

Book review

Øyvind Kvalnes: *Moral reasoning at work: Rethinking ethics in organizations*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. vi, 108 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9781137532619>

A self-defense guide against situational pressure in organizations

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5324/eip.v10i1.1970>



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Working life is an arena where we are expected to behave in accordance with ethical principles, with the most famous of these being the categorical imperative and the principle of utility. It can be argued, however, that this space demands a more specialized ethical approach than the grand formulations we find in utilitarianism and duty ethics alone. Philosopher Robert Solomon writes:

People in business are ultimately responsible as individuals, but they are responsible as individuals in a corporate setting where their responsibilities are at least in part defined by their roles and duties in the company and, of course, by 'the bottom line' (Solomon 1992:320).

In order to understand ethical conduct in working life, we need to understand working life, and the conditions people in such environments find themselves. In his book, *Moral reasoning at work: Rethinking ethics in organizations*, philosopher Øyvind Kvalnes takes this view seriously, and tries to give us tools that are tailored for promoting good behavior in such environments.

Providing these tools, while at the same time enriching the reader's understanding of ethics in organizations by considering the potentials and limits of ethics, are the book's main objectives. The book does not seek to settle grand theoretical discussions about right or wrong, or to promote fix-it-all solutions. The text is instead humble and practical, and presents several different perspectives on ethics. The goal is to make the reader more capable of conducting moral analyses in organizations, but this does not require a final answer to all the problems of working life. This puts the responsibility for ethics where it belongs: in the hands of those who find themselves in ethical situations.

The title of Kvalnes's book suggests that we need to rethink the way we handle ethics in organizations. In the business sector, ethics is often reduced to compliance. Here, compliance officers produce *codes of conduct* and train employees in ethics and ethical analysis, with the purpose of reducing the risk of unethical and illegal behavior (1). Kvalnes seeks to push us beyond mere compliance. He wants to help organizations promote good behavior among their employees, and he believes that compliance tools offer a good foundation for this, but this foundation needs to be supplemented with a respect for the complexity and ambiguity of ethical situations, and an understanding of moral psychology. Kvalnes criticizes several of the core

assumptions and tools in compliance, not to debunk these assumptions, but to give us a deeper and more realistic understanding of them.

As mentioned, ethical training is one of the tools often used by compliance officers. Kvalnes questions the value of such training, if the culture in the organization in question promotes bad behavior. He writes: "... the incentives these individuals encounter at work remain more or less unchanged, which means that the ethical training makes little difference to how they behave towards their customers" (5). Results from experiments in social psychology have shown us that the situations we find ourselves in are significant determinants for our conduct. As Kvalnes writes: "A range of studies in social psychology document that aspects of the situation have a strong impact on whether a person engages in moral misconduct or not" (72). According to Kvalnes, these experiments show us that training is not enough to help us resist situational pressure.

The flipside of Kvalnes's criticism of training is that changing incentives is one of the best ways to prevent unwanted behavior. As he writes: "Circumstances, often in the shape of incentives and decision-making structures, are significant causes of wrongdoing, and revising them appears to be the most promising measure to create responsible and fair organizations" (71). This might well be true, and Kvalnes can find support for this view among social psychologists like Philip Zimbardo (2007), who claims that the fact that systems produce environments that promote bad behavior is the most important lesson from his famous *Stanford Prison Experiment*. But few are in a position to change such structures and systems, and thinkers like Joel Bakan (2004) have tried to show that the law makes it difficult to create firms that promote good behavior, so this advice might have limited use for the common worker or the low- or mid-level manager. Because of the difficulty of applying this advice, its inclusion breaks somewhat with the rest of the book, which is more practical and easier to apply for all actors in an organization, but it gives insight into the limitations of how we can promote good behavior as individuals.

Incentives are also at the core of Kvalnes's analysis of codes of conduct. The more detailed such codes become, the stronger they signal that they have been thoroughly thought through, and that all that is left is to live by the code (56). This is problematic in two regards. First: one can get the impression that whatever the code is silent about is permissible, which can lead to a loophole culture, where the workers creatively and systematically search for loopholes. In such a situation, Kvalnes believes that codes of conduct actually promote immoral behavior through incentivizing the search for loopholes. Second: Codes of conduct might not efficiently prepare us for new and unexpected situations. As Kvalnes writes: "... each new situation can demand ethical reflection, based on the realization that the codes may be silent about the issue at hand" (56). Where the codes are silent, reflection is needed. And if the organization relies too heavily on such codes, its employees may be ill equipped to handle new moral situations. Ethical life is complicated, and it is too ambitious to believe that every ethical situation can be predicted in codes of conduct.

In addition to challenging the efficiency of the two compliance tools discussed above, Kvalnes challenges a third assumption that is common in organizational ethics: "... decision-making should ideally rest with people of strong moral character, that is, those who have a stable disposition to behave in a morally responsible manner, even when they are under pressure to do otherwise" (2).

Kvalnes's treatment of moral character is unfortunately somewhat unclear. He uses some very interesting psychological experiments to criticize character, and thus concludes that: "Aspects of the situation often appear to override character in affecting a person's response to a moral challenge" (74). Since normal people tend to act morally questionable in certain experiments, he concludes that character is fragile. This is impossible, however, according to his own definition of the concept. People who fail to act morally in these experiments lack character by definition, since they clearly are disposed towards being affected by situational forces rather than moral conviction. Since the subjects in these experiments lack character by definition, the experiments cannot be counted as evidence for the conclusion that moral character often is overridden by situational forces.

Another and more plausible claim Kvalnes makes about character is that: "Empirical research in social psychology indicates that the character oriented approach has underestimated how circumstances affect decision-making" (74). It is clear from the psychological experiments that a large majority of us can be pushed into doing unethical actions by the situations we find ourselves in. Kvalnes frames his conclusion as a criticism of traditional virtue ethics (58), but he can find support for this conclusion among virtue ethicists. The philosopher and virtue ethicist Kwame Appiah explicitly endorse the view that character has been given too much focus (Appiah 2008:71), and points to the fact that Aristotle himself believed moral character to be rare: "Acquiring virtue, Aristotle already knew, is hard; it is something that takes many years, and most people don't make it" (Appiah 2008:48). It should not be necessary to conduct experiments to show that becoming a good person is hard. This is ancient knowledge. But if it is true, as Kvalnes and Appiah believe, that there has been an over-reliance on character within compliance, the inclusion of these experiments in the book is warranted.

Kvalnes is not completely dismissive of moral character. As with the rest of the critical perspectives in the book, its purpose is to give us a better understanding of the concept, so that our usage of it in the context of working life can be more realistic. For example, he presents moral judgment as an important supplement to codes of conduct, and he allows for the possibility that some people are better at overcoming cognitive biases than others (89). This possibility could have been pursued further in the book. Not everyone in the experiments Kvalnes uses to scrutinize moral character acted in morally dubious ways. Some overcame the situational pressure, which indicates that there is room for developing moral character in people.

According to philosopher Edwin Hartman, among others, being made aware of the kind of experiments Kvalnes cites can help strengthen our disposition towards overcoming situational pressure. He writes:

Using case studies gives students experience that supports the development of their practical wisdom. They learn the warning signs of rationalization and ethical anesthesia, especially if they also learn about it by reading social psychologists like Haidt¹ (Hartman 2013:205).

If we are made aware that we are disposed towards making mistakes, we will try to identify the forces that affect us, which will make us less disposed towards making mistakes in ethical situations. This means that knowledge about the very experiments Kvalnes uses to criticize character can be used to strengthen character.

Kvalnes touches upon this point himself (75), but he presents it as an alternative to the character approach, not an integrated part.

Kvalnes presents several tools, principles and rules of thumb that can help us promote good behavior in organizations. His tools are in part based on his understanding of cognitive psychology, specifically *dual process theory*, an approach popularized by psychologist Daniel Kahneman. When a person is faced with a moral situation, according to Kvalnes, this situation can be handled by *intuition* or *moral analysis*. This way of explaining ethical decision-making understands our cognition as divided into two systems. One system, System 1, is fast and reflexive, and handles most of our daily activities. It is here we find our moral intuitions, according to Kvalnes. When we apply our intuitions in ethical situations, we act out our moral convictions quickly, without having to assess the situation. Our System 2 capacities allow us to engage our rationality in solving the moral dilemma. This process is slower and drains our cognitive capacities, but according to Kvalnes it can sometimes be more reliable than System 1. He writes: "We can reap great benefits from activating the slow System 2 to weigh the pro and cons of the alternatives" (12). Most of the tools Kvalnes include in his book are meant to help organizations promote this kind of analysis among workers.

As a normative foundation for his tools, Kvalnes uses *duty ethics* and *utilitarianism*. In addition to their normative function, Kvalnes seeks to use discussions about these theories as a way to strengthen the reader's capacity for ethical analysis. He writes: "... familiarity with Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative and other ethical concepts may actually be useful in articulating a position and arguing beyond an appeal to a gut feeling that one particular opinion is wrong" (8). He uses *trolleyology* and a discussion of *moral luck* as tools for helping the reader understand the difference between the two theories, and to further increase the reader's ethical vocabulary and capacity.

After this introduction to duty ethics and utilitarianism, Kvalnes puts these ethical approaches aside in favor of a couple of simpler principles. Normative ethics is a difficult and comprehensive subject, and we cannot expect that people in working life have the time and resources to become proficient in it. As Solomon polemically writes about using utilitarianism and duty ethics in business: "The theories themselves are incomplete, oblivious to the concrete business context and indifferent to the very particular roles that people play in business" (Solomon 1992:319). These approaches are too overarching to help us handle difficult situations in the business sector. For Solomon this meant that we should embrace a virtue ethical approach to business ethics, since virtue language is very close to ordinary language, and therefore easy for business people to grasp. But Kvalnes solves this challenge, and makes room for Kantian and utilitarian principles in working life, by formulating simpler principles that are tailored to organizational life, and that are easier for people in this field to understand.

The first principle he introduces is called *the principle of equality* (36). If we find ourselves facing a moral dilemma, we have to justify our actions if we treat this dilemma differently than similar dilemmas. This exercise forces us to discuss or think about the morally relevant aspects of the situation, which can lead to a better decision. The other principle Kvalnes introduces is the *principle of publicity* (37). One way of checking whether or not your solution to a moral dilemma is a good one is to ask yourself whether or not you would be comfortable with the solution being

published on the front page of *The New York Times*. If not, you probably have good reason to at least consider the implications very thoroughly before you implement the solution to the dilemma. These principles are not simple quick fixes to moral dilemmas, but they help us map the morally relevant aspects of such dilemmas. Interestingly, they also circumvent the need to take a stand in the debate between utilitarians and duty ethicists. Kvalnes writes: “We can apply the principles of equality and publicity to concrete cases without evoking the traditional tensions in ethical theory” (39). The simpler principles can find support in both normative camps, and for the purpose of working life, it is not always necessary to choose between duty ethics and utilitarianism in order to solve dilemmas.

The most comprehensive analytical tool that Kvalnes presents is his *navigational wheel*, which he has developed with philosopher Einar Øverenget. He describes this wheel as a: “... figure designed to put ethical considerations into a context where the dimensions of law, identity, morality, reputation, and economy also matter” (41). As we have seen, ethics is a complicated field, and people in working life have obligations beyond merely behaving ethically. It can therefore be difficult to keep track of all the relevant aspects of moral dilemmas. The wheel helps remind us of these aspects, and the options that are available to us.

In the final part of the book, Kvalnes considers the limitations of ethical analysis. He introduces the process of *moral neutralization*. When we are faced with a moral dilemma, or a conflict of interest, we are exposed to *moral dissonance*, a concept that describes “... a situation where a person has the option to act against his moral commitments and convictions” (78). This type of situation can result in moral neutralization. Instead of choosing a side in the dilemma, and acknowledging our action as an ethical one, we can explain away the moral sides of our action, and do what suits us best. This can happen through five different techniques: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher authority (78). These techniques can become routine in organizations and in people, and what Kvalnes calls *normalization of questionable behavior* can occur. The behavior can become routine, and we can become blind to our own unethical behavior. This process is in part subconscious. We fool ourselves just as much as we fool others, and this process may sometimes be better described as something that merely happens, rather than something that is actively done.

As a tool against the dangers of moral neutralization, Kvalnes suggests creating a transparent culture, where one “... encourage(s) people to speak up and confront colleagues who appear to be engaged in moral neutralization” (89). Knowledge about our cognitive biases can function as a defense against biases, but it can also enable us to identify biases in others, and it can enable us to correct our coworkers. If Haidt (2012) is to be believed, our rationality evolved partly in order for us to defend ourselves in social settings. Because of this, we work harder to look right than to be right. But if we have a transparent organization, where our actions can be called into question, we are more likely to do the right thing. As Haidt (2012:88) writes: “... when people know in advance that they'll have to explain themselves, they think more systematically and self-critically.” Here we are using a cognitive bias in order to promote good behavior.

Kvalnes's book does not dive deeply into philosophical discussions or try to settle major debates. Instead, it humbly tries to make clear the strengths and weaknesses of different ethical approaches. This gives the book a practical or even

therapeutic function. It gives the reader a better understanding of both ethics and human weakness, which can make the reader better equipped to handle difficult moral dilemmas and situations. The fact that there is no final answer to how we can ensure good behavior in organizations, and the fact that psychological forces have a large influence on our decisions, might leave one skeptical towards the whole ethical endeavor, but the kind of psychology-based approach Kvalnes suggest may be our best hope. He shows that some measures against unethical behavior are better than other, and this shows that promoting ethics in organizations can have a positive impact if done correctly.

Philosophers may find the book somewhat disappointing if they expect to learn more about theoretical ethics, since the theoretical content of the book is somewhat basic, but the book is well suited to help people in organizational life develop a fundamental understanding of ethics. And it presents highly applicable tools that can make working life more humane. This is arguably a more noble pursuit than solving intricate theoretical ethical questions, as the type of book that Kvalnes has produced has a greater potential for making the world a better place.

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Notes

¹ Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist who has conducted experiments that indicate that social factors have a heavy influence on our ethical decision-making and deliberation.

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