

Chapter 9

Ethics and Corporate Responsibility in English Literary Works

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ABSTRACT

Literature offers a critical lens through which societal ethics and corporate responsibilities can be analyzed, providing historical insights into issues still relevant in today's corporate world. This paper explores the themes of ethics and corporate responsibility in English literature, examining authors such as Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy who portrayed the moral complexities within business and social structures. These authors, through nuanced characters and narratives, reveal the moral conflicts and social responsibilities often overshadowed by profit and personal ambition, reflecting the socio-economic transformations of their times. The methodology involves a qualitative literary analysis, focusing on selected texts that illustrate business ethics, the conflicts between the rising capitalist ethos of the era. By analyzing characters and plot developments in these works, the paper aims to uncover how literary reflections on corporate behavior and ethics contributed to shaping contemporary perceptions of corporate responsibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics, the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad and morally right and wrong. The term is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles. The terms ethics and morality are closely connected. Today, it is common to utilize “ethical judgments” or “ethical principles,” whereas in the past, “moral judgments” or “moral principles” might have been more precise. Nearly every human society has a myth to explain the origins of morality. In Paris’ Louvre, a black Babylonian column known as the Code of Hammurabi features a relief of the sun god Shamash presenting laws to King Hammurabi (who died around 1750 B.C.). Another instance is found in the Hebrew Bible’s Old Testament, where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, an event believed to have occurred in the 14th–13th centuries B.C. Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras* (428/427–348/347 B. C.) includes a mythical story

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in which Zeus, seeing that humans were weaker than other animals, gave them a sense of morality and the ability to establish law and justice, allowing them to live together and cooperate within communities.

The ancient Greek city-state was defined by a collective ethical identity, where religious, moral, and political values were intertwined (Coulanges, 1905). As a result, violations of duty were seen not only as religious offenses but also as transgressions against the state. Ostracism, a form of exile, was used as punishment, stripping an individual of their political rights, religious identity, and humanity—since a person could not become a citizen in another city-state. This suggests that a person had no worth outside their ethical community, and being removed from this context was considered a punishment even harsher than death. A person's existence was deeply tied to their location and the values of their community, and without these, they would be deprived of their humanity, as was the case with ostracism. In contemporary times, however, we have moved away from organizing our personal lives according to overarching narratives (Lyotard, 1979), which once provided meaning and guided us with lasting principles. Corporate social responsibility is a type of business self-regulation with the aim of social accountability and making a positive impact on society. Corporate social responsibility, in its current form, emerged after World War II, gaining momentum during the social movements of the 1960s, including civil rights, women's rights, and environmental causes. Since then, corporate social responsibility has become increasingly significant. It is now a global concept, shaped by both theory and practice, and recognized worldwide. Contemporary businesses are expected to go beyond merely making profits and complying with laws. Ethics and philanthropy have become essential components of corporate social responsibility, as companies aim to meet the expectations of various stakeholders and remain sustainable in a competitive global market. Socially responsible companies prioritize the interests of all stakeholders in their policies, decisions, and operations (Carroll, 2015).

Ethics, a branch of philosophy, focuses on exploring rational decision-making to establish standards for ideal behavior. While many people feel they have an innate sense of right and wrong, making ethics seem unnecessary, examining it across different cultures and historical periods reveals considerable variations in how these concepts are understood. Further complicating the matter, ethics is often taught alongside or as part of religion. For many, answers to moral questions are found in religious texts or by consulting religious leaders. However, the way these texts are translated and interpreted has evolved over time and varies among individuals. Therefore, the study of ethics aims to examine the moral standards people have, whether they adopt them unconsciously or through religious instruction, and to recommend a rational foundation for these standards. Ethics refers to the principles and standards that guide behavior in terms of what is right and wrong. In a corporate context, ethics involves the moral guidelines that shape the actions, policies, and decisions within a business or organization. These can include issues related to fair treatment, honesty, transparency, respect for stakeholders, and compliance with laws and regulations. Corporate refers to anything related to a corporation, which is a large company or group of companies acting as a single legal entity. It encompasses aspects such as corporate governance, business operations, strategies, and the responsibility of the company to its shareholders, employees, customers, and the broader society. The European Commission defines corporate social responsibility as “a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and cleaner environment.” In this way, corporate social responsibility is “about how companies manage the business processes to produce an overall positive impact on society.” Corporate social responsibility has been depicted as “the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society.” However, is corporate social responsibility merely a form of window dressing, or is it inherently contradictory? In reality, corporate social responsibility carries

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