Doing good for its own sake: Recasting CSR in the light of Catholic Social Teaching

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Abstract

This paper argues that the view of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as advanced in management theory and practice is flawed due to its theoretical underpinnings in individualism, a position which upholds the primacy of the individual and provides legitimacy to individuals' active pursuit of self-interest to the detriment of society. This view, however, significantly diverges from CSR perspectives which prescribe the duty and obligation inherent in every member of society to contribute to the promotion of the common good. This paper therefore suggests the need for an alternative model and presents the view of CSR advanced by Catholic social teaching (CST) as a more comprehensive and coherent framework to correctly articulate the relations between business and society, and the consequent duty of business to contribute toward promotion of the common good. The paper also offers a critique of some CSR practices which it considers unacceptable from the perspective of CST.

Introduction

Although a relatively recent phenomenon in management theory, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a widely accepted and well entrenched principle in current business and management practice. In point of fact, no company operating in the Western world nowadays would ever claim to justify its existence merely in terms of profit. With CSR, the traditional view of business people's aversion toward any form of philanthropy immortalized in the figure of Ebenezer Scrooge as a tight-fisted and hard-hearted businessman has radically changed. Since the 1980s when the notion of CSR gained ground in business ethics literature,¹ the number and variety of CSR activities that companies engage in have grown at an exponential

¹ Archie Carroll and Kareem Shabana. "The Business Case for Corporate Social Responsibility: A Review of Concepts, Research and Practice." *International Journal of Management Reviews* 12.1 (2010): 88.

rate. Far from the customary annual gift-giving ceremonies to the poor and needy around the Christmas season, companies have embarked into more systematic, better organized and well-funded forms of philanthropic activities. Yearly, big companies spend a huge portion of their earnings investing in programs that support local communities, funding clean technology, and involving their employees in hours of non-profit work. By practicing CSR, businesses have acquired an unprecedented level of prestige as bearers of good corporate citizenship. This standing, however, was short-lived as cases of corporate malfeasance wrecked havoc on the world's economic and financial systems perpetrated by companies which presumably were exemplary in promoting CSR.

While certain sectors of society were surprised by the unethical behavior demonstrated by these supposedly good companies, critics of CSR however saw these events in a different light. Common among these critics is the idea that business interests in CSR are nothing but attempts of companies in general to window-dress what is in fact a deep-seated and relentless drive that all business have to maximize their profits. In this sense, it is perceived that business people who promote CSR are not really intent in doing good for its own sake; rather their actions are motivated by interests to improve their company image in ways that could generate more financial benefits to their firms. Interestingly, this instrumental view of CSR continues to dominate management theory and practice as indicated by some studies² (Garriga and Mele 2004, 53). Implicit however in this view of CSR is the belief that businesses are incapable of exercising genuine concern for society in ways that can be consistently demonstrated and observed. Hence it is rare to find societal objections against businesses which, on the one hand, give donations to charitable institutions, but on the other hand fail to pay just wages to their workers. Similarly rare are the occasions when objections are raised against companies that, on the one hand, provide scholarships for the education of underprivileged youth, but on the other hand market their products in a manner that is harmful to the moral welfare of the young people whom they purport to educate. It is toward such company practices that the recent Encyclical Caritas in Veritate (CV) directs its critique in pointing out that certain "ethical considerations

² Elisabet Garriga and Domenec Mele. "Corporate Social Responsibility Theories: Mapping the Territory." *Journal* of Business Ethics 53.1 (2004): 53.

that currently inform debate on the social responsibility of the corporate world are not all acceptable from the perspective of the Church's social doctrine".³

This paper argues that the view of CSR as advanced in management theory and practice has its theoretical underpinnings in individualism, a position which upholds the primacy of the individual and provides legitimacy to individuals' active pursuit of self-interest to the detriment of society. This view, however, significantly diverges from CSR perspectives which prescribe the duty and obligation inherent in every member of society to recognize, respect and promote societal good. This paper suggests the need for an alternative model and presents the view of CSR advanced by Catholic social teaching (CST) as a more comprehensive and coherent framework to correctly articulate the relations between business and society. The aim of this present paper therefore is to explain CSR from the perspective of CST as an alternative to CSR notions espoused in management theory and practice. Premised on the principle that business activity has a human significance as it is an 'actus personae'⁴, CST grounds the nature of business and of business activity on the nature of the human person as 'imago Dei' endowed with the capacity to love.⁵ As a being capable of love and as subject of economic activity, CST advances a view of the human person as a being endowed with an inherent capacity to exercise the logic of gift and gratuitousness in business⁶ and to establish ties of friendship and solidarity with his fellow men. From the perspective of CST, therefore, men in business are capable of promoting the common good of society which in effect characterizes the essence of CSR.

Man and society from the perspective of individualism

Individualism is commonly understood as a belief in the affirmation of the primacy of individual rights over those of the society or of the community. Central to individualistic theories

³ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 40.

⁴ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 40.

⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 34.

⁶ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 35.

is its idea of human flourishing expressed in terms of individual achievement and selffulfillment; from its perspective, the good of man and the good of society are seemingly best achieved when individuals are left to pursue their private interests independently of others.

Given its emphasis on freedom and independence, it advances a view of man as a completely autonomous and self-sufficient individual. It promotes the conviction that man is "the sole author of himself, of his life and of his society"⁷, an idea that obscures "people's relational dimension, which leads them to withdraw into their own small world, concerned primarily with satisfying their own needs and desires.⁸ It therefore contributes to a vision of man who is absolutely free from any form of human dependence: in its most extreme form, individualism leads to a belief that man ought to cease "thinking and believing in a foundation"⁹ and to reject the recognition of his dependence on God as his Creator and source of his existence. In its radical interpretation, individualism espouses a view of man as naturally selfish and egoistic. Prone to pursue at whatever cost what is to serve one's advantage, it posits that men cannot possibly coexist peacefully as a community unless they establish a pact restraining their selfish drives and avoid causing harm to each other. In this sense, individualism views human communities as a sort of *necessary evil* forged to counter the presence of deep seated tendencies in men for mutual destruction. From its perspective, men unite and form societies as an exercise of rational self-preservation or what it termed as enlightened self-interest.

Man and society from the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching

In contrast, Catholic social teaching (CST) advances the idea of man as a *relational being* because he is created as *imago Dei*¹⁰. Created in the likeness of God, man is a person, a spiritual

⁷ Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate, 34.

⁸Cf. Benedict XVI. Address to the Members of the Regional Board of Lazio, the Municipal Council of Rome and the Administration of the Province of Rome, January 12, 2012.

⁹ Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 53.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate, 28.

being endowed with reason and will, gifted for knowing what is true and for loving what is good¹¹.

CST maintains that man's relational character is concretely rooted in his being *imago Dei*, endowed with the capacity for love. As its nature suggests, love requires the existence of the 'other'; it demands that it be expressed not so much toward the self but toward another human being. Hence the human person as *imago Dei* is given the capacity to love not only his personal good but also the good of others, or the common good. Expressed through the notion of "gift"¹², this capacity to love is linked to man's uniqueness -as *imago Dei*- among all other created beings (GS 24)¹³. Man's capacity to be gift or to give himself to others is therefore a hallmark of his spirituality¹⁴.

Significantly included also in CST's view of man is a notion of human freedom that appears necessarily linked to his capacity for truth and love.¹⁵ CST maintains that human relations have to be sought in freedom that corresponds to man's spiritual character, created in the image of God.¹⁶ From its perspective, there can be no authentic human flourishing in societies where individual pursuit of self interest often considered as an expression of human freedom is given license at the expense of society's greater interest. Hence contrary to individualistic perspectives which proposes a view of man as a totally autonomous individual, with absolute freedom to pursue his interests without any moral bounds¹⁷, CST advances a view

¹¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 357.

¹² Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 7.

¹³ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 24.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate, 34.

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 68.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 53, 29.

¹⁷ Cf. John Paul II. Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, 17.

of man as *imago Dei*, created and not something self-generated¹⁸; hence it offers a view of human freedom that is limited because it is the freedom of a limited being¹⁹ and calls on responsible use of freedom in accordance with the dictates of the moral law.²⁰

CST also affirms that human flourishing consists not in man isolating himself from others, but in establishing relations of friendship and love with his fellow men. Society therefore is not a necessary evil as individualism suggests; rather CST maintains that the human person by nature stands in need of societal life ²¹ because "as a spiritual being, man is defined through interpersonal relations, and it is through his relations with God and with others that he establishes his worth and his own personality matures".²²

Economic activity and business from the perspective of individualism

With respect to economic activity, individualism grounds economic interactions on individuals' propensity to pursue their private gains as an engine for wealth creation²³; in this way it establishes compatibility between the pursuit of self interest and the attainment of societal good.

Concretely individualism holds that it to society's advantage that self interest be promoted as its pursuit necessarily contributes to the betterment of society thanks to the selfregulating nature of the laws that govern the market. Usually expressed through the metaphor of the Invisible Hand, these laws are presumed to necessarily work out the best possible

¹⁸ Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate, 68.

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, Homily on the 40th anniversary of the closure of the Second Vatican Council, December 8. 2005.

²⁰ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 48.

²¹ Second Vatican Council. Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 25.

²² Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 53.

²³ Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 36.

arrangement for every individual as long as no trammels are placed on each one's freedom to pursue his private interest.

Individualism therefore proposes an economic order which is presumed to mechanically function and work through the laws of the market, independent of the actions- whether morally good or bad- undertaken by the individuals who participate in it²⁴. A central tenet therefore of individualism is its significant disregard of the role of human agency in economic activity and consequently its ethically neutral view of the economic order and of economic activity.²⁵

Individualistic perspectives in the context of business also affirm that business owners are self interested individuals whose engagement in business activity is driven by the profit maximization motive, and that businesses are economic units established with the primary purpose of maximizing profits of its owners. These also maintain that relationships which develop in the sphere of business are driven by mutual self serving interests such that parties enter into a transaction motivated by what they stand to gain from that particular exchange. It therefore reinforces the idea that individual self interest is at the basis of human cooperation, and that the profit motive is the overriding motive in business interactions to which all other possible motives such as friendship, solidarity or sympathy that typically define or shape other forms of human relationships are subordinated. Significantly, this idea underlies much of contemporary theories which support the practice of CSR as a strategic tool to achieve economic ends and ultimately wealth creation.²⁶ Common among these theories is the argument that companies which practice CSR contribute to enhancing the societal environment in which they operate and it would therefore be in business firms' long-term enlightened self interest to get actively engaged in it.²⁷ Developing company reputation, gaining competitive advantage, improving risk

²⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate, 34.

²⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 36.

²⁶ Elisabet Garriga and Domenec Mele. "Corporate Social Responsibility Theories: Mapping the Territory." *Journal of Business Ethics* 53.1 (2004): 53-55.

²⁷ Archie Carroll and Kareem Shabana. "The Business Case for Corporate Social Responsibility: A Review of Concepts, Research and Practice." *International Journal of Management Reviews* 12.1 (2010): 88-90.

management, and meeting society's expectations are some of the principal benefits of CSR practices which are considered likely to impact companies' financial performance.

Economic activity and business from the perspective of CST

In contrast, CST maintains that the economy in all its branches represents a sector of human activity²⁸, and that business activity has a human significance because it is an "*actus personae*" or a personal action²⁹. Significantly, this idea constitutes an implementation of a prior and much broader principle equally set by CST which established the need for the Church's social doctrine to be grounded in a correct view of the human person³⁰, as it is considered key in defending the inviolable dignity of the human person and the transcendent value of natural moral norms.³¹

In linking economic activity to the actions of the human person created as *imago Dei*, the view proposed by CST regarding business and the economic order radically diverge from those espoused by individualistic theories in three ways. First, CST affirms that the economy has a moral dimension because of the role of human agency in economic activity. The good functioning of the economy therefore depends to a great extent on persons' responsible use of their freedom in making sound ethical economic decisions. Second, CST asserts that business people are relational beings who are capable of love. Hence contrary to individualistic perspectives which consider the world of business to be exclusively driven by individual pursuit of self interest, CST considers the economy and business activity as legitimate spheres where men could exercise this capacity and establish bonds of friendship and solidarity. Third, CST conceptualizes business as a community of persons endowed not only with its specific purpose of generating wealth for the owners, but also with the broader purpose of contributing to the integral development of the people who form part of its internal and external environment.

²⁸ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 45.

²⁹ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 41.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, 11.

³¹ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate, 45.

Fourth, CST maintains that the pursuit of the common good has to be based on the recognition of the truth about man created as imago Dei and the recognition of God as the transcendent end of every human person. CST also affirms that the attainment of the common good requires the practice of justice and contends that its promotion cannot take place in societies where pursuit of self interest predominates as individualism suggests. This paper argues that these four principles could in turn serve as arguments for conceptualizing corporate social responsibility from the perspective of CST as the duty that all men including those who are engaged in business to contribute to the common good. Additionally, these could also be used as framework for explicating the reasons as to why certain CSR practices are considered unacceptable from the perspective of CST.³²

First, CST affirms the role of human agency in economic activity and its consequent moral dimension. CST views the world of business and finance as realities that are good in themselves; however, they could cause harm to society when used by individuals for purely selfish ends.³³ Contrary to individualistic perspectives which claim "that the economy must be autonomous and that it must be shielded from 'influences' of a moral character"³⁴, CST argues that the economic sphere is not ethically neutral because economic activity is inevitably linked to moral decisions made by persons whose responsible or irresponsible use of freedom could bear significant positive or negative consequences on the entire economic order.³⁵ It therefore envisions an economic order that has the potential of being structured and governed in an ethical manner depending upon individuals, their moral conscience and their personal and social responsibility.³⁶ Concretely CST argues for the need of an ethical framework that is peoplecentered and underscores the specific contribution that Catholic social doctrine can make by advancing a view of "man's creation in the 'image of God' (Gen 1:27)" which it considers to be

³² Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 45.

³³ Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 36.

³⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate, 34.

³⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate, 41.

³⁶ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 41.

a datum which gives rise to the inviolable dignity of the human person and the transcendent value of natural moral norms.³⁷

Second, CST asserts that business people are relational beings who are capable of love. In line with its view of man as *imago Dei*, CST maintains that business people are not exclusively driven by profit gain but are endowed with the capacity to transcend their personal interest and establish authentic human social relationships of friendship, solidarity and reciprocity within business activity and not only outside or 'after' it.³⁸ From its perspective therefore, human interactions in business could take the character of familial or friendly relations which are governed not so much by the logic of "what can I gain from the *other*" but rather by the logic of "what can I give to the *other*". In order to replace the logic of self interest dominant in business, CST proposes the great challenge for business people to practice fraternity in the world of business by incorporating the logic of gift and the principle of gratuitousness in their normal day-to-day business or commercial activities.³⁹

Third, CST views business not just as an economic institution but also a community of persons⁴⁰; consequently it broadens the purpose of business beyond its economic function⁴¹ and considers the integral development of people who comprise its internal and external environment as part of its institutional mission⁴². From the perspective therefore of CST, the duties of business to society are considered obligatory because these duties are inherent in business people, who are duty-bound by their nature as relational beings to cooperate in attaining and developing the common good⁴³. This entails promoting the fundamental rights of the human

- ³⁹ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 36.
- ⁴⁰ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 338.
- ⁴¹ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 340.

³⁷ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate, 45.

³⁸ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 36.

⁴² Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 338.

⁴³ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 167.

person, the social well being and development of peoples, and societal peace and order. It underscores as unjust business situations where exploitation of people, abuse of workers' rights, and violation of social justice are common.⁴⁴

Implications for CSR practice

Further in contrast from individualistic perspectives of the common good that posit supposed compatibility between the pursuit of self interest and the advancement of common good, CST establishes that the good of each person is necessarily related to the common good, and conversely that the common good can be defined only in reference to the human person.⁴⁵

Concretely CST proposes a distinct personalist perspective of the common good when it maintains that the pursuit of the common good has to be based on the recognition of the truth about man created as *imago Dei* and the recognition of God as the transcendent end of every human person⁴⁶. Hence, CST maintains that not all forms of CSR are considered acceptable if company efforts to contribute to society were to be based on a purely materialistic view of man, reducing the common good to the achievement of society's socio economic well being ⁴⁷ without due regard for the spiritual or moral dimension of the human person. Such would be the case for instance of CSR activities that are not in line with the moral law and fail to promote the moral development of people in society. A case in point would be companies whose CSR efforts entail providing local communities with potable water facilities but simultaneously advocate abortion practices among local women to please groups of people who are investors or clients of the firm. Another case would be companies operating in developing countries where CSR efforts involve providing health facilities to local communities with the condition of requiring women to undergo sterilization procedures in a bid to sell and dispose surplus contraceptive drugs considered unfit for consumption and sale in the Western world. From the perspective of CST,

⁴⁴ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 340.

⁴⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1905.

⁴⁶ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 170.

⁴⁷ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 170.

both these cases would be considered unacceptable as these CSR efforts are based on an instrumental view of the human person, where the people involved in these CSR initiatives are treated as means to attain the end of profit maximization.

Equally considered as unacceptable are situations where CSR practices are integrated with unjust practices of the firm. This would be the case of a company which typically advertises itself as a socially conscious firm giving huge donations to the poor but fails to provide its workers -majority of whom live below the poverty line- the just pay, as wage increase is deemed detrimental to its profitability. Another example would be situations where a company gets actively engaged in cause-related marketing that support clean environment but fails in providing its workers with necessary protective gear

CST also affirms that the pursuit of the common good requires the constant effort of each member of society to seek the good of the others as though it were their own good⁴⁸. Hence from the perspective of CST, the attainment of the common good requires the practice of justice. Its position therefore stands contrary to individualistic perspectives of the common good that posit supposed compatibility between the pursuit of self interest and the presumed advancement of societal welfare. Defined as the virtue which inclines man to give what is due to another, justice entails the capacity to sacrifice one's interest for the good of another. For Aquinas, covetousness is a vice directly opposed to justice⁴⁹; the pursuit of the common good therefore can never be attained in a society where individualistic attitudes are valued as legitimate means to presumably create wealth for greater majority of individuals.

From the perspective of CST, there can be no authentic pursuit of the common good if such pursuit is intended to unjustly benefit specific groups of individuals to the detriment of the other members of society. Concretely it establishes the need for the common good to "be served in its fullness, not according to reductionist visions that are subordinated by certain people to their own advantage" ⁵⁰ and calls for the exercise of greater responsibility in its pursuit. This

⁴⁸ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 167.

⁴⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 9, a. 118

would the case, for instance, of business firms which carry out philanthropic activities in poor areas to support local politicians, in a bid to earn their favor and possibly win a huge contract with local government. Another example would be investors who project themselves as exemplary citizens for providing employment to communities by constructing gambling establishments without due concern for the negative moral consequences that such business may bring about in those communities.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has argued that the view of CSR dominant in management theory and practice is flawed due to its theoretical underpinnings in individualism, a position which upholds the primacy of the individual and provides legitimacy to individuals' active pursuit of self-interest to the detriment of society. This view, however, is significantly divergent from perspectives of CSR which prescribe the duty and obligation inherent in every member of society to contribute toward the promotion of the common good. This paper therefore proposed the view advanced by Catholic social teaching as an alternative model because it provides a more comprehensive and coherent framework to correctly articulate the relations between business and society, and the consequent duties and responsibilities that business have to contribute to the common good which is the essence of CSR. This paper has also established that notions of CSR advanced by individualism and by CST depend to a great extent on more fundamental presuppositions which they espouse regarding the nature of man and of society, the nature of business and its purpose, and the understanding of the common good. Finally the paper offered a critique of some common CSR practices and explicated the reasons as to why these practices are considered unacceptable from the perspective of CST.

⁵⁰ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 167.

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