

Management and Ethics

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Abstract


In the face of the accelerated changes that our societies have undergone in recent decades —both in scientific and technological realms, as well as in social, economic, and cultural spheres— it can be observed that certain fundamental and indispensable aspects for development remain forgotten, at individual, social, and humanity-wide levels. Within this context, concepts such as ethics seem to be marginalized when considering, for example, the high levels of corruption everywhere. This paper explores the importance of ethical issues in professional and academic activities related to management, which lean on a chance to improve efficiency and efficacy as well as individual, organizational, and social development.

Keywords: Administration, management, ethics, corruption

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Only when anomalies accumulate to a point that cannot be ignored that new paradigms are given conscious thought. These new paradigms come not from the established order, but from the "new men", foreign people or young people uncontaminated by long exposure to the current way of thinking. The arrival of the new paradigms is accompanied by a crisis period, as the old is replaced by the new, which is a revolution.
- Handy Charles⁶

INTRODUCTION

The current crisis facing our society is a product of the prevailing socio-economic paradigm centered around the allure of wealth, complexity, private property, productivity, and the pursuit of profits as the ultimate goal of management in organizations. This realization has led to the concentration of the population in large urban areas, specialization in activities, unemployment, a decrease in overall well-being, an increase in violence, and widespread corruption, among others, as a result of poor wealth distribution. This compels us, as researchers, educators, and individuals connected to the development and practice of management in its various fields, we are compelled to seek alternative ways of understanding the theory and practice of this activity in organizations within an increasingly complex society, to foster the emergence of new paradigms.

This work focuses on providing a preliminary exploration of administrative theory from a philosophical perspective, with a systemic focus, employing a systemic approach, starting from the relationship between Ethics and Management as a human activity entrusted with satisfying social needs. In the first part, the revision of some fundamental concepts about Philosophy and Ethics is deemed crucial, then, once these concepts are established, the examination proceeds to review the development of administrative theory as a scientific discipline. In the third phase, the concepts of Ethics and Management are intertwined to propose ideas that might pave the way for a different paradigm than the currently prevailing one.

ETHICS AS PART OF PHILOSOPHY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH SCIENCE

For a better understanding of what Ethics is, we will begin by identifying it, along with science, as part of Philosophy and will explore its relationship with it, considering it generally as the love for knowledge or wisdom. Specifically, Gutiérrez Sáenz (1973) proposes a definition of Philosophy as: *the knowledge of the essences and the first principles of all being*, that is, of the supreme causes of all things. In other words, Philosophy is a form of knowledge distinguished by its rational apprehension. Its material object of study encompasses all things, and its formal object is determined by the *supreme causes*.

Thanks to the precision provided by the formal object of study in Philosophy, it is possible to distinguish this branch of knowledge from the set of sciences, since Philosophy deals with all beings, but from a viewpoint markedly different from that taken by the sciences.

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⁶ Charles, Handy. *Los Dioses de la Administración*. Ed. Limusa, México, 1983. pp. 197-198.

Philosophy studies the supreme cause of all things, whereas the sciences focus on the proximate causes of some things. For example, man is a subject of study in various sciences such as Psychology, Anatomy, or History, but none of these sciences are confused with each other, due to the different aspects they examine within the same material object, which is the man. Similarly, Philosophy studies the same material aspect distributed among the sciences but distinguishes itself entirely from them due to its characteristic formal object: *the supreme causes*.

Another concept that is considered fundamental to understand the relationship between Ethics and Management, from the perspective of Philosophy, is that of Science. It can be defined as *a certain knowledge of things through their causes*, a concept that has been part of the philosophical tradition since Aristotle. Consequently, a body of knowledge is at the scientific level when it aims at the causes of what is studied, whether it be a physical phenomenon, a mathematical theorem, or the origin of the current administrative paradigm.

In this manner, and continuing with the same perspective, there arises the need to relate Ethics to Science (Ackoff, 1949, p. 664), hence Ethics can be defined as a practical and normative science that rationally studies the goodness and badness of human actions. In general, Ethics is a form of knowledge distinguished by its rational apprehension, practical nature, and normative character, with its material object of study being human actions, and its formal object being the goodness or badness of these actions.

CLARIFICATIONS ABOUT THE CONCEPT OF ETHICS

Given the complexity of the study of Ethics, it is considered necessary to establish the following clarifications based on some fundamental questions (Waddington, 1963, pp. 208-217):

1. Regarding the formal object of study in Ethics: What difference exists between an action labeled as good and one labeled as bad? Is there no objective difference, and does everything depend on individuals who judge based on customs, education, conveniences, and impositions?

Faced with this fundamental question about judging good and bad, there are many possible responses in daily life. For example, some people think that acting rightly is acting following "conscience" or according to one's utility, or the intuition of the moment, etc. Others believe that acting in accordance with "laws" is acting morally. According to them, acting under the law is behaving correctly. To refute these conceptions, one might ask again: under what conditions is conscience defined? By what criteria are laws deemed good? Are all laws good? In general, the definitive criterion for judging good and bad must be much broader than mere compliance with the law.

There is an infinity of people who commonly advise: "Whatever you do, the important thing is to do it with good intentions." Undoubtedly, these individuals have observed that morality is closely connected to a person's inner self, their intentions or purposes, and the secret of their aims. An extreme case is the famous thesis of Machiavelli: "The end justifies



the means". In this sense, it should be noted that the material object of study in ethics is provided by human actions, and the formal object is the goodness or badness of these actions. Ethics, therefore, focuses its activities on distinctly human areas such as human behavior, one's realization as a human being, free decisions, intentions, the pursuit of happiness, and one's noble, heroic, dark, or malicious feelings.

Thus, Ethics is not concerned, in fact, with human behavior as commonly performed (this would be of interest to Sociology), but rather provides norms of right conduct for executing human actions correctly, good actions, and in accordance with reason. Ethics, as a philosophical branch, shares characteristics with Philosophy, primarily due to its interest in the very essence of the human act in which it seeks its value of moral goodness, delving into the supreme causes of human behavior. In this definition of ethics, the expression "human actions" carries precise meaning, to the extent that any change in it could lead to serious confusion. Ethics does not study the acts of man (Veatch & Henry, 1972, pp. 39-62) Human behavior operates on two levels: there are human acts and acts of man. Human acts are consciously and freely performed, on a rational level, unlike acts of man, which lack consciousness, freedom, or both.

Human acts, with the described characteristics, are the only ones that can be judged as good or bad from a moral standpoint. Acts of man, as described, lack moral value; they are amoral, even though they could be good or bad from another perspective. Under these considerations, whenever judging the morality of an act, first, it must be determined: is it a human act or simply an act of man? If it belongs to the latter classification, one cannot proceed; it is indeed an amoral act, neither good nor bad from this angle, and Ethics has nothing more to say on the matter.

2. Regarding the universal validity of Ethics, a common question arises: are moral norms fixed or do they change over time? (Mackie, 2000, pp. 95-116) This is a fundamental question of moral relativism, which suggests that: All moral norms are a matter of customs or needs that change with time, place, and individuals. Each person must establish their norms. There are no effectively universal norms; each case is different from the other and, therefore, does not admit the same rule of solution. The flag of existentialism, as an extreme case of this way of thinking, is amoralism, which in practice is realized as a complete indifference towards all moral norms.

It is said to be practical because, unlike the so-called speculative or theoretical sciences, Ethics is a discipline whose main purpose is the realization of its knowledge. Ethics goes beyond knowledge for the sake of knowledge and only fulfills its proper purpose when it is embodied in human conduct. And it is normative because it studies what is normal, but not what is normal in fact, but what is normatively right. What is normal, in fact, is what usually happens, what is customary to observe. What is normatively right is what should happen, even if it does not always, or perhaps never, happen. In this sense, it studies what should happen, and what is established as correct in a rational manner, even when human conduct is typically carried out differently in practice.



3. Another common question regarding obligation and freedom in norms is: are there truly mandatory laws, and on what basis does this obligation rest? The obligation of duty to be is perhaps the most typical theme of Ethics. The feeling of obligation is a fact of which everyone is aware of. Internally, we perceive the obligation, the duty that impels us in a certain direction (Tugendhat, 1997, pp. 33-48).

Here, the issue of freedom is at stake, the authenticity of one's conduct: what is considered the most intimate and valuable in each person, their free and unpressured decision; through which one forges their own life. It seems that moral obligation robs a person of the only possibility of being themselves, according to their mentality, according to their judgment. Moral obligation has been widely misinterpreted, and far from being an obstacle to the authenticity and autonomy of humans, it is rather their condition.

Human freedom is a quality of the will through which one chooses a good over others, and it has the following characteristics: it is a quality by which something is chosen; it primarily depends on the will, but it has, as a necessary condition, prior deliberation, which depends mainly on the intellect; the chosen object is always good, which does not mean that one always chooses well; the object of choice is good, whether real or apparent; and, ultimately, it is an aspect of goodness, which can coexist with negative values within the same object. If a person saw absolutely nothing good in an object, they wouldn't even consider it for their choice. For the purposes of Ethics, four types of freedom are distinguished: physical, psychic, legal, and moral. The last three can be grouped under the name internal freedom, in contrast to the first, which is external freedom.

Physical freedom, also known as freedom of action and external freedom, consists of the absence of material constraints—chains, shackles, prison, and even violence—that suppress or at least diminish the physical freedom of a person. Psychic freedom is a purely psychological quality, entirely internal, residing in the intimacy of a person, regardless of whether externally they can execute what they have chosen internally. It could also be called freedom of will because, effectively, it is the will that, by deciding and choosing, positively wants a specific objective. Even if they cannot act on it materially, it is also known as free will. Legal freedom is the absence of conscience ties, the opposite of moral obligation. Where there is no moral obligation for a specific action, it is said that there is legal freedom for it. Moral freedom is located at a higher level but is also part of internal freedom, residing in the will, where a person comes to enjoy a special type of freedom called, strictly speaking, moral freedom.

Moral freedom is a rare state, characteristic of someone who navigates easily and spontaneously along the right, valuable, and moral path. Such a person has a positive commitment to moral values and their realization. They feel free from hindrances—resentments, passions, phobias, hatred, ideologies, etc.—to act not only honestly but also by choosing the best course among those available in each situation. Their real obligations do not weigh on them as tasks they must do, but rather they carry them out with genuine ease and even joy. They are truly free within themselves.



Internal freedom can increase over time. Psychic freedom typically grows with age: a person's will becomes more powerful as they psychologically mature. Legal freedom, on the other hand, usually decreases over time. Ordinary life situations—marriage, children, profession, interpersonal relationships—impose more and more obligations, leading to a decline in legal freedom. It remains paradoxical in human life that as one grows, psychic freedom strengthens but, simultaneously, due to life's commitments, legal freedom diminishes.

A person who voluntarily, autonomously, adheres to their own obligations and commitments, and uses their psychic freedom within the limits of their legal freedom, simultaneously acquires a more authentic and valuable freedom, which is moral freedom. This involves refraining from deceiving others when they can, avoiding engaging in dishonest or abusive business practices, and respecting the rights of others. All of this is not due to external pressures or fear of the "weight of the law" but stems from their conviction, a true self-determination that finds fulfillment in making good choices.

To the extent that freedom is lacking, the human act loses its human quality and can become a mere act of man, and therefore devoid of moral value. Among the obstacles to human freedom are: ignorance, which consists of a lack of knowledge; fear, which involves an emotional disturbance caused by the threat of imminent danger; passions such as infatuation, hatred, anger, sadness, jealousy, etc., which are inclinations or tendencies of the sensitive appetites of man; violence, which is an external force that cannot be resisted; and psychic illnesses, such as neuroses, which exhibit symptoms of distress, phobia, abulia, or a desire to evade all responsibility. Under the strict consideration that the aforementioned concepts may still appear questionable, as reality is even more complex, it is important to place them within a re-examination of the development of management concepts in modernity.

DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN MANAGEMENT

Although it is said that management originated many centuries ago with the need for humanity's initial collective efforts to meet social needs, it was not until the beginning of the last century, with the needs posed by the emergence of the Industrial Revolution to "rationalize" production processes, that the conceptualization of modern management is formulated, mainly attributed to contributions from engineer F.W. Taylor (1911) with his theory of "Scientific Management," among many other precursors⁷.

From the early conceptualizations, management, like many other human activities, began to be influenced and driven by science. Unfortunately, in most cases, this influence has been through a concept of science devoid of comprehensive philosophical consideration and marked by a limited and, to some extent, questionable ethical conception due to the results produced. The concept of "rationalization" adopted by scientific management was primarily oriented by the requirements of the Industrial Revolution,

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⁷ Consult Nelson, D. "Scientific Management, Systematic Management and Labor 1880-1915", Business History Review, Vol.XLVIII, No. 4, pp 479-500, 1974.

considering production processes as an economizing machinery that seeks to increase productivity, that is, the increase in production per unit of human effort. This led, among other things, to the formal organization's conceptualization of the worker as an "economic man" whose initiative is driven solely by purely economic aspects. Thus, the industrial organization and the individual were considered as production machines, in line with the Industrial Revolution.

Scientific Management, in this way, fostered the pursuit of improvement in productive efficiency, guided by ethical values that emphasize the pursuit of "profit maximization." The idea was that achieving greater benefits for industrial organizations would enable workers to receive higher remuneration. It was believed that achieving the good of the industrial organization through surplus gained from greater worker efficiency would primarily contribute to providing greater well-being for the workers. However, in most cases, this situation contributed almost exclusively to the increased reproduction and accumulation of capital⁸. Subsequent scientific efforts in the development of administrative theory highlighted the limitations of the previous conceptualization, emphasizing the need for a different conceptualization of the worker.

With the "Human Relations" movement, promoted, among others, by Elton Mayo⁹, where the social sciences, primarily psychology, anthropology, and sociology, allowed to emphasize, on one hand, that industrial organizations should be studied as social systems where interactions among workers were of paramount importance, and on the other hand, that the worker himself not only had and displayed solely economic characteristics, but should be considered as a whole system with multiple individual characteristics, mainly psychological, anthropological and social, and not be considered only as a machine or part of it.

The Human Relations movement prompted management to recognize the importance of considering workers as individuals who have and respond to needs and desires of various kinds. Taking these into account, trying to identify and satisfy them, results in the worker responding with greater effort to contribute to the organization's objectives and increase productivity.

By acknowledging the systemic interaction of these elements, this movement emphasized the existence of the informal organization. It proposed that to gain workers' cooperation in pursuing organizational goals, management should strive to understand and satisfy the "non-rational" nature of workers' psychological and cultural aspects, rather than designing work solely based on formal dictates.

While the Human Relations movement expanded the conceptualization of the worker, so that they were no longer considered solely as an economic machine, its ultimate concern translated into anticipating new factors that could improve productive efficiency, basing worker performance on maximizing profits and, like in Scientific Management, benefiting
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⁸ Consult Coriat B., (1982) "El Taller y el Cronómetro. Ensayo sobre el taylorismo, el fordismo y la producción en masa", Siglo 21 Editores, México.

⁹ Mayo, E., *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization*, MacMillan, N.Y. 1933 y Roethlisberger, F.J.& W.J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1976.

the workers. However, in the same way, this situation contributed, in most cases, to the fact that the predominant ethical values of the good only reached workers in a limited way and again, only fostered greater wealth accumulation, without necessarily ensuring better distribution.

As an intermediate position between the two aforementioned approaches, the conceptualization of "Administrative Behavior" emerged, driven by Herbert Simon,¹⁰ among others. This approach also served as a response to the practical impossibility of applying the concept of "rationality." The proposal of administrative behavior argues for the lack of construction of a theory for administration with more scientific foundations. This would allow, through the observation of human behavior, the development of statements or hypotheses that could be subjected to empirical verification.

Thus, among other aspects, it promoted the importance of decision-making in management within the concept of "bounded rationality," whereby administrative behavior and decisions seek to achieve "satisficing" results instead of "maximizing," somewhat corresponding to more realistic situations in organizations. Although the administrative behavior movement represented significant progress compared to the two previous, albeit scientific, efforts, in terms of ethical values of good, it did not represent any substantive change except for apparently tempering maximizing aspirations and replacing them with the attainment of satisfactory results.

Several scientific and technical efforts have followed these three movements in the construction of administrative theory. They have significantly contributed, such as sociology with its encouragement of organizational studies, economics promoting the consideration of economic and financial decisions, and engineering with the development of information and communication sciences and technologies, among other advancements (Roth, 2000).

Most of these efforts, primarily influenced by the scientific approach, separated from comprehensive philosophical questioning in general and ethical considerations in particular, have, in some way, only contributed to preserving the status quo. While there have been advances, with workers improving economically and socially in many cases, a significant portion now faces unemployment. Marginalization and inequality caused by an inadequate distribution of generated wealth mark humanity, and the biosphere is on critical paths to extinction. Should this situation continue?

ETHICS AND MANAGEMENT

Relatively few academics and professionals associated with the field of management have questioned the forms that have influenced managerial practices, leading to the described critical situations. Among them, Churchman (1961) and Ackoff (1949) stand out. For over

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¹⁰ Simon, Herbert A., *Administrative Behavior. A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administration Organization*, The Free Press, N.Y., 1945.

fifty years, based on their solid philosophical background, they have directed their contributions toward promoting the importance of generating and using applied philosophy. They advocate recognizing the role of philosophy as the foundation of all knowledge and action, ensuring that all human endeavors incorporate integral philosophical and, especially, ethical aspects.

Among the numerous contributions and academic developments of Churchman and Ackoff, their formation of a philosophical stream based on the non-relativistic pragmatism of E. A. Singer Jr., their mentor, stands out. They emphasize the possibilities of new experimentalism, and their concern for applications led them to be major pioneers in operations research, closely linked to management. They were also key pioneers in the creation of administrative sciences, providing them with a comprehensive philosophical and methodological foundation. Additionally, their contributions are noteworthy in the field of planning (Ackoff, 1999).

The philosophical orientation that has nuanced all the contributions of Churchman and Ackoff also made them precursors and founders of the systems thinking movement¹¹. This movement has not only influenced the field of administration but has given new meaning to many other human activities. In their philosophical position, they emphasize recognizing and operationalizing, as substantive parts of philosophy, the pursuit of ideals as ends that humanity pursues and never achieves but can asymptotically approach through a continuous process. The recognized ideals are "truth," "goodness," "beauty," and "wholeness."

Humanity carries out the pursuit of these ideals through different efforts that cannot be realized independently; that is, their pursuit must be systemic. Therefore, science, in its quest for the ideal of truth, cannot be pursued independently of ethics, as has been attempted many times before, and it cannot be separated from the other two ideals, here only the relationship between science and ethics under philosophy is emphasized.

This way of observing reality makes scientific and ethical questioning indispensable in all human endeavors simultaneously. Regarding administration, only a few key aspects of this interaction are highlighted here. Firstly, as emphasized by G. Vickers (1983) and others, in the management of organizations, they must be conceptualized as systems—very special human systems. Therefore, they should be perceived through special processes of appreciation, where each participating individual perceives the system in various meaningful ways, all of them meaningful, and in which this process of appreciation is intimately imbued with values, individual and collective values that present a very special dynamic of permanence and change, which must be taken into account.

Secondly, as mentioned before, decision-making processes are one of the fundamental components for action in management. While there are various ways to make decisions, all of them must, in some way, consider values or preferences about possible outcomes of
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¹¹ 10 Among other pioneering works, Churchman's is identified., C. W.: *The Design of Inquiry Systems*, Basic Books, N.Y., 1971; y *The Systems Approach and its Enemies*, Basic Books, 1979. Así como el de Ackoff, R. L., *Scientific Method-Optimizing Applied Research Decisions*. Wiley, N.Y., 1962.

actions, and values or preferences about possible action alternatives. All these elements interact systemically, and here, the aspects of value or preferences are highlighted, as they are intimately linked, primarily to ethical aspects. The consideration of the ethical value of "good" may seem challenging due to the need for a definition of what "good" is. However, the operationalization proposed by Ackoff (1949) and Churchman (1968), using the concept of an ideal, eliminates this difficulty.

The ethical value of "good," as an ideal, seeks the absence of contrary and contradictory ends within each individual and the absence of conflicting ends between individuals. Only with the absence of such conflicts, every individual can achieve their purposes. "Good," then, promotes cooperation that allows the achievement of aims that might otherwise be unattainable. The values or preferences used in any decision-making process must undergo scrutiny regarding their contribution to the pursuit of the ethical value of "good" as an ideal. Otherwise, one would be acting against it, promoting conflict rather than cooperation.

Thus, "ethics" provides the means for questioning what "should" be done in every decision-making process, while "morality" generally provides the means for questioning what "should not" be done. Ethics, therefore, articulates the difference between "good" and "bad," and morality between "right" and "wrong." Unfortunately, these are not purely dichotomous situations; there are different degrees among them, making ethical-moral questioning even more indispensable.

The persecution of the ideal of "good" as an ongoing process of asymptotic approximation, along with the existence of different levels between "good" and "bad" and between "right" and "wrong," highlights the inevitable existence of conflict and the need to learn ways to confront it. Therefore, the search for the ethical-moral value of "good" as an ideal allows for the human consideration of the continuous pursuit of cooperation: peace for individuals within themselves and among others, reducing internal conflicts and conflicts with others. The existence of conflicts within the individual, between individuals, within the organization, and between organizations is one of the main obstacles to development.

Decision-making processes in the management of organizations, besides involving ethical-moral questioning of values and preferences for alternatives and results, also entail questioning regarding the understanding of who and what is affected by solving the problematic situation faced. Ethical-moral questioning should extend to the understanding to define which system is being considered and what its context is, where the boundary of the system is perceived, and how the elements of the system and its context affect and are affected by the situation at hand.


Organizations are human systems in which each individual and/or social group has very particular appreciations that must be taken into account, along with the values and preferences for alternatives and results, and all the actors and/or their representatives who affect and/or are affected by decisions and actions. The definition of the system, its context,

and the decision-making process must be participatory in the continuous pursuit of individual and collective "good," essential in the management of organizations.¹²

CONCLUSIONS

The absence of ethical questioning in the processes of defining the system at hand and its context, as well as in decision-making in management, is what has led to the extreme situations we now face, not only unethical or corrupt situations. Many times, values and preferences are assigned only considering the benefits for an individual, a group, or an organization, without appreciating the values and preferences of others and without understanding the interaction of decisions, actions, and outcomes in the system and its context.

The consideration and questioning of ethical-moral values, specifically the "good" in management, become indispensable and unavoidable with a systemic vision. It is neither possible nor acceptable to benefit only a few, only a few organizations, and only a few countries, causing marginalization and deterioration for everyone else and for the biosphere.

Ethical aspects are fundamental in the management of organizations, not as recently proposed, supposedly promoting ethical consideration by claiming that "ethics is good business." Ethical-moral considerations are not about business; they are fundamentally essential, a matter of life or death, individually, socially, and ecologically. Their conscious consideration is crucial, not only in management but in all human endeavors. 

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¹²Mitroff I.I., R.O. Mason, and C.M. Pearson, Frame Break-Radical Redesign of American Business, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1994.

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