Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics (2007) 20:119–136
DOI 10.1007/s10806-006-9020-y © Springer 2006

ERIK DE BAKKER

INTEGRITY AND CYNICISM: POSSIBILITIES AND CONSTRAINTS OF MORAL COMMUNICATION

(Accepted in revised form September 23, 2006)

ABSTRACT. Paying thorough attention to cynical action and integrity could result in a less naive approach to ethics and moral communication. This article discusses the issues of integrity and cynicism on a theoretical and on a more practical level. The first part confronts Habermas's approach of communicative action with Sloterdijk's concept of cynical reason. In the second part, the focus will be on the constraints and possibilities of moral communication within a business context. Discussing the corporate integrity approach of Kaptein and Wempe will provide this focus. Their approach can be considered as a valuable contribution to the question of how to deal with (dilemmas of) conflicting interests, open discussion, fairness, and strategic decision-making in the context of stakeholder dialog. However, it is concluded that Kaptein and Wempe seem to overstretch the concept of corporate integrity by their inclination to make it an all-purpose remedy for corporate dilemmas.

KEY WORDS: Business ethics, communicative/strategic action, cynicism, integrity, moral communication, open/hidden agendas, social theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Moral communication in the context of free market competition is often called into question. A genuine discussion about morality and ethics seems difficult if not impossible to realize in such a context. One could argue that the economic interests at stake in the market conflict with the ethical prerequisite of non-strategic communication, which is characterized by open moral discussion and sincere involvement of the participants. Therefore, corporations are not in a position to freely deliberate about moral issues. A cynic might add that moral statements of corporations are merely window-dressing. According to Kaptein and Wempe the term integrity has become increasingly used within the business context since the mid-1990s (2002: 152). Could it be that integrity has become a true concern among many business organizations? Or is this occupation with integrity mainly business, a cunning response of profit seeking enterprises to consumer needs for

"honest" economic islands in a world increasingly featured by globalization, drifting values, and changing identities?

Integrity is a complicated matter, not only in the domain of free market competition but also in the political and public domain. Strategic action and the use of hidden agendas seem to be phenomena that are widely recognized by citizens of modern societies. As a consequence, ambitious plans or projects featured by "high" values or ideals are often distrusted. Within the domain of agricultural production, we can think of the development of ever higher food safety standards in the European Union. Political institutions or involved economic enterprises allege that these standards are primarily motivated by the wish to deal with consumer concerns in a responsible manner. But are these motivations not just obscuring certain hidden agendas of economic interests that are at work behind the scenes, for instance the protection of national markets against cheaper food products from developing countries that cannot meet the requirements of these higher standards? The same skepticism could arise with respect to the introduction of quality standards regarding animal welfare or sustainability, which are often said to be in the interest of the consumer. Should these standards not also be seen in the perspective of protecting market positions for opportunist reasons?

Sloterdijk relates cynicism about high ideals or economic or political blueprints to the critical tradition of Enlightenment to debunk concealed motives and hidden interests (Sloterdijk, 1983). The often cynical response of modern citizens towards the "social missions" of politicians, nation states, or powerful, international corporations could be seen as the dark side of "reflexive modernization" (Beck et al., 2000). According to Sloterdijk, cynical distrust in idealistic intentions and rational reasoning are closely connected. Following this vision, the problem of integrity should be regarded as a fundamental issue concerning the possibilities and constraints of moral communication between rational agents. This article focuses on this key issue of integrity in moral communication. The following questions will be addressed:

- Is the presupposition of non-strategic communication and integrity, which is thought to be necessary for moral communication, a realistic assumption?
- Is most if not all moral communication in societal practice not cursed with power struggles and strategies?
- Is moral communication possible in an economic market context despite the constraints and dilemmas of corporations?
- Could the problem of integrity, cynicism, and hidden agendas be solved by the development and improvement of corporate integrity?

The first two questions will be discussed by confronting Habermas's approach of communicative action (1981) with Peter Sloterdijk's concept of cynical reason (1983). I will argue that Habermas's theory suffers from empirical demarcation problems and also seems to underestimate the impact of modern cynicism in moral communication.

The last two questions, which address the issue of moral communication, integrity, and cynicism on a more practical level, will be dealt with by discussing the corporate integrity model of Kaptein and Wempe (2002). Finally, I will consider whether this latter model offers a fruitful perspective to tackle cynicism in a market context.

2. MORAL COMMUNICATION, INTEGRITY, AND CYNICISM

2.1. *Characteristics of Moral Communication*

Moral communication is communicating or discussing the contents of moral pronouncements. It should be understand as an exchange of moral beliefs and convictions. A crucial assumption is also that one aims to understand the perspective of the other person or party. Moral pronouncements are normative judgments, featured by appeals to general consent (in this regard they differ from expressions of taste). Furthermore, they evoke feelings of shame and pride, concern both actions and attitudes, and involve issues where fundamental (personal) interests are at stake (Kaptein and Wempe, 2002: 40–42). Although the reasons for engaging in moral communication can be strategic, e.g., image-building, such strategic reasons cannot be used as legitimate arguments in a moral discussion. The (lack of) openness about the 'real' reasons for engaging in moral communication is often related to the degree of integrity of the disputing parties.

2.2. *The Multi-layered Concept of Integrity*

The etymological roots of integrity can be found in the Latin word *integritas* meaning "wholeness," "completeness," and "purity." The ethical concept of integrity has many layers and is difficult to define. Cox et al. (2005) distinguish five different accounts of integrity: (i) integrity as the integration of the self; (ii) integrity as maintenance of identity-conferring commitments; (iii) integrity as standing for something; (iv) integrity as moral purpose; and (v) integrity as a virtue. In common with Cox et al. (2005) I will take integrity to be a complex and thick term, a cluster concept under which different overlapping qualities of character are tied together. Integrity is not so much a fixed property of a person but rather a quality of many actions that may point to a personality with integrity. It concerns the motives behind the action and

presumes a unity of effort. Integrity can be improved and should not be seen as a natural thing that a person does or does not have (Wempe, 1998: 180).

The theoretical and philosophical debate concerning integrity often focuses on the implications that integrity has for individual persons. My focus in this article will not be on the personal implications of integrity or the (complex) relation between personal integrity and moral principles, but on integrity as "standing for something" in the context of moral communication. The point of departure is agents engaged in social discussions about moral issues that are considered to be of substantial societal importance. Moral integrity in this sense presumes that one has a moral "core": a set of recognizable principles or commitments that gives an actor (person, party, organization) character or identity. The existence of this moral core is also the reason that a loss of integrity is a real possibility. McFall (1987: 10) expresses this succinctly: "In order to sell one's soul, one must have something to sell."

Calhoun (1995) argues that integrity clearly is a virtue but that it is not always properly understood as a *social* virtue, as standing for something. In her view, integrity becomes meaningful only when personal judgments about moral issues are publicly deliberated with other people. Integrity is not only an expression of a personal virtue, standing up for values that constitute who one is, but also of community involvement. In short, integrity is strongly connected with responsible citizenship. This social understanding of integrity also shifts our sense of what might be the obstacles to integrity. Besides the awareness of intra-personal obstacles, e.g., self-deception, weakness of will, or ambivalence about one's endorsements, one should also have an open eye for public obstacles like contempt of the public, loss of job, penal sanctions, being labeled "confrontational" or "difficult,"and so on. "Even the thickest skinned and toughest willed may find them hard to stand up against, especially on a continuing basis." (Calhoun, 1995: 259) The relation of integrity with social and political conditions also leads us to the tension between ideal and reality, between the world as how it ought to be and the world as it is. This tension seems to be of great importance for the chances of integrity. The more people lose faith in the (positive) effect and meaning of moral behavior and become entrenched with views of a hopeless power-driven world, the more intense the integrity question becomes. In these conditions, people can react cynically, seek their refuge in expedient action, and become indifferent to the call for moral integrity.

2.3. *Cynicism: Hidden Agendas at Work*

The Oxford English Dictionary (Volume II) defines a cynical person as a sneering fault-finder; as somebody showing a disposition to disbelieve in the

sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions, and is wont to express this by sneers and sarcasms. However, in order to get an adequate understanding of cynicism in modern societies, this description is incomplete and could even be misleading. According to Sloterdijk (1983) and Goldfarb (1991), cynicism has become ubiquitous and comes with discretion and resignation nowadays. Citizens of modern societies are familiar with rationalizing strategic behavior in which a certain amount of immorality can be observed, and everyone is also a little bit worried about this. This makes cynicism also hard to challenge. The modern cynic has made himself immune to rational criticism. He is aware of morally "correct" behavior but still acts morally "wrong." Moreover, he is able to defend his morally "incorrect" action in a rational way. "If I will not do this, somebody else will — and probably worse." Sloterdijk characterizes the cynical reason of our modern age as "the *enlightened wrong consciousness*" (1983: 37). Cynicism rests on the belief that "reality is hard" and that one has to consider all realistic means that are available to pursue a private goal. Therefore, cynicism could be defined as all "morally incorrect" orientations, attitudes, and actions that are (implicitly or explicitly) justified by referring to the way things work in (hard) reality (De Bakker, 2001: 48).[1]

A popular example of cynicism in modern societies is the simplified image of the power-mad politician or the calculating citizen without any scruples about bending the rules of law in their own interest. Nevertheless, such simplistic stereotypes do reveal an essential feature of cynical action: the use of hidden agendas combined with a world view (*Weltanschauung*) within which self-interest is considered as the driving force that makes the world go round. The existence of open and hidden agendas is a useful criterion to classify different modes of social action (Table 1). It elucidates that cynicism can be deployed both in a strategic and in a deliberative context, and that expectations with respect to integrity play a key role in social interaction.

Table 1 illustrates that hidden agendas are always connected with strategic action, but strategic action does not necessarily imply the use of hidden agendas. Social agents can be straightforward about their strategic motives and action goals, for instance corporations being fair rivals in a free market

[1] The concept of cynism, as described by Sloterdijk, points out negative aspects of realistic action on a rational basis. This might evoke the feeling that realistic action on a rational basis can never be positive. For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that Sloterdijk distinguishes between cynicism and kynicism. Kynicism is a confronting modus of rational-realistic behavior. Its prototype is the Greek philosopher Diogenes in classical Athens, who was famous for his unconcealed cynical statements and his provocations towards the rulers on top, blueprints of a purely rationalist nature or the uncritical behavior of the masses in general. A more detailed treatment of kynicism is beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on the importance of recognizing cynical action and attitudes in the context of moral communication.

Table 1. Open and hidden agendas in connection with cynical action orientations.

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Action orientations</th><th colspan="2">Open agendas</th><th colspan="2">Hidden agendas</th></tr>
<tr><th>At one side</th><th>At all sides</th><th>At one side</th><th>At all sides</th></tr>
<tr><td>Strategic context in which own interests dominate</td><td>Unilateral strategic action</td><td>Mutual strategic action</td><td rowspan="2">Unilateral cynical action</td><td rowspan="2">Mutual cynical action</td></tr>
<tr><td>Deliberative context aimed at persuasion and intersubjective agreement</td><td>Unilateral persuasive action</td><td>Mutual persuasive action</td></tr>
</table>

Source: De Bakker (2001: 50).

competition. Cynical actions in a strategic context relate to concealed strategies that violate the general rules and expectations in this context. An example, would be a catering firm engaged in a tender for the provision of meals to schools or prisons that gains advantage by bribing officials with decisive power. When the other corporations do not employ such means, one can speak of *unilateral cynical action*. In the case that other catering firms try to do the same, one can speak of *mutual cynical action*.

Unilateral or mutual cynical action can also take place in a deliberative context of moral discussions. An example of this type of action would be a multinational corporation that secretly dumps its toxic waste in developing countries and simultaneously takes a responsible stance in moral discussions (in its home country) concerning sustainable production methods to divert attention from its oversees environmental misbehavior. In a deliberative context, participants claim that their primary concern is to reach reasonable agreement on the basis of common interests. Because of the expectations that this arouses with respect to the integrity of the participating actors, the dismay and anger of people discovering unilateral cynical action is usually more intense in the (deliberative) context of moral discussions than in a clearly strategic context. If ‘‘victims of cynicism’’ lose all faith that criticism and rational reasoning are able to stop the cynical use of hidden agendas on the other side, it could even lead to *mutual cynical action*: actors at both sides keeping up appearances about their moral integrity, while behind the scenes all kind of hidden strategic maneuvers are taking place.

3. CONSONANT AND AMBIVALENT VIEWS ON RATIONALITY

3.1. *Distinct Trajectories of Critical Thinking*

The rational occupation with integrity and moral autonomy seems to suffer deeply from the tension between ideal and reality. According to Owen, this tension can also be observed in Kant's famous essay "What is Enlightenment?" (1784). In this essay, he recognizes that "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity [*unmündigkeit*]" (quoted in Owen, 1998: 7) is related to socio-political conditions. Kant explains that one should strive for maturity but also should keep in mind that the ideal age of complete enlightenment ("the Kingdom of Ends") still has to come. Living in Prussia under Frederick II, he even warns for overstretching the civil liberties offered by this age. So, Kant himself realized that at all times acting in accordance with the categorical imperative[2] does not guarantee positive results in actual reality and can lead to personal disadvantage. This raises the problem of why one should stick one's neck out following this moral principle: why not wisely wait until the Kingdom of Ends has come? Owen argues that Kant's answer to this question, having faith and relying on the existence of God, remains ungrounded. He also emphasizes the point that post-Kantian social and political thought about maturity and moral autonomy has been deeply influenced by this problem and that this resulted in different views on rationality (Owen, 1998: 1–14). We could say that while Sloterdijk holds an ambivalent view on the rational sources of Enlightenment, Habermas's view on rationality is marked by consonance.

Owen believes that Habermas's aversion to scholars such as Nietzsche, Weber, and Foucault can be countered by pointing at an alternative tradition of post-Kantian critique that is different from the Hegelian tradition within which Habermas situates himself and which is featured by the perspective of self-actualization, the realization of one's authentic being as an ethical agent. This alternative tradition is characterized by an ambivalent view on rationality and modernity in which reason and power are deeply interrelated. Habermas is aware of all the social problems of our modern age, but warns that one should never overlook the unifying force of rationality, which, in the end, is the only force that can provide reasonable reconciliation and social integration. By doing this, one makes the mistake of "unwitting complicity with the capitulation of rationality to irrationality, of thought to power, of right to might, which characterizes neo-conservative politics." (Owen, 1998: 2) However, Owen positions the historical reflections of Nietzsche, Weber, and Foucault on the possibility of maturity and moral

[2] 'Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature.' (Quoted in Kaptein and Wempe, 2002: 67.)

autonomy in the understanding that modernity both creates and undercuts the possibility of maturity, and that critical awareness and examination of this ambivalence is the only way to confront and transcend this two-faced nature of Enlightenment (Owen, 1998: 2–3). The tension between maturity (achieving moral autonomy) and modern rational development should be thoroughly analyzed, also when this implies that we will have to give up the Habermasian idea of a possible "round and sound" reconciliation in the end. This is the only sound way to deal with the (perhaps everlasting) tension between ideal and reality. The question remains which account of rationality is most suitable for dealing with the issue of integrity in moral communication.

3.2. *Habermas*'s Theory of Communicative Action

Habermas has developed a philosophical and sociological account of the prerequisites for moral communication on a rational basis. An important component of his theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1981) is the distinction between communicative integration at the level of the lifeworld and functional integration as brought about by economic and political subsystems that are steered through money and power. These different levels of social integration are featured by different modes of social action. While social coordination in the lifeworld is structured by processes of communication that aim at reaching agreement about validity claims, social coordination in the semi-independent subsystems of economic markets and bureaucratic administrations rests on the strategic pursuit of private interests. According to Habermas, the ultimate basis of social integration should be sought in communicative action in which the participants "tie their agreement to the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims." (Habermas, 1996: 4) This cannot be done in the economic and political subsystems of capitalist markets and bureaucratic administrations, which are dominated by purposive rational action and the strategic pursuit of personal advantages.

In Habermas's view, moral communication on a reasonable basis is only possible under the conditions of communicative rationality that characterize the lifeworld. These conditions ensure that validity claims about (i) truth (facts), and (ii) normative rightness or truthfulness (integrity, authenticity) can be discussed freely. This lifeworld should not be seen as an association within which individuals band together but as "constituted from a network of communicative actions that branch out through social space and historical time" (Habermas, 1996: 80). However, according to Habermas, the lifeworld has been colonized to a certain extent by the economic and political subsystems. This colonization threatens social integration in modern societies.

Although Habermas provides us with an insightful understanding of the different goals and claims connected with communicative and strategic rationality, his dualism between the lifeworld and economic and political subsystems is problematic. In many cases, it is simply not possible to draw a clear-cut line between a communicative lifeworld and subsystems dominated by strategic action. This can be illustrated by the practice of corporate social responsibility (CSR). The mixture of economic motivations and communicative efforts makes it difficult to tell whether CSR should be judged as strategic, communicative, or otherwise. Habermas's distinction between two different levels of social integration (lifeworld and semi-independent subsystems) seems insufficient to clarify the complex manner in which society, politics, and business are often entangled.

A second objection that could be raised against Habermas concerns his presupposition of free discourse that ideally underlies communicative reason. This leads *inter alia* to the assumption of communicatively acting agents that "are accountable, that is, autonomous and sincere with both themselves and others" (Habermas, 1996: 4). Agents wanting to reach reasonable agreement have to adopt certain idealizations about the autonomy and integrity of other participants. Habermas admits that a real moral discourse often will not meet the requirements of fully free communication, but contends that the underlying idealizations will always function as a powerful source for raising communicative rationality, which, in the end, is the only rational perspective for pushing back the distorting influence of economic and political subsystems.

The presupposition of (relatively) free discourse, which also implies the assumption of integrity, is probably one of the most difficult problems in the work of Habermas. What if integrity is not around or has thrown in the towel? The theory of communicative action tries to solve the tension between ideal and reality by taking the social structures of language itself as starting point. Habermas argues that these structures show that, eventually, the illocutionary binding forces of speech acts are always grounded on voluntary agreement with the utterances and claims of other agents. Therefore, the social practice of language itself can be our guide to maturity and achieving moral autonomy.

3.3. *Habermas versus Sloterdijk: Consonance versus Ambivalence*

Although Habermas is aware of the possibility that actors can also act strategically in a communicative context, he tends to downplay the impact of modern cynicism. Cynical attitudes towards universalizable moral norms, as being something that others may buy into but that need not affect oneself, are depicted and explained as "immature" orientations (Habermas, 1991:

123 ff.). Referring to Kohlberg's stages of moral judgment and Selman's stages of perspective taking, deceiving other people would be an egocentric action orientation, typical of preconventional or conventional orientations that fail to grasp the more mature (postconventional) procedures for justifying norms. In particular, adolescents who are in the transition to the postconventional mode of thought could find themselves trapped in skepticism that blocks "the coordination of the success-oriented attitude of the subject who acts strategically with the attitude oriented toward reaching understanding of the person who continues to communicate through argument." (Habermas, 1991: 185–186). In other words, cynicism would be characteristic for people going through their adolescence in a mistaken way.[3]

However, one could question whether Habermas's classification of cynicism as a nihilistic and immature response to the world does justice to Sloterdijk's treatment of this phenomenon. As explained before, Sloterdijk analyzes the rise of cynicism in modern, postconventional cultures, which in a rational sense seem to have reached maturity. This is precisely the problem: modern cynicism is not something that is caused by a lack of rational or moral development but seems inherent to this development. Many citizens in modern societies are enlightened and have emerged from self-imposed immaturity, but this also seems to be a fruitful ground for becoming cynical. This ambivalence of reason and rationality is exactly the concern of Sloterdijk. It also raises the question of whether Habermas takes the ambivalent effects of rationality serious enough in his discourse ethics, particularly regarding his presupposition of a relatively free discourse in a communicative domain occupied by authentic and reasonable agents. This question will become urgent, if we recall the empirical demarcation problems with respect to his concepts of the lifeworld and political and economic subsystems. If one wishes to have an open eye for the cynical use of hidden agendas in moral communication, it would seem more fruitful to take a hybrid social reality as starting point in which strategic and communicative interactions are inextricably intertwined. In other words, every moral discourse had better be seen as cursed with power-struggles and strategies.

Taking Owen's perspective of the two distinct trajectories of critical thinking within modern thought, Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* can be seen as an insightful contribution to a less naïve philosophy that is aware of concealed power struggles and strategies. However, written as an extensive cultural critique, it does not offer much guidance on how to deal with

[3] Remarkably, a similar line of reasoning can be found in Habermas's review of Sloterdijks *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Allthough Habermas considers this to be a nicely written essay about cynicism and cultural disillusion, he also suggests that the author seems stuck in the youthful experience of lost ideals (Habermas, 1985: 121–122).

integrity on a more practical level of moral communication. In the next sections, I will look at the concept of corporate integrity of Kaptein and Wempe and show how this approach relates to Sloterdijk and Habermas. Their approach to integrity in the field of business ethics is more practical and also interesting because it deals with moral communication in the domain of free market competition. In other words, the corporate integrity model does not only embody a very practical ethics but also puts the idea of integrity to the test in a social environment that is often regarded as unfit or less favorable for moral deliberation.

4. THE CONCEPT OF CORPORATE INTEGRITY

4.1. *Integrity as "Wholeness" and the Corporation as a Moral Entity*

Kaptein and Wempe (2002: 80–86) state that the multi-layered concept of integrity makes it well suited to integrate the main competing ethical approaches (virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and conseqentialist ethics). Inspired by the Latin word *integritas*, which means "wholeness," "completeness," and "purity," they define integrity by the following three characteristics (Kaptein and Wempe, 2002: 90–93):

1. A person of integrity is an autonomous thinker; he or she has a stable set of values and norms, and what he or she promotes is authentic; he or she stands and strives for something and is true to his or her ideals.
2. A state of internal integration; a person of integrity is capable of integrating his or her values, deeds, and their effects in his or her life in a natural way.
3. A state of external integration: a person of integrity is integrated into his or her environment and sensitive to social issues, and willing to account for himself or herself.

Integrity requires that one strives after wholeness or consistency in these three areas. However, the above description of the characteristics also points at a fundamental issue within business ethics: most models of ethics are oriented towards moral choices that have to be made by individuals, but is it also possible to hold an organization responsible in specific situations? In a reductionist model of business ethics, corporate responsibility is reduced to the sum of individual actions; the corporation only bears responsibility to the extent to which individuals within the organization can be traced back as responsible. Therefore, the corporation itself cannot be held responsible for immoral action. Wempe and Kaptein take an opposite point of view (the autonomy model) and consider the corporation as an autonomous moral entity (Kaptein and Wempe, 2002: 145–152). They argue that within each

corporation, an organizational structure and culture exists that can be distinguished from the individuals working within the corporation. The organizational structure concerns the tasks and responsibilities that are formally given to the various positions and the hierarchical relations between these positions. The organizational culture includes the informal structures within an organization: the ideas, expectations, habits, and ways of thinking, feeling, and doing that are specific to the corporation. Because of the identifiable culture and structure underlying corporate practices, it is possible to see a corporation as a moral subject and to judge its actions and intentions in moral terms.

4.2. *Three Dilemmas that Challenge Corporate Integrity*

Corporate integrity relates to the corporate efforts that are localized in the corporate culture and structure and refers to the coherence between corporate efforts, conduct, and consequences (Kaptein and Wempe, 2002: 152–154). Just like a person of integrity, a corporation of integrity has to strive for wholeness or consistency between (1) different values, norms, and ideals that motivate action; (2) words and deeds; and (3) corporate practices and the outside world (societal expectations and demands). However, the pursuit of corporate integrity is hindered or complicated by three dilemmas:

- *The entangled hands dilemma* refers to different roles that employees in a corporation may have to handle. These different roles may be badly coordinated and this can damage the corporation. Examples of the entangled hands dilemma are improper use of corporate assets, personal acceptance of promotional gifts, engaging in business with family members, making private purchases from the corporation's suppliers.
- *The many hands dilemma* is visible in the relations that employees within the corporation maintain in order to fulfill the responsibilities of the corporation. The many hands dilemma points at the problem that the internal specialization and division of labor, which characterize modern corporations, often leads to the dilution of responsibility.
- *The dirty hands dilemma* is visible in the relations maintained with the various stakeholders on behalf of the corporation and refers to the contradiction of interests and expectations. Corporations can be pushed by stakeholders to take part in discussions on moral issues. The interests and demands of less influential secondary stakeholders (for example, specific interest groups, moral claimants in the media) on a corporation may contradict the needs and expectations of primary stakeholder groups (for instance, shareholders, investors, employees). It is also possible that the self-interest and the survival of

> the corporation are at odds with the demands and needs of other involved parties. In the process of balancing the different interests and expectations, it is almost impossible for the corporation to avoid dirty hands.

Within the scope of this article, the many hands dilemma seems especially significant, because this dilemma concerns the constraints of moral communication with external stakeholders and the possibility of conflicting interests and incompatible demands. In the view of Kaptein and Wempe, dirty hands are often inevitable but can be made in a responsible way, if the corporation reflects on its wider social obligations towards stakeholders. A corporation should consider itself as a focal point within a network of *contractual* relations. As an example of a successful answer to a dirty hands dilemma, Kaptein and Wempe discuss the case of Avebe, the Dutch cooperative potato company that was on the brink of closing down in the 1980s (2002: 217–222). For a long time, Avebe seemed not able to find a realistic and acceptable solution for the environmental pollution caused by the wastewater produced by the processing of potatoes. Significant interests were at stake: employment for its members/farmers; work for its employees; nearby residents suffering from stench; return on investments for its creditors; involvement of the local and national government; the natural environment. Eventually, Avebe could be saved through installing a special commission that required the cooperation of every involved party and by taking some painful decisions. The interests and rights of individual stakeholders were (partially) sacrificed in order to secure the rights of the collective stakeholders (collective good, "license to produce"). According to Kaptein and Wempe, the Avebe case illustrates that corporations have to recognize that the individual contracts with stakeholders are always grounded in the framework of a *social* contract constituting the ultimate basis of the corporation's existence.

4.3. *The Corporate Integrity Model*

Kaptein and Wempe connect their approach of corporate integrity with the values of "sustainability" and "sustainable development" (2002: 227ff.). In view of these values, they distinguish five behavioral principles for managing stakeholder relations with integrity: openness, empathy, fairness, solidarity, and reliability (Kaptein and Wempe, 2002: 237 ff.). These behavioral principles, which we will not address in detail here, operate as criteria to assess the corporation's relations and behavior. It is argued that these behavioral principles will be easier to fulfill, if the corporate culture and structure embody ethical qualities that stimulate employees to engage responsibly with the three fundamental dilemmas. Table 2 shows that each of these

qualities – clarity, consistency, achievability, supportability, visibility, discussability, and sanctionability – relates to the three fundamental dilemmas. The seven qualities operate as criteria that can be used to evaluate the corporate culture and structure. For the incorporation of this model, Kaptein and Wempe propose a set of practical working methods that are directed at leadership/management with integrity, business codes of integrity, and the implementation and auditing of integrity.

5. CORPORATE INTEGRITY: A REMEDY AGAINST CYNICISM?

The corporate integrity approach of Kaptein and Wempe can be considered as a valuable and insightful contribution to the question of how to deal with (dilemmas of) conflicting interests, open discussion, fairness, and strategic decision-making in the context of stakeholder dialog. The three fundamental corporate dilemmas (entangled hands, many hands, dirty hands) give a clear picture of the constraints for moral communication in a business environment. By building on ethical traditions, management theory, and (organizational) sociological theory, the theory of corporate integrity offers a practical perspective on moral communication in a hybrid social context in which strategic and communicative interactions are inextricably intertwined. The pitfalls of simple moral judgments and accusations are avoided by paying thorough attention to the interrelations between normative principles and organizational ethical qualities. Ethics is placed in a specific social context and this makes the (lack of) efforts and intentions of moral agents to a certain degree (sociologically) understandable. Furthermore, Kaptein and Wempe show that concentrating on specific dilemmas within a hybrid strategic-communicative context seems fruitful for developing and improving moral debate. This seems more fruitful and realistic than concentrating on the search for (ideal) domains of free discourse within which all kind of social requirements have to be met. Nevertheless, some organizational ethical qualities (discussability, supportability) seem to be imprinted by such ideal Habermasian requirements of communicative rationality.

The theory of corporate integrity makes plausible that moral communication in an economic market context, in spite of certain constraints and dilemmas, is very well possible, but to what extent does it offer a solution for cynical attitudes and the use of hidden agendas? Although Kaptein and Wempe do not explicitly talk about the problem of cynicism in modern societies (they rather speak in terms of (economic) opportunism), the corporate integrity approach offers a practical perspective to deal with (cynical) obstacles and to fulfill corporate social responsibility. Firstly, they tackle (cynical) amoral or functional views, which do not ascribe any moral

Table 2. Ethics qualities of corporations.

Ethics qualities	Organizational dimension		
	Entangled hands – responsibilities with regards to the organization	Many hands – responsibilities within the organization	Dirty hands – responsibilities on behalf of the organization
Clarity	Employees have clarity about how they should treat the assets of the organization	Employees have clarity about their job-related responsibilities	Employees have clarity about what stakeholders expect of them
Consistency	Referents make enough effort to treat the assets of the organization with care	Referents make enough effort to fulfill their functional responsibilities	Referents make enough effort to satisfy stakeholder expectations
Achievability	Expectations on how the corporate assets should be treated are feasible	Employees have the means to fulfill their job-related responsibilities	Created stakeholder expectations can be satisfied
Supportability	The organization fosters support for the careful treatment of the corporate assets	The organization fosters support for an adequate coordination between employees	The organization fosters support for satisfying stakeholder interests
Visibility	Consequences of how the corporate assets are treated are visible	Consequences of how job-related responsibilities are fulfilled are visible	Consequences of stakeholder expectations are satisfied and visible
Discussability	Dilemmas, problems, and criticisms regarding how the corporate assets are treated can be discussed	Dilemmas, problems, and criticisms regarding how job-related responsibilities are fulfilled can be discussed	Dilemmas, problems, and criticisms regarding how stakeholder expectations are satisfied can be discussed
Sanctionability	Staff will be sanctioned, if assets are deliberately mishandled	Staff will be sanctioned, if functional responsibilities are deliberately neglected	Staff will be sanctioned, if stakeholder expectations are deliberately ignored

Source: Kaptein and Wempe (2002: 255).

responsibility to the corporation, by elucidating that also organizations can be considered as moral entities that bear responsibility as a whole. Secondly, they suggest solutions for moral window-dressing by giving practical guidelines to realize corporate ethical qualities that can function as a good antidote against internal organizational cynicism and hypocrisy, thus challenging cynical disbelievers that do not see a way out of these difficulties. The ethical qualities that are described for adequately dealing with the entangled and many hands dilemmas seem to be a good medicine against cynical behavior on the shop floor or employee's indifference. These organizational qualities with respect to corporate integrity can improve moral communication *within* the corporation.

However, Kaptein and Wempe tend to make the concept of corporate integrity an all-purpose remedy for corporate dilemmas. This can be explained by their definition of integrity, which, without doubt, has a consonant ring. Integrity was defined with three characteristics: (1) internal coherence in the motives for what one would like to be and realize, (2) coherence between motives and (the effects) of actions, and (3) coherence in motives, actions, and effects with respect to the social environment. The third characteristic of external integration with the outside world seems to overstretch the concept of integrity. Integrity would also mean fulfilling social roles and tasks that contribute "to the smooth functioning of the whole" (Kaptein and Wempe, 2002: 92), and thus becoming integrated into his or her environment. The question arises of whether a quintessential trait of integrity is not exactly the opposite, to wit, not integrating with the outside world but remaining true to what one sincerely beliefs in spite of external social pressure. Kaptein and Wempe (2002: 92) acknowledge that "integrity also implies independence and may sometimes even require disobedience and disloyalty," but do not give a clear answer about how this idea of independence relates to the demand of flexibility and adjustment with respect to the different stakeholder interests. The response that integrity in this context means "acting in accordance with the *legitimate* expectations of those around us" (Kaptein and Wempe, 2002: 92) only seems to shift the problem. What are legitimate expectations and who defines them?

Although Kaptein and Wempe take a hybrid social context as starting point in their corporate integrity approach and do not feel committed to Habermas's basic distinction between two different levels of social integration (lifeworld versus economic and political subsystems), they do seem to share with Habermas a consonant view on moral communication and rationality. Above all things, integrity is coherence. In the end, the development of moral communication and integrity should lead to the realization of one's own authenticity as an ethical agent who is peacefully integrated with his or her environment. However, taking a more ambivalent view on

this matter, one could imagine that the tension between ideal and reality could also lead to inner conflicts. For instance, the authentic feeling that one will always be trapped in a power-propelled world, if one tries to do the reasonable right thing. Recalling Sloterdijk's description of modern cynicism as a tacit and ubiquitous phenomenon, an important cause of dirty hands dilemmas might be cynical or opportunistic behavior of stakeholders or other economic rivals. These are dilemmas that might only be solved by the cynical sacrifice of less powerful parties. Perhaps the truth is that a corporation of great integrity faces unsolvable dirty hands dilemmas exactly because of its great integrity. One can become painfully aware that in reality honesty and helplessness are closely connected. Integrity is of great value but can also lead to scars on the (personal or organizational) soul that do not feel "round and sound" at all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the four anonymous reviewers for their comments on a previous version of this article. These comments challenged me in a positive way to improve my line of argument.

REFERENCES

Beck, U., A Giddens, and S. Lash (2000), *Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Calhoun, C. (1995), "Standing for Something." *The Journal of Philosophy*, 92 (5), pp. 235–260.

Cox, D., M. La Caze, and M. Levine (2005), *Integrity* http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/integrity (consulted: 4 September 2006).

de Bakker, E., *De Cynische Verkleuring van Legitimiteit en Acceptatie (The Cynical Discoloration of Legitimacy and Acceptance)* (Dissertation UvA Amsterdam). (Aksant, Amsterdam, 2001).

Goldfarb, J. C. (1991), *The Cynical Society The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.

Habermas, J. (1981), *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns (The Theory of Communicative Action)*, Volume 2 (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main).

Habermas, J. (1985), "Zwischen Heine und Heidegger. Ein Renegat der subjektphilosophie?" in *Die Neue Unübersichtlichkeit. Kleine Politische Schriften V* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main), pp. 121–125.

Habermas, J. (1991), *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Cambridge, Massuchusetts: MIT Press.

Habermas, J. (1996), *Between Facts and Norms. Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (translated by W. Rehg) (MIT Press, Massachusetts).

Kaptein, M. and J. Wempe (2002), *The Balanced Company. A Theory of Corporate Integrity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McFall, L. (1987), "Integrity." *Ethics*, 98 (1), pp. 5–20.
Owen, D. (1998), *Maturity and Modernity Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault and the Ambivalence of Reason*, London: Routledge.
Sloterdijk, P. (1983), *Kritik der Zynischen Vernunft (Critique of Cynical Reason)*, Volume 2 (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main).
Wempe, J. (1998), *Market and Morality. Business Ethics and the Dirty and Many Hands Dilemma* (dissertation Rotterdam, Eburon).

Wageningingen UR
LEI (Agricultural Economics Research Institute)
Public Issues Division
P.O. Box 29703
2502 LS, The Hague
The Netherlands
E-mail: erik.debakker@wur.nl