# Book Reviews

John Elkington, *Cannibals With Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business*. Capstone, Oxford, 1997, 402 pp. ISBN 1-900961-27-X.

"Is it progress if a cannibal uses a fork?". Elkington believes, yes. The "cannibals" referred to are the business firms in our rapidly evolving capitalist economies, where it is the natural order of things for corporations to devour their competitors. The "fork" that the cannibals can use to progress into a new stage of civilization is the concept of sustainable business, and that is what the book is all about. Everyone will profit if the cannibals will adopt the fork: business itself, its shareholders, the stakeholders, society and the environment. "Sustainable business" is the new managerial paradigm that Elkington presents for the next century. The concept is not new, but has mostly been limited to environmental sustainable. *Cannibals With Forks* sets out to enlarge the concept, thus presenting a broad picture of what a social responsibility agenda for business should entail. Business is sustainable when it lives up to the "triple bottom line" of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social justice. The three bottom lines are interrelated, interdependent, and partly in conflict. Delivering against the triple bottom line requires of business a revolution of thinking and acting in no less than seven dimensions ("thinking in 7D"): markets, values, transparency, life-cycle technology, partnerships, time-perspective and corporate governance.

The book consists of four parts. Part I reviews progress to date in the "greening" of capitalism and explores some of the implications of the triple bottom for business. A question asked in this part is whether capitalism it itself sustainable. Although "capitalism and sustainability do not make easy bedfellows", capitalism can be as much the solution to the present sustainability crisis, as it is its cause. It will have to be. Fukuyamian in his evaluation of the historic role and place of political and economic liberalism, Elkington sees no ready alternative for capitalism. A sustainability agenda for the world economy in the next century will, realistically, have to be an agenda for a free market economy. The author is not pessimistic about capitalism's potential for sustainability: "Companies able to engage their stakeholders with a clear vision of their shared future and, in the process, to outperform their competitors against the triple bottom line will be much better placed to win people's hearts and minds – along with their money". There is more "realism" in the book; Elkington does not discard genetic modification of crops on beforehand, for example.

How to think in 7D? Part II gives answers. The first revolution focuses on the use of market mechanisms, rather that traditional command-and-control measures, to deliver improved performance against sustainability targets. Elkington depicts the sustainability challenge as an unprecedented source of commercial opportunity for competitive companies, through technological innovation and improved eco-efficiency. Those who grab the chance will thrive on the coming wave of sustainability; those who don't will lose. The second revolution involves values. The worst blind-sport business leaders suffer from is that the business of business is about the creation of economic value, and not about social or ethical values. Societies evolve in the direction of "softer" triple bottom line values; companies misreading this direction of flow risk running aground. Third comes the transparency revolution in our hyper-communicative societies. Companies live in a fish-bowl world. Their sustainability performance will increasingly be benchmarked and ranked by external watchers. Companies will face growing pressure for right-to-know legislation and new corporate governance rules. Some companies will respond by using communicative "stealth" technologies, designed to let them slip in under society's "radar". Others will see the need to integrate triple bottom the considerations in their strategies. Life-cycle technology, the fourth revolution, involves a shift from companies focusing on the acceptability of their products at the point of sale to their performance from cradle to grave. Partnerships between business and activist groups are the fifth revolution. Business and campaigning

organizations increasingly define the sustainability challenge as a common problem. The sustainability community will have to recognize that triple bottom line goals will have to be met by working with business, rather than against it. To deal with the longer term problems of sustainability, revolution number six involves time: business's time perspective will have to evolve from short term to longer term. Last but nor least, there is power at stake. Sustainable business requires new definitions of ownership rights in company assets, in the balance between shareholders and stakeholders. The seventh revolution, therefore, will be about corporate governance.

Part III pictures the contours of the sustainable corporation and some of the market changes needed to make it a reality. A practical guide to building a sustainable corporation is presented in the form of "thirty nine steps to sustainability", specifying each of the seven revolutions in several points. Specific policy changes are suggested for each step. The corporate governance revolution, for example, will require a shift from a focus on tangible, owned assets (e.g. mineral resources, forests) to intangible assets (e.g. intellectual capital) which are borrowed, leased or rented. The revolution in time perspective requires a change from planning strategies to scenario strategies and the transparency revolution requires that promises be replaced by verifiable sustainability targets. Elkington seems to reconsider his initial exclusive focus on business as the great change master towards sustainability, when he discusses institutions. At least three key institutional developments are critical: good laws and effective means for their enforcement, strong financial institutions, to encourage saving and channel it to its most productive activities and good government at both local and national levels. "We must", says Elkington, "rediscover the importance of politics and governance, helping to shape governments and policies which are anticipatory, market oriented, enterprising, and empowering, yet also prepared and able to care of the less privileged".

The fourth part brings the practical approach of the book another step forwards by presenting a "sustainability audit", although the word "audit" is overpromising. Elkington does not present a set of measuring instruments, built on what already exists in the field of environmental auditing and what is being developed in the filed of social and ethical accounting, auditing and reporting. Brief mention is made of impact assessment and life-cycle assessment methods. The "audit" in this book is in fact a helpful checklist, that summarizes the author's main points regarding the "seven revolutions" to sustainability, but it adds no information to what has been said before. Readers of the Journal of Business Ethics might consult the special issue on social and ethical accounting (vol. 17, no 13), to gain an impression of what a sustainability audit might look like.

The greatest merit of this book lies in the complexity of the problem constellation addressed, and the way in which the author presents problems, analyses them and points to directions where solutions might be found. Three revolutions, seven dimensions, thirty nine steps: this is definitely not another issue of the "managers quick fix to x"-series. Elkington is very much aware of two facts: a turnaround towards sustainable business is urgent, and it will be very difficult. It will be difficult, firstly, because the market economies of the future will be increasingly chaotic, amidst an unsettled political environment. This does not seem to be a good starting point for the careful, long term approach that sustainability requires. The author hopes and "intuits" that, somehow, the very economic forces of competition and "corporate cannibalism", if directed and inspired by the right values, will also be the sources of innovative sustainable entrepreneurship. The book presents many cases of highly competitive and value driven companies that are at the same time fore runners in sustainable business. So, the message is, it can be done. The second reason why the sustainability turnaround will be difficult involves interdependencies between the three bottom lines. Elkington refers to the areas of overlap between the three bottom line dimensions as "shear zones". Each shear zone contains specific problems and conflicts. The shear zone between environmental and social objectives, for example, involves the problem of "environmental justice".

Environmental burdens are unevenly distributed among people, economically and socially deprived groups often being relatively more disadvantaged by environmental problems than others.

Elkington demonstrates an impressive capacity for complexity, but at some points this may turn against his objective to motivate the business community for sustainability. The author owns it partly to himself that the book leaves the reader overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues at stake, in a way that may make some resign before the immense challenges put to them. Where to start? The book presents the seven revolutions to sustainability as a millenarian event that will once again turn everything upside down in an already disordered world of business. This reminded me of the words of Paul Ricoeur, who once said that reform is much more productive, but also much more difficult, than revolution. The book has a strong focus on discontinuity, as has been the characteristic of all millenarian movements in history. But millenarian movements have always been short lived, died from motivational exhaustion. In the end, the Messiah never comes. Activists for sustainability, like Elkington, should be careful to avoid the motivational trap of millenarianism by overstretching their conceptions of the future. Where to connect the conceptions of a sustainable world to positive developments that are already under way? What meaningful and feasible first steps of improvement could business take for a start? The impact of the book could have benefited from a more systematic dealing with reform, rather than revolution.

Elkington fancies metaphor, rhetoric and symbolism. He wants to persuade his audience, rather than engage in discussions with academic peers. But it is visionary work, innovative, intellectually challenging, based on extensive literature research, as well as on the author's broad experience as an activist and as a consultant in the field op sustainable business for some of the worlds largest companies. The book is unique in its broad perspective on the interrelated problems of wealth creation, environmental care and social justice. Recommended to everyone involved in the social responsibility of business and everyone committed to making business ethics practical.

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## Why are there so many business ethics textbooks?

Jim Grote and John McGeeney, *Clever as Serpents: Business Ethics and Office Politics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), pp. viii, 149.

This remarkable little volume might well be overlooked in the burgeoning business ethics textbook market. Published as a one-time effort in the field by a "religious" publisher and poorly promoted, this book nevertheless offers a quietly compelling contribution to understanding the triumph of "free market" capitalism and its ethical characteristics.

The book is divided into two parts: theory and practice. The theory is not, however, exactly what most business ethicists might expect. There is no presentation of standard ethical frameworks such as consequentialism, deontologism, virtue ethics, and the like. Instead, the introduction to theory begins with a contrast between Aristotle and Dilbert. Aristotle proclaims that "Human beings are rational animals." By contrast, Dilbert thinks "People are idiots." Grote and McGeeney at first side with Dilbert, agreeing that if people are rational it is certainly not in any straightforward Aristotelian sense. But then they set out to defend Aristotle by noting that business rationality is dependent more on certain myths than any syllogistic logic.

Indeed, there are, according to the authors, two key myths: the myth of the free market and the myth of competition. The so-called free market is in reality a structured market, politically ordered in particular ways. Adam Smith's oft-cited "invisible hand" can go to work only when defended by an "iron fist" of government regulation. The idea that competition increases