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Deriving a new approach to business ethics from the Service-dominant logic of marketing

1 Introduction

„If the goal is an ethically responsible business environment, then the basic principles of business and economics must be redefined.“ (Reilly and Kyj, 1990, p. 697)

In respect of the current situation our world faces, it seems rational and logical to question the foundations of capitalism and our understanding of the economic system. Unfortunately it might not even be an exaggeration to acknowledge that we find ourselves in the middle of a global climate crisis and a global financial crisis due to the way we did and still do business. As the authors of the above mentioned quote suggest, it seems worth rethinking the theoretical foundations we hold about the economic system. Practitioners might argue this point – that it is not business academics who conduct business, and this is true. But it is also true that prospect managers get educated in business schools incorporating the contents and concepts academics and scientists provide.

The emerging service-dominant (S-D) logic was introduced by Vargo and Lusch with the article “Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing” (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) in the *Journal of Marketing*. Since then S-D logic has highly impacted marketing science. It has achieved repute to indicate a paradigm shift in marketing theory. S-D logic refers to many aspects discussed in economics like social theory and ethics (Haase et al., 2008, p. 2). This paper examines the emerging Service-dominant logic (S-D logic) of marketing regarding its potential contribution to business ethics and proposes that a new approach to business ethics can be derived from S-D logic.

2 Service-dominant logic and its ethical implications

The Service-dominant logic of marketing is, as proposed by Vargo and Lusch (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), the emerging new dominant logic of marketing. The authors identify a shift from the goods-dominant paradigm to a service-dominant perspective of marketing. In 10 foundational premises (FP) the core concept of S-D logic is constituted. Since S-D logic is largely consistent with resource advantage theory and core competency theory (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 5), it can be viewed as the underlying new logic.

Vargo and Lusch also consider S-D logic as insightful for ethical issues. They value S-D logic opposed to goods-dominant logic as implicitly normative, being capable to accommodate ethics and offer ethical guidance (Lusch and Vargo, 2006b, p. 415), since it actually says “the purpose of exchange is to mutually serve” (Vargo and Lusch, 2006, p. 5).

Service as “the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself” (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 2) points “...almost directly to normative notions of investment in people (operant resources), long-term relationships, quality service flows, and only somewhat less directly toward notions of symmetric relations, transparency, ethical approaches to exchange, and sustainability” (Lusch and Vargo, 2006a, p. 283).

Abela and Murphy elaborate on the ethical implications of S-D logic in their essay “Marketing with integrity: ethics and the service-dominant logic for marketing” (Abela and Murphy, 2008). The authors identify the problem of compartmentalization of ethics and business in theory and practice. Due to conflicting norms of business and ethics this separation leads to ethical tensions within the organization. For example, the norm of marketing effectiveness, which could include manipulative advertising, conflicts with the ethical norm that consumers should be allowed to make free choices (Abela and Murphy, 2008, p. 42). The authors see S-D logic’s ethical contribution that it overcomes these ethical tensions by being capable to integrate ethics and business. Since there is a shift in the perspective from the good that has to be marketed, to the service, which shall benefit the customer, the firm is confronted with the benefit

and harm that the provided service renders. The change of the role of the customer to a co-creator of value implies that fostering trust and the reduction of asymmetric information will be the aim of the firm. Further, Abela and Murphy assert that since value is determined by the beneficiary, the firm has to consider its whole value proposition including societal contributions. The ethical tension between pursuing higher revenues and customer satisfaction is reduced by S-D logic, since relationships are valuable and worth investing in (Abela and Murphy, 2008, pp. 45-47). The authors state that the goal in S-D logic is to increase the firm's value, whereas in G-D logic the goal is to maximize profits. Increasing the value of the firm will violate ethical norms far less, since it implies the investment in relationships and stakeholders for the purpose of co-creation and the firm's reputation (Abela and Murphy, 2008, p. 45). According to the authors, S-D logic has the capacity to align ethical goals and business goals.

It is a notable recognition of the authors that S-D logic can integrate economical and ethical issues. But is this insight exclusively referable to the foundational premises? This paper argues that it is not. It is suggested that Abela's and Murphy's conclusion refers to a part of S-D logic which has not yet been made explicit. This paper suggests that it is not the foundational premises in the first instance, which render ethical implications, but the underlying economic worldview of S-D logic. To depict this fact, the foundational premises will be examined regarding their ethical implications.

3 The foundational premises and their ethical implications

FP1: Service is the fundamental basis of exchange.

Service is defined in S-D logic as “the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself” (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 2). This foundational definition is one of the reasons why S-D logic requires a new mindset, which includes a “shift to the process of serving rather than the creation of goods” (Lusch and Vargo, 2008, p. 90). Put in other words, FP1 states that the process of doing something good for another party is the basis of exchange and

not the tangible good. The idea that it is not a material good, but actually an immaterial service that is the basis of exchange has superficially seen no ethical implication. But delving deeper into the meaning of service as ‘doing something beneficial for someone’ it becomes clear that FP1 can be imputed an ethical dimension.

FP2: Indirect exchange masks the fundamental basis of exchange.

Since service is embedded in a complex combination of goods, money and institutions, it is not always apparent that service is the fundamental basis of exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2006, p. 7). Abela and Murphy see the ethical implication of FP2 in the fact that it urges everyone to consider how one would behave if he operated in a direct exchange with someone, since it is easier to act unethically if the other party is distant from oneself (Abela and Murphy, 2008, p. 44). This conclusion is preferable but only possible with additional interpretation. It can be concluded that FP2 makes one aware to always see the service behind each and every transaction and leads in that way back to FP1.

FP3: Goods are a distribution mechanism for service provision.

Regarding its ethical implication FP3 is complementary to FP1 and FP2. Like FP2 it helps to see the service behind every tangible good and to align motivation with actual action by bringing awareness about which service is really transmitted to the other party or customer.

FP4: Operant resources are the fundamental source of competitive advantage.

Since operant resources are understood as knowledge and skills which reside in employees and customers (Lusch and Vargo, 2006, p. 285), FP4 emphasizes that these stakeholder groups are highly valuable to the organization. This insight can implicate that hurting these stakeholder groups would be inconsistent with the goal of the firm to achieve competitive advantages.

FP5: All economies are service economies.

Regarding its ethical implication FP5 is redundant to the first three FPs by emphasizing that it is always service that is exchanged. But FP5 goes one step further by taking a macro perspective of markets. Service does not only lie at the

heart of exchange, but also at the heart of economies. In that way, FP5 points out that the process of ‘doing something beneficial’ is a crucial aspect of economies.

FP6: The customer is always a co-creator of value.

Instead of being a target of marketing activities, in S-D logic the customer is the co-creator of value. FP6 implies that customers are coequal to the firm and dignified, since they can also appear as an operant resource, i.e. the customer can be the potential source of competitive advantage (FP4). This foundational premise implies that the firm should engage in transparency, foster trust (Abela and Murphy, 2008, p. 44) and recognize the value of symmetric rather than asymmetric information (Lusch and Vargo, 2008, p. 90).

FP7: The enterprise cannot deliver value, but only offer value propositions.

Like in the value creation process, the customer is also an integral part in the value-determining process. FP7 points to the same underlying core value as FP6. The customer is coequal and dignified.

FP8: A service-centered view is inherently customer oriented and relational.

FP8 emphasizes the relational character of S-D logic. It can be interpreted regarding ethical implications that FP8 implies the relevance of the long-term well-being of the customer as well as the investment in relationships by fostering trust.

FP9: All social and economic actors are resource integrators.

This FP has no evident ethical implication.

| *FP10: Value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary.*

This FP is the pendant to FP7 from the customer perspective and has the same ethical implications. Due to the fact that the beneficiary determines value, FP7 endorses the possibility that customers include societal contributions as part of the entire value proposition (Abela and Murphy, 2008, p. 46).

As it was shown, most of the FPs have some ethical implications. But still, these implications are redundant and cannot be deviated from every FP. Thus, this

paper proposes that it is in the first instance the underlying socio-economic worldview of S-D logic, which is inherently ethical. The ethical implications of the FPs are thus the result of this underlying socio-economic worldview. Further, it is suggested that making S-D logic's underlying worldview explicit, will elucidate S-D logic's potential and contribution to business ethics.

4 The underlying socio-economic worldview of S-D logic

The term worldview (*Weltanschauung* in German) has a long history and was documented the first time in the work of Immanuel Kant (Ritter, 2004, p. 454). Over the ages the meaning of "worldview" changed. Today "worldview" can be understood as the "comprehensive conception or apprehension of the world, especially from a specific standpoint" (Merriam-Webster, 2009). Thus, this paper understands socio-economic worldview as the comprehensive conception or apprehension of the economic system and its relationship with society. It is suggested that S-D logic as an emerging logic of marketing, has inherently a new worldview about the economic system and its relationship to society, which will impact current business ethics research, as the logic will further establish. It is attempted here to make explicit the key points of the underlying socio-economic worldview that are relevant for business ethics. The socio-economic worldview can be substantiated in three key assumptions.

The principle of co-creation (FP6) as well as the principle of value determination (FP10) is based on S-D logic's idea of man. Customers are not targets of marketing activities or means for profit maximization, but rather co-creators coequal to the firm. As operant resources they are of great value to the firm since they can be the source of competitive advantage (FP4). The firm's goal is to improve its performance in serving the customer rather than maximize (e.g., financial) outcomes (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 6). Thus it is the customer, who determines the value of the proposition made by the firm (FP7, FP10) through examining in how far the service can fulfill his or her needs. The human being in S-D logic is, consistent with Kant's categorical imperative, an end in itself. He is not viewed as a means to profit maximization. In summary it can be said that S-

D logic's idea of man is highly respectful towards him. The first key assumption of the socio-economic worldview can be concretized as:

(1) Humans are dignified and ends in themselves.

Remembering that service is defined as the “application of specialized competencies (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself” – put in other words, that service is the process of doing something beneficial to someone and remembering that all economies are service economies (FP5) – it can be concluded that the economic system exists to serve humankind. In addition, Lusch and Vargo state that “through the invisible hand of the exchange of service for service, a market-driven society emerges that serves humankind” (Lusch and Vargo, 2006b, p. 409). Thus, since the invisible hand of exchange can be viewed as the mechanism of the economic system, which results in a society serving humankind, it can be concluded that the economic system exists to serve humankind. This core assumption is consistent with the first core assumption because human beings are dignified and ends in themselves, i.e. they are ends in the process of serving. The second key assumption is therefore:

(2) The purpose of the economic system is to serve humankind.

The third key assumption of the socio-economic worldview of S-D logic that is relevant for business ethics refers to the purpose of the firm. As Lusch and Vargo state, “...the purpose of the corporation is not to create wealth as many students of business believe. The purpose of the corporation, we argue, is to provide a mechanism for man to exchange service(s) for service(s) in order to improve his standard of living...” (Lusch and Vargo, 2006b, p. 415). In addition, firms provide complex, in the marketplace demanded services by integrating micro-specialized competencies (FP9). Thus, it can be said that the purpose of the firm is to serve society by providing an exchange mechanism, which allows the provision of complex services. In accordance with the overall goal of the economic system to serve humankind, the third key assumption can be summarized as follows:

(3) The purpose of the firm is to serve society.

This outlined socio-economic worldview of S-D logic was not made explicit yet, and it is not asserted that it must be relevant for the field of marketing. But it is asserted that S-D logic with its inherent socio-economic worldview establishes a new perspective and understanding of the relationship between ethics and business, which can be very valuable for business ethics.

5 The significance of the economic worldview

As Morgan state, “there is a close relationship between the way we think and the way we act” (Morgan, 1986, p. 335). This paper suggests that different economic worldviews result in different philosophies and thus result in different behavior. The term ‘philosophy’ here is not understood as the study of general philosophical problems, but as the application of a value-based mindset. The term is used here like in “philosophy of life”. Since one key question of ethics is ‘what ought I to do’, (Quante, 2003, p. 11) a philosophy guides individuals in their behavior. A philosophy incorporates values, whereas values can be defined as “motivational constructs that involve the beliefs that people hold about desirable goals that can be applied across contexts and time” (Torelli and Kaikati, 2009, p. 232). Several studies examined the relation between values and behavior, showing that values influence behavior (Bardi and Schwartz, 2003; Maio et al, 2001; Verplanken and Holland, 2002; Torelli and Kaikati, 2009). It is asserted here that the underlying socio-economic worldview of S-D logic can lead to a service-dominant philosophy of business giving ethical guidance to managers and practitioners. On the contrary, it is argued that a profit-dominant philosophy prevails in today’s business in practice as well as in theory. The profit-dominant logic can be attributed to the economic worldview drawn by economic theory.

6 The relationship of ethics and business

6.1 The relationship of ethics and business in economic theory

Many scholars criticize neoclassical theory as inherently amoral. As Keller states: “In essence, the neoclassical economic ideal presents us with an ethic by placing economic efficiency before us as the highest end, and utility/profit maximization as the only means to that end.” (Keller, 2007, p. 161). The ethical legitimation for this ideal is Adam Smith’s premise that by pursuing one’s own self-interest one accidentally benefits society at large. In that way one can argue, as Milton Friedman (Friedman, 1970) does, that economics is, and ought to be, a value free science being devoid of any ethical consideration. Freeman (1994) called this prevalent phenomenon in contemporary business thought the *Separation Thesis* – the thesis that ethical issues can be clearly separated from business issues. He argues that the *Separation Thesis* is the greatest obstacle to moral decision making in organizations today.

In addition, Sen points out the weakness of the concept of rationality in economic theory, which invariably requires the maximization of self-interest. He states that: “universal selfishness as a requirement of rationality is patently absurd” (Sen, 1987, p. 16). According to economic theory, ethical behavior must be irrational if it does not maximize one’s self-interest, i.e. maximize one’s profits. Further, he shows the absurdity of the assumption that society can be said to be as well off as possible if Pareto optimality is given – a state in which no-one’s utility can be raised without reducing the utility of someone else: “A state can be Pareto optimal with some people in extreme misery and others rolling in luxury, so long as the miserable cannot be made better off without cutting into the luxury of the rich” (Sen, 1987, p. 32).

It should be clear by now that the relation between ethics and business in standard economic theory is a mere paradox one and that business ethics itself can be seen as an oxymoron. In this regard, many business ethical approaches have been developed as “add-ons” and are seen as optional from managers (Abela and Murphy, 2008, p. 40). According to Abela, ethical approaches are

being marginalized as long as the separation thesis prevails (Abela, 2001, p. 189).

Shepard et al. (1995) refer to the profit-dominant philosophy as the ‘amoral paradigm’, which arose with industrialization. The roots of this ‘amoral paradigm’ (Shepard et al., 1995) can be located in Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, though it can be strongly doubted that Adam Smith was in any sense an egoist (Werhane, 1991). It is more that “What has been lost of Adam Smith in the translation to neoclassical economics is the basis of morality and control that Smith envisioned would go hand-in-hand with market efficiency ...” (Keller, 2007, p. 172).

It is suggested that the prevailing profit-dominant philosophy is based on economic theory incorporating the norm of maximizing profits as manifestation of self-interest as the highest goal. In that way Phillips states aptly: “The assertion that the purpose of business activity is to maximize the wealth of the business’ owners ... has near religious status. It is the dogma of business and is taken for granted like the air we breathe” (Phillips, 2003, p. 4). The economic worldview of economic theory led to a profit-dominant philosophy of business, which takes ethics not or only marginally into consideration and is thus *inter alia* the cause of ethical violation.

6.2 The relationship of ethics and business in S-D logic

In respect of its underlying socio-economic worldview, S-D logic integrates business and ethics as it is proposed from Abela and Murphy (2008) in its very core assumptions. Since S-D logic sees the purpose of the economic system in serving humankind, business can be primarily seen as a tool for ethical purposes. Hence a separation of business and ethics does not exist in S-D logic. The goal of business in a service-dominant perspective is to serve society. This can happen in various ways, for example, by providing complex services to the customer, creating wealth for shareholders or in creating income for employees and suppliers. In a service-dominant perspective, according to FP10, the firm would

consider the overall value proposition including externalities, which affect society (Abela and Murphy, 2008, p. 46). As is demanded from Reilly and Kyj, externalities are in S-D logic's worldview viewed as inefficiencies (Reilly and Kyj, 1990, pp. 695-696) due to the fact that efficiency is not understood solely in financial terms, but as the overall efficiency in serving society. In that way S-D logic sees economy as socially embedded, whereas neoclassical thought assumes that the market economy can be treated as a separate system from society (Etzioni, 1988, p. 4).

Congruent to Solomon, who states: "The purpose of business is to promote prosperity, to provide essential and desirable goods, to make life easier..." (Solomon, 1992, p. 118) the goal in a service-dominant socio-economic worldview is to serve society. Since the firm can only render a service as long as it is profitable to sustain itself, a service-dominant perspective encompasses the profit-dominant perspective for ethical purposes.

It is suggested that S-D logic with its underlying economic worldview can serve as a foundation for a new philosophy of business, namely for a service-dominant philosophy.

7 A new approach for business ethics

The field of business ethics is far from being easy to see through. There are concepts like Sustainability, Corporate Citizenship, Stakeholder Theory, Triple Bottom Line, and Corporate Social Responsibility, just to name a few. The problem with all of these concepts is that they are built on a very fragile foundation as long as one tries to understand and practice them through the profit-dominant mindset based on economic theory. As it was shown, ethical behavior is often just against the logic of neoclassical theory.

It is asserted here that a service-dominant economic worldview will help to promote ethical concepts as it provides a conceptual foundation, in which ethical conduct is, in contrast to neoclassical theory, reasonable. In the mindset of S-D logic ethical behavior supports the purpose of business to serve society. The findings of Maio et al. (2001) support the thesis that providing cognitive support, i.e. reason, for values increases provalue behavior. In that way, giving people

through S-D logic the cognitive support that ethical conduct is right and reasonable, it might promote value-based behavior. On the other hand, it can be argued that approaches like Corporate Social Responsibility and Stakeholder Theory, etc., are a result of the emerging S-D logic and its inherent economic worldview.

An approach to business ethics based on S-D logic consists neither of a list of codes of conducts nor of changes in organizational structure, nor of the prescription of charity activities. An approach as it is suggested here works on a meta-level, implying a shift in the economic worldview of decision makers. This approach would include promoting S-D logic and its underlying economic worldview in business and business schools for ethical purposes. The favored result would be a service-dominant philosophy replacing the profit-dominant philosophy. Such a kind of philosophy would be a tool to reflect one's decisions and align them to the values of S-D logic. A service-dominant philosophy would ask "What is the overall value proposition we make as a company?", further "Do we serve society?" and "Do we treat our customers and employees as ends and not as means?" A service-dominant philosophy would help to bring awareness of what service, including 'externalities', is really provided and transmitted.

8 Conclusion

Scholars like Hosmer and Cheng (2001) argue that there is a need for far greater cooperation between economists and ethicists. Shepard et al. (1995) predict that there might be a paradigm shift from the amoral paradigm back to a postindustrial ethical economic paradigm. Hamrin challenges economists by stating that "Economics must return to its roots, which lie in ethics and moral philosophy" (Hamrin, 1989, p. 608).

In an attempt to that it was shown that the Service-dominant logic of marketing is inherently ethical. The examination of the 10 foundational premises regarding their ethical implications showed that it is S-D logic's underlying socio-economic worldview, which is inherently ethical. In a next step the underlying worldview of S-D logic was made explicit by concretizing its core assumptions. Considering that worldviews and philosophies hold values, which influence

behavior, the economic worldview of economic theory and its implication for the relationship of business and ethics was examined. With the result that economic theory results in a profit-dominant philosophy whose highest goal is to maximize profits, it was shown that economic theory hardly supports ethics in business, if it does it at all. In contrast to that, the relationship of business and ethics in S-D logic showed that S-D logic can serve as a theoretical foundation for business ethics. A new approach to business ethics was suggested, which incorporates S-D logic and its economic worldview. It was suggested that promoting S-D logic for business ethical purposes can lead to a new dominant philosophy, namely to a service-dominant philosophy whose goal is to serve society with the means of business.

There is definitely a need for more research to concretize the practicability and legitimation of a service-dominant economic worldview and philosophy. The aim of this paper is to show S-D logic's potential for business ethics and to point to a new approach to business ethics based on an ethical economic worldview.

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