

***Positive Business Ethics:  
Grounding and Elaborating a Theory of Good Works***

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Abstract: While the normative business ethics literature elaborates positive visions of the “good,” the behavioral ethics literature primarily focuses on unethical behaviors or decision processes that either lead to or prevent those behaviors. The former literature is valuable for rigorously defining what makes “positive” phenomena so, thereby philosophically grounding “positive”—something that has been often only implicit in POS scholarship. To better theorize a positive counterpart to unethical behavior, this chapter defines a construct called “good works,” which are behaviors that are morally praiseworthy, discretionary, and positively deviant. Elucidation of these three criteria based on their theoretical foundations helps to distinguish good works from other related behaviors. The chapter proposes a model of the decision process that precedes good works, based in part upon moral identity, moral imagination, and the sensemaking intuition model, and concludes with directions for future research into the individual and organizational antecedents and consequences of good works.

**Key Words:** Positive, ethics, behavioral ethics, normative ethics, moral identity, moral imagination, sensemaking-intuition model, supererogation, positive deviance

## **Introduction**

Positive business ethics is the study of that which is morally excellent or praiseworthy in business. While the field of business ethics has seen increasing attention by management scholars, we argue in this chapter that a majority of the research in business ethics has focused on attempting to unpack dependent variables, processes, and conceptions of the “good” that disproportionately (but certainly not exclusively) focus on negative aspects of human behavior and morality. Our ambition in this chapter is to briefly review this “negative” tendency we see in the descriptive business ethics literature, followed by the presentation of a more positive view of business ethics. We offer several different ways of theorizing “positive,” drawing from normative theories of the good. By grounding “positive” in a discussion of the “good,” we help inform descriptive research in business ethics, and more generally POS, that has often struggled to understand and define “positive.” Our model of positive business ethics—something we call a model of “good works”—explains actions that are positively deviant (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004), are perceived by the people who perform them (and their salient referents) as morally praiseworthy or excellent, and are perceived to be discretionary rather than obligatory. We differentiate our view of good works from related research that has sought to understand morally excellent or praiseworthy behaviors, and propose a model whereby decision-makers identify and determine how to perform good works. We conclude with a call to scholars to be cognizant of the negative/positive biases they bring to their study of business (un)ethics and illustrate how a view of good works expands the domain of business ethics and POS.

### **Business Ethics: A Brief Overview of its Negative Tendency**

Business ethics is a bit unique as compared to other possible fields to examine through a POS lens, in that business ethics involves both a descriptive study of human behavior more familiar to social scientists as well as a normative one that is less familiar. For descriptive studies, behavioral ethicists describe and explain organizational behaviors that are recognized by participants or affected parties as (un)ethical, as well as the rational and non-rational decision processes whereby individuals in organizational contexts (fail to) evaluate their actions in ethical terms (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Sonenshein, 2007; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). On the other hand, normative business ethicists elaborate different philosophical visions of the good that can be used to articulate why one decision or outcome is morally better than another.

While there have been descriptive theories and studies of praiseworthy phenomena like organizational citizenship behaviors or OCBs (LePine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002; Organ, 1997; Van Dyne, Cummings, & Parks, 1995; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), corporate social responsibility or CSR (Barnett, 2007; Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007) whistle-blowing (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Miceli & Near, 1992), and positive deviance (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003 & 2004; Warren, 2003), much of the work in behavioral ethics has been focused on ethical deficiencies and their prevention. Articles about behavioral business ethics written for audiences of management scholars broader than the community of business ethicists often seize their readers' attention by beginning with a reference to scandals and the need for a better understanding of how to prevent them (e.g. Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005; Jones, 1991; Reynolds, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Street, Douglas, Geiger, & Martinko, 2001; Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006;). Moreover, a prevailing concern with the study of deficiencies in ethical decision-making and behavior is evident in much research. For example,

Reynolds (2006), in his study of the biopsychological bases of moral awareness states, “I will use the neurocognitive model to develop research propositions around the central concern of ethics research: unethical behavior” (p. 742). When introducing moral imagination, Moberg and Seabright (2000) call it “a form of reasoning that serves as an antidote to decision environments that normally lead to morally defective choices” (p. 845). While the modeling and prevention of legally and morally unacceptable behavior is plainly quite important, we believe that the descriptive domain of ethically excellent or praiseworthy behaviors in business appears to be relatively undertheorized and underexamined, a focus on a more positive perspective on business ethics is not meant to relegate traditional research to the side; quite the opposite, we believe that explaining unethical behavior as well as explaining “positive” ethical behavior are both important research endeavors. However, we believe that current theoretical frameworks have a tendency to focus on explaining unethical behavior, and that theories needed to explain ethical behavior are not necessarily the same as those used to explain unethical behavior.

### **Positive Business Ethics—Summary of the Good Works Construct**

In contrast to much of the literature briefly reviewed above, we will focus this chapter on a more positive set of phenomena that we call “good works”: actions that are positively deviant (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004), are perceived by the people who perform them (and their salient referents) as morally praiseworthy or excellent, and are perceived to be discretionary rather than obligatory. We will also examine the positive processes and mechanisms that help explain such behaviors.

To begin our discussion of good works, consider some examples that have focused on more positive aspects of ethical behavior. Examples might include Howard Lutnick’s decision to

pay ten years' worth of health insurance and profit sharing to the dependents of 658 Cantor Fitzgerald employees killed on September 11, 2001 (Gordon, 2001), John Rockwell's development of McDonald's Corporation's Green Building Strategy (Net Impact, 2009), or Ajay Badhwar's conception and development of a carbon-capture business that leverages the engineering and project management strengths of Alstom Power and the Dow Chemical Company (Net Impact, 2009). All of these examples are positively deviant in that they depart from the typical behavior of managers in these decision-makers' industries and perhaps even their own companies; they are morally praiseworthy in their contribution to individual and collective well-being; and they are discretionary, in that no blame would accrue for not doing them, nor were they coerced by others.

Good works are conceptually distinct phenomena from other constructs that emphasize descriptively positive behaviors. For example, they are different from OCBs because although they are discretionary and praiseworthy, they are also positively deviant, that is, nontrivially outside of the norms of behavior typical to an organization or other relevant referent. Similarly, they are different from CSR for the same reason. They are a subset of positively deviant behaviors in that they are considered excellent or praiseworthy according to some moral standard, whereas other positively deviant behaviors may perhaps be honorable for their beauty (like the construction of architecturally attractive facilities or the placement of aesthetically excellent advertising) or their cleverness (like the use of industrial ecology to capture the waste streams from one production process as the inputs for another) but not morally excellent per se. Finally, good works are not simply the inverse of ethical misbehaviors or the results of not engaging in misbehavior, such that it is reasonable to suppose that they may be described using the same processes: rather, their discretionary, praiseworthy, and positively deviant nature makes

it likely that they are governed by decision processes that do not draw on the same cognitive resources as more urgent problems whose neglect may lead to negative sanctions (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001).

While good works may exist at the individual or the organizational level, we are focusing this chapter on good works as individual actions that result from individual-level decision processes. Individual decisions often have organizational implications, especially when individual decision-makers are acting on behalf of, or directing, the organization. However, to develop the idea of good works at the organizational level would require a theoretical focus that goes beyond our largely psychological and social-psychological approach and would take us to a more sociological analysis that warrants its own treatment. As a result, we believe that a theory of good works at the organizational level remains a fertile opportunity for future research but one that we do not take up here.

Having broadly discussed good works, we turn to better grounding the construct, first by considering its normative underpinnings and then moving to elaborate the construct for descriptively-oriented views of business ethics.

### **Good Works: A Normative Grounding**

A normative grounding of good works is important because it adds theoretical clarity to what “positive” is—that is, what makes some behaviors morally praiseworthy. While such a grounding can add important clarity to the POS literature, it is not without controversy. The content and justification of the good life and of good actions have been subjects of ongoing philosophical inquiry for thousands of years (e.g. Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. / 1985; Foucault, 1988; Taylor, 1989), and business ethicists continue to theorize applications of these visions of the

good life to and within organizations (e.g. Crane, Knights, & Starkey, 2008; Hartman, 1996; Solomon, 1992). In fact, there is an indefinite number of visions of the good (Lyotard, 1984; Taylor, 1989) that may have an indefinite set of implications for business ethics (Rorty, 2006). Our purpose here is not to recommend one normative vision of the good over the others, but rather to sketch a few of them briefly, highlight some continuities between them, and illustrate their potential implications for grounding a view of good works. We believe that normative ethics can helpfully elaborate what it is that makes good works “good,” and perhaps commend some that have not often occurred to decision-makers. This is important because one of the difficulties of the development of POS is that scholars often do not have a sound basis for what “positive” means (George, 2004).

Importantly, we are not attempting to subsume all that might be “positive” under the moral “good.” Rather, moral praiseworthiness pertains to a subset of all honorable behaviors, specifically those actions that contribute to the good life of individuals and the communities within which they live and work. Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004) characterized the “positive” aspect of positive deviance as that which is honorable; positive acts do or would meet with the approval and even acclaim of a relevant referent group because those acts exceed the norms that such a group holds for the relevant behavior. But that which is honorable includes more than just that which is morally good, whether as a matter of definition or perception (Scott, 1996). Aquinas (1984) distinguished between intellectual and moral virtues, noting that the former are useful for reasoning accurately and insightfully from both principles and evidence, regardless of the moral or immoral purposes to which they are put. A skilled integrative bargainer may discern that two children fighting over an orange can both be satisfied if one is given the peel for baking and the other the flesh for eating (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991); she has solved a problem

through a laudable rational insight, but not through strength of her moral character or brilliance of her moral vision. Similarly, aesthetic beauty is also independent of ethics (Adorno, 1970; Rothko, 2004). A well-dressed employee may be a credit to his role or organization (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993) and be complimented accordingly, while a skilled public speaker may be much appreciated by his audience, but neither one has demonstrated moral character or moral vision, at least through their aesthetic excellences. These honorable characteristics are non-exclusive; for instance, a speech may simultaneously contribute to the good life of the community by discrediting discriminatory practices, ingeniously refer to cherished identities shared by the speaker and the parties being addressed (Nielsen, 1996), and impart excitement to its message through the cadence of its delivery. But, it is the first characteristic that makes it morally praiseworthy.

One stream of theorizing about the good life in business ethics is drawn from the virtue tradition that stretches back to Aristotle, a theme that POS scholars have frequently used (Cameron, 2003). Solomon (1992) elaborated a set of classically-grounded virtues that when practiced by individual businesspeople would be conducive to collective wellbeing in organizations, on the insistence that individual happiness is enabled by the well-functioning of the surrounding community. His vision was expansive, encompassing organizations characterized by “continuity and stability, clearness of vision and constancy of purpose, corporate loyalty and individual integrity” (p. 104), where each employee has a job that “means something, one that has (more or less) tangible and clearly beneficial results, one that (despite inevitable periods of frustration) one enjoys doing” (p. 105-106). Solomon (1992) placed a high value on congenial virtues like friendliness, compassion, caring, and wit, which along with courage, toughness, and justice, complemented by intellectual virtues like vision and creativity,

are important for creating and sustaining organizations that exemplify the vision quoted above. Good works in such a framework might include acts of compassionate generosity to organization members who are victims of some misfortune (e.g. the responses to victims of an apartment fire chronicled in Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006), which would enhance the solidarity of the community and the wellbeing of its members.

Hartman (1996) similarly emphasized the importance of theorizing business organizations as communities (and as elements of broader communities) in which the wellbeing of individuals may be promoted. Hartman's (1996) overriding concern is the cultivation of moral autonomy, such that individuals are able to make (and take responsibility for) their own decisions according to the demands of their own consciences. This moral autonomy requires a context that enhances its inhabitants' abilities and opportunities to exercise it: one in which there are responsibilities to be discharged, authorities to be exercised, and goods to be justly distributed. That good community, of which the business organization is a microcosm, requires careful development and maintenance: good works there would enhance both the loyalty of its constituents and the scope of their autonomy, often through greater justice and transparency. For instance, an HR manager might promote both the availability of disability accommodations and the procedures through which their reasonability is determined. This would enhance the quality of work and life for employees who would otherwise suffer silently rather than self-identify their disability, increasing their loyalty and autonomy; it would also increase perceptions of procedural fairness among their coworkers (Colella, Paetzold, & Belliveau, 2004), to similar effect.

Other streams draw from even newer traditions in philosophical ethics. For instance, Crane, Knights, and Starkey (2008) have explored implications for the workplace of an even

more radical ideal of moral autonomy drawn from the work of Michel Foucault. This radical autonomy recognizes that people need communities if they are to realize aspirations greater than social isolation, and that joining communities requires submitting to the authority of those communities' norms; however, individuals should choose for themselves with which communities they will affiliate themselves, and therefore to which norms and authorities they will submit themselves (Crane et al., 2008). Gardner, Stansbury, and Hart (in press) have applied just such a Foucauldian approach to the practice of "poaching" employees from other firms, arguing that norms against lateral hiring among employers are in fact simply a form of opportunistic economic collusion masquerading as ethics; instead, employees ought to decide for themselves what outside offers to entertain, on the basis of relationships of loyalty mutually forged between them and their employers. One example of a good work that might be relevant to such an approach might be the formation of network groups for diverse sets of minority employees, or the promulgation of policies that encourage the formation of those groups (Friedman & Holtom, 2002); such groups provide employees with a choice of affiliations, and the opportunity to challenge the norms of one affiliation through the strength of another.

Aside from theorizing about the nature of the good itself, a different stream of philosophical thought analyzes the content and possibility of actions that are both praiseworthy and discretionary. Mellema (1991a) defines actions which fulfill no moral duty or obligation, which are praiseworthy, and whose omission is not blameworthy (p. 3) as supererogatory, that is, as being "above and beyond" what is necessary. Seven types of action are generally understood to be supererogatory: beneficence (i.e. giving gifts or charity), doing favors, volunteering, declining to claim one's rights, forgiveness, heroism (i.e. taking on extraordinary responsibilities), and saintliness (i.e. forbearing extraordinary hardships or temptations) (Heyd,

1982). Importantly, supererogatory actions need not be altruistic; good works need not be wholly selfless to be good, though praiseworthy actions typically benefit or at least attempt to benefit someone else as well (Mellema, 1991a; Solomon, 1992).

Some cases illustrate situations when a praiseworthy action is actually not entirely discretionary. These actions may fall into the category of quasi-supererogation if they are the sort of action that someone is obligated to do sooner or later, but that a person may decline any instance of without qualms (Mellema, 1991a and b). Reviewing manuscripts for a journal that one submits manuscripts to would be a case of quasi-supererogation, because declining any single review request is not a failure to fulfill one's duty to review, but declining all of them is. Similarly, some actions are quasi-supererogatory because their omission signals (howsoever accurately or inaccurately) a lack of some virtue (Mellema, 1991b). Contributing to the annual United Way drive is praiseworthy, but not doing so may imply a lack of generosity, team spirit, or both; depending on one's reasons for declining, it may be blameworthy not to contribute.

The foregoing thumbnail sketch of a normative grounding of positive business ethics highlights a pair of important points. First, the analytical study of supererogatory (henceforth praiseworthy and discretionary) actions reveals a typology of those actions, points out that those actions need not be altruistic, and highlights that some such actions are not as discretionary as they may seem. Second, various conceptions of the good generally concern themselves with the well-being of the individual embedded within a social system that must also be sustained in a well-functioning state. Businesses are subsystems of larger social systems, and happen to be especially important for the well-being of the people within them, so the individual, organizational, and social levels of analysis are interdependent. Thus, good works can entail contributions to specific individuals, like doing favors for overwhelmed coworkers or customers,

or contributions to the well-functioning of the system upon which individuals depend, like reducing waste in the company cafeteria or appointing an ombudsperson.

### **Good Works: A Descriptive Grounding**

In this section we will further elaborate the “good works” construct as an important and understudied domain within descriptive positive business ethics. Its defining features are its moral praiseworthiness, its discretionary character, and its positive deviance, as perceived by the person performing the good work and that person’s salient referents.

#### **Moral Praiseworthiness**

An action is morally praiseworthy if it exemplifies or promotes some vision of the good life, as the examples cited in the foregoing section do. For our descriptive purposes, we will define moral praiseworthiness with reference to the visions of the good held by some referent group (Warren, 2003) which may likely hold visions of the good that bear some resemblance to the ones outlined in the preceding section. These might not adhere strictly to some particular normative standard; for instance, businesspeople may consider some actions morally praiseworthy that normative ethicists, activists, or other observers do not. The generation of ecologically unsustainable waste streams is self-defeating in the long run if widely practiced, making such behavior potentially unethical (e.g. Kant, 1998), yet sustainability projects that reduce but do not eliminate emissions are viewed by many businesspeople as praiseworthy contributions to the world in which they and their children will live (Environmental Defense Fund, 2008). Even with reference to the same vision of the good (a world characterized by both

prosperity and a stable ecosystem), the line that descriptively delineates praise from blame varies with the issue at hand and the parties who take an interest in it and offer an interpretation of it.

Some actions are positively deviant and discretionary but not morally praiseworthy per se. An example of such a behavior would be Cummins Engine Company's commitment to pay architecture fees for public buildings in its hometown of Columbus, Indiana (Cummins Engine Company, n.d.; Csikszentmihalyi, 2003); honorable though Cummins's commitment is, it does not appear to enhance moral autonomy or bolster the position of the least-advantaged in the community (for instance). Similarly, Southwest Airlines's policy of not charging passengers to check bags is clever, discretionary, and positively deviant, but not morally praiseworthy per se, since the good at issue is simply a few extra dollars in its (many) customers' pockets. Such behaviors may be honorable for non-moral reasons, but behaviors that are positively deviant without being morally praiseworthy per se are likely to be better understood with models of innovation than with models of good works.

### **Discretion**

Discretionary actions are those for which no moral condemnation applies upon their omission. Not all volitional actions are discretionary; writing about organizational citizenship behaviors, Organ (1988) stated that "By discretionary, we mean that the behavior is not an enforceable requirement of the role or the job description . . . the behavior is rather a matter of personal choice, such that its omission is not generally understood as punishable" (p. 4). Whereas Organ's interest was in behaviors that were not required by the employee's job role, our interest is in behaviors that are not required by moral considerations, which is to say, behaviors that are supererogatory or quasi-supererogatory according to the definition in the foregoing section. The

case of quasi-supererogatory behaviors is an interesting boundary condition, because these are boundedly-discretionary: they fulfill a duty that must be honored in some way, but the particular action with which to fulfill the duty is up to the decision-maker. For instance, the example above of soliciting requests for accommodation from employees under the Americans with Disabilities Act is quasi-supererogatory: the action is praiseworthy, and its omission is not blameworthy, but it fulfills the employer's duty to accommodate the disabled. Since making accommodations is a duty under United States law, this proactive approach qualifies merely as an excellent way of meeting an obligation that the employer would have to fulfill anyway. Similarly, giving to the annual United Way drive may be a signal of one's generosity; not giving is not an indicator of a lack of generosity if one's generosity is alternatively expressed through gifts given directly to other charities, or even directly people in need. That said, we believe that even quasi-supererogatory actions which fulfill some minimum duty, if performed in a way that is morally praiseworthy and positively deviant, are deserving of study; it is worth asking, "Why fulfill the duty in this way, at this time?"

Some actions may be morally praiseworthy, positively deviant, but not discretionary. Instances of whistle-blowing that expose a significant and imminent harm would fall into this category; for instance, blowing the whistle on the harmful health effects of tobacco use, asbestos exposure, or some as-yet-unexposed dangerous product is praiseworthy, but suppressing the same information is blameworthy, so such an act of whistle-blowing is not discretionary. Consider also James Burke's decision on behalf of Johnson & Johnson to recall all Tylenol during the cyanide adulteration crisis of 1982: Burke was deservedly praised for his decisive and comprehensive response to the threat, but the blame that would have accrued if more people had died after a more measured response would have been fearsome, as Toyota learned during its

delayed safety recall in 2010. The Credo at Johnson & Johnson famously states in its opening lines that “We believe our first responsibility is to the doctors, nurses and patients, to mothers and fathers and all others who use our products and services. In meeting their needs everything we do must be of high quality” (Johnson, 1943). The Credo’s clear focus on the firm’s responsibility to provide high-quality medicines to its consumers highlighted the unacceptability of further deaths from a poisoned product. Therefore, morally praiseworthy and positively deviant though this decision was, it was not truly discretionary; this decision is better described by moral approbation (Jones & Ryan, 1997) than by our good works construct.

### **Positive Deviance**

Positive deviance is behavior that violates existing norms (i.e. deviates) in a way that is honorable (i.e. positive) (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). For our purposes, “morally praiseworthy” is a subset of “honorable,” as elaborated above. Deviance is behavior that is exceptional in some respect relative to typical or routine behaviors among a reference group; it may be statistically rare, supraconforming, or simply behavior that members of the reference group identify or would identify as deviant, but should not have the negative connotations that are often ascribed to the term (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). Therefore, when we state that good works are positively deviant, we emphasize that they are exceptional rather than common, they are not well characterized by typical models of similar behavior, and they do not conform to typical routines.

Some actions may be morally praiseworthy and discretionary but not positively deviant. Helping a coworker move into a new home, advising a new hire about how to comply with the code of conduct, walking a disabled customer to his car, or suggesting a process change that will

reduce electricity consumption might all be well within the norms and routines of many workplaces. Many such behaviors would be appropriately classified as organizational citizenship behaviors (LePine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002; Organ, 1997) or prosocial organizational behaviors (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986), and can be modeled accordingly. However, it is important to note that as the requirements of many jobs become more vague and expansive, what is considered in-role behavior has also expanded, to the extent that many prototypical OCBs are considered in-role by many employees and managers (Organ, 1997); moreover, meta-analysis suggests that OCBs may be most accurately understood as a “general tendency to be cooperative and helpful in organizational settings” (LePine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002). Therefore, we suggest that while the OCB construct may incorporate some good works, the positively deviant character of the latter will tend to separate it from the mundane (though not thereby unimportant) character of most of the former (Spreizer & Sonenshein, 2004). Brief and Motowidlo’s (1986) prosocial organizational behavior construct is even broader, incorporating behaviors that may or may not be directed toward the organization or its members and may or may not benefit them. Brief and Motowidlo (1986) themselves noted that the term prosocial is quite value-laden, but that neither researchers nor managers should presume that a prosocial behavior ought to be promoted for practical or ethical reasons. Therefore, we similarly suggest that while some prosocial organizational behaviors may also qualify as good works, we believe that the more restricted domain of the latter is useful for research and practice.

Similarly, CSR may be discretionary and praiseworthy but not positively deviant. Barnett (2007) characterizes it as discretionary corporate activity intended to both improve social welfare and enhance stakeholder relationships. It need not be altruistic, and in fact the intention to enhance stakeholder relationships means that genuinely altruistic acts of CSR are likely to be

accidental. Barnett (2007) also characterizes CSR as nearly universal, rather than positively deviant. Moreover, Barnett (2007), Margolis & Walsh (2003), and Scherer and Palazzo (2007) define it as an organization-level phenomenon, in the domain of strategy and organization theory. We are focusing on good works as individual behaviors; those behaviors may have organization-level implications, especially if the actors are important organizational decision-makers, but theories of organization-level good works informed by the CSR literature must remain for future research.

### **Prototypical Good Works**

Having described the attributes of good works, and the conditions that mark their absence, we will now illustrate some prototypical good works. Nike has been working to enhance its sustainability since the early 1990s, and despite a major setback during the sweatshop scandal of the late 1990s, it has made enormous progress (Arnold & Hartman, 2003; McDonough & Braungart, 2002; York & Larson, 2006). A small group of employees organized as the Nike Environmental Action Team (i.e. NEAT) in 1993, which promoted recycling programs including Reuse-A-Shoe (Nike, 2001), which has recycled over 24 million shoes into rubberized sports surfaces and other materials since 1990; 300 basketball courts, tracks, and other surfaces had been donated to communities by Nike by 2008 (Nike, n.d.). Then in 1995, NEAT heard a galvanizing presentation by Paul Hawken, which convinced its members that businesses like Nike needed to “enter a new era of commerce where human and business needs don’t deplete living systems” (Nike, 2001: 5). In 1996, Nike commissioned a new green European headquarters campus with extensive recreational facilities (McDonough & Braungart, 2002), and by 1998, Nike had an official sustainability policy, even as it was inundated by a rising tide of

bad publicity over the labor and environmental practices of its contract manufacturers (York & Larson, 2006). In July of 1998 CEO Phil Knight committed Nike to holding its suppliers to US OSHA indoor air-quality standards, to a 16-year-old lower age limit for apparel workers and an 18-year-old limit for footwear workers, and NGO involvement in monitoring of its factories' labor and environmental practices (Arnold & Hartman, 2003). Moreover, Nike has led its industry by requiring after-work educational programs for workers in its contract factories; these programs have meaningfully enhanced educational attainment and promotion opportunities for personnel who otherwise would not be able to pursue formal education, and in Vietnam, all contract factories offer education leading to the local equivalent of a GED (Arnold & Hartman, 2003). Back in the United States, Nike has been gradually eliminating its use of materials like PVC that are neither biodegradable nor indefinitely recyclable, incorporating ever-greater quantities of organic cotton into its garments, and reducing the use of non-regulated hazardous materials in its contractors' manufacturing processes (McDonough & Braungart, 2002; York & Larson, 2006). These actions qualify as good works, because they embody a morally praiseworthy commitment to social and environmental good dating back to NEAT's original epiphany in 1995, they are discretionary in the sense that they more than meet the legal requirements that Nike faces and are in many cases invisible to consumers, and they are positively deviant in that Nike has often pioneered these activities in its industry.

### **Towards a Model of Good Works**

There are an indefinite number of potential good works, and a great many possible antecedents and moderators of their incidence. Accordingly, we will next focus our attention on the decision process whereby individuals identify and carry out good works. We believe that this process is

important because it highlights one of the most important mechanisms for the genesis of good works, and because it provides an opportunity-oriented counterpart to problem-focused moral decision-making.

The decision process that precedes a good work is partly rational and partly intuitive. Rational processes are important for choosing to do a good work, because positively deviant actions are unlikely to result from the peripheral information processing that occurs when decision-makers devote little cognitive attention to decisions which they do not view as ethically important (Street et al., 2001). However, a systematic normative analysis of the set of possible good works, followed by an optimizing (or even satisficing) choice among them, seems to be beyond the cognitive resources of business decision-makers (Sonenshein, 2007). Rather, we propose that businesspeople have moral identities that are to some greater or lesser extent central to their senses of self (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Those identities will encompass a set of scripts for action that the individual considers moral; for positively-deviant actions that depart from the set of behaviors typical in the work role, these scripts may belong to a different role, and be enacted in the work role as an act of moral imagination (Werhane, 1999). A given individual will recognize an opportunity for a good work in the workplace through reflexive pattern matching (Reynolds, 2006) of the attributes of the situation with the schemas that comprise their moral identity. That recognition will prompt an intuitive determination of whether they would or would not like to perform that good work (Sonenshein, 2007). Afterwards, the individual will rationally consider the practical constraints they will face, strategies they will follow, and justifications they will offer in order to perform the good work (Sonenshein, 2007). The ensuing rational consideration may dissuade the individual from performing the good work, or encourage them to do so, depending on whether the justifications and strategies they are able to formulate

are adequate to overcome the constraints they will face in enacting their deviance. We will elaborate the elements of this model below.

Moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; McFerran, Aquino, & Duffy, 2010; Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008) is “a self-conception organized around a set of moral traits” (Aquino & Reed, 2002: 1424). Individuals will consider themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, to be people that cherish and demonstrate (or internalize and symbolize) attributes like caring, compassion, fairness, friendliness, generosity, helpfulness, hard work, honesty, and kindness (Aquino & Reed, 2002). The foregoing set of attributes is not exhaustive, and in fact different individuals will incorporate different attributes that they consider moral; however, the foregoing set is usefully general in its acceptance by a wide range of people as typically moral (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moreover, empirical studies have found that individuals who internalize these attributes are more likely to self-report volunteerism, to actually engage in charitable giving (Aquino & Reed, 2002), and to both subscribe to a principled ethical ideology and subsequently engage in OCBs (McFerran, Aquino, & Duffy, 2010). Moral identity appears to be a self-schema that prompts prosocial behavior.

Moral imagination (Moberg & Seabright, 2000; Werhane, 1999) is also important for decisions to perform good works, because the positive deviance of those good works requires a creative awareness of both the immediate situation and of other honorable possibilities: a lack of creativity leads to actions that are positively mundane, while a lack of awareness leads to actions that are flatly deviant. Werhane (1999) characterized moral imagination as being aware of the schemas guiding one’s own ethical thinking in a given situation, considering other possibly-relevant schemas from outside of that situation, and imagining new possibilities of action that draw on both sets of schemas. She elaborated on contemporary social psychological and

philosophical conceptions of the self to propose that each person has different “thick selves,” one for each set of different activities and matching reference groups one participates in. One also has a “thin self” that exists at the intersection of those many thick selves, which comprises one’s consistent moral core regardless of the situation. The thin self is able to mediate between different thick selves to bring to bear schemas that facilitate understanding and scripts that guide action as needed and as appropriate, and that bringing of different aspects of self to bear from outside of the situation at hand is constitutive of moral imagination (Werhane, 1999). For instance, a committed environmentalist may have a “thick self” that spends weekends knee-deep in mud doing wetlands restoration, and another “thick self” that spends workdays striving for efficiency as a facilities manager. Her “thin self” may incorporate an abhorrence of waste and a hands-on practicality; she may exercise moral imagination by proposing that a new parking lot incorporate a runoff-capture cistern to irrigate the grounds and prevent contamination of the watershed. We argue that the positive deviance that differentiates good works from more mundane prosocial behaviors can be understood as an enactment of a different but appropriate thick self, characterized by a moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002), in a situation in which the work self would typically apply.

The Sensemaking-Intuition Model, or SIM (Sonenshein, 2007) describes how a decision-maker faces a situation of moral equivocality, in which it is not clear what the right thing to do is. Incidents of positive deviance would seem to qualify as equivocal because they depart from the typical routines and practices of a workplace, and therefore would seem to require some degree of consideration. The SIM posits that a given decision begins with an issue construction, in which the decision-maker or others in the social environment interpret a set of social cues as marking an ethical issue (Sonenshein, 2007). Opportunities to perform good works are similarly

constructed from the schemas that identify goods and opportunities, and the scripts that guide actions, through moral imagination. A decision-maker's moral identity, as an element of the "thin self" at the nexus of many "thick selves," will organize cues according to the self-schemas drawn from those thick selves. That organization may sometimes reveal an opportunity for a good work that complements and reinforces moral identity. A given decision-maker's schemas and scripts may be well-developed, whether through careful upbringing, education in moral reasoning or practical ethics, or exposure to moral exemplars (Moberg & Seabright, 2000; Weaver, 2006; Weaver, Trevino, & Agle, 2005); more numerous and well-developed schemas and scripts are useful for better matching actions to the environment (Weick, 1979), and in this case, for exercising moral imagination to construct opportunities to do good works. For instance, our wetlands-loving facilities manager likely learned about the effect of runoff from paved surfaces on local wetlands through education, hands-on exposure to those wetlands, or both; her thick self who restores wetlands on the weekends recognized the runoff from a parking lot as harmful. Her waste-loathing thin self aligned that schema with the efficiency-seeking schema of her facilities-manager thick self to highlight the value of capturing the runoff. She constructed an opportunity to do a good work through an act of moral imagination.

Once an opportunity has been constructed, according to the SIM the decision-maker will intuitively and instantaneously make a moral judgment (Sonenshein, 2007), which in this case will be whether the good work at hand is something to perform or not. That intuition will stem from the degree to which the pattern of attributes in the opportunity construction match the pattern of attributes of a moral schema that has a positive valence (Reynolds, 2006; Sonenshein, 2007). The self-importance of one's moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002) is likely to influence that judgment, as are the type and length of the decision-maker's experiences with good works,

and the social influences for or against good works to which they have been exposed (Sonenshein, 2007). Our facilities manager is likely to judge her runoff-capture opportunity as worth pursuing, in light of its strong match with a positively-valued schema.

Finally, the decision-maker will formulate explanations and justifications of their intuition (Sonenshein, 2007). This is the point at which formal ethical reasoning can be engaged to evaluate the normative excellence of a good work, though often a decision-maker may instead formulate their explanation to others using non-normative terms (Sonenshein, 2006), and the degree of normative justification that they require for their own satisfaction may be quite small. At this stage, the decision-maker may also reassess the feasibility of performing the good work, if the explanations and justifications formulated are inadequate for overcoming the expected barriers and objections to the action. Our facilities manager may justify her runoff-capture proposal to others in terms of both rational efficiency (not consuming municipal water, and perhaps earning public goodwill in times of drought), and the ecological benefit of reducing runoff.

### **Conclusion**

Positive business ethics offers the promise of better articulating the positive foundations of ethical versus unethical behavior, as well as for providing a model for how other research streams in POS can use normative theories to better understand what “positive” means. While our review of normative theories was far from comprehensive, it suggests an opportunity for crisper theorizing for POS scholars. We took on this challenge of crisper theorizing through the development of the good works construct and its integration into a decision making model that, unlike many other models in the business ethics literature, explicitly focuses on explaining

positive ethical behavior—not unethical transgressions. In doing so, we hope to have taken an important step in helping explain some of the extraordinary good works that organizational members undertake.

### **Future Directions**

Positive business ethics, and especially a theory of good works, calls for the importance of understanding the normative foundation of positive behavior. Business ethics especially makes salient the need for theoretical clarity around what is positive, as in this case, positive has implications for fundamental questions of right or wrong. At the same time, the descriptive model we developed about good works is fundamentally rooted in social science, with implications for theorizing about the descriptive mechanisms and processes that lead to positive ethical behavior. While we are certainly not the first to have noticed questions around the integration of normative and descriptive business ethics (e.g., Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994; Trevino & Weaver, 1994), we feel that the often confusing relationship between normative and descriptive aspects of business ethics are that much more important for POS. Normative theories, such as the ones we briefly reviewed above, help inform what is positive, whereas descriptive theories explain how we get there.

### **The Ends of Business Ethics--What is “Positive”**

One of the over-arching criticisms of much of the POS literature to date has been on the murky and problematic understanding of “positive.” George (2004: 326) put it this way: “The meaning of terms such as ‘positive’... is implied or assumed to be universally understood and agreed upon... I beg to differ. Clearly, what is thought of as positive, extraordinary, or virtuous is value

laden and debatable, context-dependent, and historically, ideologically, and socially constrained.” Fineman, offering another critique of POS, used these words: “The revolutionary verve of positive scholars is striking yet attests ideologically to established traditions that fuse positive assumptions about human nature with moral rectitude” (Fineman, 2006: 272). What these criticisms rightly point out is that POS scholars have either avoided a clear definition of “positive” or made universalistic assumptions about what is positive that borders on the line of creating a “cosmology” (George, 2004: 326) or a “moral/ideological stand” (Fineman, 2006: 271). We have tried to be both explicit and pluralistic in our use of normative theories to add more texture to the meaning of “positive.” We described several possible definitions of the good that can serve as a foundation for “positive.” We remain (in this chapter) agnostic about philosophical debates over which conception of the good is “right,” or even if it makes sense to ask such questions in the first place (Rorty, 1982). Instead, we present a variety of conceptions of the good that can inform how we theorize which types of behaviors are viewed as positively ethical—that is, as morally praiseworthy.

No doubt that our very brief review of normative theories has left other important conceptions of the good out, which may also commend otherwise-ignored opportunities for businesspeople to do and be good. If POS scholars want to overcome criticisms of being ideological (that is, affirming one conception of the good) and criticisms of not being clear on what is positive (that is, not affirming any conception of the good), we encourage a stronger dialogue with business ethicists who are better equipped to elaborate the different foundations of positivity, especially concerning moral behavior. If POS scholars ground their theorizing about the positive in philosophically-articulated models of the good, then the latter criticism will be moot. Moreover, charges of ideology are troublesome mostly when the vision of the good that

grounds a work of scholarship is left implicit. By making the claims to positivity explicit in a given work, positive scholars can address the weaknesses of those claims, while remaining circumspect about what they do and do not advocate.

### **The Means of Positive Business Ethics—How do We Get There?**

While normative business ethicists have a vital role to play in explicating the foundations of positivity, we think that social scientists have much to learn about the mechanisms and processes that explain positive ethical behavior. Our brief review of (un)ethical behavior suggests that the field of business ethics has amassed quite a wealth of knowledge around explaining when and why individuals engage in decision making that leads to unethical behavior. But as our descriptive model of good works suggests, it is important for models of ethical decision-making to also explain positive ethical behavior.

There are a number of relationships that future research into these models might explain. The internalization and symbolization of moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002) may be important positive antecedents of good works, as might the diversity and detail (Weick, 1979) of the schemas and scripts that comprise individuals' moral identity. Similarly, individual-level positive or negative antecedents of good works may include personality, duration or diversity of work experiences, or gender, while organization-level antecedents may include ethical climate (Victor & Cullen, 1988), psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), or the presence of a values-based ethics program (Paine, 1994). Theoretically or practically important consequences of good works may also include affective or normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991) at the individual level. Importantly, the foregoing adaptation of the SIM for good works implies that agents of moral change, such as tempered radicals (Meyerson & Scully, 1995), might have

opportunities to appeal to other decision-makers in their organizations without recrafting their presentation of the opportunity in non-normative terms (Sonenshein, 2006). Because the intuitive judgment of the attractiveness of a good work results from the similarity of the construction of the opportunity to schemas that are important to the decision-maker's moral identity, tempered radicals can retain the moral character of their appeals by framing those appeals to match cherished aspects of others' moral identity. Understanding what goods or actions others hold dear may be especially helpful for formulating successful moral appeals, as might targeting those appeals to individuals for whom moral identity is self-important.

Both business ethics and POS share a common concern around positively deviant behavior that is praiseworthy, and as we argued here, both rely on some normative foundation to define what is "praiseworthy." In this chapter, we hope we have taken an important step at bridging these related disciplines in the hopes of creating more rigorous and impactful scholarship that informs both areas of research.

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