

A Levinasian Perspective on the Field of Applied Ethics

Authors : Payman Tajalli, Steven Segal

Abstract : Applied ethics is an area of ethics which is looked upon most favorably as the most appropriate and useful for educational purposes; after all if ethics finds no application would any investment of time, effort and finance by the educational institutions be warranted? The current approaches to ethics in business and management often entail appealing to various types of moral theories and to this end almost every major philosophical approach has been enlisted. In this paper, we look at ethics through the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to argue that since ethics is 'first philosophy' it can neither be rule-based nor rule-governed, not something that can be worked out first and then applied to a given situation, hence the overwhelming emphasis on 'applied ethics' as a field of study in business and management education is unjustified. True ethics is not applied ethics. This assertion does not mean that teaching ethical theories and philosophies need to be abandoned rather it is the acceptance of the fact that an increase in cognitive awareness of such theories and ethical models and frameworks, or the mastering of techniques and procedures for ethical decision making, will not affect the desired ethical transformation in our students. Levinas himself argued for an ethics without a foundation, not one that required us to go 'beyond good and evil' as Nietzsche contended, rather an ethics which necessitates going 'before good and evil'. Such an ethics does not provide us with a set of methods or techniques or a decision tree that enable us determine the rightness of an action and what we ought to do, rather it is about a way of being, an ethical posture or approach one takes in the inter-subjective relationship with the other that holds the promise of ethical conduct. Ethics in this Levinasian sense then is one of infinite and unconditional responsibility for the other person in relationship, an ethics which is not subject to negotiation, calculation or reciprocity, and as such it could neither be applied nor taught through conventional pedagogy with its focus on knowledge transfer from the teacher to student, and to this end Levinas offers a non-maieutic, non-conventional approach to pedagogy. The paper concludes that from a Levinasian perspective on ethics and education, we may need to guide our students to move away from the clear and objective professionalism of the management and applied ethics towards the murky individual spiritualism. For Levinas, this is 'the Copernican revolution' in ethics.

Keywords : business ethics, ethics education, Levinas, maieutic teaching, ethics without foundation

Conference Title : ICMEHSS 2015 : International Conference on Management, Economics, Humanities and Social Sciences

Conference Location : Chicago, United States

Conference Dates : October 08-09, 2015