
Kierkegaard and Leadership Theory, a Radical Reappraisal

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A COMMENTARY ON Vivi Storsletten and Ove Jakobsen (2015), “Development of Leadership Theory in the Perspective of Kierkegaard’s Philosophy,” *J Bus Ethics* 128(2): 337–349, <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2106-y>

ABSTRACT

Storsletten and Jakobsen (2015) try to integrate the instrumental, responsible, and spiritual positions in leadership studies with Kierkegaard’s aesthetic, ethical, and religious modes of existence. Their combination of leadership theory and Kierkegaardian thought, however, seems deeply problematic. In particular, the instrumental-aesthetic and responsible-ethical connections appear weak or at least significantly underdeveloped, and the spiritual-religious connection seems logically inconsistent.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD’S WORK on spiritual development has had a deep and lasting influence on philosophical and religious thought. Storsletten and Jakobsen (2015) argue that bringing together prominent positions in leadership theory (instrumental, responsible, and spiritual positions) with Kierkegaard’s “stages on life’s way” (aesthetic, ethical, and religious modes of existence) yields a radical and much needed change to the way that we view the relationship between business, culture, and the natural environment. There are some concerns with each of their respective connections. In particular, there are good

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reasons to doubt that persons in Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical modes of existence would respectively prefer the instrumental and responsible leadership positions over other alternatives. More serious concerns arise when one considers the spiritual-religious connection. Storsletten and Jakobsen ground spirituality in a Gaian form of deep ecology, which values the larger, organic system or whole over each individual entity, species, or eco-system. At the same time, Kierkegaard's anthropocentric ethic unequivocally places the value of each individual human being over and above any earthly system. The spiritual (Gaian) – religious (Kierkegaardian) connection thus seems logically incompatible.

Leadership Theory and Kierkegaard's Modes of Existence

Storsletten and Jakobsen (2015)² try to connect Kierkegaard's "stages of life," each relating to a "mode of existence," with three major positions in leadership theory. The instrumental position in leadership studies emerges from the shareholder theory of the firm (346). On this theory, the corporate objective function is to maximize profits or other measures of shareholder value. The archetype for the manager is "economic" man (346), who utilizes scientific, hierarchical, and authoritarian systems of control to extract as much financial value from others as they can (340). Storsletten and Jakobsen utilize Milton Friedman's "shareholder-centric" view as a paradigmatic example. The authors then surmise that a person in Kierkegaard's "aesthetic" mode of existence would be attracted to this position. After all, they infer, the aesthete is not concerned with lasting ethical commitments, but would rather try to reflectively and calculatedly satisfy their own, immediate egoistic desires, of which money and material possessions are main drivers (338). Accordingly, since the aesthete concentrates all of his or her energy on increasing "egocentric utility," leaders in Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage would prefer and "are well suited for working within the instrumental position of leadership" (342).

One wonders, however, why the aesthete would prefer working within the instrumental form of leadership. If an aesthete is egoistically driven then he or she would presumably only try to maximize company profitability when it is perceived to be in his or her own best

² Parenthetical page references not otherwise attributed are to Storsletten and Jakobsen, "Development of Leadership Theory in the Perspective of Kierkegaard's Philosophy" (2015).

interest to do so; otherwise, they would likely exploit shareholder trust. In exploiting shareholder trust the aesthete would in fact then be violating their moral and legal/fiduciary obligations owed to shareholders. These obligations are other-serving and require that managers, in one way or another, put shareholder interests ahead of their own interests, at least where their own interests may unfairly undermine shareholder value. So, if an aesthete is egoistically driven, why would they gravitate towards a shareholder oriented form leadership that requires them to quell egoistic pursuits? Additionally, Kierkegaard often characterizes the aesthete as reveling in or losing themselves in the romantic freeness of their spirit (à la Don Quixote). As such, work for the aesthete is at best a “dismal necessity” and constitutes the “shabby side” of one’s existence (Kierkegaard 1987: 282, 291). Though an aesthete may need to work, they would likely seek to do the absolute bare minimum. As such, the aesthete does not seem to be “well suited” for an instrumental, profit maximization, and control-oriented leadership style. Would the aesthete not resent hierarchical systems of control as an affront to their freedom? May they not try to ironically undermine these systems of control?

Different from the instrumental position, the responsible position in leadership emerges from a stakeholder- and values-based approach to management (Storsletten and Jakobsen 2015: 340). From these perspectives, value is created by positively cultivating and sustaining meaningful and cooperative relationships with multiple groups – shareholders, employees, consumers, and communities alike – each with legitimate pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests. As opposed to controlling behavior in a managerial and hierarchical fashion (the instrumental position), responsible leaders and managers tend to establish and promote common values and an overall shared and participatory organizational ethos. The archetype is not “economic man,” but rather “social man” (346). Storsletten and Jakobsen maintain that a leader in Kierkegaard’s “ethical” stage of life would be “well adjusted” to the responsible position in leadership studies. The ethical person “accepts the duties and obligations characterizing social institutions and the local culture” and wholeheartedly tries to cultivate a strong sense of ethical integrity (342). Living an ethical life in accordance with universally (or at least generally) accepted values and norms is more important than satisfying fleeting and mere superficial whims and one’s egoistic interests. The ethical person’s “yearning” to

commit to an ethical existence with normative significance, and not just a useful or expedient existence, would make them a committed, responsible leader.

Yet, the connection between the responsible position and the ethically driven individual also seems a bit stretched. As mentioned, the instrumental, shareholder- and profit-driven, position is decidedly normative. Shareholders are argued to have strong proprietary rights. Managers have a fiduciary obligation to advance shareholder interests, and in maximizing corporate wealth, are said to best promote overall, social well-being. Additionally, there are certain virtues, such as loyalty, honesty, courage, and integrity, which would enable a manager to flourish in their agential role. The shareholder-centric view is thus supported on rights, consequentialist, and virtue-based grounds. So, couldn't a person in the ethical stage of existence just as well commit to an instrumental and normative form of leadership with the same dedication and fervor that another ethical person would have towards a stakeholder, participative, or value-based position? After all, the crux of the ethical position in Kierkegaard is to will to live one's life in normative terms and commit one's self to one's social role, the emphasis being on "will" and "commitment" rather than on the specific moral content of one's social position.

The spiritual position in leadership differs from both the instrumental and ethical views. Although Storsletten and Jakobsen do not offer a clear definition of "spirituality," they tend to characterize it in the following way. Spirituality involves experiencing an intuitive and deeply meaningful relationship to some form of higher reality through which we are all connected and interdependent. Accordingly, a "holistic perspective is essential to the spiritual position" (347). The holistic perspective that they advance extends from the Gaian hypothesis. Briefly, the Gaian hypothesis is that Earth functions as a dynamic, living organism whose complex processes maintain the homeostatic conditions necessary for its ongoing survival. Viewing the ultimate ground of our being as Gaia, a single living entity, requires us to turn from "economic" and "social" man to "cosmic man," and look for solutions that bring business and culture into a larger organic community. If successful, the end result would be a state of happiness, peace, and harmony (348). Storsletten and Jakobsen find that Kierkegaard's characterization of religious existence helps to fortify this

view. Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" towards a religious perspective requires that one suspend their attachment to the social world and put themselves in a position to view the spiritual interconnectedness, unity, and coherence of our existence, ultimately in and through God's eternal love. This "radical" change in reference would promote a fundamental change in mindset and help one to creatively envision fundamental changes to the way we think, live, and engage in business (342). In the end they surmise that persons "anchored in the religious mode of existence" would "tend to prefer the spiritual position" (341) and "leaders with consciousness of the spiritual-religious perspective will focus on Gaia, including networks of all living entities on the Earth, more than on the single organization" (347).

There are significant problems, however, with the spiritual (Gaian) – religious (Kierkegaardian) connection; more serious, I think, than the two previous connections. First, Kierkegaard (1980: 16) believes in the reality of hereditary sin and the idea that in our fallen state the ideality of ethics and the harmonization of the earthly and the eternal can never be fully realized; we simply cannot achieve the "highest" in this world (Kierkegaard 1991: 80). The idea that the goal of our earthly existence is to coalesce with a greater organic and holistic entity and that we will then experience a sense of happiness, peace, and harmony is anathema to Kierkegaard. In fact, spiritual development for Kierkegaard (1991: 88) is a path that ought to be fraught with "fear and trembling," and while God's love may bring hope and sustenance, we will undoubtedly experience guilt, suffering, and anxiety. While the spiritual leaders that Storsletten and Jakobsen draw upon regard guilt, suffering, and anxiety as "negative emotions" (Fry 2003: 693), Kierkegaard thinks that these experiences, when transformed by faith, are essential for authentic spiritual awakening and development (Evans, 1990: 64–65). Second, main proponents of the Gaian view instruct us to always "think of Gaia first" and stress that our "primary obligation is to the living Earth" and our obligation to "human kind comes second" (Lovelock 2007: 151, 129). Accordingly, the whole or the larger organic unity is greater than any discrete part, individual, or species. Kierkegaard's (1991: 88–92) decidedly anthropocentric ethic, however, most clearly stresses the eternal, equal, and priceless dignity of each and every individual human being over and above the value of any earthly system. The fundamental importance is a single individual's relationship to the absolute (for

Kierkegaard, a Christian, loving God) and not to any form of earthly unity, organic, civil, religious, environmental, or otherwise. So there seems to be a logical contradiction in their spiritual–religious position, as one cannot simultaneously place Gaia above the individual and at the same time the individual above Gaia. To argue that if one loves human beings, then one ought to “think of Gaia first,” would not resolve the matter, because it would then make love for human beings conditional. This is something that Kierkegaard would never concede.

Conclusion

Though Kierkegaard’s work is unfortunately underrepresented in the workplace spirituality and leadership literature, Storsletten and Jakobsen’s characterization seems problematic. At best, the instrumental–aesthetic and responsible–ethical connections seem weak or at least underdeveloped, and at worst the spiritual–religious connection seems logically inconsistent and may have the effect of critically distorting Kierkegaard’s views on ethics, religion, and society.

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