and management studies in general?

If normativity is diminishing in business ethics and in the neighboring disciplines of CSR and sustainability, what are the implications for the field?

Should normative considerations inform questions of business purpose? If so, how?

Can normative "theory" capture the practical relevance of business ethics? What is the appropriate role of intuitions and emotions in normative business ethics?

To what extent, if at all, should normativity inform academic research on "grand challenges"?

Straddling Normative and Purportedly Value-Neutral Descriptive Research and Practice

Is the very distinction between "normative" and "value-neutral" misleading? Is there finally no separation?

How, if at all, can and do the normative and empirical interact in business ethics research? Is there a tension between the notions of "implicit normativity" and "value neutrality" in research?

Why and in which ways are values of central importance to business ethics?

How does our use of language inform attention to normativity in business ethics?

Does normative business ethics require greater engagement with (supposedly) value-neutral descriptive work? What is the role of empiricism in developing and evaluating normative theory?

How can we motivate and enable a more fruitful descriptive and normative symbiosis in our field?

Normativity in Business Ethics Research and Teaching

How has normativity figured in the development of the field of business ethics?

Has there been a generational shift in scholarship on the relation between normative and empirical research in business ethics, especially relative to its treatment in BEQ 4 (2) in 1994? How can any changes be seen in historical context?

How might new perspectives and theories help to reinvigorate normativity in business ethics research and teaching?

Is a normative approach to business ethics in danger of entrenching a hegemonic dominance of Global North, English-language worldviews? If so, what alternative approaches could be considered, and how?

Why might a normative approach to business ethics research and/or teaching be considered fundamentally gendered? What are the implications if it is?

What is new in reexamining the "separation thesis" today?

How might the "business case" for ethics have come to be viewed as essential? Is the business case sufficient as justification for practice or as a focal point of teaching in business ethics?

How can noninstrumental motivations for attention to ethical considerations in business be given greater attention in business schools?

Is the normative/descriptive debate outdated? If so, who (or what) will be at the forefront of business ethics?

Submission Process and Deadlines

Manuscripts must be prepared in compliance with the journal's instructions for contributors: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/business-ethics-quarterly/information/instructions-for-authors-submission-guidelines. Submissions that do not conform to these instructions, in terms of manuscript style and referencing, will not be reviewed. Note that, as per the journal's statement of aims and scope, BEQ does not publish pedagogically focused research or review articles that summarize a body of literature.

Manuscripts should be submitted after September 1, 2024, and no later than October 31, 2024, using BEQ's online submission system: https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/beq. When submitting, be sure to choose the option that indicates that the submission is for this special issue.

All papers will be initially reviewed for suitability by the guest editor team. Selected submissions will undergo a double-blind review by external referees following the journal's standard editorial process. By submitting a paper for consideration, authors consent to be called upon as reviewers. Authors also agree, in the event that a submission after review receives an invitation to revise and resubmit, to resubmit within three months of that invitation.

Presubmission Online Workshop

A few months before the special issue submission window opens, the guest editors will organize a virtual workshop (via appropriate web conferencing software) designed to provide developmental guidance to prospective submissions. Participation in this workshop is not a precondition for submission to, nor does it guarantee acceptance in, the special issue. The workshop will be organized in one virtual plenary followed by virtual paper development roundtables that bring together paper authors with the guest editors for in-depth feedback and advice.

To be considered for the workshop, please send a proposal or extended abstract (up to 3,000 words, references included) to SI_normativity@beqjournal.org by December 15, 2023.

Key Dates

Presubmission development online workshop application deadline: December 15, 2023
Presubmission development online workshop convenes: early February 2024
BEQ special issue submission window: September 1?October 31, 2024
Publication: late 2025 (est.)

More Information

Further information may be obtained by contacting the guest editors at SI_normativity@beqjournal.org.

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