Virtue Ethics and Meaningful Work: A Contemporary Buddhist Approach

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Abstract:

This study adds to the existing literature on meaningful work by presenting a contemporary virtue-focused Buddhist view. While a virtue-ethics interpretation of Buddhism is now widely accepted and has been applied to several issues, not much has been written about meaningful work using a Buddhist-Aristotelian comparative framework. To develop a Buddhist approach, I draw heavily on the works of Buddhist scholars, particularly in the West who use a virtue framework in interpreting Buddhism. The aims of my essay are dual. The first is to articulate a straightforward application of Buddhism to the contemporary ethical discussion of meaningful work. The second is to discuss the similarities, clarify the differences, and demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses relative to each other of the Buddhist and the Western virtue theories. In my analysis, I argue that while Buddhism is not an alternative to Western virtue theory, it offers significant contributions to the latter's approach to meaningful work and even corrective to some of its limitations. Integration of Buddhism in our theorizing of meaningful work from a virtue-ethics perspective helps us to better understand ourselves and the virtues that we cultivate in the workplace and develop a holistic and cross-cultural conceptualization that is relevant to our global economy.

Keywords: Meaningful Work, Virtue Ethics, Buddhist Ethics, Aristotle, MacIntyre, Business Ethics, Work Ethics, Buddhism, Cross-Cultural Ethics, Comparative Philosophy, Philosophy.

Meaningful work (MW) is defined as the degree of significance that employees believe their work possesses. Although it is an established area of scholarship, researchers who have studied this topic still encounter a number of difficulties. To begin with, there is little consensus on what exactly makes work meaningful. From a philosophical standpoint, the search for meaning is an essential part of being human. Thus, MW according to Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009, 657) "finds its roots in the humanities rather than in management theory." They also (2009, 508) express the need to consider differences in cultural and spiritual beliefs in studying MW. Most studies in this area are Western-centric, with very few 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 major companies outsource their production in different countries and people of diverse cultural and religious background interact in the workplace, there is a growing need to compare and contrast how different cultures view MW.

Since work shapes the kind of person that we are and plays an important role in our wellbeing, some theorists have adopted a virtue-theory approach to MW using an Aristotelian-MacIntyrean framework. For lack of a better term, I call this western virtue theory (WVT). My essay presents a contemporary virtue-focused Buddhist perspective on MW. Various studies have demonstrated the relevance of Buddhism to managerial practice and the impacts of Buddhist analysis of human cognition to modern psychology have also been explored. Buddhism is an important cultural component not only of Asian countries but of other societies that have come in contact with it. By contemporary Buddhism, I refer to an approach to Buddhism that results from its encounter with western philosophy and "seeks to make itself understood in modern times and to respond to contemporary conditions." (Whitehill 1994, 1) To develop a Buddhist approach, I draw heavily on the works of Buddhist scholars, particularly in the West who use a virtue-framework in interpreting Buddhist ethics.[1] According to Keown (1992, 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." 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 goal is *nibbana* – the escape from the karmic cycle of rebirth. "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, 221). *Nibbana* is the realization of both the highest morality and unconditioned reality. Both Aristotle and Buddhism postulate the human potential for perfection through practices of self-development. Rather than a set of moral rules, Buddhists interpret the 8-fold path as a list of virtues in conjunction with the doctrine of the middle way.

The aims of my essay are dual. The first is to articulate a direct application of Buddhism to contemporary discussion of MW. The second is to discuss the similarities, clarify the differences, and demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses relative to each other of the Buddhist and the WVT perspectives. In my analysis, I argue that while Buddhism is not an alternative to WVT, it offers significant contributions to WVT's approach to MW and even corrective to some of its limitations. Integration of Buddhism in our theorizing of MW from a virtue-ethics perspective helps us to better understand ourselves and the virtues that we cultivate in the workplace and develop a holistic and cross-cultural conceptualization that is relevant to our global economy.

WVT AND MEANINGFUL WORK

Virtue (*arête* or excellence) is a stable disposition to act, 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 persons we become and in our overall wellbeing. His thesis rests on the notion that human beings, like all other things have a particular *telos* which 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). Virtues enable us to live a flourishing life (*eudaimonia*).

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 able to deliberate beautifully about things that are good and advantageous for himself." (Aristotle 2002, 106) *Phronesis* unifies all virtues and is a necessary condition for them because it involves our ability to perceive morally relevant factors.

According to Beadle, MacIntyre's notion of practice is of paramount importance if we are to understand employment as the setting to exercise virtue 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, 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. Although MacIntyre does not speak of employment itself, he includes productive crafts (e.g. fishing) in his examples. Practices are human activities that serve as medium for human excellences. 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, 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, 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, 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, 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 role-virtues that are specified within a framework of a given profession in contrast to everyday/ordinary virtues. Role-virtues are specific to a practice while ordinary virtues such as courage, patience, or temperance are needed for any practice.

"In order to survive, however, practices need to be housed within institutions which are concerned with external goods." (Fernando and Moore 2015, 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, 35) as institutions provide the material goods 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, 13) Role-virtues are more specific than ordinary virtues and are learned in a more particular way. They are found in a virtuous agent who exhibits competencies required for her profession. Role-virtues make ordinary virtues more precise while ordinary virtues are prototype virtues that anchors our moral thinking and alert us to possibilities of excess and deficiencies. The distinction is between being good in a role and being good qua human being. While Aristotle emphasizes 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 proper 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, 149). It allows workers to practice deliberative and self-developing activities, requires application of intellectual virtues and provides decision making opportunities where workers can exercise their ability to search for the mean as well as to make sound moral judgment. "From an Aristotelian perspective, identifying and learning how to meet such challenges requires the exercise of the virtues" (Beadle, R. and Knight, K. 2012, 435). We perfect ourselves through work

and at the same time our work is perfected because of our virtues. Thus, all forms of exploitative labor such as slavery, indentured servitude, bonded labor and sweatshop production cannot be 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, 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." (Sayers 2009, 5) Work that does not provide opportunities for perfection and 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. For Arneson, MW "involves some development or exercise of the individual's intellectual or craft talents." (Arneson 1987, 522) 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, 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.

BUDDHIST VIRTUE ETHICS

The term virtue has no exact equivalence in Buddhism. For Keown, the terms *kusala* (skillful or wholesome) and *akusala* (unskillful or unwholesome) are the Buddhist equivalent of good and bad respectively in virtue ethics. Whether an act is good or bad is determined by motive or intention (*cetana*). 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, 98) Intention in Buddhism has both affective and cognitive aspect as it refers to both motive and volition. For an act to be virtuous it must be well-motivated, well-intentioned, and wise. The act must be done from selfless motivation with the intention of the good of the other (compassion) and has good consequences (wisdom). 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. Cultivation of virtuous character entails three paths of purification: conduct (ethics), understanding (wisdom) and mind (meditation).

The term *kusala* also connotes "skillfulness." A virtuous act must be effective in bringing out the intended good results. Buddhist ethics requires "the need for skillfulness, fittingness, and appropriateness in applying morality to the situation." (Nelson 2009, 202). Good intention is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for virtuous acts, 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*. 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 2006, 38) One must eliminate attachment to all actions, whether good or bad. To realize *nibbana*, unwholesome thoughts of desire, hatred, fear and delusion which are the roots of evil actions must be purged (*Sigalovada Sutta* [*SS*] Holder 2006, 193). It is in this sense that Buddhism speaks of an *arahant* who is beyond karmic fruitfulness and has transcended all rebirths. Harvey (2000, 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, 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 list of virtues in Buddhist commentarial literature, some are for laypersons, others for monks and nuns and some are for more advanced practitioners, these are all extrapolated from the 8-Fold path. The Buddhist approach to moral cultivation is holistic since the path 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 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). These virtues are not only instrumental good but good in themselves in the sense that they are constitutive of the highest good.

In terms of practice, these 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 to all beings which is usually formulated into five precepts or *sila*.[2] 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 one's welfare and the welfare of others – to alleviate suffering itself regardless who is the one experiencing 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*). Wisdom is the best use of knowledge for establishing and achieving desired goals. 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, 61). Wisdom includes knowledge of the 4 noble truths (*AN* Bodhi 2012, 555). It eliminates all distortions, including personal prejudices and other defiling mental states. We see that the conflict between self and 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, 145-146). What we designate as *self* is a contingent collection of conditioned processes that cannot exist independently. (*Samyutta Nikaya* [*SN*] Holder 2006, 83-86; *MS* Ibid., 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, 555) Finally, virtues are also states of mind, cultivating them mentally through meditation predisposes one to act accordingly. Regulation of acting, thinking, and emoting depends more on meditation rather than habituation. Being truly virtuous requires constant mindfulness to the act being performed at present (*PS* Holder 2006, 134).

MW AS RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

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. Unfortunately, the Buddha has little to say about right livelihood. Early Buddhism proscribes all kinds of economic activities for monks. 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 *nibanna*, while life of a layperson is a means to attain better rebirth. "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 which 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. (*AN* Bodhi 2012, 665-666).

Buddhist scriptures usually define right livelihood by contrasting it with wrong livelihood**,** common examples of the latter are working as a butcher, armament maker, prostitute and in occupations that involve stealing, lying, and harming innocent beings. 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, 1493) to people and to the environment, including the workers themselves through overwork or dehumanizing working conditions. 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 this category 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 harmful experiments on animals and work that depletes the environment. "Buddhism gives freedom to 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.

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 1503-1505), it must be wise, ethical, and mindful. It includes 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." (Whitmayer 1994, 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, 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 virtues. For instance, we can cultivate right speech in our corporate communications by being truthful and respectful. We must not exaggerate or embellish our words. The Buddha says that our words are powerful, they can hurt 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 our position in the firm's structure. From a Buddhist perspective, it is not so much because of our roles that we develop our specific human capacities that make our livelihood virtuous/meaningful. Rather, it is because in economic activity, we enter into a relationship with our fellow humans and 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 daily interaction. In Buddhism, virtues are situation-specific but they are not role-specific. 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 oneself, then projected progressively to friends and family, to strangers, then to enemies. Through work, we also become a 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. There are many factors in our working life that reinforce our egoism and alienation, not only form 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. 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, 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 of challenges we encounter in the workplace.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT

At the outset, the Buddhist right livelihood is in harmony with the human fulfillment model of MW which WVT advocates where work is considered as a teleological activity having the perfection of human potential as its final end. 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. Rather than a subjective notion, meaning is intrinsic to certain types of work because it relates with activities involved in their performance, either because these activities promote excellence or alleviate suffering. The two perspectives provide 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 develop by people engage in the same practice but work in different companies. Both Buddhism and WVT view work in a positive light and articulate evaluative judgment regarding noble/good or enlightened mode of life that rules out certain occupations as unworthy of human pursuit. But despite the difficulties we encounter in our workplace, the latter could be a place where we can become fully developed. 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.* 334-35 Wallis 2004, 70). While Buddhism recognizes the value of external goods, what is more important is the acquisition of internal goods. The Buddha says that what is significant is

not the increase/decrease of wealth or fame, but cultivation of character (*AN* Bodhi 2012, 02).

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, 163) In WVT, *eudaimonia* has a positive content, it is not merely the absence of suffering. Buddhism is not only teleological but soteriological: the ultimate end is liberation or *nibbana*. 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, xii) or *bios theoretikos*, the mode of existence that distinguishes us from animals. (Lysenko 2007, 65)[3] 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. As MacIntyre (2007, 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 who directly addressed the question, Aristotle and MacIntyer were not concerned with the topic of 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 the on the "standards of excellence and the systematic extension of human powers to achieve excellence" (Moore 2005, 250). While practice involves more than skills, a number of virtue ethicists consider the complexity of skills in determining 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. In addition, not every work is sufficiently complex to qualify as practice. Blue 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 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 human's proper function (*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 necessary condition for the acquisition of virtues. Because of the absence of the *ergon* argument, Buddhism avoids the *areteic* tendencies of WVT.[4] 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 according to Whitmayer (1994, 255), MW "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." 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 a 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, 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 person for Aristotle is a political animal who has the ability to regard the good of the other as one's own. He further adds that humans have a natural friendship for each other (Aristotle 2002, 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 the society where she lives. *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 relationships to those other people with whom we share the kind of purposes and standards which inform practices." (MacIntyre 2007, 191)

However, the Buddhist virtue of universal compassion for all sentient beings is more inclusive than WVT's regard for the common good. Aristotle does not speak of universal compassion in the way Buddhism speaks of it. He does not include compassion in his list of virtues (although he considers friendship as a virtue).[5] 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. 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 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 though work, if they are used to benefit others are essential part of MW, even if they are not goods internal to our profession.[6] It is only when we pursue external goods for our selfish gratification that they become obstacles to MW. 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 regarding the instrumental value of external goods and their corrupting influences that we have to 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 families. 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, 46) 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 attached to them. 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, 69) 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, the practice of linking the latter with the (intellectual) complexity 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 egoism. WVT generates what Rosso et al (2010, 102) call a self-oriented perspective that "does not do justice to the relational nature of experience at work." (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003, 94) Rosso et al (2010) criticize the overreliance on an independent conceptualization of the self of western orientation in management research. "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, 99) According to Ho (1995, 128.) the view of "self-contained individualism, characterized by firm self-nonself 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 management and worker 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, 421) How we manage employees depends on how we view human beings.

In Buddhism, persons are historically situated beings embedded in mutually dependent relationships. With its *anatta* doctrine, an *egoistic* 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." 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 wellbeing cannot be separated from the wellbeing of all." (Swearer 1998, 92)[7] The Buddha considers the person who is practicing virtues for his own welfare and for the welfare of others as more preeminent than a person who is practicing for the welfare of others but not for herself. (*AN* Bodhi 2012, 477)

What takes primacy in Buddhism is not how we cultivate and perfect the competencies required for our professional roles, but how we relate with each other. It is not that Buddhism is against the development of human 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 is not only the role of virtues in facilitating excellence in profession, but how virtues establish good relationships at work and improve other lives. Rather than role-oriented virtues what Buddhism emphasizes are relationship-virtues. 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. 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) 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; Marques 2010; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Service to the community is identified as a source of meaning for what many degrade as *dirty work*, e.g. grave digger or garbage collector (Klerk 2005). Michaelson et al. (2014) also identify company's prosocial impact as a source of MW. Cartwright and Holmes (2006) observe that majority of employees consider friendly 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. Many employees resign because they could not take an environment of constant pressure and harassment. Based on their research findings, Wrzesniewski et al (2003, 129) conclude that "The interpersonal dynamics that unfold between people at work create powerful contexts in which work meanings are composed." In many companies at present, much emphasis is given on the so-called hard skills such as cognitive and technical abilities in job hiring and career development because these skills are directly connected to one's function/role in the company. Few studies have specifically examined interpersonal and relationship virtues, which are called soft skills, as sources of MW, especially in non-Western societies.

CONCLUSION

While Buddhism gives more emphasis on relationship-virtues, I do not see irreconcilable conflict between Buddhism and WVT as long as our specific occupational roles and the virtues that we exercise on account of them 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 need to revise the notion of excellence in WVT to include not just mastery of skills or complexity of 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 also take into account the overall effects of our productive activities to the environment.

Since motivation is important in WVT, the latter 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. WVT tends to undermine work that "is devoid of opportunities for the performance of eduaimonian activity." (Walsh 1994, p. 243) On the other hand, Buddhism locates the ethical good of MW both in the activities and in personal relationships 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 in our working life. 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 the Buddhist sense if we succeed in our professional life but not outside of it. This does not imply 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.

Consideration of Buddhism in the deliberation of MW from a virtue-ethics perspective leads to a broader, inclusive, and holistic framework because it calls for integration of our professional, interpersonal, and spiritual life. Buddhism offers the possibility of changing our attitude toward work and cultivating wisdom to discern ways to improve working conditions and create a more compassionate economic system for all beings.

Endnotes:

1. I make no claim of presenting with finality *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. The term Buddhism does not refer to a single and systematic body of teaching, but is rather made up of historically and culturally diverse sects and perspectives that evolved from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama.
2. "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. 268-69)
3. "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, 203)
4. "[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, 249)
5. See Aristotle 2002, 143-45.
6. In WVT, external goods are genuine goods. But unlike internal goods that are goods of excellence, external goods are goods of effectiveness.
7. See doctrine of *paticcasamuppada* (*SN* Holder 2006, 83).

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