



# Applied Ethics at Corvinus Business Ethics Center

A review and survey of 30 years  
of interdisciplinary business ethics  
with genuine moral commitments

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## **Keywords**

Applied ethics, Corvinus Business Ethics Center, business ethics, moral commitment, interdisciplinary inquiry, Corvinus University Budapest, Hungary.

## **Abstract**

Between practical ethics, which seeks to define a wide range of ethical norms and ways of ethical reasoning on firm philosophical basis, including the definition of the foundation of ethics, and business ethics, environmental ethics or health ethics the difference is only about the degree we get to practically apply ethics. The Business Ethics Center of Corvinus University of Budapest, lead by Prof. Laszlo Zsolnai, takes all these levels very seriously. The external observer who would want to review the activities of the Center would immediately get in trouble if all that they would expect is either great theories on practical ethics, or only concrete observations on how, in some precise context, ethics is applied by economic science professionals. Indeed, as we shall review, the 30 Year Report of the Business Ethics Center of Corvinus University Budapest presents the most important conferences and workshops that they organized, describes significant books they published, and summarizes the main findings of their decades-long research. Crucially, the functioning of the Center is based on the conviction that ethics is a relevant aspect of all levels of economic activity, from individual and organizational to societal and global. Business ethics is practiced by the Center as an action-oriented, interdisciplinary scientific inquiry where normative and descriptive elements are intermingled.

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# 1. Review of the 30 Year Report of the Corvinus Business Ethics Center

## 1. Background

The Business Ethics Center of the Corvinus University of Budapest is one of the oldest institutions of its kind in Europe. It was established in 1993 by Jozsef Kindler and Laszlo Zsolnai<sup>1</sup>. Since 2022 it is part of the Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies. The mission of the Center is to promote ideas, models, and techniques of business ethics in higher education, academic research, and business life<sup>2</sup>. A report has been released covering the 30 years of activities of the business ethics center at Corvinus<sup>3</sup>. This text inspired our almost immediate decision to spread the good news in this short review, justifying even the term “survey” for this extensive and deep collection of scientific findings, not to say the esteem for those persons, never in sufficiently large number in our societies, who bear the constant commitment to the task of carving out the “moral economic man” as a personal karma.

## 2. Conferences in Europe, Asia, and the USA

From 1993–2023 the Business Ethics Center organized or co-organized twenty-five international conferences and workshops.

The Business Ethics Center organized the first ever *Transatlantic Business Ethics Summit* in 2000 in Budapest. The participants reflected on the state of the art of business ethics as it has been practiced in the

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<sup>1</sup> We are deeply indebted and grateful to Prof. Laszlo Zsolnai who did not spare time in supplementing the information we could find.

<sup>2</sup> The website of the Center is <https://www.businessethicscenter.com/>

<sup>3</sup> See: Zsolnai, Laszlo (Ed.), *For genuine business ethics: celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Business Ethics Center of the Corvinus University of Budapest*, Published by the Business Ethics Center, Corvinus University of Budapest, Nov. 2023; 102pp., ISBN: 9789635039470. Accessed from the Globethics Library: <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4300530>

USA and Europe. There was an agreement that to meet the technological, ecological, and social requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century combining the best of European and American traditions in business ethics is needed.

The Business Ethics Center organized an international workshop on *Spirituality in Management* in 2001. The workshop focused on the role of spirituality in renewing the contemporary management praxis. The participants agreed that a more inclusive, holistic, and peaceful approach to management is needed if business leaders are to uplift the environmentally degrading and socially disintegrating world of our age. (See Zsolnai 2004)

Jointly with the Bocconi University the Business Ethics Center organized an international workshop entitled *The Collaborative Enterprise: Creating Values for a Sustainable World* in 2008 in Milan. The workshop explored alternative ways of organizing and doing business to the currently prevailing competitive model. (See Tencati and Zsolnai 2010)

The Business Ethics Center was co-organizer of the conference on *Ethical Leadership: The Indian Way* in 2014 in Bangalore. Over 60 Indian, European, and American scholars and practitioners presented papers on the ethical challenges of leadership in Western and Eastern context. (See Chatterji and Zsolnai 2016)

The Business Ethics Center and the Bodo Graduate School of Business organized an international conference on *Integral Ecology, Earth Spirituality, and Economics* in 2016 in Bodo. The main inspiring source of the conference was Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato si’* that proposes Integral Ecology as a joint concern for people and the planet. (See Jakobsen and Zsolnai 2017)

The Business Ethics Center collaborated with the Coller School of Management of Tel Aviv University in hosting an international conference on *New Economy, Old Traditions: Caring Entrepreneurship* in Tel Aviv. The central theme of the conference was how to develop a new ethos of entrepreneurship in which caring for fellow human beings, future generations, and nature play a primordial role. Practical wisdom

from Jewish and other faith traditions suggests, that enterprises with a spiritual value orientation, can flourish and serve the interests of business and the wider community better than conventional enterprises, that operate according to a narrow financial bottom line. (See Setter and Zsolnai 2019)

As part of The Economy of Francesco program initiated by Pope Francis, the Business Ethics Center organized a workshop on *New Business Models for Human Flourishing & Ecological Regeneration* in September 2022 in Assisi. The workshop presented innovative business models which connect human flourishing with ecological regeneration in different industries and fields of social life.

In November 2022, the Teachers College of Columbia University, the European SPES Institute, Leuven, and the Business Ethics Center of Corvius University organized the first-ever Awakened Campus Global Conference. The conference aimed to create a collaborative global network of higher education institutions that integrate spirituality into their activities. The overall goal is to raise the spiritual awareness of students, faculty, and university leaders through the support of spiritual principles and practices in the student-faculty and student-advisor relationship, campus culture, mission, shared relational values, residential programs, and range of pedagogy.

### **3. Significant Publications**

Between 1993–2023 members of the Business Ethics Center of Corvius University published more than 340 scientific outputs including books and papers. Their most significant publications include the following:

The book entitled *Ethics in the Economy: Handbook of Business Ethics*. (Zsolnai 2002) presents a non-instrumental approach to business ethics. It is arguing that there is a chance to improve the ethical quality of our economic activities only if our motivation is genuinely ethical; that is, only if we want to realize ethical conduct for its own sake.

The book *Business within Limits: Deep Ecology and Buddhist Economics* (Zsolnai and Ims 2005) explores the Deep Ecology perspective and Buddhist Economics for transforming business toward a more ecological and human form. It argues that ecology and ethics provide limits for business within which business is legitimate and productive. But transgressing ecological and ethical limits business activities become destructive and self-defeating.

Forty scholars and practitioners from Europe, North America, and Asia contributed to *The Palgrave Handbook of Spirituality and Business*. (Bouckaert and Zsolnai 2011) It summarizes the most critical issues, approaches, and models in the field of spirituality in business, economics, and society. It presents a comprehensive, pluralistic view covering all the major religious and spiritual traditions.

The book *Economics as a Moral Science* (Rona and Zsolnai 2017) is an attempt to reclaim economics as a moral science. It argues that taking ethical considerations into account is needed to explain and predict the behavior of economic agents, as well as for evaluating and designing economic policies and mechanisms. The book employs a personalist approach that sees human persons with free will and conscience as the basic agents of economic life and defines human flourishing as the ultimate goal of economic activities.

The book *Progressive Business Models: Creating Sustainable and Pro-social Enterprise* (O’Higgins and Zsolnai 2017) presents and analyses exemplary cases of progressive business, understood as ecologically sustainable, future-respecting, and pro-social forms of enterprises. The collected cases show the best that can be expected from business in the twenty-first century.

*The Routledge International Handbook of Spirituality in Society and the Professions* (Zsolnai and Flanagan 2019) explores how spirituality is a part of human existence and presents approaches and models for professionals working in diverse areas including agriculture, city planning, medicine, business, science, design, fashion, literature, and the arts.

The book *Global Perspectives on Indian Spirituality and Management: The Legacy of S.K. Chakraborty* (Mukherjee and Zsolnai 2022) is a tribute to the revered Indian management scholar and philosopher S.K. Chakraborty,

the pioneer of human values and Indian ethos in management. The volume investigates the applicability of spiritually inspired business models in Indian and western contexts. It shows that Chakraborty was right in arguing that the mainstream materialistic value orientation of today's business can hardly be reconciled with any genuine spirituality.

The book *Humanities as a Resource and Inspiration for Humanizing Business* (Thate and Zsolnai 2023) is based on a collaborative project of Princeton University Faith & Work Initiative and the Business Ethics Center. It offers novel insights into the applicability of humanities and humanistic values in today's business and management. It facilitates the dialogue between humanities and business disciplines on renewing business and management theories, models, and practices.

This book *Value Creation for a Sustainable World: Innovating for Ecological Regeneration and Human Flourishing* (Zsolnai, Walker, and Shrivastava 2023) defines "sustainable value creation" as bringing forth products, services, organizational forms, processes, actions, and policies which satisfy human needs and contribute to the ecological regeneration of nature. The book collects and analyses innovative economic, business, and social models of sustainable value creation globally.

#### **4. Main Findings**

From the 30 years of research work of the Business Ethics Center the following basic research statements can be derived:

“ Economic behaviour is multifaceted and context-dependent. Two major factors determine the ethicality of economic behavior: the moral character of the actor and the relative cost of ethical behaviour.”

“ Actors who are intrinsically committed to the common good and define success in multi-dimensional terms are inclined to serve nature, society, and future generations.”

“ Spirituality can play a major creative role in the deliberation of economic decisions and actions.”

“ Sufficiency-oriented, community-based economic models are crucial for achieving a stable Earth-Human system.”

“ Only non-materialistic value orientation can produce real material wellbeing for people.”

“ Flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth cannot be achieved by self-interested behaviour. It requires to employ genuine, altruistic actions both in short-term and long-term.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Further reading: Zsolnai, L. (Ed.), For genuine business ethics: celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Business Ethics Center of the Corvinus University of Budapest, op. cit., and for information about the Business Ethics Center, they can be obtained on request from Professor Laszlo Zsolnai (zsolnai@uni-corvinus.hu)

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### 3. Short biography

Dr I. Haaz serves as Managing Editor at Globethics. He holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Geneva, Switzerland.