

# A Rawlsian Approach to Business Ethics

## Essays in Employment Relations and Corporate Social Obligations

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by

Anirban Mukherjee



Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, India

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## Abstract

Business ethics remains a prominent but conceptually unstable field. Debates routinely oscillate between appeals to managerial virtue, stakeholder balancing, market outcomes, and corporate discretion, without a shared standard for assessing legitimacy. This dissertation argues that this instability arises from a category error. Business ethics is too often framed as a matter of optional moral beneficence or individual ethical conduct, when it is more properly understood as a problem of institutional justice. Once this reframing is adopted, the justificatory task becomes clearer and the available normative resources more sharply defined.

As such, the dissertation proceeds in two stages. The first stage clarifies the conceptual and normative terrain. Chapter One argues that markets, rather than individual managers, constitute the appropriate object of ethical evaluation, and that while stakeholder theory offers a more accurate account of contemporary business practice than stockholder primacy, it lacks a coherent justificatory foundation. Chapter Two addresses this deficit by assessing whether dominant ethical theories can ground a public standard for evaluating market institutions under conditions of pluralism. Consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics are rejected not as morally incoherent, but as structurally underdetermined for this task. By a process of elimination, Rawlsian social contract theory is identified as the most suitable framework for assessing business ethics as part of a system of fair social cooperation.

In the second stage the dissertation applies this framework to three contested domains. Chapter Three shows that choice-based defences of sweatshop labour fail once liberty is treated as non-negotiable, and that state enforcement of basic liberties is required where systemic coercion undermines voluntariness. Chapter Four argues that formal exit

rights are insufficient to secure freedom of association in employment, and that meaningful exit is a condition of legitimacy realised through institutional design rather than corporate virtue. Chapter Five defends mandatory corporate social responsibility as a justifiable institutional obligation under the Difference Principle, independent of contingent empirical outcomes.

Taken together, the dissertation advances a limited but substantive claim. Business ethics is best understood as a matter of institutional justice. Rawlsian political liberalism, though thin by design, is sufficient to evaluate key issues in business ethics by assessing whether the institutional conditions governing economic activity can be justified to free and equal citizens under conditions of reasonable pluralism.

