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Understanding the Subjective Dimension of Work from a Buddhist Perspective

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Abstract:

The notion of the subjective dimension of work has its roots in Catholic Social Teaching. This essay offers a Buddhist perspective on this topic. Although there is no distinction between the subjective-objective dimensions of work in traditional Buddhist texts, Buddhist teaching on karma contains implicit affirmation of the subjective dimension of work as the source of the morality of work, and this notion is a useful explanatory framework in understanding right livelihood in contemporary setting. While Buddhist perspective on subjectivity of work is consistent with the view of Catholic Social Teaching, consideration of Buddhism in our conceptualization of the subjective dimension of work will challenge us to revise and expand the concept and practice of meaningful work to integrate the wellbeing of workers, interpersonal relationships, meditative practice (mindfulness) and concern for the environment.

Keywords: Buddhist Ethics, Catholic Social Teaching, Subjective Dimension of Work, Meaningful Work, Religion in the Workplace, Business Ethics, Comparative Ethics, Contemporary Buddhism, East-West Comparative Philosophy, Religious Ethics, Applied Ethics.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) report on decent work identifies subjective dimension of work (SDW) as a fundamental concept that all major religions subscribe to. It states:

The different traditions attribute a high and positive value to work, based upon the concept of the divine “call” to work. Traditions speak of work according to its objective dimension (the outcome or end product of labour) and its subjective dimension (the worker as subject of work, expressing and enhancing his or her humanity through labour) (ILO 2012, 28).

The notion of SDW has its roots in Catholic Social Teaching (CST), specifically in the encyclicals of John Paul II that affirm SDW as the source of the morality of work. In the same manner, ILO (2012, 18) confirms that the ethical component of work is closely linked to SDW.

The best approach for incorporating the principles of justice into work is by paying attention to the subjective dimension of work. The objective dimension changes drastically over time, with

the development and expansion of technology, industrial production, communication, trade and communication.

Studies also indicate the primacy of SDW in conceptualizing meaningful work – a topic that continues to generate interest in business ethics. This is because meaningful work is more related to one's subjective experience of self-realization and fulfillment while working rather than to some objective characteristics of work (objective dimension). While the two dimensions of work are interconnected, no objective aspect of work is sufficient to guarantee its meaningfulness. Unfortunately the ILO document leaves much to be desired as far as this topic is concerned. On the other hand, CST scholars rarely engage in cross-cultural or interreligious dialogue. It is essential to make an in-depth analysis and articulate in a systematic way the presence of SDW in other religions in order to fully understand the significance of this concept outside CST.

This paper presents a Buddhist perspective on SDW. While Buddhism acknowledges the importance of meaningful work since right livelihood is included in the 8-fold path, not much attention is given to this topic in traditional literature. Early Buddhism proscribes all kinds of economic activities for monks. "Sākyamuni Buddha, to whom all Buddhist schools refer, never did regular work himself, neither in a paid job nor in voluntary employment" (Baumann 1998, 133). Because right livelihood is designed for laity, the lack of attention given to it reflects the tendencies in Buddhism, especially during its earlier stage to focus on monastic way of life as a means to attain nirvana, while the life of a layperson is a means to attain better rebirth. For this reason, Buddhism "did not play the same type of role attributed to Protestant ethics in the West" when it comes to work ethic (Ornatowski 1996, 199).

My position in this essay is that while there is no distinction between subjective-objective dimension of right livelihood in traditional Buddhist literature, Buddhist teaching on karma implies affirmation of SDW as the source of the morality of work, and that SDW as conceptualized in CST is a useful explanatory framework in applying right livelihood in modern-day setting. While this Buddhist standpoint on SDW that I expound is consistent with CST, consideration of Buddhism in our understanding of SDW will challenge us to revise and expand the notion and practice of meaningful work to integrate the wellbeing of workers, interpersonal relationships, meditative practice (mindfulness) and concern for the environment. In developing *a Buddhist perspective*, I draw from authors who belong to *Contemporary Buddhism*. This term refers to new modes of Buddhism that emerge in the West since the last decade of the 20th century as a result of Buddhism's encounter with Western philosophy and its engagement with the modern world. While generally reflecting the teachings of *Therevada* as contained in the early Buddhist texts, Contemporary Buddhism does not intend to represent any particular school of Buddhism. As a religion, Buddhism is non-credal and non-dogmatic. It considers adherence to any absolute doctrine or singular dogma as a kind of attachment that can lead to suffering. Thus, there is no homogenous ethical system that is followed by all Buddhists. "This theory of more than one ethical system is more flexible and in accord with the actual moral practices of Buddhist communities"

(Promta 2005, 156). For many Buddhists, the diversity of schools in Buddhism is a manifestation of the fecundity and timelessness of its message, rather than a reason for conflict and exclusion.

At the outset we must bear in mind that we cannot expect a perfect fit between Western and Buddhist concepts without risks of superimposing Western categories. According to Edelglass (2014, 477-478) “no one Western meta-ethical theory provides an adequate theoretical framework for grasping moral thinking in any of the major traditions of Buddhism, and a fortiori, the vast and heterogeneously diverse tradition of Buddhism as a whole.” Nonetheless, the fact the Western terminology does not fully capture the nuances of Buddhist ideas does not mean that all endeavors to apply Western categories to Buddhism are misconceived. Western philosophy generally offers precise definitions and taxonomies not found in traditional Buddhist texts. Such approach does “not only refine our interpretations but also generate new insights and perspectives that otherwise would not arise” (Velez, 2013). Whitehill (2000, 26) adds, “no one argues that Buddhist ethics or morality are *sui generis*, a unique and inviolate form of Buddhist tradition to be transplanted whole and entire into Western cultural soil.”

The Two Dimensions of Work

CST makes a distinction between objective and subjective dimensions of work. Objectively, work is a transitive action that brings about the use or transformation of natural objects to satisfy human needs. As such, it is a means to economic development and appears in various types or values depending on its output. But work is not only a transitive action, it is also an immanent or a self-perfecting act. “For when a man works, he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself” (Vatican Council II 1965, no. 35). This is SDW where work is seen as the “axis of human self-making” (Baum 1982, 10). In all types of work, it is the person who acts and human faculties are utilized. Through work, we develop our natural talents, learn and acquire new skills, and improve our knowledge and competencies. Every human act leads to an end which is the realization of the subject’s intent, its fulfillment. Fulfillment involves not just the completion of the act but the actualization of the subject. Subjectively, work is an *actus personae* (act of the person) that can only be predicated to the person. It cannot have meaning and value apart from the worker from which it proceeds. “Thus, work bears a particular mark of man and humanity, the mark of a person... And this mark decides its interior characteristics; in a sense it constitutes its very nature” (John Paul II 1981, no.1). As an *actus personae*, work cannot be considered as a material commodity or valued according to the laws of market economy. While objectively work may come in various types, it is only a single activity subjectively considered, it does not admit degrees or qualifications for its worth comes from the fact that it proceeds from the person who is much more than a material being. “As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his reason of his very humanity” (John Paul II 1981, no. 8).

The term *subjective* in CST has nothing to do with subjective relativism. It has a technical meaning in the pre-pontifical writings of John Paul II where we find influences of personalist philosophy that gives “primary emphasis on subjectivity, i.e. on man’s entry into personhood through fidelity and other self-actualizing commitments” (Baum 1982, 15). CST rejects a subjective-relativist definition of meaningful work that affirms the freedom of everyone to choose any means to earn a living. SDW means that the human person is the subject of work. Being a subject is more than being an agent, for a subject is a conscious, self-governing, and self-determining being who experiences her own self in her actions. She is aware that she is responsible for her action and its concomitant effects. Human action is auto-teleological in the sense that it is *self-end* and this end is self-fulfillment. The person cannot direct himself toward external goals or values without determining himself and his values. As expressions of our inmost being, our professions have physical, ethical, and spiritual repercussions on ourselves.

SDW takes priority over its objective dimension. The person as a subject cannot be an object. Being an end in itself, the person cannot be subordinated to other lesser ends or values. To put more emphasis in its objective dimension is to alienate workers from their nature by transforming them into a mere instrument of production. Any economic activity that violates human dignity and treats the person simply as a tool of production cannot be considered meaningful work. What is more morally significant is not the external effects of work but its internal effects – what work does to the worker.

“The sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension, not in the objective one” (John Paul II 1981, no. 6). SDW is the root of the morality of work. It connects work with the person. Because SDW reveals how our work shapes our being and brings about our fulfillment, choosing one’s work is a moral choice. We must reject any kind of work that is not consonant with our dignity. To recognize the priority of SDW is to be committed in a certain way of organizing work too. Firms are obligated not only to respect the rights of workers by providing them with morally minimum standards of working conditions, but also to ensure that “such conditions must come to reflect a full understanding of the reality of human personhood and the person’s inherent impulse to manifest and fulfill his or her own subjectivity” (Savage 2008, 213).

Buddhist Teaching on Karma

Following the approach taken in CST, I analyze work from a Buddhist perspective by starting with human act or karma, since work is a specific kind of human action. The Sanskrit word karma (*kamma* in Pali) means both work and action – it applies to all kinds of intentional acts whether verbal, mental, or physical, including their moral consequences. Because karma is directly concerned with morality, any discussion of work from a moral perspective must begin with karma. For “the Buddha, the moral order of the universe is contained first and foremost in the doctrines of *kamma* and rebirth” (Gowans 2003, 29). While traditional Buddhist literature does not distinguish the objective and subjective dimensions of right livelihood, it speaks of transitive and intransitive effects of karma (Keown 2003).

Buddhism uses the terms *kusala* (wholesome) and *akusala* (unwholesome) to denote the axiological qualities of human act. It will be misleading however, to translate these terms as good and evil in English. *Kusala* and *akusala* are mental states or conditions that produce results initially in the mind. The Buddha says “Bhikkhus, whatever qualities are wholesome, partake of the wholesome, and pertain to the wholesome, all have the mind as their forerunner. Mind arises first followed by the wholesome qualities” (Bodhi 2012, 98). *Kusala* refers to condition of wellbeing and contentment without suffering. *Akusala* is the condition when the mind is unhealthy, deluded, envious, or ignorant – mental states that cause suffering. Intention is “a volitional process that intends, initiates, and directs action toward fulfilling a goal” (Heim 2014, 21). Intentionality, state of mind, the presence of mental defilements that motivate the act and full consciousness are all crucial in determination of moral responsibility. *Anguttara Nikaya* states that karma is *cetana* – a term that connotes intention, volition or the act of willing, and motivation. (Keown 2003) “It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call *kamma*, for having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind” (Bodhi 2012, 963).¹ Although karma is action, morally speaking it means the intention behind the action.

Buddhism accepts five presuppositions of the teaching of karma (Reichenbach 1990, 13). These are (1) actions have axiological qualities, (2) actions have effects, (3) these effects can be manifested immediately or in the future, (4) they can be accumulated, (5) people are reborn. Karma has two kinds of effects: *Phalas* – the “fruits” of action or all its external consequences which may be visible or invisible, and *Samskaras* or the invisible and transformative effects of action to one’s character. Some examples of *Phalas* are changes in physical appearance, increase or decrease in wealth, presence of diseases, or destruction of objects. *Samskaras* or mental formation refers to our mental dispositions, habits, and tendencies to act virtuously or viciously (Fink 2013, 670). Moral action leaves a “*samskaric* imprint” or intransitive effect in ourselves.

Looking at its effects, karma has two aspects: subjective and objective. The subjective aspect of karma considers the internal effects of actions to the quality of one’s thought.² It refers to intransitive or character-based effects that create “dispositions and tendencies, merit and demerit, which in turn affect our desires, passions, and perspective on the world” (Reichenbach 1990, 31). Gradually, one becomes what one regularly intends. On the other hand, the objective aspect affects “the instruments of our experiences, from our own bodies to the world around us” (Reichenbach 1990, 31). Objectively, karma refers to external expressions and direct impacts of actions to others. It operates based on the law of causality, a kind of natural law akin to the law of gravity (Keown 1996a). “While the intransitive aspect of moral action affects only the agent, the transitive aspect (what is actually done) affects other parties” (Keown 1996b, 334).

“It is noteworthy” Keown adds (1996b, 334), “that discussion of karma in Buddhist literature almost invariably focuses on the *intransitive* effects of karma. What is emphasized is the way moral deeds enhance or prejudice the personal circumstances of the actor, and little is said about the effect of moral action upon the world at large.” The reason for this is that first, these intransitive

or subjective effects manifest themselves directly in the life of an individual in her present or future existence. Karma implies that once we have made a conscious choice to act in a certain way, our subsequent intentional acts change who we are. We become predisposed to choose in the same way to the point that our future choices become more and more limited. Second, the connection between the transitive aspect of karma to specific actions is hard to identify with precision because of the influence of non-karmic factors. Buddhism does not rule out the role of chance or luck in human behavior. On the other hand, the subjective dimension of karma is known to a person in a direct way as one becomes aware of the transformation of one's character or the steady improvement in her wellbeing in terms of happiness and equanimity as a result of consistently doing wholesome actions. We *produce* and *reproduce* ourselves as *subjects*, as it were from moment-to-moment in the ethical volitions and choices we make. Third, the subjective aspect of karma remains fully in the subject in a non-contingent manner. For example, even if my attempt to commit robbery did not harm anyone because I was caught in the process, it still has a karmic effect on me as it shapes me into being a certain kind of person (as a thief). Finally, the intransitive effects of karma are intrinsically connected to actions that produce them in the sense that they cannot be acquired in any other way without performing those actions, e.g. one cannot be a generous person unless she acts generously. From this, it is clear that what is emphasized in Buddhism is the subjective dimension of karma - the intransitive effects of our actions in terms of how they transform us.

Because of its emphasis on the subjective dimension, some philosophers like Keown consider Buddhism as a kind of virtue ethics.³ For his part, Fink describes Buddhism as inward-looking. "Moral questions are settled, not by considering one's action from an external point of view, but by examining one's underlying motives and intentions" (Fink 2012, 376). This does not mean, however that external consequences of actions do not matter as long as we have the right intention. Even if it is the intransitive or subjective dimension of karma that takes priority, the transitive aspect is still important since action involves both intention and external outcomes. External effects of actions on other persons and the natural environment also affect the doer in terms of how the environment and other persons condition her present or future existence.⁴

For Keown, it is a mistake to interpret Buddhism as a kind of utilitarianism. The utilitarian ethics of Mill does not only hold that acts have consequences, but that acts do not have any intrinsic morality. Although Buddhism considers the ethical relevance of the effects of karma, the determining factor in the morality of action and in the kind of rebirth is *cetana*. The way Harvey (2000) puts it is that it is not bad rebirth or negative consequences of action that make the action wrong, it is because the action is wrong so it generates negative consequences, if not to other beings, definitely to the doer. Further, there is an intrinsic connection between means and end with regard to the 8-fold path and nirvana, i.e. the path is not only instrumentally good but is good in itself inasmuch as it is the only means to achieve the highest good (nirvana). The 8-fold path is a "process of developing and perfecting qualities in order to achieve the end of awakening, but at the same time these excellent qualities constitute awakening" (Vasen 2014, 549). The full realization of the 8-fold path is identical with nirvana.

The Priority of SDW – Buddhist Perspective

Buddhists recognize that work has two main functions. First, it is a means to earn a living. This is the objective dimension of work where work is considered as a transitive act and the focus is on the external goods that it creates. Work is essential to ensure economic independence and avoid misery caused by poverty and material deprivation. The *Dhammapada* states that “Hunger is the illness most severe” (Carter 1987, 37). Poverty makes it difficult to develop spiritual values and is the major cause of crimes and other unethical behaviors. Buddhism manifests positive attitude toward wealth acquired through hard work (Holder 2006, 30; Carter 1987, 61). The Buddha acknowledges possession of wealth, economic security, and freedom from debt as legitimate forms of happiness for householders.⁵ He also talks about the right use of wealth: e.g. to raise family, protect oneself, help those in need, and support the *sangha*. A person with stable income is not a burden to society, and those with greater income have more resources to alleviate the sufferings of others. Describing a virtuous householder, the Buddha says he “seeks wealth righteously, without violence, and having obtained it, makes himself happy and pleased; and shares the wealth and does meritorious deeds; and uses that wealth without being tied to it, infatuated with it, and blindly absorbed in it, seeing the danger in it and understanding the escape” (Bodhi, 2012, 1461). The Buddha also condemns idleness and considers habits that cause squandering of wealth such as gambling and addiction as vices that must be avoided.

The ultimate goal of work, however, should be nirvana. As part of the 8-fold path, right livelihood leads to human fulfillment by freeing us from our samsaric existence. It must be recalled that the eight components of the path are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. In our employment, we are regularly confronted with ethical dilemmas and environmental issues that we must solve with right intention. Our encounter with adversity, conflicts, disappointments and failures in pursuit of our careers enables us to exercise right understanding that makes us resilient to such challenges. It is written in *Dhammapada*: “Winning, one engenders enmity;/ Miserably sleeps the defeated./ The one at peace sleep pleasantly,/ Having abandoned victory and defeat”(Carter 1987, 37). There are many factors in our working life that can generate or reinforce envy, sadness, anger, and mental distortions (pride, racial or gender prejudice, illusion of grandeur). These unwholesome thoughts may cause suffering to oneself in terms of stress or depression, and are also the roots of wrong actions that harm other beings. Through right effort we can prevent the arising of these thoughts. With regard to company communications (meetings, workshops, annual reports, emails and memos, telephone conversation, promotional materials) the Buddha says that our speech must be truthful, inaccuracy in communication can create confusion and disruption. Compassion can be expressed in sharing our talents to our colleagues, spending more time to help others, and going extra mile to assist clients and customers – especially those who are vulnerable, i.e. the aged, young children, and those who are sick or economically disadvantaged. As employees, we have choices to make on how we treat each other on a daily basis. We can be humane and respectful with one another by observing the moral precepts of right action, or we can turn our offices into a hostile and less

productive environment where sexual misbehavior, theft, and bullying are present.

Buddhism recognizes the value of external goods that our livelihood produces, but it gives more importance to internal goods we acquire through work – spiritual and moral values essential for self-development and enlightenment, i.e. the intransitive or subjective dimension (SDW). Every time we practice the 8-fold path in the workplace, we do something incremental to our character regardless of the external outcomes. Our right actions may not make any difference or may be interpreted simply as a kind of social investment. Rather than helping someone, our compassion may cause co-dependence. On account of misunderstanding, our co-workers might doubt our right intention, but regardless, our acts have internal effects – they mold us into a certain kind of person and influence our future decisions by shaping our character. As mentioned previously, what takes primacy in Buddhism is the transformative/intransitive effects of our actions. The priority of SDW in Buddhism is in line with its emphasis on subjective or internal aspect of karma.

“The Buddha strongly criticized the caste system, and advocated the subjective dimension of work, where work is undertaken for man’s spiritual renewal and development; as a conscious and free subject he chooses his work in order to realize his humanity” (Peccoud 2004, 36). The caste system and other dehumanizing ways of organizing work that exploit workers by treating them as tools of production are forms of wrong livelihood, especially if these livelihoods can be organized in different ways but are not done so because of concern for excessive profits. Under these conditions, the objective dimension of work is given priority over SDW, and the human worker becomes subject to work rather than the subject of work. SDW means that work is for the person, not the other way around (John Paul II 1981, no. 6). Aside from the fact that wrong livelihood causes misery, (Bodhi 2012, 1493) it is an obstacle to nirvana because it cultivates unwholesome mental dispositions. One cannot follow the 8-fold path and engage in economic activities that involve excessive violence, production and selling of intoxicating substances, or pornography. Wrong livelihood also includes occupations based on fraud or intentional lying (Walshe 1995, 71-73). In telling a lie that we know is untrue, we deceive ourselves, making it difficult for us to practice not only right speech but also right understanding.

The priority of SDW involves concern for the good of others and the environment, not just the individual worker. This is because in Buddhism, work is an act of a person who is a conscious subject but not a completely autonomous individual or an independent-substantial self. The notion of independent-substantial-self expressed in the statement “I am a substantial, self-identical entity” is a conventional view.⁶ The term *self* refers to a bundle of constantly changing physical and mental heaps (*skandhas*) or constituents that interact and condition each other.⁷ The Buddhist notion of *anatta* or no-self does not negate the existence of persons as conscious subjects of experience and agents of action and moral responsibility.⁸ Intention is central to the domain of ethics, to abandon the notion of an intentional subject is to abandon the moral domain itself. It has been argued in many Buddhist studies that *anatta* is not incompatible with moral responsibility. Whether there is a permanent self or not, the negative or positive effects of our actions continue to exist.

Whenever *self* is denied in Buddhism, it is always qualified. What *anatta* negates is the reality of an autonomous, reified, and unconditioned substantial self, rather than the existence of the person as an acting and experiencing subject, bringing in the fact that persons are relational beings. “[W]hile there is no permanent Self, each person is seen as a particular, individual combination of changing mental and physical processes, with a particular karmic history” (Harvey 2000, 36). Neither does Buddhism deny the presence of self-experience, but renders certain modes of self-experience incompatible with *anatta* as illusory. Further, Buddhism teaches that all living beings are interconnected in the natural processes of birth, suffering, old, age, and death. This view, called *paticcasamuppada* or dependent co-arising is usually expressed in twelve causal links.⁹ Thus, there is no inherent conflict between one’s wellbeing and the wellbeing of others.¹⁰

With this notion of self, cooperation and sharing rather than competition or self-interest are the characteristic marks of rational action. The good of oneself and of others are seen as closely inter-twined. Buddhism does not negate concern for oneself, it posits that the exercise of understanding oneself, if it is to be inclusive and realistic, involves reference to others. The Buddha says, “a wise person of great wisdom does not intend for his own affliction, or for the affliction of others, or for the affliction of both. Rather, when he thinks, he thinks only of his own welfare, the welfare of others, the welfare of both, and the welfare of the whole world” (Bodhi 2012, 555). Clearly, this is another way of expressing the second evangelical commandment: Love thy neighbor as you love yourself (Matt. 22:37-39). Resonating with CST, our choice of employment in Buddhism is a moral one. We have to look at the consequences of our livelihood, not just to our individual selves but to our fellow humans and the environment as a whole for they are also part of what we are.¹¹ One has the moral obligation to reject occupations that cause avoidable harm to non-human living beings. This includes businesses that pollute the environment, engage in arms trade or unnecessary animal testing, manufacture violent video games, and support repressive governments. Consideration of the quality of goods and services is also important. Right livelihood entails efficient use of natural goods in order to satisfy the authentic needs of our present community without compromising the welfare of future generations. Work that has something to do with production and sale of luxury goods and inferior products that have to be replaced in a short time is wrongful since it makes us use natural resources for unnecessary purposes.

Another criterion for right livelihood from its subjective dimension is that it entails harmonious relationship in the workplace. In the current economy, production cannot be considered as an individual or even a group activity, but a joint effort of so many people working across geographical borders and producing products and services exchanged in globally integrated markets. It involves not just the actual production process but also the scientific and technical preparation, conceptual planning and design, as well postproduction efforts such as marketing, promotions, delivery, etc. No work is done in complete isolation without connecting the person with other workers and the natural world. Relationship makes work possible. CST scholars call this the social dimension of work. According to *Centesimus Annus*, individual work “is naturally

interrelated with the work of others. More than ever, work is work with others and work for others” (John Paul II no. 31). Moreover, the workplace today is the main vehicle for social interconnectedness where lasting relationships are oftentimes formed. These meaningful interpersonal dynamics that unfold in the workplace can be a powerful source of meaning of work for many employees.

Right Livelihood and Meaningful Work

Buddhism is more interested in our daily activities, i.e. actions that we do from moment to moment rather than major grand decisions. It is about transformation of our daily lives. “Right livelihood is interesting, absorbing work. Not so much because it is exciting, glamorous work, but more because the mindfulness practice involved makes it possible to be fully present in the work, whatever its day-to-day reality might be” (Whitmyer 1994, 255). Thus, right livelihood cannot be a meaningless job.

To be meaningful, work must be accompanied by mindfulness. By mindfulness, I refer to the Buddhist practice of mental discipline in the 8-fold path that includes right effort, right attentiveness, and right concentration. We need to be fully present in our jobs and attuned to our emotional reactions and those of others. There are times when we have the tendency to auto-pilot in the workplace especially when we do tedious or repetitive chores. Being a meaningful work, right livelihood cannot be a necessary evil, something we need to get done and over with so that we can move on for the rest of our day. Buddhist mindfulness is a mental skill that sustains attention when excitement and energy for work wane as a result of burnout or boredom. It requires focusing the mind in the present moment and “purposefully paying attention to things we ordinarily never give a moment’s thought to” (Whitmyer 1994, 252). With mindfulness, we become aware of our automatic thoughts, memories, and emotional reactions as mental entities. In Buddhism, our mind is very powerful to the point that we tend to substitute ideas and emotional reaction to how things really are. The result is that we fail to grasp reality as it is. To be effective mindfulness has to be extended to everyday living, especially in our working life. There are various techniques in Buddhist meditation that can promote consciousness at work (Thich Nhat Hanh 2008; Marques 2012; Whitmyer 1994). Doing repetitive tasks in the workplace provides workers with opportunity to practice the discipline of right concentration where the mind maintains deep awareness and attention on each moment. Buddhists “aim to make work as powerful a tool of personal transformation as formal sitting meditation. Indeed, if we understand meditation to be the systematic cultivation of positive states of mind, one might say that we aim to make our work an extension of meditation” (Baumann 2000, 379).

There is a growing body of literature in psychology and organization studies that indicates that Buddhist mindfulness has several desirable outcomes in the workplace both in terms of productivity and wellbeing of employees.¹² Mindfulness makes the mind calm and focused. It provides relief of anxiety and depression as well as promotes mental clarity, increased self-awareness, collaboration and teambuilding, leadership development, ethical decision making, and improved

efficiencies. It minimizes aggressive reactions, disruptive activities, and behaviors associated with bias and discrimination. Through the practice of mindfulness, stressful events in the workplace can be experienced as less threatening by enabling the workers to maintain calmness during such situations. In his book, Richmond (1999) writes that one does not have to be a Buddhist in order to benefit from these practices.

To fully realize right livelihood from its subjective dimension, we need to be engaged at work and excel in it by accomplishing it to the best of our ability. Through mindfulness, we can develop profound appreciation and discover the meaning of ordinary work. What matters more is not the material output of work but how consciously and carefully it is done. From this perspective, the meaning of work comes from our daily experience – the way we serve our customers and clients, the quality of our relationship and interaction with our co-workers, the accuracy of our audit and accounting reports, our attention to details when we do our inventories, the manner we write our corporate communications, and other activities that involve reflection, initiative, mind-presence, exercise of responsibility, absorption, practice of virtues, and interpersonal dynamics.

Most employment today has a measure of wrong livelihood. Many workers cannot strictly follow the Buddhist precept of non-harming. We need police and armed forces to provide us protection from criminals or terrorists, plants need to be protected from pests, mosquitoes that carry deadly viruses have to be eliminated. Our economic activities generate negative externalities such as garbage and toxic wastes, noise, congestion, and pollutants that cause suffering or inconvenience to others. I may work in a retail store that does not cause any direct harm but the clothes that we sell may have been produced in factories that do not observe fair labor practices or are located in countries where government repression of workers' rights exists. The firm I work with may offer retirement benefits from mutual funds that invest, without my knowledge, in environmentally harmful industries.

In his commentary, Baum (1982, 11) says that as far as the SDW is concerned, CST avoids any form of dogmatism. Among the many possible definitions of the person, John Paul II chose to define the person as a working being (*homo laborans*) for the reason of "its historical usefulness and transformative power." As the subject of work, the meaning we assign to our work cannot be separated from our vision of a meaningful life. In CST, the person is the end of her own conscious actions because she cannot direct herself toward external goals and values without determining her very being at the same time. As workers, we need to find deeper meaning for our daily toil and sacrifice. In the same vein, meaningful/right livelihood in Buddhism is not simply a matter of choosing the right kind of job. All types of work can degenerate into wrong livelihood if we become too attached to our careers, achievements, or material success. Any type of work can cause greed or egocentricity. Any profession can engender workaholism where work alone becomes the ultimate and only source of individual fulfillment. Loss of one's profession may cause depression. Any livelihood may be pursued simply as a means to collect paychecks, rather an opportunity to attain enlightenment. From its subjective dimension, any occupation could be an example of wrong livelihood.

As far as SDW is concerned, both CST and Buddhism are inward-looking in their approach since work is an intentional activity. Because karma is primarily *cetana*, Buddhism gives priority to the intentional aspect of our act and its subjective effects in moral analysis. Wrong livelihood is rooted in unwholesome states of mind. “The degree of unwholesomeness of an action is seen to vary according to the degree and nature of the volition/intention behind the action, and the degree of knowledge (of various kinds) relating to it” (Harvey 2000, 52). But intention is only one aspect of the completed action. One act can have a number of consequences, not all of them are intended. Not all aspects of our actions are within our control. We can only have full control of our intentions. Having negative effect by itself does not make an occupation wrongful. In order to cure diseases, doctors have to prescribe medication that has negative side effects. “An evil action done where one intends to do the act, fully knows what one is doing, and knows that the action is evil. This is the most obvious kind of wrong action, with bad karmic results, particularly if it is premeditated” (Harvey 2000, 55). Unintentional killing or injury is not considered a violation of the moral precept of non-injury.¹³ Workers are not to be blamed if they are forced by poverty to work in deplorable conditions if their intention is to provide their families with basic necessities. In addition, if one contributes to a project (e.g. manufacturing weapons) but is not fully responsible for its completion due to division of labor, one does not get full demerit for the negative outcome. An act can have wholesome and unwholesome intentions. Causing harm to a criminal to save innocent lives has two karmas, one good and one bad. One’s occupation can possess multiple degrees of nirvanic qualities corresponding to different degrees of blameworthiness. Even if our livelihood has negative external effects, it is still a positive step toward nirvana if accompanied with good intentions. We ought to look at all the aspects of our work in making moral assessment.

One implication of the priority of SDW is that firms have limits in promoting meaningful work. “One of the ironies of the subject is that organisations can foster meaninglessness through exploitative, thoughtless and directionless treatment of people. They cannot, however, create meaning or ensure fulfilment” (Overell 2008, 46). Because the meaning we attribute to our work comes primarily from our intention, it cannot be provided or “managed” by management. There are studies that indicate that people do not simply derive meaning from their employment in a passive way, but actively search for it by relating their work to their personal goals, beliefs, and values.¹⁴ Unfortunately, “The majority of studies on the meanings of work has been focused on finding effective methods of ‘managing meaning’ rather than on understanding the subjective experience of meaningful work” (Lips-Weirsmas and Morris 2009, 509). The task of management is to create a supportive environment where all workers are respected regardless of their level of education, skills, and abilities. However, the intention of employers is important. If the employers’ intention is all about productivity, they may only cause more harm than good by appearing insincere and fostering employee cynicism. Employers can only have influence on the objective aspect of work – how work is concretely organized, but they have no control with regard to SDW – how workers intend their work.

Buddhism emphasizes that we are responsible for our own enlightenment. The Buddha

assigns considerable epistemic significance to mindfulness (Bodhi 2012, 584-585). One may accept the Buddha's teaching on non-attachment theoretically, but it takes intensive meditation on *anatta* to fully overcome ego-centeredness. Mindfulness enables us to distinguish wholesome from unwholesome thoughts. It helps us explore deeply our intentions, assess our priorities and motives, and develop a state of heightened sensitivity to the moral features of our profession. To determine what is meaningful work or right livelihood, we must look at ourselves, meditate, examine our intentions, and honestly ask ourselves what motivates us to do the kind of work that we do and accept the exigencies and limitations that our livelihood imposes on us. Some critics may find this aspect of Buddhist teaching ambiguous or relativistic. The Buddha is known for adjusting his teachings to accommodate the individual character or the specific circumstances of his followers. One's subjective moral knowledge and ability to live it depends on one's level of enlightenment and contingent on her progress in practicing the 8-fold path.¹⁵ But this is not relativism. Relativism is incompatible with the moral outlook of Buddhism where there is a clear distinction between wholesome and unwholesome thoughts. Certain livelihoods that involve sex trafficking or cruelty to children are so bad that it is impossible to pursue them with wholesome state of mind. Gambling and drug dealing generate negative consequences in terms of unhappiness to oneself or others that they remain bad regardless of what the doer thinks about them. Buddhist ethics has an element of pragmatism because it allows certain flexibility depending on context, but it does not imply relativism or deviation from the moral values it holds. Contextual based ethics does not entail relativism (Gombrich 2009).

The priority of SDW in Buddhism and in CST does not imply subjective relativism. The Buddha wants us to exercise our own judgment, informed by right intention, to decide what is right livelihood in accordance to our specific historical and economic conditions. In pursuit of SDW, our whole life and our whole society are intimately involved. We may not be able to fulfill all the requirements of right livelihood. What is important is that we exert our best effort to minimize the intentional harms caused by our economic activities, and maximize their opportunities to promote the welfare of all.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis shows that Buddhist perspective on SDW is consistent with CST. It reinforces CST's teaching that the meaning and value of work is not found in material wealth we produce, or even in the physical skills and cognitive abilities per se that we develop at work, but in internal goods we acquire in terms of how work enhances our humanity and promotes our spiritual flourishing as well as the wellbeing of our communities. Both traditions affirm that work is an intentional activity that cannot be treated as a commodity. Both reject a purely utilitarian or a subjectivist approach to meaningful work. Work has value not only because it is useful, but because it is an essential component of human fulfillment. Any economic activity that demeans us or directly causes unjustified harm cannot be called meaningful work in the moral sense.

The difference between SDW in Buddhism and in CST fundamentally lies in their ontologies of self. In his encyclicals, John Paul II insists that as an *actus personae* that cannot be separated from the person, work, in the final analysis must benefit the worker who is a *concrete, historical and individual* person. This is probably a reaction against the threat of totalitarianism backed by communist regimes during the latter part of the 20th century. In traditional Catholic philosophy, the *person* refers to the unique incommunicable individual, the *individua substantia* of the classical *Boethian* definition. Although a bundle/non-substantial ontology of self analogous to Buddhism was proposed by Hume in Western philosophy during the 18th century, the substantial view is still dominant in the West especially in management theory, and is the ontology of self that is presupposed in CST. Ironically, the totalitarian ideology that CST rejects is somehow premised on this standpoint. Totalitarianism regards the individual and society as distinct entities that are separate and oppositional, so it seeks to safeguard the *superior* social good from the individual who is only after his self-interest through repression of human rights. The substantial view of self is not incompatible with the *homo economicus* model for human behavior put forward by economic materialism – a position that is severely criticized in CST because it treats work as a commodity.¹⁶ This notion of self is also related to the anthropocentric view of ecosystem where natural goods have no value in themselves except for human consumption. *Laudato Si* (Francis 2015, no. 115) identifies modern anthropocentrism as one of the roots of ecological crisis, it “sees nature as insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given’, as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape, it views the cosmos similarly as mere space into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference.”¹⁷

This is not the place to settle the metaphysical dispute between the bundle and the substantial theories of self, and I do not believe that a resolution is necessary for this essay. Many Buddhists consider *anatta* as more of a rejection of attachment to one’s ego, rather than a rejection of the self per se. It is a way of living, not a metaphysical dogma. The Buddha is known for declining to give categorical responses to metaphysical questions, emphasizing instead the importance of addressing the presence of suffering in the world.¹⁸

Having said this, I find Buddhist perspective to be both timely and relevant in the way business is taking place today. In our global economy, all things are interconnected. Work is not a solitary affair but a shared experience and a collaborative venture in the supply chain that takes place in communities existing within earth’s biosphere. SDW in Buddhism emphasizes solidarity and cooperation rather than independence, autonomy, and competition. While CST speaks of workers’ solidarity, social dimension of work and *integral ecology*, Buddhist SDW integrates solidarity, meaningful work, environmentalism, and concern for others into a synthesis that inspires holistic commitment to social and ecological issues. Promoting work is oftentimes framed as a tradeoff between employee welfare and caring for the environment. Buddhism links together the intention to pursue these two goals since workers are part of the ecosystem. It is not possible to accomplish one at the expense of the other.

Finally, Buddhism teaches that mindfulness is essential to fully realize SDW. On account of the benefits of mindfulness, there is a growing interest today among managers of some of the largest companies in the United States to promote it in the workplace by investing in mindfulness or meditation training and seminars, access to mindfulness literature, spiritual retreats and meditation, or distraction-free rooms. The practice of meditation has a significant place in Catholicism too, especially in the works of mystics like Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross, but it is not emphasized in CST nor integrated in its SDW. Mindfulness however, cannot wipe away all the negative effects of work. One misconception regarding Buddhism is that it encourages resignation by advocating a purely psychological/therapeutic approach to human problems. But Buddhists never consider mindfulness as a panacea. Meditation in Buddhism is not simply a form of relaxation but is also a time to pause and reflect on broader socio-political issues responsible to our afflictive condition in and outside of the workplace.

British economist E.F. Schumacher says work is meaningful partly because it liberates us from our egocentricity by uniting us in a common task. One paradox that Lips-Weirsmas and Morris (2009) found in their research is that while self-making is one of the sources of meaningful work, in the end meaningful work and meaningful life entail transcendence of one's self. In ethics, we often find this tension between satisfying one's individual needs and preferences and serving and belonging with others. Subjectivity may be essential in order to experience fulfillment and authenticity, but "Pushed to extremes, identity and authenticity reveal their dark side, becoming narcissistic, egotistical and subjectivist – and as they do so they make life poorer in meaning because they narrow and flatten moral horizons by making everything a matter of self" (Overell 2008, 46).

Endnotes:

1. "It is by *cetana* that we generate the *kammic* force behind our acts. Not only does this have an explanatory role in the process of *kamma*, but it also makes intention a key component of the Buddhist understanding of ethics and ethical consequence" (Webster 2005, 121).
2. "In contemporary discourse, the term 'subject' is often used to denote the self, but in Buddhist usage the term subject is closer to the definition of consciousness, that is the subject of valid cognition or simply the knowing phenomena. 'Knowing and awareness' is a classic Buddhist definition of consciousness. Knowing and awareness are momentary by nature and no 'knower,' or subject of the knowing analogous to a substantial self, is implied" (Tsomo 2006, 58).
3. One fundamental difference between Buddhism and Aristotle's Virtue Ethics is actions in Buddhism have transformative effects because they are products of our intention rather than habituation. Some Aristotelians claim that through habituation of our intellectual and physical activities, we will be able to think, feel, and act as a virtuous person. But for Aristotle, virtue is not a mindless repetitive act. Performance of virtue requires thoughtful analysis of every situation in which the virtue is to be exercised. Thus, there are ethicists today who are suspicious of the primacy of habituation in the acquisition of virtues. The notion that virtue is the result of mindless repetition is perhaps on account of Aristotle's analogy between acquisition of virtue and learning a practical skill, like playing a lyre or shipbuilding. But this comparison with practical skill is meant to highlight the notion that in performing virtues, one acts in a way that is spontaneous and immediate, but not a matter of routine.

4. Keown (1996b, 337) claims that “a coherent account of karma can be given purely in terms of *samskāras*.”
5. See Bodhi (2012, 449 ff).
6. “According to the substance conception, a self is a single, unified substance (we might also say it is a being, entity, or thing). In this respect, a self is like other substances in the world such as ordinary physical objects. A substance is something that is ontologically distinct from other substances – that is, though a substance has properties, it is not itself the property of another substance” (Gowans 2003, 69).
7. See *Samyutta Nikaya* in Holder (2006, 66-67).
8. A non-egoic view of consciousness has been defended both in Eastern and Western philosophy. Conscious experience requires a subject, not a self. *Anatta* is the rejection of the *atman* – the enduring permanent self in Brahmanical literature. It does not negate the presence of a fluid and spatio-temporal conscious subject that undergoes experiences. Neither is it incompatible with the concept of subject per se, but only with a specific understanding of the latter.
9. “Dependent on ignorance, there are dispositions to action; there is consciousness; dependent on consciousness, there is psycho-physicality; dependent on psycho-physicality, there are the six bases of sense; dependent on the six bases of sense, there is contact; dependent on contact, there is feeling; dependent on feeling, there is craving; dependent on craving, there is attachment; dependent on attachment, there is becoming, dependent on becoming, there is birth, dependent on birth, there is aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair and distress. Thus there is the arising of whole mass of suffering” (Holder 2006, 83).
10. In the same manner CST states that individual and social advancement go hand in hand. “Man’s social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on each other. From the beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person, which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need social life.” (Vatican Council 1965, no. 25)
11. Buddhism is known for being at the forefront of the struggle to solve global ecological crisis.
12. See Yang (2017); J. Marques (2012); Richmond (1999).
13. If killing is done with good intention, e.g. to save lives, rather than being motivated by anger or desire for vengeance, it is not a purely negative act.
14. See Overell (2008).
15. See “Abhayarajakumara Sutta” in Holder (2006, 126-127).
16. See John Paul II 1981, no. 7. “Economics, management and organizational theories assume, at least implicitly, a certain model of the human being, and this has significant consequences for the subsequent development of such theories and the practice of management. So far the dominant model has been, and continues to be, that of the *homo economicus*, although with certain variants. *Homo economicus*, in simple terms, is an individual with interests and preferences and a rational capacity oriented to maximizing those preferences, which are usually considered as self-regarding.” (Melé and Cantón 2014, 9) At present “the material paradigm still constitutes the main framework of reference and driving force in defining public policy” (Peccoud 2004, 24). Religious and spiritual variables have been largely excluded from organizational research. CST points out that the degradation of work is the result of the triumph of materialistic-economism that denies SDW.
17. One criticism leveled against *Laudato Si* is the lack of consistency. Initially, it departs from the traditional “stewardship paradigm” that dominates Christian environmental ethics and is related to anthropocentrism that the encyclical criticizes, and instead uses love language in expressing our relationship with the natural world. But as the text progresses, it “employs the more measured analyses and conceptual tools” of CST (Graham 2017, 59).
18. The ten classical unanswered questions by the Buddha shows that his concern is not metaphysical. It is not that metaphysics is irrelevant to ethics, but resolving metaphysical issues will not necessarily lessen suffering in the world.

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