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Dealing with moral values in pluralistic working environments

by

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Abstract:

The aim of this dissertation is to assist managers to deal with moral values in such a way that both the right of the individual to unique moral views, and the needs of the organization to create unity and cooperation among its members, are respected. In order to meet this challenge, a fundamental change is needed in the way diversity within pluralistic environments is understood. Diversity should not be understood as something that exists among distinct groups, but rather as something that exists among individuals and also within individuals. The individual, as moral *bricoleur*, draws on a variety of value-systems that form part of his or her unique distributed identity and is influences by a wide variety of contextual factors. When dealing with moral values in the South African workplace, one needs an ethical approach that can accommodate the unique and contextual character of decisions made by *moral bricoleurs*. In evaluating existing approaches, it becomes clear that many of those commonly used cannot meet this challenge, because of its universalist, acontextual premises. This dissertation develops an alternative approach for dealing with moral values in pluralistic working environments by drawing on insights from twentieth century philosophy. In order to address the needs of contemporary organizations, these philosophical insights are used to inform the development of a framework for dealing with moral values in this specific context. The implications of this framework for contemporary South African organizations will be illustrated by discussing a few case studies in which Christian managers have to deal with moral values in pluralistic working environments.

Opsomming:

Die doel van hierdie proefskrif is om bestuurders te help om morele waardes so the hanteer dat beide die reg van die individu op 'n eie morele standpunt, sowel as die behoefte van die organisasie om eenheid en samewerking te verseker, gerespekteer word. Ten einde hierdie doel te bereik, moet die verskynsel van diversiteit binne pluralistiese werksomgewings anders verstaan word as wat gebruiklik is in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks. Diversiteit bestaan nie soseer tussen unieke groepe nie, maar eerder tussen unieke individue en ook binne die unieke individu self. The individu, as morele *bricoleur*, put uit 'n verskeidenheid van waarde-stelsels wat deel uitmaak van sy of haar "verspreide identiteit" en word ook deur verskeie faktore beïnvloed. Wanneer dit dus gaan oor die hantering van morele waardes in die Suid-Afrikaanse werksplek, is 'n etiese benadering nodig wat voorsiening kan maak vir die eiesoortige en kontekstuele aard van die morele *bricoleur* se morele besluite. Indien bestaande etiese benaderings aan hierdie kriterium gemeet word, skiet dit dikwels te kort, vanweë die universalistiese, akontekstuele premisse daarvan. Hierdie proefskrif ontwikkel 'n alternatiewe benadering tot die hantering van morele waardes in pluralistiese werksomgewings deur te put uit insigte van die twintigste eeuse filosofie. Ten einde die behoeftes van kontemporêre organisasies aan te spreek, word hierdie insigte benut om 'n raamwerk daar te stel van die hantering van morele waardes in hierdie konteks. Die implikasies van hierdie raamwerk vir kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse organisasie sal geïllustreer word deur 'n bespreking van drie gevallestudies waarin Christen bestuurders gemoeid is met die hantering van morele waardes in die werksplek.

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Prologue:

A prologue is characteristically a space utilized to share joys, struggles and regrets encountered in the process of producing a text. I will start with the hardships and end with the joys, even though they can hardly be distinguished from one another completely.

A dissertation represents a site of struggle. It is a struggle where new literature, disciplines, and interpretations meet one's own horizon with brutal force. This struggle seemed more intense in this dissertation than in any of my other projects. This could be due to the scope of this study, or due to the fact that I wrote the greatest part of this text in a foreign country. But I suspect the struggle was so intense because of the nature of the discipline I engaged in. Business ethics and theology are indeed strange bedfellows. Since I now have the opportunity to present certain disclaimers, I would like to indicate how the encounter between these unique disciplines shaped the development of this text.

I wrote this text as a theologian and as a philosopher, which in itself is sometimes considered an odd combination. Business ethics however presented unique challenges to my theological and philosophical sensibilities. Business ethics does not belong to any one discipline, it draws on many, yet precisely because of this fact, it often confronts one with ambiguity. On the one hand, my philosophical background informed my conviction that essentialist groups and totalizing moral structures are outdated attempts at making morality predictable and controllable. I therefore never believed that something such as "A (uniform) Christian viewpoint" exists. Christian morality represents variations as diverse as the individuals adhering to the Christian faith. On the other hand, as a theologian, I would like to believe that my studies could inform the way in which Christians deal with moral issues in their workplaces. The places in which Christians work are characterized by diversity. But once again my philosophical background taught me that this diversity exists not only amongst groups, but among individuals, and even within individuals themselves - even within Christians themselves. I also strongly believe that Christians should engage in moral dialogue with Others, something that in the South African pluralistic environment, cannot be done solely along religious lines.

The result is a dissertation that is a unique combination of things. It attempts to marry philosophical insights with the contingencies of everyday business practice, in a way that would inform Christians about how moral values should be dealt with in the workplace. I could not write an honest dissertation in which I confidently develop "A Christian perspective" while I believe that no such thing exists. Furthermore, I thought the most valuable thing for Christians to learn is to acknowledge and respect difference within others and within themselves. The framework that I develop is one that wants to acknowledge the contingent character of moral truths, the network of moral values that infuse our moral decision-making, and the importance of valuing Otherness within our pluralistic working environments. I believe that Christian managers can fruitfully apply these insights, as will be illustrated in chapter 6.

The struggle did however bring many joys as well. One of the most precious gains was being able to spend ten months doing doctoral research in the U.S. Being able to spend time in The United States provided me with the necessary opportunity to reflect on our unique problems and gather invaluable international knowledge and perspectives. It also gave me exposure to concrete business ethics practices in the U.S. In this regard I want to thank Dr. Michael Hoffman and all the people at the Center for Business Ethics in Waltham, MA. for their incredible support during my stay in America. Not only did they embrace me, the Other, as friend and 'family', they also allowed me to become a colleague and associate in their projects.

I want to thank the Fulbright Commission for supporting my studies towards the Graduate Certificate in Business Ethics in the U.S. and for exposing me to the incredible "Fulbright experience". Further funding was provided by the NFR Doctoral Scholarship for research abroad and a Mellon Foundation Mentoring grant. No one scholarship could afford me enough time to finish this project – I am therefore indebted to these institutions for their combined support. A mentoring project is impossible without a mentor and I was fortunate to have Prof. Etienne de Villiers as mentor, father-figure and advisor. His criticism was relentless, but so was his ongoing support and encouragement. In combination these

elements contributed greatly to the completion of this project. I would also like to thank the managers who were interviewed as part of this study. Their generous help and valuable inputs made a considerable contribution to this dissertation.

Many have told me that writing a dissertation is the loneliest experience one will ever encounter. Spending hours on end writing cannot be a social affair. However, I was fortunate in having an incredible group of people cheering me on. In this regard, my parents, friends and colleagues all contributed much in terms of encouraging e-mails, conversation, and above all, their firm belief in my academic potential. Thank you.

The last bit of space of this prologue belongs to the person who with his incredible Otherness, created many of the why-questions that initiated this project. Through his endless support, conversation, editing and proof-reading, he also provided many of the hows. Arno, thank you for questioning with me, struggling with me and sticking by me.