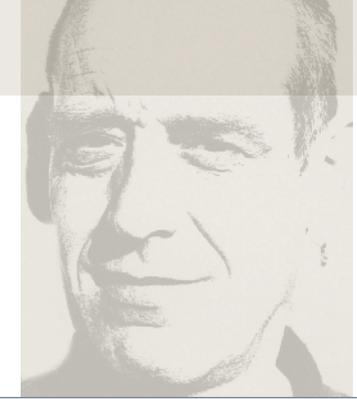


Ethics as a bridge between theory and practice

Bronwen Rees interviews John Wilson



Bronwen Rees interviews John Wilson, meditation teacher, on the nature of social research. By taking both the internal and external world of the researcher into account, researchers may be able to understand the conditions of the workplace more deeply, from both the strategic and personal perspective. Indeed, this is the privilege and hence responsibility of the researcher.

Q I understand you are drawing on the work of the ancient Greek philosophers to help position your research. Can you say more about this?

The Greek philosophers were concerned with using philosophy, or what we call ‘theory’ for the ‘Good’. Recent interest in the Greeks has probably arisen because they have their own ethical basis and some conception of working towards the ‘Good’. Even though we have a tradition with Marxist and post-Marxist philosophers such as Habermas quite clearly pointing out that knowledge is not neutral and only serves an interest, this has not been taken on up in a practical way by researchers. In my view, it is the responsibility of the social researcher (at least in part) to influence business in an ethical sense which means questioning the basis on which our economic system has developed. This is becoming increasingly vital as practitioners, struggling with the speed and complexity of modern business, do not have the time for this degree of reflection.

Q How can a researcher have this ethical influence on business?

My interest is in how the researcher can begin to see their research work as having a balance between the subjective and objective pole. This way, research becomes a way of self-inquiry as well as inquiry into the objective ways of the world. An important part of the research process is that the research transforms the researcher. If this does not happen, then the research becomes disembodied – that is to say it is not anchored in the lived experience of the researcher, and to that extent it is only an abstract idea, and

cannot be said to have an ethical basis. What I'm interested in challenging is the notion that there is an objective standpoint from which to view the world, and to claim that this is so effectively distorts the research. By taking into account both subjective and objective poles of experience, researchers may understand work situations in a more in-depth and meaningful way.

In carrying out research, we need to ask some fundamental questions: what or whom does the research serve? The Greeks had an understanding that the inquiry served both the development of the individual and the common Good. In so doing, it served both the individual and the collective. If the underlying rationale of research is profit, which is increasingly the case, then we lose the sense of the 'Good' and research becomes unbalanced.

Q *You must agree that our universities have to seek funding themselves, and researchers find it increasingly difficult to ask these challenging questions.*

Well, there is some movement towards challenging some of these assumptions – but at a more fundamental level there is a need for researchers to understand that they are part of the world, and that the way they understand the world is conditioned by their own values and views. Ideally research should not only explicate the external situation but it should also challenge the values of the researcher so that research contains a dual process where there is an iteration between the external investigation and internal questioning. I think in a way it's a matter of people taking full responsibility and I don't think that can be done unless it is accompanied by a growth in self-awareness.

Q *Is there a particular method that can help develop this?*

I don't think it's a question of using any particular methodology. It's more basic than that. It's about how researchers understand their place in the world. So ethical research has to have an emancipatory concern, and for this to happen it has to be accompanied by a self-emancipatory process. Academic researchers are in a unique position insofar as they are able to carry out research that benefits people, which is not always oriented to a maximisation of profit. I think that is our responsibility as researchers, but further, I don't think that process works unless the individual is concerned with their own emancipation which needs to have a self-reflective element.

Q *There are many research methods and paradigms that carry this self-reflective element, such as action research, where researchers work collaboratively with business and with one another through cycles of self-reflection. What is different about what you are saying?*

Action research is a move in the right direction, but I don't think it goes far enough. I don't think it necessarily gives the researcher sufficient tools for in-depth self-reflection.

Q *What tools did the Greeks use for this process?*

In the Greek tradition there is the use of dialogue – perhaps we could compare these with action research groups. But in addition, there is a whole range of spiritual exercises through which one attempted to come to a better understanding of one's situation in relation to reality.

Q *What do you mean by reality here?*

I think when I say reality, I mean perspective. I think on the whole people have lost perspective – and along with a lack of perspective, there is a lack of compassion. Most radically, if people avoid becoming aware of their own relationship towards death, their life is in all likelihood going to be dominated by selfishness.

Q *I don't quite understand what you mean by this.*

Insofar as one doesn't accept one's own finite nature, one is actually looking for external means for promoting a sense of the self. Again, it is a matter of perspective. Reading the Stoics, for example, you get the feeling that they had a real sense of their place within the cosmos, but I think this is more or less lacking in modern life. We have very little sense of meaning derived from what one might call cosmological understanding of being, and therefore we become increasingly dependent on consumption to fill that void. I think as long as the chief motivation of business is shareholder profit we can only expect issues that face the modern world – climate change, world poverty, war and so on simply to get worse. The clamour for rises in standard of living, for example has become almost a fetish, and it is these basic issues that researchers should be challenging.

❓ ***If this challenge doesn't come from academics, where else can it come from?***

I think this is exactly why the appropriation of academia by corporate interests has to be resisted not only by examining the external world but rather by individual researchers deepening their ethical sensibilities. It's quite simple really. As researchers we have to bring a genuine sense of care into our work. It seems to me that this quality of care can only come about through self-reflection, and that we have to find this for ourselves, before we can even begin to offer solutions to business. One of the greatest problems for practitioners is that they do not have this space to reflect leading to highly stressful conditions in workplaces. As researchers, we need to find ways of addressing these issues, as well as focussing on issues of efficiency.

❓ ***What are these tools of self-reflection?***

I don't think I would want to be prescriptive about how an individual researcher develops a sense of care, but I do think as researchers we need, individually and collectively, to develop ways in which this sense of care can be developed. We need to start asking some fundamental questions. Such questions invariably lead to self-investigation. For the individual, the most fundamental question that can be asked are those relating to their own motivation and purpose in carrying out research. In essence, if our motivations are not based in care, but on our own desires for success, then the research will be open to distortion.

❓ ***How can this work be translated to a business context?***

Of course businesses need to adopt practices that are both ethical and encourage awareness but I do think academic researchers have a special responsibility in this respect. Although the relationship between theory, and the practices in business is by no means a causal one, nevertheless, the generation of fresh and radical ideas within business will, at least in the long-term, have an effect. The business school and academics within them need to have more faith in the power of creative thinking. It's not good enough for us as researchers simply to accept the world as it is. We should be in the vanguard of those trying to create a more equitable and sustainable world. I know this is utopian but the alternative is ever-increasing, ever-deepening distopia which we now face.

Section 2

Views from the field

Mark Goodridge, after many years of **top level consulting**, discusses whether and how theory has helped him. Professor Chris Brewster, world expert in human resource management wonders how much has changed in **employee motivation** over the years. David Arkell sets out how we might seriously embrace the nature of our **emotional lives** in organisations. Greg O'Shea, both academic and consultant offers up some **practical methods** of exploring organisational cultures and strategies, and how a **critical approach** might contribute to a real **values change**.