

## **Genealogies of Corporate Morality: Approaching Business Ethics through Intellectual History**

Call for Abstracts, deadline – 1<sup>st</sup> November 2024 | Workshop – 25<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> June 2025

University of St Andrews Business School, Scotland, UK

Co-organised with the [Corporate Subjects: An Intellectual History of the Corporation](#) project, Copenhagen Business School, funded by the Carlsberg-Foundation

Where did ideas about corporate morality come from, and why does it matter? Business ethics, a field which has been expanding in Western scholarship since the 1970s, tends to prioritise a philosophical rather than a historical reading of past ethical thought. Although the works of ‘historical figures’ (Werhane et al, 2017) in philosophy have enriched modern analyses of corporate ethics, they tend to be read *instrumentally* – for their usefulness in addressing contemporary ethical questions – rather than *historically*, with the primary aim of reconstructing the past intellectual contexts to which these philosophers responded (Skinner, 2002; Hühn, 2018). Nonetheless, ethical responses to the modern corporation are increasingly informed by emerging research on the corporation’s intellectual history (e.g., Ciepley, 2023; Claassen, 2021; Gindis, 2020a; Harris, 2020; Ireland, 1999; Jessen, 2012; Logan, 2019; Mansell, 2024; Mansell and Sison, 2020; Phillips et al, 2020; Stern, 2023). Situating the history of corporations’ behaviour, purpose, rights and responsibilities in their intellectual contexts can reveal the ethical, economic, political and legal assumptions underpinning contemporary business ethics. This historical turn enables us to explore the frameworks and limitations of a field of scholarship that still privileges certain canons and contexts, often foregrounded in Western ideas.

Globally diverse genealogies of corporate morality can yield fresh approaches to moral and political questions today, including the public or private role of business (Ciepley, 2013), the changing framework of choices and constraints that business corporations face (Djelic and Etchanchu, 2017), and the interplay between corporate morality and other ethical and political ideas (Runciman, 1997; Fitzmaurice, 2022). For example, what is the history of thought about corporations’ environmental responsibilities (Pollman, 2024), businesses’ relationship to work and workers (Black, 2003) including the gender divisions that characterise work, and corporations’ implication in colonialism, primitive accumulation, imperial extraction, and counter-revolution (Stern, 2011; Wani, 2022)? How has intellectual debate shaped corporate law (Barkan, 2013; Gindis, 2020b; Kershaw, 2018), and what has been the influence of business forms on constitutional and political thought (Ciepley, 2017; Kubala, 2024)? Should we consider ideas about modern corporations as having an early modern, medieval, or even ancient genealogy (Duff, 1938; Kantorowicz, 1957; Tierney, 1955; Turner, 2016)? How should we critique universal histories of corporations and study non-western formations of corporate subjects (Birla, 2009)? Finally, why and how should ‘canonical’ political and economic thinkers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Smith, Kant, Marx, Nietzsche and Rawls, be approached by philosophers in business ethics (Dierksmeier, 2013; Hühn and Dierksmeier, 2016; Mejia,

2022; Mansell, 2013; Melé, 2016; Singer, 2015; Sison and Fontrodona, 2012; Smith and Dubbink, 2011; Worden, 2009)?

For this workshop, we invite contributions that think historically about the question of corporate morality. We do not expect contributors to agree on the method of historical work in business ethics; instead, we invite a range of theoretical perspectives on the use of history, as well as detailed cases where histories of ideas about corporations are demonstrated, critiqued, and analysed.

We would welcome contributions that explore:

- Global and non-Western histories of corporate morality and personhood
- The relevance to business ethics of 'historical figures' in philosophy
- Intellectual histories of corporate environmental responsibility
- Intellectual histories of corporate governance and law
- Intellectual histories of corporations' relationship to workers, work, gender and working time
- The influence of corporate ethics on constitutional and political ideas
- The role of corporations in the process of state-formation and political sovereignty
- The changing subjectivity and status of corporate persons
- The role of companies and corporations in colonial enterprise and resistance
- Changing ideas about corporate control of information and technology

The workshop will take place 25<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> June 2025 at St Andrews Business School, Scotland, UK. Participants will present pre-circulated papers, which can be considered for inclusion in a planned special issue in 2026. Participation in the workshop does not guarantee participation in the publication.

Participants' costs related to accommodation will be covered.

For inquiries, questions or submission of abstracts, please contact Sam Mansell ([sfm5@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:sfm5@st-andrews.ac.uk)), Cailean Gallagher ([cq257@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:cq257@st-andrews.ac.uk)) or Mathias Hein Jessen ([mhj.bhl@cbs.dk](mailto:mhj.bhl@cbs.dk)). The workshop will be based on the presentation of shorter draft papers.

Deadline for abstracts (300-500 words): 1<sup>st</sup> November 2024.

Deadline for draft papers (5000 words): 1<sup>st</sup> June 2025 (to be circulated among the participants).

## References

Barkan, J. 2013. *Corporate Sovereignty: Law and Government under Capitalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Black, A. 2003. *Guild & State: European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present*. London: Transaction Publishers.
- Birla, R. 2009. *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture and Market Governance in Late Colonial India*. Duke University Press.
- Ciepley, D. 2013. Beyond public and private: Toward a political theory of the corporation. *American Political Science Review*, 107(1): 139-158.
- Ciepley, 2017. Is the U.S. Government a Corporation? The Corporate Origins of Modern Constitutionalism. *American Political Science Review*, 111(2): 418-435.
- Ciepley, D. 2023. Democracy and the Corporation: The Long View. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 26: 489-517.
- Claassen, R. 2021. Hobbes Meets the Modern Business Corporation. *Polity*, 53(1): 101-131.
- Dierksmeier, C. 2013. Kant on Virtue. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 113: 597-609.
- Djelic, M. and Etchanchu, H. 2017. Contextualizing corporate political responsibilities: Neoliberal CSR in historical perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 142: 641-661.
- Duff, P. 1938. *Personality in Roman Private Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fitzmaurice, A. 2022. The early modern corporation as nursery of democratic thought: the case of the Virginia Company and Thomas Hobbes. *History of European Ideas*, 48(4): 309-334.
- Gindis, D. 2020a. Conceptualizing the business corporation: insights from history. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 16(5): 569-577.
- Gindis, D. 2020b. Ernst Freund as Precursor of the Rational Study of Corporate Law. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 16(5): 597-621.
- Harris, R. 2020. A new understanding of the history of limited liability: an invitation for theoretical reframing. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 16(5): 643-664.
- Hühn, M. and Dierksmeier, C. 2016. Will the Real A.Smith Please Stand Up! *Journal of Business Ethics*, 136: 119-132.
- Hühn, M. 2018. Adam Smith: 18th century sentimentalist or 20th century rationalist? *Business Ethics Journal Review*. 3(4): 22-27.
- Ireland, P. 1999. Company Law and the Myth of Shareholder Ownership. *The Modern Law Review*, 62(1): 32-57.
- Jessen, M. 2012. The State of the Company: Corporations, Colonies and Companies in Leviathan. *Journal of Intellectual History and Political Thought*, 1(1): 56-85.
- Kantorowicz, E. 1957. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*. Chichester: Princeton University Press.
- Kershaw, D. 2018. *The Foundations of Anglo-American Corporate Fiduciary Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kubala, K. 2024. Hobbes and the Perpetual Person of the State. *History of Political Thought*, 45(1): 61-86.
- Logan, N. 2019. Corporate personhood and the corporate responsibility to race. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 154: 977-988.
- Mansell, S. 2013. *Capitalism, Corporations and the Social Contract: A Critique of Stakeholder Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Mansell, S. and Sison, A. 2020. Medieval corporations, membership and the common good: Rethinking the critique of shareholder primacy. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 16(5): 579-595.
- Mansell, S. 2024 (forthcoming). Who speaks for the corporation? A Hobbesian theory of managerial authority and shareholder responsibility. *Business Ethics Quarterly*.
- Mejia, S. 2022. Socratic Ignorance and Business Ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 175: 537–553.
- Melé, D. 2016. Re-thinking Capitalism: What We can Learn from Scholasticism? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 133: 292-304.
- Phillips, R., Schrempf-Stirling, J. and Stutz, C. 2020. The Past, History, and Corporate Social Responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 166: 203-213.
- Pollmann, E. 2024 (forthcoming). The Making and Meaning of ESG. *Harvard Business Law Review*.
- Runciman, D. 1997. *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Skinner, Q. 2002. *Visions of Politics: Volume I: Regarding Method*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Singer, A. 2015. There Is No Rawlsian Theory of Corporate Governance. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 25(1): 65-92.
- Sison, A. and Fontrodona, J. 2012. The Common Good of the Firm in the Aristotelian-Thomistic Tradition. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 22(2): 211-246.
- Smith, J. and Dubbink, W. 2011. Understanding the Role of Moral Principles in Business Ethics: A Kantian Perspective. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 21(2): 205-231.
- Stern, P. 2011. *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Stern, P. 2023. *Empire, Incorporated: The Corporations That Built British Colonialism*. Harvard University Press.
- Tierney, B. 1955. *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory: The Contribution of the Medieval Canonists from Gratian to the Great Schism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turner, H. 2016. *The Corporate Commonwealth: Pluralism and Political Fictions in England, 1516-1651*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Wani, K. 2022. Trustees of the nation? Business, philanthropy and changing modes of legitimacy in colonial and postcolonial western India. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 59(1): 5-36.
- Werhane, P., Freeman, R. and Dmytriyev, S. 2017. The Use of Historical Figures as a Research Approach. In Werhane, P., Freeman, R. and Dmytriyev, S. (eds.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Research Approaches to Business Ethics and Corporate Responsibility*. Cambridge University Press. Pp. 12-24.
- Worden, S. 2009. A Genealogy of Business Ethics: A Nietzschean Perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84: 427-456.