

## JAPAN SOCIETY FOR BUSINESS ETHICS (JABES)

### 1 . INTRODUCTION

It would be appropriate to conform to Oxford English Dictionary for a compact definition of certain English terms. OED defines that ethics are the moral principles that govern a person's behavior or the conducting of an activity and the term is usually treated in a plural form and that it also signifies the branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles and the term in this usage is usually treated in a singular form.

In the tradition of Western philosophy there are three distinct streams of normative ethics: (1) The first, drawing on the work of Aristotle, holds that the virtue such as justice, courage, charity and generosity are the dispositions, which enable a person possessing them to act ethically: (2) The second, defended particularly by Immanuel Kant, puts the concept of duty central to morality. Humans are bound, from knowledge of their duty as rational beings, to obey the categorical imperatives to other rational being: (3) Third, utilitarianism, whose classic proponents were Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill, asserts that the guiding principle of conduct should be the consequential realization of greatest happiness or benefit of the greatest number.

Business ethics is one of the applied ethics, which is the philosophical examination of business issues that are matters of moral judgment. In actuality, however, 'business ethics' is used in a lot of different ways. Richard T. De George (2005)\* points out that the term business ethics is used in at least three different, although related, senses; (1) the primary sense of the term refers to business ethics as an applied ethic, which has emerged roughly in the early 1970s, when the term 'business ethics' came into common use in the United States. The origin in this sense is found in the academy, in academic writings and meetings, and in the development of a field of academic teaching, research and publication; (2) it is also used in "ethics in business" sense and often equated with either business scandals or more broadly with ethics in business conducts and this is the secondary sense. In this broader sense the history of "business ethics" goes back to the origin of business itself; and (3) the tertiary sense of the term refers to a movement within business to explicitly build ethics into the structures of corporations in the form of ethics codes, ethics officers, ethics committees, ethics training and corporate social responsibility (CSR) conducts.

Provided that De George's observation is accepted, one would have to conclude that 'business ethics' in the primary sense is the least practiced in Japan, especially in comparison to the situations in the United States. Furthermore, the term 'business ethics' has been translated into Japanese either as "*keiei rinri*" or "*kigyō rinri*", where "*keiei*" means 'management', "*kigyō*" means 'corporation' and "*rinri*" signifies 'ethics'. Those

who are satisfied neither with “*keiei rinri*” (management ethics) nor with “*kigyō rinri*” (corporate ethics) prefer to use such translation as “business *rinri*”, for reason that both “*keiei*” and “*kigyō*” are not proper translation of 'business'. There is even a tendency to avoid the term “*rinri*”, which is the translation of ethics and preference prevails for such terms as 'compliance' and 'corporate social responsibility (CSR)'. Those who prefer 'CSR' or 'compliance' to business ethics argue that the term “*rinri* (ethics)” is connotative of being musty, too philosophical, aloof, non-business-like, and unpractical.

Behind the fact that business ethics in the primary sense defined by De George has not much of presence, there is a situation that the JABES membership breakdown consists of company officials, lawyers, management consultants and the ratio of university teachers is relatively low compared to a similar academic association in the United States. Furthermore, those university teachers are mostly from business administration field and the ratio of philosophy field is extremely small.

Business ethics is a normative science that examines ethical principles and moral or ethical problems associated with a business environment. It involves all aspects of business conduct, relevant to the conduct of both individuals and entire business organizations and especially the conflicts between the norms entertained by individuals and what is demanded by the organizational logics. Although business ethics is a normative science, it has descriptive dimensions. Academics who attempt to understand business behavior employ descriptive methods. The range and quantity of business ethical issues reflect the interaction of what is organizationally demanded, often defined as profit-maximizing or loss-avoiding behavior, with moral concerns of individuals with a commitment to organizations. Descriptive dimensions are certainly important, especially in such a field as business ethics, which deals actual conducts and behavior of business, both individual and organizational. Certainly, business ethics is an interdisciplinary study and yet there would be no interdisciplinarity without a discipline. The central discipline of JABES, which is yet somewhat vaguely defined, will eventually converge into a more consistent and compact style of contents in due course of its further development of the activities.

## 2. JABES Activities as a whole 2011-2015

From 2011 to June, 2015 JABES as a whole has held five annual conferences, five symposiums, two overseas meetings, one in ROK and the other in Thailand, eleven meetings for research presentation and discussion. The topics and themes discussed in those conferences and meetings are described in what follows.

2011 annual conference was held at Reitaku University for two days from June 18 to

19 with a main theme “Business Ethics Education and its Prospects”.

2012 annual conference was held at Meiji University for two days from June 23 to 24 with a main theme “Quality of Management: Ethics and CSR”.

2013 annual conference was held at Hakuoh University for two days from June 15 to 16 with a main theme “Business Ethics and Diversity Management”

2014 annual conference was held at Aoyama Gakuin University for two days from June 21 to 22 with a main theme “Profession Education and Business Ethics”.

2015 annual conference was held at Takushoku University for two days from June 20 to 21 with a main theme “Asian Business Ethics: Cultural Diversity and Universalizability of Business Ethics”. The presenters of those annual conferences were given opportunities to publish their presentations in a form of academic papers, which were peer-reviewed and published in *Journal of Japan Society for Business Ethics Study*. The journal articles are in Japanese with a brief abstract in English, which can be retrieved from CiNii (Citation information by National institute of informatics) web-site.

Symposiums, held once in 2011, twice in 2012, and once each in 2013 and 2015 have covered such topics as “Corporate Missions and Business Ethics”, “Global CSR and BOP Business”, “Corporate Scandals and Management Responsibility”, “Corporate Global Responsibility and Business Ethics”, and “Age of Big Data and Business Ethics”.

A joint study meeting was held with Kookmin University in Seoul, Korea on November 8, 2012 and with Thammasat Business School of the Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand, on April 30, 2015.

Eleven meetings for research presentation and discussion were held from July 2, 2011 to December 13, 2014 and they have covered a total of 20 topics such as (1) IFRS and its possible effect on business ethics, (2) corporate governance in India: a case of TATA corporate scandals, (3) the development of business ethics in a historical perspective of philosophy in the Western world, (4) vicissitudes of personal management styles in corporate organizations, (5) the reformation plan envisioned by the Democratic Party of Japan with respect to corporate governance, (6) from ISO26000 to JISZ26000 and CSR management, (7) the meaning and significance of the Kantian philosophy in business ethics, (8) work-life balance of women workers in Japan, (9) ethics teaching in public schools and its possible influence on business ethics, (10) consumer education and business ethics, (11) business ethics and its practices, (12) corporate behavior of Levi Strauss, (13) voting power of organizational investors in Korea, (14) enforcement effectiveness of soft laws on CSR, (15) business ethics and CSR in Islamic countries,

(16) globalization, reverse innovation and business ethics, (17) big data and privacy protection, (18) business ethics and CSR in Thailand, (19) corporate governance and corporate power holders, and (20) corporate governance and corporate stewardship in Japan.

### 3. STUDY GROUPS ACTIVITIES

Besides the activities as a whole, JABES also organizes eight study groups such as (1) Philosophical Study, (2) Business Conduct Study, (3) Auditing and Governance Study, (4) Fact-finding Research, (5) CSR Study, (6) Business Ethics Education Study, (7) Kansai (Osaka) Area Study Group, and (8) Chubu (Nagoya) Area Study Group. These study groups held meetings several times a year and discussed a wide range of topics. Among those study groups the most active groups were the following four; (1) Business Conduct Study Group; (2) Auditing and Governance Study Group; (3) CSR Study Group; and (4) Philosophical Study Group. These groups regularly held study meetings once every month and brief summaries of what was discussed in the meetings were published in the web-site of JABES.

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\*De George, Richard T., "A History of Business Ethics", Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University