

Can Companies be the Fount of Dignity?

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Abstract

This essay assumes that companies must be the fount of dignity because of they have a strong relationship with all sort of elements that are related with dignity. The first one is that companies can be the place to develop the cooperation among employees, directors, and other staff. Beyond, companies can be the plane where people learn about cooperation. Second, the main organization's purpose is to improve the quality of life for consumers, instead maximizing their shareholders' wealth. Toward this goal, it wouldn't make sense if workers in an organization were to lose their dignity to increase the welfare of another group, like consumers. Third, companies are the main connection between society and the natural environment, using and transforming resources, such as raw material and energy, into goods and services for consumption. In this sense, nature belongs to all living beings, and thus what human beings and companies do with regard to the natural environment must comply with the laws of nature.

Keywords: Dignity; cooperation; welfare; natural environment

1. Introduction

In 1944, while the International Labour Organization was creating the Philadelphia Declaration, highlighting that “labour is not a commodity ... all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity” (Bolton, 2007, p. vii), the world was facing the tragic and ruthless actions of World War II. By the 1940's, countries had eliminated slavery, but the Nazi government widely used it, for example at the Monowitz concentration camp, which was a work camp and part of the Auschwitz complex of camps in occupied Poland. The holocaust survivor, Primo Levi, described the work routine at the camp in his book entitled *If This is a Man*. “When we reach the cylinder we unload the sleeper on the ground and I remain stiff, with empty eyes, open mouth and hanging arms, sunk in the ephemeral and negative ecstasy of the cessation of pain. In a twilight of exhaustion I wait for the push which will force me to begin work again, and I try to take advantage of every second of waiting to recuperate some energy” (Levi, 1959 ,p. 74).

As described, the conditions of work were horrendous and affronted every manner of dignity. The death camps existed under the conditions whereby the political structure had created an environment that destroyed the everyday forms of civility. This fact symbolizes the theme of this essay: dignity in organizations – political or corporate – correlates with dignity in the world. It is impossible to expect dignity in a world where totalitarian regimes operate freely. Since the end of World War II, the totalitarian system of government has been eradicated by most countries, and the democratic system has been adopted. This transition of systems of government toward democracy limits the opportunities for companies to exploit workers and compromise their dignity. As a result, companies should play an active role in fostering and improving dignity. A company's role encompasses three directives.

The first directive is the environment inside the organization, which should favor cooperation among employees, other staff, and directors. While it is true that a capitalist market organizes the economy around competitive forces, it has also been shown that cooperative behavior within an organization produces a higher gain than competition. Thus, the most productive place to achieve a wide sense of cooperation is inside the organization. As explained by Axelrod (1984), to achieve cooperation it is necessary to teach values, facts, and skills that promote cooperation, and once it is learned, it can spill over into other environments and circumstances and thus add to one's dignity. The second directive is the organization's purpose, which is to improve the quality of life for consumers. Toward this goal, it wouldn't make sense if workers in an organization were to lose their dignity to increase the welfare of another group, like consumers. In the third directive, companies are the main connection between society and the natural environment, using and transforming resources, such as raw material and energy, into goods and services for consumption.

Although economics insists that all things must have an owner – factories, goods, land, etc. – it is impossible for a human being or a company to be the owner of nature. Nature belongs to all living beings, and thus what human beings and companies do with regard to the natural environment must comply with the laws of nature. This concept is based on the understanding that all biological organisms are at the center of the natural system, and human beings occupy just one part of that. Thus, all activities by human beings, including production and consumption, must be aligned with the rules of nature.

The answer, therefore, to the question posed in the title is yes. By adhering favorably to the three aforementioned directives, companies can enhance dignity inside and outside of their environs. How effectively an organization succeeds at these three roles is a direct result of how companies are created, organized, and expanded. Additionally, their success is directly related to how society views them. The aim of this essay will be to explore these three corporate directives from the perspective of dignity: The first perspective is internal (corporate cooperation among employees, directors, and other staff); the second perspective is external, i.e. the corporate relationship with society (the connection between companies and consumers); and the third is the relationship of companies to the system of all living beings (nature).

2. Internal Corporate Cooperation

The first area under discussion is external. Throughout the world, external cooperation is growing, even though there is no central authority to organize or delegate responsibility among countries. A critical component of external cooperation nowadays is the internet and the amount of information available to everyone who has internet access. Here we can see how anonymous effort can generate and improve everyone's welfare. Additionally, the number of countries without dictatorships is increasing. However, external cooperation is never perfect and will forever be an issue thanks to international crises.

For example, the flow of Arab immigrants into Europe today or the acceleration of violent crime in some regions is two examples where cooperation is lacking and competition is rising. Cooperation can be understood as the process of groups working together for mutual benefit, as contrary to competition for selfish benefit. Animals can cooperate among themselves; most of them have a natural tendency to cooperate. Humans, however, can cooperate or not. The decision to cooperate is based on several factors, including education and how large is the anticipated benefit. Undoubtedly, the results achieved by cooperation are greater than competition (Nash, 1950), but it is recognized that people tend to look after themselves first. Hobbes (1962), who was one of the first philosophers to investigate this subject, believed that human beings were naturally selfish, and that cooperation was achieved only when fostered by government.

Axelrod (1984) describes five factors that promote cooperation. The first is making the future more important than the present; the second is to change the payoffs; the third is to teach people to care about each other; the fourth is to teach reciprocity; and the fifth is improving recognition abilities. In addition to the factors described by Axelrod, in certain contexts, the construction of appropriate rules or laws can increase the propensity for cooperation; i.e., even people acting selfishly can achieve results similar to those that would be obtained through cooperation (Prates, 2012). Pragmatically, making appropriate laws is one of the greatest challenges facing society today, a responsibility that falls primarily into the hands of legislators. Throughout history we can see the human effort in building mechanisms to achieve the common good, such as the Code of Hammurabi or the Bible. The first chapters of the Bible show the concern of the early Semitic people to formalize the rules of social life.

It is undeniable that there has been an improvement in our laws over the past several centuries; however, society has also grown in size and complexity, and its interests have become broader and more intricate. This equates to a much greater difficulty in creating rules, mores, and laws.

An interesting perspective on social mores and legal regulations can be gleaned from the theory of transaction costs in the definition of contracts. Namely, contracts are agreements regarding a transaction involving the transfer of ownership of an asset between one agent and another (Williamson, 1979). However, because of the unpredictability of agents, contracts aren't perfect. This same principle of business contracts can be generalized for social contracts, which are essentially what our laws are. Therefore, there is an immense difficulty in building laws that shape the behavior of a society for the sake of cooperation. Although laws are able, in many cases, to eliminate the most perverse elements of competition, laws have failed to develop properly the necessary elements to achieve cooperation. Specifically inside companies, Fletcher (1977) argued that “states must create a climate favorable to workers’ cooperation in the economy by the provision of capital, advice and specialist educational and technical assistance”. Fletcher also recognized that cooperation is related to environmental conditions, which can improve cooperation or reduce it.

A large number of economists and economic models assume that people are guided by self-interest. “This may be true for some (maybe many) people, but it is certainly not true for everybody” (Fehr, Schmidt, 1999, p. 817). The issue of self-interest is problematic in relation to cooperation, particularly as there is no central authority that enhances cooperation (Axelrod, 1984). Countries and their laws delimit social behavior, but they are still insufficient in shaping people's behavior in favor of cooperation. Although customs, conventions, and laws have the objective of achieving the common good, the scope and complexity of society's multiple objectives make achieving cooperation more abstract than effective.

However, unlike society, companies have well-defined objectives and a central authority, which provide a far richer platform for achieving cooperation. Regardless of the orientation for profit, all companies have the ultimate goal of producing goods and services to meet the needs of consumers. Companies are the most efficient way of organizing production that humanity has ever seen. Although companies have different departments, they are all somehow involved in the production process, thus everyone is involved in the same purpose. That purpose is achieved only if there is cooperation among all people in the company. Companies have a duty to combat any act that demotivates or affronts the dignity of workers, such as combating bullying (Pirson & Dierksmeier, 2014) or harassment (Bolton, 2007).

In addition, companies have the goal of fostering a cooperative learning environment. How wrote (White & White, 1991, p. 256), One is born male or female, but not lathe operator or pattern maker, and much less doctor or engineer. To become a good official or technician one must have many hours of apprenticeship or study and normally one needed teachers (...) one is not born a cooperator, because to be a cooperator requires a social maturity, training in social living. For one to be an authentic cooperator, capable of cooperating, it is necessary to have learned to tame one's individualistic or egoistic instincts and to adapt to the laws of cooperation (...). One becomes a cooperator through education and the practice of virtue”. Axelrod also stresses that education is one of the main pillars that sustain cooperation.

An excellent way to promote cooperation in a society is to teach people to care about the welfare of others. Parents and schools devote a tremendous effort to teaching the young to value the happiness of others... this means that the adults try to shape the values of children so that the preferences of the new citizens will incorporate not only their own individual welfare, but to some degree at least, the welfare of others. (Axelrod, 1984, p. 134). In many countries, workers begin to work early, often with few years of schooling. So it is a function of companies to teach or enhance the cooperative skills of their workers in a real environment, so that the spirit of cooperation is provided by the work experience, and in situations that are a part of people's daily lives.

Additionally, the vast majority of companies have a central authority exercised by the owner or a board of directors representing the interests of the owners, as is the case with large corporations whose owners are shareholders. The presence of a central authority in a company allows it to coordinate all the various activities related to production, and coordination requires cooperation between levels of workers. To show the importance of a central authority, Schrank quoted a sailor: I like it that the captain doesn't put anyone down. He's keeping the whole trip together, but he doesn't bark or growl at anyone. He seems to be drawing everyone's ideas out ... Indeed we were impressed by the high degree of cooperation and cohesion among the crew ... Everyone understood his job.

Everyone was doing his job. This is the true test of any working community – how well they do their jobs, and how effectively their skills come into play, how easily they work with each other in their cooperative Endeavour (Schrank, 1983, pp. 39, 60). The role of a central authority, in what is known as the principal agent model, is to properly construct incentives for the workers. However, these incentives can be inadequate because they constrain the larger understanding of the work.

In the other words, incentives may focus the attention of the worker only on the work, and thus the work becomes “blind”. This blindness is a kind of alienation. In this sense, incentives make the work more alienating and the worker more alienated, since the mechanisms defined by incentives restrict the ability of the worker to have a broad view of the production process. The function of the central authority is to enable the emancipation of the worker. In this aspect, Work should not be seen as a punishment but as a means of self-realization. There should be dignity in any work. He spoke of the need for cooperation and collective solidarity. He combined a social vision with an emphasis on education for technical knowledge and skills (White and White, 1991, p. 39).

Hodson (2007, p. 111) emphasizes that “pride in work, extra effort, increased cooperation, peer training and commitment to organizational goals have all been identified as components of employee citizenship behavior”. It is precisely these elements that should be targeted by companies, not only production. Ideally, a company should have broader elements to its goals, including, of course, increased capacity for cooperation among all workers. Thus, as emphasized by White & White (1991, p. 94), “the job holder was to be evaluated for overall performance, including output, quality, organizing ability, initiative, sense of responsibility, and cooperation with other workers”. Equally important is the relationship between companies and unions. Unions are organizations whose purpose is to reduce the asymmetry of power between the company and workers. In an ideal environment there would be no need for unions, but there are obvious reasons for the existence of unions. Just as companies are efficient at production, unions are the most efficient organization to represent the interests of workers. For companies that value cooperation, it is natural to see a relationship between companies and unions based on cooperation.

The union needs to move from the conventional adversarial role toward cooperation with management – without becoming simply the tool of management. This means that the union must bargain with management to arrive at mutually agreed upon bases of cooperation. (White & White, 1991, p. 292)

3. The Corporate Relationship to Society

Most people believe corporations have one purpose: “Maximizing their shareholders’ wealth as measured by stock price. Other goals – serving customers, building great products, providing good jobs — are viewed as legitimate business ends only to the extent they increase shareholder value” (Stout, 2012, p1). Starting at this point – that all human beings have needs that can be satisfied by goods and services – society must organize itself to produce the goods and services needed. Therefore, companies should more accurately be understood as an organization that strives for the best way to transform raw materials and energy into goods and services for consumption. For centuries, people produced all the goods they needed themselves.

This system of organizing production and consumption is called a “natural economy”. However, at the beginning of the 15th century, a new system arose. This new economic system had two main characteristics. The first characteristic was a division between the agent that produces and the agent that consumes. The new system thus introduced a new facet in the social order, which we call the “market”. Using the “invisible hand”, the market’s function is to coordinate interactions between producers and consumers.

The second characteristic of the modern economy is that production is done inside companies, which coordinate all the elements needed for production, such as work, capital, and raw materials. In this way, companies are the most efficient way society has developed to produce goods and services. Companies improve the quality of life for consumers and for society in general. However, it is also true that companies have a history of exploiting workers. During the first Industrial Revolution (1700s), for instance, the average work week exceeded 70 hours, totaling more than 3600 hours per year.

Additionally, the wages paid to the workers were often inadequate to meet their needs. This early model of production is not consistent with the ideal purpose of companies, which should be to improve the quality of life for both workers and consumers. Unions have played an extraordinary role in counterbalancing this inequality between the profit goals of companies and their treatment of workers. “The volume of production has been constantly rising owing to the development of modern machinery.

There are two main channels to carry off these products – one channel carrying off the product destined to be consumed by the workers, and the other channel carrying off the remainder to the rich. The workers' channel is in rock-bound banks that cannot enlarge, owing to the competitive wage system preventing wages rising *pro rata* with increased efficiency. Wages are based upon cost of living and not upon efficiency of labour" (Hobson, 1988, p.83). This paragraph was taken by Hobson and described the social conditions in the 19th century:

Workers received wages just to keep them alive, while owners and businessmen earned very high profits. The book written by Hobson didn't talk about wages, even poverty, but discussed the way that companies arranged to surpass the "rock-bound banks": to trade with other countries. This process was described by Hobson as Imperialism, and it was used as a solution to companies' difficulty in maintaining continual expansion in their original countries. The reason for that difficulty was the small wages that workers received. Additionally, working conditions were awful and work hours were too long.

In the capitalist system everything has an owner, and mainstream economics argues that the presence of owners is the most efficient way to organize production and to achieve the highest level of efficiency. Owners have the ability to organize production, and they assume the risks of production and sales, for instance. For this reason, ownership must be well-rewarded. However, companies should be understood as a social environment rather than a set of regulations about property rights that control the flow of resources, goods, energy, and wealth. This new way to understand companies assumes that traditional views adopted by them, such as efficiency, goals, and incentives, must be altered or complemented by equity and by balancing all the elements engaged, such as owners, administrators, and employees.

In fact, this has happened. More than one hundred years later, the conditions described by Hobson have changed. Some employees receive high wages that provide them with an appropriate quality of life. Additionally, many workers around the world dream of getting a job in a multinational company, although such companies are the instrument of imperialism, as Lenin noted in 1919 (Lenin, 1999). Nowadays, in many countries multinational companies are seen as the most desirable places to work, and their actions inspire local companies to improve work conditions, to offer opportunities to achieve better positions inside the company, to pay good wages and other benefits. Etc. Although global companies may be seen as the best companies to work for, they are the exception in the local work environment, which varies greatly among companies and countries. Workers in some companies are nearly slaves. Even well-known multinational companies have histories of unsafe conditions, such as Nike's shoe manufacturing plants in Vietnam. Cases reporting employment of children in the workplace are disappearing, but they still exist.

For those who do not have any resources that provide income, a job in a company, small or large, is the best way to earn money. There, working for a company is not an option but a necessity. Companies, regardless of size, are production agents that have a larger capacity for taking risks than an individual. In this way, companies can both oppress employees, who are the fragile elements in this relationship, or, on the other hand, can guard employees from unsafe conditions. Inside, companies can avoid and prevent unsafe conditions, and provide an environment for equality in gender opportunities, for example. Actions adopted inside companies can also offer opportunities to employees outside of companies' locations, providing activities beyond the workplace, or free time for spending with families or hobbies.

4. The Corporate Relationship to Nature

When companies produce goods for consumers, the production requires the transformation of goods that nature itself provides; these goods are not available in nature, but rather nature provides the resources and raw materials. Therefore, in a modern, mostly urban society, characterized by the nature of man's estrangement, companies play a vital role in utilizing resources and extracting raw materials located on the Earth, and transforming them appropriately to satisfy society's consumer needs. In turn, the development of production techniques, culminating in the emergence of companies, has removed man from nature, making for a rather tenuous relationship. Before the age of fire, the interaction between man and nature was quite similar to the behavior of other developed primates. At that time, man was collector and hunter, and there was no specific or fixed location for housing.

The emergence of agriculture started man's dominion over nature, and the techniques used for the production of agricultural goods were compatible with an environmental balance; for example, there was crop rotation to maintain soil fertility, the areas for agriculture were interspersed with woods, and there was preservation of watershed areas.

The Industrial Revolutions, which marked the consolidation of companies, signaled man's dominion over nature. The Industrial Revolutions and the scientific advances that have taken place since have allowed not only the expansion of industrial activities, but they also have provided a wide revolution in agriculture. This revolution led to mechanization and the use of chemical fertilizers, resulting in major environmental damage. In addition, the intensive use of fossil fuels and increased pressure on natural resources has caused a large number of extremely serious environmental catastrophes such as climate change, the erosion of large amounts of soil, desertification of large areas, and the acidification of oceans. Moreover, human actions have also aggravated the threat to biodiversity through the extinction of numerous species of flora and fauna.

These monumental changes, whose impacts are global, have led the scientific community to create a new name for the current terrestrial ecosystem: Anthropocene (Ellis et al, 2013). Although the actions described above affect the entire world, it is recognized that companies are the direct agents responsible for these actions, such as the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico caused by British Petroleum in 2010. Another example that is pertinent is leaded gasoline. In 1922 it was discovered that if lead were added to gasoline, this mixture would raise substantially engine compression and thus increase vehicle performance. This discovery meant that beginning in 1923, leaded gasoline was openly sold, despite the protests of the scientific community warning of the immense damage to human health (Markowitz & Rosner, 1985). These examples illustrate situations where dignity is affronted, caused by the actions of some companies that are not committed to environmental preservation. Most often, environmental oversight is not strictly enforced, which makes the situation more severe.

Since 1970, four schools of thought have arisen around the complex issue of corporate behavior in relation to the environment. The first school originates within the neoclassical perspective. This perspective is grounded in the traditional pillars of economics, such as efficiency, cost-benefit analysis, utilitarian presumptions, and property rights. This school believes that the market is the best instrument to regulate the use of natural resources. It is noteworthy that the neoclassical view does not take into consideration intra-generational or inter-generational issues. The second school of thought is based on sustainable development. This view assumes that natural resources and the environment are a serious obstacle to growth. However, by setting limits and the skillful use of economic instruments, it is possible to reconcile economic development with environmental preservation. The sustainable development concept encompasses the importance of living beings as well as the stability of physical properties. In this view there is an intra-generational and inter-generational balance.

The third view is called Ecological Economics, a school of thinking that states economic growth should be limited. Thus, the limits of natural resources and the environment must be considered in economic growth. Here, inter-generational issues overlap with intra-generational issues. The fourth view is known as Deep Ecology, whose foundation is highly preservationist, centered on full preservation of the biosphere. This means that non-human elements of all kinds, including physical elements, must be respected by man. Ethical considerations extend therefore to all of nature and are valid for all future generations.

The latter two views are based on the concept that the environment exerts restraints on the actions of society, and these limits must be respected. The neoclassical perspective, on the other hand, takes the planet's natural resources for granted and believes these resources should be used to promote economic growth, based on the concept of weak sustainability. This view states there are no problems in the long run if capital investment compensates future generations for environmental losses caused by production and current consumption. This concept is known as Hartwick's rule (Hartwick, 1977; Withagen & Asheim, 1998). In the sustainable development view, which is currently the most widely accepted, though not necessarily the most adopted, there is the supposition of integrating and reconciling economic interests with environmental restrictions. Acceptance of this view is currently being assisted worldwide by its support from the United Nations. In its report "The Life of Dignity for All," it states:

The common ground in these contributions far outweighs any differences. Indeed, it is possible to see the emerging outlines of a new sustainable development agenda: universal in nature yet responsive to the complexities, needs and capacities of individual countries and regions; bold in ambition but simple in design; combining the economic, social and environmental dimensions while putting the highest priority on ending poverty and reducing inequality; protective of the planet, its biodiversity, water and land; rights-based, with particular emphasis on women, young people and marginalized groups; eager for new and innovative partnerships; and supported by pioneering approaches to data and rigorous accountability mechanisms.

Guided by this far-reaching vision, a limited set of goals with sustainable development at the core, as called for at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, could be constructed to encapsulate current challenges and the priorities of the new agenda and to guide the transformation we need. (UN, 2013) Although the UN report does not specifically mention companies, it is clear that companies make a direct contribution to environmental problems through the negative externalities they generate into the environment. Therefore, companies that adopt adequate actions to guide production so that it does not negatively impact on the environment are supporting all elements of life. These actions taken by the company to maintain appropriate environmental conditions benefit people with no connection to the company and can be accomplished without a negative impact on the company's share price. In addition, proper maintenance of the natural environment allows that future generations will not suffer damage. Thus companies can play an integral role in preserving the dignity of future generations. In this sense, Ikenna (2015) highlights:

Moreover, to choose life involves rejecting every form of violence: (...) the violence to our natural environment which ultimately demeans human dignity in preference for senseless development. In every circumstance, the right to life must be promoted and safeguarded with appropriate ethical, legal and political instruments, for no offence against the right to life, against the dignity of any single person, is ever unimportant. The promotion of human dignity is particularly linked to the right to a healthy and life-sustaining environment...

5. Conclusion

Dignity is one of those broad concepts, such as happiness or respect that is integral in any discussion of mankind. Because it is such a broad concept, dignity consists of many layers and may be influenced, both positively and negatively, by various forces. One of the most important forces affecting the actualization of dignity is precisely the role it plays within companies. The modern understanding of companies is that their objective is to maximize their shareholders' wealth. Because companies play such a vital role in the modern world, they affect the lives of everyone. For this reason, it must be understood that in addition to serving customers, producing great products, and providing good jobs, one of a company's functions is to contribute to the enhancement of dignity.

For a company, dignity has three dimensions. The first dimension is for companies to avoid and prevent unsafe working conditions and foster a work environment that supports gender equality, etc. It does not make sense for companies to benefit some groups, like owners and consumers, at the expense of workers. The second dimension is to provide a favorable environment for cooperation. Companies have a specific goal and a central authority. This is a critical element for promoting the learning of cooperation among workers. Therefore, it is a function of companies to teach or enhance cooperation skills among workers in a real environment. Finally, companies are the main agents that affect the natural environment. Environmental degradation universally affects all people, although some more than others. In turn, an adequate natural environment provides essential services for life, and this should be balanced among all people, including future generations. In this respect, companies can promote environmental protection and enhance the dignity of future generations. We can therefore conclude that companies must be the fount of dignity.

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