

# InClass

A spotlight on faculty and their work

## What Doth It Profit a Man?

Bart Victor teaches Vanderbilt business students how to do the right thing.

By PAUL KINGSBURY, BA'80

IT'S A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON IN March. Spring is in the air, the campus is in bloom, and in Room 222 of Management Hall, the class is wrestling with right and wrong.

"So we've got lying, stealing, cheating," Professor Bart Victor says, summing up a host of ethical breakdowns

that plagued eye-care giant Bausch & Lomb in the 1980s and '90s, and which directly led to a slump in the company's fortunes. "Sounds like a country song." A beat. "Without ethics, you know, there would be no country music." Big laugh. Welcome to the Ethics in Business course, spring 2003.

Bart Victor, the Cal Turner Professor of Moral Leadership at the Owen Graduate School of Management, keeps the mood light, roaming around the cozy amphitheater-style classroom like a standup comic visiting tables at a nightclub, tossing out the occasional quip. But there's serious thinking going on here, too, as he asks tough questions and pushes the class of about 40 MBA students to confront the inevitable friction that comes from the Golden Rule bumping up against the Profit Motive.

For about 20 minutes during the 90-minute session, Victor turns the class over to three students, who assess where B&L went wrong and how the company could have stayed on the straight and narrow. In their PowerPoint presentation, they display a bombshell of a directive from B&L CEO Daniel Gill about

meeting the company's quarterly sales goals: "Make the numbers, but don't do anything stupid." As one of the student presenters notes, it certainly looks like a rather transparent code for "Don't get caught."

As the three students wrap up their presentation, a series of questions comes from a classmate: But why is making your numbers

considered acceptable behavior in pursuit of business goals. But as the session winds down, it's clear that "making the numbers"—and how one does that—is the heart of the matter.

"You're going to have the responsibility for sales targets," Bart Victor reminds the twenty-something students. "You're going to be responsible for people's behavior, even when you can't watch them."

Anyone put off by the pious ring of "professor of moral leadership" would be immediately disarmed upon meeting Bart Victor. On a spring morning in his third-floor Owen office, dressed casually in khakis, loafers and black polo shirt, with his feet occasionally propped on a pulled-out desk drawer, the 48-year-old business professor seems nearly as unguarded and informal as the students he teaches. At the same time, though, his conversation crackles

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wrong? Isn't that standard business practice? If you're a company that disregards the numbers, are you going to be around very long?"

Hearing this, Bart Victor's face lights up, and he says, "Now you've got something there," and he urges the students to grapple with the issue.

The student presenters do a creditable job of fielding these tough, fundamental questions and, challenged by the professor, the class openly discusses just what is con-

### {Suggested Reading}

- 1. Defining Moments: The Discipline of Building Character**, Joseph Badaracco (Harvard Business School Press, 2001)
- 2. God the Economist**, M. Douglas Meeks (Fortress Press, 1989)
- 3. Development as Freedom**, Amartya Sen (Knopf, 2001)
- 4. Crimes of Obedience**, Herbert Kelman and Lee Hamilton (Yale Press, 1989)

NEIL BRANE

Bart Victor

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Fyodor Dostoevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor," from *The Brothers Karamazov*. In deciding how to live, we have a choice as individuals. We can choose to let others think for us, and be slaves. Or we can choose to think for ourselves, and be free. Choose. (24 pages)

Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail." We *all* must be free to choose. Freedom belongs to everyone. Lest we forget. (6 pages)

Virginia Woolf, Chapter 6, *A Room of One's Own*. And "everyone" includes women. Again, lest we forget. (20 pages)

Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address." A lot of good people have died so that we can be free to choose. A lot. Never forget. (1 page)

Suetonius, "Augustus, Afterward Deified," Sections 61-96, from *The Twelve Caesars*. Be skeptical of those you choose to entrust with your freedom. They, too, are human. Even Caesar Augustus, to seem taller, wore lifts in his sandals. (20 pages)

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language." Some of our leaders will lie to us.

They will use words without meanings. They will hide behind empty phrases. Make them accountable. (12 pages)

Edmund Burke, "Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol." The best leaders will help keep us free by telling us what we truly need to hear—and not just what we want to hear. We need their judgment, and not just their echo. (35 pages)

Samuel Johnson, Number 21, *The Rambler*. We are none of us immune to the frailties of human nature. We each imagine that we are superior in some way to others. We are not. Be humble. (5 pages)

Immanuel Kant, "On Perpetual Peace." Despite our nature, despite our frailties, we can be better than we are. Thus, the world can be better than it is. Keep trying. (33 pages)

Henry David Thoreau, "On Seeing," from his *Journal*. Try to see. Seeing is understanding. "We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, and then we can hardly see anything else." Keep looking. (3 pages)

Plutarch, "On Contentment." Look not for fame or fortune. Fame is hollow. Fortune is

fickle. We must find contentment in life no matter what blows life deals us. Keep living. (28 pages)

Soren Kierkegaard, "The Story of Abraham," from *Fear and Trembling*. Reason alone does not suffice for living. Reason can only take us just so far toward understanding. Beyond that, we must make the "leap to faith." Keep believing. (8 pages)

William Hazlitt, "On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth." But believe in this world as well as the next. When we are young, we all think we will never die. We will. Life is short. Life is meant to be lived. So seize the day. (6 pages)

This is my list.  
Total: 404 pages.

Of course, much is missing here. Poetry. Fiction. Song. Scripture. Shakespeare. The Bill of Rights. The Sermon on the Mount. And a whole library filled with a whole lot more.

My list could go on, and your list would surely be different. But try starting here. Starting with this list will give you—and every American—an education in 404 pages. ▼

son & Johnson and Chick-fil-A, and the writings of contemporary Protestant theologian Harvey Cox. Along the way, he mentions relevant areas of his research, such as examining the role of business leaders as public theologians of a sort, and evaluating the "ethical climates" that determine the moral boundaries in various companies and organizations.

This broad style of inquiry comes naturally to Victor, says colleague Bruce Barry, a one-time graduate student of Victor's who is now the Brownlee O. Currey Associate Professor of Management at Owen. "A lot of business schools have an 'ethics guy.' And you could look at Bart and say we do, too. But I think what we have is actually something unique, which is an ethics guy who first of all is well grounded in the underlying moral philosophy of ethical reasoning—and, sadly, you can't say that about all business-school ethics professors.

"But more important than that, we have somebody who has core pieces of intellectually focused experience that are grounded in key areas outside of that—one of which is corporate strategy, which he has taught successfully here and at other places. And another is this firm grounding in social science at both micro and macro levels. What we have, then, in Bart Victor is unique, in that he brings not just a focus on ethics but also a real grounding in other social sciences."

Victor's work experience reflects his broad academic interests. Starting with an undergraduate degree in sociology, he moved from social work to service as executive director of a system of 20 day-care centers, then on to management consulting on day-care issues. Drawn to graduate school in business ("I just needed to know more"), he earned a Ph.D. in business administration at the University of North Carolina. After teaching at the universities of Nebraska and North Carolina, he took a plum position at the Institute for Management Development International (IMD) in Lausanne, Switzerland. ("It's a world-renowned place that's kind of part western business school and part executive development laboratory," says Barry.) Victor taught there three years and ran the IMD's program for executive development.

What drew him to Vanderbilt in 1999 was the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration inherent in the Cal Turner Chair in Moral

Leadership. The chair is part of an entire program in moral leadership, endowed in 1994 by Vanderbilt trustee Cal Turner Jr., BA'62, the recently retired CEO of Dollar General Corp., which brings together Vanderbilt's professional schools (medicine, law, nursing, divinity and business) to explore topics that present ethical issues for all, such as genetic research.

Under the auspices of the Cal Turner Program, Victor leads an interdisciplinary course in moral leadership offered through both Owen and the Divinity School that is open to students of all the University's professional schools and is co-taught by Victor and faculty from the various schools. Similarly, his Turner Program connections have led him to invite faculty from the other schools into his Ethics in Business course to expand the frame of reference.

Bringing together faculty and students from these other disciplines, says Victor, "allows us to deal with [ethical] problems in the way they really are. The interesting problems don't just fit here in the business school. They don't just fit in the law school. Just as business isn't simply a concern of business."

Indeed, says Victor, "business is the single most significant social defining force in the world today. It reaches everywhere. The world has never seen a social movement as significant, as powerful, as pervasive as business."

Which, come to think of it, makes the idea of teaching moral leadership in business seem all the more imperative.

Despite all the recent corporate news of accounting fraud and executive deceit, Bart Victor remains upbeat about the possibilities for American business. He sees it not as some faceless, out-of-control juggernaut but as an engine that we all have some power to control. "I like business. I think business is a great, positive thing. I think it can do awful stuff, like anything powerful. It is not simply good in and of itself. It is a human creation. We are business. We are the market. Not somebody else. So let's take responsibility for it." ▼

An English major when at Vanderbilt and now a Nashville freelancer, Paul Kingsbury, A'80, is the author of books on the Grand Ole Opry and Nashville's historic Hatch Show Print poster shop. His articles have appeared in *Entertainment Weekly*, *US*, *Nashville Life*, and other magazines.

**Virtuoso Performers** continued from page 59 content with her performance that she left immediately afterwards for the W.O. Smith Community School of Music to teach a percussion class to school-aged children.

After the competition Krystal derived some satisfaction in knowing she had played "Rhapsody in Blue" very well—maybe even well enough to win. A few weeks passed, however, before she truly understood why she had undergone so many hassles for an experience she just as easily could have sidestepped. "On Wednesday night," she says, "I played through 'Rhapsody in Blue' for the first time since the competition. An upright piano was in the Ingram Performance Hall lobby, and I always like playing on pianos I find in random places. I played through the whole piece, solo, without the cuts for the competition excerpt. It was a joy just to be able to play this particular piece of music. Even if I don't get to perform it with an orchestra, it's a great piece to have learned: an American concerto flavored with jazz, a piece with rhythmic vitality, a piece with melodies that one leaves the practice room singing."

That's why Gershwin called it a "rhapsody." And, more than any other reward, the discovery of such rhapsody drives students at the Blair School of Music to keep performing. ▼

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of his blood and whispered to the people rushing to his side, "Is everybody all right?"

The answer, of course, is that none of us was. In the political life of our troubled young country, there was simply no cure for that kind of loss. ▼

Frye Gaillard, BA'68, was chairman of the IMPACT program that brought Robert Kennedy to the Vanderbilt campus. During his lengthy career as a journalist, Gaillard has written about that event in several places, including the *Charlotte Observer*, for which he served as southern editor, and in his family memoir, *Lessons from the Big House: One Family's Passage Through the History of the South*.

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with good-natured intellectual energy. He tends to speak swiftly and passionately, sometimes giving the impression that the ideas are accumulating in his head more quickly than they can get out of his mouth.

Business ethics has long been a part of business school curricula, but its importance has been underscored recently by the wave of corporate scandals that has rocked Wall Street. Firms like HealthSouth, WorldCom and Enron that not so long ago drew praise and investor dollars are now seen as synonymous with moral and—ultimately—financial bankruptcy.

But the trap in teaching ethics case studies of companies like these or Bausch & Lomb, says Victor, is that it's all too easy for such striking examples of corporate irresponsibility to look like a rare and spectacular event. "When we make it into these big headlines, the students look at it, and it's like watching an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie: 'Wow! Whoa! Hope I don't ever have to do that.'"

What Victor tries to do in his ethics classes is to show students that ethics is an every-

day issue for everyone who works. "There aren't many people who wake up in the morning and look in the mirror and see a bank robber," he says. "Most people wake up in the morning and see a pretty good person. But how do they bring that to action? How do they bring that to life? That's where I get focused in my teaching. I think business ethics is all about recognizing that, in fact, our work matters to others."

To help business students recognize ethical dilemmas buried in mundane day-to-day decisions, Victor combines three key ingredients. First, he presents classic case studies of ethical crucibles, such as the case of Ford's dangerously designed Pinto gas tanks or Union Carbide's reaction to the 1984 chemical disaster in Bhopal, India. Then he questions the students and gets them talking about where the ethical issues lie and how they come up against business goals. Finally, he shares basic principles of moral reasoning that have been pondered by philosophers and theologians since the dawn of civilization.

"It is a class in which their opinions, their thinking is central," he says. "That's the sub-

stance of the course. Their way of thinking and understanding—not mine—is essential to the course. I am catalyst, facilitator and critic, but I am not the source in a class like that.

"I can't tell them what the right choices are. Yesterday in class I went through the Cook's Tour of moral reasoning," he says with a chuckle. "And the problem is that it's a cacophony of prescription: Think about this and you'll come to the right answer. Whether utilitarianism or deontology or social contract or virtues or moral rights—or any of these things. All of them have these strong and compelling prescriptions for making moral choices. All of them mutually exclusive. And all of them full of bloody holes. And so: What do I do? First we recognize that yes, I do have a choice. Now what? And that's where moral courage gets called upon and where moral leadership really begins."

In even a brief conversation about business ethics, Bart Victor can range far and wide, touching on the first 100 days of JFK's presidency, the moral philosophy of Andrew Carnegie ("first we will do well, and then we will do good"), the business credos of John-