

Ownership as Stewardship: Goudzwaard and Beyond

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Abstract

The dominant economic perspective often views the enterprise as an object of absolute ownership, owned by and managed for investors seeking maximum returns. In this view, employees are reduced to mere human resources, and profit is often prioritized over social and ecological well-being. However, shifting the perspective to the enterprise as a community, where people work and live together to serve the common good, challenges this individualistic view of ownership. From a community perspective, ownership is understood as stewardship.

The Dutch economist Bob Goudzwaard (1934–2024) has notably incorporated this concept of stewardship into his reflections on the economy and the enterprise. The idea that enterprises should prioritize *oikonomia*—the care of the household and everything entrusted to it—over the mere accumulation of wealth is the backbone of his argument. *Oikonomia* emphasizes maintenance for the benefit of others, in contrast to *chrematistikè*, which focuses on personal gain and unchecked growth. For his ideas on stewardship, he seems to draw on Aristotle, John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper. These thinkers emphasize the responsibility inherent in ownership, influencing Goudzwaard's concept of stewardship.

This paper explores how the views of these thinkers on stewardship differ from and align with Goudzwaard's views. Moreover, it develops the implications of this line of thought for the modern enterprise. Does it offer a pathway for the enterprise to fulfill its responsibilities as a steward, balancing the long-term well-being of employees, society, and the environment? In doing so, the paper is an invitation to reconsider the role of the enterprise—not just as owned by investors, but as a community that serves both its members and the society as a whole.

Literature

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