
The Principles Approach is a Big Tent Approach

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A RESPONSE TO Gregory Wolcott (2014), “Business Ethics and Ideals,” *Bus Ethics J Rev* 2(6): 36–41, <http://doi.org/10.12747/bejr2014.02.06>

ABSTRACT

In his Commentary on my Principles Approach, Gregory Wolcott (2014) worries that the approach leaves no room for ethical theory and decries the tendency of business school faculty to derive ethical conclusions from legal standards. However, the Principles Approach is, by design, open to supplementation by ethical theory and has the virtue of providing a basis for making ethical assessments of legal standards.

I AM GRATIFIED that Professor Gregory Wolcott (2014) found my article, “Teaching Business Ethics: The Principles Approach” (Hasnas 2013), worthy of comment in *Business Ethics Journal Review* and grateful to him for helping publicize its thesis. The editors of the Journal have been kind enough to offer me an opportunity to respond that I will use to offer a few brief remarks.

Professor Wolcott accurately notes that the Principles Approach is, by design, open to supplementation. The Approach supplies only a core set of “starter principles” that have the virtue of being derived from the activity of doing business in a market—something to which

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all business students have voluntarily committed themselves regardless of religious, cultural, or national background. These principles can and should be supplemented by whatever additional principles or theoretical approaches individual professors believe appropriate. Because such additional principles – which are not teleologically derived from the activity of doing business in a market – often must be grounded in ethical theory, I hope my article will not be read as recommending the elimination of such theory from business ethics courses.

The Principles Approach is offered as a way of getting a business ethics course off the ground without having to introduce highly abstract ethical theory. Its greatest value will be to the many business ethics professors who do not have formal philosophical training for whom it supplies a genuine normative grounding for their course. However, I hope it is valuable to the philosophically trained professor as well who can use it to get a basic set of ethical principles established before launching into whatever normative theory he or she needs to ground supplementary principles.

Professor Wolcott is concerned that business ethics courses not devolve into courses on legal compliance. I would suggest that the Principles Approach is the cure for his concern. The Principles Approach is a way out of reliance on the law as a source of normative prescriptions, and has the virtue of providing standards by which students and professors can evaluate the ethical quality of the law itself.

Professor Wolcott favors a virtue ethics approach to teaching business ethics. If he is able to teach a course effectively from such a perspective, I think that is wonderful, and he should surely proceed to do so. There are many master teachers who can both explain abstract ethical theory to business students and show them how to apply it to resolve the practical issues that arise in the business environment. But for the rest of us, I offer the Principles Approach.

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Hasnas responds to Wolcott

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