Business Ethics: Contributions of European Enlightenment Thinkers

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the concept of business ethics as well as the significance of managing business ethics. Needless to say, European enlightenment thinkers have made significant contributions to ethics, per se and consequentially to business ethics. Aristotle’s concepts of virtue and ‘good life’ are also discussed. An attempt has been made to bring out the theoretical contributions of mainstream philosophers in this article.

Key words: Ethics, Business ethics, Deontology and Utilitarianism, and Consequentialism.

Introduction:

The concept of Business Ethics has come to mean various things to various people, but generally it's coming to know what it right or wrong in the workplace and doing what's right -- this is in regard to effects of products/services and in relationships with stakeholders. Caveat emptor: This ancient Latin proverb 'let the buyer beware', tells us that business ethics has been a societal concern going back a long ways indeed. Ethics is not an exact science. People define Ethics in accordance with their own set of values which differ depending on time, place and culture. Webster's defines Ethics as "the discipline dealing with what is good and bad or right and wrong or with moral duty and obligation." The word derives from the Greek word meaning "moral," a Latin word with roots in "mores" or "customs"—in other words the values held by society.

Business Ethics is a form of the art of applied ethics that examines ethical principles and moral or ethical problems that can arise in a business environment. In the increasingly conscience-focused marketplaces of the 21st century, the demand for more ethical business processes and actions ~ Ethicism, is increasing. Simultaneously, pressure is applied on industry to improve business ethics through new public initiatives and laws.

The simplest definition of ethics and moral values would be to not distinguish between the two and say that they describe what is right and what is wrong in human behavior and what ought to be. Business ethics are the desired norms of behavior exclusively dealing with commercial transactions. Moral values are deep seated ideas and feelings that manifest themselves as behavior or conduct. If we know the consequences of our actions we can convert values into rules of behavior that can then be described as ethics, i.e, Values + Knowledge = Ethics.

In the business world, ethics often are displaced by greed when there is a periodic frenzy of rising stock market prices. Inevitably, a steep downturn then inflicts losses on investors and on businesses with a concomitant reduction in the workforce. An excessive competitive spirit tends to induce unethical business practices so the business world becomes a battlefield where the normal rules are flouted, skirted or simply disregarded. The ensuing instability is bad for the economy and for the government.

Benefits of Managing Ethics in the Workplace

Many people are used to reading or hearing of the moral benefits of attention to business ethics. However, there are other types of benefits, as well. The following list describes various types of benefits from managing ethics in the workplace.
Attention to business ethics has substantially improved society.
A matter of decades ago, children in our country worked 16-hour days. Workers’ limbs were torn off and disabled workers were condemned to poverty and often to starvation. Trusts controlled some markets to the extent that prices were fixed and small businesses choked out. Price fixing crippled normal market forces. Employees were terminated based on personalities. Influence was applied through intimidation and harassment. Then society reacted and demanded that businesses place high value on fairness and equal rights. Anti-trust laws were instituted. Government agencies were established. Unions were organized. Laws and regulations were established.

Ethics programs help maintain a moral course in turbulent times.
Attention to business ethics is critical during times of fundamental change -- times much like those faced now by businesses, both nonprofit and for-profit. During times of change, there is often no clear moral compass to guide leaders through complex conflicts about what is right or wrong. Continuing attention to ethics in the workplace sensitizes leaders and staff to how they want to act -- consistently.

Ethics programs cultivate strong teamwork and productivity.
Ethics programs align employee behaviors with those top priority ethical values preferred by leaders of the organization. Usually, an organization finds surprising disparity between its preferred values and the values actually reflected by behaviors in the workplace. Ongoing attention and dialogue regarding values in the workplace builds openness, integrity and community -- critical ingredients of strong teams in the workplace. Employees feel strong alignment between their values and those of the organization. They react with strong motivation and performance.

Ethics programs support employee growth and meaning.
Attention to ethics in the workplace helps employees face reality, both good and bad -- in the organization and themselves. Employees feel full confidence they can admit and deal with whatever comes their way.

Ethics programs are an insurance policy -- they help ensure that policies are legal.
There are an increasing number of lawsuits in regard to personnel matters and to effects of an organization’s services or products on stakeholders. Ethical principles are often state-of-the-art legal matters. These principles are often applied to current, major ethical issues to become legislation. Attention to ethics ensures highly ethical policies and procedures in the workplace. It’s far better to incur the cost of mechanisms to ensure ethical practices now than to incur costs of litigation later. A major intent of well-designed personnel policies is to ensure ethical treatment of employees, e.g., in matters of hiring, evaluating, disciplining, firing, etc.

Ethics programs help avoid criminal acts “of omission” and can lower fines.
Ethics programs tend to detect ethical issues and violations early on so they can be reported or addressed. In some cases, when an organization is aware of an actual or potential violation and does not report it to the appropriate authorities, this can be considered a criminal act, e.g., in business dealings with certain government agencies, such as the Defense Department.

Ethics programs help manage values associated with quality management, strategic planning and diversity management -- this benefit needs far more attention.
Ethics programs identify preferred values and ensuring organizational behaviors are aligned with those values. This effort includes recording the values, developing policies and procedures to align behaviors with preferred values, and then training all personnel about the policies and procedures. This overall effort is very useful for several other programs in the workplace that require behaviors to be aligned with values, including quality management, strategic planning and diversity management. Total Quality Management includes high priority on certain operating values, e.g., trust among stakeholders, performance, reliability, measurement, and feedback. Eastman and Polaroid use ethics tools in their quality programs to ensure integrity in their relationships with stakeholders. Ethics management techniques are highly useful for managing strategic values, e.g., expand market share, reduce costs, etc.

Ethics programs promote a strong public image.
Attention to ethics is also strong public relations — admittedly, managing ethics should not be done primarily for reasons of public relations. The fact that an organization regularly gives attention to its ethics can portray a strong positive to the public. People see those organizations as valuing people more than profit, as striving to operate with the utmost of integrity and honor. Aligning behavior with values is critical to effective marketing and public relations programs.

- **Overall benefits of ethics programs:**
  Managing ethical values in the workplace legitimizes managerial actions, strengthens the coherence and balance of the organization’s culture, improves trust in relationships between individuals and groups, supports greater consistency in standards and qualities of products, and cultivates greater sensitivity to the impact of the enterprise’s values and messages.

- **Last - and most -- formal attention to ethics in the workplace is the right thing to do.**

  ❖ **European enlightenment philosophers:**

  Ethical theories may be divided into the following categories:
  - Teleological
  - Utilitarianism
  - Deontological
  - Consequentialism

  Teleological theories determine the ethics of an act by looking to the probable outcome or consequences of the decision (the ends) and often treated as a synonym with consequentialism. A distinction is worth making. In teleological ethics the goodness of an action is measured in terms of its contribution to a certain purpose or, end/ objective and focuses on movement toward end. On the other hand, consequentialist ethics measures goodness of action with reference to a specific value, say, happiness (in classical utilitarianism).

  Utilitarianism was a social reform movement and ethical theory which held that morality of an act should be judged solely on the basis of results. According to Utilitarianism “Utility” is the only intrinsic good. Actions and precedents are judged morally right or wrong in proportion to their propensity to produce the most happiness or pleasure, for the greatest number. Jermy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are the prominent exponents of this approach. The details of their theories are given below.

  **Jermy Bentham (1748-1832):**

  Utilitarianism: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number:
  You have probably heard a politician say he or she passed a piece of legislation because it did the greatest good for the greatest number of citizens. Perhaps you have heard someone justify their actions because it was for the greater good.
  In this article, an attempt is made to bring out philosophy behind such actions. The philosophy is known as utilitarianism. Although it is a long word, it is in common usage every day. It is the belief that the sole standard of morality is determined by its usefulness. Philosophers refer to it as a "teleological" system. The Greek word "telos" means end or goal. This means that this ethical system determines morality by the end result. Whereas Christian ethics are based on rules, utilitarianism is based on results.
  Utilitarianism began with the philosophies of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Utilitarianism gets its name from Bentham's test question, "What is the use of it?" He conceived of the idea when he ran across the words "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" in Joseph Priestly's *Treatise of Government.*
  Jeremy Bentham developed his ethical system around the idea of pleasure. He built it on ancient hedonism which pursued physical pleasure and avoided physical pain. According to Bentham, the most moral acts are those which maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This has sometimes been
called the "utilitarian calculus." An act would be moral if it brings the greatest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain.

John Stuart Mill modified this philosophy and developed it apart from Bentham's hedonistic foundation. Mill used the same utilitarian calculus but instead focused on maximizing the general happiness by calculating the greatest good for the greatest number. While Bentham used the calculus in a quantitative sense, Mill used this calculus in a qualitative sense. He believed, for example, that some pleasures were of higher quality than others.

Utilitarianism has been embraced by so many simply because it seems to make a good deal of sense and seems relatively simple to apply. However, when it was first proposed, utilitarianism was a radical philosophy. It attempted to set forth a moral system apart from divine revelation and biblical morality. Utilitarianism focused on results rather than rules. Ultimately the focus on the results demolished the rules.

In other words, utilitarianism provided for a way for people to live moral lives apart from the Bible and its prescriptions. There was no need for an appeal to divine revelation. Reason rather than revelation was sufficient to determine morality.

Founders of Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham was a leading theorist in Anglo-American philosophy of law and one of the founders of utilitarianism. He developed this idea of a utility and a utilitarian calculus in the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1781).

In the beginning of that work Bentham wrote: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it."

Bentham believed that pain and pleasure not only explain our actions but also help us define what is good and moral. He believed that this foundation could provide a basis for social, legal, and moral reform in society.

Key to his ethical system is the principle of utility. That is, what is the greatest good for the greatest number?

Bentham wrote: "By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness."

John Stuart Mill was a brilliant scholar who was subjected to a rigid system of intellectual discipline and shielded from boys his own age. When Mill was a teenager, he read Bentham. Mill said the feeling rushed upon him "that all previous moralists were superseded." He believed that the principle of utility "gave unity to my conception of things. I now had opinions: a creed, a doctrine, a philosophy; in one among the best senses of the word, a religion; the inculcation and diffusion of what could be made the principle outward purpose of a life."

Mill modified Bentham's utilitarianism in to happiness and introduced rule utilitarianism, whereas Bentham established act utilitarianism. According to Mill, one calculates what is right by comparing the consequences of all relevant agents of alternative rules for a particular circumstance. This is done by comparing all relevant similar circumstances or settings at any time. Kenneth Arrow’s contribution comes in terms of social choice preferences.

Analysis of Utilitarianism

Why did utilitarianism become popular? There are a number of reasons for its appeal.

First, it is a relatively simple ethical system to apply. To determine whether an action is moral you merely have to calculate the good and bad consequences that will result from a particular action. If the good outweighs the bad, then the action is moral.
Second, utilitarianism avoids the need to appeal to divine revelation. Many adherents to this ethical system are looking for a way to live a moral life apart from the Bible and a belief in God. The system replaces revelation with reason. Logic rather than an adherence to biblical principles guides the ethical decision-making of a utilitarian.

Third, most people already use a form of utilitarianism in their daily decisions. We make lots of non-moral decisions every day based upon consequences. At the checkout line, we try to find the shortest line so we can get out the door more quickly. We make most of our financial decisions (writing checks, buying merchandise, etc.) on a utilitarian calculus of cost and benefits. So making moral decisions using utilitarianism seems like a natural extension of our daily decision-making procedures.

There are also a number of problems with utilitarianism. One problem with utilitarianism is that it leads to an "end justifies the means" mentality. If any worthwhile end can justify the means to attain it, a true ethical foundation is lost. But we all know that the end does not justify the means. If that were so, then Hitler could justify the Holocaust because the end was to purify the human race. Stalin could justify his slaughter of millions because he was trying to achieve a communist utopia. The end never justifies the means. The means must justify themselves. A particular act cannot be judged as good simply because it may lead to a good consequence. The means must be judged by some objective and consistent standard of morality.

Second, utilitarianism cannot protect the rights of minorities if the goal is the greatest good for the greatest number. Americans in the eighteenth century could justify slavery on the basis that it provided a good consequence for a majority of Americans. Certainly the majority benefited from cheap slave labor even though the lives of black slaves were much worse.

A third problem with utilitarianism is predicting the consequences. If morality is based on results, then we would have to have omniscience in order to accurately predict the consequence of any action. But at best we can only guess at the future, and often these educated guesses are wrong.

A fourth problem with utilitarianism is that consequences themselves must be judged. When results occur, we must still ask whether they are good or bad results. Utilitarianism provides no objective and consistent foundation to judge results because results are the mechanism used to judge the action itself.

Situation Ethics
A popular form of utilitarianism is situation ethics first proposed by Joseph Fletcher in his book by the same name. Fletcher acknowledges that situation ethics is essentially utilitarianism, but modifies the pleasure principle and calls it the agape (love) principle.

Fletcher developed his ethical system as an alternative to two extremes: legalism and antinomianism. The legalist is like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus who had all sorts of laws and regulations but no heart. They emphasized the law over love. Antinomians are like the libertines in Paul's day who promoted their lawlessness.

The foundation of situation ethics is what Fletcher calls the law of love. Love replaces the law. Fletcher says, "We follow law, if at all, for love's sake."

Fletcher even quotes certain biblical passages to make his case. For example, he quotes Romans 13:8 which says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law."

Another passage Fletcher quotes is Matthew 22:37-40. "Christ said, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Proponents of situation ethics would argue that these summary verses require only one absolute (the law of love). No other universal laws can be derived from this commandment to love. Even the Ten Commandments are subject to exceptions based upon the law of love.

Situation ethics also accepts the view that the end justifies the means. Only the ends can justify the means; the means cannot justify themselves. Fletcher believes that "no act apart from its foreseeable consequences has any ethical meaning whatsoever.".

Joseph Fletcher tells the story of Lenin who had become weary of being told that he had no ethics. After all, he used a very pragmatic and utilitarian philosophy to force communism on the people. So
some of those around him accused him of believing that the end justifies the means. Finally, Lenin shot back, "If the end does not justify the means, then in the name of sanity and justice, what does?" Like utilitarianism, situation ethics attempts to define morality with an "end justifies the means" philosophy. According to Fletcher, the law of love requires the greatest love for the greatest number of people in the long run. But as we will see in the next section, we do not always know how to define love, and we do not always know what will happen in the long run.

Analysis of Situation Ethics

Perhaps the biggest problem with situation ethics is that the law of love is too general. People are going to have different definitions of what love is. What some may believe is a loving act, others might feel is an unloving act. Moreover, the context of love varies from situation to situation and certainly varies from culture to culture. So it is even difficult to derive moral principles that can be known and applied universally. In other words, it is impossible to say that to follow the law of love is to do such and such in every circumstance. Situations and circumstances change, and so the moral response may change as well. The admonition to do the loving thing is even less specific than to do what is the greatest good for the greatest number. It has about as much moral force as to say to do the "good thing" or the "right thing." Without a specific definition, it is nothing more than a moral platitude.

Second, situation ethics suffers from the same problem of utilitarianism in predicting consequences. In order to judge the morality of an action, we have to know the results of the action we are about to take. Often we cannot know the consequences.

Joseph Fletcher acknowledges that when he says, "We can't always guess the future, even though we are always being forced to try." But according to his ethical system, we have to know the results in order to make a moral choice. In fact, we should be relatively certain of the consequences, otherwise our action would by definition be immoral.

Situation ethics also assumes that the situation will determine the meaning of love. Yet love is not determined by the particulars of our circumstance but merely conditioned by them. The situation does not determine what is right or wrong. The situation instead helps us determine which biblical command applies in that particular situation.

From the biblical perspective, the problem with utilitarianism and situation ethics is that they ultimately provide no consistent moral framework. Situation ethics also permits us to do evil to achieve good. This is totally contrary to the Bible.

For example, Proverbs 14:12 says that "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." The road to destruction is paved with good intentions. This is a fundamental flaw with an "ends justify the means" ethical system.

In Romans 6:1 Paul asks, "Are we to continue sinning so that grace may increase?" His response is "May it never be!"

Utilitarianism attempts to provide a moral system apart from God's revelation in the Bible, but in the end, it does not succeed.

Bentham believed that utility could be measured quantitatively (he called it hedonistic calculus). To him seeking happiness is an inherent part of human nature, and that happiness could be measured as a matter of quantity. Each person is his/her own judge when it comes to happiness, but when it comes to the greatest happiness (he called it felicity), a person can really only be happy if others around him/her are happy too. This is known as the greatest happiness principle. It depends upon the circumstances, upon the community in which one happens to be, upon how people seek to maximize harmony and comfort, and happiness with friends and neighbors. Bentham devises the Hedonistic Calculus, which has the following components.

- **INTENSITY**: The force value of some happiness
- **DURATION**: The length of time some happiness provides
- **CERTINITY**: The chance that some action will lead to happiness
- **PROPENQUITY**: How close are the circumstances
- FECUNDITY: How much of a “spill over” effect some happiness has or will more of the same follow.
- PURITY: How less are or no negative “side effects “from some happiness or the pleasure will not be followed by pain.
- EXTENT: The number of people affected by the pursuit of happiness

Bentham believed that the pursuit of pleasure could be measured in quantitative terms. He argued that it’s some times best to sacrifice individuals for the good of the organization.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873):

Mill believed in qualitative approach which essentially involved checking one's perceived judgments with others for second opinion so to speak. He adjusted the hedonistic tendencies in Bentham philosophy by emphasizing the following
- It is not the quantity of pleasure, but the quality of happiness that is central to utilitarianism
- The calculus is unreasonable, because quality can not be quantified (there is distinction between higher and lower pleasure)

- Utilitarianism refers to the “Greatest happiness principle”--- it seeks to promote the capability of achieving happiness(higher pleasure) for the most amount of people( this is its extent)

Mill insisted that some pleasures are more worthy than others and that a refined person would pursue more refined pleasures. For instance, in the corruptible nature of society and organization it is probably more important to look upon self-sacrifice and individual conscience as virtues in themselves.

DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS:

“It act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” - Immanuel Kant

Deontological philosophy holds that rules are the basis of morality. Kant rejected the consequentialist view of morality, because to him it relies too heavily on subjective considerations. He presented the deontological moral system based on the demands of the categorical imperatives as an alternative to cosequentialism, based on hypothetical imperatives.

There are many philosophers who reject the entire teleological agenda by arguing that moral goodness has nothing to do with generating pleasure, happiness, and or consequences. Deontological theories are by definition duty-based. That is to say, that morality, according to deontologists, consists in the fulfillment of moral obligations, or duties. Duties, in the deontological tradition, are most often associated with obeying absolute moral rules. Hence, human beings are morally required to do (or not to do) certain acts in order to uphold a rule or law. The rightness or wrongness of a moral rule is determined independent of its consequences or how happiness or pleasure is distributed as a result of abiding by that rule, or not abiding by it.

It's not difficult to see why philosophers would be drawn to this position. In ordinary life, we often encounter situations where doing our duty toward others does not necessarily increase pleasure or decrease pain. In early nineteenth-century America, many members of the anti-slavery movement argued that slavery was wrong, even though slaveholders and southern society in general, economically benefited from it. Suppose, also that the slaveholders were also able to condition the slaves to the point where they actually enjoyed living under slavery. From a teleological perspective, slavery might appear to be an ideal economic institution. Everybody is happy!

A deontologist, however, would argue that even if the American government conducted a detailed cost/benefit analysis of slavery and decided that it created more pleasure in society than pain, it would still be wrong. Therefore, deontologists believe that right and wrong have nothing to do with pleasure, pain, or consequences. Morality is based on whether acts conflict with moral rules or not, and the motivation behind those acts. An act is therefore, good if and only if it was performed out of a desire to do one's duty and obey a rule. In other words, act out of a good will. Hence, slavery is wrong, not because of its negative consequences, but because it violates an absolute moral rule. The problem here
is: "How does one distinguish absolute moral rules from mere convention, prudence, or legality, without reference to the distribution of pleasure and pain?" In the Western tradition there have been two approaches to the establishment of deontological principles: divine command theory and Kantian theory. Plato and Stoics have articulated ethical behavior in terms of divine commands.

**Immanuel Kant (1724-1804):**
Kant was a German philosopher. He is regarded as one of the most influential thinker of modern Europe, and the last major philosopher of the Enlightenment. Kant introduced his moral philosophy in his 1785’s work “Groundwork of metaphysics” and continued to develop his moral philosophy. It is his “Critique of practical reason”, 1788, and “Metaphysics of Morals”, 1797 that sum up his moral philosophy. Before going into discussion on Kant’s moral philosophy we need to understand some terminology. These are

**Hypothetical Imperative:**
One, which tells us what we must do if we want to achieve some goal For instance, if we want to solve differential equations we must learn calculus. (Proposition, that’s conditional in nature)

**Categorical Imperative:** One that is binding on us absolutely, simply in virtue of the fact that we are rational creatures.

**Kant’s Moral Philosophy:**
Kant believed that there is a single moral obligation, which he called the “categorical imperative”, and is derived from the concept of duty. It is from the categorical imperative that all other moral obligations are generated and by which all moral obligations can be tested. He believed that the moral law is a principle of reason itself and is not based on contingent facts about world, such as what would make us happy, but to act upon the moral law which has no other motive than “worthiness of being happy”. He believed that moral obligation applies to all and only rational agents. A categorical imperative is an unconditional obligation; that is it has the force of an obligation regardless of our will or desire. Kant argued that the source of the good lies not in anything outside the human subject, either in nature or given by God, but rather only the good will itself. A good will is one that acts from duty in accordance with the universal moral law that the autonomous human being freely gives itself. This law obliges one to treat humanity--- understood as rational agency, and represented through oneself as well as others---as an end in itself rather than as means. Morality is rooted in human freedom and acting autonomously is to act according to rational moral principles. Kant gave three conditions essential to his concept of morality. Theses are also known as the formulation of morality. They are

**The first formulation:** The first formulation declares “the maxim be chosen as though they should hold as universal laws of nature”. This implies that one must perform his actions in such a way as that could be applied universally. This formulation has its supreme law “always act according to that maxim whose universality as a law you can act the same time will” and is the only condition under which a will can never come into conflict with itself...”.It is also called universality test. It has the following steps
1) Find the agent’s maxim. The maxim is an action paired with its motivation. For instance: “I’ll lie for personal benefits”, lying is the action, the motivation is to get what one desire. paired together they form the maxim.
2) Imagine a possible world in which every one in a similar position to the real world agent follows that maxim.
3) Decide whether any contradictions arise in the possible world as a result of following the maxim.
4) If a contradiction arises, acting on that maxim is not allowed in the real world
5) If there is no contradiction, then acting on that maxim is permissible, and in some instances required.

**The Second formulation:** “Every human being is an end in itself”
The rational being as by its nature as an end, and thus as an end in itself must serve in every maxim as the condition restricting all merely relative and arbitrary ends

**The third formulation:**
It is a synthesis of the first two and the basis for the complete determination of all maxims. It says that every rational being is a realm (kingdom), the legislative force, and also the subject in himself. Thus all maxims which stem from autonomous legislation ought to harmonize with a possible realm of ends as with a realm of nature. “So act as if your maxims should serve at the same time as the universal law (of all rational beings), implies that we should so act that we may think of ourselves as “a member in the universal realm of ends”.

This formulation of ethics is basically deontological.

❖ **Conclusion:**
Aristotle’s main contribution is that he defined ethics as virtue. What constitutes human character and good life? European thinkers’ contributions lie in defining deontological and teleological ethical behavior. From these theoretical frameworks, management thinkers developed business ethics.

References and Notes: