



# Peter Drucker's leap *to* faith

## Examining the origin of his purpose-driven life and its impact on his views of management

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to identify and interpret the spiritual foundation that permeates all Drucker's contributions, and to show that his convictions served as his internal compass, thus helping him to develop and articulate a coherent and unequivocally ecological view of the nature of management.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper makes use of primary data by focusing on Drucker's published works, as well as private correspondence found at the online Drucker Archives of the Drucker Institute in Claremont Graduate University. It also makes use of materials written about Drucker and his views by former students and colleagues.

**Findings** – The paper presents Drucker as a lifelong learner, as the excellent student who used his personal lens to observe, synthesize, and purposefully distil his experiences into what would become the practice of management. The paper examines his contributions to the field of management from a personal perspective by presenting Drucker as the spiritual philosopher, the social ecologist, the learning teacher, and the refracting bystander.

**Practical implications** – The paper suggests that Drucker's views achieve greater clarity, poignancy, and relevance when contextualized within his personal philosophy. This foundation humanizes his phenomenal contributions, and increases respect for a man who exemplified what he preached.

**Originality/value** – Presenting Drucker as a pragmatist alone devalues his overall contributions to management and society. In an era of reported spiritual decline and commodization of the individual, Drucker's spiritually-aligned contributions remind readers that doing the "right thing" is both simple and complicated, but always a timeless human right and responsibility.

**Keywords** Philosophy, Knowledge management, Ecology, Learning, Teaching

**Paper type** Research paper

The last clear definite function of man – muscles aching to work, minds aching to create beyond the single need – this is man [...] For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 154).

### Introduction

When John Steinbeck wrote these words in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), almost 70 years ago, the journey of the Joad family illustrated the *Gestaltic* relationship between work and the individual. In the novel, Steinbeck's characters worked to preserve their human dignity, but also to transcend spiritually. As in Steinbeck's masterpiece, Drucker's work constantly highlights the spiritual connection between individuals and their contributions to society. For both authors, these contributions are the key to a



socially responsible life, as they must synthesize into positive interdependence the tension existing between the individual and the collective. Drucker, specifically, saw this synthesis as a source of power and social order because, by channelling knowledge into performance, he believed that people advance their spiritual selves and improve the world's social justice (Drucker, 1959, 1986).

In *The Practice of Management*, for example, Drucker explained that aiming for a "whole that is greater than the sum of the parts has since Plato's days been the definition of the 'good society'" (Drucker, 1986, pp. 12-13). Achieving this *Gestaltic* whole, however, is not possible unless the parts are motivated into concrete action by a sense of integrity of character, individual responsibility, and a desire to contribute to the whole. That is why Drucker assigned great importance to the parts, for "to get out more than is being put in is possible only in the moral sphere" (Drucker, 1986, p. 146). It is precisely this sense of individual responsibility that makes him conceptualize management the way he does: as the means to achieve a fulfilled and authentic life (Drucker, 1974). For Drucker, managerial practices must be founded in individual integrity and morality, which are the only ways to make the spirit tangible and concrete, and which, at the end of the day, define Drucker's idea of what a manager truly is (1986).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relevance of Drucker's spirituality in his work. More concretely, it aims to identify and interpret spirituality as the foundation that permeates all of Peter Drucker's contributions. The paper also shows how his convictions served as his internal compass and thus helped him to develop and articulate a coherent, unequivocally ecological focus regarding the nature of work and the worker. Through his published works, private memoranda and personal letters, and the views of former students and colleagues, the paper presents Drucker as a life-long learner; an excellent student who used his personal lens to observe, synthesize, and purposefully distill his diverse experiences into what would become the practice of management. Drucker's dimensions as a spiritual philosopher, a social ecologist, a learning teacher, and a refracting bystander add depth to his contributions by contextualizing them within a more personal reality.

Drucker's dimensions must be explored in light of his privileged life; privileged because for 95 years (Peter Drucker was born in 1909 in Vienna, Austria, and lived until 2005), his life served as an example of "what to be remembered for" (Cohen, W., 2008, p. xi). According to Ira Jackson, Dean of the Peter F. Drucker and Masatoshi Ito Graduate School of Management at Claremont Graduate University, "what to be remembered for" was Drucker's guiding maxim. Drucker wanted to be remembered for his strengths, not for his weaknesses. His desire to make a contribution in line with his strengths and individual integrity of character is evident in his coining of the terms knowledge worker and management by objectives (MBO). Both concepts embody what his life was about because, as the coherent practitioner he was, he practiced what he preached. As a knowledge worker, his productivity was concerned with self-direction, and quality, and marked by a deep sense of who he was as a spiritual person. As he saw it, a knowledge worker had to be a leader because only a leader rises above the mere process and into the spiritual realm of social responsibility and personal fulfilment. Naturally, his self-direction as a knowledge worker also served as the foundation for him to manage by objectives. In "Management" (Drucker, 1974), he suggested that MBO requires managers to challenge themselves constantly to greater

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heights through self-control and self-discipline. This is a practice he engaged in frequently (Beatty, 1998). In following his MBO, Drucker became a free, fulfilled man because, by underscoring the importance of values and morality in the philosophy of management, he also achieved his personal goal as a knowledge worker.

In *The New Realities* (2003), Drucker revealed what was often hinted in his other books, that “management is deeply involved in spiritual concerns – the nature of man, good and evil” (p. 223). This is congruent with his philosophy since he believed that organizations need to serve as tools for the individual to contribute to society by means of accomplishing personal goals (Drucker, 1967). In his philosophy of management, Drucker wanted the manager to accept a role as an enabler of other people’s strengths, since it is only through the acceptance of that responsibility that these strengths become productive and fulfilling for workers (Drucker, 1974). Yet, he certainly did not want to be remembered as a Guru or teacher, a term he disliked, but mostly as a life-long student who used teaching and writing to encourage himself to learn and discover the world around him (Drucker, 1994).

His dislike for the term Guru seems to match Søren Kierkegaard’s perspective (Bretall, 1973). Anyone familiar with Drucker, knows that his worldview was greatly shaped by Kierkegaard’s philosophical tenets, which he discovered, accidentally, while a young trainee in Germany (Drucker, 1992; Flaherty, 1999; Stafford, 1999). Drucker (1992) described his “providential” discovery of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* as the spark that lit his desire to dedicate his life’s work to affirm, like Kierkegaard, the “existential, the spiritual, the individual dimension of the Creature”, thus affirming his humanist approach, but also disclosing his stance as a decidedly spiritual thinker (pp. 425, 426).

Kierkegaard respected the freedom of the individual so much that he did not want any followers to feel that he was choosing their path for them (Bretall, 1973). Like Drucker, he wanted to be someone who offered them alternatives to choose from instead of answers to follow blindly. Drucker always maintained that, above all else, he was a writer (Beatty, 1998) and, as a responsible one, he acknowledged and respected that readers often rely on a writer’s accurate observations to form an opinion. This is probably why he never gave solutions, but rather presented observed facts (Cohen, W., 2008) to let people make their own conclusions. Like Kierkegaard, Drucker wanted people to find a truth that was true to them on their own terms. His training as a journalist and his respect for freedom in humanity had taught him that, although his words should have what he called “substance”, his gift was to “explain what is, not to parse wisps of what could be” (Cohen, W., 2008, p. 29). Just as Kierkegaard devoted his life to examine what it meant to be a Christian, so did Drucker devote his to examine what it meant to be a manager.

Drucker knew early on that he had a talent for writing (Drucker, 1979), and this talent defined his professional career. When William Cohen (2008), a former student, noted Drucker’s incredible sense of self-confidence, he explained that its origin resided in the fact that Drucker knew what he could do well. Cohen further explained that, if in his mind Drucker was truly convinced that he was qualified to do the job, then that knowledge alone gave him the necessary confidence to complete it. In “Adventures of a bystander” (1979), Drucker’s autobiographical book, this sense of self-confidence becomes quite evident in the epiphanies he chose for reflection. Equally evident, however, is that personal commitment to self-development played an important role

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too. In “The effective executive” (1967), Drucker (1967) expressed this sentiment when he reported his ultimate conclusion: that “effectiveness can be learned – but also that it must be learned. It does not come by itself. It is a practice that must be acquired” (p. viii). Yet, in *Management* (1974), he warned that character cannot be learned, and that management must place “an uncompromising emphasis on integrity of character” (p. 462). Although both statements may seem initially at odds, they are perfectly compatible in Drucker’s world. To understand Drucker’s philosophy of management, it is essential to understand that it is integrity of character that allows a manager to fulfill any goals by becoming a contributing “part” performing for the “whole”. It is also in this frame of mind that a manager becomes truly effective. Drucker was, indeed, an effective knowledge worker who contributed to society’s well-being by materially influencing our capability to achieve goals through performance.

Drucker’s responsible contributions took many forms: the Spiritual Philosopher, who saw authentic selfhood as the driver of effective management; the Social Ecologist, who used language to convey a message of positive interdependence, while reminding society that knowledge was both a freedom of the “part” and a responsibility of the “whole”; the Learning Teacher, whose shared epiphanies shaped the minds of many by teaching them to look for the future in the present; and that of the Refracting Bystander, whose subjective experiences allowed readers to consider multiple possibilities to find their truth. Most of the terms used to define these dimensions come from Drucker himself or from his efforts to frame his contributions “in” society. These dimensions also balance a sense of individuality and social responsibility that is grounded in spiritual coherence, which is essential to understand the focus of his work.

When Kierkegaard reflected on the importance of a life with consequence, he argued that it is not the traits but what one accomplishes that is noteworthy (Bretall, 1973). The consequence of Drucker’s life is evident in the interest that he created and the legacy of knowledge he left behind. Beatty (1998), his biographer, noted that “Drucker never washes his hands of this vale of tears, however, never lets his spiritual convictions stop him from working toward the bungalow Utopia of the ‘bearable society’” he mentions in *The Ecological Vision* (1993, p. 99). I argue that Drucker’s spiritual convictions were, precisely, what fuelled all of Drucker’s contributions, making them truly consequential to our present and future success as organizational leaders.

### **The spiritual philosopher**

Drucker can be seen as a spiritual philosopher because his views about management are always contextualized within a purposefully spiritual approach. For Drucker, human existence can only be experienced by finding its spiritual center. His post-modern, *Gestaltic* view of the “whole” embodies “elements” or “parts” that contribute purposefully and responsibly because they have a necessity to develop spiritually and meaningfully. Drucker’s philosophy recognizes that moral values and strength of character develop the spirit while advancing the practice of management. Indifference, on the other hand, was the grave sin of the twentieth-century (Drucker, 1979); the dangerous “moral numbness” that poisons mind and soul because it makes both blind to compassion (Drucker, 1959). In fact, he cited as one of his four most important contributions the fact that he focused the whole discipline of management “above all on responsibilities” (Drucker, 1999, p. 1). These responsibilities are what his

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wife Doris saw as the reason behind his teaching management; “to create organizations for building and supporting a civil society”[1]. Drucker, himself, saw management as a social function that requires a philanthropic desire on the part of the executive to take care of people (Drucker, 1974).

According to Steinfelds (2005), this sense of responsibility, this desire to help organizations to build and support society, was what first lured Drucker to the field of management, yet the sense of responsibility itself had already been defined by his interest in religion. Drucker made the interest clear in *Landmarks of Tomorrow* (1959), when he prescribed that “society needs a return to spiritual values – not to offset the material but to make it fully productive” (p. 264). In “Practice of management” (1986), he even asserted that the material “can and should be used to advance the human spirit” (p. 4), which highlights the instrumentality of work in achieving social goals. Drucker’s (1959) protestant work ethic characterized work as a means to fulfill spiritually and physically, as well as a way to put values to constructive use. He further recognized that “the crisis in which we live is not just one of the individual conscience. It is also one of metaphysical convictions” (p. 265). In a personal communication to Carolina Biquard, he went so far as to affirm that it is conviction, in fact, that defines what a contribution truly is, since only a commitment to a belief encourages a contribution. Doing what is simply proper or expected amounts to nothing more than doing one’s job (Drucker, 1996). Similarly, in *Management Challenges for the Twenty-first Century* (1999), Drucker reminded readers that “values are the ultimate test,” and that for an organization to be effective, and for the worker to produce results, personal values must be in line with those of the organization (p. 178). Drucker’s views impressed Churchill who, in 1939, reviewed Drucker’s book, *The End of Economic Man* (Churchill, 1939; Drucker, 1939), and concurred that society can be build only by valuable lives set to succeed in principled action. Likewise, Drucker, in the preface of a later imprint of *The End of Economic Man* (1969), observed that Churchill’s leadership succeeded precisely because it conveyed a sense of morality, of appreciation for values, and a committed faith in the rational action of principled men.

Clearly, Drucker believed that people’s work can transcend what they do but that, in order for this to be true, they must exercise conviction and commitment. Conviction is what makes a person become universal and meaningful, and commitment is what makes their faith effective (Drucker, 1949). Not surprisingly, this is also Søren Kierkegaard’s view. In an essay that Drucker wrote about the philosopher in 1949, he explained how Kierkegaard’s views enable human beings to live fully. This is what the philosopher terms spirit-full existence or authentic selfhood. Reaching authentic selfhood is Kierkegaard’s third sphere in the three-step understanding of what constitutes an authentic existence. It requires a person to be guided by “the ethical light of a higher individual,” but it also empowers individuals to find creativity to affirm their unique identity in their quest for adventure (Marsh, 2003, pp. 3, 7). For Kierkegaard, as for Drucker, the attainment of knowledge is an individual responsibility that requires identifying that for which someone lives or dies (Bretall, 1973). Drucker’s ever-present question, “what is my contribution?” perfectly embodies Kierkegaard’s views on spirit-full living. This question engages people in “creative self-becoming,” while recognizing their freedom and responsibility “to move from knowledge to action” (Marsh, 2003, p. 8; Drucker, 1999, p. 180).

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Drucker was committed to spirit-full living in his own life, and periodically asked himself about the quality of his contributions. Beatty (1998) cited his commitment: "I am always asking that question . . . It is a question that induces you to renew yourself – because it pushes you to see yourself as a different person – the person you can become" (p. 10). Similarly, Drucker advised organizations to assess their business performance by asking: "What is our business and what should it be?" (Drucker, 1974, p. 49). Drucker believed that the organization, as an instrument for social justice, also had to exist authentically, especially because organizational spirit is threatened when it does not focus on its strengths.

Recognizing Drucker as a spiritual philosopher is not difficult because the influence of Kierkegaard's views is so prevalent in his thought process. The tension of opposites that Kierkegaard regarded as the basis for his discourse "pragmatizes" the abstract. In fact, it encourages individuals to fulfill their mission in life through the accumulated knowledge that continuously creates them (Drucker, 1949). This idea of leaping to faith through the intentional fulfilment of a person's life mission seems to be present not only in Drucker's conception of the purpose of management as a whole, but also in his vision for Management by Objectives and the Knowledge Worker. Just as Kierkegaard emphasized that the "passionate subjectivity of religious belief" should "incarnate" and be embodied in concrete actions and "in the ideality one affirms" (Marsh, 2003, p. 7), so Drucker believed that knowledge and power "must be grounded in purpose – a purpose beyond the truth of knowledge and the glory of power" (Drucker, 1959, p. 267).

Drucker obviously believed that there is a spiritual relationship between the Creator and the worker (Drucker, 1986) and, by assuming that workers are lazy managers and organizations prevent them from leading the fulfilling lives they ought to experience. This managerial approach destroys them morally and physically (Drucker, 1986) and denotes organizational irresponsibility. As a Spiritual Philosopher, Drucker believed that spirituality can be achieved only through committed practice, and like Kierkegaard, he believed that, when people do not fully utilize their knowledge to fulfill the essential tasks of their human lives, they should be condemned ethically (Kierkegaard, 1954).

### **The social ecologist**

According to Beatty (2005), Drucker defined himself often as a social ecologist because he studied the whole of society for answers about its behaviour. What constituted success or failure, and what made society rise or fall, provided clues for Drucker to interpret ecologically, or in context as it could also be defined. A social ecologist uses perception rather than analysis because the "whole" is essential to understand the "elements" or "parts" (Drucker, 2003). Vision, therefore, becomes an essential characteristic of what defines a manager or leader (Drucker, 1986), and its lack is what Drucker sees as the reason for the world's repeated crises (Drucker, 1959).

For Drucker, managers must have a vision, but also they must lead responsibly. In fact, leadership can be described as such only when it benefits the organization and society, not the leader (Cohen, W., 2008). Results, after all, exist outside the organization by means of their impact on society (Drucker, 1988). Part of a leader's responsibility includes selecting the right worker, since no one has the "right to ask people on jobs that will defeat them" (Cohen, W., 2008, p. 162). Management does not have the "right to break good people," which Drucker equated to an immoral "human

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sacrifice” (Cohen, W., 2008, p. 162), but should develop and nurture their potential for success.

Managing responsibly also involves the achievement of objectives resulting from more than a “reaction to environmental conditions” (Cohen, W., 2008, p. 205). Although he contended that organizations need to be profitable, Drucker believed that they also need to fulfill a responsible societal role. In a radical departure from American individualistic approaches, Drucker contended that socially responsible organizations turn society’s problems into profitable opportunities, which result in increased worker output as well as “intellectual and moral growth beyond a man’s original capacities” (Drucker, 1972, p. 28). In “Practice of management” (1986), Drucker made this evident when he said that the practice of management requires managers to develop workers by making their strengths more effective and their weaknesses irrelevant. This *Gestaltic* view of the power of organizations is what, in Drucker’s view, determines an organization’s competitive advantage and the essence of its success. It is through the workers’ contributions that the organization grows and achieves its goals.

Drucker’s dimension as a spiritual philosopher, therefore, seamlessly merges with his role as a social ecologist. After all, living authentically requires having a mission in life, and “in social ecology, a truly natural spirituality centers on the ability of an awakened humanity to function as moral agents” (Bookchin, 1993, p. 355). Agency involves actual behaviour that is both purposeful and intentional. As a social ecologist, Drucker associated agency with doing the right thing. Yet doing the right thing entails a sense of freedom and responsibility as well as a clear spiritual slant for Drucker (Jäger, 2007). This belief is explored repeatedly in *The Practice of Management* (1986), *Management* (1974), *The New Realities* (2003), and *Landmarks of Tomorrow* (1959), to cite but a few.

In *The Practice of Management* (1986), for example, he described the agency of management as a way to “harmonize the goals of the individual with the common weal” (p. 136), while in *Management* (1974), he reminded readers that business “can be justified only as being good for society” (p. 41). In “The new realities” (2003), his worldview was further defined when he said that the universe is changing from a mechanistic to an ecological understanding of the role of knowledge. The consequences of this change are important in that they include a shift towards a more spiritual perception of the role of the worker in society. From a social ecology perspective, Drucker saw the knowledge worker as the foundation of organizational success, but he also considered knowledge irrelevant unless it took responsibility for moral agency. It is a manager’s ability to form a vision and purposefully engage in moral responsibility which defines managerial effectiveness (Drucker, 1986). Therefore, fulfilment of personal goals, alignment with organizational goals, harmony with society’s well-being, and the use of knowledge as a development tool are all elements of the ecological “whole” described in *Landmarks of Tomorrow* (1959).

According to Kiessling and Richey (2004) Drucker’s ecological understanding of responsibility may be explained easily when contextualized within the Austrian School of Economics, a considerable influence in Drucker’s life. One of the school’s axioms, for example, maintains that “the firm has social responsibility not only to its workers, but also to society as a whole” (Kiessling and Richey, 2004, p. 1274). This belief becomes literally evident in another piece of personal correspondence to Carolina Biquard, where Drucker (1995) identified results as the essence of responsible behavior driving

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social ecology. Drucker's views, therefore, like those of social ecology, "call for a collective effort to change society" (Bookchin, 1993, p. 355). It is not surprising that Drucker's views influenced Biquard's (2001) conceptualization of a partnership, which she then defined as "the key organ of globalization" and as the "discipline that guarantees social ecology [...] because its foundation is diversity in order to produce results" (p. 1). Not only were results important to Drucker's views on partnerships, (Drucker, 2001b) but he also stressed the idea that regardless of whether partners had different result expectations, it is responsibility and mutual trust that fuels interdependence among equals. As Drucker (1959) saw it, interdependence among knowledge workers in organizations is the essence behind "a new ideal of social order in which society and individual become mutually dependent poles of human freedom and achievement," (p. xi) especially since "knowledge is power, and power is responsibility" (p. 268). Similarly, social ecology sees human beings as complementary and thus morally responsible for supporting one another in the advancement of society (Bookchin, 1993, p. 369. According to Drucker (1988), "knowledge is the primary resource and society's true wealth" (p. 67), therefore, management must guarantee the interdependence of knowledge workers by encouraging their joint performance. It is in working together that their strengths become effective and their weaknesses no longer important. Interdependence, therefore, encourages Knowledge Workers to think about what they can give to help others, as well as to request the help they need from others in order to achieve their goals.

From the very beginning, Drucker regarded the practice of management as an organic system, one whose interdependence makes all parts responsible for one another (Bowman and Wittmer, 2000; Drucker, 1959), and which, by virtue of its interdependence, becomes a type of "ministry for saving our society" (Stafford, 1999, p. 47). In *Management Challenges for the Twenty-first Century*, Drucker (1999) explained that people often become effective when working with other people, and suggested that self-management requires "relationship responsibility" (p. 184). This responsibility is particularly important because modern organizations tend to be built on trust more than on force. It is precisely this sense of autonomy and interdependence that gives the worker freedom from domination (Drucker, 1986). For Drucker (Stafford, 1999), a "knowledge worker is a [...] colleague, and an associate rather than a subordinate" and, as such, deserves trust in order for his specialized knowledge to contribute meaningfully (p. 50).

Perhaps one of the most evident aspects of spirituality in Drucker's dimension as a Social Ecologist is that from an ecological perspective, people are not objectified or made into commodities that can be traded for economic wealth, but instead, their individual uniqueness and spirit-full lives make the whole of their contribution greater than the sum of the individual parts. This ensures that their work transcends spiritually "through continuous subliminal interactions of 'tensions'" (Mewes, 1976, p. 2). As he explained in "The practice of management" (1986), "to get out more than is being put in is possible only in the moral sphere" (p. 146). This, as Drucker constantly reminded readers, should be an organization's goal, since regular people are always capable of outstanding achievement if their strengths are nurtured and developed (Guy and Hitchcock, 2000). Drucker (1988) often made clear that management is about human beings working interdependently towards common goals and common values. Yet, he also clarified that, unless management provides the right structure, training,

and development, they will not be able to perform successfully. When management helps them to grow and develop their potential, their work leaps to faith, and society benefits because, as he indicated, results exist outside the organization's walls.

### **The learning teacher**

As a spiritual philosopher and social ecologist, Drucker's dimensions balance seemingly opposite concepts or tensions – the being versus the spirit, and the individual versus society – with spiritually-sound authentic and responsible living, respectively. In his dimension as a learning teacher these tensions also play an important role, but maybe less evidently. For Drucker, just as for Kierkegaard, attainment of knowledge is uniquely individualistic. It is based on experience, perception, and reflection, and yet, due to human interdependence, it must be useful to society too. Character cannot be learned but it is tested in society, while effectiveness must be learned but relies on character to be meaningful. Drucker's tension as a learning teacher is that his purpose is on learning, on fulfilling his goals, and on self-development, yet, in the process, his authentic self makes him a teacher because his observations constitute a philosophy that contextualizes the practice of management. He does not focus on style or charisma because it "creates arrogance" (Drucker, 2003, p. 103), and because it is never effective unless supported by clear goals and a vision. Instead, he is intentionally interested in gaining knowledge through social ecology.

Drucker's organizational structure in *Adventures of a Bystander* (1979), for example, shows that the intentionality of learning was, to him, far more useful and important than the gift of teaching. Kierkegaard's philosophy, for example, proposed existing in knowledge for one to become authentic, thus making self-direction a key responsibility in the process (Marsh, 2003). Considering learning more important than teaching, therefore, made spiritual sense for Drucker. For him, it was self-direction that gives workers their freedom because it encourages them to learn and develop their strengths. In *Adventures of a Bystander* he illustrated this belief by choosing learning epiphanies rather than linear events as the basis of his account. Being as authentic as ever, he teaches, but only by sharing how he first learned from his observations, all of which are intentionally chosen for their knowledge value. As a knowledge worker, Drucker used his experiences to create responsible knowledge that contributes to the understanding of management concepts. Every learning epiphany balances the kind of Kierkegaardic tension that transcends the message itself, making it timeless. By using epiphanies, Drucker was also able to present an authentic, spirit-full, and responsible set of clues to the origins of his purpose-driven life, where the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

Drucker was a systems thinker and, keeping in line with his *Gestaltic* approach, his teaching is holistic, non-linear, and self-organizing. Systems thinking, when understood within cultural and theoretical parameters, allows knowledge to develop naturally because its purpose is "not to pursue one's own goals, but to lead a fulfilled life" (Mewes, 1976, p. 2). This big-picture, systemic approach was what Drucker also used in his classes, where his lectures frequently went "off in an unexpected direction which seemingly had nothing to do with the question asked" so "before you knew it, he was giving a lecture within a lecture," but "if you stayed with him, and sometimes it took as long as an hour, he would suddenly conclude and you would realize that everything tied together" (Cohen, W., 2008, p. 15-16). Because he was a social ecologist,

his teaching was a direct result of his learning, and in creating knowledge as a learner, he also fulfilled his role as a teacher.

Just like his teaching, his approach to knowledge was also systemic, and injected with spiritual responsibility. Although the effectiveness of the system is determined by the worker's productivity, Drucker believes that it is the system the one that has to serve workers by encouraging their responsible contributions and protecting the relationships (Drucker, 2002). It is in interdependence that knowledge is created, and it is in joint effort that workers become effective. Drucker (1974) believed that the desire to develop others must be inherent in the role of manager. He considered this desire a spiritual need and a moral responsibility because management deals with individuals who need to be both responsible and fulfilled by their work. Furthermore, organizations, according to Drucker (1974), provide unique opportunities to make workers' knowledge useful if encouraged and developed.

Like Kierkegaard, Drucker rejected the objectification of workers because he believed that turning them into commodities denies their spiritual potential (Marsh, 2003). In "Management" (1974), he expressed this belief when he said that the purpose of learning is self-improvement, but also when he stressed the importance of character. Both Drucker and Kierkegaard believed that it is precisely through responsible contributions that the person becomes engaged in, and to, the system. Again, in the afterword he wrote for his 2001 book, *The Essential Drucker*, he observed that "the challenges that we will face in the next economy are management challenges that will have to be tackled by individuals," and that effectiveness will greatly depend not only on what these individuals do within the system, but also with what they do "with their own lives" (Drucker, 2001a, p. 349). This thought borrows insight from systemic developmental psychology by suggesting that "unacceptable conduct distorts a systemic explanation" because in any system, "the meaning of a behavior is found specifically in its effects on other people in the system" (Karson, 2001, pp. 56, 57).

Drucker repeatedly mentioned that he disliked being called a Guru (Drucker, 1994). This was by no means false modesty but an acknowledgement that, in order to be truly equated to an Indian Guru or to a Japanese Sensei, a master had to have authority over the spirit and not just over learning (Drucker, 1979). It is evident that with his call to social responsibility and authentic self-hood, Drucker's contributions go beyond learning and into the spiritual, but he did not want followers. Instead, he exhorted people to create meaning on their own by focusing on becoming able to work interdependently while focusing on what makes the unique. Although in "Management" (1974) he defined the career professional as a teacher or educator, Drucker advised that this role is more about offering choices for development than dispensing standard wisdom. As he saw it, management is more about responsible freedom and self-direction than the authority conveyed by a Guru. Furthermore, by distinguishing between the skill of learning and the gift of teaching, Drucker (1979) understood that producing learning could be a responsible and realistic choice, whereas the gift of teaching, like charisma, is accessible only to a chosen few.

This is an important distinction because the practice of management is ultimately about contributions and performance and, according to Drucker, effectiveness can be, and must be, learner-centred and intentional (Drucker, 1967, p. viii). In order to produce results, therefore, knowledge must be produced, and to Drucker, the best way to do it is by developing learning skills that focus on strengths rather than weaknesses

(Edersheim, 2007). Drucker's effectiveness as a thinker and as a contributing human being was a result of learning from strength, not weakness, as he recognized: "I realized that I, at least, do not learn from mistakes. I have to learn from successes" (Drucker, 1979, p. 75). Although his perspective might seem pompous to some, it showed great coherence with his spiritual beliefs. "The Good Lord has so created Man that everyone can make every conceivable mistake on his own. Don't ever try to learn from other people's mistakes. Learn what other people do right" (Drucker, 1979, p. 75).

Drucker rejected the Sophist perspective of the Western teacher, the sage full of answers, because his definition of a teacher was more aligned to the Eastern, spirit-full conception of the master. From a philosophical perspective, Drucker explained that man is not the master, and yet man is responsible and free precisely because God is within (Drucker, 1949). A less philosophical reason could be that a Guru is commonly understood as someone who has all the answers and, because he seldom gave solutions and often preferred to produce learning through questions, he probably saw himself more as a student than a master. But for Drucker there was a duality in learners; one that allows them to be both students and masters if responsibly committed to transcending beyond their knowledge. To be effective, a learner must help others to perfect what they do, and by virtue of this interdependence not only will they learn about effectiveness, but they also will fulfill their social responsibility towards the whole.

In one of Drucker's vignettes depicting his interactions with Ernest Freedberg (his boss at Freedberg & Co. in London) he said: "The answer was obvious: I had to first make Mr. Freedberg effective in doing what he loved to do and did best" (Drucker, 1979, p. 195). To Drucker, interdependence encapsulated the duality of teaching and learning, but only when authentic and socially responsible. It is within this context that weaknesses can be dealt with appropriately because they are no longer perceived as a threat. This is why Drucker saw the production of learning as so important; it is important because in systems thinking "people concentrate their forces on the most effective point within a process of natural development," which results in the more effective attainment of goals (Mewes, 1976, p. 3). Similarly, when describing the method of Miss Elsa, his beloved teacher in the fourth grade, he outlined a very systemic, yet Kierkegaardian thought when he said that those capable of producing learning "find the strengths of the individual student and set goals to develop those strengths [. . .]. Only then do they concern themselves with the student's weaknesses, which emerge as limitations on the full exercise of the student's strengths. They make sure that students get the feedback from their own performance, so they can exercise self-control and direct themselves" (Drucker, 1979, p. 78). These views exemplify Drucker's views regarding Christian thought because for Drucker, a Christian "must live in the spirit and yet must maintain that true faith is effective in and through charity (i.e. in and through social responsibility)" (Drucker, 1949, p. 8). Similarly, the spirit must be present in management, but a manager's effectiveness is ultimately about results, and results can only exist in society (Drucker, 1988).

### **The refracting bystander**

Drucker defined himself as a bystander because, as he explained in the prologue of his book, "bystanders have no history of their own" (Drucker, 1979, p. 1). According to Drucker, bystanders do not simply witness; they also reflect on what they observe.

Their observation, after being reflected on, is refracted – redirected from its original path and given a new direction – for the intentional choice of allowing others to generate knowledge too. Refraction, for Drucker, was what makes existence authentic and where responsibility lies. Without refraction, the bystander indolently blends with the group, falling prey to the Genovese Syndrome – also called the bystander effect – and engulfed by the “awful loneliness, the isolation and dissonance of human existence” when such existence is devoid of faith (Drucker, 1979, p. 8). In choosing the word bystander to contextualize himself within his life, Drucker emphasized that responsibility cannot be diffused because, as happens when white light goes through a prism, sharing an experience can refract seven-fold to benefit others. According to Drucker, giving a person the “chance to contribute to a worthwhile cause” is a privilege (Stafford, 1999, p. 46).

As a learning teacher, Drucker married his dimensions as a spiritual philosopher and social ecologist by becoming a Refracting Bystander. As a bystander in society, Drucker was always engaged in learning to fulfill his spiritual purpose in life. By reflecting on what he learnt, he created knowledge which, when intentionally shared, transformed him into a teacher. According to Drucker, “teaching is not a function of subject knowledge or of ‘communications skill,’” it is, in fact, an intentional method (Drucker, 1979, p. 78). The creation of knowledge, he explains, is an essential task of management. The creation of knowledge requires reflection, however. In *Management* (1974), for example, Drucker explained that managers need time to reflect, not only on their experiences but also on the strengths that make them meaningful to the organization and to society as a whole. Another example of Drucker’s refracting nature is his explanation that “students without a good deal of experience don’t learn anything from me because I don’t learn anything from them” (Beatty, 1998, p. 21). Analogous to Kierkegaardian thought, Drucker saw meaning in uniqueness because it is in diversity that interdependence becomes meaningful. For Drucker, the opportunity to reflect on experiences refracted meaning to others and allowed the dual existence of life in the spirit and in the flesh. This concept also embodies Confucian ethics, where the behaviour of the parts optimizes the interests of both the parts and the whole (Bowman and Wittmer, 2000).

The definition for knowledge management seems to be rooted in this belief. When Tsoukas and Vladimirou (2001) evaluated the concept of knowledge management, they acknowledged Drucker’s merger of the concrete and the spirit. According to the authors, knowledge management encourages managers to turn “an unreflective practice into a reflective one by elucidating the rules guiding the activities of the practice, by helping give a particular shape to a collective understanding and by facilitating the emergence of heuristic knowledge” (p. 990). In his coining of the knowledge worker, Drucker ultimately believed that the productivity of knowledge is the reason behind management, but only when knowledge can be applied, actionable, and responsible is management effective (Edersheim, 2007).

Before refracting, Drucker’s knowledge worker first needs to reflect, and it is in this prescription that Drucker’s phenomenological assumptions become evident. Heidegger, building on Husserl, already had suggested reflecting as a way to understand and experience human existence. Not surprisingly, Heidegger’s views resonated with Asian, and particularly with Japanese, thought because, culturally, Japan gives more priority to the development of people’s character than to their

scholarship (Lebra, 1984). Similarly, Drucker (1974) linked the creation of knowledge to character, and further believed that without it a manager is unqualified for the job. It is through character that people reflect and interpret life's events, and it is integrity of character that makes them refract what they learned in the process.

It is plausible, therefore, to think that Japan attracted Drucker so much because, in a way, it had become a metaphor of his thinking. Its art and its values combined the innately individualistic with an incredible sense of cooperation and interdependence in a seemingly perfect balance of Kierkegaardic tensions. As a refracting bystander, it is also plausible that Drucker's reflections on Japanese culture helped him create knowledge that advanced his philosophy of management. It is no secret that Drucker admired the skill of the Japanese to balance the tensions between the individual and the collective. In "The ecological vision" (1993), he says that by being perceptual, they spot the essence – or Tao – of issues, which is a skill that allows them to define their "self" within society while keeping their individuality intact. As a result, the Japanese are able to interpret or refract knowledge differently, which in turn, allows them to be highly innovative (Drucker, 1993).

### **Conclusion**

According to William Cohen (2008), Drucker was not one to give answers or solutions, but rather, one to ask questions. Drucker told people what to do, but he did not tell them how to do it. Through his refractive prism, observations of what he saw in the present allowed people to see their solutions for the future. By refracting his own learning, he allowed people to create their own. Ultimately, Drucker's message is both simple and complex: effectiveness can be learned, but it is ultimately a personal choice and a societal responsibility that requires people to acknowledge their moral dimension.

According to Kiessling and Richey (2004), "great thinkers are foundationally influenced by lifetime experiences. These experiences structure their processes of thought and direct their theoretical inclinations" (p. 1270). Like Steinbeck, Drucker believed that freedom, without responsibility, is empty, and that, without cooperation, the whole is nothing more than a sum of the parts (Drucker, 1959; Heavilin, 2002). Kierkegaard, too, saw freedom within the context of responsibility, and argued that freedom resulted from combining what is needed with what is possible in reality (Marsh, 2003).

Drucker often has been presented as a pragmatist, yet this is no more than a two-dimensional depiction, which devalues his overall contributions to management and society. In an era of reported spiritual decline and commodization of the individual, Drucker's spiritually-aligned contributions remind readers that doing the "right thing" is both simple and complicated, but always a timeless human right and responsibility. For Drucker, a moral foundation is an essential element of effectiveness because "knowledge is power, and power is responsibility" (Drucker, 1959, p. 268).

For Drucker, the knowledge society is mobile and, unless it "builds the person", it risks becoming isolated from reality (Stafford, 1999, p. 47). In today's unstable times, Drucker's underlying spirituality challenges people to find their own spiritual center in order to reaffirm "that man is not just a biological and psychological being but also a spiritual being, that is creature, and existing for the purposes of his creator and subject

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to Him” (Drucker, 1959, p. 265). Incidentally, modern leadership approaches recognize that there needs to be a balance between emotional and mental behaviors, where “core values and the ability to remain authentic regardless of the environmental challenges” becomes a critical competency area (Cohen, E., 2008, p. 54).

From his very first writings, Drucker believed that the “liberation and mobilization of human energies – rather than symmetry or harmony – are the purpose of organization” (Edersheim, 2007, p. 179). Drucker was concerned with freedom, but was conscious that true freedom is meaningless without responsible action. The concept cannot be any more relevant and timely in the twenty-first century. Bryan and Joyce (2007) have already predicted that the only way for organizations to remain competitive in the twenty-first century is by mobilizing mind power, a concept which builds on Drucker’s concept of knowledge workers. It is not too difficult to see that this mobilization of minds will also redefine the concept of boundaryless organization by allowing minds to contribute from anywhere in the world (Kiessling, 2004). As organizations begin to expand laterally due to the global interaction of their members, Drucker’s concept of the knowledge worker, with its focus on self-direction and moral responsibility, will become the cornerstone of organizational success.

As he explained in “The ecological vision”, Drucker always knew that his “life would not and could not be totally in society, that it would have to have an existential dimension which transcends society” (Drucker, 1993, p. 425). Drucker’s life’s work as a spiritual philosopher, social ecologist, learning teacher, and refracting bystander was laced by the spiritual foundation of his internal moral compass, which only enriched the coherence of his management thought. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to acknowledge his timeless contributions and to bring attention to spirituality as a source of effectiveness in the practice of management.

#### Note

1. “Peter taught management not as an end in itself but as a means to create organizations for building and supporting a civil society” (Doris Drucker, October 27, 2006).

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