

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Dialogical Ethics and Market Information

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ABSTRACT

We apply dialogism to ethical thought to form a theory of Dialogical Ethics (DE). Specifically, Dialogical Ethics is defined as the interplay between four historic ethical traditions: Formal (Kantian) Ethics, Content-Sense (Utilitarian) Ethics, Answerability Ethics, and Value/Virtue (Story) Ethics. However, on a broader level, Dialogical Ethics is the interplay between the dominant ethical systems of society. We then use DE to analyze four consumption-ethics problems. Two can be described as information tragedies and two are related to an overemphasis on Kantian and Utilitarian Ethics. Finally, we suggest a re-emphasis on Value Ethics and Answerability Ethics. We also suggest that business educators find ways to teach not only *techne* but also *phronesis*.

Keywords: Dialogism, Ethics, Answerability, Information, Consumption

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Introduction

Ethical ideas are disseminated throughout society and culture in many forms. Some possible forms include Sunday sermons, parental advice, the media, the actions of others, corporate training programs, workplace interactions, and discussions amongst friends. The result of this dialogue is a complex web of lived experience upon which every individual draws (consciously and unconsciously). The sum total of an individual's lived experience then becomes a factor in determining how, at a specific time, place, and situation an individual will choose to act.

The perspective that we take in this article is that no one ethical code can be used to understand an individual's actions. Rather, from a complex web of ideas, dialogism emerges, in which an individual, by merely observing, interpreting or acting becomes a part. Our viewpoint of ethics can be described as Dialogical Ethics. Specifically, Dialogical Ethics (DE) is defined as the interplay between four historic ethical traditions: Formal (Kantian) Ethics, Content-Sense (Utilitarian) Ethics, Answerability Ethics, and Value/Virtue (Story) Ethics. However, on a broader level, Dialogical Ethics is the interplay between the dominant ethical systems of a society. As we delve into this idea, we look at how these ethical traditions interact and influence an individual.

<<Figure 1>>

Dialogical ethics aims to understand the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions inherent in mainstream business ethics paradigms. Our perspective is critical of an overemphasis on the epistemological assumptions of Kantian and Utilitarian ethics (both of which are prevalent in mainstream business ethics paradigms). We find that the epistemological focus of these ethical paradigms results in them being easily misappropriated by individuals and society for unethical purposes. Any ethical system can be used destructively, but we find that the destructive use of

Kantian and Utilitarian ethics results in some of the great injustices of our time, environmental degradation and sweatshop/slave labor in the global market system. We recommend a rebalancing of Kantian and Utilitarian ethics in business with the ontological focus of Answerability and Value Ethics.

Dialogical ethics is relevant to management decision-making and individual consumption choices. As the information environment changes, consumer awareness also changes. This awareness has the potential to transform an ordinary purchase into an ethical purchase decision. To illustrate the importance that the information environment plays we consider two tragedies of information, *The Tragedy of Cassandra* and *The Tragedy of Oedipus*.

The Tragedy of Cassandra

The Greek god, Apollo, taught Cassandra how to predict the future. This blessing is later turned into a curse when Apollo makes those who hear her accurate foretelling of future events to believe that they are lies. Cassandra learned of the impending destruction of Troy via the Trojan horse, yet no one listened to her warnings. Cassandra watched helplessly as Troy was burned to the ground. Cassandra's tragedy was one of information (Floridi, 2006). She received very useful information, but found herself powerless to use this information to effect any change.

This is similar to what an individual is experiencing who learns of societal problems such as environmental degradation, sweatshop abuses, or other geopolitical issues, yet feels powerless to effect change. Within the context of consumption, this sense of powerlessness often pervades. Take for instance, environmental degradation. On some level, most are aware that our consumption activities are adding up on a global scale causing massive problems. Deforestation, destructive mining practices and pollution (greenhouse gases and toxic chemicals) are a direct result of our consumption activities. Despite this growing awareness (I had never heard of a carbon footprint ten years ago), most just feel powerless and continue to maintain the same consumption habits that have been ingrained as habit since childhood.

We continue to purchase material goods that bring about destruction and a depletion of resources. A 3000+ square foot home, countless plastic toys for our

children, ten magazine and newspaper subscriptions, one or more automobiles, big screen televisions, even bottled water and soft drinks – when over a billion people desire these things - the result is an unleashing of an immensely destructive force upon nature, a tragedy of the commons. Many consumers choose, to some degree, to make modest efforts at change such as recycling, perhaps an occasional refrained purchase, or purchasing a hybrid vehicle. These changes everyone recognizes as a start, but the overall feeling is one of powerlessness as information reports continue to trickle in of environmental degradation, labor and child exploitation in third world countries, war that is fought over oil, and the violence and corruption that results from narcotics and human trafficking. We know on some level what are the end results of our cumulative lifestyles. Those who have this information are living the tragedy of Cassandra.

The root of the Tragedy of Cassandra is information, but a lack of power (Florida, 2006). Many consumers who learn of global problems simply shrug their shoulders and say, “But what can I do?” A sense of helplessness pervades. Others choose to take action and feel that they have the power to effect change. Are their actions bringing change or are they in vain like Oedipus’ actions?

The Tragedy of Oedipus

The root of the Oedipus tragedy is somewhat different. Oedipus also suffered from information that he received (he learned that he would kill his father and marry his mother). In this case, Oedipus had a sense of power and a desire to avoid his fate (he attempted to avoid his fate by leaving Corinth), but he lacked the pertinent information (he did not know the identity of his real father and mother). Since, Oedipus lacked information his destiny was tragically fulfilled.

This is oftentimes the case for individuals who feel empowered by boycotting ethically irresponsible products and even engaging in consumer activism. Their battle is one of getting the pertinent information. Initially, activists received correct information about Nike’s use of sweatshops. From 1986-2003, Nike accounted for 61% of the total number of news report mentions on sweatshops and human rights abuses compared to only 3.1% for Reebok (Sethi, 2003). As a result, Nike’s sales, profits, and stock values decreased during the 1990s.

Reebok on the other hand, appeared to be a model corporate citizen by implementing a corporate code of conduct on labor standards in supplier factories. They followed up this policy by using information in the form of press releases, advertising, and corporate reports to convince the activists that their products were sweatshop free. For instance, Reebok sponsored a “Human Rights Now!” world concert tour at a price of \$10 million dollars (Yu, 2008). This was a shrewd tactic on Reebok’s part. They were able to position themselves as the supposed leader in CSR at the same time as it raised awareness of the issue (which further hurt Nike).

However, this information is only a part of the story behind Reebok. In a case study of a major supplier to Reebok in China, findings indicate that many of the most inhumane labor practices were indeed curbed (such as child labor, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, and severe disciplinary methods to punish workers). However, Reebok did not give a higher price for the goods received from their suppliers. The end result was that the suppliers passed the increased cost of conforming to Reebok’s labor related codes directly to the workers. Ironically, the end result of Reebok’s CSR standards was that Chinese workers for this supplier “were forced to work harder, faster but earn less payment which was no longer sufficient to meet basic needs of workers themselves and their family dependents” (Yu, 2008, p. 525). Industry-wide labor practices for the most part, had remained unchanged. Activists had felt empowered (they boycotted Nike and perhaps bought Reebok instead), but in actuality had brought little change.

Nike has since adapted. The company seeks to propagate information that portrays Nike as socially responsible and not involved in sweatshop labor practices. Consumers who are concerned with CSR issues could visit Nike.com and Nikebiz.com and find information about programs that Nike has enacted including Livestrong products, ninemillion.org, and the Nike Foundation to name a few. A concerned consumer can spend hours perusing the website. For instance there is a 48 page document entitled “Workers in Contract Factories” (Nike, 2008).

However, a concerned consumer would receive contradictory information by using the Google search query “Nike sweatshop”. At the top of the search results is a

website for the Nike Campaign (Global Exchange, 2007) with the ominous lines appearing below the website listing: “Read Global Exchange's report about how Nike remains unwilling to tackle the underlying causes of sweatshop abuses”. Not a single positive website appears in the top 20 Google search results.

This information could leave a concerned individual unsure of how to interpret the contradictory information received. Even the academic research is contradictory. The following (Nike sponsored) research portrays Nike in a positive light: (Young and Jordan, 1997; Mihaly and Massey 1997; Kahle, Boush and Phelps (2000) and the 16 St. John’s University students’ inspections of Nike subcontractors factories (Nike, 2000). While the following non-sponsored academic research, (Bissel et al. 2000; Cole 1996, 1997; Boje 1998, 1999), remains critical of Nike. The end result from the consumer’s perspective is that they are likely to act on information that is of the wrong type as Oedipus did. What kind of ethical decision making will a consumer make who searches the Internet for 20 minutes, one hour, or 36 hours on Nike. How will they filter through the “interplay of Nike writing and resistance writing” (Boje, 2001)? Will they buy Nike’s apparel?

Using Dialogical Ethics, we seek to understand these two information tragedies. We also seek to understand why some resist and scoff at the notion of ethical consumption (the bad) and why others choose to remain unaware and completely oblivious to the possibility of ethics in consumption (the ugly). We intend to explore this subject through the lens of the interplay of four different yet interdependent ethical positions, deep conflicts inherent in humanity (Fromm, 1947) and the rise in the amount and availability of information in society.

The structure of this article is as follows: First, we look at the growing instances of ethical consumption in the literature and the changing context of information availability. Then, we apply Dialogical Ethics to four different ethical philosophies. Finally, we conclude with some suggestions for future research as well as ways in which ethics education can improve the injustices in the market system.

The changing context: information availability

One area where the research seems to agree is that there is a general increase in the awareness of the possibilities for ethical consumption (Freestone and McGoldrick, 2007). Previous research has attempted to explain this growing awareness. Market and information campaigns from companies with a vested interest in creating more ethical consumers have been proposed as the reason (Harrison et al., 2005). Also, consumer activism such as pressure groups and boycott activities is increasing (Auger et al., 2003; Harrison et al., 2005). Consumer activism can figure prominently in increasing awareness through traditional media coverage as well as through word-of-mouth. Another phenomenon that explains growing awareness is the idea of consumer sophistication (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). The sophisticated consumer has been found to be better informed about consumer rights and product characteristics than was the case in earlier times (Hirschman, 1980; Barnes and McTavish, 1983).

A common denominator, (yet not explicitly stated) is the increase in the availability of information. As shown above, scholars over a 27-year period (Hirschman, 1980 – Freestone and McGoldrick, 2007) have remarked on the increasing availability of information. The fact that today, information about the positive or negative ethical attributes of products can more readily be obtained represents a fundamental contextual shift for ethics research. In other words, our information environment has become highly developed.

This contextual shift poses ethical choices and dilemmas that consumers in the 21st century are facing that for the most part were absent from the consumer decision-making process in previous centuries. In the following sections, we examine how consumers are dealing with the changing information environment. Are consumers' decision-making reflecting an increase in ethical responsibility? Do consumers find themselves answerable for the things that they are buying?

Philosophical Perspectives

Dialogism comes from the Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin. He theorized that certain works of literature, language and even all thought did not exist in a vacuum, but rather exists in a dynamic state - forming a web of interrelatedness. Thoughts and words are expressed not only in response to things that have already been said, but also in

anticipation of how others will respond to what is about to be said. All thought holds to this concept.

We apply dialogism to ethical thought to form a theory of Dialogical Ethics (DE). According to DE, ethical thought always exists in relation to other, differing ethical thoughts or ideas. This creates constant ethical redescriptions of the social world. Not only do ethical theories exist in relation to other ethical theories, but individual ethical action would also necessarily be influenced by competing ethical theories and (indeed) the ethical actions of others. To illustrate, our theory, we choose four prominent ethical systems (Boje, 2008), and how they interact and influence an individual. These four types are formal ethics (Kantian categorical imperative), content-sense ethics (such as Utilitarianism), answerability ethics and value ethics. Of course, DE need not be contained to a description of these general ethical systems, in fact other ethical systems may be more appropriate for understanding ethical decision making in certain societies. For instance, formal ethics holds considerable influence in Western societies. In Eastern Societies, it may be more appropriate to illustrate DE by using Confucian or Buddhist Philosophies.

What makes DE pertinent to business, is the interesting societal outcomes and tensions that are caused by an overemphasis on one type of ethical system over another and the resulting constructive and destructive applications of those ethical systems. (See Figure 1.)

Formal (Kantian) Ethics

Kantian (or formal) ethics emerges as a dominant viewpoint in Western thought, particularly with respect to the influence of deontology. Deontology is a theory that seeks to find moral norms through the use of categorical imperatives or universal laws. According to Kant (1785), the categorical imperatives must be determined through metaphysics and pure reasoning and logic. Pure or rational reasoning must be free from any situational influences. Situational influences such as an individual's lived experiences can only cloud pure reasoning, resulting in invalid moral norms. As a result, moral norms then come from outside the individual, a priori to an individual's lived experience. A key assumption is that since all people are rational, we will all conform to

the same moral laws that are determined according to pure reason. Since the moral norm was determined rationally outside of any single person's lived experience, then the universal law binds everyone across time and space.

In formal ethics, morality exists independently from any individual, at any time, and in any space. It is at this point that morality succumbs to "fatal theoreticism (the abstracting from my unique self)" (Bakhtin, 1993, pg. 27). Any deed that is subjected to moral judgment takes place in a theoretical world, yet "provides no approach for a living act performed in the real world" (Bakhtin 1993, pg. 27). The law of formal ethics is that one should follow the law. Hence, formal ethics regresses into an empty prescriptive ethics. "The law of the conformity-to-the-law is an empty formula of pure theoreticism" (Bakhtin 1993, pg. 27).

When this prescriptive ethics leaves the world of the universal and seeks to enter the unique, time and place specific world of individual actions, at best, an individual is left with the following idea. "I should probably follow the law because it is the right, rational thing to do." This is precisely what has been found in the marketing literature where the average consumer tends to equate ethically wrong actions with illegal actions (Vitell and Muncy, 1992). Formal ethics is "merely a domain of modern philosophy of culture" (Bakhtin, 1993, pg. 27).

Despite the demonstrable philosophical problems, formal ethics does have considerable influence in Western societies and lends itself to a number of socially practical concepts such as a respect for rationally determined rules and laws. However, equating legality with ethical and moral behavior can lead to a dangerous game of rationalization of behavior, such that there is little for which individuals will hold themselves accountable. A person can reason that as long as I don't break any rules, then I am secure in the idea that I am a good person/good citizen. The end result of this attitude is the use of norms as a way to evade individual responsibility (Belova, 2008). Operating according to a set of categorical imperatives results in only a fraction of an individual's behavior being moderated. Individuals will choose not to kill or not to steal based on a categorical imperative, but with regards to the thousands of actions that we choose to make in a day, plus the thousands of actions that we choose not to make in a

day, formal ethics holds no sway. The end result is that formal ethics furnishes an alibi where the idea of personal responsibility is minimized. “For someone to be moral, then, the question to ask is not how should I act in a given situation but rather, how do I act to fulfill my duty as commanded by a (moral) law” (Belova, 2008).

An individual influenced by Kantian ethics, will see their duty as a blind obedience to the law. They may from time to time, feel like Cassandra over information received. However, this information is quickly rationalized and discounted. They simply admit their powerlessness and deny responsibility. They may even not be interested in seeking out more information, deciding to leave those matters up to others such as lawmakers or policymakers. After all, they did not break any rules or laws by purchasing a product. They feel pain, just as Cassandra, but lack any motivation to change the system. Instead, they reason, if the product is so bad, then someone should make a law against that product. Just as Pontius Pilate, they wash their hands of any wrongdoing and point to problems with the system, which they obviously didn’t create. “We consciously believe in man’s power and dignity, but –often unconsciously- we also believe in man’s – and particularly our own – powerlessness and badness and explain it by pointing to human nature.” (Fromm, 1947) They fail to recognize their complicity in the system or any real responsibility to change the system. Furthermore, they may then choose to ignore new information altogether – knowing that such information will cause them to feel the pain of knowing like Cassandra. A psychological strategy of avoidance is chosen. They are the ugly.

Content-Sense (Utilitarian) Ethics

Bakhtin defines content-sense ethics as a specific approach or method of ethical inquiry. Content-sense ethics “endeavors to find and to ground special moral norms that have a definite content – norms that are sometimes universally valid and sometimes primordially relative, but in any case universal, applicable to everyone” (Bakhtin, 1993, pg. 22). Because of their genesis from human experience they hold considerable influence in the dialogic ethical climate of human experience. Their closeness to human experience means that these ethical systems (such as medical ethics or business ethics) do not succumb to fatal theoreticism as formal ethics do. Furthermore, they can result in a

much greater penetration into everyday situations offering more guidance and generally a greater sense of answerability than just a general sense of “I must follow the rules”. Thus, some of the flaws of formal ethics are avoided by content-sense ethics. And the extent to which these two balance each other result in a certain amount of employability of the two systems in ethical everyday life. One system demands our obedience to the law and rational thought while the other system helps to create useful guidelines that can be applied to everyday life situations. Furthermore, with content-sense ethics, individuals tend to take more responsibility than they would with formal ethics. This genesis of responsibility comes from the acknowledgment that an individual is part of a group. For instance, simply by being a doctor one recognizes that they are part of the medical system. They take the Hippocratic Oath and thus take responsibility for the ethicality of the medical system. The same applies for Business Ethics, by acknowledging that you are a businessman or an employee, one takes on a mantle of responsibility to competently fulfill tasks in an ethically prescribed manner. There is often also a felt responsibility for the company’s reputation as well as its well-being (aka profitability).

However, content-sense ethics is not a panacea. The problem with content-sense ethics is its claim for universality. Since the grounding of the ethical ideas occur in a specific discipline, (e.g. business, biology, medicine, logic or aesthetics) the only real structure is that they are similar to scientific norms that have not been effectively proven. The result is that content-sense ethics are nothing more than “practically useful generalization(s) or conjecture(s)... an indiscriminate conglomeration of various principles and evaluations” (Bakhtin, 1993, pg.23). “The ethical ought is tacked on from the outside” or assumed to apply to everyone at all times and in all situations (Bakhtin, 1993, pg. 23). Norms chosen by a select few are universally imposed on the majority. Universality supplants the individual.

However, what happens when an individual or a select few (sometimes well-meaning, sometimes not) create even greater lists of virtues that are actually defects? These defects are what Spinoza calls socially patterned defects (Spinoza, 1677). The results of these defects is that individuals fail to achieve their full potential as human beings (Fromm, 1947). Socially patterned defects arise when groups create a set of virtues that are inconsistent with what can be considered a healthy virtue for an

individual. The phenomenon results in the raising up of individual defects to the level of a virtue for the group. An extreme example of defects raised to a value took place in the doctrines of Calvin. According to Calvinism, “the person who is overwhelmed by a feeling of his own powerlessness and unworthiness, by the unceasing doubt of whether he is saved or condemned to eternal punishment, who is hardly capable of any genuine joy and has made himself into the cog of a machine which he has to serve” was viewed as valuable according to Calvinism (Fromm, 1947, pg. 222). The individual upon acceptance by the group was protected from the natural feeling of being profoundly inadequate and isolated (Fromm, 1947).

Spinoza spoke of the idea of a socially patterned defect in *Ethica*, where he describes insanity as being seized by “one and the same affect with great consistency” and “if the greedy person thinks only of money and possessions, the ambitious one only of fame, one does not think them insane, but only as annoying” (Fromm, 1947, pg. 222). The market system of supply and demand is predicated upon the notion that everyone is motivated by their own self-interest and greed. Not possessing these traits is a threat to the system. What was considered as merely annoying in Spinoza’s time has now been transformed into a norm – even a virtue!

Corporate culture raises individual defects to the status of a virtue. However, since they are, after all, defects and not virtues, we choose to label these anti-virtues. Through the culture industry companies create their own set of virtues/anti-virtues that fit into a system of ethics that we call Corporate Utilitarian Ethics (CUE). CUE, while beneficial to the survival of the organization (the supposed greatest good) and the capitalist market system, do not translate into healthy behavior on the individual level. The ultimate corporate utility is profitability. All other utilities are secondary. Profitability even comes before truth, especially when the survival of the organization is at stake. This has been witnessed through countless corporate scandals where false profitability was reported such as was the case with Arthur Anderson, ENRON, and lately the Madoff Ponzi scheme. Economic theory has also created new virtues for the individual. Ambition and greed are considered virtuous, not because they are healthy for the individual, but because they create the greatest good in economic terms. The presence of ambition and greed ensure corporate profits as well as a healthy economy.

The absence of these virtues would result in the collapse of the economy and thus a decrease in total utility. The virtues/anti-virtues of CUE are moderated by other competing virtues such as the Christian Virtues of Temperance, Love and Charity. Thus, dialogism exists where individuals are exposed to differing ideas - both the modern anti-virtues of CUE and the ancient Christian virtues.

Consumer culture aligns itself with CUE. In consumer culture, the idea that more is better dominates, especially in America. This is Utilitarianism in its original sense – its rawest form, as proposed by Jeremy Bentham. This form of Utilitarianism focuses on providing the greatest amount of pleasure to the greatest number of people. American fast food chains serve up pleasure in the form of juicy, fatty goodness. They provide 2000-calorie meals and spread across the landscape. With no room left for expansion in the U.S., they seek to spread throughout the world spurred on by the Corporate Utilitarian Virtues of growth, expansion, dominance, and short-term profitability. This is seen in Ritzer's (1993/2002) "The McDonalidzation of Society". McDonalds exports clown-fun, the exhalation of performativity, a good value, the cookie-cutter franchise model, and the destruction of the unique and the individual. Profit is paramount. Of no concern are issues such as "anti-unionism, robotic jobs, exploiting children in advertising, and a diet of unhealthy food, killing animals, and the destruction of the rainforest for cattle-grazing" (Boje, 2008, pg. 9). The corporations eagerly follow each other. "Wal-Martization, Disneyfication, and Las Vegasization" (Boje, 2008, pg. 9) spread across the globe. The business model of profit and expansion at any cost changes culture around the world and we are left with the sad state of Global Consumer Culture. We now define ourselves by what we have. Modern consumers can use the following formula: "I am = what I have and what I consume." (Fromm, 1976, pg. 26). "The attitude inherent in consumerism is that of the swallowing the whole world" and this is what seems to be happening (Fromm, 1976, pg. 26).

Corporate Utilitarian Ethics, The Culture Industry, and Global Consumer Culture converge to unleash a monstrosity, a destructive power unrivaled in history upon our landscape. Lives are destroyed in sweatshop production or workaholicism. Human smuggling and slavery once relegated as a monstrosity of the past have re-emerged. Environmental destruction seems eminent.

Others may recognize these problems, but instead of feeling pain as Cassandra did, they may actually take secret pleasure in the unfairness and destructive power of the system and their own recognized participation in that system. People behave in ways similar to Apollo. Greek gods were known for their destructive and vindictive behavior – yet such behavior of the gods was modeled on man’s own behavior. Apollo did not feel pain over the misfortunes of others as Cassandra did. Rather he took pleasure in the fact that Cassandra (and others) were suffering. For many, such dark thoughts stay buried in the subconscious, but they do exist. Freud explained this as an inherent duality of man (and in biological organisms in general); the drive to live and the drive to die. According to Freud, the drive to die manifests itself either outwardly as a drive to destroy outside objects or inwardly in the form of self-destructive behavior (Freud, 1927).

Self-destructive behaviors are commonly witnessed within the realms of consumption such as excessive drinking, smoking or eating. While, consumption behaviors that are destructive to others and outside objects include excessive consumption of materials that lead to environmental degradation and exploitation of labor in developing countries. At the extreme, mankind’s destructiveness is witnessed through occurrences of genocide that have persisted with disturbing regularity from the earliest days of history to the present (Darfur region, Rwanda). Only through naïve or wishful thinking could someone ignore the destructive nature of mankind – Freud’s drive to die. And oftentimes the most destructive effects of mankind are perpetrated through elaborate systems of which we are all complicit. Through my own experience, when confronting individuals who choose wasteful consumption practices oftentimes they do not claim ignorance. Instead they acknowledge their wastefulness and claim that it is their right and privilege to be wasteful if they so choose. Even though they realize the immense destructive power of the system, they almost gleefully take part. By succumbing to their baser instincts of self-indulgence and laziness while acknowledging their own complicity in the destructive system, they are satisfying their drive to die – they are the bad.

Still, dialogism continues. New virtues emerge. Books are created on environmental virtue ethics (Cafaro and Sandler, 2005). The Roman Catholic Church has created seven new deadly sins. Meanwhile, Corporate Virtue Ethics calls upon the Kantian ethical ideals of obedience and sacrifice. We should be loyal to the corporation

and follow orders. Don't question authority. Following the chain of command is virtuous. This is why ex-military employees are so highly valued. They go from being the Property of the US Government to the Property of Exxon Mobile. Don't concern yourself about your company's action or what you buy. Just "Do the right thing in your cubicle and all will be well" (Boje, 2008, pg. 17). But can this happen? Adorno (1963/2000 pg. 174) argues that "there is nor right behavior in a wrong world". Meanwhile the corporate world fills our mind with slogans like "Just Do It" and "I'm Loving It". These slogans exalt action over retrospection. CUE + Kantian Ethics = slave ethics. We should not question society, our companies' actions, or what is offered for sale. We have become a "society of isolated individuals" (Horkheimer, 1933/1993, pg. 25) who don't concern ourselves with the systemicity of our actions. We are cogs in the modern machinery of post-industrial society. We are slaves to either our own unbridled desires or else we are literally slaves in global sweatshops with little possibility of ever achieving economic independence. In 1973, Adorno stated, "Freedom from the economy is nothing else than economic freedom and remains restricted to a small circle of people as a luxury." Freedom from the economy is still a myth today. Even those who considered themselves wealthy and free, helplessly watched as the value of their supposed "assets" proved to be illusory. What is the value of a piece of paper or a few numbers on a computer screen? If the consumption process stalls, even for a few months (as shown from September 2008 to February 2009) the whole system crashes – eroding a lifetime of savings.

Content-sense ethics can and does balance the rigidity and (to some extent) the lack of answerability of formal ethics. However, content-sense ethics, by creating socially patterned defects can destroy an individual's full human potential. The production and consumption system and the anti-virtues that it promotes have this effect.

Answerability (Bakhtinian) Ethics

Formal ethics and content-sense ethics occupy a prominent place in the ethical decision making of most Westerners. As we have demonstrated in the above discussions, the logical and philosophical shortcomings of formal and content-sense ethics manifest themselves into very real everyday life problems. In particular, the dialogue between the

two seems to amplify society's problems. We contend that the ethics of answerability acts as a countervailing weight in Dialogical Ethics. Answerability ethics addresses the philosophical shortcomings of the previous two ethical systems and may alleviate the adverse societal manifestations of these philosophical shortcomings.

Bakhtin created this system of answerability ethics in direct response to the formal and content-sense ethics. Bakhtin seeks to ground morality back into the individual act and find out what compels people to act morally. This is exactly the connection that business academics have been seeking in the ethical consumption literature when they are trying to find out why actions of consumption include a moral dimension.

Bakhtin grounds ethics back to the individual and away from fatal theoreticism and unfounded leaps of faith of universality. Essential for this view of ethics is that the "once-occurrent actual act/deed and its author – the one who is thinking theoretically, contemplating aesthetically, and acting ethically" not be separated (Bakhtin, 1993, pg. 28).

Just as an act and the author of the act are inseparable, being and value are also inseparable. Objects and events cannot exist independently of our perception or evaluation of them. This extends not only to objects, but to words, experiences, thoughts, and ideas. Everything is imbued with an emotional-volitional tone. For example, a word uttered, cannot escape the attitude of the speaker.

"Everything that is actually experienced is experienced as something given and as something-yet-to-be-determined, is intonated, has an emotional-volitional tone, and enters into an effective relationship to me within the unity of the ongoing event encompassing us. An emotional-volitional tone is an inalienable moment of the actually performed act, even of the most abstract thought, insofar as I am actually thinking it, i.e., insofar as it is really actualized in Being, becomes a participant in the ongoing event." (Bakhtin, 1993, pg. 33)

It is in the uniqueness and unrepeatability of an action - that our actions carry an emotional-volitional tone, and that actions are inseparable from the author - that the act could have been performed by no one else - that responsibility arises. Answerability is not assigned from an external source, rather answerability arises from the action itself.

This is the crucial point: “answerability *is always already* in the act” (Belova, 2008, pg. 125).

The fact that we exist means that we are always in some state of action, since every action has an emotional-volitional tone, then the only universal truth (*istina*) is that everyone has a “non-alibi in Being” (Bakhtin, 1993, pg. 40). In fact, *istina* is not composed of a series of universally valid moments (as Kant would argue), but is actually composed of a series of unique emotional-volitional tones that seeks to express individual truth (*pravada*). Thus, an individual act belongs solely to the individual and cannot be divorced from the individual into a world of theoretical abstractions.

This does not mean that moral values are indefensible because of their subjective and relative nature under this system of ethics. This argument would separate a value from a specific act, which according to Bakhtin, is not possible. Rather, it is the act that embodies moral values but also the unique situation of an individual in a unique time and place.

A multitude of ethical ideas (thoughts are a type of action with an emotional-volitional character) our unique sense and perceptions of the moment, our past experiences, and our anticipated future experiences interact in our consciousness. All of these play a role in the ethical actions of an individual at a particular moment in time. Bakhtin calls this the architectonics of the act. Bakhtin’s architectonics is dynamic and unique to the individual and is similar to our theory of Dialogical Ethics. In Dialogical Ethics, ethical ideas always exist in relation to each other and indeed defined by each other. This dialogue is characterized by dynamic tension and a constant state of transformation.

Living Story Value Ethics

In *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle develops a list of virtues that will allow someone to live “a good life”. The good life is not prescribed from a universal, but is determined by the individual. The good life is “the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is” (MacIntyre, 1998). Of the three philosophies, Living Story Value Ethics involves the important components of time

and purpose (*telos*). Using Living Story Value Ethics an individual is able to draw from Kantian ethics, Utilitarianism, and answerability ethics those values that are necessary for the good life. As individuals mature, they develop *phronesis*, which helps them to understand the complicated maze of Dialogical Ethics. *Phronesis* is the capability, developed over time, to consider what modes of action are necessary to deliver change and to enhance the quality of life. *Phronesis* allows one to contemplate on how to achieve certain ends and to reflect upon one's life as a quest to determine that end. Life as a quest is also driven by an aesthetic quality perhaps best expressed by Stephen Cummings: (2000, pg. 22)

“One's life-task was to make his or her story, through the everyday act of living, as good or as aesthetically pleasing as it could be, in order to enable, eventually, a good and proper ending. Such a story would be woven into the development of the stories that made up the fabric of one's community.”

According to Dialogical Ethics, an individual is likely to gather values from all three areas of ethical thought (as well as a few anti-virtues, which may impede progress towards the good life). We can envision our life quest as a living story as we seek a virtuous path. An important aspect of *phronesis* is that we have an understanding of our interrelationship with others' living stories as well as a sense of our relationship with nature and community (see Boje, 2008). “My living story is in fragments, and my encounters with others' living stories are equally fragmented” (Boje, 2008, pg. 110). Yet through *phronesis*, we can engage in sense-making of these fragments.

Tragically the bad and the ugly and their effects on society are likely to remain. However, there is hope that things may improve. We call for a shift towards an ethics of answerability. To some extent this is already happening. Phrases such as ‘Think Globally, Act Locally’ are becoming more common. An ethics of answerability is gaining more credence, as individuals can no longer ignore information reports about the injustices and destructive elements that are inherent in the market system. Kantian ethics is individualism at an extreme, just do the right thing according to categorical imperatives and your duty is fulfilled. Where is the room for love and compassion in Kantian ethics? One can ignore the larger picture and just focus on oneself. Instead of an ethics of

individualism, we must be individualistic. Value ethics has the individualistic quality necessary. In value ethics there is room for love, a value that was so important to Nicholas Berdyaev. “Love burns up all necessity, and gives freedom”; “Love is creativeness” (Berdyaev, 1914: 151). Story ethics embraces creativity helping one to understand how our stories interact with the stories of others. Story ethics helps us to envision the possibilities. We can create our life as a quest for better interactions with others. We can also use story ethics to find ways to creatively solve the macro-problems of our time. Thus story ethics and value ethics converge to form Living Story Value Ethics.

“The decision rests with man. It rests upon his ability to take himself, his life and happiness seriously; on his willingness to face his and his society’s moral problem. It rests upon his courage to be himself and to be for himself.” (Fromm, 1947, pg. 250)

However, it is not enough just to make the Frommian decision to be answerable for oneself and society. The skill of *phronesis* is also necessary. As individuals develop *phronesis*, they become better able to understand how their actions and how our living stories interact with the living stories of others. *Phronesis* also allows us to make use of the wealth of information in society and as well as to recognize misinformation. Using the Internet, we can learn about the plights of others in far away places. Using the Internet, we can understand how the things we buy may cause environmental degradation. But also, through the Internet and advertising, companies will seek to cover ethically questionable actions through misinformation. Companies will also use the media to spread the anti-virtues of economic development and profitability at all costs and the anti-virtue of unlimited satisfaction of material desires. *Phronesis* can help to alleviate the tragedies of Cassandra and Oedipus. *Phronesis* allows individuals to find creative ways to solve or at least to not contribute to global macro-problems (thus avoiding a feeling of helplessness). *Phronesis* will also allow individuals to interpret conflicting information reports and to look for the complete story (thus avoiding misguided action through incomplete or wrong information).

Dialogical Leaders Needed

As educators, the best thing that we can do as members of society is to teach *phronesis*. Since *phronesis* is an individual skill that is developed over time, this is not an easy task. Oddly, business schools may find themselves at the forefront of this

education process as enclaves of critical theorists gain faculty positions in business schools. What is not needed is an education by which knowledge is imparted from a professor to the students – a banking style of education where students are passively receiving knowledge (Freire, 1972). (This is especially the case in Business ethics education.) This only prepares students to become passive, un-thinking members of society. They are trained to fit in rather than to affect change in society. They only learn *techne* rather than *phronesis*.

Rather a problem-posing education should be used. A problem-posing education is characterized as by communication between teachers and students. Together, they seek to understand a problem in society (Freire, 1972). By attempting to understand and solve problems, students gain *phronesis* rather than just *techne*. They develop their ability “to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 1972, pg. 71).

As educators, we must be open to new insights. Education in the classroom should be a process in which the unveiling of reality occurs. This unveiling happens as we listen to and tell stories – for it is stories that allows us to discover *istina* (universal truth). *Istina* is never wisdom imparted by an all-knowing authority in the banking-style of education. Rather, *istina* is composed of a series of unique emotional-volitional tones that seeks to express individual truth (*pravada*).

“The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.” (Freire, 1972, pg. 67)

As each member of the classroom expresses *pravada*, and they realize how their living stories interact with the living stories of others, not only reality is revealed, but the skills to think critically. They may also come to understand the *telos* of their lives and learn that they can change the system of which they are apart. By learning *phronesis*, they come to realize their answerability. As that skill develops over time, a creative force for the realization of the good life for that individual and those around him or her can occur.

Conclusion

The theory of Dialogical Ethics, that there is interplay of the dominant ethical systems of a society, helps in understanding everyday ethical decisions. We examined four consumption-ethics problems (the two Greek tragedies and the bad and the ugly). The findings are that the two Greek tragedies are linked to a lack of *phronesis* (ontologic) and the bad and the ugly are the result of an overemphasis on Kantian and Utilitarian (epstemic) ethics. We propose that a new pedagogy of ontologic, problem-posing education (Freire, 1972) be implemented in the classroom so that students can begin to develop *phronesis* instead of just *techne*.

Also, we have highlighted how some prevalent problems in the market system may have its roots in a misappropriation of ethical ideas and indeed a lack of balance in the dialogism of those ideas. By understanding the philosophical underpinnings to this problem, it is our hope that future business ethics research can be more effective in finding solutions to some of the great injustices of our time (environmental destruction, sweatshop labor).

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Figure 1 Constructive and Destructive Appropriations of Ethical Ideas for Consumption Ethics

The Good: Developing *phronesis* avoids informational tragedies, values gleaned from dialogical ethics allows a person to live one's life as virtuous story, to have compelling *telos*

