

For or Against Corporate Identity? Personification and the Problem of Moral Agency

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the concept of corporate identity from a moral perspective. In it we argue that the reification and personification involved in attributing an identity to an organization has moral repercussions. Through a discussion of ‘intentionality’ we suggest that it is philosophically problematic to treat an abstraction of the corporation as possessing identity or acting as a conscious moral agent. The article moves to consider practical and ethical issues in the areas of organizational commitment, of health and safety, and corporate social responsibility, and finds that the notion of identity can be abused, although it will no doubt continue to be used as it does have some practical utility. In conclusion, we argue that despite being meaningless from a philosophical stance, the concept of corporate identity need not be discarded, however, it is far from benign and intense moral scrutiny is necessary wherever it is applied.

KEY WORDS: corporate identity, intentionality, moral agency, reification, social responsibility

Introduction

In this article we set out to explore the concept of corporate identity, and in particular, to consider the moral dimension of such a notion. We argue that philosophically speaking it is problematic to talk of identity as something that can be attributed to a corporation as an entity in its own right. Nonetheless, there are social and legal practicalities involved that have resulted in the development of a whole industry that sets out deliberately to reify the organization/corporation. Our concern is that some participants may do so with disingenuous intentions, perhaps even to misrepresent and mislead. This may have the potential for undesirable moral consequences.

We begin with a discussion of the notion of corporate identity, highlighting its anthropomorphizing tendencies, and then introduce arguments relating to the problems of corporate (or more accurately, collective) moral agency that cast doubts over the validity of reifying the organization. We introduce phenomenology, specifically the psychology of *intentionality*, as a premise to bolster the argument that it is philosophically problematic and often morally undesirable to treat an abstraction (the corporation) as a conscious moral agent. We conclude by illustrating how potential deceits from the marketing of ‘corporate identity’ may arise, both internally, the case of engendering organizational commitment, and externally, the case of corporate social responsibility, as well as with relation to employees and customers in the area of health and safety.

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Corporate identity and the legacy of individual identity

The thinking behind the idea of corporate identity is relatively straightforward as it is represented in the practitioner literature (such as Olins, 1978). According to Olins:

In order to be effective every organization needs a clear sense of purpose that people within it understand. They also need a strong sense of belonging.

Purpose and belonging are two facets of identity.

Every organization is unique, and the identity must spring from the organization's own roots, its personality [...]

When companies lose sight of their individuality, their real purpose and strengths, they get deflected into making mistakes. (1989, pp. 7–9)

Balmer (2001, pp. 265–267) has warned against an over reliance on the graphic design influence, which Olins represents. It is true that Olins' opinions are repeated across all types of corporate identity literature, but there are more critical, less prescriptive sources that recognise a complexity that is downplayed by the practitioner-focused genre. For instance, Balmer and Greyser (2003, p. 33) view corporate identity as a problematic concept but one too powerful to ignore. Melewar and Jenkins (2002) review the numerous definitions of corporate identity, drawn from various disciplines, in order to develop a comprehensive model of the construct. The result illustrates the intricacy of corporate identity, as it is divided into four subconstructs, which in turn are downstream of 12 antecedent variables. The antecedents themselves are immensely problematic and subject to the type of criticism we level at the broader corporate identity construct below. When the processes by which corporate identity might be managed are added to the equation (Bick et al., 2003), the whole notion does indeed resemble a Gordian knot as Balmer and Greyser suggest (2003, p. 33).

The term *identity* is borrowed from the psychological and sociological literature on individual identity where it is used to express the sense that a person has about his or her self. We talk of self-concept, self-image, self-esteem, self-awareness, self-

consciousness, self-belief and so on. Identity is linked to personality and character. Both of these concepts incorporate a complex array of ways of *being* and psychological characteristics which have continuity over time, but character specifically highlights the moral component as reflected in typical conduct – where something can then be 'out of character' (Harman, 2003). Identity gives recognition to these aspects of self by establishing what makes one unique or at least to distinguish between one person (or 'entity') and another.

Identity is also linked to role. It has been argued by Mead (1934, pp. 152–214) that each individual has multiple identities, for instance, as a daughter, as a mother, as a lover, and by Goffman (1959) that we play out our various identities as if performing roles in a drama. Inevitably these identities appear, disappear, reappear and alter over time depending upon individual situations and circumstances. Not only that, but whilst we draw our sense of identity from the past and we live it in the present, we also project it into the future.

Markus and Nurius (1986) argue that a great deal of the motivation for much of our behaviour is explained by our sense of 'possible selves', that being an individual's idea of what we might become, what we would like to become and what we are afraid of becoming. The issue here is that this particular sense of identity, the 'possible selves', need have nothing to do with lived experience or be verified by social experience. In other words, desires and fears, independent of experience, can have a substantial influence on many of our actions.

The starting point for the construction of identity may be individual consciousness, but the economic, political, social and moral milieu is then drawn into the construction of our identity (or identities) (Woodward, 2002, p. 6). So the nature and origin of individual identity is immensely complex drawing itself from factors such as gender, body image, personality, role, social and economic status, and manifesting itself in values, attitudes, motives, character and ultimately behaviour. It describes who we are and what we want to become. It is no coincidence that similar terminology crops up in the literature on corporate identity. The implication is clear; that organizations can be treated as individual, holistic entities that possess the same sort of attributes that an individual human possesses, such as values, beliefs,

personality, a conscience, a voice, a mind, even a soul (Olins, 1978; Balmer and Soenen, 1999; Balmer, 2001).

Manifest or constructed identities?

The portrayal of corporate identity reflects rarely the character, role and temporal complexities of individual psychology, and particularly the prescriptive literature in this area has a schizophrenic quality. On the one hand it suggests that corporate identity is the possession of the organization as a whole, but on the other, makes clear that corporate identity is imposed by perhaps just one or a handful of individuals and is certainly not drawn from organizational experiences, that is, the experiences of all organizational actors.

The analogy with individual identity is stretched to its limits. For example, 'corporate identity guru' Elinor Selame, when asked whether the 'task' of implementing a corporate identity 'programme' can be delegated, responded:

The CEO is usually the guiding light for a corporate identity programme. Steve Jobs at Apple Computers is a good example [...] It is hard to imagine a world-class identity initiative without the CEO as the driving force behind it. (Nelson, 2004, p. 114)

It is worth noting that terms such as *task*, *programme* and *initiative* are not those generally invoked when we consider the development of an individual person's identity. Likewise, Cornelissen and Elving point out that:

The corporate positioning of an organization through the corporate identity mix has in much prior work been considered as a direct function of the strategy of an organization as captured in its mission and vision [...] Mission and vision statements provide an overall unifying theme and goal for both motivating and focussing all employees, and for creating a coherent and distinct corporate image in advertising and publicity that differentiates the organization from its competitors. (2003, pp. 16–17)

To their credit Cornelissen and Elving question the value of 'essentializing' the strategy of the organization, but the implication of their words is apparent, for the most part the assumption is that the identity of the corporation is a gift bestowed by the board-

room, perhaps with the help of the corporate communications group or external consultants (Olins, 1989, p. 9). It is also worth noting the almost interchangeable way in which 'image' and 'identity' are used. This blurring of the distinction between the more superficial projection an entity 'has' – the 'image' – and the more embedded and self-reflexive notion of what something 'is' – the 'identity' – is not helpful.

It is clear that a central facet of the theory and practice of corporate identity management is to reify and anthropomorphise the organization. Those involved with the promotion and public relations management of the corporation know that the marketing of the organization succeeds best where a sense of humanity is engendered.

Corporations' brand identities are 'personifications' of 'who they are and where they've come from,' says Clay Timon, chairman of Landor Associates, the world's largest and oldest branding firm [...] 'Corporations, as brands ... have ... soul(s),' says Timon, which is what enables them to create 'intellectual and emotional bond(s)' with the groups they depend upon, such as consumers, employees, shareholders and regulators. (Bakan, 2004, p. 26)

At the extreme, with careful manipulation, the corporation can appear to outsiders as being an existing individual, whereas, in reality, that individual is completely fictitious. For instance, Betty Crocker is the human face of the General Mills Corporation. According to the Center for History and New Media internet site (www.chnm.gmu.edu – accessed 11th May 2005) a post-war opinion poll rated her the second most famous woman in America, after Eleanor Roosevelt, and today the General Mills internet site (www.generalmills.com – accessed 11th May 2005) invites you to come "baking with Betty" and claims that "Betty Crocker takes her title as 'the first lady of food' seriously". On their more earnest history page General Mills acknowledge that "Betty was never a real person" before making the somewhat incongruous claim that "Betty Crocker really does have her own kitchens", just beneath her most recent portrait. Other rather more generic fictional characters are intended to have a similar effect, such as the Quaker Oats Quaker, Uncle Ben, or Mr Kipling. Even characters that did exist as real people, including Colonel

Sanders and Sara Lee had precious little to do with the management of the corporations that grew up around their names.

Such obvious 'personification' is generally only intended to influence corporate clients but other human facets, such as values and conscience, are invoked to reach out to other important stakeholders, most notably employees. The Design Council (1995, p. 15) distinguishes between 'identity programmes' aimed at external audiences and those aimed at internal audiences, but still recognises that although the objectives of each may differ, the tools used are often overlapping.

We will return to the distinction between internal and external focus later, but for now it is important to emphasize that, despite the implied criticisms, we are not arguing that the idea of organizational identity, or even the use of the term, should be abandoned. However, we do maintain that much more care should be taken in its usage because there are significant ethical implications. To illustrate this we turn to the matter of moral agency.

Corporate moral agency

It is perhaps clear by now that from a philosophical standpoint there are problems with the concept of corporate identity. Like many reified concepts 'the corporation' represents useful shorthand through which to express the nature of the inter-relatedness of a myriad of concrete entities. At the heart of the issue here is the question of what an organization 'is'. Clearly corporations exist as legal and economic entities constructed to pursue social or economic objectives. The question is whether they exist and 'live' beyond this.

Holmes (1990) argues that a particular problem stems from the empiricist tradition.

Anyone approaching the nature of organizations from a conventional empiricist position must assume that either organizations are 'objective' – in which case they are 'really there' in the same way that rocks and trees and sunsets are 'really there' or that they are 'subjective' – in which case they are not 'really there' but have some status as value judgements and the fantasies so beloved of psychoanalysts. There is no third possibility (Holmes, 1990, p.214)

Having set-up his straw man, Holmes proceeds to argue that the objective – subjective duality is misleading and unhelpful, and that there *is* a 'third possibility', which is social constructivism. His argument is valid in that corporations clearly are not fantasies, but nor are they real objects, they are entities that are socially constructed and reconstructed beyond their legal and economic definitions to encompass the human desire for emotional and cognitive 'sensemaking' – they are imbued with qualities to help us make sense of the world around us. We reify organizations as an easy way of expressing our feelings toward a world that appears increasingly to be dominated by such entities (as opposed to, say, by family or community). However, someone may say that they hate 'the corporation' they work in, but if they reflect upon their attitude they realise that what they hate is the decisions, actions or attitudes of particular individuals acting as agents of the corporation, although they may be unaware of who those individuals are. So, because 'corporations' exist simply as socially constructed entities does that make it right to attribute to them psychological constructs such as values, personality, conscience and, of course, identity?

This is the very problem that the debate surrounding corporate moral agency has been grappling with for some time. That is:

Can a corporate organization itself be morally responsible (at least in part) for its actions, much like a large scale human-being? Or should we refuse to look at a[n ...] organization as anything other than a multitude of inter-related people each of whom is more or less morally responsible for what an organization does [...]? (Velasquez, 2003, p. 531).

Moore (1999, p. 329) identifies these two contrasting positions as collective moral agency on the one hand, and methodological individualism on the other, and concludes that the arguments in favour of the former carry more weight. He implies that a distinction needs to be drawn between the philosophical, perhaps more accurately metaphysical, arguments and the more pragmatic ones (legal, economic and so on), claiming that most of the debate has been conducted in the philosophical plane. The distinction is an important one, which we will return to, but there is not much evidence of

metaphysics in the writings of the two main protagonists (or any other contributors) in the debate, Peter French, representing the collectivist standpoint, and Manuel Velasquez, representing the individualist position.

French (1977) argues that corporations have goals, they have policies to achieve those goals and individual employees subordinate their own interests to those policies by adopting consistent patterns of behaviour. French takes J.K. Galbraith to be ‘quite literally correct’ when citing the economist’s view that:

From [the] interpersonal exercise of power, the interaction ... of the participants, comes the personality of the corporation. (French, 1977 reproduced in Hoffman and Frederick, 1995, p. 178)

As, ‘quite literally’ according to French, corporations have personalities it follows logically that they behave rationally with deliberate intentions, and therefore, they must be treated as morally responsible agents (this argument is fleshed out in French, 1995). The device that holds this argument up is what French calls the Corporate Internal Decision (CID) structure. The CID structure has two components that make it ‘real’; the roles and responsibilities represented as the organizational chart and the corporate rules and regulations presented as policy.

In effect, [the CID Structure] tells us what anyone who occupies any position is vis-à-vis the decision structure of the whole [...] Hence every corporation creates an image or a general policy, [...] the ‘basic belief of the corporation’, that must inform its decisions for them to be properly described as being those of that corporation. ‘The moment the policy is side-stepped or violated, it is no longer the policy of the company.’ (French, 1977 reproduced in Hoffman and Frederick, 1995, p. 178).

All of this makes it right and proper to hold an organization accountable for events occurring as a consequence of the actions of its employees so long as they result from the implementation of corporate policy.

In a recent article, Velasquez (2003), a long-time critic of French, sets out to ‘debunk’ the idea of corporate moral responsibility. He points out various

fallacies and fictions upon which the collectivist position depends; for instance, he pays close attention to what he considers to be flaws in logic. He says the collectivist argument comes down to:

- (1) If X has properties that cannot be attributed to its individual members, then X is a real individual entity distinct from its members.
- (2) But corporate organizations have properties that cannot be attributed to their members.
- (3) So the corporate organization is a real individual entity distinct from its members.

But Velasquez counters this by suggesting that there are elemental logical mistakes resting on two fallacies. The first false premise of this argument is based on the ‘fallacy of division’:

The logical fallacy of attributing the characteristics of a collection to one or more of its members. (Velasquez, 2003, pp. 539–540)

The second false premise lies in the fallacy that an agent and even a corporation is morally responsible for an act or event where they are causally responsible and also had the intention to so act, assuming such organizations can have intentions (Velasquez, 2003, p. 542). This premise also assumes that if an act or event cannot be predicated of an individual, then the individual cannot be causally responsible.

Intentionality

We consider Velasquez’ position to be valid and there are strong metaphysical doctrines that support the arguments of methodological individualism. One such doctrine, Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, and in particular the principle of intentionality, has the greatest potential to reinforce the individualist position whilst at the same time undermine the collectivists.

Both French and Velasquez discuss whether it makes sense to talk of corporations having intentions. French argues that it *is* meaningful, whereas Velasquez distinguishes between “as if” and “literal intrinsic” intentions, which begs the question if corporations do “intend” – are they acting “as if” they have intentionality or literally with it? (2003,

pp. 548–549). Concurring with Velasquez we would argue that there has to be a unity of consciousness – *the conscious perceiver* – to enable the self-reflexivity that makes intentionality meaningful. Therefore organizations can only act “as if” they have intention, and not literally.

There is a second, separate but related question that links to our earlier discussion of reification, and that is whether individuals can meaningfully direct their consciousness (emotions, attitudes, etc.) towards a corporation as an abstract entity? Valle et al. (1989, p. 11) point out that *intentionality* has a very particular meaning in the phenomenological sense, one that differs from the everyday notion of intention (as application of purpose and direction) used by French and Velasquez, although that everyday notion can form part of the phenomenological sense. In effect, the idea of *intentionality* refutes the premise that perceiving is a passive process; rather it is an active process:

which takes account of the intending, selecting, choosing and ordering capacities of the mind in the act of perception. (Bullock and Trombley, 1999, p. 435)

To clarify the matter more completely attention has to be directed to the twin concepts of *noesis* and *noema*. These concepts, when analysed closely, clearly stand as separate but they become almost seamlessly entwined in the actual act of intentional perception. At the risk of oversimplification we might say that *noema* represents the object of perception and *noesis* is the way in which that object is perceived. They possess a total inter-relatedness.

A key element of such inter-relatedness is the process of reflection that enables humans to move beyond merely passive perception. Thus, to use an often quoted example, during even the simple act of *seeing* a tree that is some distance away an individual will reflect on their understanding of ‘trees’ to fill in the perceptual gaps (as Husserl (1931, p. 260) refers to them) which exist within our sense data. So, the tree is seen as three dimensional as opposed to two dimensional, it is, therefore, possible to contemplate the branches that make it suitable for climbing and so on.

Crucially, phenomenology reflects on the premise that consciousness is directed outwards towards objects, and therefore, emphasises the active nature of perception. In particular, that consciousness of

objects is not passive, but a correlative interaction between subject (*noesis*) and object (*noema*), which endows the world with meaning. Thus, consciousness must be consciousness of something concrete, not abstract – consciousness must be *intentional*. To put this matter another way, in order to have consciousness of something we must be able to perceive it, either empirically or by its recreation in the imagination. Yet we cannot perceive or recreate ‘the corporation’ in this way. We can conjure up objects associated with ‘the corporation’ as conscious phenomena, such as the helpful colleagues, a pedantic supervisor, devious executives or even the suffocating regulations, but we cannot conjure up a perception of ‘the corporation’ *per se*.

If we take the counter argument, that humans do emotive towards abstractions, we find that ultimately these are perceived at the tangible level. Taking the instance of conscious intentionality and commitment towards ideas, such as commitment to a religion or ideology, then these are impossible to conceive of in the abstract, they lack meaning unless brought back to the concrete, for example, from anti-poverty to the notion of the starving person, from Christianity to the scriptures or God. What this means is that it is not viable to perceive and, therefore, intend towards anything other than concrete entities. It is meaningless to attribute or apply human attitudes or emotions, for instance, guilt, blame and so on, to an abstract entity such as a corporation and equally it is meaningless to suggest that humans emotive towards abstractions, even if they appear to do so, and act as if it were meaningful.

To sum up our argument here we are suggesting that corporations lack the unity of consciousness to enable self-reflexivity, identity and intention, and they also lack the tangible physicality of the object – ‘noema’, to enable individuals to direct their consciousness meaningfully towards them. The corporation, therefore, is better seen as a metaphor, analogy or projection in this realm (see, for example, Goodpaster and Matthews, 1982 or Morgan, 1997).

So far we have argued that applying the concept of identity to a corporation stretches the analogy to its limits, and in our discussion of corporate moral agency and intentionality that philosophically it is nonsensical even to talk of corporations possessing identity. Yet if we turn to the practical domain we face a number of other issues. Here we discuss three main areas wherein the notions of organizational

identity and corporate moral agency appear to have currency. The first relates to external relations and explores corporate social responsibility, particularly from an external communications perspective. We then turn to internal relationships and the issue of 'organizational commitment', and finally move onto an area that includes internal and external stakeholders, employees and consumers – the topic of health and safety. These three illustrative areas will help to clarify further the use and abuse of 'corporate identity' and 'corporate moral agency' with respect to the anthropomorphism of the organization.

Corporate identity and corporate social responsibility

The ethical issues regarding corporate identity are perhaps more easily identified when we consider organizational relations with external audiences. There are innumerable instances of organizations portraying themselves in one way but behaving in contradictory manner and we shall explore a few of them. However, what is difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate is the extent to which the manufacture of identity is intended as a deliberate smokescreen to mask morally dubious activities. The likelihood is that because a strong identity is believed to result in so many benefits to the organization those charged with communicating it will be active on numerous fronts.

Take McDonald's, for example. Here we have an organization with what appears to be the strongest imaginable corporate identity, from the iconographic 'golden arches', through the mythology of the McDonald brothers and Ray Kroc, to the employee 'crews' and the Hamburger University (Ritzer, 1996). A family oriented multinational company that through the quality of its product and service as well as its community schemes takes its social responsibilities seriously, and that is personified in Ronald McDonald and the fight with his nemesis The Hamburger. To suggest that such an identity was fashioned simply to conceal the type of issues brought to light by the now famous 'McLibel' case may be stretching a point, but there is little doubt that the image is at odds with much of the evidence. McDonald's have fought a variety of legal suits to silence its critics and those that made unfavourable

claims about the company (Schlosser, 2002, p. 246), and portray it in ways that are counter to the image it has manufactured. Their identity is nurtured and protected to the extent that 'counter' identities are dissolved. Today, McDonald's, like many corporations in the fast food industry, is attempting to invent a new identity as a nutritionally aware food producer. Not only then is identity something that is manufactured, but the identity in this case is pursued even through courts of law to protect the artifice. The fact that the identity is a fiction is made undiscussable.

Another industry that has been attacked more than most on its social responsibility record is the sports apparel and equipment industry. Perhaps because of its immense success Nike has come in for what some argue is more than its fair share (Kahle et al., 2000). Nike's external identity is perhaps best summed up by their slogan 'Just Do It', what appears to be a call to action aimed at each and every one of us. Nike certainly seems to be an organization with an emancipatory zeal, for instance, with its emphasis on the promotion of female participation in sport (although the social desirability of such promotion is undermined because it is mainly achieved through advertising – see Helstein, 2003; Lucus, 2000). However, the identity linked to emancipation is, many have argued, somewhat at odds with the experience of many especially female workers employed in Asian companies often under exclusive contract to Nike.

The allegations center on the notion that young workers are paid low wages to work long hours in unpleasant and unhealthy conditions. Reports have circulated of physical abuse and of exposure to toxic substances, such as the chemical solvents toluene and acetone, which can lead to serious health impairment, including birth defects. (Kahle et al., 2000, p. 44)

Once again, it is not just an issue of a fake or manufactured identity, but one which is at odds with experience, despite Nike's more recent attempts to develop their corporate social responsibility (Skapinker, 2005; Zadek, 2004).

In 1992 Ben and Jerry's and Body Shop were founder members of a group called 'Business for Social Responsibility' (BSR) along with 52 other ethically aware companies such as Levi Strauss and Stride Right. By 1995, through active recruitment,

the number had reached 800 associate corporations, many of which had received and continued to receive substantial criticism regarding the ethics of their activities, including The Gap, the Clorox Corporation, Starbucks, Taco Bell and even Monsanto (Stauber and Rampton, 1995, pp. 71–72).

Even if BSR was established with the best of intentions it is arguably now difficult to see it as anything beyond a public relations resource intended to bolster the identity of the connected companies (www.bsr.org – accessed 13th May 2005 – offers advisory services but consists mostly of press releases) – ethical by association and by dint of belonging to an organization with a favourable title (no credentials required to join). Perhaps more worryingly, though not all that surprisingly, the halo was slipping even from the leading lights. In 1994 Stride Right was criticised for shifting shoe production from economically depressed neighbourhoods in the U.S. to more affluent areas and low-wage economies overseas (Pereira, 1994 reproduced in Hoffman and Frederick, 1995). Furthermore:

Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream have found it easier to improve their image than it is to reconcile social responsibility with profitability [...] The gap between words and deeds actually became a major scandal for the Body Shop [...] To highlight its concern for indigenous cultures in the Third World, the Body Shop publicized its 'Trade Not Aid' program [...] In 1994, however, [Jon] Entine began a series of investigative reports and discovered that only a minuscule fraction of the Body Shop's ingredients come from Trade Not Aid. Entine also discovered that the company:

- used many outdated, off-the-shelf product formulas filled with nonrenewable petrochemicals;
- used animal-tested ingredients; and
- had a history of quality control problems, including selling products that were contaminated and contained formaldehyde. (Stauber and Rampton, 1995, pp. 73–74)

In external relations then, the image and identity of the corporation may be fictional on two counts, its anthropomorphism of identity, and the extent to which this portrayed identity accords with practice.

Reification, anthropomorphism and organizational commitment

We earlier mentioned the distinction between external and internal focus of identity programmes and we now turn our attention to the latter as we explore the notion of organizational commitment. We argue elsewhere that the concept of organizational commitment is as problematic as that of corporate identity, because the organization can no more be the *intentional* object of an attitude, such as commitment, than it can be in possession of an identity (Ashman and Winstanley, 2006). That is not to say that commitment cannot manifest itself in the workplace, but where it does, it is directed towards concrete entities such as colleagues or clients.

Nonetheless, corporations place great emphasis on managing and presenting an identity that signifies commitment. It has been maintained that appropriate workplace policies, for instance, High Commitment Management (HCM – Wood, 1996; Wood and de Menezes, 1998) and High Performance Work Practices (HPWPs – Huselid, 1995; Storey, 1992; Pfeffer, 1994) create the right organizational climate to bring about increased levels of commitment among employees, which in turn results in enhanced loyalty, attendance and productivity. Such practices as profit-sharing, career progression for all, permanent employment policy, designing jobs to ensure the full use of workers' abilities and no compulsory redundancy policy (Wood and Albanese, 1995, p. 225) contribute towards the creation of what Cullen et al. (2003) refer to as a benevolent ethical climate. The benevolent climate is characterised by a concern for others (colleagues, clients, communities), mutual attraction, cooperation and corporate support systems. They cite their own research to argue that a benevolent climate engenders commitment, whereas an egoistic climate lowers commitment. It is unsurprising that corporations attempt to incorporate benevolence as part of their identity management.

In truth the evidence to support the view that high commitment results in loyalty and high performance is patchy (Benkhoff, 1997; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990), but our concern here, from a moral perspective, is that the internally projected identity is at odds with the experience of many employees.

The precarious nature of employment within the *peripheral* labour force is well documented and encountered by many (Hutton, 1995; Legge, 1998; Sennett, 1999), but even what is considered to be the more privileged *core* labour force, is made to feel pressurised and insecure by corporate practices and policies that, ironically, are intended to establish and enhance organizational commitment. For instance, workplace policies promoting empowerment, involvement and autonomy, all typical of HCM and HPWP, in the final analysis can result in more demanding work regimes, longer hours and the threat of severance if the pace cannot be maintained. The strain in the workplace can spill over into home life, which further exacerbates the sense of insecurity as family members withdraw their support in the face of a partner, or parent who seems to be more committed to their corporation than their family. Within organizations the fear of losing one's job is often mistaken for commitment, and needless to say the two do not equate. Sennett (1999) has provided a good exposition of the corrosive effects of unmet expectations and unreciprocated commitment, as individuals are set adrift in flexible economies that expose them to greater and greater elements of risk:

Being continually exposed to risk can eat away at your sense of character. (1999, p. 84)

The exploration of organizational commitment suggests that it is not only in external marketing communications that the notion of a corporate identity is a manufactured and artificial construct, but is also one that may in effect be used as an internal act of deceit. Finally, we turn to the issue of health and safety where the ethical ramifications are obvious, but we discover that the notion of corporate moral agency complicates the attribution of blame and responsibility whilst, paradoxically, offering the best hope of compensatory justice.

Corporate moral agency and health and safety

To illustrate his support for corporate moral agency, Moore (1999, p. 329) cites a survivor of the King's

Cross underground fire, saying the following about London Transport:

"I think they are a wicked organization. I think their cumulative incompetence caused hell on earth on November 18, 1987. They've shown no remorse. They have no good will."

Such emotion is understandable but from a phenomenological perspective, somewhat empty. To attribute wickedness, remorse or good will to an abstract entity is misconceived and likewise the anger of the survivor appears directed at an organization he has no intentional consciousness of. He makes continual references to 'they' because as he reflects on his anger he recognises that the incompetence, lack of remorse and so on, is attached to real people. He may or may not know who those people are, as individuals, but they are actual people, making concrete decisions relating to the safety of London Underground passengers and they are responsible. On reflection they cannot hide behind the corporation. Hundreds of London Transport employees had no role in the decisions and events leading up to the King's Cross fire. Some who did have a part to play, perhaps did so unknowingly, but others, specific individuals making specific decisions, could be considered culpable, yet they were not the whole of the corporation, nor the corporation all of them.

Applying corporate moral agency can have the benefit, if translated into law, of enabling an individual to sue for substantive compensation from an organization, but also the disadvantage that we lose sight of the individual agent who is culpable. Velasquez (Velasquez, 1985, also Moore, 1999) distinguishes between moral, causal and compensatory responsibility, a distinction that could usefully be employed to distinguish between individual and corporate culpability and enable compensation from a corporation without denying the individual's role.

In the U.K., legislation is being planned to introduce the concept of 'corporate killing' to statute in response to the continuing inability to prosecute culpable parties beyond limited breaches of health and safety laws, for such disasters as the Herald of Free Enterprise ferry sinking, the King's Cross fire, the Clapham rail crash, the Southall rail crash and the Hatfield rail crash (information on the various

disasters, court cases and intended legislation drawn from various reports archived at www.bbc.co.uk/news and www.guardian.co.uk, accessed 6th May 2005). In each event the disaster was considered to be predictable and therefore, preventable. At the time of writing two cases of particular relevance are going through the British courts; the first is the prosecution of the Railtrack organization for the Hatfield crash; the second concerns Barrow Borough Council for a fatal outbreak of legionnaire's disease caused by an air conditioning unit that had not been maintained. The judges concerned have directed juries to acquit the organizations because the current law relating to corporate manslaughter cannot sustain the charges.

In both cases, however, prosecutions continue against a number of individuals believed directly to be involved in mismanagement leading to the deaths. What is interesting is that the proposed legislation on 'corporate killing' will be constituted so as to hold senior organizational executives responsible for deaths caused by their employees' actions or inaction. The legislation might seem like a shift away from individualism, because it seems to shift responsibility up the corporate ladder, but it is not as the focus is still the individual executive. In fact under French's theory of collective moral agency the legislation itself will be immoral unless the executives themselves can be demonstrated to have acted outside of the CID structure.

Velasquez (2003, pp. 534–535) makes the same point in his telling of the case of National Semiconductor, an American corporation that falsified records to cover up the inadequate testing of computer chips installed in defence systems, which had the potential for catastrophic consequences. A small number of managers made the decision to falsify documents and over 100 employees were complicit in the deception by actually falsifying documentation. However, considerable numbers of employees refused to fabricate records when ordered to do so. When the fraud came to light the U.S. Department of Defense wanted individuals to be punished to ensure they could no longer hold office of such responsibility, but the National Semiconductor CEO, in effect using French's collective moral agency argument, maintained successfully that it was unethical to blame individuals and that the company, as a company, alone

should be made to pay what amounted to \$1.75 million.

According to Velasquez (2003, pp. 535–537) the outcome of the case is morally perverse for four reasons. First, the perpetrators of the fraud suffered no meaningful consequences as a result of their actions. Second, the company fine, was not going to act as a deterrent to other corporations because the fraud had cost National Semiconductor much less than if they had tested the chips properly or been honest about the inadequate testing – acting illegally and putting perhaps millions of people in danger was the profitable thing to do. Third, many innocent people (employees who refused to fabricate records, company shareholders) were punished to the same degree as the guilty, and last, that the collective agency principle deflects attention from further wrongdoing because there is a sense that punishment has been administered.

An important point regarding the National Semiconductor case is that the prosecutor acting on behalf of the U.S. Defense Department wanted *both* the individuals *and* the corporation to be sanctioned for the crime. From an ethical perspective the individual perpetrators deserve to be punished and their punishment might act as a deterrent, whereas, from a practical point of view the corporation has the resources to compensate injured parties. It seems likely that U.K. 'corporate killing' legislation if it ever reaches statute will seek similar ends. Ultimately the law appears to acknowledge that morality can only be attached to individuals, whereas justice for victims may be better achieved in practice by penalising the corporation (even if some of the penalty falls on innocent stakeholders). It is not difficult to envisage how the manufacture of corporate identity may influence the attitudes of various stakeholders in their willingness, or otherwise, to accept blame and share responsibility. How that in turn might influence the behaviour of those same corporate stakeholders is difficult to say, but it would be an interesting field for future research.

Concluding remarks

This article has recommended caution in ascribing identity to the abstract corporation, because the

personification and reification of the organization has implications when issues of corporate moral agency and corporate responsibility are addressed. The ethicist is presented with a dilemma, because although, when it comes to intentional consciousness, it is nonsensical to talk of corporate identity, moral agency and responsibility, there are occasions when it is beneficial to treat these concepts as meaningful for social, political and economic reasons. There is also a sense that natural justice may better be served by invoking such ideas. A counter argument, however, might express concern regarding the potential for such notions to promote, or at least not deter, unethical behaviour from corporate decision makers. When Soares (2003) claims that the debate surrounding collective and individual agency amounts to a dual ontology contested between nominalists and realists he is mistaken, the debate surrounds what is ethical and pragmatic.

Ultimately, it is from the practical standpoint that the value of the corporate identity construct will be judged, which is why we highlight, invoking both practical and theoretical arguments, the potential for it to be used for morally disingenuous purposes. We have presented evidence that suggests the corporate identity construct is not benign and that there are potential ethical dangers. We are not suggesting that corporate leaders never set out with the best of intentions; the problem is that very quickly such intentions become so entwined with competing interests that they become lost to the point where an identity constructed along lines of social responsibility can be misleading and disingenuous.

Finally, the debate in this article has implications for researchers and academic commentators in this area. We would reassert the value of seeing 'corporate identity' as an anthropomorphism that is convenient, but represents an analogy, projection or metaphor only. If we lose sight of this then as academics we add to the confusion and misunderstand the nature of the ethical issues that can arise. Research into the affect that applying constructs such as corporate identity or corporate moral agency has on the attitudes and behaviours of corporate stakeholders certainly seems overdue.

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