



REVIEW ARTICLE

The conscientious HR manager and the Rubik's Cube

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The conscientious
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Abstract

Purpose – By examining the literature on the ethical dilemmas of H/RM practitioners, the paper aims to put an “H” in H/RM.

Design/methodology/approach – Analysing the significant contribution which H/RM scholars have made in studying the ethical dilemmas of H/RM practitioners, the paper builds a view of an H/RM practitioner as a “conscientious HR manager” loosely connected to an ethical dilemma, a “Rubik’s Cube”. Using these linguistic devices to simplify others scholarly work, the paper introduces a complex autopoietic system to provide a more “connected knowing” of ethical dilemmas and the “H” in H/RM.

Findings – Generalising from this analysis, the paper connects a social sub-system (H/RM) with a living human system.

Research limitations/implications – Naturalistic “grounds” for launching a normative critique of H/RM that celebrates humans as social and biological animals are provisionally outlined.

Originality/value – The paper adapts Capra’s complex autopoietic system to present a normative critique of H/RM from the Darwinian left.

Keywords Ethics, Human resource management research, Human biology, Philosophical concepts

Paper type Literature review

[...]for the first time since life emerged from the primeval soup, there are beings who understand how they came to be what they are, and this may in the future be “the perquisite for a new kind of freedom” (Singer, 1999, p. 63).

Contemporary interest in the morality of human resource management (H/RM) is marked by the publication of two books in 2007 that joins ethics and the humanity of practitioners. Common to the contributions in “Ethics and Employment” is an intention of addressing recent and long standing debates on ethics and H/RM (Pinnington *et al.*, 2007). “Searching for the human in H/RM”, highlighting the missing human in HR over the last 20 years in which the “thick nature of human relations is reduced to a thin veneer” (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007, p. 2), argues for a fresh look at the notion of human and human relations. By uniting “human” with “ethics” H/RM scholars have opened an “ethical black box” (Kupperman, 1991, p. 101) not reliant on sociology to understand “H/RM” and the ethical dilemmas of its practitioners.

This paper sets out to put a “human” in H/RM. Through the rare work of H/RM scholars who, by examining the experiences of practitioners have not ignored the workers (Guest, 2007, p. 53), the writer constructs a social role, “conscientious HR manager”, and a social puzzle, “Rubik’s Cube”. Arguing this H/RM understanding of ethical dilemmas disconnects practitioners from their “humanity”, an alternative view



from outside H/RM is offered that centres the “humanity” of practitioners. Defining ethical dilemmas as experiences of complex human systems, the paper reconnects ethical dilemmas to the “humanity” of practitioners and, in doing so, puts an “H” in HRM that potentially offers a naturalistic critique of H/RM which, declaring prejudices, is from the Darwinian left (Singer, 1999). H/RM practitioners are by their human nature social animals that, in delivering and practicing H/RM, are disciplined and self-disciplined by its discourse (Townley, 1994) and, in this moral discourse, they experience ethical dilemmas. Inside or outside H/RM, humans are discursive embodied subjects; they are social and biological animals who conform, and resist this discourse (Cooper and Blair, 2002). Connecting social science to biology and moral philosophy, an ethical dilemma is described as the cognitive experience of a “human” resource practitioner and “human” as a dynamic complex autopoietic system.

Human resource practitioners and their ethical dilemmas

Ethics describes, interprets and explains social phenomena with the intention of establishing the human in the natural world, thereby, sensitising humanity to its animal nature. Ethics is about our human nature, good and bad, and the process by which we create meaning in our lives. It is a life process, a way of thinking that refers to the “the way you are, the way you are made” (Adorno, 2001, p. 10). Human life evolves and humans change in two different ways: agonal and orthogonal (Maturana and Poerksen, 2004, p. 19). Referred to as first order and second order changes (Mahoney, 2007, p. 253) agonal experiences are confirming because the system, as a totality, remains in the same directional relational flow as it was before the experience. Agonal changes are small gradual refinements made between “what is” and “what ought to be” as humans learn, change and develop in their lives. Humans change as they habitually experience the tensions, quandaries, discomforts, frustrations, confusions, ambiguities, uncertainties in their lives (Foote, 2001). Orthogonal experiences are second order changes and non-confirming because changes to the system are novel to the system, as a whole, and the system undergoes a shift in its directional flow as a totality. Orthogonal experiences make humans conscious of life and, because they offer up the conscious possibility of different ways of living, life forms, they create anxiety. Potentially transformative, they destabilise, jolt, the totality of a system by interrupting and re-orientating its flow. Orthogonal experiences are foundational to the organisation of particular ways of living.

Ethical dilemmas are complex orthogonal experiences that take place at the “threshold of stability”, at the “edge of chaos” (Capra, 2003, p. 98; Cooper, 2005, p. 38) and they have a number of features. They are irresolvable conflicts because (Sinnot-Armstrong, 1988; Hursthouse, 1999, pp. 43-87; Mothersill, 1996) none of the conflicting moral or ethical requirements overrides another. Action A is obligatory, action B is obligatory and, although it is humanly possible to do either A or B, it is not possible to do both A and B. Ethical dilemmas therefore involve normative conflicts, choice, demand action and leave remainders of normative obligations not met. Ethical dilemmas are irresolvable “ill-structured” (Swanton, 2003, p. 258) “divergent problems” (Schumacher, 1977, p. 121) of “dynamic complexity” (Chia, 2006) that are “bifurcation points” (Capra, 2003, p. 12) of consciousness in human lives. Every dilemma is a novel conscious experience and, without routine, it cannot be prescribed for, codified, or resolved. Ill-structured, ethical dilemmas emerge as humans respond to their

experiences and process these experiences narratively, imaginatively and creatively. Divergent problems are not problems that have been solved or are awaiting resolution. Dilemmas are irresolvable problems with fundamental dialectical oppositions between, for example, growth and decay, freedom and order, love and hate that are an inevitable and continuous part of human life. Irresolvable, dilemmas leave parts “unsolved”; they leave “remainders”. It is impossible to do A and B. Unlike taxonomic complexity that temporally and spatially classifies, locates, isolates and fixes, dynamic complexity associates ethical dilemmas with a living reality perpetually becoming, renewing itself and perishing. Dynamic complexity also recognises the interpretative indivisible systemic nature of our living experience, “*in-one-another-ness*” (Chia, 2006, italics in original) of being and becoming human.

Capra (1996, 2003, 2005) develops a complex system integrating biological, social and cognitive dimensions of human life that when linked with a “metaphysical biology” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. x), presents humans as living, complex, interrelated, interdependent and ethical animals. In this complex relationship of hidden connections ethical dilemmas cannot be fixed and fitted into concepts, episodes, identities, roles, categories or types. “Human” is a moving concept (Sayer, 2007, p. 188) because humans are evolving material animals processing different forms of living through the normative meanings that emerge and are made as humans experience normative forces, the “oughts” of living, they can never fully know (Capra, 2003; Cooper, 2005). This systemic process of human production, ethics, is autopoietic (Capra, 1996, p. 30; Maturana and Varela, 1998, p. 47), and an autopoietic system tells us (Cooper, 2006) that human life is a series of self-constituting acts of creative division, bifurcations, where humans experience and narrate fields of forces as they interact in the web of life. Like *ch'i* in Chinese philosophy (Capra, 1983, p. 34), the “oughts” of living are *meaning-based* and these consensual and conflicting transformative forces, productive and repressive of our human identities and agency (Simon and Oakes, 2006, p. 130 emphasis in original), push and pull us towards and away from being and becoming “human”.

The conscientious HR manager and the Rubik’s Cube

Studies of HR practitioners’ ethical dilemmas limit understanding humans as complex living systems. Examining the anxieties of practitioners these studies humanise “H/RM” and, paradoxically dehumanise it by projecting an image of an HR practitioner as an inanimate “conscientious HR manager” and their complex living dilemmas, as a “Rubik’s Cube”. Morally conscientious HR managers have social roles to play in HR; they hold an intellectual puzzle at a distance and, in playing their functional roles, they are expected to solve the managerial puzzle of morally managing others. Vertically and horizontally integrating “different fits”, internal organisational strategic environmental and personal (Pauwee and Boselie, 2005, p. 70), the “conscientious HR manager” pieces together “Rubik’s Cube”.

Human movement is arrested. Practitioners are fitted and fixed in a variety of different social categories and sophisticated social techniques are deployed to loosely attach dilemmas to social roles. Social moralities and “morally managing” dilemmas, implicitly and explicitly, are given priority over ethics and the humanity of the practitioner. The dilemma is one of an H/RM “professional” (Wiley, 2000; Woodall, 1996; Danley *et al.*, 1996) in which virtues have hierarchies of importance according to

their contribution to job performance (Ardagh and Macklin, 1998). Alternatively, practitioners and their dilemmas are HR roles to be placed along a continuum between the needs of the business and the needs of employees (Foote and Robinson, 1999), or, to be viewed in terms of how HR roles are impacted by organisational and charitable values (Foote, 2001). Functional comparisons between accountants and HR specialists (Fisher, 2001) are made and hierarchies created by laddering techniques (Foote and Lamb, 2002). Wooten (2001, p. 165) categorizes dilemmas based on a core theme of role multiplicity that comprises role sending and role receiving and with this taxonomy of “dynamic, complex and difficult to conceptualize” dilemmas he immobilises these HR dilemmas into his taxonomy of five role episodes. To help managers become “morally decent” Macklin, 2007, p. 275 provides an extensive “*catalogue*” of potential guidelines for HR managers to refer to when they feel the need for moral supports and, if dilemmas, are not resolvable by the catalogue then society or HR communities will help HR practitioners to draw a “line in the sand”. Petrick (2000) expects H/RM managers to exercise their judgment integrity by creating a balance between the person and the economic system. Ardagh and Macklin (1997, p. 138), view the HR manager as a decision maker who can resolve their ethical dilemmas procedurally, a procedure that culminates in “immovable necessary constraints on individual self-interest at family, clan, political, organisational or semi-organisational levels” because it is social and organisational policy that, ideally, produces the common good for all the community. Fisher (2005), using the logician’s semiotic square analysis, provides a sophisticated matrix of 12 HRD roles and four ethical stances so the ethical limitations of HRD can be mapped. Recognising previous ethical HRD roles have been defined functionally and HRD choices are complex involving “ethical trade offs”, he argues that his conceptual framework of an “epistemology of values” captures the ethical dilemmas of HR practitioners. With an epistemology of values central, his matrix models what he accepts is an axiological ethics. It focuses on values, roles and practices, not the narrative humanity of the practitioner and complex human systems, consequently Fisher (2005, p. 247) accepts that the ethics to which he refers is not a synonym of good and, therefore, implicitly excludes the human quest for individual, social and species’ goods (Hursthouse, 1999).

Explicitly Watson (2007), relying on years of personal research rather than empirical research directed specifically at the ethical dilemmas of HR practitioners, argues from, and for, a sociological perspective. “Sociological theorising” he deploys at two levels: the level of ethics in human societies generally and the level of the institution of HR management in industrial capitalist societies. With this theorising he “cuts through” much of the standard discussion” of “what it is to be ethical” (p. 224) and concludes that ethical considerations in HR work are ambiguous, contradictory and muddled. He suggests HR managers have limited scope to make ethical interventions, but they can throw into the mix of decision-making criteria some personal ethical considerations. To further understand these limitations a “theory of HR management” is needed because we cannot expect HR managers to introduce ethical criteria in their own terms into decision-making (p. 228 italics in original). He acknowledges that HR managers have to deal with ethical and moral matters every day of their lives but their task is to deal with ethical problems, not as ethical issues in their own right, but in organisational terms. The logic of managerial work is to keep the organisational show on the road, not to bring ethical considerations they think are

important, as private citizens or members of professional bodies, into their managerial work. Managers are agents of the organisations that employ them. It is therefore “vital” to realize that the basic systems and institutions of HR formally rule out the right to introduce into HR decision-making and actions ethical criteria which are not consistent with corporate priorities. He qualifies his “basic case” by acknowledging that ethical considerations are relevant from beginning to end in doing HR work, and that there are possible but limited spaces for HR managers to “bring to bear” ethical considerations that were personally important to them (p. 235). The ethicality of employment practices and the ethicality of HR managers must come from argument and debate within democratic societies, and not from within HR itself. For Watson, “matters of morality, ethics and the pursuit of the good life are too important to leave to HR managers” (p. 236).

In cutting through the question of the meaning of ethics and stressing “sociological theorising”, Watson assumes ethics can be understood at the social and institutional level and managers can bring ethics into their lives at work; they introduce ethics into decision-making or bring them to bear in HR work. Practitioners can choose when to be human and ethical and select those times when it is appropriate to introduce their humanity and their ethics, a living process, into their work. Watson ends with the view that it is from outside HR and from within social debates about democracy, that the ethics of HR work can be best understood. It is therefore with a theory of HR management developed through “sociological theorising” that the ethics of HR practitioners can be understood. He forecloses understanding ethics with a complex living system, prevents understanding management philosophically, confuses social and institutional moralities with ethics, abstracts ethics from its contextual and particular meanings and fails to consider that practitioners are, by their human nature, animals.

Simply, Watson (2007) dehumanizes practitioners, detaches them from their ethics, and simplifies the complexity of their dilemmas. He assumes ethics is the introduction and application of external sociological principles whose operation has little effect on the narratives of practitioners. Because he has never witnessed HR practitioners express their ethics in straightforward ethical terms, (p. 224 emphasis in original) and without reference to corporate issues he suggests ethics can be captured in straightforward language and isolated from the social and material relations in which it is expressed and enacted. Lost in his search for an ethical theory of HR management, is the field of latent relations in which HR practitioners experience the ethical complexity of ethical dilemmas. Therefore, when Watson reports on an HR manager’s desire to be ethical as a Christian, he openly acknowledges this is an important part of the manager’s personal identity but this super-natural meaning has to give way to Watson’s main point about social structure and the economic-political limitations upon managerial choice (p. 232). The primordial human questing for life’s meaning is stopped; the animate becomes inanimate as secular and non-secular ethics is made social. Dominated by this sociology is the “inward meaningfulness of work” (Overell, 2008) to this Christian.

The conscientious HR manager and the Rubik’s Cube

In this HR literature ethical dilemmas are fitted into taxonomies, hierarchies, ladders, matrixes, professional or managerial roles and, despite their acknowledged

complexity, can be regulated by procedures, compared, balanced, traded off and resolved by catalogue, organisational policies and “sociological theorising”. However, ethical dilemmas are complex orthogonal experiences of human living systems. They are ill-structured, bifurcating, emergent, moving, dialectic, novel, anxious, re-orientating, divergent, irresolvable, incomplete conscious narrative experiences which are never fully realised. Ethical dilemmas, at the threshold of stability, are the essence of being alive (Capra, 2003, p. 98).

Metaphorically, an ethical dilemma is portrayed in the HR literature as a Rubik’s Cube. Constituted by an infrequent humanity and dominated by social moralities, Rubik’s Cubes are detached from HR practitioners’ lived experiences. Their meanings do not reside in what is or ought to be meaningful lives, good lives, for practitioners so what are of value to practitioners in terms of life forms worth living are excluded from the Cubes. Abstracted from the lives of practitioners, external to their humanity and residing in various regulatory moralities, these Cubes await internalisation by practitioners. Personal preferences and social circumstances are influential or to be added to the puzzle, but they are not immanent to the experience of practitioners. Consequently, Rubik’s Cubes are primarily rational problems that contain conflicting principles or theoretical oppositions and not emotional narrative experiences that are ethical dilemmas for the very reason they threaten to disorientate practitioners from the forms of life they view as meaningful. Detached from practitioners and what is humanly possible for individual practitioners in their institutional lives, Cubes are separated from their institutional contexts and impervious to institutional moralities in which they are experienced, and by which they are made meaningful by practitioners. Practitioners are connected to their Cubes by their social roles and, in these decontextualised abstractions, emotionally free from the human consequences of their actions on them. Disconnectedly the “conscientious HR manager” moves indifferently from one Cube to another because the “Rubik’s Cube” is never orthogonal; the Cube does not work the operator. Unaffected by the consequences of deciding to do this or that, A or B, there is no guilt or shame, joy or pride, in operating the Rubik’s Cube because there are no ethical remainders, memories, of past normative and narrative experiences, or, if they are remembered, the reminders are only temporary; they can somehow be exchanged or “traded off”. Only momentarily irresolvable, the puzzles are ultimately resolvable, finalized and have no continuity in the mind of practitioners or others. They are atemporal intellectual puzzles, games to be played by role players.

The HR manager is conscientious and has a quandary (Pincoffs, 1983), not a dilemma. The “conscientious HR manager” plays the H/R field (Ulrich and Beatty, 2001) of resolving the irresolvable puzzles of ethical dilemmas. Without memories, it has no ethical conscience because it is the atemporal inanimate H/R role that is morally responsible for its actions. Disembodied, without a historical consciousness and a narrative identity, it has “sins without sinners, crimes without criminals, guilt without culprits” (Bauman, 1993, p. 18), the “conscientious HR manager” attaches overriding moral significance to the tacit agreement by an individual to their moralities, social roles, social institutions and various moralities. It is a role player that justifies itself abstractedly, on what anyone would have done in the same circumstances, and not what it narratively experienced and translated in its particular circumstances. In a quandary about how to vertically and horizontally fit different parts into symmetric whole, it is tenuously connected to a social puzzle which is of epistemological value.

It is satisfied when it puts together the fragments into wholes that are sensible or “morally decent” (Macklin, 2007) structures. The value comes as the pieces fit together satisfactorily, the quandary is resolved and the puzzle is neatly completed. When the procedures of this complex work puzzle, despite frequent repetitions, do not click into their symmetrical place then it will consult the catalogue, or, pick “n” mix from a variety of routines and principles that others have supplied. Solely responsible for completing the puzzle, the game player knows that failure will not produce recrimination because, as the “conscientious HR manager”, it is separated from humans who praise and blame its actions. It has sovereign authority over the puzzle. Isolated from being in a dynamic human relationship with living others, it experiences no living normative forces as it manages the puzzle, apart from those that it alone and in its sovereignty creates and values. *Sui juris* it can operate and make sense of the puzzle by reference to external moralities, which it can add to the puzzle to make the axiological colours of the puzzle fit together. Alone and outside human relationships and their normative demands, it is omnipotent and safe in the knowledge that, if the colours of the Rubik’s Cube do not match, nobody else will mind about experiences that are of little consequences to it, or the life of others. The complexity of human life is rationalised, humanity is meaningless and a normative critique of “H/RM” silenced.

A normative critique of H/RM

H/RM, “Tis thy name that is my enemy” (Romeo and Juliet: Act 2: Scene 2).

H/RM is specialised organisational and management function with living practitioners, receivers and deliverers of H/RM who spend a significant amount of their “time” (Taylor and Jones, 2000, p. 250) carrying out H/R practices in a moral economy. By its social practices and nomenclature, H/RM identifies itself as the organisational function that manages human resources. H/R practice is therefore a temporal practice “inter-homines” (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 59) in which practitioners are normatively connected to other humans. They are in “human relations”. However, despite MacIntyre (1999, p. x) acknowledging the error he made in *After Virtue* of centring social practices at a cost of understanding the animality of human life, H/RM is shy in addressing the human relationship of mind and spirit, united in substance with the flesh and engaged in the universe of matter (Maritain, 1964, p. 452). Sociological thinking and “sociological theorising” (Watson, 2004, 2007) about the humanity and inhumanity of H/RM with a “theory of HR management” and without an understanding of what it is to be “human”, risks issuing H/RM with a “rubber stamp of goodness” (Simon and Oakes, 2006, p. 132) and being self defeating. Protestations about the humanity of H/RM derived from only a sociology of H/RM, instead of awakening ethical reflection as an intrinsically human activity, will raise distrust. If the H/RM fox preaches “look after your chickens” then “guard your geese” (Bouckear, 2002, p. 86).

The small strand of H/RM work on ethical dilemmas is a rare sample of human life in H/RM that permits and inspires two generalisations. HR practitioners are workers and their living and embodied animality has not been conceptualised in this literature. Secondly, complex living systems have not been used to understand ethical dilemmas or the “H” in H/RM. Adapting Capra’s (2003, p. 64) complex autopoietic system of living matter, process, meaning and form, workers are complex evolving animals systemically connected by matter (human nature), their cognitive processes (questing

of meaning making (ethics) and their different ways of living (form). This systemic alternative way of thinking about the “H” in H/RM, not dominated by isolated roles and puzzles, tentatively sketches a “connected knowing” of H/RM and argues this “H”, in its all its vibrant naturalistic materiality, provides grounds for a normative critique of H/RM. It cautiously peeps under the lid of the “black box” and argues H/RM will continue to lack a critical perspective (Keegan and Boselie, 2006) as long as H/RM can avoid being named and blamed as the organisational function authorised by humans to make lives meaningful, and meaningless. Human “animality” with its unconscious instincts, impulses and desires, unsuppressed by reason, the radical alterity of animal and human standing in dialectic tension to each other and “becoming animal” materially as a part of its human nature (Gerhardt, 2006) all provide fertile ground for normative critiques of living systems. However, the central normative focus of this paper is not to bring the inanimate alive, on making H/RM live, but to construct and connect the “H” of H/RM. This “connected knowing” links a living system (human) to a social sub system (H/RM) that rarely appears to consider complexity theory and autopoiesis (Gregory, 2006) as a way of defining H/RM as a social system.

A condition for a normative critique of H/RM is its impact on life. Life is an evolving process of interactions between genes, cells, proteins, organ, system, organism and the environment. Life is a process of ebb and flow, of activity, in which living bodies are in an intricate web of hidden connections, a web or music of life (Capra, 1996; Noble, 2006). Human consciousness requires an embodied living mind and humans spending their time in H/RM seek meaning because they are conscious and unconsciously aware of time passing. Despite assertions to the contrary (Watson, 2007) ethics knows no limits because time exceeds our perceptive and imaginative grasp. At the moment of injustice, at the point of chaos, the dead, unborn and the absent open up a massive dimension of infinite time that consciously confront humans with an irreducible ethical responsibility, the face of the other: “indefinite number of inappropriable temporalities irreducibly immanent to the experience of the infinitely responsible self” (Hutchens, 2004, p. 72). An indifference to human life, not knowing the difference between life and death, repudiates human’s living animal vitality, decouples humans from their embodied material nature, equates the living with non-living (Rubik’s Cube/conscientious HR manager) and promotes an understanding of life as an analysed and administered life in which the past is no longer alive in the present (Glover, 2001, p. 411). It then becomes implausible to think of what H/RM says and does to regulate a whole human and mortal life. An ethics independent of biology is not possible and a metaphysical biology from the Darwinian left provides a naturalistic materialism capable of criticising an economic materialism that promotes “organisational growth” without being mindful of nature’s material resources. Capra’s answer to the central human question “what is life” is a dynamic complex autopoietic system of process, meaning, matter and form that lives in a web of life. This and other complex autopoietic systems can be used by those who wish to be less “pigeon livered” and have more “gull” (Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2) when criticising an H/RM which fails to acknowledge human life is part of, and dependant upon, other living and non-living systems.

Process (questing)

Ethics is the philosophy that determines whether particular forms of social and managerial thinking promote good or bad social forms such as “H/RM”. It is the primal

hybrid thinking that encompasses all other forms of thinking such as “sociological theorising”. Ethics is an evolutionary life process of questing (Cooper, 2001, p. 323 emphasis in original), moving closer, and further away from good lives, in all their infinite meanings. It is a continuous lateral creative holistic movement that expands infinitely sideways to construct meaningful forms of human living. Ethics is practical reasoning about the final ends in our lives (Richardson, 1994) and these transient emergent forms of the good life go by way of their material and social environments. This questing process knows human ends are loose, unfixed, and revisable and that when we revise our ends we move to a less precise end and, in changing this end, we appeal to another end that we then specify, as we relate to the material world. Ethics gains its meaning in the material and moral world that is essentially useful. It seeks to find “the lost land of the soul and make it pragmatic” (Cooper, 1976, p. 1016).

A complex autopoietic system has a distinctive characteristic, comprising internal interdependent parts that are self-organising, it emphasises processes over structures; it “pulls itself up by its own bootstraps and becomes distinct from its environment, in such a way that both things are inseparable” (Maturana and Varela, 1998, p. 47). Self-organising is teleological and teleonomical (Mahoney, 2007, p. 255). Teleologically the system moves because it has a specific destination and, commonly found in rational planning and concrete problem solving such as completing a “Rubik’s Cube”, its telos is the satisfaction of a specified, for example, social or managerial good. Teleonomic self-organising refers to the spontaneous order that has no specific destination and its flow and meaning cannot be decoupled from its environment. It cannot be fitted into a specific organisation role such as “conscientious HR manager” because its telos [loose, unfixed and revisable] is primary to a good that cannot be abstracted and defined. Teleonomy reaches out for meaningful lives that defy sociological “theorising” or planning, stability, autonomy, categorisation, rationality, routines, conventions, principles, and measurement because, like an ethical dilemma, every human life is complex. Complex self-organising human systems teleonomically questing meaning in their lives paradoxically and pragmatically seek coherent life forms, but resist a teleonomic order. Living humans conform and naturally resist being squared and cubed.

Forms (ways of living)

Nature is continuously evolving. Humans are on the move in a mobile world. Humans have an evolving pattern of organisation that makes them a form of animal, biological-form, which is continuously moving from one form to another. On the move they are trans/forming, bifurcating. Be/ing and be/coming, with different ways of thinking, “thinking-forms”, living a variety of different possible lives, “life-forms”, working in different labour-forms, inhabiting a number of institutional-forms, performing a variety of different social roles, “role-forms”, using a number of different linguistic and mimetic forms to think and act. Biologically and socially humans have various forms, unity-patterns of organisation, which mark them out as human and they are continuously moving between forms. Paradoxically, they move to stay human. Evolving they nevertheless have “a certain range of power and tendencies, a repertoire, inherited and forming a fairly firm characteristic pattern” (Midgley, 1995, p. 74) that is their human nature.

Social roles are not living-forms and a sociology that marginalises ethics marginalises human life. Morally contingent duties cannot collide with “rock bottom

duties" (Urmson, 1969, p. 64), beliefs of the "mind and heart" cannot differ from those expressed by managerial and trade union roles (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 28); social expectations cannot account for those times when "we hang out the Off Duty sign" (Kupperman, 1991, p. 79). Sociological thinking that culminates in social roles promotes a social/moral HRM that encourages conformity to existing social moralities. Morality can, in defining what is morally normal, inspire and constrain a normative critique of H/RM; it provides a language for a critique of H/RM and also works to protect social groups and institutions. As a "stiff armour" (Bauman, 1993, p. 33) of social conventions, codes and duties, it is the social texture (Benhabib, 1992, p. 50) that humans must pass through in seeking meaningful lives. A socio-moral H/RM limits the influence of the unconscious in our lives, promotes the manifest over the latent and assumes all human experience including what makes lives meaningful and meaningless can be translated, identified and consciously known in language. It reifies the quest for social/moral goods at a cost to other secular and non-secular Goods. Consequently, a social-moral HRM limits understanding the morality of HRM through for example bio-centric non-Western versions of ethics such as those originating in Confucian moral philosophy as understood for a millennia in China, Korea, Japan and elsewhere (Bretzke, 1995). In a Westernised "sociological thinking" H/RM can be managerially and morally "resourced" because humans can be put in their moral institutional place and outside their species membership. It is easier to be inhuman when others are identified, classified and categorised as social roles, as "professional", as "worker", as "shop steward", as "black", as "gay" than when they identify others and, therefore, themselves in their human form. Ethics conforms and resists social moralities. Adorno's central argument is there cannot be a good life within a bad one (Adorno, 2001, 2005), the quest for the good life is the quest for the right form of politics and the right form of politics consists in resistance to forms of the bad life. In an ethics of resistance there are no "life lies" about social systems that privilege economic productivity over living matter.

Secondly, a form of sociological "theorising" that emphasises individual social roles limits understanding a whole life and its relationship with human nature, narratively. The first step of theory development is antimythic (Donald, 1991, p. 275) Things and events must be stripped of their previous mythic significance before they can be subjected to "objective" analyses. Consequently, before the body could be dissected and nature classified it had to be demythologized, analysed, and categorised. Stripped of its living flesh, human nature was made timeless. "Theorising" is without a conception of human time and a timeless H/RM can treat human as episodic bits of labour without personal or social narratives. Myths and narratives are discourses of historical consciousness (Gergen, 1998) and the "conscientious HR manager and the Rubik's Cube", as they have been projected by H/RM, are unconscious of their own and others histories. An ahistorical "theorised" H/RM precludes critical narratives and the process of narrative plotting as a way of uncovering and expressing what H/RM is and ought to be (Steers, 2008).

Matter (human nature)

We never find life except as living matter; we never find consciousness except as conscious living matter; and we never find awareness except as self-aware, conscious, living matter (Schumacher, 1977, p. 23).

Social roles and puzzles are not material. Matter matters because we experience in matter, and each embodied mind finds in human nature what it needs in ethics (Williams, 1995, p. 203). Humans are neural, phenomenological and meaning-making animals (Varela *et al.*, 1993; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) bound to and acting in the material world from which they cannot be detached. Each act of embodied social construction of the embodied mind reconstructs the coherence of the animal body. Claiming “my body as mine”, I privilege our humanity over fragmented distinctions between mind and body, inanimate social roles, divisive social identities and mechanistic puzzles.

Workers are embodied matter and, as material bodies (Bean and Durant, 2005), they experience forces that seek to make them docile (Foucault, 1977, pp. 135-170). Understanding economic materialism and power relations requires an understanding “human nature” (Lukes, 2005, p. 117) and our human nature activates a critique of social systems which promote economic “growth” without consideration of the natural world of which we are a part. In the words of a biologist, a physiologist and a physicist, the relentless pursuit of productivity unweaves the “rainbow”, the “web” of life (Dawkins, 1998; Capra, 1996) and silences its “music” (Noble, 2006) because it destroys life. The normativity of goods – the “ought” – is not only of “employee” relations arising from the socio-economic employment relationship, but also material inferences arising from a compassionate awareness of others as embodied “humans” in “human” relations with vulnerable minds and bodies. Ethical oughts are not demands because to act against you would threaten your identity as an “employee”, an “organisational citizen”, or party to a “psychological contract” but from demands not to injure you because I see you as one not to be injured (Bernstein, 2001, pp. 161, 323). Inseparable from its human relations, human and non-human, human nature makes its normative demands because humans experience the normative forces of their material nature. Withdrawing the materiality of humans disconnects humanity from itself, levels all humans to the inanimate, human is machine, the living become dead, and humans forget to think, act and feel materially about themselves, and each other.

Human matter inherits more than its DNA; it inherits the world (Noble, 2006, p. 41) and its meanings. Thinking socially in the moral economy assimilates the human to the social, replaces ethical responsibility with social responsibility and any opportunities for a normative critique originating in bio-centric, ecological, environmental, feminist and humanitarian ethics are reduced. Humans cease to be, by their “human” nature, living systems in symbiotic human relations and are, instead, defined by their “employee” relationship. If humans are defined by their employment relationship, then management and labour, institutions and interests and conflict regulation by procedural or managerial strategies of commitments are emphasised over moral agency, conflicts of conscience (Provis, 2006) and human relationships. In H/RM’s social sub system, employees spending “time” in H/RM become disconnected from the unbounded dynamics of their human relationships. Yet, it is in ch’i, “*in-one-another-ness*” and on the edge, in the dynamics between individuals and organisations (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006) and at the “the interspace between the individual and its environment that begins to emerge as a prime mover of human agency in the continuous work of cultivating the world ” (Cooper, 2005, p. 1690 emphasis in original).

Meaning (ethics)

Without meaning animal life is reduced to a bare, organic biological life of docile bodies and any critical inquiry into H/RM and meaningful/meaningless work inevitably

confronts what it is to live the life of a human being. It cannot “on pain of incoherence” (Hurley, 1995, p. 275) describe a life of some other being, god or beast, that is impossible for human be/ing and be/coming, to obtain. Humans are born into, live and work in overlapping social and organisational moralities in which they trans/formatively create meaning, secular and non-secular, of their moral relationships with themselves and others by being and becoming “human”. These meanings “cannot be researched from afar as an abstraction” but by getting “up close and personal” and understanding meaningful work as an “ethical adventure”; a “quest” by living humans with “animated” purposes that gives direction to life as a whole (Overell, 2008, pp. 18, 19). This ethical process of a living animal interacting with matter and non-matter makes, and remakes different meanings of their experiences and translates them into varied meaningful forms that guide their actions in the world. Never ending or complete and always provisional, this human quest for super-naturalist (soul and God centred) and naturalist (objective and subjective) meanings in their lives (Metz, 2002) is what is complex about human living inside/outside H/RM and ethics, the material process of meaning making of myriad animate forms, is one primary source of a normative critique of the “H” in H/RM.

In/conclusion

A typical critical theory has three main constituent parts (Geus, 1981, p. 76). A part that shows it is humanly possible to move from a present unacceptable state to some proposed more acceptable state, the movement between states is practically necessary and only by agents adopting the critical theory can they realise their interests. In omitting to articulate a humanity, providing structural often sociological explanations of ethical dilemmas, prescriptions for complex irresolvable problems, and emphasising social roles and moralities, “The conscientious HR manager and the Rubik Cube” dehumanise and simplify the complexities of the “H” in H/RM. Turning away from static inanimate roles, catalogues, matrixes, taxonomies and ladders that disconnect practitioners from the complex processes of human living, critical H/RM scholars have a categorical normative, an “ought” other than moral decency, at their disposal; H/RM be Human[e]! In this “human” demand critical H/RM scholars can safely argue from outside work, and from within their naturalist and super-naturalist quests, that work and human life are interweaved in an ethical process of matter, form and meaning making which is, and can never be within H/RM’s gift; any attempt to possess or commodify “human” makes its meaning meaningless (Overell, 2008, p. 16). In this Post Darwinian age that recognises the fluid unity of nature, its organic aspect and its morality (Richards, 1999), Capra’s living human system is one author’s cognitive map critical of another connected social sub system, H/RM. Celebrating that ethics cannot be ensnared by any managerial or social system complex or otherwise, it is a tentative effort towards invigorating a normative critique of H/RM so scholars and practitioners confronted by H/RM can, with nature’s narrative (biology, theology, sociology, art, literature, music, and comedy) respond with their own naturalistic and super-naturalist critiques. Without these inconclusive critical steps the human response can only be “Am I bovered” and H/RM’s “people process levers” (Gratton, 1999, p. 31) will coldly grind out its language, services and products as humans are unmoved by the human consequences of creating meaningful, and meaningless work in human lives.

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