

TOWARD A CROSS-CULTURAL VIRTUE ETHICS PARADIGM OF MEANINGFUL WORK: ARISTOTELIANISM AND BUDDHISM

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The topic of meaningful work (MW) continues to attract attention in managerial and business ethics research. Defined as the degree of significance employees believe their work possesses, MW is an established theoretical/normative and empirical/descriptive area of scholarship. Several studies indicate that MW has positive effects to both employee and organizational outcomes. It relates to employees' wellbeing, mental health, motivation and performance, and job satisfaction (Fouche et al. 2017; Steger et al. 2012; Parker and Bevan 2011). On the part of the organization, MW promotes organizational citizenship and commitment, work engagement, increased productivity, employee retention, and reduction of employee cynicism (Michaelson et al. 2014; Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009; Cartwright 2006). Decline in job satisfaction has adverse effects to the company in terms of frequent tardiness and absences of workers, high employee turnover, and strained communication between management and employee. On the other hand, job alienation, the inverse of MW has substantial negative effects on employee engagement, organizational commitment, work effort, and work-to-family enrichment (Tummers and Den Dulk 2013; Overell 2009; Kanungo 1992). From a philosophical standpoint, the search for meaning is an essential part of being human. Thus, the concept of MW "finds its roots in the humanities rather than in management theory." (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009, p. 657)

However, researchers in various fields who have systematically studied this topic still encounter a number of difficulties. To begin with, there is little consensus on what exactly makes work meaningful. According to Ciulla (2000), MW also entails a sense that one's life is meaningful and worth living. To promote MW, it is not enough to provide workers with jobs that are challenging or interesting. The deeper spiritual needs of the workers must also be addressed, for "the mark of true meaningfulness is that it is based on personal discovery and free choice rather than prescription and domination." (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009, p. 494) But while it is true that MW has subjective dimension since it is experienced on a personal level, "an exclusive focus on individuals remains an inadequate account of the concept of meaningfulness." (Overell 2009, pp. 42-43) In addition, Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009, p. 508) point out the need to consider differences in cultural and spiritual beliefs in studying MW. Most studies in this area are Western-centric, with very few that attempt to consider non-Western and cross-cultural perspectives (Michaelson et al. 2014). The question on whether MW varies across cultures is rarely addressed. In this global economy where more people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds are

working in the same company, there is a growing need to understand how different cultures view what is work and what makes it meaningful (Michaelson et al. 2014).

This study adds to the existing literature on MW by offering a cross-cultural perspective. Since work shapes our personality and plays an important role in our well-being, some theorists have adopted a virtue theory approach to MW using an Aristotelian-MacIntyrean framework. For lack of a better term, I will call this a Western Virtue Theory (WVT). This paper presents a contemporary virtue-focused Buddhist perspective on MW. By contemporary Buddhism, I refer to new modes of Buddhism that result from its encounter with Western philosophy as it engages with the modern world. Western philosophy provides sophisticated and clearly defined conceptualizations and taxonomies that are not found in classical Buddhism. Such approach does “not only refine our interpretations but also generate new insights and new perspectives that otherwise would not arise.” (Velez 2013, p. 502) According to Whitehill (2000, p. 3), “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.” However one must not expect a perfect fit between Western and Buddhist concepts as the risk of superimposing Western categories is always there. As Edelglass (2014, pp. 477-478) notes, “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.”

Since the publication of Schumacher’s seminal work on Buddhist economics, there has been an increased interest in the field of business ethics on Buddhism and the insights that it offers to humanize the workplace. Several articles have been published that demonstrate the relevance of Buddhism to organizational and managerial practice (Chang et al 2012; Low and Purser 2012; Case and Brohm 2012; Marques 2012, 2010; Borden and Shekhawat 2010; Gould 1995). Buddhism is an important cultural component not only of countries that are predominantly Buddhist, but of other societies that have come in contact with it. To develop a *Buddhist perspective* on MW, I will draw heavily from the works of Buddhist scholars, particularly in the West who use a virtue framework in interpreting Buddhist ethics. According to Keown (1992, p. 21), “Aristotle’s ethical theory appears to be the closest Western analogue to Buddhist ethics, and is an illuminating guide to an understanding of the Buddhist moral system.”¹ He considers Buddhist ethics as a type of teleological virtue ethics.² Aristotle’s argument is predicated on the claim that we have a final end (*telos*) and virtues enable us to achieve it. For the Buddha this

¹ See also Fink (2013); Lysenko (2007); Gowan (2003); Whitehill (2000); Harvey (2000); Swearer (1998). “While the interpretation of Buddhist ethics as a virtue ethics is now widespread, not everyone has been convinced by Keown’s interpretation of Buddhist ethics as sharing essential characteristics with Aristotelian moral philosophy. Some scholars, such as Georges Dreyfus, suggest that Keown went too far in searching for similarities between Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics and that a better correspondence is the *eudaimonistic* virtue ethics as articulated by one or another of the later Hellenistic philosophers, such as the Epicureans, Stoics, or Skeptics.” (Edelglass 2015, p. 481)

² It is teleological but not consequentialist because there is an intrinsic connection between means and end. Virtues are not only instrumental good but good in themselves in the sense that they are constitutive of the highest good. “In both Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics, an action is right because it embodies a virtue which conduces to and ‘participates’ in the goal of human perfection. Both are ‘teleological’ in that they advocate action which moves towards a *telos* or goal/end with which they have an intrinsic relationship” (Harvey 2000, p. 20).

goal is *nibbana* (or nirvana in Sanskrit) – the escape from the karmic cycle of rebirth or *samsara*. “In Buddhism virtuous choices are rational choices motivated by a desire for what is good and deriving their validation ultimately from the final good for man (nirvana)” (Keown 1992, p. 221). *Nibbana* is the *summum bonum*, the realization of both the highest morality and the unconditioned reality.³ Both Aristotle and Buddhism postulate the human potential for perfection through practices of self-development. Rather than a set commandments or moral rules, many Buddhists interpret the 8-fold path as a list of virtues in conjunction with the doctrine of the middle way.⁴

The aims of my essay are dual. The first is to articulate a straightforward application of Buddhism on the contemporary ethical discussion of MW. The second is to discuss the similarities, clarify the differences, and demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses relative to each other of a Buddhist and a WVT perspective on MW. While a virtue-ethics interpretation of Buddhism is now widely accepted and has been applied to several moral issues, not much has been written about MW using a Buddhist-Aristotelian comparative framework. As pointed out in one study, assessment of issues in business ethics is usually hampered by exclusive reliance on Western models (Sanchez-Runde et al 2013). In my conclusion, I will argue that Buddhism is not an alternative to WVT, but it offers significant contributions to WVT’s approach to MW and even corrective to some of its shortcomings.

This essay has limitations. Like most studies of MW from an ethical or managerial standpoint, it focuses on one specific way in which human work finds embodiment, i.e. as experienced in paid employment. There are different interpretations of Aristotelian and MacIntyrean ethics and to take account of all of them and resolve their differences in one essay is not possible. A detailed application of specific virtues to the workplace is outside the scope of this study. I make no claim of presenting with finality or authoritativeness *The Buddhist Philosophy* of MW. “Since Buddhism is an amorphous movement with no clear hierarchy or locus of authority, it is difficult to make authoritative statements of the kind ‘The Buddhist view on issue x is...’ without qualification.” (Keown 2004, p. 174) Neither do I intend to represent any particular school of Buddhism. It is well known that the term Buddhism does not refer to a single and systematic body of teaching, but is rather made up of historically and culturally diverse beliefs and practices that evolved from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama. Thus, there is no single ethical system followed by all Buddhists.⁵

³ “There is, *bhikkhus*, that base where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air; no base consisting of the infinity of space, no base consisting of the infinity of consciousness, no base consisting of nothingness, no base consisting of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; neither this world nor another world nor both; neither sun nor moon. Here, *bhikkhus*, I say there is no coming, no going, no staying, no deceasing, no uprising. Not fixed, not movable, it has no support. Just this is the end of suffering.” (*Nibbana Sutta* Ireland 2012)

⁴ “Both [the Buddha and Aristotle] understood the mean as something more complex and more intricate than an equal distance from opposite ends, an arithmetical mean, or mechanical equilibrium (equipoise). They presented the mean regarding human beings as a state (condition) which is never given a priori” (Lysenko 2007, p. 62).

⁵ “This theory of more than one ethical system is more flexible and in accord with the actual moral practices of Buddhist communities, both those mentioned in the texts and these that inertly exist.” (Promta 2005, p. 156) The Buddha considers any adherence to an absolute doctrine as a kind of bondage, an obstacle to right understanding.

WVT AND MEANINGFUL WORK

Virtue (*arête* or excellence in Greek) is a stable disposition to act, think, desire, and feel in a way that helps us achieve our *telos* by enabling us to fulfill our distinctive human function. For Aristotle, our actions when habitually performed have a major influence in the kind of person we become and in our overall well-being. They enable us to live a flourishing life (*eudaimonia*). His thesis rests on the notion that human persons, like all other beings have a particular *telos* that is found in their proper function. Having a rational soul, the human function is to think and act in accordance with right reason. Thus he distinguishes virtues as virtues of action (moral) and of thinking (intellectual). *Nicomachean Ethics* explains *eudaimonia* as the highest form of activity that satisfies all the conditions for human good. The ideal life is that which is devoted to intellectual contemplation (*theória*). Excellence in moral action lies in moderation. This refers to a choice lying in the mean relative to a situation as appropriately determined by practical wisdom (*phronesis*). *Phronesis* is one of the most important intellectual virtues, the latter includes wisdom (*sophia*), scientific knowledge (*episteme*), intuition (*nous*) and skill (*techne*). It is the complete virtue as it implies understanding the relationship between the universal good and particular circumstances and the capacity to figure out the appropriate response. “And it seems then to belong to someone with practical judgement to be able to deliberate beautifully about things that are good and advantageous for himself.” (Aristotle 2002, p. 106) *Phronesis* unifies all virtues, and is a necessary condition for all virtues because it involves our ability to perceive morally relevant factors.

According to Beadle (1998), MacIntyre’s notion of practice is of paramount importance if we are to understand employment as the setting to exercise virtues and achieve the good life. Virtue ethicists regard professions as the context in which practices occur. Following Aristotle, MacIntyre develops the concept of practice that provides the framework in which virtues are acquired. Practice is

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized 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. (MacIntyre 2007, p.187)

Practice refers to activities that have standards of excellence and specific goals. It entails competence that comes as a result of training, discipline and commitment. Practices are distinct from skills. Skills do not admit innovation, contrary to practice. Compared to skills, practices have dynamically complex aims rather than fixed. Practices are human activities that served as medium for human excellences. Although MacIntyre does not speak of employment itself, he includes productive crafts (e.g. fishing) in his examples. Every practice contains specific internal goods, i.e. goods valued for their own sake. They are “particular excellences or products realized through the activity of a particular practice, goods that cannot be gained without engaging in the activity of the practice itself.” (Vodehnal 2010, pp. 66-67) Internal goods are transformative. They are “goods of character that make a claim on our identity and give definition to life – they shape who we are and make us persons of a particular sort.” (Muirhead 2004, pp. 155-156) An excellent portrait is the result of the actualization by the painter of the standards of excellence required in painting. The

former also actualizes something else, the good of a certain life, e.g. “the painter's living out of a greater or lesser part of his or her life *as a painter*” (MacIntyre 2007, p. 190). Virtues are acquired qualities that enable a person to achieve internal goods. “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which prevents us from achieving any such goods.” (MacIntyre 2007, p. 191) They are excellences that produce internal goods that include excellence in the product and the flourishing of the individual. The person who exercises virtue pursues a practice for the sake of its internal rather than external goods (e.g. fame, power, reputation, or money). Since what is required to excel in one profession is not the same in another, there are virtues that are specific to a certain profession in contrast to everyday or ordinary virtues. There are virtues specific to a practice as well as general virtues that are needed for every practice such as courage, patience, fortitude. etc. The former are role-oriented, they are specified within a framework of a given profession (Annas 2015).

“In order to survive, however, practices need to be housed within institutions which are concerned with external goods.” (Fernando and Moore 2015, p. 186) External goods are the ends of institutions. They are goods in so far as they are instrumental in the actualization of internal goods. Unlike internal goods that are practice-specific, external goods are generic. MacIntyre warns against the corrupting effects of institutions, including corporations, that make workers focus on external goods rather than acquisition of virtues. While he recognizes the interdependence between internal and external goods (MacIntyre 1989, p. 35) as institutions provide the material needs and structural support for practices, he identifies an unavoidable tension between the goal/success of institutions and the integrity of practice so that it is always necessary to protect practices from the corrupting power of institutions.

“It is a part of practicing a particular profession that you deal with a particular kind of situation... and so virtues you display have to be in some way tailored to these situations, not a matter of going from one situation to another.” (Annas 2015, p. 13) These role-oriented virtues are more specific than general virtues and are learned in a more specific way. They are found in a virtuous agent who performs certain actions required for the role or occupation that she has. Role virtues make ordinary virtues more precise, while ordinary virtues are prototype virtues that provide “anchors for moral thinking in role contexts, alerting us to possibilities of excess and other forms of wrongness.” (Swanton 2007, p. 217) The distinction is between being good in a role and being good qua human being. While the emphasis of Aristotle is the latter, his function (*ergon*) argument in *Nicomachean Ethics* begins by considering the different functions that humans are capable of such as flute playing or ship-building, and from this he inquires regarding our characteristic activity qua human beings. This shows that there is a connection between our proper or generic function as rational beings and our specific or role-related function, and this seems to be obvious for the very reason why we are capable of certain functions that require the use of reason is because we have a rational nature. Virtues have different application from one function/role to another, and a truly virtuous person has the practical wisdom to know the difference.

MW enables us to develop our character and achieve our *telos*, which is not wealth, fame or power, but living “fulfilled lives in which we make the most of our talent and abilities.” (Marchese et al. 2002, p. 149) It allows workers to practice deliberative and self-developing skills, requires application of intellectual virtues, and provides decision making opportunities where workers can exercise their ability to search for the mean as well as sound moral judgment. “From

an Aristotelian perspective, identifying and learning how to meet such challenges [in our employment] requires the exercise of the virtues” (Beadle and Knight 2012, p. 435). We actualize ourselves through work and at the same time our work is actualized because of our virtues. Dehumanizing work is definitely non-MW. But “Other things equal, a complex, interesting job that demands the use of skilled, practical judgement enhances the capacities and satisfaction of the worker, whereas a boring, unskilled job dulls the mind. The former is also likely to bring more recognition than the latter, providing the skilled worker with a source of self-esteem.” (Sayer 2009, p. 2) MW contributes to the development of our potentialities. “We enjoy activities that are skilled, varied and complex more than simple, repetitive ones, and we may try to emulate others whose skills we admire.” (Sayer 2009, p. 5) Work that does not provide opportunities for acquisition of virtues because either it is too tedious or it lacks room for the exercise of autonomy and judgment is non-eudaimonian and cannot be meaningful. Because virtue is not taught but rather self-learned through practice, virtuous work requires high job engagement, autonomy, and exercise of practical wisdom. MW must entail activities that are open ended rather than mechanical or determined, i.e. activities that allow a continuous dialectical process between the subject’s intent and practice, and it is through this process that decision making, communication, imagination, and improvement of task take place (Walsh 1994). To be open ended requires performing complex roles that give opportunities for self-expression, innovation, critical thinking, and creativity.

One way to understand MW from the perspective of WVT is to see it as a kind of craft that necessitates perfection through discipline, and brings about personal satisfaction and sense of pride and dignity. “Craft stands for the pleasure of work for its own sake. Craft is the worker’s desire to do a job as well as he or she can.” (Overell 2008, p. 42) According to Arneson (1987, p. 522) the right to a MW implies a right to a work that “ involves some development or exercise of the individual’s intellectual or craft talents.” It lies in a “midway on a continuum between boring and overwhelmingly difficult work. Work that is too far beyond my capacity ceases to be interesting just as much as work that is too far below my capacity.” Like the medieval guilds, craftspeople are skilled workers who are to an extent, self-determining and self-managing (Moore 2005, p. 248). Crafts have determined standards of excellence that include learning, training, and apprenticeship. They do not only refer to mastery of skills, but the pursuit of excellence and this can only be done by craftspeople working in a community (Moore 2005, pp. 250-251). Being a craft-practitioner implies that one has specialized skills and has a sense of control over her work and “of creativity in adapting her general knowledge to the particular circumstances of the client.” (Simon 1997, p. 461)

A BUDDHIST VIRTUE ETHICS

The term virtue has no exact equivalence in Buddhism. For Keown (1992, p. 191), the terms *kusala* (skillful or wholesome) and *akusala* (unskillful or unwholesome) are the Buddhist equivalent of good and bad respectively in virtue ethics.⁶ Whether an act is good or bad is

⁶ See also Harvey (2000, p. 43). Ambalaṭṭhikārahulovāda Sutta explains how to distinguish wholesome from unwholesome actions: ““Whenever you want to do a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I want to do — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful bodily action

determined by motive or intention (*cetana*).⁷ 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.” (*Anguttara Nikaya* [AN] Bodhi 2012, p. 98) Intention or *cetana* has both affective and cognitive aspect as it refers to both motive and volition. Virtuous action involves motivation, intention, and wisdom. For an act to be virtuous it must be well-motivated, well-intentioned, and wise (Fink 2013, p. 676). The act must be done from selfless motivation with the intention of serving the good of the other and has good consequences (wisdom).⁸ Since mental intention plays a significant role in Buddhist ethics, meditation is essential for one to be ethical. It helps us explore deeply and clarify all our intentions.⁹ Thus, cultivation of virtuous character entails three paths of purification: purification of conduct (ethics), view (wisdom), and of mind (meditation).

The term *kusala* also connotes the notion of skillfulness. A virtuous act must be effective in bringing out the intended good results. Buddhism requires “the need for skillfulness, fittingness, and appropriateness in applying morality to the situation.” (Nelson 2009, p. 202) Good intention is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a virtuous act, for the latter must ultimately lead to the realization of *nibbana*. Like WVT, Buddhism emphasizes the importance of wisdom in enabling the agent to decide and choose which means is effective in attaining *nibbana*.¹⁰ But it is not enough to do good and avoid evil, because even good actions can lead to attachment. “When a *bhikkhu* is... Not attached, he does not tremble. Not trembling, he personally achieves *nibbana*.” (*Mahanidana Sutta* [MS] Holder p. 38) One must eliminate attachment to all actions, whether good or bad. To realize *nibbana*, unwholesome thoughts like desire, hatred, fear and delusion that are the roots of evil actions must be purged (*Sigalovada Sutta* [SS] Holder 2006, p. 193). It is in this sense that Buddhism speaks of an *arahant* who is beyond karmic fruitfulness and has transcended all rebirths. Harvey (2000, p. 49) defines *nibbana* as the destruction of attachment.

As a moral theory, Buddhism “is not ultimately concerned with the development of individual virtues.” (Case and Brohm 2013, p. 63) Virtue is the result of eliminating greed, hatred, and ignorance - the mental roots of unwholesome actions - by following the 8-fold path. Although one can find a long list of virtues in Buddhist commentarial literature, some are for laypersons, others for monks and nuns and some are for more advanced practitioners, these virtues are all

with painful consequences, painful results, then any bodily action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any bodily action of that sort is fit for you to do.” (Bhikkhu, 2006)

⁷ Keown connects the Buddhist *cetana* with *phronesis* and *phrohaireisis* of Aristotle, for *cetana* implies attention, reflection, and resolution. Ethical conduct involves choice and deliberation among alternatives.

⁸ An example given by Fink (2013, p. 677) of a non-virtuous action that is done with good intention but lacks wisdom is giving alcohol to an alcoholic. The intention of the giver may be good (to alleviate suffering) but the act is actually foolish rather than wise.

⁹ There are empirical and conceptual studies on how mindfulness can shape “human experiences in a wide variety of functional domains, including thought, emotion and action.” (Good et al 2015, p. 22)

¹⁰ As a soteriological goal, Buddhists distinguish *nibbana* into two kinds: *nibanna* with a substrate – one that can be attained in this life, e.g. the *nibbana* attained by Siddhartha when he reached enlightenment, and nirvana without a substrate or post-death *nibbana*. In the first kind, *nibbana* is not beyond the 8-fold path, but the full expression or realization of it. The final goal is post-death *nibbana*.

extrapolated from the 8-Fold path. The Buddhist approach to moral cultivation is holistic as it includes cognitive, ethical and meditative or affective aspects. The cognitive domain includes right view and understanding, ethics covers right speech, right action and right livelihood, and meditative pertains to right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Following tradition I will take these three domains as the principal classification of Buddhist virtues: cognitive pertains to virtues of understanding, ethics to virtues of conduct, and meditation is the integration of the two (virtues of the mind).

In terms of practice, these three virtuous domains are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. Ethics is intertwined with wisdom and meditation. To achieve enlightenment, the 8-fold path must be practiced simultaneously, rather than numerically or sequentially. Central in Buddhist ethics is the virtue of compassion (Rahula 1994) to all beings,¹¹ which is usually formulated into five precepts or *sila*.¹² Rather than a set of rules, these precepts are taken as training guidelines that shape one's character. The idea is to develop them to the best of one's ability according to one's actual conditions. One must equally care for her own welfare and the welfare of others – to alleviate suffering itself regardless of who is the subject who experiences it. Living an upright life is necessarily connected to wisdom – understanding reality as it is: that all things are unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), non-substantial (*anatta*), and transitory (*anicca*). Christensen (2000, p. 601) defines Buddhist wisdom as “the ability to best use knowledge for establishing and achieving desired goals and the process of discerning judgments and action based on knowledge.” Because it is accompanied by ethical reflection and meditation, “it refers both to an ability to act wisely in the conventional everyday world and to supra-mundane access to non-conventional truths” (Case and Brohm 2013, p. 61). Wisdom includes knowledge of the 4 noble truths (*AN* Bodhi 2012, p. 555). It eliminates all distortions, including personal prejudices and other defiling mental states. We see that the conflict between the self and the other is false or apparent because the truth is that there is no individual or non-relational self (*anatta* doctrine) (*Potthapada Sutta* [PS] Holder 2006, pp. 145-146). What we designate as *self* is a contingent collection of conditioned processes that cannot exist independently (*Samyutta Nikaya* [SN] Holder 2006, pp. 83-86; *MS* Ibid., pp. 36-38). One can accept the doctrine of *anatta* in theory, but it takes intensive meditation on no-self to fully overcome ego-centeredness. With this view, cooperation and sharing, rather than competition and self-interest are the characteristic marks of rational action. “[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.” (*AN* Bodhi 2012, p. 555) Finally, virtues are also states of mind, cultivating them mentally through meditation predisposes one to act virtuously. Regulation of action, thought, and emotion depends more on meditation rather than habituation. Being truly virtuous requires constant mindfulness to the act being performed at present (*PS* Holder 2006, p. 134).

¹¹ “Just as a mother would protect her only child with her own life, even so, let him cultivate boundless thoughts of loving kindness towards all beings. Let one not deceive nor despise another person, anywhere at all. In anger and ill-will, let him not wish any harm to another.” (*Metta Sutta* 7-8 Nalanda Institute)

¹² “Buddhist cultivates moral virtue by observing ethical precepts, the most common of which are the ‘five virtues’ (*pañca-sīlāni*; BW.172–4). The avowal of each of these begins ‘I undertake the rule of training to abstain from...’. The five abstentions are from: (i) ‘onslaught on [i.e. killing] living beings’, (ii) ‘taking what is not given’, (iii) ‘misconduct concerning sense-pleasures’, (iv) ‘false speech’, and (v) ‘alcoholic drink or drugs that are an opportunity for heedlessness’.” (Harvey 2013, pp. 268-269)

MEANINGFUL WORK AS RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

It is clear that Buddhism acknowledges the importance of work since it includes right livelihood in the 8-fold path. Because what is ethically right is also virtuous in virtue ethics, we can call right livelihood as virtuous livelihood, which is the Buddhist conception of MW (Whitmyer 1994). Unfortunately, the Buddha has little to say about right livelihood. Early Buddhism proscribes all kinds of economic activities for monks (Gowan 2003, p. 178). The lack of focus on right livelihood reflects the tendencies in Buddhist tradition, especially during its earlier stage to emphasize monastic life as a means to attain *nibanna*, while life of a layperson is a means to attain better rebirth. But “Still the Buddha did support and teach laypersons. No aspect of the Eightfold Path was barred to them” (Gowan 2003, p. 169). In addition, Buddhism manifests positive attitude toward wealth acquired through hard work. Buddhism does not condemn wealth, what it condemns is greed or craving that is the origin and condition of attachment. “Therefore, Ananda, just this is the root, the cause, the origin, the condition for attachment, namely craving.” (MS Holder p. 30) Like Aristotle, the Buddha says that wealth cannot be an end in itself. The Buddha acknowledges possession of wealth, economic independence, and freedom from debt as legitimate forms of happiness for a householder. He also talks about the right uses of wealth (AN Bodhi 2012, pp. 665-666): to support family, foster happiness of friends and colleagues, protect oneself, and to give offerings to the *sangha*.¹³ *Anguttara Nikaya* (Bodhi 2012, pp. 1166 ff) compares wealthy persons to a fertile field where rice grows for the benefit of all. A person with a stable source of income is not a burden to other people, and those with greater income have more resources to help alleviate the suffering of others. Wealth should be used to produce happiness for oneself and others. The Buddha also condemns idleness and considers habits that cause squandering of wealth such as gambling and addiction as vices that must be avoided and eliminated.

Buddhist scriptures traditionally define right livelihood by contrasting it with wrong livelihood, common examples of the latter are working as a butcher, armament maker, prostitute, manufacturer of poisons and intoxicants, or in occupations that involve stealing or lying. These trades lead to bad rebirths. They cultivate wrong habits that predispose one to break the precepts under the virtuous conduct in the 8-fold path. Wrong livelihood is an obstacle to enlightenment because it causes harm (AN Bodhi 2012 p. 1493) to people and to the environment, including the workers themselves through overwork or dehumanizing working conditions. It includes all forms of exploitative labor such as slavery, indentured servitude, bonded labor and sweatshop production. Likewise, work that has to do with production and sale of superfluous luxury goods and inferior products that will need to be replaced in a short period of time belongs to the category of wrong livelihood as it makes us use natural resources for unnecessary purposes. Wrong livelihood is also defined as any economic activity that is based on trickery or greed. We can include here insurance and accounting fraud, false advertising, doing unnecessary harmful experiments on animals, and work that depletes the environment. “Buddhism gives freedom to

¹³ *Dana* or generous giving is one of the most important virtues in Buddhism, especially for laity because it is through the exercise of generosity that lay people support the *Sangha* for all its needs: food, clothing, accommodations, etc. “The Sangha is not an unproductive drain on the economy, as some have suggested, but a focus of cultural continuity and stability, supporter of an ethically sound society.” (Harvey 2000, p. 193) See also Bodhi (2012, pp. 447-448).

everyone in seeking wealth. All people have the right to choose an occupation according to their skills and ability, but that occupation should be within the frame of ethics.” (Numkanisorn 2012, p. 46) Distinguishing right from wrong livelihood requires wisdom (discernment) and meditation (heightened awareness) on how we choose to earn a living.

Expressed positively, right livelihood is that which is free from the influxes of desire, anger, and delusion. As something inseparable from the other elements of the 8-fold path (*AN Bodhi* 2012 pp. 1503-1505), it must be wise, ethical, and mindful. It includes meaningful occupations that are wholesome, beneficial, skillful, and effective (in terms of quality of goods and services) in producing positive effects, i.e. liberation from suffering and spiritual growth for the individual and the community. Right livelihood entails the wise (i.e. efficient and careful) use of natural goods in order to satisfy the authentic needs of our community now and in the future. Right livelihood must also be done with mindfulness. This means consciously choosing the work that we do, being committed to it and doing it well, even if at times we do not enjoy what we are doing. We must develop the skills and abilities needed to do our work competently. Mindfulness “is cultivated by purposefully paying attention to things we ordinarily never give a moment’s thought to. It is a systematic approach to developing new kinds of control and wisdom in our lives, based on our inner capacities for relaxation, attention, awareness, and insight.” (Whitmyer 1994, p. 252) In our daily work, we can be fully present in the actual tasks we are doing, and in the process, become more mindful of our own thoughts, emotions and things we ordinarily do not notice. Although it is difficult to maintain this level of awareness, we can find opportunities to cultivate this virtue while doing some of the repetitive aspects of our work. “A further criterion for a justly applied right livelihood” according to Baumann (1998, p. 131), is that it “should not be carried out alone, but jointly with others. This feature provides the possibility of working together in a group with people who share the same ideals and thus encourage and inspire each other.”

Right livelihood is a setting for the cultivation and practice of virtues. For instance with regard to right speech, the Buddha says that our speech must not only be truthful, it must also be beneficial. We must not exaggerate nor embellish our words. Our words are powerful, they can hurt other people, sometimes even unintentionally. In our company parties and celebration, we can practice moderation. In dealing with our clients, we have the opportunity to serve them honestly and lovingly. The presence of adversity, conflict and failure in the workplace enables us to exercise diligence and equanimity that make us resilient to such challenges.

It is true that employment involves roles since we relate to each other in the workplace according to the rules of expectations that come from the roles that we perform. But from a Buddhist perspective, it is not so much because of our function or role in business activity that enables us to develop our specific human capacities that make our livelihood virtuous or meaningful. Rather, it is because in business, we enter into a relationship with our fellow humans and with the natural world. Every time we practice virtues such as compassion or sympathetic joy, we do something incremental to our character, regardless of the outcomes. We become the kind of person who has the wisdom to apply virtues in our day to day interaction. In Buddhism, virtues are situation-specific but not role-specific. The only time roles come into play in Buddhism is when it distinguishes between monk/nun and lay-virtues. But even among monks and nuns, they

are supposed to live in a community marked by equality and democratic practice.¹⁴ What takes prominence is the relationship between the practitioner and other persons. It is impossible to practice the virtues of compassion, non-harming, or loving kindness in a non-relational context. Even when one meditates on these virtues, she first meditates on how they are practiced to herself, then projected progressively to friends and family, to strangers, and finally to her enemies. Through work, we also become part of a business organization that makes use of natural goods, establishing a relationship between us and the natural world. Many companies engage in activities that directly or indirectly exploit the environment.

Without virtues, any type of livelihood will degenerate into wrong livelihood, causing us to be attached to our careers, achievements, and wealth. Any type of work can generate greed and attachment. In Buddhism, having MW is not simply a matter of choosing the right kind of job. There are many factors in our working life that reinforce our sense of selfhood and alienation, not only from our fellow humans but from other sentient beings too. We face challenges that may cause anger or frustration, these have to be tempered by equanimity. The competitive nature of doing business in the free market can be destructive to ourselves, to our community, and to our environment unless we practice compassion and loving kindness. Failures can cause depression and success, over-confidence. A Buddhist should not be depressed or overly happy because she knows that all things are impermanent (*Dham.* 409-412 Wallis 2004, p. 83). Even socializing and friendship in the workplace, which are focused on human relationship, are often “reduced to a kind of networking that facilitates getting ahead.” (Muirhead 2004, p. 99) With regard to the practice of virtue, right livelihood has a dual role: it gives us opportunities to practice virtues, but as it happens, virtues also enable us to cope with many challenges we encounter in the workplace.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT

Both Buddhism and WVT view work in a positive light. Despite the challenges we encounter in our workplace, the latter could be a place where we can become fully developed human beings. Together with the 8-fold path, right livelihood leads to our moral, affective, and cognitive transformation. Like WVT, Buddhism gives emphasis on intrinsic goods derived from work as craving for external goods can cause suffering (*Dham.* 334-335 Wallis 2004, p. 70). While Buddhism recognizes the value of external goods, what is more important is the acquisition of internal goods in terms of spiritual and moral values. The Buddha says that what is significant is not the increase/decrease of wealth or fame, but cultivation of character (*AN* Bodhi 2012, p. 102).

Although Buddhism contains some elements of WVT, there are substantive differences between the two. “For the Buddha, our unenlightened nature is deeply flawed, and only extraordinary measures can overcome this. Aristotle’s conception of human nature is quite different, the virtues develop our nature but they do not radically transform it.” (Gowan 2003, p. 163) Buddhism is not only teleological but soteriological: the final end is liberation or *nibbana*. Contrary to *eudaimonia* of Aristotle, *nibbana* is not only the cessation of suffering or the extinction of *samsara*, it is the ultimate unconditioned reality. “Here bhikkus, I say there is no coming, no

¹⁴ Buddhism arose in India as a reaction against the oppressive and hierarchical caste system associated with Brahmanism.

going, no deceasing, no uprising. Not fixed, not moving, it has no support. Just this is the end of suffering.” (*Nibanna Sutta* Ireland, 2012) Aristotle’s account of a good life is based on his anthropological view of a well-functioning rational individual that gives emphasis on reasoning as the prime human activity. “The good of human being then, will be exercising that capacity well.” (Pakaluk 2005, p. xii) Intellectual virtues are considered the best and complete virtue. “Aristotle appears to claim that happiness is to be identified with just one good, that of philosophical contemplation” (Pakaluk 2005, p. xii) or *bios theoretikos*, the mode of existence that distinguishes us from animals (Lysenko 2007, p. 65).¹⁵ While there are those who interpret *Nicomachean Ethics* as expounding an inclusivist view that defines *eudaimonia* as comprising of different kinds of activity, the notion that speculative thought is the highest good remains central to WVT. As MacIntyre (2007, p. 219) points out, “the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is.” Unlike the Buddha, Aristotle and MacIntyre were not concerned about right livelihood or MW. The practices of definitive work, as understood by MacIntyre are not reducible to work as experienced in employment relationship. Complexity is central to practice and many of MacIntyre’s examples are drawn from fine arts, sciences, and games – they are not readily compatible with market or organizational bureaucratization. If one makes a straightforward application of the notion of practice to MW, primary consideration would be given on the “standards of excellence and the systematic extension of human powers to achieve excellence” (Moore 2005, p. 250). While virtues involve more than skills, a number of WVT writers consider the complexity of skills in determining what is MW (Clark 2017; Yeoman, 2014; Moore 2005; Simon 1997; Walsh 1994).

If virtue is excellence in human function, MW must involve high degree of understanding and mastery to promote the flourishing of human powers, especially the intellectual ones. Many individuals however, either through lack of education, talent or both, are not fit to share in the internal goods that some types of work offer.¹⁶ In addition, not every work is sufficiently complex to qualify as a practice. Blue collar and lower white-collar jobs that are boring, too simple, mechanical, and do not involve much decision making or intellectual stimulation would fall short of these standards. But to eliminate them will lead to massive unemployment as they provide decent livelihood to many semi/unskilled workers. Because of automation, even professionals engage in some form of routine activities. Most tasks can become repetitive when done frequently over a long period of time. Distribution of less challenging work as proposed by Sayer (2009) does not really eliminate repetitive work, it only makes the latter available for more workers. While this may satisfy our demand for distributive justice as Sayer (2009) argues, the issue of trying to cope with or make sense of these tasks is still a challenge.

Contrary to WVT, Buddhism does not speak of the person’s proper function or purpose (*ergon*) in theorizing virtue. The foundation of Buddhist ethics is the reality of suffering. Rather than habituation, Buddhism emphasizes the importance of meditation or spiritual formation as a

¹⁵ “Nevertheless, Keown’s argument for the parallel between Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics is problematic given that Aristotle’s *phronesis* (prudential judgment or sense of appropriateness) is primary an aristocratic mastery, an accomplishment for the practical householder and active citizen, whereas Buddhist moral skillfulness (Pali: kusala) transcends the *ekos* and polis to a kind of freedom in relation to people and things.” (Nelson 2009, p. 203)

¹⁶ I understand that this is also a social justice question. To articulate a Buddhist conception of social justice and apply it to the workplace is not possible given my limited space.

necessary condition for the acquisition of virtues.¹⁷ Because of the absence of the *ergon* argument, Buddhism avoids the *areteic* tendencies of WVT.¹⁸ As an integral part of 8-foldpath, every productive manual or intellectual activity that qualifies as right livelihood has internal goods in the sense that it shapes our character and is an essential part of a life well lived, even if it is not complex enough to count as practice. The most important aspect of MW in Buddhism is that it alleviates suffering. It does not matter whether it involves higher skills or not. In Buddhism, 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, p. 255) Nonetheless, this does not mean that no measure should be done to change the conditions of employees on the production-line through improvement in work design, job rotation or reduced working hours, especially if their condition is deplorable. Nor does this imply that we should resign ourselves to jobs that are below our talents or abilities even if more complex and challenging occupations are available. The Buddhist goal of alleviating suffering applies to all beings, including workers themselves.

A common criticism against WVT is that “it emphasizes the goodness of the agent’s own life and character.” (Walker and Ivanhoe 2007, p. 7) Aristotle of course thinks that a virtuous person is one who has considerable concern for the good of others. While the goal in WVT is the development of one’s character, the human being for Aristotle is a political animal who has the ability to regard the good of the other as one’s own. Human beings have a natural friendship for each other (Aristotle 2002, p. 144). Both MacIntyre and Aristotle stress the importance of community in character formation as virtues are practiced in a social context. Developing virtues needs community support. Individual flourishing can only take place in a peaceful and orderly society so that there is an interdependence between the flourishing of the individual and of the society where she lives in. *Eudaimonia* is first achieved through the combination of internal goods we acquire in practices we engage in, but MacIntyre also adds the significance of the common good through which the individual good is achieved, since practice is a cooperative human activity. “Every practice requires a certain kind of relationship between those who participate in it. Now the virtues are those goods by reference to which, whether we like it or not, we define our

¹⁷ There are philosophers today who are suspicious of Aristotle’s account of habituation (Annas 2015, p. 3). Aristotle seems to believe that through habituation of our intellectual and physical activities we will be able to think, feel, and act as a virtuous person. 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 for Aristotle, acquisition of habit is not merely a mindless repetition. Performance of virtue requires thoughtful analysis of every situation or context in which the virtue is to be exercised. His 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. Similarly in Buddhism, there is no struggle for an enlightened person in performing virtues. The latter seems a natural expression or a second nature that occurs without any doubt or hesitation. This is the reason why in Mahayana Buddhism, the *bodhisattva* is said to act without any goal in the sense that he does not have to consciously deliberate the goal of his action. He knows it intuitively.

¹⁸ “[T]he Aristotelian word *arête*, [which] is translated both as virtue and excellence helps in the realisation that, in practical terms, this would mean endeavouring to produce the best of which the individual is capable. Thus the marketing manager would design and execute not just a marketing plan but *the best* marketing plan of which she was capable. And, bearing in mind the virtue of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), the concept of “best” would involve not just a plan that was conceptually and creatively excellent but one that would “deliver” as far as the organisation was concerned.” (Moore 2005, p. 249)

relationships to those other people with whom we share the kind of purposes and standards which inform practices.” (MacIntyre 2007, p. 191)

However, the Buddha’s call for the virtue of compassion for all sentient beings is more universal and inclusive than WVT’s regard for the common good. Aristotle does not speak of universal compassion in the way Buddhism speaks of it. In fact, he does not include compassion in his list of virtues (although he considers friendship as a virtue).¹⁹ Generally, Buddhist virtues, not only in the moral domain of the 8-fold path but the derivative ones such as compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (*Kalama Sutta* Holder 2006) are relationship-oriented.²⁰ What they promote is not necessarily professional excellence but better human relationship in and outside of the workplace. This does not mean that professional excellence is unimportant. An incompetent physician for example, can cause harm to her patients. A virtuous physician however, is not only competent, she is also compassionate. Further in considering what is MW from a Buddhist perspective, we have to look at the consequences of our actions, not just to the human community but to the environment as a whole. The external goods we create through work, if they are used to benefit others are essential part of MW, even if they are not goods internal to our profession.²¹ It is only when we pursue external goods for our selfish gratification that they become obstacles to MW.²² Buddhism rules out certain types of work as non-meaningful because they are harmful regardless of the complexity of skills or high intellectual challenges that they provide (e.g. production of violent video games, forgery, manufacture of nuclear weapons). On the other hand, work that includes menial tasks like cooking or sweeping floors is highly valued when performed with mindfulness and in the spirit of service.

Buddhism and WVT agree on the instrumental value of external goods and their corrupting influences that we have to be wary about. But even internal goods for the Buddha can lead to suffering. Many professionals are so attached to their work, causing them to neglect their own wellbeing and the welfare of their loved ones. The Buddha teaches: “Do not be attached to what is pleasing. Not seeing what is pleasing is painful as is seeing the unpleasing....There are no bounds for those people for whom there is no notion of pleasing and unpleasing.” (*Dham.* 210-211 Wallis 2004, p. 46) Buddhism does not pay much attention to the distinction between internal and external goods in relation to MW, unlike MacIntyre who views the two goods as almost diametrically opposed. “Only reluctantly does MacIntyre concede that practices might have vicious effects on the larger society. Because he focuses mainly on the way practices constitute the good life for those who participate in them, he tends to neglect the relation between internal goods and the common good.” (Muirhead 2004, p. 169) It is not that there is an ‘inherent’ conflict between internal or external goods that is the issue, but the motivational hold of external goods on workers, oftentimes reinforced by management itself. The excessive valuation of external rewards

¹⁹ See Aristotle 2002, pp. 143-145.

²⁰ Equanimity is “the ability to see everyone as equal, not discriminating between ourselves and others... We shed all discrimination and prejudice, and remove all boundaries between ourselves and others.” (Thich Nhat Hanh 1998, p. 174) Compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity are called the four illimitables in Buddhism.

²¹ In WVT, external goods are genuine goods. But unlike internal goods that are goods of excellence, external goods are goods of effectiveness (Moore 2002, p. 28).

²² “Neither for your own nor for another’s sake should you wish for a son, wealth or empire. You should not wish for your own success if acquired by improper means. You should be virtuous, wise, and honorable.” (*Dham.* 84 Wallis 2004, p. 19)

as motivators, the practice of linking this with the value/worth of work, and the devaluing of front-line jobs make work all about earning a living rather than finding fulfillment.

While WVT considers the importance of our social nature since flourishing cannot be a purely individual endeavor, the central ethical goal is still one's own virtue or flourishing, which may be interpreted to suggest that a person who desires virtue is motivated by selfishness or egoism. WVT generates what Rosso et al (2010, p. 102) call a self-oriented perspective that "does not do justice to the relational nature of experience at work." (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003, p. 94) With the Buddhist *anatta* doctrine, such interpretation of virtue ethics, even if misleading is not possible. Buddhism calls for a radical transformation by challenging our conventional notion of an isolated and independent self. But Buddhist altruism does not imply a complete denial of oneself. One must equally care for one's welfare and the welfare of others. A statement attributed to the Buddha is "Whoever loves himself will never harm another." In fact, Buddhist virtues are all about constructing and preserving "relationships and communities, as much as cultivating oneself." (Whitehill 2000, p. 29) Good acts can have self and other-regarding motives as the two are not inherently opposed. Moreover, Buddhism teaches that all beings are interconnected in the natural processes of birth, suffering, old, age, and death. "Individual well-being cannot be separated from the well-being of all." (Swearer 1998, p. 92)²³ The Buddha considers a person who practices virtues for her own welfare and for the welfare of others as more preeminent than a person who practices for the welfare of others but not for herself (AN Bodhi 2012, p. 477).

Since motivation is important in WVT, it agrees with Buddhism in giving consideration to the relation between actions and mental states. Although Aristotle does not speak of meditation, he emphasizes the importance of developing intellectual virtues. The practice of meditation can help cultivate these virtues. But WVT tends to undermine work that "is devoid of opportunities for the performance of eudaimonian activity." (Walsh 1994, p. 243) On the other hand, Buddhism locates the ethical good of MW both in activities/skills and in personal relations that take place in the workplace. Under the rubric of right livelihood, there is no need to distinguish different types of employment or job roles. This makes employment itself as a kind of practice that requires virtues so that we can experience enlightenment or fulfillment in our working lives. Any type of work entails being connected with someone, whether as a manager, customer, supplier, or co-worker. Every time we practice virtues such as compassion or generosity, we do something incremental to our character, regardless of the outcomes. Our compassion may not be appreciated by others, it may be misinterpreted as insincere or simply a kind of social investment. Our generosity may be abused. Our empathy may not make any difference in our workplaces, but regardless, our virtuous actions shape our character – we become the kind of person who has the wisdom to apply virtues in our day to day interaction. In Buddhism, we must not only be wary of the corrupting influences of external goods, even internal goods can lead to attachment. We cannot be considered virtuous in a Buddhist sense if we succeed in our professional life but not outside of

²³ This view, called the doctrine of *paticcasamuppada* or dependent co-arising is usually expressed in twelve causal links. "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." (SN Holder 2006, p. 83)

it.²⁴ This does not mean that there cannot be any conflict between our professional and personal lives or between role-virtues related to professional excellence and relationship-virtues, but I do not see any reason why such conflict should be inherent.

TOWARD A CROSS-CULTURAL PARADIGM OF MW

In developing a cross-cultural virtue-ethics model, I will answer three crucial questions that are asked regarding MW from the perspective of organizational studies research: What makes work meaningful? Why does meaningfulness matter? and How can meaningfulness be cultivated? (Michaelson et al. 2014).

What makes work meaningful and why does it matter?

At the outset, right livelihood in Buddhism is in harmony with the human fulfillment model of MW that WVT advocates where work is considered as a teleological activity having the actualization of human potential as its final end. Virtuous work leads to a fulfilled existence. Both descriptive and normative, Buddhism and WVT avoid subjectivity in understanding MW without imposing a single normative definition by considering the worker's actual conditions and purpose or ends. As Ciulla (2000, p. 225) convincingly argues, to define MW on the basis of one's subjective preferences is morally dangerous. Rather than a subjective notion, meaning is intrinsic to certain types of work because it relates to activities involved in their performance, either because these activities promote excellence or alleviate suffering. The two perspectives provide an adequate and relevant account that distinguishes MW from a non-meaningful one, while avoiding the pitfall of a circular definition (MW is the kind of work that workers find meaningful) found at times in a purely empirical approach. Because virtues involve structured activities directed at specific aims, virtue ethics is amenable to empirical research in so far as those activities can be identified and measured, including comparative assessment of virtues developed by people who are engaged in the same practice but work in different companies. Both Buddhism and WVT articulate an evaluative judgment regarding noble/good or enlightened mode of life that rules out certain occupations as unworthy of human pursuit.

What takes primacy in Buddhism is not how we cultivate and perfect the skills related to our professional roles, but how we relate with each other. It is not that Buddhism is against the development of our talents and abilities, but this is not sufficient in determining MW. We need certain skills to do our work effectively or create harmonious relationships. However, what is essential in a Buddhist MW is not only the role of virtues in facilitating excellence in profession, but how virtues establish good relationships at work and improve other lives. Because Buddhism resists compartmentalization of virtues, Buddhist virtues cannot be located in an inherent way to any specific practice or profession, it cannot be reduced to mere professional excellence. "It is not ultimately concerned with the development of individual virtues. It cannot be as, in ultimate and

²⁴ As one Buddhist lawyer said, "For a Buddhist, each activity in his daily life provides an opportunity for greater enlightenment. Therefore, I have not separated my legal affairs from my community responsibilities." (Kanazawa 1998, p. 1175)

absolute terms, there is no essential self. What Buddhist ethics does encourage in every sense is an opening up to the other as well as a gentle acknowledgement of relative conditions in which we find ourselves.” (Case and Brohm 2012, p. 63) Rather than role-oriented virtues, what Buddhism offers are relationship-based virtues. Our job roles are only a superficial aspect of who we are and do not constitute our true identity. They can hinder us from our ultimate end if we become too attached to them.²⁵ This can also lead to overvaluing of work and eventually promote attachment to one’s occupational or professional role, especially if the latter is seen as the locus of flourishing and personal fulfillment. Work per se cannot be the ultimate end of human life. Lips-Weirsmas and Morris (2009, p. 495) wrote that “to find meaning, the cause for which individuals work must be a transcendent cause, in other words, a cause that extends beyond the boundaries of self.”

Many managers may not share the metaphysical commitments of Buddhism but it is a fact that in today’s global economy where most things are interconnected, no work is accomplished in complete isolation without connecting the worker with other persons and with the natural world. There are evidence-based studies that indicate how harmonious interpersonal relationship in the workplace, perceiving one’s job to benefit some greater good, and work-life balance are positively connected with MW (Fouche 2017; Fourie 2015; Munn 2013; Steger, et al 2012; Duchon and Petchsawanga 2012; Dane 2011; Marques 2010; Valentine et al 2010; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Ayers, et al 2008). Service to the community is identified as a source of meaning for what some degrade as *dirty work*, e.g. grave digger or garbage collector (Klerk 2005). Michaelson et al. (2014) also identify the firm’s prosocial impact as a source of MW. Cartwright and Holmes (2006) observe that majority of employees consider friendly and helpful colleagues and close working relationship as more important than money. On the other hand, rather than any specific job task, a common source of frustration among employees is antagonistic relationships in the workplace. Managers at times blame employees for poor service or decrease in productivity. With regard to their co-workers, some employees leave because they could not take an environment of constant pressure and harassment. Based on their research findings, Wrzesniewski et al (2003, p. 129) conclude that “The interpersonal dynamics that unfold between people at work create powerful contexts in which work meanings are composed.”

While Buddhism gives more emphasis on other-regarding virtues, I do not see irreconcilable conflict between Buddhism and WVT as long as the specific roles that we have in connection to our occupation and the virtues that we exercise on account of it are not separated from our goal to pursue the good life, not only for our individual self but for our community and for all sentient beings. To further synthesize the two ethics, we also need to revise the notion of excellence in WVT to include not just mastery of skills or complexity of our work. Standards of excellence of MW should incorporate the quality of our relationships in the workplace and how the goods and services we create satisfy human necessities rather than desires. They should take into account as well the overall effects of our productive activities to the environment.

A Buddhist-WVT model of MW offers motivation for hard work, as virtue ethics in general has a motivational force. Employee motivation is vital to the success of any organization. That virtues of excellence in function are in line with the business’ pursuit of productivity maximization does not need further explanation. Buddhist virtues on the other hand that promote

²⁵ The notion of impermanence that is cultivated under virtuous wisdom in Buddhism “is highly useful in the workplace, because it can help people to realize that the positions, titles, and honors they chase may be admirable, but are not lasting, hence not worth back-biting for.” (Marques 2012, p. 13)

good interpersonal relationship can create better interaction in the company and minimize tensions and interpersonal conflicts that interfere with the operation of the company or its overall growth and productivity. They can also encourage employees to go above and beyond what is required of them by spending more time to assist customers and being more willing to support each other and share their talents. Workers are regularly confronted with ethical dilemmas and environmental issues that require wisdom to solve. As mentioned, mindfulness – integral in the Buddhist cultivation of interpersonal virtues – can promote positive relationship in the workplace as well as elimination of negative mental states that can cause discord and enmity among employees. This practice can also reduce stress and anxiety. On a daily basis, employees and managers face multiple challenges in the workplace such as demanding customers, difficult bosses, or uncooperative co-workers. In his study, Richmond (1999) points out that one does not have to be a Buddhist in order to benefit from these practices. Right speech (which includes writing email and memos, telephone conversation, and deep listening) can foster harmony and smooth interaction in the firm and minimize inaccuracy in communication that can create disruption. Knowing what is right livelihood will help business leaders understand how their employees who adhere to Buddhism view their work and thereby manage them in a more effective way. All of these can help a company achieve higher levels of output.

How can management cultivate MW?

Some employers think that to provide every employee with MW is unrealizable. The concept of workers' flourishing is too broad or vague to be the basis of determining MW, it might be best to limit the discussion on working conditions that can be specifically negotiated in the bargaining of contracts. It is generally admitted that management has the moral responsibility to maintain minimum standards of working conditions, to respect the dignity of workers and prevent abuses and exploitation, but such minimum standards do not necessarily promote human flourishing or MW (Michaelson 2005). Not all jobs can be enriched or re-designed, and not every employee can advance in their career. In every business organization, most employees belong to the rank and file level, with very few of them being promoted to the mid-level or top managerial positions. The assumption that "what people are looking for is to move up through the levels of the career structure, is not always accurate." (Parker and Bevan 2011, p. 16) Liberal theorists for their part think that any obligation of the management to provide employees with a normatively defined MW is paternalistic. People should be given the freedom to do any kind of work for any reason. As Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) point out, there is prevailing tension in MW literature between meaning as a personal search process and management of meaning through leadership and organizational culture.

Since virtues for both WVT and Buddhism involve practice, they can be developed and cultivated in the workplace. Rather than assume that MW is an outcome of discovery process of an individual's will to meaning, management has a lot to do in terms of job design and promoting positive relationship in the workplace. But on the other hand, since MW is a relational process and a matter of self-cultivation, workers themselves must play an active role. According to the Buddha, we are all responsible for our own enlightenment. Because virtues are activities that involve process rather than completion, MW is threshold concept rather than an all-or-nothing phenomenon.

From the perspective of WVT, management practices that can make MW possible include enhancement of workers' autonomy through delegation, participative management, and job enrichment – providing workers with jobs that require various skills, higher level of knowledge and responsibility, complexity and variety, and those that offer space for growth and learning. (Klerk 2005). Management can enhance the full development of their employee's potentials by motivating them to excel in their respective roles and giving them opportunities to make use of their skills and judgments as well as access to necessary information and tools so that they can make responsible decisions. Currently, managerial focus is task or skill oriented i.e. creating tasks related to roles and functions that will make work more meaningful or by promoting job-fit (Scroggins 2008). A job fits because it enables the worker to use her individual talents and abilities, or there is a harmonious alignment between work and the individual's goals, values, temperament, and lifestyle (Muirhead 2004). The overall outcome is the achievement of a sense of control through mastery of one's performance, development of self-esteem, competency, and self-efficacy.

Consideration of Buddhist perspective by managers on the other hand will provide them with more ways to promote MW. The emphasis on an independent and autonomous self with only an external and instrumental relationship to others runs counter to most of our experience in the workplace where deep personal interactions are made and most tasks cannot be performed in isolation, and to the view held by Buddhism that persons are historically situated beings embedded in mutually dependent relationships. According to Ho (1995, p. 128) the view of “self-contained individualism, characterized by firm self-nonsel boundaries, personal control, and an exclusionary conception of the person or self; this psychology is dominant in U.S. society today.” Each person is an individuated self with rights and privileges that need to be protected. One problem with this is that it may lead to the view that the management-employee relationship is adversarial “because individuals within the organization are viewed as separate, autonomous and independent of one another, playing the win-lose or zero sum game of controlling available resources.” (Kanungo 1992, p. 421) But the Buddhist framework goes beyond respecting the rights of the workers and participative management, it aims to transform the organization into a community of persons whose lives are interconnected and interdependent. All participants in a business enterprise – shareholders, managers, associates, suppliers, and customers are social beings who are united by a shared sense of purpose. This implies a revision of worker-management relation. “When managers experience their “self” as a part of an enduring relationship with a sense of community, their behaviors tend to be guided by an interest to minimize the sense of powerlessness or alienation among workers and a responsibility for enhancing their self-worth.” (Kanungo 1992, p. 421) Respecting the workers' dignity and autonomy does not only involve protecting their rights, but also includes positive support for their wellbeing, in consideration of their present situations and actual options. This involves positive obligation of love and care. Management may not be able to eliminate all forms of tedious work, but it can do its best to reduce their incidence or minimize their negative physical and psychological effects. Perhaps through full automation, repetitive and dead-end jobs will be a thing of the past and Buddhism has no objection to this, as long as it would not cause suffering through massive unemployment and poverty.

Each person has a potential Buddha nature, which means that every person has the capacity to be compassionate and to overcome her self-interest in order to promote the wellbeing of others. Since we are relational beings, by being virtuous, one can influence others. The best way that a

manager can promote good interpersonal relationship in the workplace is by acting as a role-model. Management is in itself a kind of practice that provides the setting for the exercise of Buddhist interpersonal virtues. Management can help solve not just professional but personal problems of their employees that may affect their productivity. It can provide a supportive environment where all workers are respected regardless of their positions, skills, educational attainment, and abilities. Organizing workers into smaller units would foster better interaction and cooperation that would minimize the anonymity of the work process. Respect of worker's autonomy should be counterbalanced with efforts to foster teambuilding and solidarity. Working as a team encourages constant communication, collaboration, interdependence, and mutual respect and understanding. Perhaps, some business leaders can look at the Buddhist community (*sangha*) as a model for management where decisions are made through regular meetings, dialogue, and consensus building. Finally, since workers find their jobs more meaningful when they take part in something that is socially useful, business leaders are called upon to produce goods and services that truly meet the needs of society as well as to promote corporate engagement in community through employee volunteer programs and charitable or outreach projects.

Buddhism also recognizes that MW has a subjective dimension since it requires mindfulness. There are studies that indicate that employees do not simply derive meaning from their job tasks in a passive way, but actively search for it (Rosso et al. 2010). Mindfulness is a mental skill that sustains attention when excitement and energy wane as a result of job burnout or boredom. There are various techniques involved in the practice of Buddhist meditation that can promote consciousness at work and make work experience a gratifying one (Thich Nhat Hanh 2008). Today there is a growing interest among business leaders of some of the largest companies in the United States to promote meditation and mindfulness at the office by investing in mindfulness training, meditation seminars, access to mindfulness literature, spiritual retreats and meditation or distraction free rooms.

Mindfulness however, cannot wipe away all the negative effects of work, especially the physical and psychological exhaustion that comes with many types of work, including knowledge or intellectual work. One misunderstanding regarding Buddhism is that it encourages resignation by advocating a purely psychological or therapeutic approach to our problems in the workplace. Indeed, several texts have been written on how Buddhist meditative practices can enhance the quality of our oftentimes stressful and anxiety-filled working lives (Dhiman 2009; Thich Nhat Hanh 2008; Richmond 1999; Gould 1998; Whitmyer 1994). But Buddhists never consider mindfulness as a panacea. As mentioned, meditation in the 8-fold path is inseparable from wisdom and ethical action. Buddhist meditative practice is not simply a form of relaxation, but also an opportunity to pause and reflect on broader socio-political issues responsible for our afflictive condition in and outside of the workplace. Like other religio-ethical frameworks, Buddhism can be misappropriated by management as a tool of oppression and exploitation of workers, but this is obviously contrary to what Buddhism teaches.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Consideration of Buddhism in our theorizing of MW leads to a broader, inclusive, cross-cultural and holistic paradigm, especially from the perspective of virtue ethics because it calls for integration of our professional, interpersonal, and spiritual life. It offers the possibility of changing

our attitude toward our work as well as cultivating the wisdom to discern ways to improve our working conditions and create a more compassionate economic system for all beings. Buddhist ethics is not an alternative, but a powerful and enriching complement to WVT that has tendencies to be too elitist, rationalist, and anthropocentric (Whitehill 2000, p. 1). It has much to teach to modern society that has become fragmented on account of commercialism, breakdown of communities, political polarization, and violence. The dominance of relationship virtues such as loyalty, cooperation, compassion, tolerance, patience, and empathy has been empirically verified in companies that operate in regions that are heavily influenced by Buddhism (Fernando and Moore 2015). Further empirical research is needed on the significance of these virtues in the workplace in Western societies and how can management effectively develop them. At present, much emphasis is given on the so-called hard skills such as cognitive and technical competencies in job hiring and career development/training. Few studies have specifically examined interpersonal and relationship virtues, which are called soft skills, as sources of MW, especially in non-Western societies. A more holistic approach to MW should consider how “others inside and outside of the workplace influence the meaning of work.” (Rosso et al. 2010, p. 102) Future agenda in MW research should also focus on the social dimension of work by considering the connection between MW and corporate social responsibility, corporate environmental impact, and employee volunteer programs.

Rosso et al (2010) criticize the overreliance on an independent conceptualization of the self of Western orientation in management research. How we manage employees depends on how we view human beings. For example, a basic assumption in work motivation is that employees are self-interested (Michaelson 2005). “In contrast an interdependent conception of the self (typical of Eastern cultural orientation) which conceives of the self as fundamentally interconnected with others might suggest that greater interdependence is more meaningful for people than the pursuit of individual goals.” (Rosso et al. 2010, p. 99) A relational view of the self found in Buddhism implies greater emphasis on solidarity and cooperation rather than independence and autonomy. Empirical evidence is needed in order to find out whether autonomy and independence in the workplace are more important than solidarity, or is it the other way around.

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