LIBERTY AND SOLIDARITY
Living the Vocation to Business

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What are the main theological and philosophical challenges to living this vocation?

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The title of my talk—“What are the main theological and philosophical challenges to living this vocation [of Business]?”—suggests a question in search of an answer. In this case, however, the question is rhetorical because we already know the answer.

Professionals in fields as diverse as business, academics, politics, and military life tend to describe their actions in terms of “processes” that generate optimal and efficient external outcomes. We do so despite the fact of what we already know: namely, that optimization and efficiency regarding external states of affairs cannot adequately describe a human vocation, much less the perfection of human action, and, what is more, that a consistent application of the norms of optimization and efficiency across all domains and levels of human life would prove to be a grotesque simulation of authentic human well-being.

Let’s begin with a hypothetical scenario drawn from the very important and provocative work of the Oxford futurologist Nick Bostrom.1 Imagine a super-smart machine programmed with the seemingly harmless, and ethically neutral, goal of getting as many paper clips as possible. First it collects them. Then, realizing that it could get more clips if it were smarter, it tries to improve its own algorithm to maximize computing power and collecting abilities. Unrestrained except by external circumstances, its power grows by leaps and bounds, until it will do anything to reach its goal: collect paper clips, yes, but also buy paper clips, steal paper clips, perhaps transform all of earth into a paper clip factory. The machine has instrumental reasons for stubbornly and very smartly pursuing open-ended acquisition of a particular but limited good. Indeed, it maximizes and innovates, even to the point of progressively recapacitating its own powers. Even so, common sense dictates that if such an intelligence succeeded in its endeavor, defeating all opposing reasons for action and overcoming recalcitrant powers and systems, things essential to human flourishing will have been irreversibly lost.

Bostrom’s question is whether super-intelligent machines can be made human-friendly. Of course, the scientific and technological aspects of the question are still to be known. But the moral and anthropological issues are known, at least in a general and perennial way. A human person is capable
of practical wisdom, insofar as he or she can revise purposes in accord with a ranking of ends; a human practical intelligence can learn how to make prudential judgments about right means in a variety of contingent contexts; and, above all, a human agent includes, even if somewhat implicitly, the perfection of the agent (the acting person) as a good to be achieved. The perfection of the agent is an intransitive good—a good distinguished from external results and a good that remains in the agent. A slave, can optimize and innovate, but what counts to the slave owner is the external result rather than slave’s personal perfection. Presumably, this is precisely what makes human slavery morally repugnant, and, by the same token, what makes human use of a machine as a mere instrument morally benign.

Swap out for the super-duper machine collecting paper clips the definition of homo economicus learned every semester by college undergraduates. Begin with the so-called rationality principle: Individuals (in the aggregate) maximize welfare as they conceive it—namely, profits and utilities. They are constrained by time, resources, imperfect calculating capacities, and so forth. But on the whole, they want more rather than less, and their intelligence is devoted prevailing in the face of external circumstances, estimated according to risks and advantages, which function like natural algorithms.

To be sure, it’s only a model for predicting outcomes. Many if not most economists will insist that it does not realistically describe any particular human person’s intentions. Economists will also point out that in the aggregate irrational as well as rational expectations can be coordinated—thus rendering the homo economicus model of rational choice somewhat shaky, at least with regard to predictions. But whatever the advantages or disadvantages of the model, it is a very incomplete understanding of human action.

As for the subject of our gathering, human vocations, I suppose that everyone can quickly understand that a particular vocation cannot be lived or described properly on the abstract model of open-ended maximization of profits and utilities.

Married people, for example, make love, procreate and nurture and educate children, and give to one another acts of fidelity.

Clergy preach and console, and perform sacramental actions. Scholars teach, research, write, and communicate.

Physicians diagnose, heal, and comfort.

Public authorities pledge service to the common good according to the rule of law, and those who take the oath of military arms swear to face dangers to life and limb.

Not even economists claim to maximize in some open-ended way, but to analyze and to understand, perhaps to predict.

The vocation of business is especially wounded by the abstract model of open-ended acquisition, for if any vocation resembles the relentless paper clip collecting intelligence, it is business. We should not be surprised that, according to a recent survey reported in The Wall Street Journal, more than half of the U.S. public says that strong and influential corporations are “bad,” even if (and here is the key part) they promote innovation and growth. Only 36% think they are a source of “hope.” In other words, ordinary people are not in doubt that business enterprises maximize and innovate, but they are skeptical about what any of this means for human ends and actions.

Catholic social doctrine cannot help us to solve problems of public relations, much less pretend to provide abstract mathematical models for predicting economic outcomes. It can, however, assist us to see more clearly and to better describe things we already know about human action.

**FIRST POINT: ACTIONS HAVE PRIORITY TO THINGS IN BUSINESS ENTERPRISE.**

It is easy to focus too much upon the “thing” being produced, exchanged, distributed, and tallied up as profits or losses. One reason is familiar to everyone. When we are engaged in work—making paper clips, or writing speeches about paper clips—it is quite natural to be chiefly aware of the product or the outcome. The excellence of our own action and often the excellence of other agents as well remain implicit, in the background so to speak. While we “work” our focal interest is given to the product. Yet what makes human action different than operations of Bostrom’s paper clip collecting AI is that the intrinsic good of our actions (in which our perfection consists, at least as agents) remains an end even when it is not focal.

Another reason is colored by our own culture and time. Utilitarianism is our last standing philosophy. Here, I do not necessarily mean the academically nuanced theories of Utilitarianism so much as the popular sense—which is to say that, for public purposes, actions and policies should be evaluated and then rejected or accepted chiefly on a cost-benefit account of what can be measured by computation. This point of view is reinforced by the reticence of our po-
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Catholic social doctrine does not pretend to predict or to directly shape economic outcomes just as such. Rather, it begins at the beginning. Made unto the image and likeness of God, the human person is an intelligent master of his own acts, and in so doing he is provident for himself and others. Being provident is first an action. Business embodies such a complex and morally rich ensemble of actions, that the vocation is misrepresented if we talk only about outcomes rather than the incredibly rich and varied ecosystem of actions and transactions.

SECOND POINT: THE PRIORITY OF RELATIONS TO THINGS

As Aristotle wrote: It is by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men that we become just or unjust (NE 1103b). On this view, justice is not a thing standing alongside other things of the world, but rather a tripartite relation between persons and things. For there can be no justice unless and until we correctly align three factors: who owes, what is owed, and to whom it is owed. If justice is to be done, it is not enough that the right “thing” be given to another, but also that the person who owes gives it to whom it is owed.

This triadic relation culminates in an act—one, an individual or a group, gives what is due to the other. Only in this way is it perfective as justice. Of course, that the needy child receives medicine is perfective of the child, but in the order of justice it perfects the acts of whoever is obligated to give. Therefore justice is not maximization or innovation, but a right relation. What is mine, what is thine, and what is ours? The question does not belong solely to the State, for it is dynamically built into the actions and transactions of production, exchange, and distribution.

Justice is sometimes simple, sometimes complex. It depends upon intelligently discerning what we actually owe within the circumstances and complications of various so-
cieties (family, nation, firm), who must deal with perplexities of temporal frame (short or long or longer term), in view of what belongs to individual or collective action, and all of that within context of different political and economic systems.

No business person gets to decide all of the circumstances nor all of the legal and moral rules for this activity. We do get to decide how to treat people within our competence and role: the firm, the employees, the customers, the neighborhood.

The law leaves many judgments and actions indeterminate. Therefore, passive obedience to the law is not enough. No entrepreneur would ever think that the path to a good business is simply complying with the law. Rather, he or she would actively discover new ways to identify authentic human needs and ways to meet them.

Surely, it is always situated. Whatever good sense might be made of the hidden hand of the market, the virtue of justice is an intentional human act in view of what is actually owed to another person—to the actions of employees, to investors, to various communities, from the state to the neighborhood. Who is my neighbor? Globalism sorely tests this intention to be right by our neighbor. But the fact that business stands in the thick of this turmoil indicates that it is worthy of being regarded as a vocation, for it is not a mere method of generating outcomes so much as a set of responsibilities.

THIRD POINT: SUBSIDIARITY IS NOT EFFICIENCY.

Subsidiarity is often confused with devolution of decisional power from the highest to the lowest, or to the most efficient level.\(^1\) No authentic vocation could be properly described in this way. Think, for example, of the spousal responsibility and right to procreate, nurture and to educate their children, or the responsibility of a legislature to make and to revise laws for the polity, or in Catholic ecclesiology the obligation and role of apostolic authority in teaching, sanctifying, and governing the Church. Surely, it would be odd to think that the principle of subsidiarity protects these actions and roles only on the ground that someone else can’t do them more “efficiently” or on the ground that each is at a “lowest” level. Instead, the tradition of Catholic social doctrine speaks of a “proper” level.

[The] primary responsibility in [social justice] belongs not to the State but to individuals and to the various groups and associations which make up society. ... In addition to the tasks of harmonizing and guiding development, in exceptional circumstances the State can also exercise a substitute function ... Such supplementary interventions, which are justified by urgent reasons touching the common good, must be as brief as possible, so as to avoid removing permanently from society and business systems the gifts of service which are properly theirs [propria munera] ... Here again the principle of subsidiarity must be respected: a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving it of the functions which properly belong to it [propria officiis]. (Centesimus Annus, §48)

We return once again to human actions and relations, but now with an emphasis upon roles, or what we can call vocations. Pope John Paul uses two important ideas. First, propria munera, which can be translated as “gifts of service properly one’s own.” Second, propria officiis, which presents a similar idea of “an office [role] belonging” to a person or community. And thus subsidiarity can be neatly put as follows. When the State provides assistance to societies other than the polity—marriages, families, schools, business firms—it must not absorb or subvert that actions proper to these domains. How low, small, or efficient these societies and associations might be is beside the point of the principle of subsidiarity. The key is the actions—what John Paul calls the “gifts of service” proper to human agents in their social roles and duties. The matrimonial vocation, for example, is not merely reproducing efficiently, but rather procreating matrimonially. Modern technology, as we know, makes possible very efficient methods of reproduction “lower” than matrimonial acts. Yet the efficiency is realized only by the loss of the human action.

There is much more to say about human action, subsidiarity, and vocation. For now, I want to urge those in the business vocation to give more attention to how they describe their actions and transactions so that the actions are not suffocated by the usual language of efficiency.

CONCLUSION

In two generations’ time, we have witnessed the collapse of modern utopianisms: political, social, economic, religious. What the utopianisms had in common is the belief that human perfection as an aggregate state of affairs happens, willy-nilly, behind the backs of the actions of human agents. This is why the worst of the utopianisms declared war outright on individual and communal action by giving absolute and unilateral power only to the state, or only to an abstract market. Thus, the utopianisms leave out the centrality of the human agent,
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made unto the image and likeness of God, master of his own acts and provident for himself and others.

The vocation of business is at the center of our post-utopian age of the 21st century. This is not because business is the most important institution. Rather, the most important institutions are those necessary for human happiness: Marriage-family, polity, and Church. The human being is a matrimonial, political, and ecclesial animal. I suggest that business is at the center because it touches upon and perfects actions across and within all of these other institutions. All human institutions depend upon the actions of business: producing, exchanging, distributing, investing. Both for its own sake and for the sake of the rest of society it is important that business understands the dignity of its vocation. ★

FOOTNOTES

1 This is a written transcript of an oral presentation.
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