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# HUMAN DIGNITY, THE COMMON GOOD, AND SOLIDARITY: A CATHOLIC AGENDA FOR DIALOGUE WITH CHINA

人的尊严、共同利益和团结：

天主教与中国对话的议程

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## ABSTRACT

The modern way of life promotes individualism and a quest for happiness restrained only by a certain measure of tolerance or justice. It is characterized by a limited and minimalist morality. Everyday life demands personal decision making, responsible choices, and critical judgement. Since men and women remain social beings, the question of how to establish more and more authentic interpersonal relations constantly arises. Nowadays one of the most fundamental challenges in philosophy is the question of ethics, viz. constructing a theory of morals that could guide men and women in their everyday activities. The tradition from which Catholic Social Teaching emerges considered all of life as a Divine creation. Humanity's exercise of free will primarily consisted in discovering what God was expecting from us, the basis of our decision-making being the Divine indicative (Fergusson 2004, 23-47). Such an assumption seems to be slowly disappearing together with a gradual break with tradition in contrast with a growing emphasis on humanity as a rational, free, and autonomous being with equal rights (Jamnik 2018). Thus, when making ethical decisions, men and women today stand at a crossroads. In what follows I will try to outline the economic consequences of this crossroads moment, highlighting the meaning for business ethics of basic principles enshrined in Catholic Social Teaching. These are meant to stimulate dialogue with China, by offering a glimpse at a Western tradition not dominated by modern perspectives celebrating individualism and ethical relativism.

## Modernity and the Excesses of Ethical Relativism and Individualism

It is a paradoxical and worrying fact that along with distinguishing itself in the field of mathematics, natural sciences and technology, the Western mind seems more and more powerless in the field of ethics. Whereas theoretical reason has been expanding to all areas of knowledge about the world, practical reason has been withdrawing from its own area of critical reflection on humanity's aims and values.

A consequence of this scepticism about morality, one that is increasingly common nowadays, is the fact that individualism tends to result, not in happiness, but in solipsistic isolation, a person's withdrawal into his or her own shell. Unfettered freedom often turning into arbitrariness, a fateful withdrawal into the illusion of self-sufficiency, results in a person's shutting herself off from her neighbours as well as from God.

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The modern search for a source of morality that would be independent of reason was given a strong impulse by David Hume, who emphasized that man's practical reason only worked on command of irrational, instinctive or interested endeavours (Murdoch 1970, 45-47). This meant a complete break with Aristotle's view that reason is meant to lead and educate human activities, whereas Hume understood reason as a servant of these endeavours. This, however, had fatal consequences because it led to the acceptance of the momentous idea that human actions do not proceed from reason, but from completely extra-rational, spontaneous motives. And this led some to the conclusion that humanity cannot find any predetermined aims and values, that there is simply no generally valid morality. Concerning the possibility of generally valid morality, a universal doubt and scepticism prevailed. Morality became a matter of individual choice and taste.

characteristic views and traditions. (Jamnik 2018, 57-58; Parfit 1984)

a) Traditional Western view of social relations and community

According to Aristotle, the human person by nature is a social being. Therefore, men and women form a family, several families join into a village and villages join into a polis, a state. Since man's biological nature required family as the basic cell of association, it culminates finally in the formation of the state. This is the basic meaning of Aristotle's saying that humanity is a *zoon politikon*. (MacIntyre 1981, 66-77)

This view of humanity prevailed during the Middle Ages (Jamnik 2018, 259-273). This means that humanity's solidarity with others is so deep that the search for what is good for an individual cannot, as a rule, conflict with the search for what is good for the community. Men and women can only reach their aims together with others. Medieval philosophy and theology

found support for this Aristotelian view of humanity's social nature in the Jewish-Christian Biblical teaching. The Biblical view asserts that it is not good for a person to be alone. Being created in the image of God requires men and women to live together with others because God by creating humanity in His image so created them. Hence all Jewish and Christian religious truths particularly emphasize community and solidarity (Jamnik 2018, 6-77; Macpherson 1962, 15-34).

b) Modern individualism and the impoverishment of social relations and community

At the beginning of the modern era Western philosophers challenged these views. Thomas Hobbes maintained that the human being is individual by nature. In a natural, original, pre-civilisation state humanity is not a social being oriented towards others but an individual. Our primary endeavour is self-preservation (Taylor 1989, 23-98; Macpherson 1962, 69-88)). All people have this basic tendency. It necessarily follows that as an individual the natural tendency to self-preservation collides with the same endeavour of others. This self-assertion is unlimited by nature. Therefore, men and women constantly feel threatened by others (Biebricher 2018, 27).

Humanity's natural state is like that of an animal: without society, without common production and culture. Everyone lives in a constant fear; and thus they are compelled by this fear to seek a kind of non-aggression pact among themselves. According to this social contract citizens, freely and to their own benefit, give up their unlimited natural rights and assign them to the sovereign. The sovereign guarantees their compliance with the contract enforcing mutual non-aggression, co-operation, and peaceful co-existence.

The basic characteristic of Hobbes' view is that he understands liberty as itself requiring restriction. Outside the state and its laws

restricting liberty, liberty turns against itself. The theory of the Social Contract develops with Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant as its best-known representatives (Biebricher 2018,79-109). The basic emphasis of this theory is that the human person as an individual is an absolute subject deciding for itself, even when decisions are taken by a political authority. These presuppositions inform liberalism's view of society emphasizing the importance of the freedom and autonomy of the individual (Taylor 1989, 201-270). Certainly, the modern emphasis on humanity as an individual also has positive consequences: the importance of the freedom of the individual, human rights etc. We live in a world where people have the right to choose their own life pattern, to decide to their best knowledge and belief which convictions to support, to define their way of life in a multitude of ways their ancestors could not control.

In antiquity and in the Middle Ages humanity usually saw itself as part of a bigger order. In some cases, this was the cosmic order, the "Great Chain of Being" in which we discovered our place in life. This hierarchic order in the universe was reflected in the hierarchies of human society. Humanity lost this broader view because people began concentrating primarily upon themselves. In other words, the dark side of individualism encourages a concentration upon oneself which makes our lives shallower and narrower, impoverishing their meaning and undermining our interest in others or in society (Fergusson 2004, 94-97, Parfit 1984, 87-106). The consequences are evident nowadays, in the phenomenon described as a "permissive society", the preponderance of "narcissism" complicating any attempt to renew a commitment to the common good.

## The Challenges of a New Economic Paradigm for Ethics

“Whoever appropriates more than the minimum that is really necessary for him is guilty of theft.”  
(Mahatma Gandhi)

There is no need to stress the importance of business ethics in the present day. The extensive economic crisis in the entire world makes us consider the relation between humanity and material possessions: who serves whom, who is the means, who is the end? The answer to these rhetorical questions can be provided by the actual state of affairs: humanity is becoming enslaved to material goods, when in fact the opposite should have happened. But the problem is not a person's right to personal possession, clearly defined by John Locke (and other great thinkers before him); we must prevent personal possessions from taking over man's freedom and his dignity.

relations with other humans, based on trust and honesty; we cannot rise above pragmatism, calculability (jealousy and envy), and our thirst for various manipulations. Ethics does not begin somewhere out there, in some objectivist procedural rules; ethics begins in the depth of human heart, which is something we should never forget.

### Human Dignity and the Common Good in a New Economic Paradigm

Basic principles shared by various religions and beliefs represent a kind of “global ethos” of honest and just behaviour in all areas of life, including business. The foundation of these principles lies on basic philosophical and religious views, which share the following axioms (Jamnik 2012, 159-163; MacIntyre, 1981)<sup>1</sup>:

If we want to preserve the basic dignity of human life and man's self-respect, if we want people to keep their word and not manipulate others nor allow being manipulated, if we want people to keep their personal freedom and self-confidence, self-respect and integrity, we must recognize the urgent necessity of renewing discussion of the basic soil of ethical insight—the global ethos common to various beliefs and religions—at all levels of social and personal life.

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- Human dignity: Persons should always be the end, never the means only.
- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you (the Golden Rule from the Bible and Confucius).
- The joy of being and true beauty in life

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the statement of the Parliament of the World's Religions, 1993., *Declaration toward a Global Ethic*, for an outline of the possible consensus emerging from interreligious dialogue.

can be achieved in our relationships with other people (common good), and not in our solitude or pragmatic individualism. We should explore these axioms more precisely as basic principles of ethical business conduct. These principles represent some of the aspects which should challenge us to personal reflection, prudence, and self-questioning about our own ethical conduct.

The first principle is Human Dignity.

The first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” When applying this principle to business ethics we must not forget that the primary goal of each business corporation is not constant striving for profit but society’s well-being. There is nothing wrong with profit in general, as it is necessary for the realisation of business opportunities, but we must be aware that profit only represents the means for reaching a higher end, which in this case is the fulfilment of human needs. Our society is built as a hierarchical structure, yet every job is intended to fulfil human purposes. We were given talents which can be used to improve our living conditions so that we can lead a fuller and more creative life. But there is a problem in our present-day world: humanity as an end is pushed aside by objectivistic views and evaluations of work,<sup>2</sup> which transform humans into means in service to a narrowly economic desire for profit. Our human characteristics are affected by our work, so we must be cautious and act rationally; our planning and decision-making must not hinder our development and

self-realisation, but rather help us make progress. With every decision we make, which has an impact on the wider society, we should ask ourselves: Does this decision respect other people? Does it neither humiliate nor transform them into agents of modern slavery?

The second is the principle of the Common Good.

The common good enables trade and the establishment of a state, it is the result of our mutual relations. This broadness of heart and mind helps us go beyond bare survival, we become more creative and cooperative. Our society has a moral obligation towards its members: conditions must be ensured in which everyone can develop his or her full potential as this is the only way for an individual to contribute to the common good of the entire society. In terms of business decisions, a moral obligation of company managers is to consider the consequences of their actions and foresee the impact of specific decisions upon their company and its shareholders, as well as upon the wider society and humankind in general (Jamnik 2018, 334).<sup>3</sup>

The principle of Fair and Responsible management of Goods and Property.

Material goods are only means in service to humanity as an end. Constant acquiring of material goods should not be the primary goal of our lives. People should strive for excellence in different areas and at different levels of their lives, physical, cultural and spiritual. Moderation, as well as a proper attitude towards material goods and wealth, are of extreme importance. While material goods provide money and profit,

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2 Cf. the statement, *The Vocation of the Business Leader*, 2018 English Edition, outlining the basic principles of Catholic Social Teaching for business ethics.

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3 Cf. the statement, *The Macau Manifesto* (2020), which outlines several practical initiatives that help promote a new economic paradigm.

which are important, they only represent the means to live a more fulfilling life. We should not crave to gain more and more material things in our lives. We must not ruthlessly exploit our environment, as our actions can have devastating consequences for all of humanity today and for future generations. Natural resources must be used responsibly and with consideration: it is our moral duty. With moderation and reason, overexploitation of natural resources should be avoided, and we should cause as little environmental pollution as possible, the result of which would be fewer natural disasters.

### The Principle of Subsidiarity

This principle includes an individual's attitude towards various institutions, both state and international. It is the task of these institutions to support and protect the first three principles. To be able to do that, the said institutions need to renounce those activities which would undermine the autonomy of the individuals, families, or the entire nation, and it is an individual's responsibility to recognize the needs of his domestic environment and act accordingly. International and state institutions should not interfere with the activities of local communities if these fulfil their duties and are able to solve their own problems. They may and should interfere only when the activity of a particular institution disrespects basic human rights and threatens other countries in different areas of cohabitation on our planet.

### The Option for the Poor

According to the fifth principle, The Option for the Poor, it is our moral obligation to evaluate social and economic activities from the standpoint of the most disadvantaged members of society. From the point of view of business ethics,

large corporations have the moral obligation to work in favour of society's most vulnerable members. They must be aware that their decisions have a strong impact on people, both globally and locally. Too often large corporations consider their employees only as a means and exploit the fact that many people globally are prepared to work for minimum wages. Employees are thus humiliated by their employers and people in poor countries are basically enslaved, doing their jobs for extremely low compensation.

### The Principle of Solidarity

The Principle of Solidarity supports a firm determination to strive for the common good, demonstrated in recognising other people's needs and endeavouring to achieve changes and long-term improvement. "Wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else," Aristotle observed. The practice of solidarity involves a string of relations between givers and receivers. This is not pity, it is acknowledging that we build mutual relations, all being responsible for the common good. Our decisions and choices should protect both our own interests and those of others. It is vital that our exercise of freedom does not threaten the freedom of our fellow human beings (McClennen 1989, 1-44).

### Conclusion

Let us all endeavour to make our culture ethical, to take a step forward in our attitude and particularly in our way of life, when considering honesty, justice, the common good and solidarity in our mutual relations. Nurturing self-respect, cherishing ourselves, keeping our word, in short, starting to change ourselves, will change the world around us. Present-day society (Jamnik 2018, 334) in our home countries and around the

world, represents both a challenge and an outcry to wake up from our dogmatic slumbers, to notice our fellow human beings in need of material help, who perhaps only want to be heard in their painful loneliness, crying for human company and understanding, who want to be accepted and needed in this world ... only hoping to do something good for everyone else! The Western mind's struggle over material possessions, their meaning and use, is meant here as an invitation to dialogue with Chinese moral philosophy, from which we may learn from their own struggles over similar issues.

Let me conclude with the words of the great German writer J. W. Goethe: "Man's greatest wealth is the courage not to desire wealth."



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