

# **BUSINESS SCHOOLS, ETHICS CLASSES AND THE TRIUMPH OF RELATIVISM OVER REASON**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Over the past century higher education has undergone a dramatic transformation (paradigm shift) that has impacted the natural and the social sciences as well as business schools. This transformation has implications for how we teach students in the use of reason when seeking an ethical resolution to a business decision.

One of the results of this shift is that the classic use of reason in arriving at ethical decisions appears to be, for the most part, contrary to how reason is put to use in this new paradigm. This paper will compare and contrast two paradigms to illustrate the differences between the paradigms and how these differences impact the way we teach students in the use of reason to arrive at ethical decisions.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past century higher education has undergone a dramatic transformation. Those responsible for this transformation and the enthusiastic supporters of this transformation laud this new age of academia as heralding in a new era of intellectual development and human behavior. This transformation of higher education to a post-modern paradigm appears built upon the presuppositions of relativism, humanism, and naturalism in both the natural and the social sciences. Business schools have also been influenced by this paradigm shift. This shift has also impacted how we teach students in the use of reason when seeking an ethical resolution to a business decision.

One of the results of this shift in paradigms is that the classic use of reason in arriving at ethical decisions appears to be, for the most part, contrary to how reason is put to use in the post-modern paradigm.

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast two paradigms and their associated approaches to reason in an attempt to identify the strengths as well as the shortcomings in the use of this post-modern paradigm in teaching students how to determine what is right and what is wrong with respect to their behavior as future business professionals.

The author readily acknowledges that this paper is written not from the perspective of an ‘ethics expert.’ Rather it is written from the perspective of an observer and participant in business schools over the past 40 years as both a student and as an accounting department faculty member.

### **The Traditional Theistic Paradigm and Its Use of Reason**

The traditional theistic paradigm will be compared to the post-modern paradigm. The traditional, theistic paradigm is built upon a different set of presuppositions (absolutism, universalism, and theism) than the

post-modern paradigm. In discussing the use of reason under this traditional paradigm, Isaac Watts, the author of the work that was the standard textbook on logic and reason for over 200 years at schools such as Yale and Harvard stated in his introduction “logic is the art of using Reason well in our inquiries after truth, and the communication of it to others” [1]. The author went on to state that “reason is the glory of human nature...” [1]. This paper will argue that the use of reason is a critical pre-condition to the study of ethics and to the making of moral decisions. The question is what is the right use of reason?

### **The Post-Modern Paradigm and Its Use of Reason**

The current dominant post-modern paradigm founded on relativism and its related concepts of humanism and naturalism is, arguably, internally incoherent when attempting to apply a classic use of reason to its ethical decision making. To overcome this incoherence it seems an alternative approach to reason must be employed. It will be argued that although this alternative post-modern approach to reason has a certain intellectual appeal, it also suffers from similar internally incoherent incompatibilities that tend to create rather than resolve moral issues. This is due, at least in part, because in this new paradigm, what is truth is defined as relative to each individual. In other words, what is right for you may not be right for me. The problem is that if each individual does what is right in their own eyes, the breakdown of society may be the inevitable outcome. Thus, this paradigm appears saddled with the dilemma of trying to develop an approach to reason that can defend what a classical approach to reason would argue is indefensible. This problem necessitates changing how reason is used to arrive at ethical decisions in a post-modern paradigm.

This paper will compare and contrast the two paradigms to illustrate the differences between the paradigms and how these differences impact the way we teach students in the use of reason to arrive at ethical decisions.

### **REFERENCES**

- [1] Watts, Isaac. *Logic or The Right Use of Reason in the Inquiry after Truth with a Variety of Rules to Guard Against Error in the Affairs of Religion and Human Life, as well as in the Sciences*. Grand Rapids, MI: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 7th printing 2008. (First published in 1724 in London), p. 1.