

# Dictionary of Business Ethics

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## BOURGEOIS VIRTUE

The virtue of businesspeople, such as responsibility, honesty, prudence, and enterprise.

The bourgeois virtues are contrasted with aristocratic virtues such as courage and magnanimity, or with peasant virtues such as faith and solidarity. Philosophers and novelists have since the middle of the nineteenth century rejected bourgeois virtue, seeing it as a contradiction in terms, a disguise for the vice of greed. The "ethics of the virtues" (q.v.), an approach as old as Aristotle but revived since the 1970s, suggests another view: that any practice develops a set of virtues, and that a practice as widespread as business is unlikely to thrive without them. Bourgeois virtue reinvents an eighteenth-century project, especially in Scotland, of developing a vocabulary of virtue for a commercial society.

The bourgeois virtues apparent in business practice might include enterprise, adaptability, imagination, optimism, integrity, prudence, thrift, trustworthiness, humor, affection, self-possession,

consideration, responsibility, solicitude, decorum, patience, toleration, affability, peaceability, civility, neighborliness, obligingness, reputability, dependability, impartiality. The point of calling such virtues "bourgeois" is to contrast them with non-business virtues, such as (physical) courage or (spiritual) love. Bourgeois virtues are the townspeople's virtues, away from the military camp of the aristocrat or the commons of the peasantry. Sometimes the distinction between bourgeois and other virtues is mere verbal shading. An aristocrat has wit, a peasant or worker jocularly. A businessperson must have humor. But the contrast can be more than shading. Physical courage, shown by aristocrats in war and sport, resembles bourgeois enterprise. But to make the two into one virtue is to encourage warfare in business, which has led sometimes to shooting wars bad for business. Trustworthiness is a business virtue, paralleled in some ideals of a peasant or working-class community by a loving solidarity. But solidarity has socialist outcomes, also bad for business.

The usual vocabulary of the virtues, persisting to the present, tells only of a world of heroes or laborers. Our ethical moral talk overlooks the growing world of management, negotiation, leadership, persuasion, and other business. The eighteenth century began to construct an ethical vocabulary for merchants, especially in Scotland, and most especially in the writings and teaching of Adam Smith. As Michael Novak put it recently, "Smith saw his own life's work as moral teaching for the 'new class' of his era." In a dedication to the memory of Mr. William Crauford, a merchant of Glasgow, Smith praised his "exact frugality, . . . downright probity and plainness of manners so suitable to his profession. . . . unalterable cheerfulness of temper . . . the most

manly and the most vigorous activity in a vast variety of business" (Smith, 1756, in Essays, p. 262). Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759, 2nd ed. 1790) is often neglected in favor of The Wealth of Nations, but both of the two books published in Smith's lifetime expost a bourgeois virtue. Many eighteenth-century men admired commerce, as distinct from the violence of aristocrats and the piety of peasants. As Doctor Johnson put it, "There are few ways in which a man can be more innocently employed than in getting money."

The eighteenth-century admiration for commerce was overwhelmed in the middle of the next century by anti-business sentiments on the left and right, what George Bernard Shaw called "the great conversion" and what others have called "the treason of the clerks."

The oldest argument in favor of bourgeois virtue is that it is good for business. A roofer in a town of 50,000 who installs a bad roof will not be in business long. The pressures of entry and exit force the bourgeoisie to exhibit virtue. The trouble with such an argument is that pressure is the absence of ethics. A businessperson induced by prospective profits or forced by potential loss to speak honestly to her customers is not behaving out of ethical motives. The reply would be that it does not matter why she is virtuous: anyway, she is. And the rejoinder would be that as soon as the balance of advantage turns to lying, she will.

A deeper argument is that bourgeois life is good for ethics. This is what European novelists and philosophers have denied since the middle of the nineteenth century. In Flaubert's Madame Bovary (1857) or Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt (1922) the only way to be a good bourgeois is to stop being one. It has become conventional wisdom that the market eats

away at virtue, and at society and the environment as well. As someone put it recently, "the expansion of the exchange system by the conversion of what is outside it into its terms. . . . is a kind of steam shovel chewing away at the natural and social world."

The new research in bourgeois virtue mistrusts such conventional views, and wishes to return to the eighteenth-century project of recognizing our bourgeois character. The economist Albert Hirschman (who himself speaks of "bourgeois virtues") has recounted the career from Montesquieu to Marx of the phrase "doux commerce," quoting for instance the Scottish historians William Robertson in 1769: sweet commerce "tends to wear off those prejudices which maintain distinctions and animosity between nations. It softens and polishes the manners of men."

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