Our inherent vulnerability and dependence on others in the workplace

"It is hard to see for an outsider that you become friends with these people—business friends. You trust them and their work. You have an interest in what they're doing outside of business" (An interviewee quoted in Uzzi, 1997)

As members of organisations, human beings remain inherently vulnerable, facing threats and obstacles stemming from uncertainty, information asymmetries, and even potentially dangerous accidents. Because of this, organisation members remain dependent on the uncalculated actions of others, actions that enable participants to cope with vulnerability.

Such actions give expression to the virtues, especially virtues like generosity, mercy, and benevolence. The relationships of giving and receiving created and sustained by these virtues contribute greatly to the flourishing of organisation members and are often vital to the success of their organisations. By facilitating the sharing of information and risk, helping behaviour, and care in times of urgent need, networks of giving and receiving contribute directly to individual success and wellbeing.

But gratuitous relationships within organisations are easily overlooked. In pop culture – think of Alec Baldwin's famous speech in *Glengarry Glen Ross* – as well as the academy, business is commonly thought of as an inherently self-interested endeavour. This view has deep philosophical roots. Aristotle, for example, argued that persons involved in trades and commerce were unable to fully participate in the virtuous activities of the city. In this light, business ethics has often been seen as an attempt to identify rules and norms that can serve to check excessive self-interest.

More recently, researchers have countered this dominant narrative. Drawing upon Alasdair MacIntyre's theory of virtues and social practices, effort has been directed toward identifying the inherently cooperative – and virtuous – aspects of various business activities and modes of production.

MacIntyre (2007) defined a practice as "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended."

Following MacIntyre, business ethicists have argued that many common business activities have this structure, both modes of production and means of providing services, including professions like nursing, architecture, and engineering, forms of manufacturing, financial services like banking, as well as support services like accounting and HR. From this perspective, participants in these practices are seen to be committed to “internal goods” and “standards of excellence” specific to their activities. This commitment is sustained by the virtues.

Virtues like justice, courage, and honesty direct practitioners to endorse and adopt professional standards even when these are not easily monitored. Similarly, the virtues facilitate innovation when participants struggle to change existing professional standards to further the aims of the profession as a way of promoting the common good.

In a recent article, I extend this work by focusing much more closely on the virtuous relationships that form within organisations rather than on particular activities, or practices. More specifically, I highlight the role of gratuitous relationships, what I call *networks of giving and receiving*, in promoting the wellbeing, or flourishing of participants, and often, the success of their organisations.

Regardless of the task, members of organisations – like human beings generally – remain inherently vulnerable to various threats that may have a very large negative impact on their wellbeing. Contingencies, accidents, forms of information asymmetry, etc., often prove to be obstacles hindering job performance, financial success, and in some cases, representing threats to health and wellbeing, more broadly.

In order to cope with this pervasive vulnerability, organisation members rely on the care of others, care that provides vital forms of assistance in a gratuitous and uncalculated manner. Involving acts of generosity, benevolence, and mercy, these relationships are focused on the needs of others but because of this focus, they provide important benefits to both parties. Sustained by the virtues, these relationships provide a context where individuals are better able to achieve their goals, to gain information and cope with uncertainty, to receive assistance in the face of contingencies, and to share risks with those better able to bear them. Paradoxically, relationships of giving and receiving provide these benefits to participants precisely because they are not focused on such individual benefits, but rather on the needs of fellow participants.

While self-interest is rightfully and inevitably a part of business – directed as it is toward the satisfaction of needs – overlooking the importance of virtuous forms of care within organisations obscures the way in which individual success and wellbeing often depends upon mutual commitment to the needs of others. It obscures the way in which self-interest and other-directed concerned are frequently harmonised in organisations that sustain networks of giving and receiving. Recognising the importance of such relationships requires a broader understanding of the ethical salience of organisational life. It requires an appreciation of the role of virtues such as generosity, mercy, and benevolence, as dispositions that are both selflessly directed to the needs of others and vital for the preservation of relationships by which individuals achieve their own wellbeing.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the author’s paper Networks of Giving and Receiving in an Organizational Context: Dependent Rational Animals and MacIntyrean Business Ethics, Business Ethics Quarterly, 2018.*
- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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