WORK IN THE FIRM: COLLECTIVE ACTION AND COMMON GOOD

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Abstract

Work occupies a prominent place in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, on the basis of human action in moral theology, although the Church does not set out a theory of work. Work is also a key theme in the social sciences, especially in the theory of action. This article develops a theory of work as a human action, following the contributions of economics, psychology, sociology and management sciences. It focuses, above all, on human action developed with other people and within organizations, with special emphasis on forms of joint action, cooperation and trust.

Keywords: Cooperation; Individual action; Labour; Shared action; Social doctrine of the Catholic Church.

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“Work should be the setting for this rich personal growth, where many aspects of life enter into play: creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values, relating to others, giving glory to God.”


Introduction

Work is a central theme in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. Its starting point is the person who works: work is a manifestation of God’s image in man, a continuation of God’s redemptive work, a means of sanctification, a manifestation of man’s freedom and the sphere within which it is exercised. This is the anthropological and theological foundation on which Catholic social doctrine develops the social function of work as a financial support for the family, an opportunity to acquire knowledge, abilities and virtues, a contribution to the common good, etc. Lastly, the social doctrine of the Church also pays attention to work’s social, economic, political and cultural setting: the right to work, the conditions in which it is performed, the relationship between labour and capital, the right of association, etc.

Moral theology and Catholic social doctrine do not propose a theory of work from the viewpoint of the person who works. They are concerned with the morality of human action, based on an anthropology that has been developed over the centuries, starting with the revelation and tradition and with the collaboration of the human sciences. In this article, the aim is to reflect on human work as a human action that takes place within human organizations – in other words, work as collective action.

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“For while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, men and women are performing their activities in a way which appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labour they are unfolding the Creator’s work, consulting the advantages of their brother men, and are contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan.”

There is no conflict – and neither should there be – between human action studied by the social sciences and that proposed by theology. However, neither are they two superimposed realities, as if faith were merely a supernatural affix to a purely human activity or as if the only contribution that could be expected from the social sciences would be to confirm what theology said about human work.

We will begin with a discussion of the action of the agent who works and this action’s ethical dimension, subsequently focusing on shared action within an organization such as the firm, the agent’s purpose and motives, and coordination of work in the organization, before summing up.

**The action of the agent who works**

Action is any rational, voluntary, deliberate act performed by a person, the agent. “To be an agent is to influence intentionally one’s functioning and life circumstances [...] People are self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting. They are not simply onlookers of their behavior. They are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them.”

Human agency has four main properties:

1. **Intentionality:** “people form intentions that include action plans and strategies for realizing them.”

2. **Forethought**, which “includes more than future-directed plans. People set themselves goals and anticipate likely outcomes of prospective actions to guide and motivate their efforts [...]. Through cognitive representation, visualized futures are brought into the present as current guides and motivators of behavior.”

3. **Self-reactiveness:** “agents are not only planners and forethinkers. They are also self-regulators” who have “the ability to construct appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution.”

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4 A. Bandura (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency, Perspectives on Psychological Science, 1(2), 164.

5 Ibid., 146.

6 Ibid., 146.

7 Ibid., 147.
4) Self-reflection: people “are also self-examiners of their own functioning [...] they reflect on their personal efficacy, the soundness of their thoughts and actions, and the meaning of their pursuits, and they make corrective adjustments if necessary.”

Action may be entirely individual but it usually refers to an external, mainly human environment. It is, above all, about relating, opening oneself to nature and people. Action arises from a need and is broadly understood as the step from one situation to another situation that is expected to be better. The need defines the goods or ends that the agent sets out to achieve, and these are what justify the action. It may be a need of the agent has or of another person. However, it invariably appears as an opportunity, a call to action. Once he or she is apprised there is a need, the agent identifies the expected or desired outcomes and the means that he or she can use.

The action’s outcomes may vary greatly but they can be divided into three categories:

1) Extrinsic outcomes, which are the environment’s response to the agent’s action: for example, the salary received or recognition of the agent’s activity.

2) Intrinsic outcomes, which the agent does not receive from outside but produces in himself or herself, such as job satisfaction and operational learning (knowledge, skills, abilities).

3) External outcomes, which the action generates in other people and which move the agent to act, such as satisfying consumers’ needs. However, more important than these external outcomes in other people are the effects on the agent: evaluative learning that develops the virtues of the person who works.\(^9\)

The expected or desired outcomes determine the action’s motives – that is, the reasons for doing. Action is not the passive result of physical or biological laws or of social determinants or objective efficiency criteria but the fruit of the agent’s voluntary, freely performed action. The motives may be extrinsic, intrinsic or transcendent, depending on the extrinsic, intrinsic or external outcomes\(^10\) that move the agent to act.

Any of these motives may be found in the action, and they are likely to change over time. A man who started working just for the money may later become engrossed in a task that he finds truly absorbing, and eventually end up persevering after many hours out of a sense of duty.\(^11\) Motives

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8 Ibid., 147.

9 Other people’s good also includes one’s own good: “the interest of the others or the community in their well-being and in the good for them, can be understood as one’s own interest as well, since it seems impossible—at least, if we want to be consistent—to recognize and pursue ‘what is truly good for myself,’ if I do not also understand it as fundamentally ‘a good for others’ as well, even to the extent of having a personal interest that others also partake of that good” (M. Rhonheimer, 2010. *La perspectiva de la moral. Fundamentos de la ética filosófica*. Madrid: Rialp, p. 19; English-language edition: M. Rhonheimer, 2011. *The perspective of morality: Philosophical foundations of Thomistic virtue ethics*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, p. 6).


11 Emotions, inclinations and feelings also play a role in the action, in so far as they influence the spontaneous motivation to act a certain way.
are not associated with moral considerations: working because of extrinsic motives is not only
legitimate but good, as the action is a confluence of motives on different levels.

We will use the term “intention” to refer to the main motive, as it lends unity to the action and
relates it to other actions that also arise from the same intention.12 It is not a mere wish or belief
and cannot be defined from outside. On the contrary, it is always defined by the agent who acts.

Before the action can be carried out, the motives must become motivations, incentives that drive
the agent to achieve the results,13 and this introduces the concept of will. We can also talk about
three types of motivation: extrinsic, intrinsic and transcendent, which correspond to the three
types of motive and the three types of desired outcomes. There is no hierarchy among them: all
of them are present simultaneously. The main or dominant motivation will be that which is
brought into play by the intention.

The motivations determine the commitment to do the work, as well as the commitment to oneself,
to others or to God. Commitment gives strength and continuity to the intention, particularly in
actions performed with other people.

Once the action has been performed, these three types of outcome will always be obtained, to a greater
or lesser extent, even though the agent has not consciously sought or desired them, and even though
he or she is not aware that they have been obtained. Extrinsic outcomes are, probably, obvious and
immediate, with the risk that they may become the predominant outcomes in the judgment of the
action. However, all of them have consequences for the agent: for example, operational learning
(intrinsic motives) may make it easier (or harder) to perform future actions, and the action’s effect on
other people (transcendent motives) may make the agent’s relations with these people easier (or
harder) in the future, not least because the agent’s disposition will have changed.

The ethics of personal action

In order to assess an action from an ethical viewpoint, at least three elements are needed: 1) a
criterion by which to judge the action’s morality; 2) the action’s relationship to the agent’s moral
character; and 3) an idea about the role that ethics must play in the conduct of the agent and of
the organization in which he or she works.

1) There are three variables (which must be addressed simultaneously) that can be used to
judge the action’s morality:14 the outcomes that the agent had set out to achieve (what he
or she “wants” to attain, which is the action’s “what” or object); the motive or intention
(the action’s “why” and, if there are several, the dominant one), and the action’s
circumstances, which must be considered in each case.

When the agent must make a decision, he or she must consider these criteria, not
abstractly but concretely with respect to the agent’s action, here and now, including the
available alternatives, which will form part of the circumstances. In the theory of action,
ethics is concerned not so much with actions’ consequences for other people but with
their impact on the agent.

13 Cf. Pérez López, Fundamentos, 56.
Cambridge University Press, 1a2ae, qq. 6–21.
2) Actions are not self-contained entities but are related. An agent’s ethical actions are intimately linked to what is called his or her “character”, which is the result of the virtues the agent regularly practises, in a more or less orderly and stable fashion.\(^{15}\)

3) What must a person do to ensure that his or her actions are ethical? Different ethical theories propose different answers but the theory of action presented here proposes that “complete ethics must be ethics of goods, norms and virtues”.\(^{16}\)

   a) Everyone seeks what is good, even though sometimes people choose the wrong thing or look for good inappropriately. As we have already said, goods may be extrinsic, intrinsic or transcendent.\(^{17}\)

   b) Norms or rules are imperatives, normally negative imperatives, that help decision-making, limiting the agent’s scope of choice so that he or she does not do what is bad.

   c) Virtues are acquired operative habits that are developed by the deliberate, voluntary repetition of acts that seek to become increasingly better.\(^{18}\) The agent acquires or develops virtues when he or she strives to attain what is good for himself or herself and for others, resisting the temptation to do something that is more pleasurable or that would provide immediate benefits. The virtuous person correctly perceives the situation, feels that he or she must act in a given way, is moved to perform this action and has the strength of will to see it through.

**Shared action in organizations**

An organization is “a group of people who coordinate their actions to achieve objectives of interest to all of them, even though that interest may be due to very different motives”.\(^{19}\) This definition can be applied to a broad range of organizations, from a group of people who find themselves waiting for a bus on a rainy day and decide to share a taxi to make the journey more bearable to a formal organization such as a family, a firm, a trade union, a sports club or a group devoted to organized crime. The organization is a means for achieving results that would be impossible or more difficult to attain without everyone’s joint efforts.

Our interest does not lie in the organization but in the person who works and his or her actions. The fact that this work takes place within an organization means that we have to consider several things: 1) the people, the organization’s members, each one with his or her motives; 2) a common purpose, which is a need that the organization intends to satisfy through its members’ cooperation, which entails 3) a motivation or intention to participate, which may be cooperative or not, and shared or not; 4) the coordination of these activities; and 5) the collective or shared actions that are carried out. In very broad terms, a “joint action can be regarded as any form of


\(^{19}\) Pérez López, *Fundamentos*, 13.
social interaction whereby two or more individuals coordinate their actions in space and time to bring about a change in the environment.”

**Purpose and motives of shared action**

The purpose is the answer to the questions: Why do these people act together? What do they want to achieve together? It is not about each individual’s motive or the “why” of a person’s action. The people who work in a company, for example, contribute to a good’s production process to satisfy consumer needs. This process will be the organization’s purpose or objective, and it is in everyone’s interest because, through it, each individual will be able to satisfy the needs that have motivated him or her to take part in the organization: remuneration, recognition, career opportunities, satisfaction with what one does, knowledge acquisition, skill development, serving consumers and society, caring for the environment, meaningful human relations, acquisition of virtues, etc. The organization’s purpose is then transposed to each of the specific actions that are performed.

Within an organization, collective, shared, plural or joint actions are performed that imply a shared purpose. The fact that the purpose is shared does not necessarily add a new motivation but it does open up new possibilities and new ways of relating, which may give rise to shared social motivations. For example, as Godman (2013) discusses, two workers who perform an unappealing task together, such as moving a piano, may discover shared affinities, interests and tastes that lead them to enjoy the action itself, precisely because it is performed with that other person. In other words, the shared action may create links that not only produce personal benefits but also social benefits, which lead to new commitments. “Joint actions (in general) should be understood as having the two primary functions of (1) achieving the intended target outcome of the function, and (2) attaining the benefits related to being part of a social bond”.

In a shared action, the agent acts in accordance with his or her personal extrinsic, intrinsic or transcendent motives. These motives, in turn, may or may not align with those of the other agent, in a variety of possible situations. For example, one person may be motivated by serving the customer (transcendent motive) while the other person is interested only in the salary (extrinsic motive). Or both may have the same motive, salary, but it is not shared, because each individual is only worried about his or her own salary. Or it may be a social motive: they want the relationship, but it is not shared. Instead, each person wants it only to the extent that it benefits him or her personally: for example, because it enables each person to earn a larger salary. Or it may be a shared social motive, as in the example of the workers moving the piano. What is important here is the purpose, not the motives.

In practice, the relative importance of the purpose and the shared social motivation may change, and the action can continue even when some of these causes have ceased to be operational. And it is also possible that continuity in the collective action leads to new intrinsic and, above all,

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21 Godman, op. cit., 588.

transcendent motivations, in both the personal and social spheres. Accordingly, performing actions with others may facilitate (although not always) the practice of virtues.

Cooperation and trust

“For organization to exist, it is not enough for there to be a group of people; it is not even enough for them all to have a common purpose. The truly decisive element is that these people organize themselves – coordinate their activity – by directing their joint action toward the achievement of results that, although it may be for different reasons, they all believe it is in their interest to attain.”23 This coordination may take very different forms.

A simple form of collective action is what Ihlan calls coordinated collective action.24 Several different trades are involved in constructing a building (bricklayers, carpenters, electricians, painters, etc.): all of them want the work to be completed successfully (shared purpose) but each one works independently from the others, even at different times and without knowing each other.25 This type of action produces strategic interdependences – for example, the different specialists must contribute their work in a particular order. However, no dialogue or willingness to cooperate is required. (This may exist, and often does exist, but it does not have any external manifestations.)

There are situations in which the interdependence between agents is not just strategic and oriented towards extrinsic outcomes, so there must be shared intentions. In such cases, a higher form of cooperation is required, which would include: a) sensitivity, because each agent must understand the other agent’s intentions; b) dialogue between them, concerning their action’s ends and means; c) commitment, at least, to carry out the joint activity (“if I cooperate, the other person will cooperate too”) and, better still, commitment to provide reciprocal support, (“if I need him, the other person will help me”),26 and d) as a result, trust, which may be functional or technical (the other person is expected to know what he or she has to do and be able to do it) or, better still, personal (it is reasonable to expect the other person to want what is best for me – that is, that person is moved by transcendent motives when acting).27

A more complete form of joint action is group agency (for example, the musicians in an orchestra or engineers specialized in different fields who work together to make the prototype for a new machine). The organization establishes the action’s ends and expected outcomes, and its members share the social (transcendent) motives. In the event of conflict, the team’s ends prevail. All share a high level of commitment, not only to the ends but also to the actions that each individual

23 Pérez López, Fundamentos, 14.
25 Various degrees of cooperation are possible within an organization, from the “we-mode”, in which the individual agent fully takes into account the organization’s purposes, values, standards, rules and beliefs – in other words, the agent acts as a member of the organization – to the “I-mode”, in which the agent acts as an independent agent. Cf. R. Tuomela and M. Tuomela (2005). Cooperation and trust in group context, Mind & Society, 4, 49-84.
26 The commitment can be unconditional or limited, temporary or enduring. “‘Commitment’ is seen as the glue of the group, of collective activity: it links the agent with the joint goal and the common solution, it links members’ actions with the collective plan, it links the members with each other” (C. Castelfranchi, 1995. “Commitments: From individual intentions to groups and organizations”. In L. Gasser and V. Lesser (eds.), Proceedings of the first international conference on multi-agent systems. Menlo Park, CA: The AAAI Press, p. 41).
performs. They all devote their entire efforts to coordinating their actions. They are willing to help those who need it, and have complete trust in the other members.28

As the cooperation becomes stronger and deeper, the motivations may change. The transcendent motivations may become more important, and the extrinsic motivations may decrease in significance (although they do not disappear), because there are fewer equivalent value exchanges, and the risks of free-riding conduct are greater. The agent must be aware of other people’s needs: he or she must give without receiving, at least in the short term and without an equivalent value.

To sum up, a shared action can lead to a great variety of situations. At one extreme, there is the individual action within an organization, which we have called coordinated collective action. In this case, the agent shares the purpose with other players. The agent’s actions are strictly individual, and his or her relations with others are minimal. Perhaps simple forms of coordination are developed, with very little dialogue. The trust required may be purely technical, and the commitment can be confined to complying strictly with what is expected from each individual.

At the other extreme, there is group agency: a team of people who fully share not only a common purpose – “what” they do – but have developed shared motivations, “why” they do it, because they are moved not only by what they expect from their project but by the very fact of collaborating with others in the project. They work in a team, in regular contact with each other, and they even swap tasks. They develop advanced forms of cooperation, including open dialogue. They try to understand not only what others are doing but also what those others want and why they want it. Each is committed to do what each one must do, but also to help others, supporting them, calling on them to perform and spurring them onward.

It is impossible to say which of the two situations is the more ethical. The moral criteria we outlined earlier are applicable to both. The mere fact of working within an organization does not lend a greater moral quality to work. The painter who works alone in his studio does not necessarily have to be less ethical than the member of a socially motivated start-up team who is full of projects for improving society. However, there will be at least two significant differences. One is the action’s impact on society, which, in the latter case, will be projected on many people and will have more significant economic, social and even political consequences (without this implying that the artist’s impact cannot be very great, especially in the long term). As we already explained, an action’s ethical content is not measured solely or even primarily by its social impact.

The other difference takes place within the sphere of the organization: the opportunity to develop relationships with other people and, therefore, the lessons that the agent learns through his or her action, together with the learning he fosters in others, including the acquisition and growth of both the agent’s and other people’s virtues.

The most important virtue is love, which animates and inspires the other virtues.29 The love of benevolence wishes and seeks the other person’s good, and does not do this in the expectation of any benefit this may bring the agent. And it manifests itself when the agents acts out of transcendent motivation – that is, when the agent takes into account the other person’s needs,

28 Cf. Godman, op. cit.; Ihlan, op. cit.
including moral needs. “Love, in its proper and full sense, is the an agent’s impulse to achieve [...] perfect unity with other individual agents.”

Love often appears in work relationships: affection, which is a simple form of love; congeniality, which generates a certain communion between people; comradeship; and so on. Shared action may also give rise to the love of mutual, reciprocal friendship that seeks a common goal and excludes any utilitarian motivation.

“Work is born from love, it is a manifestation of love and is directed toward love.” When the agent develops his or her transcendent motivation, the agent is growing in love. And, in turn, this becomes the work’s main intention. This leads to some conclusions, which do not form part of the theory of action but are perhaps its corollary: work is an opportunity to give of oneself to others, work changes the nature of the things that are produced and, viewed in its social dimension, work is an opportunity to transform society.

Conclusions

The theory of action that we have developed in the preceding pages is by no means a complete theory of human work but it does point out certain important properties of work, which we summarize below and which point back to the social doctrine of the Catholic Church:

- A very broad concept of work, which identifies with human action.
- The fact that it is something personal: the agent is an active person, who acts with intentionality and forethought, is reflective and self-regulates.
- The action’s starting point is a human need, felt by the agent or another person, which leads to the opportunity to act to satisfy that need. Depending on the nature of that need, the work’s social influence will be greater or lesser.
- Action has an external dimension (extrinsic outcomes), an internal dimension (intrinsic outcomes) and a social dimension, in other people (transcendent outcomes). All three dimensions appear at the same time, and no precedence can be given to any single one over the others.
- The action’s motives and intentions have a central position. They are the reasons for the person who works. They are put in place by the agent and do not come to the agent from outside. Hence the agent’s responsibility in his or her work.
- The motives determine the work’s meaning, and this transforms the person’s decision-making through operational learning (development of knowledge and abilities) and evaluative learning (virtues or vices). This learning gives rise to cumulative changes in the agent, so that his or her future decisions will be conditioned by the agent’s present actions.

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30 Pérez López, Teoría, op. cit., 271.
32 “Through his work, through his gift as a person at work, he manages to change the things created using the things with which he works and those he transforms into something for the other person” (P. Martí, 2016. El rostro del amor. Misericordia, perdón y Vida. Madrid: Rialp, p. 66).
• As activities performed by a free, responsible person, actions always have an ethical dimension. A morally correct action must meet certain criteria, which refer to the object (the action’s nature), the end (the agent’s intentions or motives) and the circumstances.

• A moral action always makes reference to the person’s character – that is, the virtues that person practises (or, in a negative sense, that person’s vices).

• Human work is usually performed through relations with other people, within what we have called organizations, in very broad terms. Accordingly, work has a social dimension: to work with and for others.

• Collective action’s social dimension manifests itself in the common purpose of those who act, in the possible social (and also shared) motivations and in the need to coordinate actions to achieve the desired outcomes.

• Work as a shared action can be an opportunity for the development of virtues, but it is equally possible that this may not be so. A team of people in a criminal partnership may have a shared purpose, social motivations and a high degree of cooperation but none of this will generate true virtues, genuine trust or a good for society.

• In short, shared action is a sociological, psychological, economic or political category and, like any other human action, it has an ethical dimension.
References


