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The Moral Imperatives of Humanistic Management

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Abstract
I discuss the nature of the moral imperatives that Humanistic Management seems to propose. In particular I discuss whether Humanistic Management should be seen as an inspirational invitation to reimagine how organizations could be conceived and practiced or as a mode of organizing which is mean to replace our current forms of organizing and which we have a moral imperative to adopt.

Keywords Humanistic Management · Morality · Dignity

Overview

Humanistic Management, with its emphasis on restoration, protection, and promotion of dignity, helps us to reorient the way business is conceived and practiced, opening up valuable avenues for research, teaching, and practice. “Dignity and the Process of Social Innovation: Lessons from Social Entrepreneurship and Transformative Services for Humanistic Management” (Pirson et al. 2019) provides a helpful and succinct summary of the core tenets of Humanistic Management and articulates how these tenets may enrich and be enriched by social entrepreneurship and transformative services.

Humanistic Management is portrayed by the authors as an “alternative model” to the “economistic model,” one that aligns with the “growing interest in new organizational forms and activities that focus on improving the human and, inextricably related, ecological condition” (Pirson et al. 2019). The focus on human dignity is meant to align with efforts to “amplify a concern for human beings, engender greater respect for people and their aspirations, and improve conditions that allow individuals to live with greater well-being” (Pirson et al. 2019). The moral undertones are pervasive throughout the paper. Humanistic Management is positioned as an alternative that seeks to correct the economistic’s neglect of “ethical, social, and developmental aspects of human nature”, the “instrumentalization of human beings” and the “de-ethicalization (or de-moralization) of management theory” (Pirson et al. 2019). Close connections are drawn with Transformative Services, an approach

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that, according to the authors, proposes "that social innovation in services is becoming an imperative [a moral imperative] when there is a dignity gap" (Pirson et al. 2019).

In what follows I want to discuss the nature of the moral imperatives that Humanistic Management seems to propose. In particular I want to discuss whether Humanistic Management should be seen as an inspirational invitation to reimagine how organizations could be conceived and practiced or as a mode of organizing which is mean to replace our current forms of organizing and which we have a moral imperative to adopt.

Perfect Obligations, Imperfect Obligations, and Supererogatory Actions

To address this issue, I would like to bring to bear a traditional distinction within moral philosophy between three types of moral actions and obligations: perfect obligations, imperfect obligations, and supererogatory actions (Beauchamp 2019; Heyd 2019; Hill 1971; Rainbolt 2000). While philosophers have not always been consistent in how they use these three labels,[1] it has been relatively standard to identify perfect obligations with obligations that require compliance without exception, imperfect obligations with obligations that allow for latitude and discretion concerning their fulfillment, and supererogatory actions with actions that are very highly regarded from a moral point of view but which are not morally required. The duty not to murder an innocent person is an example of a perfect obligation; everyone is bound by this duty, and this duty should be discharged in every occasion. The wide duty of charity is an example of an imperfect obligation; it is morally wrong to never engage in acts of charity (i.e., charity is an obligation), but one has a substantial degree of latitude to determine when to engage in acts of charity, whom to benefit with these acts, and how to perform them. Heroic sacrifices are frequent examples of supererogatory acts; while they are not morally required, they are highly valued from a moral perspective.

This threefold distinction can help us to better identify the specific nature of the moral obligation to restore, protect, and promote human dignity.

Arguably, respecting the dignity of others is a perfect obligation. Everybody deserves to have its dignity respected, and no one is entitled to violate someone else's dignity. Individuals are morally required to respect each other's dignity, and such an obligation does not afford much leeway or discretion. "Respecting" dignity (a term the authors do not explicitly discuss) provides a helpful concept to disambiguate between two kinds of moral obligation that may be associated with "restoring dignity." Because individuals have a perfect obligation to respect human dignity, they are morally required to restore it when their own actions have violated it. In particular, individuals who violate the dignity of their employees have a perfect obligation to restore it. Because these cases of "restoring dignity" belong to the category of perfect duties, they provide a very strong moral imperative to fulfill them.

But not all cases of "restoring dignity" are cases of perfect duties. Take the obligation to restore the dignity of another party whose loss of dignity is not the result of one's actions. This obligation should not be seen as a perfect obligation but as an imperfect one. It is immoral never to try to restore the dignity of others; we have an obligation to do so. But we are not required to always and on every occasion be working towards this goal. If this obligation was perfect, it would require individuals to restore the dignity of others whenever

[1] See Mejia (2019, p. 540) and Rainbolt (2000, pp. 233–4) for a discussion of the variety of such uses in the scholarship.

they had the opportunity to do so. And given that we almost always can devote our efforts to this cause, it would constitute an extremely demanding (and thereby undesirable) moral norm. Moral obligations should allow space for individuals to pursue their own individual projects and well-being. Just like there is such a thing as "having done enough" when it comes to beneficence, so does there seems to be such a thing as "having done enough" when it comes to restoring other people's dignity.

While there are conceivable cases where "protecting dignity" may exemplify a perfect obligation (for instance, when one has reason to believe that without this protection to a particular party one may end up violating this party's dignity), most examples of the "protection of dignity" discussed by the authors are cases of imperfect obligations. Likewise, the imperative to "promote human dignity," will frequently instantiate an imperfect obligation. To never try to promote human dignity constitutes a moral fault; it shows a lack of acknowledgment concerning its value and importance. Mohhamad Yunus' decision to serve poor Bangladeshi workers with loans that "provide these workers freedom and dignity by paying off their loans" and his attempt to "restore and protect" such dignity (Pirson et al. 2019) should be seen as instances where restoring and protecting dignity discharged an imperfect obligation.

The authors seem to propose that there is a certain logical and temporal order in the sequence: "restoration", "protection," and "promotion" of dignity. They appear to suggest that to protect dignity you first have to restore it, and that it is only when you already protect it that you should go on to promote it. If this is correct, then it entails that there is a certain logical and temporal priority between restoration, protection, and promotion of dignity and, because of this, that the obligations to fulfill these duties will be less stringent as you move along this spectrum. The imperative to restore dignity will be stronger than the imperative to protect it, and this latter imperative will be stronger than the obligation to promote dignity.

It is worth mentioning that there will also be instances where restoring, protecting, and promoting human dignity constitute examples of supererogatory actions. For instance, when the efforts to restore, protect, and promote human dignity impose significant costs or risks to those involved in these efforts. We highly value them from a moral point of view, but given the high costs and risks associated with them, we should not consider them morally *required*.

An Aspiration to Organize Differently or a Replacement to Current Forms of Organizing?

According to the authors, "[p]roponents of Humanistic Management argue that organizing practices, no matter what provenance (market or administrative or otherwise), could and should centrally focus on the protection of dignity and the promotion of well-being" (Pirson et al. 2019). Some of their citations seem to suggest that dignity should be a core organizing pillar and play a central foundational concept in our organizing practices (Pirson et al. 2019).

How are we to interpret these claims? What does it entail to say that dignity should be a "central focus," a "central pillar," or a "foundational concept" of our organizing practices? Does it mean that the activities of all the individuals within every organization should be effectively oriented towards restoring, protecting, and promoting human dignity? Or does it mean that while an organization need not be focused on these goals, it is nevertheless required to recognize the inherent and unconditional value of human dignity and, thereby,

to ensure that its activities do not lead to the violation of human dignity and do not interfere with efforts (internal or external to the organization) to restore, protect, and promote it.

The authors appear to suggest the former given that in all their examples restoring, protecting, and promoting human dignity is the explicit focus of the organization's efforts. I am not sure that this conclusion is warranted. As I have suggested, most cases of restoring, protecting, and promoting the dignity discharge imperfect obligations. As imperfect obligations they require individuals to find ways to fulfill them (i.e., find ways to restore, protect, and promote dignity). But because they are imperfect, they provide individuals with leeway about when and how to fulfill them. Because they is an imperfect obligation they will not, typically, require individuals to make dignity the main focus of their lives or of their organizing efforts. It would be legitimate (morally legitimate) to discharge any of these imperfect obligations in one's spare time or through one's private efforts. Because they are imperfect obligations, they afford latitude and, thereby, would not require us to fulfill them in any specific form. In particular they would not require us to fulfill them within a particular organization to which one belongs.

If this is correct, it entails that Humanistic Management should be conceived as an inspirational and aspirational model and not as a model that one is morally required to adopt. If it is unwarranted to require everyone to make the restoration, protection, and promotion of dignity as a central focus of their lives, then it is unwarranted to demand that every organization does it.

Humanistic Management provides a very inspiring model of organizing. As the authors compellingly argue in their paper, it can help social entrepreneurs identify higher forms of organizing. I wish there were more organizations structured around this model and more entrepreneurs who followed it. But Humanistic Management seems to inspire in the way that certain moral heroes inspire. These heroes deserve our highest respect and admiration. But even if their heroic actions are worthy of emulation, we would go too far in our moral demands if we portray them as morally required. Thus, while Humanistic Management provides an elevated and higher model of human organizing, while it is morally admirable to organize in this fashion, we should recognize that these higher moral standards should not be conceived as a moral imperative.

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