Business Ethics in Times of Crisis

Call for papers for a special issue of the *Journal of Business Ethics*

Today it would seem that we are surrounded by talk of crisis. Banking crisis, personal and sovereign debt crisis, ecological crisis, and, perhaps inevitably under these circumstances, a crisis of morals. There seems to be no escape from some kind of catastrophe, or at least from a hyperbolic catastrophism that calls for extraordinary, even desperate, measures. Indeed it feels sometimes like we are living in what the philosopher Slavoj Zizek calls ‘end times’ in which he tells us he has seen the riders of the apocalypse on the horizon. Zizek asks if such catastrophism is really just the disguised opportunism of those who would appear as saviours, really just a prelude to even greater political catastrophe as after the Great Depression, when our ethical systems entered systemic crisis globally. Or can these current serial crises be instead a genuine passage to new ethical vision, a new dawn for business and society, or more exactly for business in society and in the natural world?

Any such rendezvous with a new ethical vision for business may look particularly distant at the moment, even fanciful. After all, rather than being cast as the solution, business ethics has equally be portrayed as part of the crisis, or at very least unequal to the task of preventing or responding to unfolding catastrophe. Can a business ethics said to be in crisis itself respond to crisis? And how? More profoundly, what will be the role not only for business ethics, but business itself in the aftermath of such shattering ecological crisis as the British Petroleum disaster and near catastrophic collapse of the global banking system itself? How should business ethicists respond? Can they respond? How should ethical leaders in business respond? How should the global citizenry itself respond to business?

This special issue, which was inspired by papers originally presented at the fourteenth European Business Ethics UK conference at the Queen Mary School of Business and Management at the University of London in April 2010, invites discussion of these questions. Papers should accord with the scholarly standards of the *Journal of Business Ethics*, but are here explicitly invited to go beyond business ethics just as these crises themselves seemed to exceed the capacity of existing business ethics to respond to them. The special issue aims in fact to be equal to the scale of these crises by inviting bolder, grander, and more daring interpretations of business ethics to match the scale and challenge of these crises.

We invite contributions dealing with any aspect of crisis. These may range from the more obvious outward manifestations of crisis, some of which we have already noted. But we also invite considerations of less obvious aspects of our current crisis. For instance, while much talk of financial crisis has been concerned with rescuing our economies and financial arrangements, much less have we understood the concrete social crises lived by the working poor, the credit-damaged, the ecologically vulnerable, and indeed the way that further crises for these populations may yet be produced in the very responses to the
current crises in corporate boardrooms and Treasury offices throughout the world. Similarly, while much needed attention has been shifted to the way we teach business ethics, far less has been said about the ethics of business scholarship, research, and publishing.

Our focus in this issue is of course on ethics as foundational to both business and society, and we particularly invite papers that focus on the ethical antecedents to and consequences of the crisis. We invite contributors however to be suspicious of the easy moralising, characteristic perhaps of too much of the public discussion of these serial and linked crises. We must not hastily abandon the philosophical complexities of ethical questions and we must critically scrutinise both the current times of crisis and the place of business in these, and not just the moral culpabilities but also the context in which such ethical lapses are produced almost as a matter of course.

Contributions to the special issue may include responses to these questions from any approach and perspective, may use any justifiable method, and may be motivated principally by empirical, theoretical or political concerns. We invite contributions from academic but also from non-academics who have lived through and have experience in dealing with crisis. In addition to what we have said above, contributions may choose to focus on issues including, but not restricted to:

- Crisis and critique – what are the responsibilities of academics in the face of social suffering?
- The inadequacy of existing academic disciplines to respond adequately to the crisis – how has the discipline of finance for example, responded to the crisis and in what ways does that discipline itself need reform?
- Education and ethics – what is the role of pedagogy in failing to prevent crisis, or conversely helping to prevent or respond to such crisis?
- Small or big measures – given the rise of massive expenditures to support economic stability, are we today in a position to ask for similar measures to support measures motivated by concerns for social justice?
- The risks of not acting – what are the likely practical results of failing to act in response to anticipated challenges to, for example, supplies of water and food in coming years?
- The uneven and combined nature of the crises – in what ways do the effects of crisis continue to depend on where one is placed in global order?
- The way crises are linked and interactive – how does these links and interactions suggest holistic response but also unintended consequences?
- The limits of ‘ethics’ as explanation of and basis for critique of business – is this an ethical crisis at all?

**Submissions**

For consideration for inclusion in this special issue, papers must received no later than 1 December 2010. Submissions must be no longer that 8,000 words and must comply with submission requirements of the *Journal of Business Ethics*. Submissions should be made to c.jones@le.ac.uk. Contributors should note that
you must specify that your paper be intended for consideration in this special issue.

**Guest Editors**

Rowland Curtis ([r.curtis@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:r.curtis@qmul.ac.uk)) is Lecturer in Organisation Studies at Queen Mary University of London. His research is currently concerned with the ethics and politics of academic knowledge production. His doctoral thesis examines the UK Research Assessment Exercise. His work has been published in *Culture and Organization* and *ephemera*.

Stefano Harney ([s.harney@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:s.harney@qmul.ac.uk)) is Professor of Strategy, Culture and Society and Director of Global Learning at Queen Mary University of London and Chair of EBEN UK. He is widely published in top academic journals and this third book *Governance and Criminality* is forthcoming with Routledge. He has frequently appeared in the print and television media on questions of the consequences of the financial crisis. He has recently established a research centre called Finance Watch, which is concerned with the analysis and contribution to public debate about responsibility in the financial sector.

Campbell Jones ([c.jones@le.ac.uk](mailto:c.jones@le.ac.uk)) is Senior Lecturer in Critical Theory and Business Ethics at the University of Leicester School of Management. His publications include *For Business Ethics* (2005, Routledge, with Martin Parker and René ten Bos) and *Unmasking the Entrepreneur* (2009, Edward Elgar, with André Spicer).

Authors wishing to discuss potential submissions are invited to consult with the guest editors in advance of formal submission.