



Thinking About the Future of work: Promoting Dignity and Human Flourishing

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Abstract

This paper is the introduction to the Special Issue with a selection of papers presented at the 21st IESE International Symposium on Ethics, Business and Society, held in Barcelona, Spain, in July 2021. The Symposium focused on the future of work and how to promote dignity and human flourishing. This editorial introduction emphasizes how work has been studied over the centuries and how new directions have been considered in recent times. We suggest that dignity and human flourishing are particularly relevant in the current context and for the future of work. Finally, the papers that make up this special issue are introduced and summarized.

Keywords Work · Ethics · Human dignity · Human flourishing

Work is a central element in human life and business organizations. That is why work is so relevant for humanistic management. In the past, it has drawn the attention of different academic disciplines, including business ethics. Current studies cover a broad range of issues from personal, organizational, and social dimensions. However, the conversation on human work still has many open questions, and further research is necessary.

This special issue of the Humanistic Management Journal brings together a selection of papers presented at the 21st IESE International Symposium on Ethics, Business, and Society, held in July 2021. In this introduction, we will first consider how work is a concept that has been studied over the centuries by theories that take different perspectives but also share some common aspects. We will then present how work is related to human dignity and flourishing. Next, we will point out some relevant issues in the current context. Finally, we will present the papers that make up this special issue.

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This Symposium was sensitive to the fact that 2021 marked the 40th anniversary of the Encyclical-letter *Laborem Exercens* by John Paul II (1981), an essential milestone in ethics of work. This document strongly emphasized the dignity of work and human flourishing and provided solid motives for meaningful work. Some concepts and ideas on work the text raises may shed light on ongoing discussions in our current context and, more specifically, in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Melé 2020). Among other topics, this document dealt with the subjective dimension of work, the inherent dignity of all work, work alienation, work and family life, the primacy of work over the capital, human rights in the context of labor, and spirituality at the workplace (Melé 2021).

Work: Human Dignity and Flourishing

Throughout history, all philosophical schools and cultural and religious traditions have offered a vision of the meaning of work (Arendt 1958). Work ethic—understood as a set of values related to hard work, discipline, and frugality—has been often identified with the Protestant work ethic or, more specifically, the Calvinist work ethic. However, the concept of work ethics, with these or similar values, has been defended by other traditions and cultures. For instance, there are references to Islamic work ethics (Ahmad and Owoyemi 2012) or Confucian work ethics (Yeh and Xu 2010). In modern Catholic social teaching, the dignity of human work and ethics at the workplace have been emphasized since the late 19th century (Leo XIII, 1981). Within an increasingly globalized world, these proposals deserve to be explored in light of the intrinsic human dignity, examining how they contribute to human flourishing.

Although the approaches have been different, from the ancient philosophers to Adam Smith or Karl Marx, the underlying theme has always been the same: examining to what extent work influences—and at the same time is an expression of—the dignity of the human person and to what extent it contributes to human flourishing.

The dignity of work has been emphasized from both secular (Pirson 2017; Donaldson & Wash, 2015) and religious (John Paul II, 1981; Sison et al. 2016) perspectives. However, in practice, this dignity is not always respected, either for cultural reasons (e.g., Mahalingam et al. 2019) or as a consequence of certain premises adopted by social science (Agassi 1986), including a reductionist economic view of business (Ghoshal 2005).

The dignity of work is associated with human dignity, a concept with a long history that dates back to the Renaissance period and continues through Kant and the Enlightenment, personalist philosophers, and contemporary declarations of human rights. Complementing the objective character of dignity, organizational psychology has introduced a subjective meaning of dignity (Lucas 2017). Despite these efforts, a sound theory of workplace dignity (Thomas and Lucas 2019) is still missing.

Respecting the dignity of work has many practical implications, including subjective factors (meaningful work, autonomy, respect) and objective factors (job security, financial reward, equality of opportunity, and safe and healthy working conditions) (Bolton 2007). Labor rights are an appropriate response to the human dignity of workers. However, the demands of dignity include further issues (Gilabert, 2016), such as fostering professional and human development (Melé and Dierksmeier 2012), respecting spirituality in the workplace (Melé and Fontrodona 2016), or contributing to human flourishing.

Work is not only a transitive activity but an immanent one too. Workers – the subjects of work – not only produce objects but develop themselves, acquiring good habits or virtues, which are central to human flourishing (Fontrodona and Sison 2015). Many virtues apply to human work, such as industriousness, diligence, courage, order, constancy, self-discipline, humility, magnanimity, companionship, and concern for other people, among many others. In turn, virtues contribute to improving working conditions and results and support meaningful work and behavior (Beadle and Knight 2012).

Current Context and the Future of Work

The year 2020 was marked by the extraordinary experience of a pandemic that paralyzed the entire world. The health crisis had multiple ramifications in different areas of social and economic life, including work. In many cases, businesses had to reorganize job content and job dynamics. Many companies reduced their workforce or were shut down. The health crisis was followed by an economic and a social crisis, the scale and effects of which will last for a long time.

The effects of the pandemic also caused many people to rethink the meaning of their work. The concept of “great resignation” was coined to refer to the large number of people who questioned their careers, work conditions, and long-term goals due to the pandemic (Sull et al. 2022; Serenko 2022). Conversely, some professions -to which we had hitherto attached little importance- proved to be indispensable in the fight against the pandemic and in maintaining access for people to meet their basic needs during the crisis, highlighting the importance of the social dimensions of work and changing our views on the meaning of work.

Human work has many expressions, affects many aspects of human life, and generates diverse dynamics both in social life and in companies. Many topics can be the basis for ethical discussion; moreover, they change over time and according to social and cultural contexts.

Unemployment is a persistent problem in many countries and has increased further with the pandemic. It implies a cost for societies, not only in economic terms. Most significantly, it causes individual suffering and a loss of personal dignity; it is a source of social unrest (Jahoda 1982). Furthermore, income inequality has grown in most industrialized countries—not to mention developing ones—in recent decades (Franzini 2019). Today, having a job does not guarantee sufficient income and avoidance of social exclusion. These situations require not only responsible action from businesses but also initiatives by public policy-makers. For example, there is currently an open discussion around a universal basic income (Widerquist and Lewis 2017).

In many places, and particularly in developing countries, working conditions are still deplorable (Arnold and Bowie 2007) and far from meeting the standard of decent work advocated by the International Labor Organization since the end of the 20th century, and now included among the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations 2015). Decent work is a comprehensive concept regarding labor rights that may also include other aspects (Benedict 2005, n. 63). Besides, work is also related to other issues promoted by the SDGs, such as responsible consumption and production, the fight against poverty, health and well-being, clean energy, gender equality, and peace and justice. Therefore, work

is a transversal concept that may be used to evaluate the implementation and achievement of the 2030 Agenda. In the current context, issues related to safety and healthy environments have become especially relevant.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion matter more than ever. Besides the business case for diversity, the ethics case needs to be carefully studied. Common human dignity requires a respectful treatment of diversity (based on gender, age, ethnicity, disabilities, or any other dissimilarities among the workforce), posing an ethical challenge to overcome unfair discrimination and notorious inequalities in the workplace. Moreover, many positive aspects of diversity in the workplace should be highlighted and promoted (Foma 2014; Chrobot-Mason and Aramovich 2013). Beyond current organizational studies, more work is required to conceptualize diversity from an ethical perspective (e.g., Frémeaux 2020) and implement ethical practices on diversity in the workplace (e.g., Ng and Sears 2020).

Work can empower women as well as socially marginalized groups. That challenge is particularly significant in developing societies where women do much of the work. Enabling them to run their businesses and become part of the cash economy through such techniques as microfinance can be a powerful force for liberation and the proper education of the next generations (Cornwall 2016; Karwati et al. 2018).

Work-family balance plays a vital role in individual and organizational well-being and societies at large. There is abundant literature on balancing work and family responsibilities, generally emphasizing negative or problematic aspects from psychological and organizational perspectives (Marchese et al. 2002). Besides, there is a growing interest in more positive views, such as “Work–Family Enrichment” (Greenhaus and Powell 2006; Shein and Chen 2010), whereby experience or participation in one of these two roles increases the quality of performance in the other one.

Meanwhile, new forms of work, such as the collaborative economy, or the use of new technologies (Industry 4.0), generate or favor new working conditions, which require careful analysis from the perspective of work dignity and human flourishing. New technologies may destroy jobs and create new ones (Schwab 2017; Baldassari and Roux 2017; Rainnie and Dean 2020). Industry 4.0 will alter the landscape for talent development (Karacay 2018) and require improvements in work conditions, work performance, and work relationships (Caruso 2018).

Finally, the debate about the significance of work is inevitably linked to the purpose of business, another concept under discussion. The importance given to work can be different depending on how the purpose of business is defined: some approaches give a more instrumental character to work, whereas others relate it to the common good of the firm (Sison and Fontrodona 2012; Pinto Garay 2015). Companies with a social purpose may give more importance to work. On the other hand, particularly as the self-employed sector is growing, work orientation, job content, and well-being may differ between self-employed and externally employed workers (Warr and Inceoglu 2018). Especially in developing countries, but also in new business forms, artisanal work highlights the vocational sense of craftsmanship (Pantea 2019).

Contributions to this Special Issue

The 21st IESE International Symposium on Ethics, Business, and Society -which took place on July 2021- focused on the future of work, paying particular attention to how human dignity and the dignity of work should be respected and promoted, and how human flourishing may be fostered in the workplace and the design of organizations. More than sixty papers were presented during the Symposium. After a selection process, this special issue presents eight papers that cover different aspects related to the future of work and humanistic management.

Three papers take a more theoretical approach, bringing some historical proposals to the reflection on how to turn business into an environment that gives more relevance to work. Koehn (2022), in her paper “Applying Aristotelian and Confucian Virtue Ethics to Humane Work in the Business Context,” presents two ways of thinking about humane work, using an Aristotelian and a Confucian virtue ethics approach. These approaches reveal the need to think about work’s connection not merely with autonomy but with self-refinement and self-perfection, and with the production of genuine goods.

For their part, Harry Hummels and Patrick Nullens (2022), in their paper “‘Other-wise’ Organizing. A Levinasian approach to agape in work and business Organisations”, are inspired by Levinas’ ideas to propose an agapeic turn to management and organization. This turn means that the focus on the employee’s well-being should be at the core of organizing. Agape is introduced as an analytical concept that guides the structuring and the effectuation of human interaction in and through organizations.

Finally, Robson (2022), in his “Aquinas’s principle of misericordia in corporations: implications for workers and other stakeholders,” argues for the revival of the virtue of mercy as a core principle of ethical business practice. Robson relies on Aquinas’s broad concept of the virtue of misericordia as the basis for a principle of mercy. He considers its practical implications for standards of corporate behavior towards employees and other stakeholders through the introduction of a ‘vulnerability grid’ that offers a critical contrast to other analysis tools, such as stakeholder power-interest matrices.

Two other papers reflect from economic theory, although with different perspectives. Asslaender (2022), in his paper “Broken Promises – The Probable Futurity of the Laboring Class (Re-Assessed),” takes a historical approach. Asslaender warns how positive attitudes towards work established by the political economic theories of the 18th and 19th centuries are jeopardized by the social changes in post-industrialized societies because of globalized economies, digitalization, and changed industrial relations. New phenomena like “gig economy” or “crowd work” not only constitute precarious working conditions but also contradict the social esteem of work resulting from the social theories of the classical economy.

In contrast, in her paper “Decent work in the South African macroeconomy: who are the winners and losers?“, Mackett (2022) conducts a data analysis of the South African economy to show how macroeconomic policies can be used to address labor market inequalities, which is especially important in economies with large inequalities. Her contribution highlights that changes in quality of work at the microeconomic level – regarding particular social groups like women- may impact macroeconomy changes.

Finally, three other papers deal with specific aspects affecting work. Two of them are framed within the framework of virtue ethics; the third refers to the impact of new technologies on work. Rozeboom (2022) writes about “The Virtues of Relational Equality at

Work.” He argues that the virtues of modesty, civility, and humility are intrinsically morally important since they facilitate the attitudes and dispositions by which we relate as moral equals. For managers, sustaining and enacting these virtues of relational equality involves a distinctive cluster of role-specific traits, such as respect for employees and commitment to express such respect.

In their paper “How organizations can develop solidarity in the workplace? A Case study” Marie-Noelle Albert, Nadia Lazzari Dodeler, and Asri Yves Ohin (2022) focus on the virtue of solidarity. When business is understood as a community of people, it is easier to understand the role that solidarity can play in the good functioning of the company. Solidarity fosters human flourishing, moving away from the individual perspective and the individualism-collectivism dichotomy.

The final paper, “Unpleasant Memories on the Web in Employment Relations: A Ricoeurian Approach,” deals with the impact of new technologies on work. André Habisch, Pierre Kletz, and Eva Wack (2022) reflect on some practices in human resources through digital platforms that save time and effort in data collection but present some legal and ethical doubts. Following Ricoeur’s notion of forgetting as “kept in reserve,” the authors propose guidance for the responsible handling of unpleasant online memories.

We want to end this introduction by thanking the Journal editors for giving us their confidence in the edition of this issue, and the Editorial Office for their constant support and guidance throughout the process. We also thank the authors for their collaboration and positive reaction to all the suggestions. The academic profession has an essential component of service to the academic community; one of its expressions is acting as a reviewer of manuscripts for scientific publications. It is a job that has a clear altruistic component. We are all aware of how full our schedules are and how difficult it is to find reviewers. Therefore, our sympathy goes to all those invited to review and, for various reasons, declined our invitation, but above all our greatest appreciation to those who did accept to collaborate in this hidden task.

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