

Teaching Business Ethics as Practice: An Existential-Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract

This paper articulates an existential-phenomenological pedagogical framework for an ethics course taught to undergraduate business students. Contrary to rational, analytic and justice-oriented approaches, a transformational, personal growth and ‘spiritual’ development model is presented that blends insights from Max van Manen’s phenomenological pedagogy, the ‘spiritual exercises’ orientation found in Pierre Hadot’s philosophical work, and the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas concerning moral subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Qualitative participant survey data collected over a ten-year period from more than 1500 participants is presented in support of the effectiveness of this existential-phenomenological approach.

Keywords: existential phenomenology, business ethics pedagogy, Levinas, van Manen, Hadot, ethics of care, ethics as practice, spiritual exercises, personal moral development

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"In some sense all phenomenology is oriented to practice—the practice of living. But from the perspective of pragmatic and ethical concerns, we may have a special interest in phenomenology. We have questions of how to act in certain situations and relations. This pragmatic-ethical concern I call the 'phenomenology of practice'. Thus, we explore how a phenomenology of practice may speak to our personal and professional lives." (Max van Manen, 2014, p.69)

"...I also began to attach considerable importance to the existence of spiritual exercises in Antiquity, that is, to the practices ... which were intended to generate a transformation in the subject practicing them." (Pierre Hadot, 2011, p.36)

1. Morality: Decision-making or Praxis?

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) the steady stream of moral scandals occurring in the business world today, along with the general defeat of corporate social responsibility (Fleming and Jones, 2013; Eichar, 2015), there has been a renewed interest in teaching business ethics to undergraduate business students (Bowie, 2013). This resurgence of interest has generated experimentation with different theoretical and practical approaches aimed at clarifying goals and objectives for business ethics courses; delineating new conceptual frameworks; and offering various platforms for delivering pedagogical content effectively (Felton and Sims, 2005). This essay intends to contribute to this renaissance of interest in teaching business ethics to undergraduate business students by presenting an existential-phenomenological conceptual framework and pedagogical platform that has shown itself to be effective in helping students become more moral.

But what is meant by the term "become more moral"? This essay proposes that the answer to that question will depend on the position taken by the teacher of business ethics regarding two fundamental orientations to the field of ethics: First, whether morality is best understood as a cognitive, analytic process of rational decision-making; or whether morality is best understood as an existential process of personal ('spiritual') growth and development. Secondly, how the teacher of business ethics conceptualizes the nature of human subjectivity and thus engages the moral subjectivity that is the focus of business ethics interventions.

The rational decision-making approach to morality responds to the question: *How can I logically decide what justice demands in this specific, unique and unrepeatable situation regarding this or that moral question*, along the lines of Kant, Rawls, Sandel and others in the justice tradition (Sandel, 2009). This justice-oriented, moral decision-making approach to ethics entails the rational application of universal moral principles derived from rationally articulated moral theories. But the cognition-heavy, analytic and applied approach to "doing business

ethics” leaves out of the picture the everyday, ‘messy’, existential, open-ended, non-rational reality of the intuitively immersed, unique, dynamic and incommensurable, body-bound historical moral subject in the world. Because of this existentially restricted cognitive orientation, the analytic, top-down, theory-driven approach to ethics is not the best place to begin the study of morality with undergraduate business students.

The personal growth and ‘spiritual’ development approach to engaging ethics practice, reflected in the quotes from Max van Manen and Pierre Hadot in the epigraph of this essay, responds to the question: *What kind of person should I be and how should I go about living the best possible life here and now in a world with others?* (van Manen, 2014; Hadot, 1995) This personal growth and spiritual development approach to morality is more attuned to emerging business ethics perspectives within the “ethics of care” and “ethics as practice” frameworks than with the cognition and analysis-oriented ethics of justice approach (Painter-Moreland, 2008; Hammington & Sander-Staudt, 2011). This essay proposes that this personal growth and development approach within an existential-phenomenological pedagogical framework is best-suited for ethics courses delivered to undergraduate business majors.

Rational decision-making and everyday praxis are not mutually exclusive domains, of course, and they are both important and integral to the fullest practice of ethics. But, too often, the rational, deliberative, a-historical, analytical, decision-making perspective tends to get presented uncritically to undergraduate students as *the one and only* way to approach the ‘doing’ of ethics, while ethics as the phenomenological practice of an intensely personal, interior moral search for meaning situated within the parameters of the life-world is presumptively understood as the expected or hoped-for (but messy, unpredictable, and irrational) outcome of the deliberative process. If you make sound, rational, analytically correct and logical moral decisions, the justice orientation seems to assert, then you will thereby live the best possible life existentially every day. Sounds good ‘on paper’—a kind of ‘trickle-down’ morality. But this perspective does not effectively engage the pre-reflective phenomenological experience of the existential individual in the everyday world, immersed bodily and intuitively in multi-layered, situational, interpersonal and self-referential practices of meaning-making involving both conscious and unconscious sources of influence, as Merleau-Ponty indicated in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (Walsh, 2005a). Making sound, rational moral decisions is a necessary but insufficient condition for living a truly and fully integrated moral life.

Social psychology research demonstrates clearly that many moral judgments are driven by non-rational, often unconscious situational factors (Somers, 2011). Rarely, if ever, is moral agency transparent to itself in a conventional, existential moral framework. Moral judgments are always bounded situationally. They are not necessarily clear and distinct Cartesian events, as they are often depicted to be in rational analysis and empirical studies. For example, there are what might be called “lived moral judgments” resulting from positioning yourself in a continuous social or ideological framework; “bodily moral judgments” made by proximally ‘being there’ and putting yourself physically ‘on the line’; “emotional moral judgments” that stretch out over felt-time and vary in degree, mood, intensity, commitment, orientation, etc. Living in the liquid fluidity of the everyday moral life involves more than merely making reflective, *rational* moral judgments understood as discreet, a-historical, cognitive computational events – something AI supposedly could be trained to do (Wynsberghe, 2015). Certainly, this type of unbounded, constrained rationality—disengaged from the lived-world—should not be the sole proprietor of moral practice.

A person's moral value orientation and moral position-taking in the world involves moral intuitions, moral confusion and bafflement, moral urges, moral sensitivity and awareness, moral courage and cowardice, moral flexibility and rigidity, moral discernment, moral wisdom and ignorance, moral connectedness and separation, moral strength and weakness, etc., attitudes, postures, relations, leanings and disturbances that 'structure' one's moral value orientation as an existential lived experience in the world. As Husserl and the later tradition of existential phenomenology has shown, this being-in-the-world is not easily or fully captured by empirical research or rational analysis (Walsh, 1991). Yet, the failure of this more fluid and messy idea of morality to make its way into the current restricted business ethics research orientation that is dominated by protocols established by Lawrence Kohlberg and later standardized in the DIT and DIT2 evaluative instruments by James Rest and his colleagues (Rest, et al, 1999), has left business ethics professors who are genuinely concerned about teaching ethics as a spiritual practice without a framework for their pedagogical aspirations. Thus, a broader, phenomenological view that is self-consciously inclusive of the holistic, body-bound person in the fullness of her everyday existential engagement within irreducible, interweaving practices in the world—and not merely a segregated, separate, abstract, dehumanized and privileged cognitive function—is necessary in order to understand how to structure and evaluate educative ethical interventions effectively with undergraduate business students.

In this essay, I propose that an amplified phenomenological pedagogy and research methodology of practice, along the lines suggested by the seminal work of Max van Manen, is best-suited to provide a broader, more inclusive view of existential moral engagement, especially when situated in the context of a personal growth and moral development orientation to ethics practice. Phenomenology accomplishes this by focusing on the unique and unrepeatable experiential subjectivity of the subject rather than on the disembodied analysis and deconstruction of abstract formulations (the rational, analytic approach) or the compilation and analysis of depersonalized empirical data (the experimental, reductionist approach). A "phenomenology of practice," as van Manen puts it, "is sensitive to the realization that life as we live and experience it is not only rational and logical, and thus in part transparent to reflection—it is also subtle, enigmatic, contradictory, mysterious, inexhaustible, and saturated with existential and transcendent meaning that can only be accessed through poetic, aesthetic, and ethical means and languages" (van Manen, 2014, p. 213). From a phenomenological research orientation, this mysterious and inexhaustible moral subjectivity will be shown to be the real and only proper 'subject matter' of ethics.

2. Moral Subjectivity: Perspectives

Moral education has been allotted a key role in the forming and shaping of personal subjectivity (Chinnery 2003). The development of the moral character of college students has been identified as a matter of national interest by policy makers such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (King and Mayhew, 2004) and accrediting agencies such as The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (Phillips, 2004). Certainly, the roots of business education are entangled with assumptions about subjectivity and human nature (Freeman, et al, 2009). Therefore, since morality and subjectivity are existentially inseparable, the nature of the moral person and how it is that s/he *is* moral and what difference this makes to the teaching of business ethics must be considered

Many approaches to teaching ethics presume a modernist, liberal notion of subjectivity, featuring a rational, autonomous, self-conscious, self-sufficient, self-determining, and self-

interested moral agency at the heart of subjectivity. This modernist subjectivity is variously considered to be initially amoral following Hobbes; endowed with natural rights following Locke; outfitted with an innate moral sensibility (sympathy) functioning as a kind of natural supply chain for moral decision-making following Hutcheson, Hume or Adam Smith from an empiricist perspective; or, the end result of a purely cognitive, rule-generating process for rationalists in line with thinkers like Kant and Rawls. What these and other modernist configurations of subjectivity have in common is that they presuppose that moral development should focus mainly on the cognitive, analytic, and conceptual skill development of the autonomous and existentially separate decision-making moral self, structured empirically from a research point of view as what can be quantified experimentally and represented objectively with ‘hard’ data that is, for business students, pragmatically geared to employability (Roberts 2001). Educative approaches that thoughtlessly—perhaps unconsciously—presume that this modernist view of subjectivity is the gold standard for structuring and evaluating the effectiveness of ethics interventions, necessarily miss engaging the flesh and blood existential person living in the everyday business world (Rowland 2005).

It is well-known, of course, that the cognitive-dominant, modernist view of subjectivity understood as autonomous agency has been challenged by numerous postmodern philosophical thinkers in the Continental tradition from Nietzsche to Derrida and beyond (Kelemen and Peltonen, 2001; Painter-Morland, 2005). But modernist moral positivism finds one of its most stringent and enduring antagonists in the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas (Walsh, 2005b). Levinas’s ethical phenomenology is rarely mentioned in the business ethics literature outside of a handful of theoretical references, while being decidedly absent from any hands-on, practical, pedagogical considerations. The metaphysical ground of Levinas’s ethical phenomenology leaves practitioners who wish to incorporate his in-seeing into their classroom activity wondering what they should do in the classroom on Monday (Chinnery, 2003). Perhaps this lack of practical translation is because Levinas’s ethical phenomenology of exorbitant responsibility is often interpreted with such hyperbolic subtlety and metaphysical nuance that it is not easy to transfer his radical formulations into practical, normative, everyday benefit for undergraduate business majors without losing Levinas’s metaphysical radicality. And, in all fairness, Levinas himself resisted such a normative reduction that would obscure the metaphysical context of his ethical phenomenology. The praxis-oriented phenomenological approach to business ethics education presented in this paper, however, seeks to make a remedial contribution to this normative reticence, first in these preliminary reflections on moral subjectivity and then, more specifically, in the approach of the phenomenologically situated business ethics course, the basic lineaments of which are described below.

Contrary to the modernist view, Levinas’s phenomenological figuration of moral subjectivity accords a central place to the inexorable and unrepresentable moral development of the whole person. This includes rational and non-rational aspects with a special emphasis on the saturated normative liquidity of particular, non-repeatable personal experiences within overlapping everyday practices; situational sensibility and sensitivity; inter-subjectivity; emotions, passions, intuition, empathy, sympathy, relational responsiveness, caring, and all those non-rational ‘dimensions’ of the human person that are exiled from the rational, analytic and empirical approaches. The practice of this phenomenological, pluralistic “eclecticism” (Hadot, 2011, p. 182), or perspectival style of pedagogy is analogous to engaging in heteronomous jazz improvisation in the classroom and the life-world and not so much like playing in a perfectly synchronous symphony with its pre-determined score (Chinnery 2003). It is always an

improvisation on the radical Levinasian ethical position that moral responsibility—understood as tacit, pre-conscious responsiveness to or responsibility for the vulnerable Other lived-through in many particular social and workplace interactions every day—is metaphysically prior to the calculating, controlling and conquering modernist moral consciousness guided by self-interest, individualism, autonomy and a rigidly rational and thus functionally unrealistic idea of agency.

Within the contemporary instrumental, neoliberal, and pragmatic view of the corporation, on the other hand, the concepts of moral codes, compliance, and accountability—framed by a vertical, rule-governed, semblance of corporate social responsibility (as opposed to a more horizontal, relational, interpersonal, and cosmopolitan responsiveness to and responsibility for the Other)—can be used cynically to justify a rapacious pursuit of power and profit behind a compliant cloak of justice that blunts genuine responsibility for the less-fortunate and most vulnerable (Painter-Moreland 2008; Baker and Roberts 2011). Levinas's ethical phenomenology of exorbitant responsibility for the Other would be an antidote for such professional cynicism.

For Levinas, morality is not a skill adopted by an empirical subject. It is not an added-on dimension of the human person, as if persons first existed as morally neutral Hobbesian units in the state of nature who then must somehow pragmatically become or be made to be moral. Morality is not a quality or set of qualities inhering in the subject or in the subject's supposed 'character', contrary to a virtue approach. Rather, in the context of Levinas's philosophy, it would be more accurate to say that morality *is* the whole, inscrutable existential person always-already engaged in a fundamental, pre-conscious relation of responsiveness to the Other before this is reflectively articulated; already a dynamic for-the-Other before s/he knows it, existentially engaged out ahead of itself. Morality is not a faculty, skill or acquisition that I possess and command; nor is it exclusively rational, as suggested above. More properly articulated, one should say that *morality possesses me* like a culture possesses and 'constructs' its people, the very people who reciprocally and ambiguously create it while simultaneously are being 'given' by it. Morality exerts a claim on me from the Other, a claim that I can certainly resist, deny, ignore, distort and forget. But, according to Levinas, I would dismiss the primordial ethical claim of the Other upon me to my own detriment. Why? Because I am a thoroughly moral being from the beginning, from before "my" beginning-as-me, caught up in an exorbitant pre-conscious responsiveness to the Other from which, ambiguously, I first emerge *as 'a'* subjectivity. Thus, from this perspective, ignoring the pre-reflective 'call' of the Other endangers the very emergence and development of my own moral self.

All too often, courses in business ethics approach their goals and outcomes by focusing on the subject matter presented in business ethics texts in a way that does not actively engage this ambiguous, existential situatedness of student subjectivity at a deep, personal level—particularly at the level where personal morality can be conflictual, indeterminate, messy, hard to talk about and manage, as suggested above. This can be dangerous personal territory, understandably avoided by business ethics teachers preferring the safer route of focusing on subject matter over subjectivity, clear and clean cognition over messy, improvisational, existential connectedness. Unfortunately, the safer, exclusively cognitive routes through the field of business ethics, where the instructor takes no personal risk to demonstrate the messier but real practice of morality in its everydayness, are not the best for motivating business students to actively upgrade and refine their own personal morality.

Business students are inexorably influenced, however consciously, by the materialistic, monetaristic and Machiavellian moral values inhabiting and purveyed by the non-ethics business courses they are exposed to across the business school curriculum. Thus, a business ethics

course competes at a disadvantage within a pantheon of other glitteringly attractive moral values represented in the business school curriculum and its market-driven mission where success and greed (however sanitized) are too often tacitly assumed to be correlative.

3. Business School Values and Culture

A recent study has suggested that many undergraduate students these days are “academically adrift” and learning less than we think in the classrooms of colleges and universities that are themselves often academically adrift, operating more like financial markets than marketplaces of ideas and values (Arum and Roska, 2011). At the same time, college-age students are often *morally adrift*, seeking experimentally to determine and consolidate their moral value-world and conform it to their personal, interpersonal, and professional lives – a process that will take time to fully crystalize (Burton, et al, 1991; Felton and Sims, 2005). Faced with an industry-wide climate where corruption and scandal are commonplace and accepted with a shrug and a wink, it is not surprising that business students are willing to cheat more readily than non-business students in order to get ahead (Simha, 2012).

It is not only the endless corruption and blindness to moral boundaries in the background of business students’ everyday lives, but also, and perhaps more perniciously, the materialistic, dollar-driven, monetary success-above-all-else type of values that inform, color and shape business students’ motivational attitudes from within the business school experience itself. These moral values are communicated to students through the business school curriculum, culture, classroom pedagogy, networking events, a “jobs placement” orientation, and, more subtly and indirectly, from the very nature of capitalist business itself, depending on how it is presented and taught, cultivated and reflected within the context of the business school culture as a whole and across the business curriculum.

When the end goal of business education is narrowly focused on beating out the competition to get a good job in order to make a lot of money so you can consume a lot of high-end goods, then classroom pedagogy will tend to be more performance-oriented and grades will become more important than personal mastery, thus creating unintended situational inducement in the classroom context to cheat (Day, et al, 2011). Well-intentioned entrepreneurial values encouraging students to “think outside the box” and create “disruptive” technologies or business models that push ideas to the moral limit may also, perhaps inadvertently, encourage looking for creative ways to bend the law, with little regard for morality, in order to maximize self-interest and profit. Thus, business students may engage in behavior normally thought to be cheating without fully realizing that they are cheating. Indeed, how cheating is configured makes a difference in how widespread cheating appears to be (Jordan, 2001). Thus, professors charged with teaching business ethics to undergraduate business students are faced with a range of unique, substantive and pedagogical challenges amplified these days in the context of rapidly developing, technologically driven business trends like big data analytics and self-learning algorithms (Richards and King, 2014). Thus, an approach to teaching business ethics that is sensitive and responsive to these challenges is needed.

4. The Existential-Phenomenological Approach

The existential-phenomenological approach to teaching business ethics to undergraduate business students, within a personal growth and moral development orientation and a Levinasian view of moral subjectivity, is, above all, a student-centered, experiential approach based on the

central value of practice and practicality. All of the typical theoretical elements of an ethics course are included in this model, but the subject matter is presented not so much for the sake of the subject matter itself, but for the sake of developing the student's subjective/intuitive in-seeing in order to produce an experience of transformational moral enlightenment. Through the application of various 'spiritual exercises' (Hadot, 2002), including experience-based reflections, moral dilemma scenarios, conversations, interviews, meditations and other forms of hands-on practice-oriented exercises (See, Appendix 1), students are directed, through written and oral phenomenological responding (van Manen, 2002), to *use* the subject matter to reveal to themselves their own moral value orientations, leanings, positionings, questions, uncertainties, etc. From the experiences of undertaking these exercises, they are led to see where they stand in relation to specific moral issues, to see how they feel about that standing, how comfortable they are with it, what principles might be at stake behind the scenes of their emotionally intuited responses, etc., in order to consider modifying or upgrading their moral value orientation to be more consistent with their pursuit of living the best possible life. Subjectivity is thus clearly accorded an existential preeminence over subject matter.

The section of the course that focuses on moral philosophy, for example, is not meant to be an exhaustive survey of the field of moral philosophy. Rather, the two-volume course textbook, *Entrepreneurial Ethics*—written to actualize the existential-phenomenological approach described herein (Walsh, 2019)—offers students the traditional conceptual philosophical 'tools' (terms, ideas, theories, principles, perspectives, etc.) from the history of moral philosophy that will be most helpful for the primary purpose of seeing and describing the nature and functioning of their own existential, everyday practice of personal morality revealed to them through the exercises. Students are directed to focus on their intuitive moral responses reflectively geared to putting their intuitions to work constructing the sense and non-sense of their dynamic moral self from which their unique and unprecedented moral judgments and meaning-full actions flow. Ethics is thus concretely shown to be more of a living, ongoing practice of self-creation and re-creation rather than a process of calculative decision-making and problem-solving. Students are called upon to make, evaluate and examine many existential moral judgments during the course. Every student will produce twenty-five phenomenological reflections throughout the semester-long course in response to the various exercises and will receive original qualitative feedback on each one. This results in a business ethics course that is quite different from an analytic study of moral theories applied to tired, worn-out, and often insipid and uninspiring cases.

The practical orientation underlying the existential-phenomenological approach to teaching business ethics calls for students to experientially undergo a lived-value ecdysis of their moral positioning in the world as the result of their engaged practice. I fully expect and encourage them to move away from a conventional morality toward a conscious responsibility for the Other built up from a phenomenological investigation of personal subjectivity through the 'spiritual' exercises and other experiential practices. That shift will involve an ongoing cultivation of insightfulness geared to an interpretation and understanding of what is the best possible life as a horizon and guiding principle for how I actually go about living my life every day, entailing a molting of the modernist, self-interested subjectivity motivated by greed, consumption, and acquisitiveness in favor of a posture of 'being-for-the-Other' motivated altruistically by love.

The postmodern critique of agency and the grasping/conquering consciousness of the modern era is a move in the right direction from the modernist, Enlightenment view of

subjectivity, but it does not go far enough ethically speaking and thus results in a moral vacuum where ‘God is dead’ but nothing has shown itself as a replacement, and which is thus the source of a widespread obsessive moral restiveness reflected in the idea of a rampant “liquid modernity” in our day (Bauman, 2012). Beyond Bauman’s notion of liquidity, however, the aim of Levinas’s phenomenological project—activated by van Manen’s pedagogical framework and Hadot’s construal of spiritual exercises leading to philosophy as a *way of life*—would be to awaken both the modern and postmodern consciousness of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity from its forgetfulness of the original bond of responsibility for the Other which always already links together all human subjects in a fundamental cosmopolitan moral community that is older and more original than being. Another important way that I invite my students to experience this primordial bond with the Other is through a service-learning component where they are given the opportunity to volunteer in the community and then reflect phenomenologically upon and write about their lived-experience of responding to the neediness of vulnerable others and to present their findings to the class—always a joyful process!

This experiential, student-centered approach to a renewed understanding of our pre-reflective ethical relation of being-for-the-Other is the backbone of the existential-phenomenological approach to teaching business ethics. It is strategically geared to traumatically impact the way in which my students value themselves and value their work within the business community, culminating in a transcendent movement from self-interest to a concern for the priority of the Other, from egoism to altruism, from self-aggrandizement to a compassionate love of the poor, disenfranchised and less fortunate. This personal transformational goal is what makes the existential-phenomenological business ethics course presented here different from every other course in the business school curriculum. Ethics would thus be a practice of ‘waking up’ through a series of enlightenments. As Husserl says in *The Crisis*, this waking-up through the practice of phenomenology is “destined in essence to effect, at first, a *complete personal transformation*, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion...” (Husserl, 1970, p.154). Feedback from participants in the existential-phenomenological course that I teach frequently report having just such an unexpected transformational experience.

5. Evidence for Effectiveness

Research regarding the effectiveness of educative moral interventions with college age students during the last forty or fifty years—primarily using Rest’s Kohlbergian-inspired DIT and the DIT2 evaluative instruments (Rest, et al, 1999), with their modernist moral architecture—has not produced an unambiguous answer to the question of whether any moral interventions are more effective than others with undergraduate business students. The research has been suggestive in some areas, depending on how a “successful outcome” of the moral intervention is conceived (King and Mayhew 2004; Bodkin and Stevenson, 2007), but no consistently reliable way of evaluating ethics interventions with college-age students has emerged from the extensive experimental empirical research.

Some researchers believe that the solution is for more pre- and post-test research studies to be done in this area (King and Mayhew 2004; Bodkin and Stevenson, 2007; Schmidt et al 2013). But the lack of a clear and consistent determination of effectiveness may also be caused by the conceptual underpinning of the measuring devices themselves and not the fault of the interventions. Underlying assumptions about the goal of ethics educative interventions assimilated into the DIT2 and other similar empirical assessment schemes leave out of

consideration the radical situated particularity of the moral subject in favor of objectifiable, measurable and quantifiable assessment measurements, as was argued above. If you believe that an increase in cognitive facility with principled moral reasoning is the primary goal of the study of ethics, then assessment procedures (such as the DIT2) will be directed to measure that outcome. But, as I have argued, this leaves out of consideration the radical situated particularity of the moral subject in favor of objectifiable, measurable and quantifiable assessment measurements which have resulted in a lack of conclusiveness regarding effectiveness.

A more phenomenologically oriented approach to assessing the subjective effectiveness of ethics interventions for participants would be to undertake an exit interview with each student involving a phenomenological exploration of each student's subjective attitudes, consciousness and self-reports about the meaningfulness of their experience of moral growth and development before, during, and after the intervention, employing techniques suggested by van Manen's phenomenological pedagogy. Since time and practicality constraints in most circumstances make such in-depth interviewing impossible, however, I have used an exit survey with the dual purpose of making improvements to the course structure, design and delivery and also for gauging the effectiveness of the course in promoting transformational personal moral development.

The anonymous student exit survey calls for short-essay type responses to the seven questions listed below. It was self-administered online by all students taking my required Business Ethics and Social Responsibility course in the College of Business at a large state university in the U.S. over a nine-year period from 2011 to 2019. During this period a total of 1594 students participated in the course and responded to the seven-question survey. 221 of these students took the course in a fully online version.

STUDENT EXIT SURVEY QUESTIONS 2011-2019

1. What part of this course did you enjoy the most? the least? Why?
2. How do you think the course could be improved? Please elaborate.
3. Would you recommend this course to a friend? Why or why not?
4. Overall, how would you rate this course on a scale of 1 to 10 compared to other similar courses you have taken? (1 = "worst" / 10 = "best"). Please give a brief explanation of your answer.
5. Did you think the testing (quizzes & exams) was fair? Too much testing? Not enough? Please explain.
6. Do you feel that you have personally benefited from this course, or was it just the fulfillment of another requirement? Please elaborate.
7. Did the professor seem knowledgeable of the material? caring of students? well-prepared for class? able to communicate ideas clearly? Etc.

Here is a brief summary of the average responses to the seven survey questions across the 1594 students who responded:

- Question 1: Students generally cited discussions in class or in the online discussion forums and the various ‘spiritual’ exercises as what they enjoyed the most. What they generally disliked was the testing and the amount of reading. It was in response to the feedback from this survey question that I was led to move more and more toward the use of essay-style evaluation and testing procedures in the course and away from objective grading methods, until finally the model was developed to use essay-type evaluation and grading procedures exclusively. Twenty-five short essays were required of every student during the course.
- Question 2: Many suggestions were made regarding how the course could be improved. These were often used to make improvements to the course, especially when a majority of responses involved a similar suggestion. In this way, the course was continuously upgraded, refreshed and refurbished to be more consistent with what seemed to be most effective means for the transformational experience I was hoping to accomplish with participants.
- Question 3: An average of 98.4% of the students responding said they would recommend the course to a friend. This always seemed to me to be one of the best ways of assessing how meaningful the course was for student participants, i.e., whether they felt it was personally beneficial and transformational. Students in a university setting such as the one where this course was offered are continuously discussing and evaluating professors and courses within their informal peer-group assemblages and networks. This survey question aimed to tap into the practice of these informal peer-group interactions where students learn what courses are worth taking and which should be avoided. This data clearly suggests that students felt that they were benefiting from participation in the course.
- Question 4: On the ten-point scale (1 = worst / 10 = best) the course was consistently rated at 9.2% overall.
- Question 5: Students generally thought the testing and grading was fair, even though being tested, in general, was not their favorite part of the course.
- Question 6: An average of 95.3% of the students thought the course had been personally beneficial rather than merely the fulfillment of a requirement. Many insightful and revealing comments and reflections about individual student’s personal moral growth and development experiences were attached to this question. It was interesting to me that many students related that they had been surprised by how meaningful the course turned out to be for them although they had not had high expectations for a meaningful experience coming into the course. The frequency of this response made me wonder: Why would students not have positive expectations about being required to take an ethics course? Perhaps, I thought, it is because normal socialization results in most people

believing that they are already sufficiently moral and, thus, as young adults, do not need to be taught to be *more moral*. This suggested to me that what was needed was a clarification of the purpose of ethics in order to counteract this felt superfluity of ethics study. This led me to make it very clear at the outset of the course that I did not think it was my job to make my students be ‘more moral’. Rather, I saw my job as inviting them become *more aware* of just how moral they already were by providing them with the tools and the experiences by which they could investigate, evaluate, come to see and possibly change their moral value orientation as they saw fit. I always felt it was necessary to drive home this caveat in order to overcome the initial widespread reluctance among students to being required to take a business ethics class. By the end of the course, however, as the survey repeatedly made clear, this initial reluctance had been generally overcome. And that is what led to the frequent reports of feeling they had benefited from the course despite having low expectations at the outset. In fact, in response to this survey question, many participants said that they thought the course would have a meaningful impact on them for the rest of their lives, both professionally and personally. Overall, I thought that the responses to this survey question was the most certain, clear and consistent evidence for the meaningful success of the existential-phenomenological approach.

- Question 7: An average of 97.6% of students perceived the professor to be well-prepared, caring of students and able to communicate effectively. This feedback confirmed for me the importance of students’ perception of their teacher, especially regarding the teaching of ethics, and was consistent with my own experience of having been a student. The coherence between responses to this survey question and Question 6 were also consistent with research indicating that students’ perception of teachers of ethics courses can make a positive difference in outcome (Dukerich, et al, 1990).

In sum, the information generated by the exit survey was helpful for assessing the general effectiveness of the course in bringing about positive moral development for the participants. Reading straight through the responses from one hundred or more students to any of the survey questions at the end of a semester, for example, produced in me a subjective ‘feel’ regarding student responsiveness to the course and what aspects of the course were meaningful and which were not, and this allowed me to make profitable and effective changes to the course design and delivery across the ten-year period being considered here.

6. Conclusion

This essay has described an existential-phenomenological pedagogy and conceptual framework based on strategies adapted from van Manen’s phenomenological studies, Hadot’s ‘spiritual exercises’ orientation to philosophy as a way of life, and Levinas’s ethical phenomenology of exorbitant responsibility for structuring and teaching business ethics to undergraduate business students, along with a straightforward phenomenological exist survey procedure for evaluating its effectiveness. It was proposed that a meaningful determination of the effectiveness of undergraduate business ethics courses is essentially geared to the posture taken by the teacher of such a course in reference to two key questions: first, whether morality is understood primarily as a process of rational moral decision-making or a process of transformational personal growth and development, and, secondly, whether moral subjectivity is

best understood from a modernist or from a Levinasian perspective.

Interpreting the nature of morality to be primarily a function of principled moral decision making was shown to be inadequate for realistically addressing the moral integration of the existential individual who is intuitively engaged every day in various intersecting and competing interpersonal practices structured both rationally and non-rationally, consciously and unconsciously. Thus, if morality is restricted to a cognitive rational deductive process it will fail to generate a pedagogy that will be engaging for undergraduate business students in their existential situatedness. This is especially true since undergraduate business students may already be motivated by materialistic values in their career aspirations, which are then reinforced across a business school curriculum skewed pragmatically toward employability and a vision of personal success measured by profit and loss.

Arguing that it is crucial to the success of undergraduate business ethics pedagogy, a radical account of moral subjectivity based on a pre-conscious and fundamental orientation of responsiveness to the otherness of the Other was presented based on the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas. This was seen to be an antidote to a modernist or post-modernist subjectivity infused with Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment characteristics. It was shown that the way in which moral subjectivity is understood will substantially influence pedagogical determinations for the teacher of business ethics. Adopting a Levinasian model of moral subjectivity was depicted as being more consistent with the strictures of ethics understood as a process of personal, transformational growth and development and more likely to engage a broader range of non-rational features of morality that emerge in a consideration of the meaning-producing activities of undergraduate business students in their life-as-lived average everydayness.

Appendix 1

Here is a sampling of the experiential ‘spiritual’ exercises used in the existential-phenomenological business ethics course.

Note: Responses to the ‘spiritual’ exercises below structured as course assignments took the form of essays (300-400 words) written by students and posted in a class discussion forum that is accessible to all students who post in the forum. Each essay is privately graded according to a published construction metric and feedback is provided privately to each student. Sometimes general feedback is also published.

1. *Memento Mori* ... In this exercise, adapted from Plato’s understanding of philosophy as “the practice of death” in the *Phaedo* and the Stoic philosopher Seneca’s biography *Dying Every Day* (Romm, 2014), students are asked to consider how they would like to be remembered after their death, how they would like people to think about them, and what people will recognize as their greatest achievement during their lifetime.
2. *Measuring your moral progress* ... This exercise utilizes an insight from the Stoic philosopher Seneca for gauging your progress of moral growth and development. After studying the Stoic approach to living the best possible life within a framework of business practices, students are asked to describe a person that they know who best embodies the moral ideals of the Stoic sage, a person against whom they could measure their own progress and someone whom they would like to emulate.
3. *Reframing* ... This exercise utilizes an insight from Epictetus that is also reflected in Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy developed by Albert Ellis. After studying the Stoic idea that our experience of what happens to us is the result of our judgment about what happens and not the thing that happens itself, students are asked to reframe various situations in ways that take back the power that events seem to have to cause reactions in us, thus enhancing their own moral power.
4. *Discerning your maxim* ... This is an exercise developed from Kant’s idea that we produce our own subjective moral principles or maxims which we then use to make deontological judgments as to what we should do or not do. In the context of various real-to-life scenarios, students are guided to recognize and articulate the maxims they form and to alter these to produce the most morally desired outcome. Students become aware of their own production of maxims.
5. *What you can control and what you cannot* ... This exercise of determining what is in your power to control and what is not within your power is adopted from the first principle in the *Handbook of Epictetus*. After discussing this principle with students and showing them how it works, students are asked to utilize it in their daily life to guide their emotional and behavioral responses in situations arising in their personal life and in a professional context, focusing on what is within their power and becoming indifferent to what is not.
6. *Virtue hierarchy* ... After studying Virtue Ethics, students are asked to create for themselves a virtue hierarchy consisting of what they think are the ten most important virtues and are then directed to use this hierarchy to evaluate various real-to-life moral dilemmas where a person is stuck between two or more competing virtues, such as a conflict between friendship loyalty and justice as fairness in a hiring situation.

7. *Determining consequences* ... This exercise sometimes becomes a game among students to see who can describe the fullest set of moral consequences following upon some action such as building an oil pipeline or firing an employee. Consequences are seen to be virtually endless.

8. *What would you do?* ... Numerous scenario exercises are presented to students with various business and non-business real-to-life moral dilemmas. Students are directed to empathize with the main character who is experiencing the dilemma, evaluate the situation from various moral perspectives, and then describe what they would do and how they would feel about doing it if they were the character experiencing the dilemma. Here is a typical example:

What Should Mary do?

by Shel Horowitz*

Mary W., a sales rep for a large, international educational materials supply corporation, was achingly close to making her million-dollar sales goal — only \$1,000 short.

If she made the goal by the end of the year, it would mean a fat \$10,000 bonus check and a happy trip to the bank to finance a dream home she'd recently found and desperately wanted. Other sales reps in her large office of fifteen reps also were close, and one had already made the bonus. The books would close in just a few days, but at the end of the year her clients weren't in a buying mood.

Still, Mary had one hope: inner-city Lincoln High School. Its students, who often had to share textbooks, could really use her company's multimedia educational aids, but Lincoln had no discretionary money in its depleted budget for new teaching materials. 'What if I donated the money to this needy school for the purchase,' Mary thought to herself. 'That would put me over the magic quota.'

Or perhaps she could offer partial "donations" to close sales at several schools, she thought. She would then surpass her quota goal with room to spare. The Lincoln school or other needy schools would gain immensely valuable educational programs that would help them serve their students; her company would pick up sales revenue; and she would meet her sales quota. Even better, she would earn a cool \$10,000 on an investment of \$1,000 and her dream house would be hers.

At first thought, this seemed like a win-win solution. But the idea needled Mary's conscience. The more she thought about it, the more something about it bothered her. Yet if she didn't close this "sale" by "donating" to the school — a "sale" which would help disadvantaged students — she wouldn't make that bonus, and her dream house would remain out of reach. She found herself wondering, "What should I do?"

What do you think Mary should do?

DIRECTIONS: Evaluate Mary's moral conflict from (1) a Virtue Ethics perspective [Would it be virtuous for Mary to act on her scheme?]; (2) a Deontological (Duty Ethics) perspective [Does her scheme violate her moral duty?] and (3) a Utilitarian moral perspective [Would a utilitarian conclude that her scheme was morally correct or not?] (4) Which of these three moral analyses seems to you to be the most morally correct thing for her to do and why do you think that?

* Adapted from *Shel Horowitz (shel@principledprofits.com) "Should Mary Buy Her Bonus?"*
Downloaded (January 2010) from <http://business-ethics.com/>

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