

# A Logic of an Introductory Business Ethics Course

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**Purposes**—The course should help students identify problems in business that are related to the ethical domain of thinking. Students should also learn some ethical frameworks in order to have multiple points of view about ethics from which to create judgments about the ethical issues. Finally, the course should create methods that individuals can use to develop autonomous, rational judgments, adhering to the most significant standards for thinking about ethics in business.

**Questions**—When is it acceptable to harm others in business? What constitutes “harm” in business? What are the important points of view within the context of business? What is the relationship between ethics at work and ethics when a person isn’t at work? What is the appropriate relationship between authority at work and the right way to live? How do work and business promote the good life? Can they interfere with the good life? If so, how?

**Information**—Broadly, the class should contain information about various ethical theories inside and outside of market structures, along with examples about how judgments are reached while using those theories. Information should be included about relevant business activities in the headlines and in popular culture, to include markets, stakeholders, regulation, sustainability, profit, social justice, and other relevant concepts, and a host of business activities, along with examples of when those activities and related thinking create compromises and concerns in the ethical domain of thinking. Some of these compromises and concerns might manifest as conflicts of interest, corruption, and other externalities. Of course, the class should also contain information about when business should be praised.

**Inference**—Thinkers in this class should learn to connect the examples of appropriate and dysfunctional business to various ethical theories, to unpack their own intellectual processes around business relationships and activities, and to identify how ethical judgments are arrived at for business. They should also learn to examine their thinking regarding the relationship between individual values and values of the marketplace.

**Assumptions**—Thinkers in this course should interrogate the assumptions of the instructor about various deep issues in business ethics, as they should similarly interrogate their classmates and themselves. Topics include, but are not limited to, assumptions around the centrality of capitalism for business success; the importance of working for success; assumptions about the relationships between wealth and goodness; assumptions about oversight for consumer products and services; the roles of self-interest and authority; the ways capitalism is changed by distance and time; etc.

**Concepts**—Important concepts in this class, all of which will be explored explicitly and in a business context, are power, truth, goodness, wealth, capitalism, Marxism, culture, democracy, free markets, fair trade, sustainability, income equality, social justice, discrimination, the invisible hand, redlining, obligations, rights, fairness, profit, the dialectic, ethical egoism, The Neoclassical Model of Corporate Social Responsibility, and many others.

**Implications and Consequences**—Some implications to look for involve how your thinking might change if you take any of the ideas in the course seriously, subsequently thinking them through and exemplifying them for important business applications. There are implications for your spending, your market choices, your personal and professional values, and your interest in activism surrounding business ethics if you take the material in this class seriously. Failure to take this material seriously could result in outcomes like loss of job, loss of reputation, forfeiture of property, incarceration, fame, accumulation of power and assets, restructuring of life trajectory, and/or a complete personal ethical makeover. Which of these implications become consequences is up to each thinker to control, although relative power will always be a factor in implications becoming consequences.

**Point of View**—A course in Business Ethics should be approached with the idea that whatever values, rules, customs, or laws exist around business, these can be challenged and interrogated with critical thinking and other appropriate tools. Further, a critical approach to Business Ethics places fairmindedness at the center of the decision-making processes that should inform any ethical inquiry into business. Too often, business thinking is slanted, compromised, or otherwise limited by authority, profit-motive, a quest for power, or all three. Careful attention to points of view can illuminate areas where the thinker is being limited by his or her egocentric and sociocentric biases surrounding business values, and where he or she can improve as a thinker on this topic.