

# Are ethics in entrepreneurship possible at all?

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The present paper is concerned with the ethics of the conduct of entrepreneurs and ethical principles of entrepreneurs. Due to the visible economic dynamics as well as development of entrepreneurship supported by government administration, ethical issues related to these fields are becoming prominent.

It seems that employment priority is currently treated as an antidote for most of the problems that the economy is faced with (it eliminates unemployment, allows to use the human capital in a better way, minimizes the problem of social exclusion, enables self-realization, etc.). The most powerful impetus to the development of entrepreneurship is the very high contribution of small and medium-sized enterprises to the Gross Domestic Product. Is such rapid development of entrepreneurship in comparison to fierce competition on the more and more demanding market a threat to the principles of ethical conduct in business? Are ethics – so important from the perspective of the society – possible in business activity at all? The problem under discussion is important not only for the entrepreneurs themselves but also for their employees, the employees' families as well as the whole social system, etc. The deliberations presented in this article lead to a gloomy conclusion that business, as it appears, may do without ethics and actions within enterprises or among them are chiefly based not quite on a sense of togetherness, common good or purpose but, e. g. on misconceived competition. According to the authors, such a state of affairs is a consequence of, among other things, a redefinition of the notion of conscience and lack of proper upbringing.

**Key words:** ethics, business ethics, entrepreneurship

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## INTRODUCTION

In view of civilizational maturity, development of societies while having regard for cultural diversity as well as experiences gained from history, it might seem that operation in compliance with

the law, respect for human dignity, and application of the fair play principle to competition would be obvious. Legislation concerning the economy and business activity undergoes changes working towards high standards of regulation. These changes are predominantly intended to provide clear economic standards, protect the rights of the weak, maintain integrity, and put a stop to any abuse in business activity both global and local. One should note that new concepts are also emerging in management science, such as, e. g. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Moreover, completely new and more favourable conditions foster the explosive growth of entrepreneurship and emergence of new companies. Entrepreneurship allows to counter unemployment (in rather difficult rural areas as well), works against the so-called social/professional exclusion, and, above all, is the biggest contributor to the Gross Domestic Product and thus to the development of national economies as well.

Numerous benefits arising from entrepreneurship indeed encourage setting up own business. However, is this sudden boom in entrepreneurship a threat to the already existing entrepreneurial culture? Will new entrepreneurs chasing quick profit, who often have no formal education in the relevant field and come from various social backgrounds (with different value systems), conduct their business activity in accordance with the principles advocated by normative ethics? Are ethics in entrepreneurship/business possible at all?

## CONTEMPORARY ENTREPRENEURSHIP

“Entrepreneurship” is an extremely complex and somewhat controversial phenomenon (Vivarelli 2013). Because of this there is no one definition of this term in the literature and it is considered in many different ways as a multidimensional construct.

It can be recognized, for example, as 1) the process of creating something new and valuable through substantial time and effort, accompanied by financial, mental, and social risk as well as the anticipated reward (Hisrich, Peters, Shepherd 2005); 2) a type of human activity (one consisting of taking advantage of opportunities that occur in a particular environment by implementing undertakings that generate economic or non-economic benefits); and 3) a feature, i. e. a set of behavior models, enabling the creation and realization of business undertakings that are aimed at achieving a certain purpose (Janasz 2004: 18–24).

In the last years, a notable growth of newly founded enterprises has been observed. The same tendency is observed in Poland. In 2009, the number of newly registered business entities in Poland amounted to 349.6 thousand, which is the highest figure since the year 2000 (Polish Ministry of Economy 2010). In 2013, Poland ranked 45th in the world in the ease of operating a business (The World Bank 2013).

These newly founded enterprises are mostly micro, small, and medium-sized companies (SMEs) – 99.8% in European Union. In Poland, for example, 1.78 million operational companies, entities from the SME sector constitute an overwhelming majority (99.8%); however, this sector is dominated by micro companies to a greater extent than in the EU, as such firms account for a greater percentage of the total (96%) than the European average (93%).

According to the research conducted in Poland, students play the leading position in the group of potential Polish entrepreneurs. The majority of them plan to start their own business activity (Banerski, Gryzik, Matusiak, Mażewska, Stawasz 2009; Staniewski, Szopiński 2013). The largest group is students above the age of 25 (Staniewski, Szopiński 2013).

Of adult Polish citizens, 22% declare an intention to start a business, and the corresponding figure for the European Union is 13% (Tarnawa, Zadura-Lichota 2013). According to Reynolds

(1997), seven out of ten companies in the USA may be established by individuals between the ages of 25 and 34.

Analyzing the factors influencing entrepreneurial behavior, statistically significant correlations between readiness to start a business and sex, age, academic major, and parents' business activity have been observed (Staniewski, Szopiński 2013). Men were more eager to declare that they were prepared to undertake a business activity.

Entrepreneurship is particularly important for the world economy, especially if we consider the role, played of SME. The contribution of newly established enterprises to the GDP in 1995 was 30% and amounted to as much as about 48% in the first years of the 21st century (Dominiak 2005: 91–108). In 2011, the SMEs operating in Poland generated nearly three-fourths of the Polish GDP (71.8%) (Łapiński, Nieć, Rzeźnik, Zakrzewski 2013). At the same time, the proportion of the employed in SMEs in relation to the total employed population was 70.2% (Łapiński et al. 2013). At the end of 2011, the number of people employed in newly-established SMEs amounted to 443.8 thousand people (Łapiński et al. 2013).

To summarize, it is necessary to highlight that entrepreneurship is the engine for economic growth, both for developed and developing countries (Koellinger, Thurik 2012), a remedy against unemployment, and means of employment creation (Ayyagari, Demirguc-Kunt, Maksimovic 2011).

Such profound development of entrepreneurship observable all over the world may seem like a threat to the already existing principles, good practices, and ethics of the so called 'big business'. For instance, rapid development of new enterprises may paralyse the offices serving the functions of control and regulation. In fact, it is possible that substantial benefits that entrepreneurship brings about – especially in economic terms – may encourage government institutions to assent to behavioural patterns contrary to ethics. Therefore, it is justified to ask whether the existence of ethical normative regulations in all types of business activity is necessary.

## ETHICS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In order to discuss ethics in business, two issues must be differentiated. Business ethics as a variation of professional ethics – which is a certain subdiscipline of ethics pursued by professional ethicists and institutional or even academic in character – are different from ethics in business understood as the necessity to engage in ethical conduct in the real world of business. The existence of business ethics in an institutional sense is evidenced, e. g. by academic lectures on ethics or publications on the topic. Obviously, it does not necessarily testify to the philosophical or theoretical value of these actions. In pursuance of the objectives of the present paper, the significance of ethics in business as well as application of ethics in entrepreneurship will be deliberated on.

In order to support the thesis put forward in the introduction, the following three arguments will be presented:

- 1) Entrepreneurship as activity influenced by the principles of supply and demand as such is not subject to ethical valuation;
- 2) In the contemporary world of globalisation, activities undertaken by businesses are compelled by processes occurring on a global scale, which a single enterprise has no influence on;
- 3) There is no notion of the subject in business (and it is necessary to bear in mind that the notion of the subject is understood in line with traditional philosophy) (Czarnecki 2006; 2008).

All the three arguments are based on a distinction between an enterprise and an entrepreneur. Not enough attention is paid to this distinction, whereas it appears to be of key importance

for the assessment of the possibilities of applying business ethics and thus engaging in ethical conduct in business. Predominantly, the difference between an enterprise and an entrepreneur lies in disparate purposes of activity. The objective of an enterprise is to produce certain goods, while the aim of an entrepreneur is to generate profit on sales of these goods. For instance, shoe manufacturing is the purpose of an enterprise, whereas earning profit from sales of these shoes is the goal of an entrepreneur (Bocheński 1993). Increased demand for the products manufactured by a given enterprise leads to an increase in production, and lower demand causes a decrease in production. On a free market, a decline in demand leads to bankruptcy of some companies, a rise in unemployment, impoverishment of certain social groups, etc.

The first two arguments in the substantiation of the thesis seem irrefutable. Only argument 3 may fall subject to discussion. And so, if it turned out that the notion of the subject may not be applied in deliberations on business, it would mean that ethical considerations concerned with business activity are impossible. This is because we assume that the subject is always an inevitable element of an ethical action. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine that, for example, two trees, two stones, or two companies as non-subjective beings could operate on the basis of moral emotions. In any case, intervention of consciousness is necessary and only then we may discuss behavioural patterns which are in accordance, in this case, with business ethics.

The literature on ethics generally presents business ethics as the ethics of an enterprise or the ethics of business life as such (Jedynak 1999). The term business ethics may also be defined in as broad terms as possible. For instance, according to the authors of *Mały słownik etyczny* [Small Dictionary of Ethics] (Jedynak 1999), business ethics are interested in such notions as: acceptance of human dignity, the principles of democracy or peace, the relations between the employer and the employee, ethical attributes of entrepreneurs, etc. However, if conceptualized in such broad terms, business ethics simply become the ethics of public life and any conclusion drawn is equally relevant for entrepreneurship and other areas of social life. Whereas, it is necessary to define the specific character of business ethics so that application of these ethics in a given reality will not be questioned.

Hence we claim that business ethics are a type of philosophical reflection upon the values and moral principles that an enterprise is obliged to materialize or that anyone who undertakes whatever economic activity is required to materialize. The point of departure for this type of deliberations is a claim that the economy should serve the human being and so we should know what detailed norms are applicable to activity undertaken as part of running a business.

Analysis of the notion of the subject in classical and contemporary philosophy – even if performed exclusively for business ethics – would go beyond the present deliberations and thus we will only focus on one condition that must inevitably be met in order for us to discuss the moral subject – **conscience**. Both in classical and contemporary philosophy, conscience is defined as the inner voice (e. g. the voice of God, according to St. Thomas) which is heard at contact of the human with the world of ethical values. This voice belongs exclusively to a human being as an individual and never to the human race in general. The voice of conscience is not the same as the social sense of rightness or wrongness of, e. g. events that occur. As far as this understanding is concerned, the Kantian ethics regarding exclusively the individual (and not collective) subject should be mentioned. According to this philosopher, each person is a moral being capable of distinguishing right from wrong and this power is referred to as conscience. “Conscience – as Kant puts it – is original, <...> every man has, as a moral being, a conscience”. Next, Kant proceeds to claim that: “Conscience is man’s practical reason, which does, in all circumstances, hold before him his law of duty, in order to absolve or to condemn him” (Kant 1886: 213).

And the practical mind is that of an individual. Hegel as well discusses the individual and sees conscience as a process of defining the right, which occurs inside the thoughts (Hegel 1969). Although he distinguishes individual from objective, that is social, conscience, this distinction arises from the general assumptions underlying his philosophical system (in Hegel's system, the right is part of the objective spirit and may be materialized only at the level of the whole society [the state, humanity, history, etc.]) and is related to the society as such and not to individual communities and much less to organizations operating within a particular society (Loidolt 2009). It is worth noting that both for Kantian ethics, along with their central tenet – the practical reason, and the ethics rejecting scientific rigorism and excluding the possibility to draw conclusions on morality from analysis based purely on language or logic, the individual subject is the hub of all cogitation. Differences between these two types of ethics with regard to the late philosophy of Husserl are discussed by S. Loidolt (2009).

Contemporary philosophy also considers conscience as the inevitable provision for the existence of a moral subject. E. g. according to Heidegger, conscience is a 'voice' or a 'call' not in the sense of communication (of something to somebody), but in the sense of implication. "If the everyday interpretation knows about a 'voice' of conscience – says Heidegger – it is thinking not so much about an utterance, which can factually never be found, but 'voice' is understood as giving-to-understand. In the tendency toward disclosure of the call lies the factor of a jolt, of an abrupt arousal" (Heidegger 1996: 251). Disclosure passes over beyond, on the one hand, any references of the individual self to community life and, on the other hand, the tendency to "unrestrainedly dissect <...> 'inner life' with excited curiosity" or "stare 'analytically' at states of the soul". The call of conscience may be misunderstood, though, and be "distorted in its character of disclosure" (Heidegger 1996: 252–253). S. Geniušas (2009) advocates that the primary contribution of Heidegger (and the whole phenomenology for that matter) is the fact that areas which are not directly part of ethics but lay theoretical foundations for ethics have been made available for ethical consideration.

Whereas E. Levinas believes that the capability of distinguishing moral right from wrong emerges provided that 'the Other' – a different moral subject – is present, which is perceived as such a subject. Levinas accentuates that ethical doubts, i. e. being conscious of moral right and wrong, could not come into existence, if it had not been for meeting another human being. By meeting another human being 'face-to-face', a certain 'grouping' occurs, which is different from a purely cognitive relation between the subject and the object due to the fact that the other human being may not be reduced to any general category. It is not, therefore, a cognitive but ethical 'grouping'. "Being a grouping quite different from the synthesis – as Levinas puts it – it initiates a proximity different from the one that presides over the synthesis of data, uniting them into a "world" of parts within a whole. The "thought" awakened in the face or by the face is commanded by an irreducible difference: thought which is not a thought of, but, from the very beginning, a thought for..." (Levinas 1998: 185–186). Thus according to Levinas (1984), an ethical relation, and at the same time manifestation of ethical sensitivity, i. e. conscience, is established at contact with the Other – contact with the Other's face which the subject may not remain indifferent to and which imposes an obligation on them.

Although conscience is attributed exclusively to an individual, only the functioning within a community allows to ask questions about the sense of one's own existence and formulate answers to those questions. T. Kačerauskas notes that answers to the questions concerning the purpose of our existence, including questions about ethical values as well, are always sought within a community (Kačerauskas 2010). This fact seems to give rise to an error consisting in

equating the individual's ethical obligations with the obligations of the community.

In the philosophy of Levinas, contact with the Other constitutes, on the one hand, the moment of establishment of an ethical relation and, on the other hand, a type of a bridge connecting ethics with ontology. The attempt of Levinas at constructing 'ontological ethics' appears to be justified as ethical considerations in a strict sense must take into account the existence of a certain continuum between ethics and ontology. However, validation of this oneness may only be sought at the level of reflection on the existence of a human as an individual being and never at the level of collective beings, such as human organisations. For instance, the problem of death is one which combines ethical and ontological perspectives (Kačerauskas 2009), while it seems unquestionable that death is an exclusively individual phenomenon. The notion of freedom may also be considered from the point of view of ethics as well as ontology only if individual freedom is addressed (Briedis 2009). The latter point of view was adopted by, among others, Husserl. Whereas existentialists, with Sartre in the forefront, have made an attempt at ascertainment of the consequences that ethics *sensu stricte* would bear due to taking a phenomenological perspective on freedom (Briedis 2009).

The loneliness of conscience – as Barthes might perhaps put it (Barthes 1978) – is most fully realized in a situation in which there is a rational sense of necessity which an individual is not able to abide by. To put it differently: even though the subject is aware of the moral imperative as well as the rules of proper conduct in relation to another human being, they are able to act contrary to knowledge on the norms of appropriate behaviour when faced with profit – e. g. emotional or, *toutes proportions gardées*, economic. Such objectification of the subject and hence a distance between the conscience and what is different, alien, or dangerous is even more visible in Foucault's critique. Precisely, the operation of an oppressive system of stigmatization consists, among others, in depriving conscience of subjective relationships and thus responsibility. In other words, what is objectified – or defined, named – eludes meta-ethics and normative ethics. Application of specific ethics to, e. g. business deprives them of primary principles and thus makes them prone if not to complete evaporation then certainly to far-reaching modification (Foucault 1961). Such a principle may be exploited by the entrepreneur by simply bending the rules to serve just one value – the profit.

## SUMMARY

Obligations contained in ethical codes are complied with in the period of prosperity. In crisis situations, however, where human relationships become objectified, only profit and survival matters, and conscience is forgotten in the end, no ethics apply. Since allegiance to the principles that one declares is so difficult, we have initially formulated a question whether ethics in business are possible at all and whether there are any boundaries as to their application.

Any ethical action is based on specific ethical reasoning (whether real or merely potential). This reasoning is related to the subject of the action and it is intended to determine what ethical values are involved in a given action and how to act in order not to infringe any significant values. Whereas an enterprise as a certain organizational and legal entity is surely not a subject in an ethical sense. Although it seemingly operates in the same way as an ethical subject in a strict sense, i. e. it pursues coherent goals using certain resources and bears the consequences of its action, it lacks at least one inevitable attribute nonetheless, namely, conscience.

In the circumstances marked by fierce market competition and the striving for the biggest profit – at all costs – an assumption about ethical conduct of entrepreneurs finds no justification. What is more, the companies which abide by the principles of ethics and the

entrepreneurs who act in accordance with the voice of conscious run the risk of economic losses and in consequence – termination of activity. When acting in compliance with ethical rules is not possible, the consequences of following them must be considered. This, however, leads to conclusions contrary to the above-mentioned institutional ethics whose task is first and foremost to introduce and preserve these very principles.

Business ethics are specific ethics whose main foundation is a commonly accepted ethical system. They are of particular importance and serve, first and foremost, to avoid moral malaise and the use of non-humanitarian practices. Are they possible though? Certainly, one of the solutions would be to teach moral principles such as abiding by one's word, i. e. contracts, turning to negotiation instead of physical extortion, being punctual, reliable, etc. from early childhood. The family, nursery school, school, the university as well as workplace should all participate in this process.

Perhaps this is what work should begin from – the basics which must be taught so that attitude of potential future entrepreneurs towards ethics will be different.

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## Ar įmanoma verslo etika?

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama verslininkų elgsenos etika ir jų etiniai principai. Dinamiškai plėtojantis ekonomikai ir verslumui, remiamai vyriausybės, etikos klausimai, susiję su šia sritimi, tampa vis svarbesni. Didelis postūmis verslumui plėtotis yra mažos ir vidutinės įmonės, kuriančios nacionalinį produktą. Kyla klausimas, ar tokia sparti verslumo plėtra varžantis rinkoje nekelia grėsmės verslo etikos pagrindams; ar socialiai svarbi etika apskritai galima versle? Ši diskutuotina problema aktuali ne tik patiems verslininkams, bet ir jų šeimos, visai socialinei sistemai. Straipsnyje svarstoma, gal verslas gali apsieiti be etikos, o verslo veikla paremta ne bendrumo jausmu, bendru gėriu ar tikslu, bet klaidingai suprasta konkurencija. Pasak autorių, tai lemia neteisingai apibrėžtos sąvokos ir netinkamai ugdoma visuomenė.

**Raktažodžiai:** etika, verslo etika, verslumas