

BOOK REVIEW (In AJoBE Vol. 3, No. 1)

Book title: Ethics for Africa today: An introduction to business ethics.

By: Christine Wanjiru Gichure

Paulines Publications Africa:
Nairobi, Kenya, 2008, 248 pages, soft cover.

Review by *Dr J.J. de Klerk

There is a dire need for a better understanding and application of ethics in Africa. I believe that we need not only a Western view and approach to ethics in Africa, but also an understanding of ethics within the African context and within the cultures and difficulties Africa is facing today. As the author hails from Africa (Kenya specifically), and has been exposed to the academic world of business ethics in both African and the West, this book promised to be just the one I have been looking for; contextually relevant and a sober approach. It was thus with great anticipation that I started reading Christine Gichure's book on ethics for Africa. My anticipation was largely met in this book.

What does the book offer? 'Ethics for Africa today' is aimed at students of business ethics, as well as any person or leader in the business world. The main objective with the book is to assist its target audience to acquire, among others, an enhanced understanding of the fundamentals of ethics. As an 'Introduction to business ethics', (as the latter part of the title suggests), Gichure awards much attention to the introduction and discussion of the classical ethical theories (e.g. Aristotle, Hume and Mill) throughout the book. However, she does not only focus on theory, but also attempts to ensure that the reader becomes schooled in making reasonable ethical decisions in the workplace. It is with this goal in mind that she applies the theories to practical business case studies – many of these from Africa and within the African context.

Combining foundational ethical theories with relevant practical case studies is helpful in the learning and understanding of business ethics, especially for readers who have had little or no previous formal exposure to ethical theories. Most of the case studies are relevant and they add value to the discourse on ethical theories and their applications. It should be beneficial to students as well as business people to deal practically with business ethics, as it provides much more than theoretical ideas. In some of the case studies, Gichure has even obtained the contribution of several business people and ethics practitioners to provide insight to the cases from their own perspectives. These contributions on ethical issues and how to deal with them are interesting and insightful. As the respective participants also express opposing views, the difficulty of making sound ethical business decisions is clearly demonstrated.

Perhaps the most useful information to the reader already *au fait* with the founding principles of ethics and for those who are more interested in the 'Ethics for Africa' part of the title, can be found in chapter 2. In this chapter, the author provides interesting and insightful perspectives on how Africa's context and history are related to its ethical context. For instance, how the impact of Africa's colonial history and the abusive slave trading history on the continent remain relevant for ethics in Africa. She also provides some explanations and insights on how the African cultures and social systems have influenced ethics and peoples' views on ethics in Africa.

Of course, no book is without limitations. For example, the contents of the book do not seem to cover everything the title suggests. Is the book about ethics in Africa, or is it about an introduction to business ethics? This ambivalence and dual focus can be detected throughout the book. Too many direct quotations, some that very long, from the classical scholars are included in the text (e.g. Aristotle, Glaucon and Adeimantus), without assistance to the novice reader in interpreting and contextualising the quotations. The European roots of ethics are explained without enough attention to integrating them adequately with African philosophies and approaches. Although some golden nuggets of African wisdom and proverbs are

mentioned, there are too few of these. It would have added value if the author could have elaborated on the extent to which African wisdom and approaches are similar or different to the Western and classic traditions. The author also fails to mention what the implications of these approaches are for an ethical Africa today.

As mentioned, most of the case studies are relevant and valuable. But why include over-exposed American case studies such as the Enron debacle? There are numerous African and African-contextual examples with as much or more richness and learning potential that could have been included. Since the case studies are not consistently clearly introduced and only limited interpretations of the ethical issues they are supposed to reflect, are provided, the author runs the risk that some of the cases may not address the target audience's learning needs. Confronting questions on difficult ethical dilemmas are not posed to assist the targeted reader (who is most likely a novice to business ethics) in identifying the ethical issues and how to deal with them. In the cases where different opinions from business or ethics experts are reported, the author neglected to interpret the opposing views. This could have greatly enhanced a more conclusive comprehension.

The title of the book suggests 'Africa today'. Too much emphasis is, however, placed on the historical roots of ethics, rather than focusing on current ethical issues in Africa, or different views and approaches to ethics in Africa. Where the book addresses more current ethical issues in Africa's business environment (chapters 11–13), the focus is mainly on the ethical/unethical behaviour of Western multinational companies in Africa. Although this highlights valid issues and is helpful to understand some of the ethical problems in Africa, it appears to represent somewhat of a victim mentality of what others did, or are still doing, to Africa and in Africa. This leaves the African leader stranded with unanswered questions such as: "What ethical issues are we accountable and responsible for?" and "What is our role and accountability to change this?" After all, we in Africa have created many of our own ethical

problems. We should therefore be held accountable for these problems, and we ought to take hands in solving them.

Notwithstanding the criticism, 'Ethics for Africa today: An introduction to business ethics' by Christine Gichure, is an enjoyable read that makes a worthwhile contribution to understanding and dealing with business ethics in Africa. It should find wide acceptance with many readers – from those being introduced to business ethics to those that prefer not to be swamped with an approach that may be perceived to be too academic in nature. The author succeeds to a large extent in guiding students and business leaders of Africa into the world of business ethics. The book contains a sufficient number of practical examples, ideas and triggers to stimulate most readers' thoughts/ideas on business ethics. This is good news for Africa as we have the need to expose more people to understanding ethics and thinking about ethics, and then to engage in changing business in Africa by giving it a more ethical orientation.

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