

# Towards an Immanent Business Ethics?

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**ABSTRACT**— *The aim of this paper is to explore the possibilities for an immanent ethics for business. The paper has three parts. In the first part, I make some general and critical comments about the nature of business ethics. In the second part, I outline the immanent ethics as presented by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Then, I positioning immanent ethics within business, primarily in relation to the terms "best practice" and "best fit." The main claim here is that an immanent ethics encourages a shift from a merely reactive approach toward an active. This shift opens up the field for an affirmative practice that aims at enlarging the discussion within business ethics as such.*

**Keywords**— immanent ethics, power, affirmative practice, Deleuze, Nietzsche

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, we live in a world in need of an ethical re-evaluation. The *Financial Crisis Inquiring Commission Report* concludes that the financial crisis of 2007–2009 was a "result of human action" and "failures of corporate governance." Last, the authors of the report conclude, "there was a systematic breakdown in accounting and ethics." These conclusions, it says, "must be viewed in the context of human nature and the individual societal responsibility" (FCIC 2011).

The conclusion assumes that there existed ethical norms that could have guided the decision-makers. In some situations this assumption is probably correct. Yet, as Wallace (1988, 2009) has argued, sometimes the existing norms offer no help in novel situations. The crisis itself illustrates a classical ethical dilemma where "values are in conflict" (Treviño & Nelson 2007) across a wide range of human endeavors: accounting, ethical standards, human action and nature, and the societal. Two assumptions are contradictory: 1) that norms will and can guide decision-makers; and 2) that decision-makers know how to take the best possible decision even if norms seem less relevant or even problematic, perhaps conflicting. It can be complicated to determine whether the systematic breakdown was caused by the system itself, i.e., the existing norms could not anticipate the actual situation, or whether a few decision-makers could not live up to these norms. The conclusions of the report are located somewhere in-between when it rather vaguely suggests that the crisis is viewed in the context of human nature and each individual's societal responsibility.

The challenge is how to merge abstractions or norms with a concrete situational practice. Wallace (1988, 2009) suggests that norms are social artifacts, therefore, norms are a kind of knowledge, "items of practical knowledge" (p. 9). The practical knowledge of a community changes due to its practical reasoning. In this paper, I will present one alternative approach to ethical or practical reasoning inspired by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. His ethics may best be labeled as immanent (Smith 2011). I will contribute to the pragmatic idea that practical reasoning is an ethical approach. Basically, it makes the agent perceive or understand what is there, as something real, but not yet actualized. An ethical business, therefore, would be one that is able to dissect the situation in order to actualize what is in the midst of becoming. It opens up any situation for new experiences. Keywords in such a practice are, therefore, experience, creativity, and understanding. "Practical reasoning at its best is improvisational and creative" (Wallace 2008: 19). In alignment, Deleuze and Guattari (2000: 19) write: "Nothing here is representative; rather, it is all life and lived experience." Nothing exists in itself, only relations between different forces that constantly change everything. It could be different cultures or different set of beliefs and practices that only emerge when in collision with other forces. Furthermore, this approach is related to Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power" as the individual's will interpreting and creating new values. It is ethics as a sensuous and attentive approach (Nietzsche 1973 & 2010).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The traditional criticism of immanent approaches often addresses three issues. First the lack of a critical distance on practices, since they always take the terms of those practices for granted. The point is, of course, that an immanent approach does not operate with a meta-position, i.e. an ideal, and for this reason nothing is taken for granted. Rather an immanent approach expects nothing, which means that it is open, curious and aware. Second an immanent approach does not aim at diverging from anything transcendent. It's not a battle. Rather an immanent approach is simply not guided by

This ethical practice is crucial for any decision-maker, if, by decision-maker, we understand one who is able to present new directions based on his or her contact with the world. Hereby I not only refer to business situations, e.g., new markets or products, but also different ways of life and mindset among its workforce. An ethical practice, as presented here, encourages the decision-makers to see new possible relations, and see beyond the present moral standards and norms. This ethical practice is experimental. It might be viewed as contracting the common advice to prevent another financial crisis, i.e., advocating for less risk-taking; it is not. The experimental approach is evaluated against life itself, not financial accountability. In other words, one of the main claims in this paper is that the authoritative moral standard in business is profit, whereas Deleuze uses only that of life (Deleuze 2002; see also Wallace 2009: 27). To put it simply, sustainability is about passing on what lives to the next generation, rather than passing on a solvent business.

Thus, an ethical practice, as suggested here, is not ethical because it embeds a higher or a better set of norms and ideals. Instead, an ethical practice is ethical, because it does not operate with any transcendent values, norms, or ideals. This ethical approach is affirmative, which is a practice that draws upon an immanent ethics for its esteem. First, however, I will begin with a short critical exploration of business ethics. Then, I will present an immanent ethics. Last, I will try to illustrate how the moral standard in business is profit by referring to the concept of best fit (Boxall & Purcell 2011). The overall challenge is to bring the practitioners of business back from where a too-rigid focus on profit has pushed the moral standard aside.

## 2. A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF BUSINESS ETHICS

“[T]here is not outside to the world market: the entire globe is its domain,” Hardt and Negri wrote in *Empire* (2001: 190). The two writers stress that there is no outside to capitalism; there is no other world we can refer to as being better, more beautiful, more righteous, and so on. Therefore, a potential change of the guiding mechanisms or principles in business is already being part of business. A possible change of an ethical approach in business comes from within as a kind of counter-actualization of something overlooked or neglected.<sup>2</sup> There is no center that controls it all, no lucrative position, no unchangeable set of norms. The world market works like a network with no specific entrance or exit. Instead, it exists only due to the various relations of information, communication, finance, money, and so on.

It is important to keep this understanding in mind when we are talking about business ethics. Otherwise, the post-crisis business debate can easily become yet another debate about who is referring to the best set of ideals, values, and norms. For example, the system did not work; therefore, we create a new and better system. At times this is what happens within corporate social responsibility (CSR), e.g., when corporate responsibility is placed within a "four-part model" (see, e.g., Carroll 1991). Here, CSR depends on societal norms and rules: economic and legal responsibility is required, ethical responsibility is expected, while a more philanthropic responsibility is something that society hopes for. The level of responsibility refers to some transcendent moralistic ideals of what is good, which unfortunately leads to a reactive behavior according to how much one diverges from the ideal, not necessarily due to what the situation requires. Contrarily, an immanent ethics understands ethics as a practice where values are ingrained in this practice. Perhaps this arises as the situation requires a more creative, i.e., a new set of values.

An immanent approach is relatable to one of the four strategies or philosophies that Carroll (1979) addresses in relation to social responsiveness. These four are: Reaction, Defense, Accommodation, and Pro-action. In the last, the firm tries to live up to a given set of norms. However, from an immanent ethical point of view, I would argue for a different understating of the term "pro-action," i.e., one operating without any transcendent criteria (I am borrowing Garroll's model to emphasize a point that she most likely will disagree with). Pro-action could therefore mean that the firm actively aims at enlarging its power to act, e.g., by seeing norms as changeable principles. Pro-action is, as I present it here, a way of establishing a foundation for future actions, a foundation that gradually undergoes changes due to new experiences leading to more qualified understandings.

A transcendent moral approach is also what led Collins (1994) to ask: "Is business ethics an oxymoron?" Hereby he assumes that doing business is the death of ethics. For him, one cannot act responsibly while at the same time gaining profit. This assumption would remove the Dalai Lama from the well-being industry. The claim is problematic for at least two reasons. First, how do we define which came first, business or ethics? Second, if—as I believe and will argue for—

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transcendent moral categories, but strictly experience what is happening. Third, some object that there is no guidance. On the contrary, once one is not already guided beforehand, one will have to pay attention to what is happening to see what relations may be possible to draw. A criteria, therefore, is to relate or connect in a nondestructive manner.

<sup>2</sup> According to Hardt and Negri (2001), it is no longer possible to start a revolution based on an ideal that exists outside of capitalism. That would simply be too naïve. Rather, one will have to focus more on the different forms of life that always are productive. For example, using already established mediums like the Internet to share knowledge, products, and services for free. Such an alternative *might* be able to change the relationship between power and knowledge. Our practical knowledge of power as something operating by constraints and limitations, e.g., "power-over," changes toward a form of power that blends differences and cooperation, e.g., "power-with." Due to this change in our practical knowledge, our norms might change as well (Wallace 2009).

Hardt and Negri are right, then even a coherent ethic is not possible, if it cannot exist alongside business. Thus, everything is inside or part of the logic of business, therefore, a business ethic, of course, is possible. However, instead of falling into this very unconstructive debate of opinions, I wish to suggest that we meet the responses to doing business, as we deserve. Hereby, I wish to stress that we still have not learned how to break the negative spell of capitalism, e.g., the resentment that many feel toward businesses as such. In other words, the critique of business ethics suffers from being either too idealistic or too full of resentment (e.g., Collins). The critique is even, perhaps, romantic, as when Horrigan (2010) mentions when he shows how some writers within CSR favor "social altruism and profit-sacrificing" (p. 34). What is romantic is not the wish to develop one's workforce, act philanthropic, take environmentally sustainable decisions, and so on. Rather, it is to deny that doing well often is a costly affair. Still, in business the instrumental values or means tend to coincide with the overall goal or purpose. For example, in the use of extrinsic motivation instead of intrinsic motivation, the latter encourages that the activity in itself be interesting, challenging, and personally enriching. In other words, an intrinsic motivation is evaluated according to how meaningful it is for the person, not how meaningful it necessarily is according to one ideal (Deci & Ryan 2002).

Another reason why it can be difficult to rely on norms as a secure guide of thinking and acting is the difficulties of setting a universal definition of what the word "good" means, or even what it normally used to say (Moore 2013; Mackie, 1990). "There are no objective values," Mackie says (p. 15). Furthermore, this illustrates how an ethical dilemma is both a personal and societal dilemma; it is related to forms of life. Wittgenstein (2009: 94) says: "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" What is true and false is what human beings *say*, and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinion, but rather in form of life." The term "form of life" is related to one's historical, sociological, and psychological context, a context that is expressed in one's use of language. Wittgenstein mentions how one can only participate in certain language games if one knows the rules and practice of the game. The concept "form of life" emphasizes that how one thinks, feels, and acts is intimately connected with how one lives as well as the event that makes one think as one thinks. One can then bring one's "form of life" into the language game, perhaps in order to differentiate it.<sup>3</sup> An example is how business ethics in general has been able to change the agreed-upon language in business. From Friedman's infamous article in 1970 stating that business and social responsibility were disparate toward today's discourse dealing with CRS, stakeholder, the triple bottom line, value-based management, ethical accounting, the political consumer, well-being, and so on. The game is different, but it is not finished with developing.

Wittgenstein (2009) points out that human beings do and say what makes sense for them to do and say. A similar observation applies to business organizations. What is interesting, however, is whether sense is given or produced. Wittgenstein stresses that meaning never is defined by an ultimate referent; for instance, more money makes more sense than less. Instead, meaning depends solely on the context, that is to say, by its use within a particular language game. Yet, as mentioned, he emphasizes that the context never is given, but is constantly created and recreated. The process of making sense is, therefore, an active interpretation and reinterpretation of our past, present, and future beliefs. Similarly, Rorty (2008) has described how our beliefs and habits constantly change, for instance, when new experiences are incorporated. One negotiates with the context. Norms are a social artifact (Wallace 2009).

Traditionally, the ethical decision-making process can be described through four different stages (see, e.g., Loe et al. 2000): 1) Recognize a moral issue; 2) make some kind of moral judgment about the issue; 3) establish an intention to act based on the judgment; and 4) act according to intentions. An immanent ethics starts in a similar way when an ethical situation emerges, e.g., when it is unclear or uncertain what to do next, but it does not make any judgment that leads to intentional actions, because this action would be a reaction based on the criterion that laid the foundation for the judgment. Instead, an immanent ethics engages or interacts or negotiates with what happens to see which forces are being repressed, and so on. The approach does not hold a specific identity. Rather, it is an approach that is open to change based on what is best, i.e., what is establishing the most relations with other ideas, thoughts, and feelings. This ethical approach proposes a shift from the idea of power as "power-over" toward "power-with." Power-over is based on control exercised by someone, whereas power-with or power-to emphasizes the strength of participation, i.e., it is a social practice of reasoning (Holland 2006). Such a shift is also linked with Stewardship Theory in Corporate Governance that focuses on collaboration rather than control as in Agency Theory (Sundaramurthy & Lewis 2003; Davis et al. 1997).

Studies within psychology illustrate this problem as well. Initial studies conducted by Deci and others (e.g., see Deci & Ryan 2002) show that rewards narrowed people's focus, basically hindering them in seeing beyond the established guiding norms. The authors found a decrease in intrinsic motivation when tangible rewards were expected. Thus, goals imposed by others, whether these are a profitable return on investment and sales targets, as well as social issues like equality regarding gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and so on can often have negative effects, because they tend to last briefly. It may also explain why pragmatic practical reasoning often is neglected among the decision-makers; they are motivated to gain profit by using profitable means of motivation, i.e., extrinsic motivation (Author 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> The point is not to reproduce stereotypes, e.g., gender stereotypes claiming that women by nature are different than men, but to embrace diversity as such relating it to one's form of life, not one's gender, ethnicity, religion, or age. For example, the Dalai Lama might change the game of doing leadership because of his form of life affecting this "game."

At least two possible suggestions appear. One would be to change the rules of the game in business. For example, changing the objective of doing business from profit toward joy or happiness, and, for example, by changing the idea that “money talks” toward “well-being talks.” Research within positive psychology has made major contributions toward qualifying what makes a life better—both on an individual level as well as a societal level. For example, to increase the quality of life, money is not the key factor; rather, it is safety, security, strong social relations, and so on (see David et al. 2013, section VII). Irrespective of the good intention, it is difficult not to fall for the naturalistic fallacy saying how one *should* act based on how one (i.e., a statistically significant average human being) is acting when being happy.<sup>4</sup>

The other solution is to try to develop an ethical practice based on an immanent ethics. Such an ethics will move the focus from reacting according to a set of certain values, virtues, ideals, and norms toward how one acts to actualize the being of becoming. In other words, how does one facilitate a business culture that encourages different forms of life, i.e., new ways of thinking that might lead to improving the right way of doing business? An immanent ethic is one that deals with the power or strength to act in order to overcome setbacks and resentments in life.

The two solutions are closely related, but in order to avoid that a too-rigid definition of happiness or well-being becomes a new transcendent ideal, I believe it is important to change our ethical thinking toward ethics as an affirmative approach. This, I believe, requires a shift from a transcendent morality toward an immanent ethics, from reaction to action. It is time for presenting the foundation of an immanent ethics.

### 3. AN IMMANENT ETHICS

What is an immanent ethics? The attempt of this section is to answer this question, but first we need to understand what is meant by the term “immanence.”

Deleuze is very explicit about how to understand immanence, saying that immanence is not immanence *in* something. “It is only when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence” (Deleuze 2005: 27). Why this urge to stress that immanence is not immanent to or in something?

Mullarkey (2007) clarifies this question by outlining the etymology of immanence, as well as stressing its potential pitfall. He describes immanence as something existing or . . .

remaining within; being “inherent”; being restricted entirely to some “inside”; existing and acting “within the physical world” . . . Most often, though, the equivocality of immanence is linked to the question of ontological monism: if there is nothing “beyond” the world, no “*arrière-monde*,” then there can be no duality, no two-worlds view. (Mullarkey, 2007: 6)

In other words, often immanence is contrasted to something transcendent; however, such an understanding implies a two-worlds view. However, there is no other world to refer to; instead, as Deleuze says, immanence is immanent in itself. It is folded, refolded, and unfolded in itself. Recalling Hardt and Negri, then one way of constructing more productive alternatives to business comes from unfolding, refolding, and folding the existing practices to locate different ways that one could do business, i.e., through practical reasoning. Practical reasoning, in this view, requires a careful look or a kind of hyper-attentiveness to what takes place. Another way of being careful would be to unfold what happens, e.g., to see whether it is possible to fold things differently. An immanent ethic is related to an affirmative ontology that affirms the being in what is in the state of becoming something else—perhaps something more liberating. It nurtures what brings more power to life, i.e., power-to collaborate. That is to connect by emphasizing how things are interdependent.

An immanent ethics draws a distinction between ethics and morality (Smith 2011). Morality is defined as a set of constraining rules that both guide and judge our actions and intentions. By relating our actions and intentions to transcendent or universal values we can guide and judge our life like it was part of a quiz show. Everything worth knowing, e.g., the definition of what is good or bad, is known beforehand. Thus, moralistic questioning aims at leading one in the right direction, that is to say a direction that is already defined before the question is asked.

Ethics, on the other hand, is a set of assisting rules that helps one in evaluating what he or she is doing, thinking, and feeling according to the immanent existence it implies. While morality implies that one should act in a certain way, because this is the right form of behavior, ethics makes no claims beforehand. On the contrary, if one desires and wants to do something, then it must be good in the sense that all human beings not only act in a way that makes sense, but also in a way that will help them overcome themselves. May (2005) describes this difference as a difference in two forms of addressing a life. One question is: How should one act (Morality)? Another question is: How might one live (Ethics)? Another way of formulating these questions could be: What ought we to do? (Morality), and: What might we do

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<sup>4</sup> Happiness, in other words, should not become too rigid an ideal. An uncritical quest for happiness can have negative consequences, if one’s life is without purpose. Meaning and purpose seem to weigh more heavily regarding living a life worth living (see Baumeister et al. 2013). I believe that the process of making sense that Deleuze talks about is a very fruitful purpose in life.

(Ethics)? These questions are asked when a decision-maker is put in a novel situation, i.e., what possibilities does the person have to affirm or sustain that which brings life (cf. the authority of moral standard is that of life). The ethical questions—"How might one live?" and "What might we do?"—do not encourage that one steals or loots. It might be possible, but one cannot do it.

The point is, of course, not to act criminally or neglect scientific research, but use one's creativity to invent new forms of actions without neglecting the present practical knowledge and know-how. However, if one can transgress a set of beliefs held by a community without violating the previous norms, one should do so. Hereby lies the normative element in an immanent ethics. Norms are potentially changeable; if viewed otherwise, doing so hinders our human curiosity to improve.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, a few greedy and selfish decision-makers did not cause the financial crisis of 2007–2009. Rather, businesses have been able to organize themselves in a way where one does not ask ethical questions. What could we do different? How might we establish an inter-relationship between all living beings?

An immanent ethics does not spare or preserve established norms, ideals, or values. On the other hand, it creates values. This, of course, does not mean that an immanent ethics believes that slavery or racism is not morally wrong. More strongly, it views such postulates as ignorant and without any empirical verification. An immanent ethics respects the present values and norms; nevertheless, it tests them, challenges them, and tries to improve them. Thus, norms are not protected for the sake of the norm, because better norms might be discovered. Simply by asking ethical questions one prepares the ground for value-creation. Nietzsche called this practice to "philosophize with the hammer," which is a practice that begins by acknowledging that the notion of value implies a critical reversal. Deleuze writes, and I quote *in extenso*:

The problem of critique is that of values of values, of the evaluation from which their values arises, thus the problem of their *creation*. Evaluation is defined as the differential element of corresponding values, an element which is both critical and creative. Evaluations, in essence, are not values but ways of being, modes of existence of those who judge and evaluate, serving as principles for the values on the basis of which they judge. This is why we always have the beliefs, feelings and thoughts that we deserve given our way of being or our style of life. There are things that can only be said, felt or conceived, values which can only be adhered to, on condition of "base" evaluation, "base" living and thinking. (2002:1–2)

The challenge that Deleuze (and Nietzsche) address is how to overcome oneself, that is to say, overcome one's will to the truth, e.g., the truths as something worth preserving like a set of universal values, or one's will to solely see the world from one's perspective. To evaluate is to create. This means that one creates a site where things can emerge as something different depending on the forces or strength that take possession of it. A site where what becomes can express itself. In other words, one cannot evaluate based on taxonomies or systems of classification, because regardless of how convenient such models are, they are essentially reductionist. They try to label what is moving instead of following the flow. For Nietzsche, says Deleuze (2002: xi), the challenge for philosophy is to transform the Platonic question "What is . . . ?" into "which one is . . . ?" Since every event—everything that happens—is always having a multiple sense, Nietzsche sees empiricism as a correlate to pluralism. In order to evaluate, one will have to weigh the specific situation based on what happens, and not according to some abstract or pure ideals.<sup>6</sup> Still, before we go on asking, "Which business is capable of being ethical," it is important to stress that by asking "which one . . . ?" we are not referring to an individual, to a person, or to a specific firm, but to an event (*ibid.*).

Thus, what is an event? Briefly, in any situation something happens, but what happens is an event, and what happens depends on the forces or strength that takes place in it. For example, when the financial market is suffering from a crisis, various mechanisms begin to ask questions: What happens, who is to blame, how to get back on track, and so on? By analyzing this discourse one can see how an understanding of what happened is assigned to something real, e.g., decrease in GNP, how many lost their job, what industries are involved, and so on. However, seen from Nietzsche's point of view, then "what things *are* called is incomparably more important than what they are" (1974: 121). In other words, "GNP," "efficiency," "unemployment," and so on have no natural meaning, but are used to measure and weigh things according to a norm. Therefore, one origin is never enough to understand what happens. Rather, multiple perspectives are encouraged, i.e., multiple forms of life are necessary to see how different experiences of the same event might lead to differences in understandings. "We can destroy only as creators" (Nietzsche 1974: 122), by producing alternatives, or by

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<sup>5</sup> An immanent approach encourages people to develop a more productive way of relating with the world. This touches upon Socrates' famous claim "the unexamined life is not worth doing", only that here the exploration does not take place in light of a certain ideal. Similar, it touches upon an approach to life like mindfulness.

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein is here close to Nietzsche's idea of philosophy as pluralism when he talks about life forms and context, that is, how a context never is given, but created due to one's life forms. Also, Nietzsche is related to phenomenological thinking, which emphasizes how one will have to move one's body in order to see, etc. However, for Nietzsche an object is not a phenomenon but an intersection of forces, an encounter. Things do not exist by themselves. Instead, only relations exist.

creating a practice where the process of becoming is not interrupted. The evaluation is, therefore, not done from a certain position.

The normative formulation of a Deleuze–Nietzsche ethics is: "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" (Nietzsche 1974: 274). Or as Deleuze formulates it: "*whatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return*" (Deleuze 2002: 68. Italics in original see also Deleuze 1994: 7).<sup>7</sup> This norm stresses how a force is "what can," for instance, a force can do something or affect one; whereas the will to power is "what will." In other words, do what you will, but only insofar as you *can* exercise this will at this specific moment (Deleuze 2002: 69). One needs first to be affected by the forces of the outside, then one can try to match them, that is, "will what one can." It is here that willing becomes creating.

The main difference between a transcendent and immanent ethics is that the latter does not break the movement of what happens. It does not try to frame or represent what becomes within a set of moral categories, or to evaluate how well it fits with the stakeholder's opinions. Instead, the approach aims at becoming with what happens in order to become a practice itself.

For Nietzsche, ethics is a matter of power or strength, a will to power that should not be interpreted as what the will wants, but the one that wants in the will (Deleuze 2002: xi). To seek power, i.e., power-over, is the lowest degree of the will to power. Instead, power for Nietzsche is a creative will that invents a practice for what is needed to let a life flourish. The power is impersonal, because it is related to the various forces that constantly organize and reorganize what happens. Basically, the will to power tries to overcome the habit of what might be called the will to truth, or, in other words, "What a will wants is to affirm its difference" (Deleuze 2002: 9). That is, the differences that emerge when different forces encounter one another. Elsewhere, Deleuze writes: "In order to be actualized the virtual cannot proceed by elimination or limitation, but must create its own lines of actualization in positive acts" (Deleuze 2000:97). The criterion for what to affirm is related to strengths or the power to act. For Nietzsche, choosing a choice is not implicitly closing down other potential choices. Instead, for him, taking a decision is to liberate oneself, because one is enhancing one's capability to act (Nietzsche 1973).

An immanent ethics, therefore, does not conserve old values or protect certain universal values. Instead, it is a practice that focuses on the values that are to come, i.e., the values that certain forms of life produce. An ethical practice, as it is presented here, is also a critique, however, a critique understood as something positive. For Nietzsche, a critique is never a reaction, but an action. It is "the active expression of an active mode of existence," as Deleuze writes (2002: 2).

More generally, Nietzsche and Deleuze claim that the world is made possible by differences, because difference is something extra. Difference is excess. For example, Nietzsche is producing a critique of behaviorism similar to the one that humanistic and positive psychology present much later. Everything that happens refers to a difference that is its main reason. It is through inequality or differences that things emerge. The future is not something given, but one might enhance one's likelihood to act in it, if one affirms what is worth affirming again and again, that is, one's power to act that intensifies one's ability to accomplish. It basically strengthens participation.

The main elements of an affirmative approach consist of three phases. The first is to problematize, that is to bring decisions out in the open where no roadmap exists. Second, a hyper-attentiveness where one intermingles with what happens. "This is the secret of knowledge: it functions like the world," writes Serres (1997: 71). This is what it means to enhance one's power to be affected. "Neither *positioned* nor *opposed*, unceasingly *exposed*" (p. 12). The third element is the transformation. It is related to what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) defined as the main role of philosophy. They write: "philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts" (p. 2). Then they go on to say: "All concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges" (p. 16). For Deleuze and Nietzsche, the primary task of philosophy is to confront the illusion that problems are something to be solved by choosing between option A, B, or C. Instead, problems are invented every time we do not know right from wrong. These three elements are not something abstract, but take place in a concrete and complex life-condition. "We are dealing here with a problem concerning the plurality of subjects, their relationships, and their reciprocal presentation," Deleuze and Guattari write (1994: 16). A possible better world exists as something real, but not yet actualized. The challenge is to intermingle or negotiate with the various forces of life, see what they can be and what they open up for, then create a language where the will to become can manifest itself. This is an affirmative practice.

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<sup>7</sup> To avoid any misunderstandings, if one wishes to discriminate against women because "one will," then one cannot do so without reducing oneself to an ignorant person. Who would like to continue being ignorant? The point is that an immanent ethics doesn't abandon the existing practical reason, however, it doesn't see the practical knowledge as finished. So, one cannot will what one cannot do. Instead, it aims at improving one's capacity to act, hereby learning the best ways of doing things. Therefore, knowledge is normative, but if one can do better, then this improvement also changes the norm. Similarly, if one can, then it makes sense to will it, unless norms or political agendas are hindering one's power to act.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Let me try to illustrate how an affirmative practice differs from other practices within organizational and strategic thinking. Boxall and Purcell (2011) make a useful distinction between a strategic approach that encapsulates the role of the context (best fit) versus a universal approach (best practice). The two authors argue in favor of best fit, claiming that the context is being neglected within strategic human resource management (HRM). The authors urge for a change, claiming that we need to ask: Why is the firm doing what it is doing?

A change is needed, although the notion of best fit remains a static approach. The firm either adjusts to the context, or it tries to change the context; either A becomes B, or B becomes A. It still operates within a metaphysics of being that elevates stability or order; whereas the affirmative approach presented here operates within a metaphysics of becoming.

According to Boxall and Purcell (2011: 73), best fit operates on three levels: the societal, the industrial, and the organizational. For instance, most firms respect the employment laws of the society in which they operate, just as some firms—one might add—respect certain unwritten rules, especially if held by key stakeholders. Boxall and Purcell (2011) assert that "social legitimacy is an important goal in HRM, all firms would be wise to do so" (p. 84). Also, they stress, "The overall point is that behaviour of firms is heavily shaped by labour law and all firms *ought* to comply with it if they wish to be responsible corporate citizens" (p. 72). The main argument for implementing a best fit approach seems to be profit, even though Boxall and Purcell try to turn it into a strictly ethical argument. Later, they write in relation to adapting one's economy to the economic realities of one industry (or implementing the same organizational tools, for instance, if a British firm operates in Japan). They conclude: "It seems, again, that firms adapt to their context, and they are wise to do so" (p. 78). The firms are wise to follow the context of the society, industry, or organization in which each operates. Wisdom, as the two authors use it, refers solely to how a firm remains in business. There is something shameful at play here.

Sartre (1993) developed the idea of shame as being without the possibility to become, that is to say, grow or enhance one's capabilities to act. He writes, "Shame reveals to me that I *am* this being, not in the mode of 'was' or of 'having to be' but in itself" (p. 351). The shame is linked with seeing oneself as a thing, an object, without the freedom to become. For instance, the shame of taking a decision based on the motives that one cannot afford to do otherwise. Here the shame emerges from acting like one is not free. For Deleuze and Nietzsche, such a decision would be an example of resentment or nihilism. "We have opposed knowledge to life in order to judge life, in order to make it something blameworthy, responsible or erroneous" (Deleuze 2002: 35). Basically, one blames one's decision-making on something else, whereby one appears to have been acting even though no one actually did act. One was just blindly following norms without considering their relevance in this specific situation.

Horrigan (2010) distinguishes between "instrumental CRS (which is pursued for business profitability) and intrinsic CRS (which is pursued regardless of its connection to business profitability)" (p. 35). Seen in this light, Boxall and Purcell fit into the first category. They wrap up profit-maximizing ambitions in a pseudo-moralistic vocabulary where the main drive for adapting or fitting in is money. The argument follows the idiom: If in Rome do as the Romans do. But they refrain from answering the question: What should a firm do, if it operates in North Korea or in the porn-industry? Or should an organization reproduce gender stereotypes such as the notion men are naturally more fit for becoming CEOs than women, even though no empirical data can verify such an assumption? It appears that a firm should follow the customs of whatever industry or society in which it operates. In this view, the best fit seems to some extent to be related to stakeholder theory as presented by Donaldson and Preston (1995), because listening or adapting to the context is "wise to do."<sup>8</sup>

The distinction that Boxall and Purcell make between best fit and best practice is complicated. The best practice implies that nothing really changes. Here one is repeating past success as if nothing had changed. Their critique of this practice is welcome, just as it is a good example of how practice can develop new norms. They argue that best practice needs to ask: Best practice for whom? Whose goals and interest are being served? (Boxall & Purcell, 2011: 84). Such questions, however, could easily be addressed to best fit, e.g., seen from which position is this a best fit? Who is fitting into what and so on? The approach seems to lack a will to experiment, a will to unfold and see what might also be possible. Instead, best fit becomes universal in saying that there is no universalism, except, it seems, profit. The point is that Boxall and Purcell miss that the logic of doing business is not changing, it is only the firm that adapts or fits in, because it cannot afford not to. Best fit lacks the critical questioning that emerges from the acceptance that things could be different.

The main problem, seen from an immanent ethics point of view, is that they do not question the context. In their view, the context is something static and unchangeable. They ignore that a context always is constructed due to the forms of life, or the forms of business that are interweaving in it. A context describes how things hang together, which of course depends on the eyes viewing what happens. Perhaps, things actually do not hang together. Boxall and Purcell assume that

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<sup>8</sup> Donaldson & Preston (1995) point out three forms of stakeholder theory: 1) Normative, 2) Descriptive, and 3) Instrumental. Here the moral focus changes from how a firm should act, to how it actually acts in respect of stakeholder interests, and finally, whether listening to stakeholders is beneficial or profitable for the firm.

the firm cannot produce sense. It accepts, apparently, even fabricated ideals for the sake of profit. Yet, instead of accepting the dominant industries, societies, and organizations' various values and ideals, one could be attentive toward what potential is there, but not yet being actualized.

Both best practice and best fit does not show any special capacity to deal with the unknown. The point that I wish to make is that being ethical is to increase one's power to be affected. In other words, this means that the best possible ethics is one whereby certain principles or ideals are not intervening before one acts. Instead of trying to fit in according to the dominant discourse, then one could also suggest a more experimental approach toward any contextual setting. This would be to explore what might be possible. Such an approach strives not for fitting in, but to do what one is capable of doing.

The ethical challenge is not to fit or blend in. Rather, it is to become hyper-attentive in order to see, if some real potential has not yet been actualized. If we have to take ethics seriously, then it does not operate with a measurable end-goal. The good business acts in a good way due to its capabilities to unfold and interpret the context. One needs to experiment with what happens, but not necessarily adapt.

Where does the responsible corporate citizen begin? Is it when the firm fits in, or is it when it creates new values that might push our thinking beyond good and evil? One might also ask: Who can draw the line between being responsible and irresponsible? Does one's answer depend on following the norms and ideals of the various contexts in which one interacts? What does one do when the values and ideals of society, organizations, and industry are diverse? Which of the three is most powerful: society, industry, or the organization?

Seen from the point of view of an immanent ethics, everything is interwoven with everything. To view a context as something static and unchangeable is to reduce one's capacity to take decisions freely. Both best practice and best fit are approaches that can teach us a lot, for instance, what not to do. Still, if a firm bases its decision-making on either one it is because it does not have the power to take decisions to begin with.

The best advice that Deleuze and Nietzsche can give is something like: Take the decisions today that will make it easier to take decisions tomorrow. This means that each one of one's decisions is enhancing one's power to act. Hereby, one also tries to overcome what hinders one in growing today to continue.

All actions are evidently a mixture of the moralistic and ethical in the sense that everything we do can be argued to confirm certain ideals and norms. Still, the main difference between the various transcendent ideals and values, as well as various practices and forms of adaptations, are that they create a false consciousness. Instead, I advocate for a curious and explorative approach. Basically, this consists of asking oneself: What does this ethical problematic open up for? What might we do? What might be possible? How can we also act?

The systematic breakdown in ethics happened because decision-makers stopped asking questions. An immanent ethics transforms our understanding. It is related to how we experience the world, i.e., how we understand and make sense of it.

## 5. CONCLUSION

An immanent ethics would never claim what is wise to do beforehand. Instead, it will unfold what happens in order to see, how it might be able to affirm what is in the midst of becoming—especially, if such affirmations can increase a life's power to act in the future.

In this paper, I have shown how business ethics in general operates with transcendent values or ideals that at times (e.g., novel situations) hinder the firm in questioning what actually does happen. A transcendent framework gives the firm a certain speed, but it also hinders it in taking decisions that might make it easier for them to act in the future. The ethical norm in an immanent ethics is not that it increases the firm's power *over* the world. This would require two worlds. Rather, it enhances or increases its power to be affected. It is an approach that allows itself to be exposed, that is to say, be open and to interact.

If we take Deleuze–Nietzsche at face value, then we need to overcome our habit of seeking an unchangeable moralistic truth. Instead, we need to experiment with the world to see which decision will actualize more future relations or not. To take a decision is not to choose between A or B, or to "fit in," but "freeing life wherever it is imprisoned" (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 48).

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