

# **RESTORING THE BROKEN IMAGE: THE CENTRALITY OF THE SUBJECTIVE DIMENSION OF LABOR AND LIBERAL EDUCATION IN CATHOLIC BUSINESS EDUCATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The value of work is determined by the fact that it is the act of a human person, intended to fulfill human purposes. Purposiveness gives any work a spiritual, ethical (immanent/subjective) character as well as its obvious character (transitive/objective) as an act of production. The Catholic tradition affirms the priority of the immanent/subjective character of work over its transitive/objective character. This affirmation follows from the Catholic understanding that the spiritual aspect of the human person, who is both flesh and spirit, ontologically distinguishes us as human and that each human person is so far a transcendent being superior to all material things.

This affirmation has decisive consequences for the Catholic understanding of business and business education. Business, as an organization of human work, must have as its end the cultivation and promotion of the immanent/subjective dimension of work and, thereby, human flourishing. This understanding is radically at odds with the prevailing view of business and business education, which is premised on the priority of things over persons, or (in John Paul II's language) on the error of "economism." The economic view of business is exemplified by the financial (shareholder wealth maximization) theory of the firm and by that theory's concomitant criteria for judging and acting, which suppose the greater attractiveness of the material over the spiritual and moral.

To be consistent with the Catholic tradition and to fulfill their mission, Catholic business schools must re-found business education on the conviction, the consistently held image, of the priority of persons over things.

The Catholic tradition proposes that liberal education, understood as the cultivation of the human capacity for wonder and contemplation in leisure, leads students and teachers to understand that they transcend the physical world through their capacity for spiritual knowledge, that is, knowledge of the created, sacramental universe as a whole. Fulfillment of the capacity for spiritual knowledge—relatedness to God, humankind, and the world—is the complement of students' and teachers' self-realization as persons. They comprehend their ability and need to communicate with other persons on the basis of spirit and knowledge. They become convinced of their own personal priority over the entire physical world. They personally perceive the image of the priority of persons over things.

These comprehensions entail concomitant criteria of personal judgment and action, based on the greater attractiveness of the spiritual and moral over the material; they form the animating principle, the guiding image, for the long and difficult task of re-founding business education on the conviction of the priority of persons over things.

## LABOREM EXERCENS: THE OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE DIMENSIONS OF HUMAN WORK

In an organic development of the Catholic tradition's understanding of work, John Paul II asserts in *Laborem Exercens* that all human work has, simultaneously, an objective dimension and a subjective dimension. His analysis of the primordial call by God, given to our race in *Genesis*, at creation, to dominate and subdue the earth is the foundation of his analysis of the two aspects of work.

The objective, transitive, dimension of work appears in the product of human work, outside the person. Human history testifies to the objective dimension of work and its importance. From the earliest forms of agriculture and the domestication of animals, to the most sophisticated developments of modern technology, human work has objectively shaped our physical world. The objective dimension of labor can be measured, scientifically analyzed, and organized.

However, John Paul proposes that the subjective dimension of labor is prior to the objective dimension.

This dominion, in a certain sense, refers to the subjective dimension even more than to the objective one: this dimension conditions *the very ethical nature* of work. In fact there is no doubt that human work has an ethical value of its own, which clearly and directly remain linked to the fact that the one who carries it out is a person, a conscious and free subject, that is to say a subject that decides about himself.

Dominating and subduing the earth imply no license to abuse. These concepts indicate that the human person is a moral agent regarding creation, commissioned to use the world in a rational, creative and responsible way.

I wish to emphasize four related, mutually reinforcing, aspects of work's subjective dimension. First, work is an immanent act of self-realization, part of human flourishing, in which the person acts as the image and likeness of God. Work does not belong exclusively to the realm of natural or technical necessity. Moral choice is decisive.

Second, human work is an act of communion for the common good, not only an act to help satisfy the common, material need. Through work we participate in and contribute to the flourishing of others. This communion spans generations and localities. We share our own self-realization with others. This is an expression of the principle of the priority of labor over capital and of our participation in, and recognition of, the universal destination of all property, viz.: to return to its Creator through the satisfaction of genuine human purposes.

Third, fair compensation for work and decent working conditions are necessary, but not sufficient, acknowledgements of work's subjective dimension. Jobs must be designed creatively, so the worker is able to see in her work that she is "the one who is dominating."

Fourth, and most radically, the human person doing the work, that person's value as a moral agent, finally determines the significance of *any* work. John Paul tells us, "[T]he basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person . . . even if the common scale of values rates it as the merest 'service.'"

John Paul II refers to the ancient world's view that work requiring physical exertion was considered unworthy of free men and was consigned to slaves. A person's worth was coincident with the kind of work he did. The notion of the subjective dimension of work undermines this concept, which is still embedded in our understanding of persons and society. The subjective dimension of work radically engages some of the most enduring social and philosophical issues: liberal/servile arts; master/servant; conception/execution; the one/the many. One way of seeing work as the key to the social question is to contemplate the critical and renewed engagement with these central themes of western philosophy the understanding of the subjective dimension of labor necessitates.

The priority of the subjective dimension of labor is not the common vision of human work. The ancient world's division of people according to the work they do has been reinforced by modernity's obsession with the separation-*cum*-opposition of labor and capital and the need to treat work primarily as a quantifiable commodity available at a price.

### **THE BROKEN IMAGE OF THE PRIORITY OF PERSONS OVER THINGS**

In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul points out that through a synthesis of faith and reason, all can discern in their work two inheritances, the work of persons who have gone before us and made our work possible and the gift of God's creation that presents itself for our work. *For John Paul it is critical that this discernment produces an image of the person as the subject of work - the physical result of work, capital, is not a moral subject, but an object subordinate to the human person. It is the image of the priority of persons over things.* How is that image broken and how can it be restored?

John Paul II points to the theory and practice of modernity as the principal reason for the broken image of the priority of persons over things. The image was broken when labor was separated from capital as two impersonal forces in opposition. This was the error of economism, which John Paul categorizes as mode of materialism, and which teaches the subordination of the spiritual and moral aspects of the human person to the material, supporting a hierarchy of goods in which the material has a greater immediate attractiveness than the spiritual and moral.

This occurs in systems based on atheism and "the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which views human and social reality in a mechanistic way" and which deny human transcendence of earthly realities. In counterpoint, John Paul asserted that, "It is by responding to the call of God contained in the being of things that man becomes aware of his transcendent dignity. Every individual must give this response, which constitutes the apex of his humanity . . ."

The consistent Christian message of work affirms those spiritual and moral aspects which constitute work's subjective dimension. This message emerges from the Old Testament and is

given deeper meaning by the life of Christ as a carpenter. The manual labor of Christ reveals the meaning of the work of the most sophisticated international hedge fund manager and of the janitor in her building.

These affirmations of the value of human work are embedded in the Catholic tradition and they lead to a critique of the way modern business is conducted. John Paul summed it up this way, “In the modern period, from the beginning of the industrial age, the Christian truth about work had to oppose the various trends of *materialistic and economic* thought.”

In light of the clear Christian message of work arising from the very life of Jesus Christ, we can appreciate how deep and powerful is the fundamental error that subordinates persons to things and that makes human work simply another factor of production. John Paul proposes, “The only chance there seems to be for radically overcoming this error is through adequate changes both in theory and in practice, changes *in line with* the definite conviction of the primacy of the person over things, and of human labour over capital as a whole collection of means of production.” To prevail against the error of materialism and economism we must restore the broken image of the priority of persons over things.

### **THE CHALLENGE AND PROMISE OF CATHOLIC BUSINESS EDUCATION**

There can be little doubt that modern business and the mainstream way of teaching business are imbued with the error of materialism and economism. The prevailing academic understanding of business, including the Catholic academy, is the financial theory of the firm: the purpose of business is to maximize profits. This is finally an expression of the conviction of the primacy of things over people and of capital over labor. The modern business corporation does much good. However, the operation of the corporation is based on the practical and theoretical premise that its end is material. Therefore, it harbors an undeniable tendency—expressed as a hierarchy of goods and determinate criteria of judgment—to subordinate the subjective dimension of labor to the objective dimension.

The challenge presented is so fundamental that the very identity of the business school as Catholic is at stake. The challenge requires a radical response firmly based on the Catholic social and intellectual traditions. This will result in the subjective dimension labor and the goal of human flourishing, taking a central place in the life of the Catholic business school. There is no aspect of business or business education that ultimately does not implicate our evaluation of the nature and moral significance of human work. To overcome the error of materialism and economism requires the long and difficult task of re-founding business education on the Catholic tradition, guided by the restored image of the priority of person over things.

### **RESTORING THE IMAGE –LIBERAL EDUCATION AS THE CULTIVATION OF THE HUMAN CAPACITY FOR WONDER AND FOR CONTEMPLATION**

Liberal education is the cultivation of the human capacity to acquire spiritual knowledge of the world, of all things visible and invisible, through contemplation and wonder. Only through wonder can we lead genuinely personal lives. Without wonder we cannot achieve the self-realization central to the subjective dimension of labor.

To wonder means to enter into a relationship with the whole world, to be *capax universi*. Inanimate objects, plants, and animals all relate to an environment limited by what they are. Only the human person, through wonder and contemplation, can relate to the whole world as spirit and truth. This is the radical source of our freedom and of our priority over things—we transcend the material world by comprehending its meanings, the universals that constitute it a cosmos. What follows from this understanding of the relation between the human person and created, sacramental world, is the reality of our interiority, our self-realization, which becomes the more solid, the deeper our contemplation of reality in genuine leisure. As John Paul asserted we reach the apex of our humanity by responding to the call of God in the being of things. As our personhood develops we see our ability and need to communicate with and relate to other persons on the basis of spirit and knowledge.

The knowledge gained from wonder and contemplation in leisure is good in itself. This is what traditionally is meant by the liberal arts. They are the arts of the mind that lead to the knowledge which is self-realization, radical human freedom, subordinate to no “use” or “product.” The servile arts are those which are good because they produce something that provides in some way for human need. They are not good in themselves.

The distinction between the liberal and servile arts is real and it is crucial for human flourishing. However, the attitude that separates liberal from business education, based on the distinction between the liberal and servile arts, is more pagan than Christian. It impedes the restoration of the image of the priority of persons over things almost as much as the instrumental subordination of the liberal arts to the pursuit of material gain.

In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul noted that affirmation of the *human* value of work emerges from the “wealth of the Christian truth.” Because it discerns the spiritual dimension of the person in *any* work she does, the Catholic tradition recognizes a vital, essential relationship between the liberal and servile arts and between contemplation and action. Hence, for example, in *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, Josef Pieper asserts that the thrust of Catholic Social Thought is to “extend the character of ‘liberal art’ deep down into every human action, even the humblest servile work.” Again, Jacques Maritain’s philosophy of education asserts the dignity of manual work and describes how Christian contemplation does not stop in the act of knowing, but rather overflows, superabounds through love, as action in the world. The Catholic tradition seeks to discern in the liberal arts and the servile arts—in the subjective and objective dimensions of work—a proper relationship, a proper hierarchy of goods. The relationship is the priority of persons over things.

For liberal education, neither the completion of a prescribed number of units in a prescribed distribution of disciplines, nor yet the range of one’s cultural, or multicultural, tourism is decisive. Particular curricula notwithstanding, the personal experience of wonder and its concomitant self-realization are decisive. As students and teachers, through wonder and contemplation, see themselves as persons, as transcendent of the material, as conscious and free subjects who decide about themselves, they gain the capacity to discern the two inheritances of work: the self-realization and self-giving of prior generations of workers who make our work possible and God’s gift of creation. Thereby, the image of the priority of persons over things is

restored, its concomitant criteria for judging and acting are established and the privileged task of re-founding business education on the basis of the Catholic tradition can begin.