

Discussing „Wirtschaftsethik“ With Regard to „Business Ethics“ and „Economic Ethics“

Report on a DGPhil Panel at the 23rd World Congress of Philosophy in Athens 2013

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The 23rd World Congress of Philosophy 2013 took place in Athens, the alleged cradle of (Western) philosophy and thus also of ethics. One keynote came from Jürgen Habermas on cosmopolitanism, discussing constitutional law and solidarity. Established for the world congresses there are several official congress languages, one of them being German. This led to the call of the German Philosophical Association (DGPhil) to encourage its members to make use of German to continue the diversity and heritage of different languages next to English.

The panel entitled “*‘Wirtschaftsethik’ as contribution and alternative from German-speaking philosophy to business and/or economic ethic(s)*” took up and advanced the initiative by discussing whether the German term “Wirtschaftsethik” adds something to the debate that is not already covered by the English equivalent of “business ethics” and/or “economic ethic”. Therefore, seven scholars contributed to the panel discussing possible specifics of the concept of “Wirtschaftsethik”. The German-speaking panel was opened by an introduction of the organizer and author of this report, pointing at the integrative quality of the concept “Wirtschaftsethik” comprising the macro- and the micro-level as in “economic ethics” as well as the meso-level as discussed in “business ethics”. Whereas in English speaking universities and journals the two are mostly separated into either business studies or economics, the concept of “Wirtschaftsethik” synthesizes the three levels under the notion of “Wirtschaft”, also discussing the political dimension of the concept. This can be exemplified, for example, by two concepts that became prominent in the English journal scene: one is the Habermasian approach of “political CSR” as developed by Scherer and Palazzo (2007), promoting deliberative democracy along with a new political role of corporations. The second concept can be seen in Matten’s and Moon’s (2008) distinction between “explicit” and “implicit” CSR, referring to the export of management concepts like explicit CSR to countries and cultures, where there has been for many years, particularly on the level of small and medium-sized enterprises, an implicit CSR (see also Hiss 2009). Both examples may show the integrative and synthesizing capacity inherent to the concept of “Wirtschaftsethik”. At the same time the overarching quality of the concept makes it difficult to be translated into established categories of the international business ethics and CSR discussion.

In the following sessions, each panellist chose a specific question or concept. The first presentation was given by Claus Dierksmeier (Tuebingen, Germany), differentiating

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between quantitative and qualitative freedom, developed on the basis of Dierksmeier and Prison (2010). In quantitative freedom concepts like social responsibility appear to be negative and bear the “burden of proof”. In qualitative freedom, following Dierksmeier, the “quale of freedom” adds the ‘what’ of freedom and ‘whose’ freedom. Thus, in qualitative freedom a procedural quality is achieved, leading to a productive dialectical relation. Dierksmeier also refers to the Kantian concept of legal and moral freedom, which is not incorporated in what he calls quantitative freedom. The second presentation from Jacob Rendtorff (Roskilde, Denmark; current head of the DGPhil subgroup “Arbeitsgruppe für Wirtschaftsethik und Philosophie”) also addressed the concept of freedom from a Kantian perspective. Adding to the work of Bowie and Freeman, Rendtorff proposed five aspects to develop a Kantian “Wirtschaftsethik”, consisting of: 1) anthropological preconditions, 2) moral law and legislation, 3) reasoning powers, 4) “Wirtschaftsethik” in constitutional democracy, and 5) cosmopolitan “Wirtschaftsethik”. Ludger Heidbrink (Kiel, Germany) described the issue of “Wirtschaftsphilosophie” as a German concept. He concluded to opt for an extended “Wirtschaftsethik” instead of “Wirtschaftsphilosophie” for the following reasons: “Wirtschaftsphilosophie” does not fill an adequate role as independent field of philosophy and so far has not reached the critical mass. Attempts were made in order to demand an “economic turn” (Friedrich Kambartel) or an “ethical Economy” (Peter Koslowski). Instead, Heidbrink’s proposal of an extended “Wirtschaftsethik” would need to fulfil the following requirements: empirically anchored, descriptive and also normative. He therefore proposes the concept of “postliberale Wirtschaftsethik” that should be embedded in the social sciences.

Alexander Brink (Bayreuth, Germany) and Arne Manzeschke (Munich, Germany) discussed the concept of governance as a key concept of “Wirtschaftsethik”. Next to the established three governance levels of micro, meso and macro they added, borrowing from Georges Enderle, the super-level of governance, i.e., globalization. Furthermore, they proposed an additional meta-level, which takes the entire system into consideration. Their theoretical contribution rests on the principle of supererogation and the development of what they call “perverted supererogation” (Brink/Manzeschke 2010). Their contribution brings together three claims for the concept of governance: 1) implicit contracts for the cohesion of organizations, 2) economization disposes supererogative actions and ‘perverts’ them, 3) development of a new “Wirtschaftsethik”. The final presentation from Christoph Lütge (Munich) introduced the new branch of experimental ethics research, which is put forward by the experimental ethics laboratory (eel) in Munich. Following Lütge, experimental ethics research has two fundaments: naturalism and “order ethics” (“Ordnungsethik”). Experimental business ethics is to be differentiated from “armchair philosophy” and instead draws on experimental economics, experimental psychology, evolutionary biology and cognitive science. First research deals with compliance in corporations and the credibility of CSR reporting by making use of experimental surveys and incentivized experiments.

The panel was well received and attracted also international participants. Overall it can be stated that the policy of the World Congress of Philosophy to promote and publish contributions in English, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Korean, French, and German

adds to the diversity of thoughts and concepts against mono-cultural discourses. As seen in the example of “Wirtschaftsethik” the underlying concept is difficult to translate into other languages and enriches by its integrative character the debate on applied ethics with regard to business and society, as well as for the entire economy.

Literature

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