

Volume 9 Issue 3-4
09-12/2011
tamarajournal.com



Aesthetics and Ethics: You Can't Have One Without the Other

Steven S. Taylor

Worcester Polytechnic Institute, US
sst@wpi.edu

Michael B. Elmes

Worcester Polytechnic Institute, US
mbelmes@wpi.edu

Special Issue on Aesthetics and Ethics
Editorial paper

As the old song *Love and Marriage* tells us: you can't have one without the other. Such is the case for aesthetics and ethics and we have too long suffered from the divorce of the two that came with the enlightenment (Wilber, 1998). In this special issue, we sought to mine the rich vein where aesthetics and ethics meet – to look at this relationship that so much of modern organizational scholarship has ignored. Of course, not everyone has ignored it. Brady (1986) broached the subject and concluded that “ethics is fundamentally aesthetic, and the categories of right and wrong ultimately are reduced to the beautiful and ugly (p. 340)”. The authors here do not find the relationship to be quite as simple as that, but there is a persistent theme that aesthetics and ethics are bound with each other and with the instrumentality that drives many of the processes and decision factors in business and management.

We start with Bathurst and Edwards' (this issue) illustration of how aesthetics and ethics work together in Aotearoa/New Zealand's Treaty of Waitangi. Using the metaphor of the carver, they consider the Treaty's role in fostering a rich and complex dance among the instrumental, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of ethical dilemmas in New Zealand – which are applicable to dilemmas in other parts of the world. The tensions within the dance do not resolve, but rather play together in fruitful ways.

Ladkin (this issue) then suggests that moral perception is much like aesthetic perception and managers can be taught moral perception in the way that artists are taught aesthetic perception. Just as artists learn to stay with the evidence of their senses in order to see the world afresh, managers can learn to stay with their senses in order to cultivate their moral perception and see their own world in moral as well as instrumental ways. Yet as with any art, often it requires intention and practice to cultivate the aesthetic sensibility and skill that managers need before they can perceive the moral dimensions of the issues they face.

Finally, Kimball (this issue) offers a first person account of the complex interplay between aesthetics and ethics in her own efforts to make a work of art that included rats. She starts with the idea of creating an artwork that includes live rats running through tubes and wheels, but is quickly faced with both ethical and instrumental issues. Her story shows us a first hand account of Bathurst and Edwards's complex dance of tensions between aesthetic, ethical, and instrumental concerns as well as how an artist practices Ladkin's understanding of moral perception. In the end, Kimball shows us that the dance never ends, the tension never really resolves, yet ethical decisions are made and actions taken along the way.

In all three pieces we see how the three spheres – instrumental, aesthetic, and moral – aren't separate at all. Although great strides have been made in enhancing the material aspects of our existence by separating the instrumental from the moral and the aesthetic, we have to wonder about the cost of that separation. Although none of the articles address that cost directly, we wonder

if the string of corporate ethics scandals of the last decade and the financial crisis of 2008 would have happened in a world where ethics and aesthetics are inseparably bound with the instrumental. Could executives at Enron have tried to game the California electricity market to artificially inflate prices if they were acting from aesthetic and ethical sensibilities as well as instrumental concerns? We don't think so. We think that the cost of the separation of aesthetics and ethics from the instrumental is a world dominated by instrumental logics, a world where the bottom line is the bottom line and managers are incapable of modifying their gaze.

It is a world that is not just overly instrumentalized, but overly intellectualized. The other theme that comes out of these three pieces on the intersection of aesthetics and ethics is embodiment and the way that when aesthetics and ethics come together they do so in a physicalized way. Bathurst and Edward's show us how the aesthetic of the Maori carvings at the *whare whakairo* or carved meeting house (Te Tiriti O Waitangi Whare Runanga) on the land where the Treaty was signed physicalize the ethics of the Treaty. Ladkin shows us how the practice of staying with our senses, with our direct contact with the physical world is a critical practice for artistic and moral perception. And Kimball shows us how actual involvement with the corporal physicality of the rats changed her ethical and aesthetic understanding of her project. Ethics and aesthetic come together in our embodied practice in the world.

References

- Brady, F. N. (1986) Aesthetic components of management ethics. *Academy of Management Review*, 11(2), 337-344.
- Wilber, K. (1998) *The marriage of sense and soul: Integrating science and religion*. New York: Random House.