

Genealogies of Corporate Morality: Approaching Business Ethics through Intellectual History

Call for Abstracts, deadline – 1st November 2024 | Workshop – 25th-27th June 2025

University of St Andrews Business School, Scotland, UK

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Where did ideas about corporate morality come from, and why does it matter? Business ethics, a field which has been expanding in Western scholarship since the 1970s, tends to prioritise a philosophical rather than a historical reading of past ethical thought. Although the works of ‘historical figures’ (Werhane et al, 2017) in philosophy have enriched modern analyses of corporate ethics, they tend to be read *instrumentally* – for their usefulness in addressing contemporary ethical questions – rather than *historically*, with the primary aim of reconstructing the past intellectual contexts to which these philosophers responded (Skinner, 2002; Hühn, 2018). Nonetheless, ethical responses to the modern corporation are increasingly informed by emerging research on the corporation’s intellectual history (e.g., Ciepley, 2023; Claassen, 2021; Gindis, 2020a; Harris, 2020; Ireland, 1999; Jessen, 2012; Logan, 2019; Mansell, 2024; Mansell and Sison, 2020; Phillips et al, 2020; Stern, 2023). Situating the history of corporations’ behaviour, purpose, rights and responsibilities in their intellectual contexts can reveal the ethical, economic, political and legal assumptions underpinning contemporary business ethics. This historical turn enables us to explore the frameworks and limitations of a field of scholarship that still privileges certain canons and contexts, often foregrounded in Western ideas.

Globally diverse genealogies of corporate morality can yield fresh approaches to moral and political questions today, including the public or private role of business (Ciepley, 2013), the changing framework of choices and constraints that business corporations face (Djelic and Etchanchu, 2017), and the interplay between corporate morality and other ethical and political ideas (Runciman, 1997; Fitzmaurice, 2022). For example, what is the history of thought about corporations’ environmental responsibilities (Pollman, 2024), businesses’ relationship to work and workers (Black, 2003), including the gender divisions that characterise work, and corporations’ implication in colonialism, primitive accumulation, imperial extraction, and counter-revolution (Stern, 2011; Wani, 2022)? How has intellectual debate shaped corporate law (Barkan, 2013; Gindis, 2020b; Kershaw, 2018), and what has been the influence of business forms on constitutional and political thought (Ciepley, 2017; Kubala, 2024)? Should we consider ideas about modern corporations as having an early modern, medieval, or even ancient genealogy (Duff, 1938; Kantorowicz, 1957; Tierney, 1955; Turner, 2016)? How should we critique universal histories of corporations and study non-western formations of corporate subjects (Birla, 2009)? Finally, why and how should ‘canonical’ political and economic thinkers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Smith, Kant, Marx, Nietzsche and Rawls, be approached by philosophers in business ethics (Dierksmeier, 2013; Hühn and Dierksmeier, 2016; Mejia,

2022; Mansell, 2013; Melé, 2016; Singer, 2015; Sison and Fontrodona, 2012; Smith and Dubbink, 2011; Worden, 2009)?

For this workshop, we invite contributions that think historically about the question of corporate morality. We do not expect contributors to agree on the method of historical work in business ethics; instead, we invite a range of theoretical perspectives on the use of history, as well as detailed cases where histories of ideas about corporations are demonstrated, critiqued, and analysed.

We would welcome contributions that explore:

- Global and non-Western histories of corporate morality and personhood
- The relevance to business ethics of 'historical figures' in philosophy
- Intellectual histories of corporate environmental responsibility
- Intellectual histories of corporate governance and law
- Intellectual histories of corporations' relationship to workers, work, gender and working time
- The influence of corporate ethics on constitutional and political ideas
- The role of corporations in the process of state-formation and political sovereignty
- The changing subjectivity and status of corporate persons
- The role of companies and corporations in colonial enterprise and resistance
- Changing ideas about corporate control of information and technology

The workshop will take place 25th-27th June 2025 at St Andrews Business School, Scotland, UK. Participants will present pre-circulated papers, which can be considered for inclusion in a planned special issue in 2026. Participation in the workshop does not guarantee participation in the publication.

Participants' costs related to accommodation will be covered.

For inquiries, questions or submission of abstracts, please contact Sam Mansell (sfm5@st-andrews.ac.uk), Cailean Gallagher (cq257@st-andrews.ac.uk) or Mathias Hein Jessen (mhj.bhl@cbs.dk). The workshop will be based on the presentation of shorter draft papers.

Deadline for abstracts (300-500 words): 1st November 2024.

Deadline for draft papers (5000 words): 1st June 2025 (to be circulated among the participants).

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