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# A New Philosophy of Clothes: Brunello Cucinelli's Neohumanistic Business Ethics

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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In 1833 Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist, historian, and satirist, published *Sartor Resartus*—"the tailor, retailed"—in which he depicts an anonymous editor's struggle to present the work of an obscure German philosopher, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, who has created something he calls a Philosophy of Clothes. The skeptical English editor worries about the pertinence of Teufelsdröckh's inquiries: "Apart from the choice of such a topic as Clothes, too often the manner of treating it betokens in the Author a rusticity and academic seclusion, unblamable, indeed inevitable in a German, but fatal to his success with our public."<sup>1</sup> Brunello Cucinelli, a contemporary Italian fashion entrepreneur—and head of the highly successful business that carries his name—is an unlikely match with Teufelsdröckh insofar as we have, in Cucinelli, a new manifestation of the effort to articulate a philosophy of clothes. From this apparently shared general project, the similarities end. Where Teufelsdröckh's work was complicated and compromised by complexity—Carlyle exercising simultaneously a satire of Teutonic philosophy along with a dose of good-natured self-critique—Cucinelli's work is defined by "rational elegance," as one fashion critic described it, but perhaps more surprisingly, by an intellectual outlook underwritten by two and a half millennia of classical humanistic philosophy and religious teachings.<sup>2</sup> Cucinelli does not just theorize a philosophy of clothes, but, as it were, wears it, and thereafter attempts to make it available to a global audience of customers and clients. If it is said "clothes make the man," and Cucinelli's clothes are in some manner made by his reading of philosophy, what kind of philosophy contributes to this attire and its manufacture? Is such a philosophy translatable from, say, the realm of humanistic ethics to the realm of luxury sportswear?

The contrast between the two philosophers of clothes begins as early as an encounter with the man himself: one could never imagine Herr Teufelsdröckh as composed and elegantly appointed as Signore Cucinelli. For Teufelsdröckh, "the colour of his trousers, fashion of his broad-brimmed steeple-hat, and so forth, we might report," says the editor, "but do not."<sup>3</sup> In short, nothing like Cucinelli's head-to-toe bespoke suits made from the world's finest lightly colored gray cashmere, a folded stark white handkerchief in his breast pocket, and a pair of pale nubuck oxfords. And the contrast intensifies as Teufelsdröckh's philosophical musings recede into rarefied academic speculation, while Cucinelli's remarks are aimed to convince us of a direct connection between his philosophical commitments and the improvement of his employees' lives on a daily basis—to say nothing of how his clothes might affect millions of customers with whom he has no contract, over whom he bears no control. It is not just that people may look and feel better in his expensive clothes, but that Cucinelli's business practice involves a breadth of care and concern for the people who create his line of clothing and make it available to the world. Cucinelli, following after his core convictions, puts the human first, and lets the products follow. His

decision to address the humanity of his workers before checking the bottom line of the corporate ledger prompts some wonder whether this order *contributes* to his success, and if it does, whether this approach is something novel for business ethics or simply an innovative reapplication of well-known, established, and effective strategies that may have become obscured by globalization.

For all the striking differences in their outward lives, Teufelsdröckh and Cucinelli both exemplify a commanding interest in the ideas that animate their respective philosophies of clothes, as the editor of *Sartor Resartus* notes:

For here properly the higher and new Philosophy of Clothes commences: an untried, almost inconceivable region, or chaos; in venturing upon which, how difficult, yet how unspeakably important it is to know what course, of survey and conquest, is the true one.... Teufelsdröckh undertakes no less than to expound the moral, political, even religious Influences of Clothes; he undertakes to make manifest, in its thousandfold bearings, this grand Proposition, that Man's earthly interests "are all hooked and buttoned together, and held up by Clothes."<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, Cucinelli says "we remain faithful to the grand ideals that support our company—religion, politics, and family."<sup>5</sup> In short, Cucinelli's notion of a clothes philosophy, like Teufelsdröckh's, has nothing to do, we might say, with fashion. Instead Cucinelli aims for the fashionableness of the eternal, the enduring, and in this way his clothes become an expression of classic forms, his garments continually eschewing both the latest catwalk trends and stuffy, superannuated designs. Rather than being a gloss on the cliché that "clothes make the man"—where style dictates character—Cucinelli is decidedly opposed to the superficial ways in which clothes signal elite status or insider knowledge. Instead, Cucinelli inverts the standard trope by suggesting that character is expressed in one's style: he calls this *sprezzatura*—the key to wearing clothes, even his line, he says is to "make it your own."<sup>6</sup> In this way the humanity of the wearer—announced by his or her individual traits and preferences—is revealed. On this view, one doesn't wear Cucinelli's clothes as a costume or a uniform (much less as an occasion for marking flamboyant differences from standard styles or seasonal trends) but as a natural extension of one's innermost values (something much less likely to change from season to season). In Cucinelli's context, then, clothes become a metaphor for the nature of humanity—more precisely, the ideals of which can be made evident through choice, through presentation. In taking up the moral, political, aesthetic, and religious implications of clothes, Cucinelli has shown himself to be an heir to this aspect of Teufelsdröckh's speculative mission: to

explore the “grand Proposition” that a proper philosophy of clothes can hold the world together, and make it intelligible.

My task in what follows is to situate Cucinelli’s business model and his business philosophy (two aspects that may or may not be necessarily bound together) into the wider conversation in business ethics, including the role of religion in the conduct of corporate practice. Granting, of course, that working conditions are presently—especially in Italy, Europe, Scandinavia, and United States—enviably improved from their status in the nineteenth century and earlier, there is no attempt to establish a contrast between stark or stereotypical visions of the corporate leader—with, for example, Cucinelli as an “enlightened” boss set against a “hard-nosed” taskmaster; perhaps both images are by and large strawmen. Rather, the present investigation seeks to explore the finer gradations of Cucinelli’s chiaroscuro portrait within the context of the larger critical discourse in business ethics. (If there are perceived lacunae in this essay, I recommend a look at “Brunello Cucinelli: A Humanistic Approach to Luxury, Philanthropy, and Stewardship.”) Cucinelli reads philosophy, but he is also the leader of a highly profitable business venture. Understanding the relationship, if any, between these two phenomena is the central issue at hand. A wealthy entrepreneur who runs a high-end manufactory and does good works is, fortunately, not an unfamiliar thing. Whether there is something distinctive about Cucinelli’s clothes philosophy, then, becomes the onus of this inquiry into the relationship between philosophy, religion, and business ethics as we find them interacting in Cucinelli’s company.

It could be said that Cucinelli explores the humanism that pervades Teufelsdröckh’s research through what appears to be—at least from his promotional materials and the on-the-ground experience of life in the continuously restored village of Solomeo—a business venture that aims to be imbued by conscience and care for one’s fellow human. Instead of capitalizing on the fashionable—or ephemeral—aspects of consumer culture, Cucinelli has oriented his business to the eternal and enduring elements of classical style: both in the cut of his clothes and the contours of his thinking. Cucinelli’s approach to clothes, we might say, like Nietzsche’s to the history of ideas, is “untimely.” Cucinelli’s business program shows little evidence of dedicating attention and other resources to chasing the latest trends and seasonal styles; instead we find his declared aspiration to pursue durable truths—truths that inform the flourishing of human life. He has remarked, for example, that his work involves “the contemplation of beauty in pursuit of profit.”<sup>7</sup> And he has noted that he believes “in a form of capitalism” but “would like to make a profit using ethics, dignity, and morals.”<sup>8</sup> Even as Cucinelli’s business becomes more profitable and more celebrated, his philosophy of clothes makes evident the way in which he does not

operate according to the long-prevailing logic of the fashion industry. Interpreting Cucinelli's clothes philosophy will hopefully illuminate the logic of *his* industrial initiatives—that is, spell out the positive definitions and features of his principals, rather than merely state his approach in contradistinction to the assumed attributes of the prevailing fashion industry.

While there may be an inherited notion that working conditions in Italy are, and perhaps have always been, uniformly dignified for workers, Cucinelli himself seems marked by his father's stories of the indignities of the factory floor at mid-century. And while there are some aspects of working at Cucinelli that are found at other Italian, as well as European and Scandinavian, workplaces (for example, lengthy lunch breaks, clean and organized factories, and opportunities for supplemental education), there is at Cucinelli a conspicuous attention to the mind and spirit of the worker that appears to set his approach apart from other manufacturers. In building from the ground up a Forum of the Arts that supports a prominent theatre, a well-stocked library, and a restored church, Cucinelli's appraisal of value and significance for his workers is concretely translated into an ethic of business. The theatre, library, and church are places where we all learn the kinds of behavior and moral knowledge that Cucinelli hopes to see prevail in his company: humility, honesty, tolerance, loyalty, intellectual curiosity, and a faith in human potentiality when it is well-supported.

While the company has been designed to provide the physical conditions for the enrichment of humanistic activities, there are instances when Cucinelli himself becomes a model for his enterprise as when, in 2008, the global financial crisis threatened to decimate the luxury market. Faced with a daunting economic climate and even more dire predictions, Cucinelli drafted a letter that he sent to all his clients—Bergdorf Goodman, Barneys, and other prominent collaborators—saying that his company is committed to an ongoing relationship despite the crisis. He wanted to assure them of his loyalty and his desire to find a way forward together. To Cucinelli these corporate relationships (aimed at profit for all involved) are first and foremost relationships made between people. And Cucinelli announced the same commitment to his factory workers in Solomeo: not one worker would be laid off owing to the crisis, he assured them. Cucinelli's specific values and ideas about how business should be conducted were put to a crucial test. If it is an anecdote, it is a prominent and intriguing one since Cucinelli was the only luxury brand in fashion to make a profit during the recession following 2008.

Any businessman and business ethicist—like the skeptical English editor of *Sartor Resartus*—is justified in asking how it can be that a humanist has become a rogue leader of a profitable and praised commercial culture. My task, in what follows, is to articulate some of the constitutive elements of Cucinelli's philosophy of clothes—in effect, to provide some indication of how that

philosophy contributes or constitutes a business practice and how the resulting business conducts itself according to ethical and humanistic principals.

#### **SEEKING THE ETERNAL NOT THE FASHIONABLE**

2010 was a watershed year for the recognition of Brunello Cucinelli by elite cultural, political, business, and academic institutions in his native Italy. In January, Cucinelli was awarded the Leonardo Prize at the Quirinal Palace in Rome, bestowed by Italian President Giorgio Napolitano as a mark of distinction and recognition for his “contribution to Italian industry and culture.”<sup>9</sup> In May, Germany’s leading fashion trade journal, *Textilwirtschaft*, voted unanimously to award him the Forum Prize.<sup>10</sup> In June, Ernst & Young celebrated him as Entrepreneur of the Year for Italy. And in November, the University of Perugia awarded him an honorary doctorate in Philosophy and the Ethics of Human Relations [*Filosofia ed Etica delle Relazioni umane*]. The University of Perugia, which recently celebrated 700 years of continuous instruction, bestowed on Cucinelli a degree meant to signal its awareness and praise for his work in Umbria, the region of his birth and the site of his home and his business. As Cucinelli himself told me when we first met, it would have been more appropriate for a man of business to receive an honorary degree in Economics. In Paris earlier in the year, he told a crowd gathered to celebrate his success as an entrepreneur that he understands the acknowledgement not just as praise for quality production “but also for our perseverance in building a value-based humanistic enterprise model focused on people rather than economics.”<sup>11</sup> So we shall ask: what has Cucinelli done to merit recognition for contributions to philosophy and the ethics of human relations? And how does being a temporary custodian “of the tangible and intangible heritage and human resources that the company represents” constitute a distinctive business ethics that also makes good business sense?<sup>12</sup>

I traveled to Italy to witness the awarding of Cucinelli’s doctoral degree and later toured sites in Umbria pertinent to Cucinelli’s business operations and cultural initiatives. During visits to Perugia, Assisi, Norcia (home of St. Benedict) and Cucinelli’s beloved hamlet of Solomeo—meeting with workers, facility managers, and Cucinelli himself—I learned about his company and his interest in the history of philosophy and religion and his commitment to the translation of philosophical thinking into business practice. (Some of these interactions, including an interview with Cucinelli, are featured in an independently funded documentary film I directed entitled *Brunello Cucinelli: A New Philosophy of Clothes*.) Academic philosophers, students of religion, and business entrepreneurs (three groups seldom drawn together and almost never joined to consider the work of a fashion impresario) may all share a surprise in his manner of deploying canonical works of philosophy and religion in the service of day-to-day business operations—and, apparently outwardly profitable ones at that. In April 2012

Cucinelli went public with an initial public offering in Milan that saw shares climb over fifty percent during initial trading. Despite the robust response from investors—“a sparkling market debut” in one estimation—Cucinelli himself used the occasion not to highlight 2011 net sales of 243 million euros but instead to say: “This listing shows that romanticism and enlightenment are compatible with a humanist form of capitalism,” after which he presented the chief executive of Borsa Italiana (Italy’s stock exchange) with a 16th-century edition of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>13</sup> Are these expressions and recuperations Cucinelli’s savvy appropriation of religion and philosophy for his company’s financial advances, or are these authentic gestures meant to stir the hearts and minds of not investors, but, human agents? Perhaps the latter naturally leads to the former?

Philosophy, at least as understood by the dominant values of capitalism, is almost a totem of anti-profitable activity. The notion that philosophy has something to teach business and that business could learn such lessons (on the way to further profits), seems worthy of attention—and not just by unemployed philosophers. And the notion that a business person could draw inspiration from philosophy and find ways of having it underwrite daily business practice—shifting emphasis away from the profit-motive and toward something more expansive, like the quality of the workday and what one makes of it, and perhaps even the care of one’s mind and soul—seems equally worthy of attention, and, of course, it is central to so much research in business ethics. For these reasons, it would appear that for theorists and practitioners working in business ethics, sustainable manufacturing, and entrepreneurial activities there is something of vital contemporary relevance in Brunello Cucinelli’s business model, if not also his interpretation of philosophy and religion.

Cucinelli calls his project “a humanistic enterprise,” and yet it seems strange that his understanding of this work is meant to be co-extensive with a *business* enterprise. What, after all, does business have or want from humanism (not in its everyday sense as, for instance, the decent treatment of people, but in its philosophical connotations as a school of thought)? How can a business operate according to humanistic principles (again, in the careful, rigorous terms of the Scholastic and Renaissance thinkers, or from various Stoics and Christian saints) and still know itself as a business? It has been a cliché (but of course clichés are borne of truth) that business “serves the bottom line,” not the needs or desires or unarticulated aspirations of workers. Cucinelli’s business outlook appears to invert the relationship between capitalism and humanistic work: aiming to discover how “serving the human”—supporting it, inspiring it, redefining it—contributes to financial success. He seeks prophets to create profits. In his book *A Humanistic Enterprise in the World of Industry*, Cucinelli quotes from St. John Chrysostom who noted that riches may “belong to the devil but may also belong to God.” That is to say, as Cucinelli glosses the sentiment:



“On the one hand the riches of plunder, those of the man who steals and hoards: on the other hand the good riches of the man who transforms and distributes, and by so doing, renews life.... This is what Solomeo represents for me.”<sup>14</sup>

#### INSPIRATIONS FOR THE NEW HUMANISM

Humanism is a term used widely in the long history of Western philosophy and religion, and its prevalence can give rise to confused definitions. For example, the term can be as aptly applied to moments in the ancient Greek world (with the Stoics, Sophists, Socrates, and Isocrates) as to the tumult of the Italian Renaissance and much later to the central motifs of European existentialism.<sup>15</sup> For some thinkers, such as the fifteenth century scholar Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, humanism is compatible with a robust faith in God, for others, such as contemporary theorist Peter Cave (and so-called “ethical” or “scientific” humanists) humanism is anathema to the divine. As Cave notes: “Understanding the world without God, giving sense to the world without God, is the heart of today’s humanism.”<sup>16</sup> Which is only to say that Cucinelli’s neohumanism is *not* part of today’s humanism, but much closer in spirit and principle to Mirandola’s, and reaching further back, the Stoic and Socratic worldview. While Cucinelli reads widely in the history of philosophy, he is drawn most to rational thinkers who maintain, develop, defend, or transform a space for religious experience. He reads as intently in Aristotle as Augustine, Marcus Aurelius as St. Francis and St. Benedict, Boethius as Kafka, Dante as Schopenhauer.

As an indication of the kind of humanism Cucinelli wishes to align himself with, we can look to the subject of the convocation speech: “Dignity as a Form of the Spirit” [*La Dignità come forma dello Spirito*]. From memory, Cucinelli delivered his remarks to a community gathered at the University of Perugia: professors dressed in black silk gowns and toques; the ermine-clad Rector Francesco Bistoni; an audience of nearly a thousand—including international fashion elite, a throng of journalists, and myriad well-wishers.<sup>17</sup> (As if to make their admiration evident, nearly everyone not on stage wore some shade of taupe, gray, or light charcoal—creating the impression of a sea of shifting and subtle gradations of light and tone). Cucinelli does not proclaim human dignity as a political entitlement, but affirms something closer to a Christian or Kantian outlook based on natural rights; and like Mirandola—in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* [1496]—Cucinelli emphasizes core values of the Italian Renaissance: the expansive capacities of human achievement; the importance of the liberal arts and the quest for knowledge; the compatibility of free will with God’s directing force; and the abiding notion that (as Pier Cesare Bori says of Mirandola’s work) “human dignity consists in the mystical vocation of the human creature.”<sup>18</sup> Cucinelli also made reference to a host of thinkers whose humanistic credentials he understands to be complementary with many of

Mirandola's sentiments, including Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Aurelius, Augustine, Boethius, St. Benedict, Dante, Erasmus, Spinoza, Kant, and Rousseau among others.

On this occasion, as in his daily work as a businessman and head of an international company comprised of nearly five hundred workers, Cucinelli addressed the importance of human dignity: the way labor can reinforce and enlarge or diminish dignity—though, one presumes based on the logical consequences of his appeals, not entirely eradicate it. He gave a heartfelt account of his father's experience working in a factory: "I would see him in the evening silent and troubled at times... [for] during the day he had been subjected to humiliations, sometimes even insults from his employer."<sup>19</sup> With decades to process the moral of this experience and respond to its difficult lessons, Cucinelli finds in his father's troubled work life an ur-story of human agency and self-valuation: "I was saddened seeing my father in such conditions and it was probably then that I began to understand the important role work plays in men's lives. Through direct experience I realized how unjust it is to offend the dignity of a man's labor and not to appreciate its true value."<sup>20</sup> Cucinelli discovered in philosophy a place where the care of men's souls—the dignity of their spirits—was the primary concern, and over time he has adapted these ideas, sometimes rarefied, into the very immediate workaday world of labor and commerce. When was the last time you heard a businessman at the head of a highly profitable, growing, and well-respected business creating a product of widespread critical acclaim also quoting from the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant? How do we get from there to here? From vaunted philosophical speculation to on-the-ground business practice? For Cucinelli, the transition to *honorable* profitability can occur only when the company makes the development and protection of dignity a central part of its mission. Though a worker's human dignity is a given—an attribute of his or her being—its quality and vigor is not; rather, a company must maintain a constant vigilance to guard against its diminishment (and perhaps also take measures to not overvalue the individual, leading to pride—something that can read like a sin in the context of Cucinelli's operations). Human dignity according to this outlook is not just one among many important values; it supports them all. Making the point aphoristically, and with an overstatement meant to seal his commitments, Cucinelli once said: "Human dignity comes before bread."<sup>21</sup>

Cucinelli's claim that it is "unjust to offend the dignity of a man's labor" highlights his core belief that cultivating dignity through labor is among his primary motivations as an entrepreneur. Skeptics may wonder what counts as labor, and what happens when a worker's labor is unproductive, her wares lack quality, or her products are not in demand. Cucinelli, who is of course not a theorist of labor, pays his factory workers more than the customary wage for similar work at Italian factories, and this additional pay seems to reflect his desire

to attract the best talent and retain it. The additional wages may make the worker feel valued (or at least more valued than at a competing company) and as a consequence she may be more willing, or more likely, to produce a superior product. But Cucinelli's view of labor—at whatever level of production—seems tied to the worker's own sense of her labor's meaningfulness. From the factory floor to the showroom, from design to distribution, from boardroom deliberations to corporate functions, from reading in the library to performances in the theatre, there is a continual attention to the nature of work and its satisfactions. Loyal—and humble—workers are routinely promoted and trained to perform different tasks or to assume more responsibilities; workers who do not adhere to the culture of respect and discipline at the company are dismissed from it. Arrogance, as noted, is sharply censured and could prove to be grounds for firing. Perhaps the best place to explore and understand Cucinelli's specific notion of dignity through labor—how and why a person should seek to achieve personal value through his or her work—derives from Cucinelli's engagement with the history of humanism in philosophy and religion, as we shall see in what follows.

On the other side of labor, we might say, is the customer—the one who buys the products of labor—and Cucinelli has a signal influence in this regard as well, but it does not come from an ancient Greek or Roman, or a figure of the Italian renaissance, but rather from Theodore Levitt, a mid-twentieth century faculty member of Harvard Business School. When Cucinelli was in the first phase of building his eponymous clothing line, Levitt's work—especially the essay “Marketing Myopia”—made a profound impact on Cucinelli's understanding of what it means to sell things to customers. It was not enough to simply make beautiful, high quality, and fashionable products; the *sine qua non* of a successful business, Cucinelli learned from Levitt, is the customer experience. Consider this crucial passage from Levitt's 1960 essay:

The difference between marketing and selling is more than semantic. Selling focuses on the needs of the seller, marketing on the needs of the buyer. Selling is preoccupied with the seller's need to convert his product into cash, marketing with the idea of satisfying the needs of the customer by means of the product and the whole cluster of things associated with creating, delivering, and finally consuming it.<sup>22</sup>

Cucinelli recognized in Levitt's work a essential insight about the relationship between producer and consumer: the producer should be “consumer-oriented” rather than “product-oriented.”<sup>23</sup> Being consumer-oriented means understanding the “needs of the buyer”—for example, how they can and often do exceed the product itself. Many luxury goods (or even more precisely, brands) of their own

accord illustrate the point: possession is less about the product than its associations, what qualities or values it signals to oneself and others. Of course making a quality product in the first place—not skimping, not trying to get away with doing less but still charging more—aids customer experience and fulfills many customer needs. In addition to quality control on the front end (before an item ships) Cucinelli promises to repair any cashmere garment for free; this gesture (as expensive as it is for the company—such services run at about twenty-five percent of costs) gives the customer the immediate reassurance that buying Cucinelli clothing is a secure investment—really something more akin to a long-term relationship. A favorite, long-loved, long lived-in sweater then needn't have holes.

Theodore Levitt is among the very few contemporary figures Cucinelli regularly references when explaining his understanding of business ethics. In several respects, Levitt provided a necessary and much-needed framework for Cucinelli to transform his reading of the classics, religious texts, and humanistic works so they could be made available to his day-to-day operations. Reading a few brief passages from Levitt one finds what might be called the moral as well as strategic impetus for Cucinelli's corporate conduct—from the basic values that underwrite the company to the leadership required to express them in business:

Selling concerns itself with the tricks and techniques of getting people to exchange their cash for their product. It is not concerned with the values that the exchange is all about. And it does not, as marketing invariably does, view the entire business process as consisting of a tightly integrated effort to discover, create, arouse, and satisfy customer needs.<sup>24</sup>

The trick is to survive gallantly, to feel the surging impulse of commercial mastery; not just to experience the sweet smell of success, but to have the visceral feel of entrepreneurial greatness.<sup>25</sup>

No organization can achieve greatness without a vigorous leader who is driven onward by his own pulsating *will to succeed*. He has to have a vision of grandeur, a vision that can produce eager followers in vast numbers. In business, followers are the customers.<sup>26</sup>

In order to produce these customers, the entire corporation must be viewed as a customer-creating and customer-satisfying organism. Management must think of itself not as producing products but as providing customer-creating value satisfactions. It must push this

idea (and everything it means and requires) into every nook and cranny of the organization. It has to do this continuously and with the kind of flair that excites and stimulates the people in it. Otherwise the company will be merely a series of pigeonholed parts, with no consolidating sense of purpose or direction.

In short, the organization must learn to think of itself not as producing goods or services but as *buying customers*, as doing the things that will make people *want* to do business with it. And the chief executive himself has the inescapable responsibility for creating this environment, this viewpoint, this attitude, this aspiration. He himself must set the company's style, its direction, and its goals. This means he has to know precisely where he himself wants to go and to make sure the whole organization is enthusiastically aware of where it is. This is a first requisite of leadership.<sup>27</sup>

If these notions—"entrepreneurial greatness"; "a vision of grandeur"; "flair that excites and stimulates"; a chief executive who believes he has "the inescapable responsibility for creating this environment"; and establishing "the company's style, its direction, its goals"—seem reminiscent of Cucinelli's own self-description and general rhetoric of humanistic endeavor, we might reference Theodore Levitt as providing an elemental conceptual outlook and practical strategy for the young Italian entrepreneur. Just as Cucinelli was trying to figure out what kind of business he was in, and what he wanted from it, Levitt's remarks helped him bring clarity and focus to the undertaking. For Cucinelli this meant creating a business that would satisfy customers by relying on the principles and precepts of neohumanism.

Still, from a marketing perspective, a significant problem may appear in Cucinelli's assumption that his products—because of their high quality and purportedly perennially relevant styling—could, in fact, have currency for decades, much less be timeless. Empirical evidence in the marketplace countermands his claim (or is it a hope?). Yes, it is a strong brand that justifies high prices but strong brands are *more* susceptible to life cycles than generic brands (the generic, in this sense, contains an implied gesture to the timeless—or at least, to a focus on the product itself, as material content, instead of its label/brand and its associations). If Cucinelli makes his clothes too generic, as it were, he risks reducing their appeal, and thereby the justification for high prices. Generic clothing as a luxury item would have to be worn *ironically*, as we sometimes see when Brad Pitt or Kayne West don a tattered white t-shirt that costs two or three or four hundred dollars. For Cucinelli, or any other brand that aims to create luxury clothes that, in some sense, last, balancing timelessness with

the fashionable is a perpetual struggle. Making clothes that are too generic, therefore, dissipates the brand. At what point, then, does a long-term vision for clothing styles become a liability for both price acceptance and brand equity? Cucinelli's upward growth and profitability thus far suggests that the company has not reached that point, which may in itself be a curious fact worthy of additional research. That the company could continue to resist seasonal flourishes—overt signs that give away when the item was new—seems at odds with both the marketing literature and our common sense experience of consumer culture.<sup>28</sup>

In his studies Cucinelli for the most part bypasses the controversies that hector humanism after the Enlightenment, skipping back to pre-Copernican times when man was as Mirandola says “at the center of the world”—and that notion seemed both reasonable and justified.<sup>29</sup> The thinkers that draw Cucinelli's attention emphasize a paradox of pre-Enlightenment thinking—namely, the ways in which humanism flourished along with pervasive religiosity: when love of the human was coextensive with genuine piety. The pre-Enlightenment thinkers also highlight an optimism, hope, and faith that animated human invention, as Mirandola boldly proclaims for mankind: “to have that which he chooses and to be that which he wills.”<sup>30</sup> The sovereignty and dominion of God somehow protected the primacy of the human experience, and allowed for pleasure in it. God's will—as an earlier form of modernist or scientific determinism—was compatible with human creativity and expressiveness, self-definition and -determination. As an instance of Cucinelli's displacement of modernist controversies—his apparent leap back to a time before they existed—we discover that one of the philosophical touchstones of his neohumanism, and a central force in the ethics that informs his business model, comes from the “spiritual history” of his native region, Umbria.<sup>31</sup> Cucinelli, who was raised in Castel Rigone, and now lives and works nearby in Solomeo, finds an instinctive recognition of meaningful philosophical expression in the homegrown writings of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Benedict of Norcia. If we begin with a careful reading of a few selected passages from Benedict's *Rule*, we might surmise the unexpected transition from this sixth-century monastic Christian's worldview to contemporary Cucinelli's business ethics.

Chapter 4 of the *Rule* begins with “tools for good works”: “Discipline your body; do not pamper yourself, but love fasting”; “Your way of acting should be different from the world's way”; “Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die”; “Harbor neither hatred nor jealousy of anyone, and do nothing out of envy.”<sup>32</sup> Cucinelli has explained his relation to this kind of thinking: “I am very rigorous with myself. St. Benedict, one of my great teachers, says that you have to take care of the mind with studies, the soul with prayer, and then your body.”<sup>33</sup> Cucinelli's Benedictine regimen is apparent to others, as echoed during

journalist Michael Paterniti's on-site visit: "Associates say he is both disciplined and happy, as well as extremely meticulous. 'You see,' [Cucinelli] says, 'it was St. Benedict, this very rigorous man, who taught me the most important thing: Look after your mind through study, your soul through praying, and your body through exercise—and then work.'"<sup>34</sup>

Cucinelli's daily habits reflect an internalization of Benedictine tenets: he rises early and swims for an hour, works diligently through the day, eats a small dinner of soup, and plays soccer almost every evening; he conducts his business with a focus on the care of workers—their minds and bodies, and an awareness of fitting and fair remuneration; he doesn't watch television or read newspapers (but has trusted associates select important items for him to read); he is not interested in most topical news—especially the gossip that passes for news and that permeates everyday discourse—but instead is focused on the way people think, and how their thinking informs their conduct. Like the Stoics and Benedict after them, he views philosophy as a daily practice of "learning how to die" well, which is to say learning the terms and conditions for living well. As a result of his lifestyle, Cucinelli reports that he doesn't feel much anxiety.

Other passages from the *Rule* reflect ideas that inform the wider life of Cucinelli's employees: where and how they work. In Benedict we find remarks on daily manual labor ("Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as prayerful reading"), and how "the artisans of the monastery" should "practice their craft with humility."<sup>35</sup> But in what contexts do we find the demands of factory work—in this case, dedicated to the creation of high-quality cashmere knitwear—compatible with periods of "prayerful reading"? How can this kind of business be defended against mere busyness, labor transformed into something meaningful beyond the creation of a product? Is Cucinelli's moral achievement perceivable in the finely crafted suits, sweaters, and scarves he sells—or are these elegant, tasteful, attractive items the signs of the good lives the workers lead in making them?

Cucinelli, like Benedict, makes ethics a factor in understanding aesthetics. On this view, the beauty of an object should reflect the range of conditions in which it was made, including the spiritual and physical states of the artisans and the way they are treated by their employer. Consequently, commenting on the beauty of a Cucinelli product would have the distinction of being a kind of ethical judgment. Of course, this state of affairs begs the question for those works of beauty that are made by despicable artists or under loathsome conditions. But then many art connoisseurs—and fashion-conscious customers of Cucinelli—do not care at all about (or are otherwise oblivious to) the conditions of creation and the moral state of the artisans. The most prominent effect of Cucinelli's enterprise may involve those occasions when clients and entrepreneurs discover how a humanistic approach to labor and product-creation might be profitable. Or, in a

more limited way, a client who learns of Cucinelli's business practice may regard it as simply a bonus to a product she was already going to buy: the news that Cucinelli may be decent or magnanimous and choose to build a library, theatre, school, or hospital instead of (only) jet-setting around the world can confer a pleasant effect on the purchaser. Unfortunately, this does not seem the effect Cucinelli aims for among his customers.

Even as consumers have become aware of the conditions under which products are harvested, created, and sold—for example, in the widespread use of the “Fair Trade” label for coffee and other agriculturally derived foods, or the “Red” campaign that links a higher cost premium to a moral cause—luxury consumption, for the most part, remains an activity that is more readily associated with sinfulness or waste, with profligacy or other kinds of transgression. Buying a luxury item is not commonly associated with an ethical act—unless, for example, the luxury (like the Red campaign) could be tied to, for example, a form of charity. Attempts to introduce an ethical component into the branding of Apple's iPod, among other products, have proved to be grave failures.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, we can note that consumers of high-end automobiles such as Porsches and Ferraris would not be *primarily* persuaded to purchase these cars because of, say, improvements in environmental impact. The availability of a hybrid gas/electric Porsche is not the central appeal of the car—for a Toyota hybrid could be had for a tenth of the price. The luxury market seems resistant to the invocation of moral messages as a *reason* to buy products; the moral component is, rather, something more like an ancillary benefit, but not a cause for acquisition. Negative moral activity, however, from Coca-Cola in South Africa to SodaStream in the West Bank, can aggravate consumer sentiment—but, importantly, these are mass market products, not luxury goods. Consequently, Cucinelli's belief, as we are encouraged to identify it, that the moral practices of his business dealings contributes positively to his profits may be misleading, disingenuous, and even false.

Some critics may wonder if Cucinelli's business model is a case of “greenwashing.”<sup>37</sup> Would it be a cynical reading of Cucinelli's efforts to source his materials from farmers in Tibet or to employ local Umbrian artisans (instead of sending the materials to lower-wage factories outside of Italy) to say that he is capitalizing on the (moral?) appeal of sustainability? As with the aforementioned cases of luxury automobiles, questions remain about the extent to which references to sustainability—and other ethically situated attributes of a product and its manufacture—are effective in luxury markets, if at all.<sup>38</sup> “Sustainable luxury” almost strikes one as an oxymoron. Yet there are other expressions of Cucinelli's ethically-oriented business operations, for example, in his attention to the physical structures that define the contexts of lives lived together in a small village.



Cucinelli's particular incorporation of religious belief and Benedict's "prayerful reading" seems literalized in his restoration of a medieval church and his construction of a library. In these two edifices, separated by the imposing neoclassical theatre that he also built, we find the spaces in which Cucinelli invites his workers and the townspeople to the ongoing practice of attention to God and attention to our own souls. The self-curated titles on the library shelves skew towards the philosophy, religion, and literature with an evident emphasis on humanist works from ancient Greece and Rome through the Italian Renaissance and selected moments in modernity (especially Spinoza, Kant, and Adam Smith). Texts by and on St. Francis and St. Benedict—sons of the same Umbrian soil—are featured and appear to be among the authors Cucinelli himself repairs to with regularity. Just as knitwear is among the core traditions of Umbria, so there is a robust tradition of religious innovation. Cucinelli appears to be among the latest inheritors of these twin local enterprises, and somewhat uncannily has drawn them together—attempting to make knitwear and religious thinking appear both coextensive and codependent. The union of these local industries derives principally from Cucinelli's reading of humanism, the space in which he finds consideration of a philosophy of clothes consistent with religious belief, prayerful reading, and ethical conduct.

A couple of decades ago Cucinelli began buying up property in the Borgo of Solomeo, a hilltop hamlet overlooking the expansive, fertile fields of central Umbria. Hiring local craftsman for the labor, he renovated medieval buildings to serve his business, but also restored a church and began to construct innovative cultural spaces such as the Cucinelli Theatre [*Teatro Cucinelli*] and the Neohumanistic Academy [*Accademia Neoumanistica*]. Like his clothes, the theatre is handmade, and the interior color palette of the theatre is not dissimilar to the product line: warm whites, light tans, sandy grays, and muted lavender—all "untimely" colors. The architecture, like the clothes, defies temporal specificity. They are meant to always appear pertinent and attractive. Busts arranged in a lateral arc face the stage, a perpetual audience including Carneades, Seneca, Hadrian, Julius Caesar, Demosthenes, Hippocrates, Trajan, and Cicero. The inscription on the lintel above the entryway to the theatre is from Ovid's *Tristia*: "Poetry comes finespun from a mind at peace" [*carmina proveniunt animo deducta sereno*].<sup>39</sup> In addition to the fitting sartorial metaphor, there is something Benedictine about Ovid's notion—the presumption that tranquility is a condition for creativity. Tranquility, though, understood as a condition for labor, not as the indulgence of rest and repose. Peace is hard won, the result of much concentrated effort. (In the same spirit Mirandola later notes that "dialectic will calm the turmoils of reason," "natural philosophy will calm the strifes and discords of opinion," and "Theology herself will show the way to that peace and be our companion and guide."<sup>40</sup>) The Benedictine model, here expressed in Ovidian

terms, contends that work and peace are mutually reinforcing. Cucinelli, likewise, strives not for agitation but calm. As Benedict writes, and Cucinelli appears to follow: “Excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous or oversuspicious he must not be. Such a man is never at rest.... He should be discerning and moderate.”<sup>41</sup>

Cucinelli has been described variously as a philosopher-king and a prince (perhaps owing to his love of Plato, or his proximity to the medieval kingdoms that Machiavelli wrote about; the *New Yorker* illustration depicts Cucinelli in a profile meant to evoke the courtly prestige of Piero’s portrait of Prince Urbino (c.1474)). Rebecca Mead, for example, claims that Cucinelli’s “dedication to Solomeo is, in part, a form of benign Umbrian chauvinism,” and that he has “enacted a peculiar fantasy of beneficent feudalism, with himself as the enlightened overlord, and the residents, many of them his employees, as the appreciative underlings.”<sup>42</sup> What Mead describes as Cucinelli’s “benign chauvinism” might be re-described as a form of self-appointed responsibility for others; perhaps that is why it is benign. The “fantasy” may seem “peculiar” from the point of view of a skeptical outsider, a journalist from New York, but then the realities of Solomeo—and the expanding global enterprise—suggest that the approach or attitude is effective for running a successful, profitable, and at the same time ethically and aesthetically conscientious business. Cucinelli himself recommends that the role he plays in the life of his company and his company town is not that of king, prince, or overlord (benign or otherwise), but rather is most closely aligned with the Benedictine abbot. This is a high self-estimation—or is it instead an aspiration?—and one that must be assessed carefully.

A close reading of the *Rule* suggests there are some points of affiliation between Cucinelli and the abbot Benedict describes. Cucinelli speaks of having a self-appointed mission as “custodian,” a role that aligns with Benedict’s sense of the abbot as “caretaker,” and a name that signals an awareness of the temporary nature of the occupation. While Cucinelli is the owner of the company he runs, he is eager to point out that he does not *celebrate* that role; he diminishes the power customarily associated with title partly because he thinks it is the owner’s privilege to destroy his company as well as grow it, while a custodian is solely dedicated to the care of his charge. The role of custodian is, in another vernacular, not dissimilar to a form of citizenship, even cosmopolitanism.<sup>43</sup> Reading in Benedict, we find the following sentiments about the “election of an abbot:” “Once in office, the abbot must keep constantly in mind the nature of the burden he has received, and remember to whom he will have *to give an account of his stewardship*. Let him recognize that his goal must be profit for the monks, not preeminence for himself.... Let him strive to be loved rather than feared.”<sup>44</sup> The italicized phrase is drawn from the Gospels where Jesus tells a story of a steward that must give an “account” of his stewardship—in effect, be held accountable for

his conduct as a caretaker.<sup>45</sup> Part of this accounting, as noted earlier, entails a constant vigilance in the protection of human dignity.

In his speech to the convocation committee at Perugia, Cucinelli articulated his custodial role this way:

To put my resolution into practice, I decided to divide the profits according to four criteria that I still follow to this day. The first part is assigned to the business, a business of which I see myself as the custodian and not the proprietor. Of course, I am the majority shareholder and the person in charge, but solely as the guarantor of its solidity and stability. I have always believed that if one sees oneself as the caretaker rather than the owner, everything will take on a different meaning, it will all become almost eternal. The second part is reserved for my family, which lives in a small town and therefore does not have any particular needs. The third, the most important part, is for those who help me in the enterprise, so they can work in a better way and live according to their expectations. The fourth part, which is just as relevant as the other three, is devoted to “embellishing the world”, a concept that can encompass any type of initiative: to help a person in difficulty, but also to restore a church, build a hospital, a crèche, a theatre or a library ... and I should add that in this case I was inspired by the great mind of one of my mentors, the emperor Hadrian, when he said: “I feel responsible for all the beauty in the world.”

This is the underlying philosophy of the enterprise.

It is perhaps surprising to hear of a corporate CEO speak of a Roman emperor as a “mentor,” but then it is also novel to hear a Roman emperor speak of his responsibility for beauty. Cucinelli’s point, it appears, is not about self-aggrandizement but about how a self—motivated by custodial incentives—may aggrandize the world. Cucinelli’s four criteria reflect an abbot’s conscientious awareness that he should testify or give an account “more by example than by words” and through “good works and in humility.”<sup>46</sup> Cucinelli’s mode of “embellishing the world” includes creating a meaningful work environment for his employees; and in his conduct as CEO, Cucinelli appears to genuinely strive to embody and enact qualities Benedict commends for the abbot: “he must not show too great concern for the fleeting and temporal things of this world, neglecting or treating lightly the welfare of those entrusted to him. Rather, he should keep in mind that he has undertaken the care of souls for whom he must give an account.”<sup>47</sup>

### **MANIFESTATIONS OF THE NEW HUMANISM**

Benedict's *Rule*, of course, includes a lot of instruction if taken literally and exclusively that is not obviously or easily transferable to the life of a twenty-first century entrepreneur at the helm of an international company: the asceticism is severe, and there are many injunctions for sharing property in common. Yet we find in Cucinelli's disciplined diet and exercise some limited measure of ascetic rigor; and in the creation of public spaces available to all, a modest portion of communal property (if not in title, then certainly in practice and sentiment). Because Benedict's worldview may be too constrained and too historically and religiously situated to be meaningful to a wide range of business leaders and business ethicists—including Cucinelli himself—it is worth noting some ways in which *Cucinelli's* understanding of ideas and injunctions from Benedict reveals itself in his mode of philanthropy.

Cucinelli, in his self-described role as a kind of Benedictine abbot, is seldom seen to “plead [a] lack of resources as an excuse” for evading what he regards as humanistic ventures—programs and projects that preserve and protect human dignity.<sup>48</sup> In fact, he seems to find excuses for being generous and inventive in his charity: he allocates twenty percent of the company's annual profits, as he says, “for humanity.”<sup>49</sup> That is roughly double what the Catholic Church expects its members to tithe. While addressing the daily needs of his employees—such as providing a ninety-minute lunch break, a commonplace among many Italian companies, and one that affords workers the chance to go home and visit with family, and to rest if need be (Cucinelli himself takes a brief nap each afternoon)); or preparing a satisfying Umbrian lunch at the canteen at a subsidized rate; or curating a free library whose space and resources are available every day to any interested reader—Cucinelli also supports a football (soccer) team from his hometown, Castel Rigone. He did not just buy the players uniforms as a one-off, but pays them a regular salary for their work. And he built a stadium to house their practice and play. These are some ways in which Cucinelli's espoused dedication to the welfare of his fellow citizens manifests itself. And yet, all this bypasses the manufacturing of clothes. Yet that may be fitting, since Cucinelli, like Benedict and other philosophers, sees the conditions and processes of daily life as the proper point of one's focus. If day-to-day life nurtures the spirit, then dignity will be safe-guarded, and so will, we are to presume, exceptional products will follow.

Charity, of course, is compatible with all manner of money-making. In fact, for many corporations it is often part of the business plan—a form of asset allocation meant to signal the values of the company. Such an observation need not entail a cynical response, for example, that charitable giving is beneficial for tax-purposes, or for garnering customer sympathy—even though it may contribute to those facets of a business's financial profile and popular identity.

Cucinelli's particular brand of charity is, as outlined above, directed to the support and continual restoration of Umbria, and in particular of Perugia, Solomeo, and his hometown, Castel Rigone. Like many other successful entrepreneurs, Cucinelli has chosen to make the care of his native land and its people a priority for his business plan; the recent allotment of resources to the restoration of the Etruscan Arch in Perugia is another example of his provincial loyalty and his vision for re-invigorating and preserving Umbrian traditions. In the press release announcing Cucinelli's commitment to the Arch's restoration, he writes: "I'm convinced that the ability to build the future is within everyone's reach, and, in keeping with that illuminist *caretaker spirit* ideal that I cultivate—and the legacy of the great Teachers of Humanity—to achieve the improvement of man by recuperating and reconnecting his values to those of Art and Spirituality."<sup>50</sup> Despite his overtly Umbria-centric focus, Cucinelli has directed attention beyond his beloved central Italian region, for example, mounting an advertising campaign featuring Mongolian goat herders—the promotion functioning as a tribute to their relationship as international merchants. (Cucinelli joins them, as they all face the camera and embrace with smiles—is that an expression of the joy of fraternal feeling across international borders or the satisfaction of a mutually beneficial business deal? Perhaps both.). Since the business relationship is presented as a shared compact may by willing and interested parties, the advertising campaign does not come off as exploitative. And while the advertizing is not meant to depict charity on his part, it does divert from the customary—and perhaps expected—focus on the clothes he sells. When we learn of a more literal or conventional mode of charitable giving—Cucinelli's aid for the construction of a hospital in Malawi—it is not from press releases and advertising, or from, say, a limited edition "Malawi" handbag, and the like, but rather something gleaned from a casual conversation with him about the nature of caretaking.

"Embellishing the world" may be a useful concept for business philanthropy first because it is ambiguous and expansive—it suggests that the whole world is one's concern. But also the idea of embellishing requires a sensitivity to how things can continually be improved by degrees. In English, "embellish" often carries a different connotation than in Cucinelli's usage; he does not mean to suggest superficial or finishing effects, but substantial acts of lasting significance that enhance the order of things (not incidentally, a core objective of Benedictine asceticism<sup>51</sup>). Such a melioristic understanding is highly complementary to an otherwise daunting demand for a global initiative. To think of philanthropy as a continual practice of substantive beautification and enhancement—and not the temporary maintenance of the status quo, or worse, the mere distribution of wealth to other entities that will determine its allotment—makes philanthropy itself a form of accounting, a deliberate and empirical

manifestation of the care of souls. Embellishing, for Cucinelli, is a radical and ongoing activity.

The Accademia Neoumanistica is part of an educational initiative that includes performances that take place at the Teatro Cucinelli located in Solomeo. In the 2010-2011 season, the directors of the Teatro invited a range of guests: from writers to vocal ensembles, dance troupes to choruses, opera singers to instrumentalists. As the Parthenon is a marker of a certain kind of intellectual, national, and social culture, so the Teatro is a structure meant to signal a house of thoughtful and creative work; it is sited to highlight a view of the Umbrian terrain below and also to emphasize its presence on the landscape when seen from the lowlands. Even in his approach to architecture, Cucinelli enacts a strict retrospective appropriation of ideas and traditions; when speaking of the design and development of the Teatro, he says:

We have tried to listen only to the wise words of the architects of the past, such as Palladio, Leon Battista Alberti and Vitruvius. Inspired by them, we concerned ourselves with respecting nature and the environment, paying attention to the *Genius loci*. We set it as our objective not to alter the past, but to return it to former and future generations, possibly even more beautiful than before, precisely with the aforementioned caretaker spirit.<sup>52</sup>

Not far from the Teatro is the library of the Accademia. The texts that line the white shelves reflect Cucinelli's interests—the authors he most admires and draws from—and are offered in several languages to help facilitate reading by guests from other countries. The same book offered in Italian, French, German, Russian, and Japanese is, one presumes, meant not only to improve the chance of conversation between interested readers but also as a form of hospitality—to allow a visitor to feel at home in picking up a familiar text and reading in a familiar language. Cucinelli's employees are encouraged to avail themselves of the library's resources—as a place to read or converse, to gather and discuss the texts that inspire Cucinelli; or as Cucinelli himself put it “to come and restore your soul, to regenerate, to read in your own language.”<sup>53</sup> On my several visits to the library, it was noticeably vacant.

## CONCLUSION

A reader, much less a customer who buys his wares, may wonder what Cucinelli wants of the history of philosophy and religion for use in business, and moreover may even be suspicious of a fashion designer's appropriation—no matter his good intentions—of difficult texts for what may seem like everyday or simplistic uses, or more perilously, for the instrumental enhancement of financial profits. When I toured the showroom at the factory in Solomeo, I was surprised to see gorgeous,

finely knit gray cashmere clothes displayed along with a brittle, archive-worthy copy of Aurelius' *Meditations*. (In the retail store, I found copies of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Rousseau's *Discourses*, Boethius' *The Consolations of Philosophy*, among other works.) There is a palpable literalism about the juxtaposition of the clothes and the philosophy, with ideas supporting the fashions. But the proximity is nevertheless striking. Cucinelli could have easily (and certainly more conventionally given the standards of *haute couture*) displayed his clothes along with high-gloss fashion magazines. While it is unlikely that a customer, or even in some cases an employee, will pick up a copy of these books and begin reading it (as I did), it is nevertheless worth guarding against the hubris that would condescend to this use of philosophical, religious, and occasionally literary texts in the discourse and concourse of contemporary business practice—especially when so many of these works possess overt or evident relevance to human conduct as we find it expressed in market-based capitalism. Of course, as acknowledged, the literature in business ethics and marketing is replete with references to the history of philosophy and religion; the concern, then, is whether Cucinelli is himself a capable steward of these intellectual and social traditions—whether, for example, the profit incentives of contemporary global capitalism would not overwhelm even an earnest attempt to use philosophy and religion for the care and protection of human dignity. So, as one sits in a store or a showroom contemplating the effects of Cucinelli's enterprise, there is reason to wonder about the relationship between the literal, superficial, and direct application of ideas and the figurative, studied, and indirect engagement with their natures. Still, if the only things to read within reaching distance are the greatest works of the human mind from the last several millennia, the odds that something of it will be read—by someone, by anyone—are certainly higher than if they are hidden away, absent from the coursings and flow of a busy workday or bustling retail experience (as they appear to be even in Cucinelli's own *Accademia*). And being displayed prominently next to elegantly made cashmere products is not the worst fate works of philosophy and religion have endured!

Readers—principally the audiences that may find unlikely company with Cucinelli: philosophers, students of religion, and business entrepreneurs outside of the fashion world—should take stock of the prominent use of humanistic works even as they consider its limitations or the myriad potential for the further exploration of those works in contexts that may not be immediately intuitive. In particular, as my remarks in the foregoing essay might occasion, there appears to be sufficient reason for business ethicists, especially those attentive to the meaning and use of religion in the marketplace, to take note of Cucinelli's application of the history of humanistic philosophy in the management of his company. And relatedly, students and scholars of religion (outside of the realm of

business) may reconsider the degree to which the objects of their study—whether it be the exegesis of a sacred text, the analysis of spiritual reasons for moral action, or the nature of the human soul—are decidedly part and parcel of our engagement in contemporary business ethics. That said, there may nevertheless be an impasse between what academics can tolerate in the application and pertinence of their fields and sub-fields and places beyond the strictly academic—that is, one might say, in regions exceeding their purview and control. One conclusion to draw, then, is that instead of critiquing what may seem at first blush Cucinelli’s intellectual pretensions and naiveté, academics might instead lean in to offer their notions of how philosophy and religion can be productively integrated into the daily life of nonspecialists working successfully in today’s business and economic climate. In fact, Cucinelli’s reading of philosophy and religion—as he often does, by himself, by the fire (a cliché that may imperil his credentials even further)—can easily give rise to a caricature of his comprehension of what he reads. Yet, his apparently gentlemanly, but largely untutored, reading of works in philosophy and religion seems partly vindicated by the success he has had in translating several of humanism’s core beliefs into aspects of a thriving, ethically-oriented business operation. In this way, Cucinelli may prove to be an unexpectedly effective, if still limited and oddly contextualized, interpreter of the Western philosophical canon. Unlike that other philosopher of clothes, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh—Brunello Cucinelli has shown signs of being surprisingly capable of making his application of lessons from philosophy and religion appealing and beneficial to, if not entirely understood by, his employees and a wider audience of consumers, which is to say a humanity always in need of measures that protect, restore, or otherwise amplify human dignity.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1891), 19. More information: [www.DavidLaRocca.org](http://www.DavidLaRocca.org) Contact: [DavidLaRocca@Post.Harvard.edu](mailto:DavidLaRocca@Post.Harvard.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Godfrey Deeny, in conversation, November 10, 2010, Spello, Italy.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Emily Gyben, “Brunello’s Big Year,” *Daily Front Row*, May 10, 2010 ([dailyfrontrow.com](http://dailyfrontrow.com)).

<sup>6</sup> *The Robb Report*, September 2011, 118.

<sup>7</sup> Brunello Cucinelli, Press conference at Teatro Cucinelli, Solomeo, November 11, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Mead, “The Prince of Solomeo,” *The New Yorker*, March 29, 2010, 76.

<sup>9</sup> Mead, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Gyben, May 10, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Godfrey Deeny, “Brunello Cucinelli Named Italian Entrepreneur of the Year,” *Fashion Wire Daily*, June 4, 2010 ([fashionwiredaily.com](http://fashionwiredaily.com)).

<sup>12</sup> Gyben, May 10, 2010.



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- <sup>13</sup> Michael Rose, "Cucinelli's stellar debut seen boosting Italy IPO appeal," *Reuters*, April 27, 2012.
- <sup>14</sup> Brunello Cucinelli, *A Humanistic Enterprise in the World of Industry*, Quattroemme, 1999.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 375-376.
- <sup>16</sup> Peter Cave, *Humanism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 1.
- <sup>17</sup> Godfrey Deeny, "Brunello Cucinelli Awarded Honorary Doctorate," *Fashion Wire Daily*, November 14, 2010 (fashionwiredaily.com).
- <sup>18</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, tr. Charles Glenn Wallis, Paul J. W. Miller, and Douglas Carmichael (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998). Pier Cesare Bori, "The Italian Renaissance: An Unfinished Dawn?" (accessed online February 11, 2011).
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- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 142.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 165.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 166.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 166-167.
- <sup>28</sup> See A. Radón, "Luxury Brand Exclusivity Strategies—An Illustration of a Cultural Collaboration," *Journal of Business Administration Research* 1, no. 1(2012): 106-10.
- <sup>29</sup> Mirandola, 5.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Cucinelli, Press conference at Teatro Cucinelli, Solomeo, November 11, 2010.
- <sup>32</sup> St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed., Timothy Fry (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics), Chapter 4: 12-13.
- <sup>33</sup> Mead, 74.
- <sup>34</sup> Michael Paterniti, "Un Uomo Nuovo: How I Learned to Look, Act, Eat, and Think like an Italian Gentleman in Just Three Days," *GQ*, April 2012, 163.
- <sup>35</sup> Benedict, Chapter 57: 55.
- <sup>36</sup> See T. Hadler, "Why the Ethical iPod is a Branding Mistake" (nbs.net), 2013.
- <sup>37</sup> See Joshua Karliner, "A Brief History of Greenwash" (corpwatch.org), March 22, 2001.
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- <sup>39</sup> Ovid, *Tristia*, I.I.39.
- <sup>40</sup> Mirandola, 11.
- <sup>41</sup> Benedict, Chapter 64: 63.
- <sup>42</sup> Mead, 74, 72.
- <sup>43</sup> See K. Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Sons, 2007).
- <sup>44</sup> Benedict, Chapter 64: 63.
- <sup>45</sup> Luke, 16:2.

<sup>46</sup> Benedict, Chapter 2: 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Mead, 75.

<sup>50</sup> Press release from Wladimiro Boccali, Mayor of Perugia, announcing Cucinelli's financial support for restoring the Etruscan Arch in Perugia, September 8, 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Father Cassian Folsom has remarked: "The great monastic asceticism exists to put order into the soul," Mead, 79.

<sup>52</sup> Cucinelli, "Dignity as a Form of the Spirit," 23.

<sup>53</sup> Cucinelli, press conference, November 12, 2010, Solomeo.