

75. Corporeal ethics

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Outline of the topic

This entry introduces corporeal ethics as a politically productive way of thinking about ethics and considers its implications for innovation. Corporeal ethics constitutes a new and vital approach to the ethics of organization that attends to how ethics is grounded in an embodied experience that occurs prior to rational calculation and responds openly and generously to the needs of others through the interpersonal and collective movement of bodies. In organizations, such ethics manifests in social relations that resist power's tendency to dominate and emboldens the possibility of joyous encounters between people. Corporeal ethics is the basis for responding to the injustice of inequality through the organization of ethics in the context of political action. It implies that the fundamental act of caring for other people through material and embodied relations can animate human life. From such animation, ethics becomes translated into politics that demands that we care for each other more and act on it in the pursuit of justice. This politics can arise through activism, assembly, and democratic participation. It can also occur in workplaces and organizations as people strive together for better lives and struggle against oppression, inequality, and injustice.

Corporeal ethics can inform innovation by considering the social, relational, and interpersonal dimensions of the innovation process and their implications for well-being and justice. With corporeal ethics, innovation is cast as an interhuman political activity that can produce more or less fair effects and outcomes, highlighting the importance of registering and accounting for how both the ethical and the political is imbued in innovation. Innovation is also relevant to corporeal ethics in that the political responses to injustice themselves require innovation to create real action that drives change towards justice. Such ethics are not pre-given but arise through creative and innovative responses.

Conceptual overview and discussion

To consider ethics as corporeal attests to the idea that the original impulse that moves us to act for the benefit of others without prior or

primary consideration of ourselves arises as an affective and embodied feeling. The desire for such action does not result from rational calculation, moral deliberation or ethical reasoning. It is a more fundamental and affirmative response to other people's needs. Corporeal ethics begins pre-reflectively and before one's ego. This ethics can manifest in productive actions such as caring for, protecting, and helping others. It can also inform actions that preserve one's well-being and ability to act for others, for example walking away from destructive relationships or disengaging people whose actions result in hurt or harm.

Within the organization studies literature, studies of corporeal ethics have variously addressed topics such as gender and organization, difference and inclusion, women's embodied labour, and entrepreneurial subjectivity. These projects share a political sensibility that engages with the material effects of embodied and affective experience at work. This sensibility enables a more engaged, compassionate, resistant, and pluralistic ethics that counters strong organizational tendencies towards control, homogeneity, discrimination, and domination. Corporeal ethics does not propose a universal solution or submit to a desire for one. In its place, there are possibilities for an ethics that is social, relational, and embedded in its local contexts and situational particularities. Moreover, this concern with the ethics of the body engages with materiality, the fleshy substance of the human body, as well as its relation to the material of the world and of non-human bodies. As such, corporeal ethics focuses on the particularity of embodiment that occurs before any consideration of a codifiable reason-based ethics or general principles.

Rather than being universal, corporeal ethics is the domain of the embodied human activity suffused by affect, intimacy, and the non-rational. That, by Western standards, these categories are culturally feminine is part and parcel of their neglect in the masculine, gendered organization. Corporeal ethics offers an alternative to the commonly rationalized ethics that we find dominant in both the theory and practice of organizations. Corporeal ethics turns our attention to how people's conduct and interaction in organizations might be ethically informed in the context of, and in resistance to, the masculine rationality of dominating organizational

power relations in which they find themselves. This includes power relations that would seek to render ethics itself in a rational-masculine form.

Application

To date there has not been any research directly focused on the connections between innovation and corporeal ethics. Nevertheless, research on corporeal ethics in organizations yields important insights into understanding the ethics of innovation. Karen Dale and Yvonne Latham have developed corporeal ethics in relation to research in an organization that supports the social integration of people with disabilities. They draw special attention to embodiment as it relates to race, sex, physical ability, and age, as well as how forms of difference that are outside of the organizational norm become common sources of oppression and discrimination. The corporeal ethics that Dale and Latham identify is rooted in a responsibility to overcome inequalities written on the body by organizations themselves. The uptake of this ethics is political, Dale and Latham argue, in that it contests and disturbs organizations in actual encounters between people and their (different) bodies. The relation between different bodies is similarly evident in the innovation process as people work together to develop new ideas for material outcomes. This suggests that innovation can too create embodied forms of oppression in way that are not always considered by those involved.

Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Melissa Tyler addresses corporeal ethics as it relates to diversity and inclusion in organizations. Tyler draws attention to how inclusion can be read as a 'normative regime' that members of organizations are compelled to conform to for diversity and difference to be incorporated organizationally. Difference is thus codified and managed, with some forms of difference recognized and others marginalized, in effect limiting the necessary forms of difference required for innovation. Tyler's position is that ethical relationships are based on material interconnection and the embodied vulnerability this entails. This relational conception of ethics jars with approaches to inclusion premised on the codification of difference and the attendant power relations they produce. According to Tyler, inclusion must be ethically reimaged to move beyond

organizational regulation and towards a more embodied relational practice.

Care needs to be taken not to imagine that corporeal ethics in organization occurs only in individual interactions but can also be collective in spirit. Sheena Vachhani and Alison Pullen clarify that corporeal ethics is very much a matter of embodied solidarity. As they aver, ethical resistance to sexism in organizations is not just in response to personal experiences of sexism and includes collective resistance that organizes through solidarity. Through such solidarity, embodied compassion and care for others develop into a social sensibility that provides a means to mobilize resistance against sexism. Given existing debates over sexism in innovation, Vachhani and Pullen's work provides a valuable guide to how that sexism can be resisted and overcome.

Critical summary

Corporeal ethics reflects a celebration of difference and being positively moved by intercorporeal relations with others. This is not an ethics that guarantees righteousness or appeases ethical anxiety but rather one that embraces human interaction in all its ambiguity and complexity. Corporeal ethics in organizations can be thought of as a horizon that calls one towards it, yet at which one never fully arrives. It is embarking on such a perilous but necessary journey that is required if ethics is to remain alive in the lives of people who encounter each other in organizations.

Corporeal ethics destabilize how organizations can reproduce practices that negate differences and result in oppression, discrimination, and inequality. In allowing for the importance of corporeal ethics for organizations, forms of ethically grounded resistance and critique can challenge self-interested organizational power and privilege. The contribution of the corporeal approach emerges from ethics in organizations that are collective, other-focused, and generous. This ethics is fundamentally based in embodied affect, yet practically materialized in ethico-political acts of positive resistance and revitalization.

Studies of corporeal ethics point to how the ethical can be conceived of and practiced in innovation. On the one hand, innovation that occurs in organizations can be expected to face the same ethical problems and dilemmas as in any other form of organizational

activity such that corporeal ethics can be present. On the other hand, innovation itself can be imagined as a means through which to respond to the demands of corporeal ethics, for example innovating to deal with the forms of oppression, discrimination, and inequality that corporeal ethics surfaces.

Further readings

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