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Experiential Learning in Virtue Ethics Through a Case Study: The “St. Albans Family Enterprises”

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Abstract. Teaching business ethics effectively may prepare future leaders and managers to better deal with delicate situations that they might face in the workplace. However, such an aim is one of the biggest challenges that educators at universities are called on to solve. An increasing number of scholars are invoking the role of prudence in the virtue ethics context as a viable approach to teach students how to manage ethical dilemmas. In this regard, this paper discusses the “St. Albans Family Enterprises” case study that can serve as an instrument to help students and practitioners develop their ethical decision-making ability and to foster a disposition towards applying sound judgment or what can be called in classical terms, prudence. The teaching note that accompanies the case study offers guidance to educators about how the case can be used for teaching purposes, and explains the implications of exercising practical wisdom (prudence) within a virtue ethics framework.

Keywords: virtue ethics, practical wisdom, ethical decision making, teaching business ethics.

1. Introduction

The financial scandals and economic crises of recent years have generated widespread criticism regarding the managerial style of large corporations that have tended to prioritize making profits over other corporate goals. This profit orientation, unfortunately, can also be ascribed to a distorted management education (Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang 2015, Beverungen, Dunne, and Hoedemaekers 2013, Podolny 2009, Rasche, Gilbert, and Schedel 2013, Wang, Malhotra, and Murnighan 2011). Following the current trend in social sciences and economics, management theory started to look towards the natural sciences to explain certain organizational behaviors (Bennis and O’Toole 2005, Ghoshal and Moran 1996). Consequently, management education has adopted a scientific model, excluding any impact of human intentionality (Bailey and Ford 1996, Rocha and Ghoshal 2006) and thus a moral perspective. Such denial in managerial activities might result in business students, and potential future leaders, being freed from any sense of moral responsibility (Ghoshal 2005, 76-77), and concern for human wellbeing (Pfeffer 2016, 6). As a consequence, a recovery of business ethics education has become a central theme in pedagogical debates (Cornelius, Wallace, and Tassabehji 2007, Evans and Marcal 2005, Gioia 2002, Rubin and Dierdorff 2011, Weber 2006). In this regard, even a green paper of the European Commission (2005) “*Towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning*” (EQF) claims a major emphasis on developing ethical competences, i.e. to promote social and ethical advancement through

actions among higher education students.

For Guillén, Fontrodona, and Rodríguez-Sedano (2007), the concept of ethical competences used in the EQF is similar to the acquisition of habits or virtues through actions stated by Aristotle (2000). Virtue can be defined as a deliberately acquired habitual disposition or character trait that enables the agent to perceive, deliberate, decide, and act and experience emotions in a proper way, that is, in accordance with reason (practical wisdom), in particular situations. Although virtue was not the only element, it was considered the controlling factor to attain *eudaimonia* (human flourishing) (Ferrero and Sison 2014, 386). Therefore, the concept of virtue in Aristotle is even stronger than ethical competences since it is not only the product of the action that is of concern – as it would be for a skill – but also the intention and thus the “enjoyment” that is produced by the act.

In response to such calls for a shift towards placing more emphasis on ethics in management, with a specific focus on virtue ethics, we developed a case study based on a real business situation so that students too can get a sense of a real-life dilemma to test and practice their ethical judgment. The case is called the “St. Albans Family Enterprises” and poses different ethical dilemmas to be discussed with students and in so doing, develop their autonomous judgments by evaluating the implications for different scenarios or courses of action. Students are stimulated to formulate judgments and then critically analyze and reflect on them, in the light of the elements and information brought into play by the narrative of the case study. This is indeed the very core of a sound judgment (Melé 2010, Nonaka and Takeuchi 2011), which in a virtue ethics approach can be associated with the virtue of practical reason/wisdom (in classical terms *phronesis* or in later Latin expressions *prudence*).

This paper contributes to the literature in at least two ways.

First, from a theoretical point of view, we contribute to the pedagogical debate about how to teach business ethics, specifically virtue ethics, by means of a case study which implies an experiential learning approach. Thus, this may reinforce the consideration of virtue ethics in module design and for stimulating debate about how to develop virtues in business students.

Second, in a more practical sense, we present the accompanying case study with well-developed teaching notes and a description of the structure of the lesson. Thus, teachers and instructors of business ethics can easily employ this case study in their class activities.

The paper is organized in two conceptual blocks: the first is the presentation of the teaching approach; it is composed of this introduction, two additional subsections on the reasons why virtue ethics, and especially prudence, can be taught through the case study method, and a final conclusion section, where we summarized the main outcomes from this study.

2. Teaching Virtue Ethics

In business ethics education, the traditional dominant schools have been deontology and utilitarianism (Bowie 1991, Collier 1995, Donaldson and Dunfee 1994, Duska 1993, Ferrero and Sison 2014, Furman 1990, Kahn 1990, Lahdesmaki 2005, Williams and Murphy 1990). Deontology foundations lie in the formulas of the categorical imperative of Kant (2002/1785 *Groundwork*, 4, 421; 429; 431), and it is referred to as non-consequentialist. It posits that behavior should be mainly evaluated in relation to its conformity with universal rules of justice for the sake of compliance. However, this perspective may lack the flexibility needed to understand contingencies and thus to obtain a rightful application of such general principles. Moreover, it disregards the results of acting as if an agent would not be affected by these contingencies (Marchese, Bassham, and Ryan 2002, Williams and Murphy 1990).

In contrast, a utilitarianism approach judges actions through a cost-benefit analysis of its consequences for the greatest number of agents, resulting in the greatest “good” possible. This is a consequentialist ethic with hardly any regard for norms or values that guides the action. Despite the evolution of this basic assumption, that arrived to evaluate the principle/rules that can maximize the “good”, the utilitarian approach still risks justifying acts as intrinsically wrong, potentially giving rise to a dangerous moral relativism (Furman 1990).

Criticisms of both approaches are generally related to their principle-based foundations (universal and particular), the weakening of the concept of personal development for an agent and the difficulty of their application in an everyday business situation such as those faced by managers, employees, and other stakeholders (Solomon 1992, 114). For these reasons, alternative approaches such as virtue ethics have been rediscovered, placing a stronger emphasis on the moral agent or person and his/her *being* rather than, or at least in conjunction with his/her *doing* (Sison, Beabout, and Ferrero 2017).

Virtues, in the Aristotelian tradition, are marks of “excellences” of the character oriented toward the good life, with three relevant features: i) they refer to free actions, so directly connected to the intentionality of a subject; ii) behaviors are linked to personal identity, thus they affect the way an agent perceives him/herself. Indeed, Aristotle affirms that the purpose of studying ethics, is “to become good”, not just “to know what excellence is” (2000, 1103b ff.); iii) they have a teleological structure, with happiness as the underlying goal of personal ethics (*eudaimonia*), and the common good as the ultimate horizon of social ethics (MacIntyre 2007).

However, virtues are not natural inclinations; they need to be practiced in every situation so that they can become personal traits in the long term. (Whetstone 2001). The absence of virtue impairs a complete state of happiness since his/her action is not perfect, and hence cannot attain excellence, resulting in a situation that frustrates human desires/goals (*teloi*) (MacIntyre 2007). Ethics and morality, in this sense, are essentially about being a good person. In the context of management, this means being a good businessperson, which should be the goal of best management practices (Melé 1997).

As Ferrero and Sison state, “with its emphasis on character development, virtue ethics provided a developmental dynamic absent in both utilitarianism and deontology. These features combined, made virtue ethics a more integrated, balanced, and nuanced framework in order to normatively evaluate human action” (2014, 376).

Although virtue ethics and deontology both subscribe to universal principles, virtue ethics focuses attention on the motives, intentions, habits, character, relationships of agents, and the circumstances surrounding the action. Like utilitarianism, virtue ethics also considers outcomes, specifically those related to the development of the agent’s character. However, it differs from utilitarianism in that it considers that prohibitions exist that can undermine the development of the character.

This paradigm also received attention in business ethics education (Sison, Beabout, and Ferrero, 2017), especially regarding the emphasis of evaluating the principles and consequences for an agent in a specific context.

Thus, the pedagogical prominence or value of a virtue ethics approach is precisely related to an increased ability to “frame” a situation i.e. individuating the best course of action. This better understanding of the situation should also provide a better guidance for actions (Crockett 2005, Dyck and Kleysen 2001, Furman 1990, Hartman 2006, Horvath 1995, Koehn 1995, Mintz 1996, Shaw 1996).

Consequently, as outlined by Guillén *et al.* (2007), the ethical training of employees and managers, had already been formally acknowledged in the Green Paper of the European Commission, and courses or modules in business ethics have become quite a common feature of business degrees. At the highest level of academic study, students are expected to “promote social and ethical advancement through actions” (European Commission 2005). Ethical competences, linked to social issues, are thus understood as the capacity to solve problems in reference to their ethical aspects. This capacity is developed through training, as far as decision-making acts are repeated, since its nature is essentially more of a habit than a cognitive skill, and forms part of the character (Moore 2005) in accordance with the Aristotelian tradition.

Because virtue ethics as an ethical theory focuses on the role of virtues in the decision-making process, it gives paramount importance to prudence which is the ability to analyze complex situations and detect their moral content and implications (Melé 2010, Pellegrini and Ciappei 2015, Roca 2008). Through this virtue, appreciating what is truly worthwhile and valuable in life, agents are able to discern how in contingent situations such goals can be attained (Bachmann, Habisch, and Dierksmeier 2017, Beabout 2012). Keenan affirms this when he explains Aquinas: “the entirety of a person’s moral life is governed by prudence, which is that virtue able both to recognize the ends of our natural inclinations and to bring them to realization through virtuous activity” (2002, 259).

In this context, this paper is a response to requests from some scholars for more research on the subject of practical wisdom (Moberg 2007, Weaver 2006), as applied to business leadership (Crossan *et al.* 2013), especially dealing with crisis situations.

3. The Case Study Method

It is generally accepted that case studies are particularly effective in ethics education (Champoux 1999, Hosmer and Steneck 1989, Huczynski 2004, Painter-Morland, Fontrodona, Hoffman, and Rowe 2003). This is partly due to its storytelling format, but also because learners are exposed to real-life situations where the decision-making processes do not necessarily have a unique or pre-determined solution. The idea that students are responsible for their own learning process is becoming a widespread paradigm (Breton 1999, Ruiz-Gallardo, Castaño, Gómez-Alday, and Valdés 2011) and in this sense, the case method appears to be a highly participative activity where students are required to get involved actively. Business Schools have a commitment to linking knowledge and application and the case study method enables students to discover and develop their own unique framework for addressing, understanding, and dealing with business problems (Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen 1994, Pearson 1951, Ruiz-Alba, Almenta, and Vallespín, 2014).

In fact, learning from experience is one of the most rudimentary and intuitive ways of learning, and in most cases it does not require an excessive effort. Experiential learning offers an opportunity to reflect and think, both as an individual and/or within groups, and its main strength is its ability to present knowledge in an integrated, contextualized and applicable way (Beard and Wilson 2004). Therefore, experiential learning enhances students' skill development significantly over traditional approaches (Inks and Avila 2008). Furthermore, case studies are designed to illustrate the application of concepts to real-life situations, building analytical skills that can distinguish high-priority from low-priority elements.

Such ability in traditional virtue ethics would be associated with the virtue of practical reason/wisdom or prudence. Prudence is a prominent virtue that is regarded as the "mother of the virtues" both in the classical tradition and in the classic studies of Aristotle (2000) and Aquinas (1947), since it is about the excellence of finding the right means to attain specific goals (MacIntyre 2007). Especially in managerial terms, this virtue can be recognized by the ability to frame a situation correctly in order to enable the subject to make an ethical sound judgement, being judgment an act of prudence i.e. ethical reasoning skill (Nonaka and Takeuchi 2011, Pellegrini and Ciappei 2015). This is indeed a prerogative of any normative ethic theory; what distinguishes virtue ethics is that it places emphasis contemporaneously on principles (or virtues), on consequences (on the other and on the development of the character) and on contingencies of the case to avoid rigid *a priori* evaluations (Buchholz and Rosenthal 2005). Accordingly, many scholars have dedicated particular attention to the pedagogical aspect of virtue due to the exemplarity of virtuous behavior. For example, Mintz (1996) shows how case studies, collaborative and cooperative learning, role-playing and video presentations can be used to integrate virtues into the curriculum. Equally committed to teaching Aristotelian virtue ethics is Hartman (2006, 2008), who upholds the importance of prudence defined as the ability to discern the salient

moral features of situations, and who states that case studies, as a modern version of Aristotelian dialectic, that can help students to reach a reflective equilibrium to counter possible untoward pressures from the environment.

If educational objectives focus on mind qualities (curiosity, judgment, wisdom), personal qualities (character, sensitivity, integrity, responsibility), and the ability to apply general concepts and knowledge to specific situations, then discussions on a particular case within a prudential context may provide powerful insight (Barnes *et al.* 1994).

With this purpose in mind, a case study with its teaching note are presented in conjunction with this article, with the intention to first and foremost illustrate the application of the concept of prudence, but also to describe how other virtues interplay in a simulated real-life business situation.

4. Conclusions

The main conclusion of this paper is that a case study as an experiential learning approach can serve as an effective tool to teach virtue ethics to business students and in particular, to help them foster a better disposition towards ethical decision-making by applying the virtue of prudence.

The “St. Albans Family Enterprises” case offers a fruitful contribution to understanding virtues and their role in decision-making and to improving individual ethical competence.

In relation to the theoretical contributions, the case facilitates reflection and the further development of personal virtues that would help when making ethical decisions, since virtue ethics offers no algorithm or standard solutions for it i.e. without dictating unique solutions (Marchese *et al.* 2002). In addition, the case study can be used in training sessions to address the relevance of virtues, such as prudence and integrity to bring their true values to workplace decisions and thereby contributing to the ideal of the “humanizing of business” (Moore 2005). At the same time, it could also improve the level of ethical decision-making in wise leaders that in turn can foster virtuous behaviors in others and throughout the organization (Nonaka and Takeuchi 2011).

We propose to approach business dilemmas considering the principles to be followed, consequences (for others and the moral development of the agent) and contingencies that renders it possible to act correctly in the present moment rather in hypothetical situations (Buchholz and Rosenthal 2005). The case is rich with concrete decisions to reflect upon and to be taken directly by students. However, we can only call for further pedagogical efforts to develop teaching approaches and tools to foster virtue ethics in classes. For example, the clear explanation of some theoretical frameworks related to virtue ethics in real situations or the managerial stories of wise managers would help in guiding the discussion on case studies. While storytelling is quite a valid approach to business and virtue ethics, the precise explanations of behaviors adopted could be strengthened.

Regarding practical implications of the case study, results from an anecdotal account of its use have been presented (see the Appendix). A survey was conducted amongst students who participated in an academic experiment using

the case study. Results show that the experience has helped them to better understand the ethical theories (88%), to increase their ability to identify ethical issues (85%) and to enhance skills in moral reasoning (90%). 11% of the students identified the predominant role of prudence in decision-making as a main learning outcome. We could then agree with Wittmer and O'Brien (2014) who affirm that business students find virtue ethics intuitively appealing and easy to be applied to their own lives, not only in a business context but also in personal life. In this sense, Argandoña (1999), points out the significance of enhancing the impact of ethics on companies' day-to-day activities, because the overall purpose of the study of ethics is not to explain morality but to change behaviors.

However, even in this regard, we call for further studies to evaluate the "impact" of this case in different university settings, probably within the context of other national cultures.

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APPENDIX – Post-Discussion Survey Material

Format Used for the Survey :

General information:

Age: _____

Gender: Male / Female ()

Status: Home/Eu () International ()

Question related to the case study:

1. The use of the case study St Albans Family Enterprise has helped me to understand better the ethical theories (please circle one)

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

2. With the case study St Albans Family Enterprise, I have increased the ability to identify ethical issues (please circle one)

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

3. With the case study St Albans Family Enterprise, I enhanced skills in moral reasoning (please circle one)

Strongly Disagree ~~Disagree~~ ~~Neutral~~ ~~Agree~~ Strongly Agree

4. The case study St Albans Family Enterprise has helped me to clarify moral aspirations, (please circle one)

Strongly Disagree ~~Disagree~~ ~~Neutral~~ ~~Agree~~ Strongly Agree

The main learning with this case was (Open question): (please write here your reflections)

Table 1: Student's responses to the survey

Post-discussion survey	
Likert scale questions	Percentage (n) ^a
The use of the case study has helped me to understand better the ethical theories	88% (48)
With the use of the case study I have increased the ability to identify ethical issues	85% (46)
With the use of the case study I enhanced skills in moral reasoning	90% (49)
The use of case study helped my clarification of moral aspirations	72% (39)
The main learning with this case was:	
Role of prudence in decision making	11% (6)
Individual reflections and implications for their own lives	18% (19)
Application of theories and concepts to the case study	63% (34)
Statistics Student responses (n = 54) Average age: 23 Gender: Female (56%); Male (44%) Home/EU (77%); International (23%) ^a Percentage: students responding strongly agree or agree on those questions (n): percentage of student that cited the element in their open questions.	

Table 2: Students' responses

Emerg ed themes	Students' quotations
1. The role of prudence in decision-making	<p><i>"To know the right thing here and now is wisdom but to do the right thing here and now is prudence and that is exactly what Philips needs to do about Linda".</i></p> <p><i>"Good managers should have one to one meetings; this is the most prudent decision. In this case a one to one could solve many further problems".</i></p> <p><i>"In this case the prudent decision is not the most relevant thing. Here is also important to understand how the situation created to Linda could have been prevented and avoid the same mistake in the future. This is virtue ethics: not looking only at a particular decision".</i></p> <p><i>"This case has helped me to identify ethical dilemmas and to apply theories, but what is crystal clear is that without the virtue of prudence is very difficult to address and solve ethical issues."</i></p>
2. Individual reflections and implications for their own lives	<p><i>"For me, the most meaningful aspect is the critical reflective thinking I am required to do. For example, trust is a natural inclination of human being, although I had not realized this until we covered this topic".</i></p> <p><i>"I feel more confident about making ethical judgments as I'm more analytical and I see more aspects and also because I have useful tools".</i></p> <p><i>"I wonder how I can inflict happiness on others in the workplace".</i></p> <p><i>"All in all, trust is the most precious asset I can lose, because it takes years to build and sometimes just a second to lose it".</i></p> <p><i>"The discussion of this case had a big impact on me because I am currently employed as a Supervisor and it helped me to understand how to help my employees to be happier and perform better".</i></p> <p><i>"I've really enjoyed discussing the case and feel what I've learned has deepened my understanding of the current debates centering on how business should be conducted and the complex ethical issues businesses face today".</i></p> <p><i>"Growing up, my elders endeavored for me to understand the difference between right and wrong. Together with advice of what it was to be a man of integrity, honor and virtue, my ethics were formulated. Philip should follow his instincts but also his principles, if he has any..."</i></p> <p><i>"This case is eye opening and can be applied in many everyday situations. I think I will be able to make more ethical decisions in my future career by implementing normative theories in different circumstances."</i></p>
3. Application of theories and concepts to the case study	<p><i>"If the main protagonist; Philip applies the non-consequentialist normative theory of Egoism probably the right to do is doing nothing: turns a blind eye and leave things pass..."</i></p> <p><i>"I think that using the ethics of duty is the most correct thing to do, however I doubt that in that case I would do so, as in a practical way this could generate more problem like losing a friend (George and opening a can of worms...so I am for an utilitarian perspective: just reprehend Linda".</i></p> <p><i>"We have focused most of the analysis on Philip, George, etc., but what about Linda. It is very unfair that she has been forced to a stressful situation, because at the end of the day, Nathalie is her sister and we need to understand that she has a natural right to protect her family. I think that following the ethics of rights, Linda is entitled to call Danielle and prevent her, this is not a leakage, it is just common sense".</i></p> <p><i>"I feel that most of the analysis done in the session is ironic and controversial as all depends on the intentions and we have learned with the Triple Font Theory that we can't evaluate the actions without the intentions. We should draw several scenarios depending of Philip's intentions. If he wants to harm George or others, probably he will use Linda's situation as a scapegoat to punish third parties".</i></p> <p><i>"I should apply the second maxim of Kant: treat others as ends not as means. They should use Linda's situation. She is not guilty she is a victim".</i></p> <p><i>"We should have dedicated more time to descriptive theories and to the circumstances and consequences."</i></p> <p><i>"With the Triple Font Theory I learned that if an action is wrong, even though the intention is right, the final decision is wrong. For that reason, Linda can't call her sister as the action is wrong as this information is confidential. This is what is expected from a professional."</i></p> <p><i>"I have learned how to apply different ethical theories to the same case study however; I know for sure that I need to read more on the ethics of duty by Kant".</i></p>