



July 2014

# Brunello Cucinelli: A Humanistic Approach to Luxury, Philanthropy, and Stewardship

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## Recommended Citation

LaRocca, David Ph.D. (2014) "Brunello Cucinelli: A Humanistic Approach to Luxury, Philanthropy, and Stewardship," *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics*: Vol. 3 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe/vol3/iss1/9>

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# Brunello Cucinelli: A Humanistic Approach to Luxury, Philanthropy, and Stewardship

## **Cover Page Footnote**

For many forms of orientation and support, insight and cheer, and valuable criticism during the composition of this essay, I sincerely thank: Araminta Atherton, Silvia Bellia, Roberto Berardi, Mayor Wladimiro Boccali, Lorenzo Bringheli, Natasha and Massimo Carrona, Godfrey Deeny, K. L. Evans, Maria Farrow, Lorna and Sheldon Hershinow, Elizabeth Lord, Letizia Mariucci, Thomas Ricotta, Geoff Schneiderman, Claudia Silver, Alessandro Subrizi, and Francesco Tomassini; James Fitzgerald, Angela and Tom Small at ColdWater Media; Jay Barksdale in the General Research Division and the F. L. Allen Room at the New York Public Library; Patrick Flanagan at the Journal of Religion and Business Ethics; Bridget Murphy at Longhouse Projects; Maurice Black, Stacie Fulcher, Thor Halvorssen, Lana Harfoush, Erin O'Connor, and Rob Pfaltzgraft at the Moving Picture Institute in New York; Caroline Johnson and Roberto Rizzo at the New York City International Film Festival; Ben Cosgrove and Mark Hruby at the Signet Society of Harvard College; Roger Stephen Gilbert in the Department of English at Cornell University; and the staff and employees of the Cucinelli company in Solomeo and New York—and especially to Brunello Cucinelli for granting me time to discuss his business philosophy. I genuinely appreciate the constructive comments on earlier versions of this essay offered by several anonymous outside readers for the journal. And lastly, with deepest gratitude, I thank Giorgiana Magnolfi for the invitation to Solomeo, introducing me to Brunello Cucinelli, and her careful translation of his Italian.

The Italian fashion entrepreneur, Brunello Cucinelli, has earned a reputation for translating ideas from the history of Western humanism into the core of his business practice. His business ethics are as informed by Aristotle, Aurelius, St. Benedict, St. Francis, and Kant as they are by contemporary marketing theorists such as Theodore Levitt. Cucinelli's perhaps unexpected, even uncanny (and at times disconcerting) use of Western philosophy and religion to frame and underwrite his business enterprise must be qualified a number of impressive attributes, perhaps not least the fiscal success of his company. If Cucinelli, the company, owes some of its growth and profit to religion and philosophy, business ethicists—as well as entrepreneurs—are likely to take note, and lean forward to learn more. While there are many tenets that would seem intuitive, even to a bold capitalist—for example, treat your workers well and they will perform better—there are issues that remain perplexing. It is to these less digested aspects of his business enterprise that I turn my attention in what follows. In Part I, I address some of the apparently paradoxical ideas that relate directly to core aspects of the company, in particular, the nature of luxury in the midst of a humanistic enterprise. Thereafter, in Part II, I turn to an assessment of whether Cucinelli's philosophy of clothes—based on millennia of ethical and aesthetic ideas—can be usefully replicated in other spheres of business, inform a wider conversation about business ethics, and contribute something novel to the spectrum of philanthropic activities based on capitalist principles. (For an introductory portrait of Cucinelli's corporate model and his specific interpretations and applications of humanistic philosophy in that context, please see “A New Philosophy of Clothes: Brunello Cucinelli's Neohumanistic Business Ethics.” For an interview with Cucinelli see an independently funded documentary film I directed entitled *Brunello Cucinelli: A New Philosophy of Clothes*.)

### **PART I: RETAILORING THE MEANING OF LUXURY AND LEASURE**

When Rebecca Mead of *The New Yorker* attended an event in honor of Brunello Cucinelli at the Quirinal Palace in Rome, she asked the guest of honor “whether he thought St. Benedict would approve of his business, founded as it is upon providing the least needy of people with the most unnecessary of objects.”<sup>1</sup> Mead describes his response: “Cucinelli paused for a moment, and told me that he thought St. Benedict would be very happy with his work.” Later, in Mead's presence, Cucinelli told Father Cassian Folsom, an American Benedictine monk living in the Umbrian town of Norcia, that Mead wondered “whether St. Benedict would approve of his work, and ask for his opinion on the matter.” Mead notes that Father Cassian “weighed the question,” then “mentioned the beauty of the workmanship that emerges from Cucinelli's factories, and the concern for the individual worker that Cucinelli maintains. Benedict, he concluded, would rule in Cucinelli's favor. ‘Obviously, Brunello's work is a little out of our category,’”

Father Cassian added, “But quality is quality.”<sup>2</sup> Quality may be quality, but what quality has to do with *luxury* remains for us to consider.

We can locate in Rebecca Mead’s question to Cucinelli and his subsequent repetition of the question to a Benedictine monk a palpable and underlying anxiety about the nature of luxury. In an age of unprecedented human flourishing made possible in part from advances in health and human sciences, and the proliferation of technologies that enhance everything from travel to telephony, safety to diet, it is increasingly unclear how to separate want from need. Yesterday’s luxuries are today’s taken-for-granted. And yet, we seem to know luxury when we see it. Or do we?

In *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation*, Christopher Berry offers a rich and involving analysis of the concept of luxury that clarifies many contemporary definitions—and worries—about the nature and meaning of the term. Among the crucial notions Berry addresses is the prevailing sense that “luxury and superfluity are commonly associated.”<sup>3</sup> The fashion industry—indeed, the very notion of what “fashionable” means—has long been caught up with luxury: from the courts of Louis XIV to the contemporary red carpet and runway, *excess*—even if elegant and refined—has seemed an ineluctable part of what we mean by luxury. As Berry has theorized: “luxury goods represent the increasing development of specific desires within categories established by certain basic generic needs. They constitute qualitative refinements. As refinements they can always be substituted for a less refined product.”<sup>4</sup> In the context of Cucinelli’s enterprise, or any luxury manufacturer, the onus is on the creation of “qualitative refinements,” and the hope—and business plan—is that such refinements lead to the “development of specific desires” for these products. But that is not assured, and many items deemed luxuries today—and markers of good taste—can become either routine (mobile phones) or gaudy (crystal chandeliers). Some luxury brands have inverted their products’ potential fragility as unnecessary or replaceable into a hallmark of brand identity—as with Porsche (“There is no substitute”) or Mercedes Benz (“The Best or Nothing”). Such claims are meant to lend the client support for believing that the product is luxurious without being superfluous, and, moreover, a luxury without compare and hence without substitute.

Cucinelli does not have a slogan, but it has a seal—the crest of Solomeo—and this sign marks a place and a history without possible imposture. Solomeo, like the clothes produced there, are rarefied, the culmination of a specialized process of “qualitative refinements” that take us from the hairs on a goat’s throat to the muffs of Madison Avenue. In that process, the question becomes: can luxuries become necessities? Would such a shift lend credence to the idea that a client has ceased to make practical decisions and begun instead to make moral, aesthetic, or even spiritual choices? Purchasing a luxury item would then be as

radical and substantive as Benedict's decision to wear a woolen robe. Christopher Berry's research suggests that replies to these questions demand a fundamental engagement with our understanding of desire, value, and taste—an investigation that I hope is supplemented by the present course of inquiry. Consequently, answers are not easily forthcoming, but luxury brands of the contemporary fashion industry do provide useful case studies for any effort to understand the way in which a luxury item might (reasonably) be judged a necessity—and in the process lose its designation as superfluous and replaceable.

Among recent engagements with the haute couture fashion industry we find that luxury is a term and an experience that is under negotiation by its purveyors. Tomas Maier, creative director and head designer at Bottega Veneta (the illustrious makers of the much-sought after Cabat bag) responded to another *New Yorker* writer, John Colapinto's query about the "ethics of creating astronomically costly things when many people are having trouble meeting their food bills."<sup>5</sup> Maier replied that the prices are a reflection of the cost of materials and labor, labor that, as at Cucinelli, also takes place in Italy: "At Bottega, we pay our artisans in Vicenza properly, with benefits, and excellent working conditions. We use the best materials, and we make things in a way that is built to last."<sup>6</sup> Like the workers in Vicenza, the employees in Solomeo are paid a living wage ("higher than market rate"<sup>7</sup>), with benefits, and they inhabit impressively humane working conditions—especially for what might be called factory work: facilities built from high-end materials with interiors that reveal clean, tidy, open-air, and naturally-lit workspaces. Maier not only defends the price of Bottega's goods as coordinated with their value, but goes a little further to suggest how much commercial culture has been deformed by impracticable expectations and desires. As Colapinto notes: "He insisted that Bottega's goods were not beyond the reach of middle-class people, who have simply been trained to want too much stuff. Anyone, he said, could afford one five-hundred-and-fifty-dollar hand-painted cashmere scarf. 'Just have less,' he said."<sup>8</sup> A sentiment we might consider not incommensurable with passages from Benedict's *Rule*. "For nothing is so inconsistent with the life of any Christian as overindulgence."<sup>9</sup> Maier appears to speak from personal experience as he notes "I'm not somebody who likes to possess.... I'm not the person who has six hundred suits. I want to have two suits. Actually, I want to have one suit, and I replace it."<sup>10</sup>

There are many claims from ancient and medieval texts that may patently resist adaptation or integration into a state-of-the-art manufacturing operation. And yet there are moments of surprising resonances in the sentiments that underlie humanistic motives across the millennia. For example, a passage from a chapter in Benedict's *Rule* on "The Clothing and Footwear of the Brothers," takes on a new urgency for our contemporary debate about luxury as exemplified in Cucinelli and Maier's comments above:

The clothing distributed to the brothers should vary according to local conditions and climate, because more is needed in cold regions and less in warmer. This is left to the abbot's discretion. We believe that for each monk a cowl and tunic will suffice in temperate regions; in winter a woolen cowl is necessary, in summer a thinner or worn one; also a scapular for work, and footwear—both sandals and shoes.... To provide for laundering and night wear, every monk will need two cowls and two tunics, but anything more must be taken away as superfluous.<sup>11</sup>

Benedict's emphasis on parsimony might seem at odds with any notion of luxury. For Cucinelli, however, luxury does not entail abundance, but in fact something quite like its opposite. When asked about his notion of luxury, Cucinelli said: "An object must be extremely well-made—full of quality and craftsmanship. In Umbria we have a tradition of fine textiles that has endured for hundreds of years. This focus on craftsmanship is part of the way we live. And what we make should be selectively distributed. And therefore somewhat rare. Ideally the product should feel exclusive to its user—as if made solely for him."<sup>12</sup> Cucinelli's notion of luxury, then, is dependent on his assessment of quality: making and having quality things is an expression of luxury but not, importantly, a sign of wealth. It is thus consistent to say that luxury should be ubiquitous in everyday life—"part of the way we live"—a constant feature of one's experience. Significant research from the literature of marketing, a field that has dedicated considerable attention to the phenomenon of fashion, substantiates Cucinelli's notion that luxury is largely defined by uniqueness, rarity, distinction, and quality—rather than by being merely expensive.<sup>13</sup> Having fewer things of higher quality becomes the ideal of luxury. Tomas Maier's desire for a single well-made suit is in line with this vision—though Maier may even be more strict than Benedict; for Maier, one tunic is enough!

It may be worth pushing back on Cucinelli's historical references to the Christian saints, and his allusions to or alliances with them. He drives a Bentley for goodness sake! Though when he speaks of the car, it not as a point of braggadocio about its high-status marquee but rather as if he is telling us about a family heirloom object *and* an art object—more like a cherished painting than a luxurious mode of conveyance: "I think it is the best car in the world," he says. "I buy these cars as it is my dream to use them and then to leave them as an inheritance for my grandchildren. When I take my evening walk, I stop and look at my Bentley and say to myself: 'How is it possible to create such a beautiful object?'"<sup>14</sup> We can recall, then, how Benedict's *Rule* demands a rigorous form of poverty, a strict asceticism, and therefore the use of only simplest products—

certainly not Bentleys or their sixth century equivalent. Read another way, the Benedictine's search for not just any sandals but good quality sandals was neither a function of their parsimoniousness nor of their secret admiration for quality. For the Benedictine's, quality and luxury occupied different realms.

And for us, by and large, luxury is not equated with quality—though, luxury brands, like Cucinelli, might wish their consumers believed the high price was also linked to positive attributes of its material nature. There are, to be sure, many high-quality products—with quality defined by durability, longevity, purity, density, etc.—that are *not* luxury products and occupy the lower end of the product hierarchy. Luxury products, then, are principally identified—and defined—by their position at the higher end of the price spectrum. The Cucinelli company offers no evidence to counteract these points of faith and practice, and in fact, the company's success appears to confirm the *separation* of luxury and quality since there are many quality products that would serve as a fit proxy for Cucinelli's clothes, but they are not chosen because they are not luxury items. Likewise, a Toyota may have many quality features—and even boast better acceleration, fuel economy, and electronic systems than a Bentley—but the Toyota will never be considered a luxury car. The introduction of Lexus—as Toyota's luxury line—is testament to that brand's limitation on the spectrum of luxury automobiles. Even Mercedes-Benz needed a higher threshold for the expression of luxury, so Daimler created Maybach!

Cucinelli has responded to what might be called “the ethics of luxury” in the way he has interpreted Benedict and other humanistic philosophers. Cucinelli has, in particular, made luxury a term of praise and admiration—an ideal to pursue modestly, with steady research and disciplined learning. In his opinion, luxury *is* a function of quality and craftsmanship, so the design must also reflect an aesthetic that will endure. There is little achievement in creating a piece of clothing that will last but is unwearable because it is garish or otherwise out-of-step. Consequently Cucinelli's clothing line does not appear to undergo radical shifts from season to season; color and contour, fit and fabric, style and stitch are all fairly stable. It is worth noting that in his decades as a purveyor of luxury couture Cucinelli has neither presented a runaway fashion show nor sent his clothes gratis to celebrities as a bid to garner conspicuous advertisement for his wares. People come to Cucinelli for the clothes themselves, not for their associations with supermodels and celebrities (though, of course, celebrities do *buy* his clothes); in fact, Cucinelli proudly features his employees and area townspeople in his promotional materials. When I visited the Cucinelli retail store in Solomeo I recognized two of the clerks from a print campaign. And walking around Solomeo reinforces the impression that Cucinelli's clothes—because of their quality and style and despite their expense—are part of everyday life. (A paradox, of course, lies in the fact that the profits that fund Cucinelli's projects

and his subsidization of employees' wardrobes derive mainly from selling vast amounts of retail-priced clothing in Los Angeles, New York, Milan, Dubai, and Hong Kong). The everyday reality in Solomeo—with every third person wearing a complete Cucinelli ensemble—may not be a “peculiar fantasy” there (as Rebecca Mead noted), but everywhere else.

The reason so many Cucinelli employees wear the company's clothes stems from the fact (common in many businesses) that they receive a discount on purchases of the company's products. What is more, they are given an annual stipend to offset the high costs of the apparel. Even under these favorable conditions, skeptics may wonder about Maier's commandment to “Just have less,” since he seems to ignore how goods and services must be weighed against one another. For instance, to what lengths should a customer go to purchase an item—even if convinced by the quality of an item? Economists, of course, call this opportunity cost. And Cucinelli, like Bottega Veneta and other high-end luxury brands, seems to press the issue more than many everyday questions about “having less” in order to afford a luxury item (for example, buying name brand instead of generic brand at the grocery store). To make this more concrete, a Cucinelli suit ensemble for a man may cost about seven thousand dollars: a cashmere suit jacket and pants (\$4000), shoes (\$900), a shirt (\$500), a belt (\$500), a scarf (\$500), a tie (\$200), a handkerchief (\$100), and socks (\$80). Add a cashmere sweater (\$500), a leather jacket (\$3000), and a leather duffel (\$3000) and it is easy to assemble a single outfit and a bag to carry it in for as much as thirteen thousand dollars. Add a second outfit—to wear when cleaning the first—and the total reaches the base-price of a new Mini Cooper. With these prices, just having less may not be an elective decision.

What happens when a company such as Target imitates the lines and colors we find in Cucinelli, and mass produces them at a fraction of the cost? Certainly the Target clothes are not made of cashmere or assembled by hand in a restored medieval Italian village, but there is a sense in which a savvy consumer might create an entire suit outfit for the cost of, say, a Cucinelli tie. The Target suit may only last a season or two before it frays, while the Cucinelli suit may last for decades. But then one could buy forty or fifty Target suits—one a year for the rest of one's life?—and keep abreast of the trends (tie and lapel widths, color palette, textures, cuts, etc.). What is the thinking—what are the incentives—that encourage a client to “just have less,” given this comparison? (Admitting of course that there are reasonable choices in between the extremes of Cucinelli and Target).

Opportunity cost entails making a trade—for example, exchanging one commodity (the time to earn money) for another (a desired product). What happens when, for the average consumer, Cucinelli's prices no longer seem luxurious—that is, when the high sticker price is normalized, perhaps even



seeming like a bargain? Perhaps this shift in value—this evaluation of opportunity cost—is a hint that (somewhat unintuitively) humanistic principles have displaced a strict focus on cost. Buying a piece of Cucinelli clothing, like many other products, becomes an act of buying into an idea, a brand, a vision of one's participation in something valued. Yet how many Cucinelli clients are aware of the way the company's profits go back to the town of Solomeo, to its artisans, to the restoration of heritage sites, to cultural initiatives (such as theatre, dance, and literary events), to the quality control and care of garments already purchased, and all the other ways Cucinelli aims to “embellish the world” through charity and other creative initiatives? If customers do not make a connection between Cucinelli's clothes and the stones and stitches of Solomeo, it might be that his clothing line is morally and aesthetically indistinguishable from other luxury fashion brands (LVMH, Hermès, Versace, DVF, Armani, Prada). Buyer preference would be based on the immediate sense of *pleasure* in the specific garment, or its cultural associations and its conferral of, among other things, status, not on the myriad ways in which the piece of clothing represents the humanistic values of the company and, once purchased, contributes to the ongoing support and realization of those values.

While we contend with what appears to be a persistent and unresolved (unresolvable?) paradox at the core of Cucinelli's business enterprise—namely, that the attempt to develop and sustain luxury products and their acquisition seems logically antagonistic with the asceticism of religious thinking from St. Benedict to St. Francis, and more recently, from Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis I. Cucinelli's entrepreneurship is, understandably, deeply informed by the Catholic culture in which he was raised. So it may be worth contrasting how Catholics have historically associated business, and capitalism in particular, with the promise of expansive benefits and abundance, with Protestant sentiments about capitalism (at least according to Max Weber's enduring thesis), which is perceived as a framework in which to adjudicate denial, frugality, and ascetic practice. This perennial divergence of perception has contributed to a longstanding debate in Catholic culture about the limits of needs and the parameters of desire. Should shirts or scarves or sandals even be produced that sell for \$800—regardless of the products' purported qualities, the sourcing of their fabrics, the excellence of their craftsmanship, or the beneficent ways the workers were treated? Benedict XVI tells us in *Caritas et Veritate* that there is no “right to excess,” even in affluent societies (§43).<sup>15</sup> Relatedly, drawing lessons from Benedict's social encyclical, we may wonder if consumers (Catholics and non-Catholics alike) have a *duty* to abstain from exorbitantly expensive products. A bottle of water stocked in the middle of the desert may be assigned a high price but this is a function of scarcity; the water is not a luxury, though its market value may be higher in the desert than by the freshwater river. Benedict XVI affirms

that consumer culture has a social responsibility to undertake a “serious review of its life-style, which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences” (§51). He continues, quoting John Paul II from encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*, 36: “What is needed is an effective shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of *new life-styles* ‘in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments.’” Benedict concludes without equivocation:

It is good for people to realize that purchasing is always a moral—and not simply economic—act. Hence *the consumer has a specific social responsibility*, which goes hand-in-hand with the social responsibility of the enterprise. Consumers should be continually educated regarding their daily role, which can be exercised with respect for moral principles without diminishing the intrinsic economic rationality of the act of purchasing (§66).

Coupled with the foregoing concerns about the nature of purchasing in the context of luxury items—what is bought and for how much—we find an attendant preoccupation with the meaning of leisure. For luxury is a term often associated with leisure. Luxury is, for example, said to be something enjoyed by the elite who have the means—and the free time—to indulge their expensive tastes. Yet there is a long tradition in which leisure is *not* defined as the means to enjoy luxury, but as the very condition of achieving a human life. For example, while Thorstein Veblen’s influential study *A Theory of the Leisure Class* did much to explain, and pillory, the emergence of consumer society, and Karl Marx’s *Capital* raised awareness about the exploitation of labor, we should turn to Joseph Pieper’s more modest *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* to find a humanistic analysis of the concept of leisure complementary to Cucinelli’s enterprise. What we need in the present context is neither a theory of the leisure class (Veblen) nor a theory of the laboring class (Marx) but a theory of leisure for the laboring and middle classes, which is what Pieper gives us. And this is something we find in Cucinelli because it is something we find in the humanistic tradition he adopts. The Greek the word *skholē* or *scholē* (σχολή) means leisure—later in Latin, *scola*, and later still in English, *school*—and so etymologically we derive a first clue that any conflation of leisure with rest, especially rest of the mind, is misplaced.<sup>16</sup> In Pieper’s view, as it was for Aristotle, leisure is not *opposed* to work—time away from or without work—but time for the very highest forms of constitutional development and creative exercise. Writing after Veblen and Marx, Pieper can anticipate their criticisms of a humanistic reading of the concept, as he does when clarifying the role of leisure *in working life*:

The point and the justification of leisure are not that the functionary should function faultlessly and without a breakdown, but that the functionary should continue to be a man—and that means that he should not be wholly absorbed in the clear-cut milieu of his strictly limited function; the point is also that he should continue to be capable of seeing life as a whole and the world as a whole; that he should fulfill himself, and come to full possession of his faculties, face to face with being as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

The individual employee is ideally not lost or absorbed or alienated by his work activities but finds in them a part of his or her meaningful existence *as* human. In this sense, a *humanistic* business or labor initiative is one in which time is allocated for thinking—that is, not just for producing something. (Then again, as we will see, such an allocation of time is an insufficient definition of humanism; it is, then, for the time being, only an indication of a broader bid for an awareness of the *interactivity* between the development of the mind/soul and the material products it creates.) Or more subtly put: we cannot always be sure how our thinking, sometimes apparently indolent or without a definitive end, will ultimately contribute to meaningful production. Within a humanistic corporate organization one may be said to live or work *in* luxury, not in the sense of perpetual recline and repose, but rather in the midst of continually balanced, harmonious, and self-reinforcing activity. Attentive work that supports human value should not feel like work (that is, a kind of exchange for labor, or even worse, a form of punishment repaid with wages), but like an enterprise—to emphasize Cucinelli's word—that one desires to undertake; this is another valence of leisure in the humanistic sense. While there is much pride to be taken in the craftsmanship needed to make quality products, the day must be filled with other forms of *skholē*: time with family and friends, for meals and rest, exercising and reading, being entertained and in conversation. Cucinelli, drawing from the humanistic tradition, including Aristotle and Benedict, regards idleness as a deviation from the care of the self and soul. Since every aspect of daily life should be mutually reinforcing to the end of developing and protecting human dignity, Cucinelli's vision—his “peculiar fantasy”—may be to regard Solomeo as a sort of campus for the human spirit.

## **PART II: EXPORTING MORE THAN CLOTHES**

Cucinelli's business practice has contributed to his highly profitable more than two hundred million dollar per year eponymous luxury line. Perhaps especially for his financial success, Cucinelli's business ethics may attract emulation; they are certainly intriguing and admirable—sufficiently pronounced and complex to

invite and even demand further consideration—but there is also an open and obvious concern whether his application of these ethics in his entrepreneurship and philanthropy are localisms fit only for small medieval hill towns in Umbria. In short, can Cucinelli's business philosophy be exported? And if so, can it be applied to businesses outside the fashion industry, and replicable in places other than Italy? Could something like a Cucinelli “brand” of business ethics for luxury companies be articulated, borrowed, and established in other industries?

We might begin to explore and identify possible traits for transmission to other countries and cultures by pausing to note what is *unremarkable* about Cucinelli's operations. That is to say, there is something decidedly *Italian* about the way that Solomeo and its several kinds of facilities (from theatre to factory) are operated. Admittedly, the low-key countryside seems a fitting climate for laborious, time-intensive craftsmanship and the handsome horizons and hills invite reflection on the thoughts of philosophers and poets (but how often this happens by workers, and what effect it has on the company's fortunes remains a matter for speculation—that is, while the well-stocked library of the Accademia Neumanistica seems to await its most eager readers). Perhaps it would be more useful to note how the enduring habits of Italian family life make leisurely lunches and communal meals an expected part of daily life, not a surprising perk. The work force is local and very culturally homogeneous.

When I visited the factory and surrounding facilities, employees related to each other as long-time friends would, or even as family members (perhaps they were both). I observed affable comportment among the various levels of employment and types of expertise—from fabric technicians to quality-control knitwear specialists, from sales-clerks to managers of operations in shipping and receiving. Despite these observations made at Cucinelli's factory and fabrication facilities, I could, likely, have made them at other companies throughout Italy and even, more broadly, throughout Europe and into Scandinavia. Thus, there is some pressure on clarifying what makes Cucinelli's company distinctive, and what sets it apart from the admittedly humane working conditions found throughout Italy and Europe. To achieve this clarification, it may be most effective, at least initially, to separate Cucinelli's business model from his philosophy. Every company has a business model, often with mission statements and promotional narratives, but many fewer espouse explicit allegiances to and inspirations from the Western philosophical canon. An outside observer, as much as a prospective consumer, may wish to interrogate the degree to which these two strands are entwined—whether they can be individuated, and whether the success of the company has something to do with their interactivity. To begin, one may try to identify all the traits that Cucinelli has in common with other Italian manufacturers, and then see what is left out.

If, for example, provincial qualities—ones that give Solomeo its distinctive sense of place, its *Genius loci*—are factors in the definition of Cucinelli's business model and the development of his neohumanistic philanthropy, then it is clear that translating his approach to business more generally and more broadly will require more than replicating or adapting physical structures, whether to metropolitan areas or to dynamic and heterogeneous labor forces. Cucinelli's industrial activity, like so many other manufacturers in and out of Italy, requires a supporting ethos—specifically, it needs ideas that give form to those buildings, inspire employees and visitors to converse in them, and have both communities in tandem contribute to the cultures of craft and intellect. So a corporate ethos appears to be a necessary part of *any* business model, and not something a company can operate without. The under-used library, referenced above, may illustrate how the worker can be treated well—paid above the status quo, given the chance to work in humane conditions, etc.—and still not engage in Cucinelli's philosophical initiatives. By analogy, the owner of a well-run factory may also own a sports team, and the factory—and its workers—may benefit from the profits of the sports team. That does not mean that the workers play the sport, or even watch it! The owner's passion for the sport can be understood as a *direct* benefit to the fortunes of the factory worker (in terms of pay, etc.) without *also* believing that the factory worker enjoys or cares for the owner's team. Cucinelli's reading of philosophy, then, may be akin to the owner with the sports team. It is something that permeates the company, and yet, when pressed to figure its special contribution, we are at a loss. His philosophical reading, then, to switch analogies, may be usefully understood as akin to collecting fine art: he displays prominently the pieces he has acquired, but that does not make the workers art critics or connoisseurs.

It is possible that a company looking to improve its bottom line could imitate Cucinelli's (or a broadly Italian or European) treatment of workers—paying them a fair wage, creating comfortable working conditions, offering opportunities for meaningful work, and other elements of responsible manufacturing—and still not be able to match the company's financial success. Of course, such an account begs the question: for are Cucinelli's profits a *consequence* of these aspects of his business practice? If the fair and positive treatment of workers is not especially distinctive to Cucinelli, then there may be other factors—say, the margins on his luxury fabrications—that are the more likely explanation for exceptional profits.

So we arrive at a set of some essential, inter-related questions: would an entrepreneur who desires to replicate Cucinelli's corporate and civic arrangement have to undertake a fairly robust education in the liberal arts or even build an infrastructure to make that instruction possible for himself and his workers. Is this a feasible undertaking for a corporation to consider—as if every company also

needed to provide some kind of educational campus or arts program? Would there be a justified claim for such initiatives, for example, if it were suggested that an understanding of humanism leads directly to profits? Moreover, is Cucinelli's striking fiscal success sufficiently pronounced to warrant an investigation into how it might be realized in other business endeavors—for instance, outside of luxury clothing? With Cucinelli, is it evident that studying the history of philosophy and religion *pays*—that is, at least in the way that Cucinelli has found to apply philosophical lessons to his corporate work? This would be a business innovation, indeed. All these questions return us anew to the task of determining the degree to which Cucinelli's philosophy (or philosophical commitments) contribute to the business model that constitutes his corporate culture, and by extension, the lauded reputation of the brand and the profits it declares.

An outside analyst may be best served by directing her investigation to Cucinelli's business-as-usual—and, at least initially, not to Cucinelli's philosophical statements. For then it may be determined whether Cucinelli's reading of philosophy, and his attempt to integrate it into his corporate culture, is not something that can be skimmed off without a loss. In short, we are given an opportunity to judge whether Cucinelli's business model and his philosophy are sufficiently integrated to make them coherent and inseparable, or whether his philosophy remains a superficial element—something that is perhaps a strongly held personal faith (not unlike one's religious commitments) but is not essential to the success of the business as it operates from day to day. After all, Cucinelli's cabinet of books—from Aurelius' *Meditations* to Benedict's *Rule*, from Mirandola to Kant—is full of heady, high ideals that are extremely difficult to understand and perhaps even harder to actualize or apply. If Cucinelli's company were simply well-run—able to serve and support human dignity—and make a profit (and in his case a tremendous one), that may be completely satisfactory. Reading the *Critique of Pure Reason* at lunch may not be necessary at all.

Cucinelli often invokes the legacy of his region's fabric and textile manufacturing as a source of inspiration and pride for his contemporary company; even St. Francis' father was a cloth merchant! That is at least 800 years of history to draw from as one formulates a business plan full of references to authenticity, longevity, and tradition. These factors—very local, very specific—can make it even harder to export the special qualities of this Umbrian company. And if we think of prospective hosts—such as the United States—it may be readily noted that the country has a great appetite for fads and fame, a short memory, and is susceptible to advertizing that may argue against the consumer's beliefs and interests. The success of Cucinelli in America, then, may simply be an effect of a culture that is attentive and attuned to brand appeal and ostentatious consumption of luxury goods. Are customers at the Cucinelli outlet in Cabazon, California really asking the store clerk about the moral philosophy of medieval ascetics

before they swipe their Visa cards? The motivation to buy the clothing may not come from reading Leonardo da Vinci but instead seeing a paparazzi shot of Leonardo DiCaprio wearing Cucinelli on the red carpet.<sup>18</sup>

While the half-life of a fashion trend may be weeks or months, and as such innovation is a standard trope of fashion critics, there has been some indication that so-called “heritage” brands are enjoying a meaningful recovery and reincorporation into the stylistic repertoire of both the everyday and the elite. Yet, as some of these clothes may be worn ironically, many products from brands such as Levis, L. L. Bean, Red Wing, and Pendleton are donned as part of a celebration of American craftsmanship, design, and the iconic legacy of some now-fading professions (such as sailor, farmer, mechanic, and factory worker (the latter two are especially caught up in “steampunk” trends)), or expressive myths (such as the cowboy (Ralph Lauren RRL) and the preppie (Ralph Lauren Rugby)). Heritage brands are unique in so far as they blend evidence of high quality with the temptations (and pleasures) of nostalgia. The heritage brands make fashion *backward* looking. And so, in the same way that Cucinelli reaches to the antique notions of the Stoics and the Umbrian saints, perhaps there is a parallel to be gleaned in American heritage brands: namely, an attempt to link a lost or faded ethos to a current sartorial form. A consumer may not necessarily like the way a sailor’s clothes fit or even look, and yet, the idea of “being” a sailor—of carrying a copy of *Moby-Dick* in one’s sea-worthy waxed linen tote—is enough to prompt the purchase of an entire outfit. Beard optional. The danger of such nostalgic dressing, to be sure, comes from cultivating the appearance of wearing a costume instead of one’s own clothes. Still, the appeal of a retrospective sentiment may be a feature of Cucinelli’s entrepreneurial practice that can be meaningfully made portable, exported, and adapted to local tastes, tempers, and the talents of tailors (another fading profession worthy of nostalgia!).

Cucinelli makes no secret of drawing from the history of philosophy for the purposes of articulating his preferred business ethics; indeed this move—from philosophy and religion to corporate experience—is a proud and prominent part of his public persona and shapes the day-to-day operations of his company. And yet there may be limit situations—such as the dictates of corporate law—that would impair the translation or replication of Cucinelli’s business ethics, such as he defines them, in other countries. For instance, in US corporate law there is a legal mandate to place shareholder interests first—that is, before those of the CEO, founder, employees, or other interested stakeholder parties; the protection of shareholder priority has long been upheld by the Supreme Court, and arguably its origins can be traced back to as early as 1819 when the court recognized corporations as having the same legal rights as persons.<sup>19</sup> Until April 2012, Cucinelli’s corporate form was entirely closely held, and this made it possible to

conduct his business operations as he saw fit, irrespective of shareholder input and directives. Currently only about thirty percent of the company is being publically traded, with the remainder still closely held and marked for inheritance by Cucinelli's choice of successor. Of course, there is no guarantee that the CEO who succeeds Cucinelli will fully share his vision (for example, will see his corporate role principally as a kind of steward or Benedictine abbot), or respect his wish to maintain and develop a humanistic enterprise in the world of business—and subsequently more shares of the company could be sold until it is no longer closely held.

While Cucinelli appears pleased with both the ethical and financial integrity of his company, this cannot be traced strictly to his presence as a moral manager. “Being a moral manager,” as scholars have noted, “involves being a role model for ethical conduct, communicating regularly about ethics and values, and using the reward system to hold everyone accountable to those values and standards.”<sup>20</sup> And yet, under US corporate law the notion that a moral manager makes a *company* moral is false; it is a fallacy of composition, among other things.<sup>21</sup> It remains to be seen, then, at the point Cucinelli might become guided—or dominated—by the interests of shareholders whether the company will maintain its allegiance to humanism in its current forms. A majority of shareholders may simply declare Cucinelli's humanistic business ethics to be unprofitable, or to present a liability to expanding the global presence of the brand. In the meantime, entrepreneurs must consider the degree to which corporate law in their respective countries and jurisdictions might support or limit initiatives to integrate Cucinelli's kind of corporate humanism into their own businesses.

### **1. EDUCATIONAL PHILANTHROPY AS STEWARDSHIP**

Maybe the notion of “replication” has additional valences worth exploring. For instance, in addition to transforming business culture and entrepreneurial activities, Cucinelli provides a dynamic and direct way of thinking about philanthropy, especially what might be called educational philanthropy: the notion that human life is improved through education at all ages, in all forms of work, and that such opportunities ought to be supported by private underwriting. This may be understood as a kind of caretaking or stewardship, especially in so far as we find it in the private sector. There are well-known examples of this phenomenon—from nineteenth century industrialists (J. P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and Ezra Cornell—the first creating a library, with the latter three all contributing to the foundation of universities) to Silicon Valley entrepreneurs (Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg). Cucinelli appears to be undertaking projects that could naturally lead to something like the establishment of a foundation or fund for humanism that would expand and



sustain the Accademia Neoumanistica. But he also seems similarly attentive to initiatives that are neither educational nor local, for example, donating the funds for the construction of a hospital in Malawi. The common thread that ties the Accademia, for example, together with the hospital might be described as an attention to the care of the self or soul; in this context, one even hears a different resonance in the notion of health *care*.

While patronage from private sector business leaders is common, the notion of *stewardship* is not regularly part of the intended mission of those grants and gifts. Cucinelli's frequent invocation of the term—often as an intentional term of positive self-description—reaches out not to business per se, or even mainly, so much as to the likes of Catholic social thought, which has exhibited some of the most sustained reflections on the sources, meaning, and impact of stewardship. Initially we may wish to look at Luke 16:1-8 (where a steward is called to “give an account of thy stewardship”), then also consider more recent remarks by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace's publication *Vocation of the Business Leader: A Reflection*, which followed after seminars on “the logic of the gift” that dwelled on Benedict XVI's social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.<sup>22</sup>

§52. Scripture teaches that good stewards are creative and productive with the resources placed in their care. They do not merely take from creation's abundance; instead they use their talents and skills to produce more from what has been given them.

§83. To live out their vocation as faithful stewards to their calling, businesspeople need to be formed in a religious culture which shows them the possibilities and promise of the good they can do and which they ought to do—the good which is distinctly theirs. Family, Church, and school are critical institutions in this formation.

In this respect, then, profit is a sign, among others, that the businessperson possesses a spiritual as well as an economic health. And Cucinelli frequently comments on the intimacy that obtains between his family, the Church, and the other social institutions that underwrite their daily lives, such as schools; Cucinelli has also contributed—in a more literal sense—to the restoration of his town's church and elementary school. The “logic of the gift,” as Cucinelli seems to interpret it—and live it—shows a holistic set of relationships: the church addresses the needs of the spirit, which in turn supports the individual and community in work, which in turn contributes to profit, which can then be returned, in part, to the Church and other elements of the community. While Cucinelli makes a habit of addressing his stewardship of the company and the company town—again, we wonder to what extent this is promotion for a brand

rather than a religious or cultural ideal—he also recurrently invokes philosophers and religious thinkers as the fitting motivation for his architectural, business, and social initiatives. In short, he emphasizes how ideas underwrite the institutions that frame our lives.

Cucinelli has already undertaken infrastructural projects—such as the restoration of core buildings in Solomeo, the development of a library (both as a building and a collection), and the construction of the iconic Palladio-inspired Teatro Cucinelli—so moving forward to the development of an educational curriculum would appear both a fitting and perhaps even necessary way to fulfill the promise and potential of the built environment. As part of an initial effort to create an intellectual community dedicated to humanism, the curriculum would likely reflect Cucinelli’s interests in the subject. At present, no such initiative for the development of content for the Accademia has taken place—nor does there appear to be an expressed awareness of the need to pursue it.

Perhaps, then, before choosing books and modes of instruction, we need to ask the more fundamental, preliminary question: in what sense can Cucinelli’s views be called humanistic? Given his references, and especially owing to the cultural and even physical environments of his study—from St. Benedict and St. Francis to Pico della Mirandola, from Perugia and Assisi to Solomeo—Cucinelli can seem a patron of the arts that would be familiar to 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian humanists (and their attention to *umanesimo*), though Cucinelli’s robust marketing campaigns go further—as if his patronage were also a form of business-centric, profit-oriented promotion and popularization (such as we have come to expect from those who create and enrich brands). So whose humanism is Cucinelli attempting to inherit and develop? His designation of the term “neohumanism” lends a clue in so far as it presumes an established history and a set of credentialed references.

Cucinelli in large measure looks back to earlier traditions, views, and values in order to recover them and find new contexts for their application—perhaps especially with a concern for those elements that promote human flourishing and protect human dignity (as the movements of humanistic psychology and humanistic business management would both suggest and be suited to). In fact, Cucinelli’s regularly made historical allusions to both divine and anthropocentric philosophy, coupled with his own outward behavior as the steward or abbot of his hamlet and its people, make him seem a heir to the ambitions of the Renaissance humanist—especially in the tradition of “civil economy” that was typical in Italian city states since the middle ages. As Bruni and Zamagni have written of the phenomenon, its “main contribution to the history of economic thought is its conception of the market as a place centered around the principle of reciprocity and civil virtues.”<sup>23</sup> As an entrepreneur who is focused on the well-being of his fellow citizens, Cucinelli’s credentials are intact.

His leadership role, then, is not primarily for personal enrichment or for the exercise of power of others (though both may naturally follow from his initiatives), rather, his self-appointed task is the attempt to support and expand human flourishing—both locally and, to the extent possible, beyond the perimeter of his medieval borgo.

Cucinelli is, then, not so much an innovator of ideas as an inventive reclamer of well-established, but also in some cases well-forgotten or stridently discredited, ideas—as Bruni and Zamagni wonder about the “reasons the civil approach to economics disappeared from cultural debates, scientific enquiries and the public arena.”<sup>24</sup> For example, it has been said that “the key to Kant’s moral and political philosophy is his conception of the dignity of the human individual.”<sup>25</sup> Cucinelli’s version of neohumanism—as a reclamation and re-application of ancient, Renaissance, and some Enlightenment values—in large measure cuts against the grain of most contemporary philosophical theory; this adoption is coupled with an eschewing, or at least neglect, of ideas deriving from the post-Enlightenment, the post-modern, and what is increasingly coming to be called the “posthuman.”<sup>26</sup> The fact that posthumanism—underscored by the desire to move past or beyond the human as a measure for value—is gaining traction at the same time that Cucinelli is advocating for *neohumanism* suggests yet another way in which his enterprise is out of phase with current trends. And yet it is not apparent whether posthumanism is capable of supporting both human dignity and the development of a profitable business.<sup>27</sup> Given the extent to which such phenomena as the stock market are largely computer-based and computer-driven, perhaps business has—at its core—already moved past human agency. While computers increasingly run the economy, humans may be at most (and at best) overseers and at the lower end, mere shoppers.

At odds with Cucinelli’s appeal to the legacy of humanism, especially from Renaissance sources, most contemporary explicators and defenders of human dignity, such as George Kateb in *Human Dignity*, argue for a secular notion of the concept.<sup>28</sup> As existentialists did, especially Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Existentialism is a Humanism*, it is common to find modern advocates of human dignity contend aggressively for the elimination of all reference to or reliance on divinity (a different sort of appeal beyond the human).<sup>29</sup> It is rarer these days to find a humanist say, as Richard Taylor does, “just as the ancient concept of virtue is unintelligible apart from the idea of function, so is the concept of moral obligation unintelligible apart from the idea of God.”<sup>30</sup> More commonly Taylor’s brand of humanism comes in for a sharp critique: “Such proclamations” as Walter Sinnott-Armstrong says of Taylor’s claim, “confirm the fears of the religious, but they depend on the same refusal to distinguish morality from religion. This misidentification is pernicious.”<sup>31</sup> As a general trend, it is safe to say that since the mid-nineteenth century and the rise of the scientific credibility of Darwinism and

other forms of natural science, humanism has been stripped of its capacity to account for man's relationship to God, the divine, or any kind of mystical or supernatural experience. There are some signs of push-back as in Marilynne Robinson's *Absence of Mind*, where she argues that many of the "new atheists"—Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Steven Pinker, E. O. Wilson, and others—have adopted "the methods of a kind of argument that claims the authority of science," yet is not subject to the rigorous standards of science.<sup>32</sup> In short, the positivist critique of religion—and along with it millennia-old traditions of humanism—is better understood as "parascientific literature" caught up in a "hermeneutics of condescension" and not science at all.<sup>33</sup>

While Sartre's famous work *Existentialism is a Humanism* lent new credence to a trend of secularization in twentieth century philosophy and science, it also drew criticism from Martin Heidegger who in his "Letter on 'Humanism'" found Sartre's claims missing the core problem of human existence. By merely inverting Plato's idea that essence precedes existence, Sartre leaves us in a metaphysical muddle. Heidegger says: "For even if philosophy wishes to determine the relation of *essentia* and *existentia* ... it still remains to ask first of all from what destiny of being this differentiation in being as *esse essentiae* and *esse existentiae* comes to appear to thinking."<sup>34</sup> Put less obliquely, Sartre's reversal of Plato's notion retains a focus on human beings instead of Being. Heidegger is a critic of humanism insofar as it makes us "forgetful" of being-as-such: "we should first of all make clear how being concerns the human being and how it claims him."<sup>35</sup>

The debate between Sartre and Heidegger is significant, in part, because it set the dominant terms of humanistic inquiry among many philosophers in the second half of the twentieth century, including Jacques Derrida. In Derrida's essay "The Ends of Man," he engages both Sartre's and Heidegger's remarks on humanism and posits what may be considered some of the first inklings of posthumanism.<sup>36</sup> As David Mikics has noted: "Derrida intends his title to suggest the conclusion or overcoming of the humanist tradition."<sup>37</sup> It was Heidegger who pointed out that Sartre's "reversal of a metaphysical statement"—namely changing the priority of existence and essence—"remains a metaphysical statement."<sup>38</sup> One of the important and lasting features of Derrida's critique is his claim that Heidegger's emphasis on Being (that is, trying to remind us of its importance) is also part of the metaphysical superstructure. Mikics points out how Derrida announces a fundamental shift in our relationship to both Being and human beings: "The house that metaphysics built is shaking, if not collapsing; all our cherished ideas of the human have been questioned. And the shaking comes from within, from metaphysics itself."<sup>39</sup> In the wake of the controversial tracts by Sartre, Heidegger, and Derrida, we have inherited a complicated, some might say compromised, vision of the human, and for that matter, Being. Sartre's human-

based worldview and Heidegger's more ecstatic metaphysics have *both* become discredited forms of pursuing philosophical inquiry: existential humanism and mystico-religious metaphysics have been rendered inert historical phenomena by contemporary thinkers, among them the new atheists and the posthumanists.

The development of "posthumanism" must be counted a peculiar undertaking for humans. After all, why are we trying to go "beyond" ourselves? (And hear we hear inklings of Nietzsche asking after Emerson's question "Where do we find ourselves?," when he writes "We have never sought ourselves—how could it happen that we should ever *find* ourselves?"—in short, that the posthuman presumes an achievement we never made!<sup>40</sup>) In the present context, moreover, it should be worth asking by extension how an attempt to "overcome" or go "beyond" a hegemony—such as "the human"—can evolve into an argument *against* it? Just as Marilynne Robinson has alerted us to the ways in which the "scientific" claims of the new atheists are in fact more appropriately deemed "parascientific" in nature, so the principles and even the tone of some posthumanistic thinking suggests that any argument for what comes "after" the human necessary postulates (and perhaps privileges) what *displaces* the human. If posthumanism goes far enough where does the human go? When posthumanism goes too far, as it might for example in the work of Michel Foucault, does it not become, instead, a kind of *anti*-humanism? "As the archeology of our thought easily shows," Foucault remarks, "man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end."<sup>41</sup>

Given this pre-history of posthumanism—and, as it were, neohumanism—it is worth noting that while humanism has often been used as a *secular* alternative to a religious approach to life and business, Cucinelli appears to embrace an unapologetically *spiritual* form of expression. Indeed, the speech he gave (from memory) on the occasion of his investiture with an honorary doctorate from the University of Perugia was entitled "Dignity as a Form of the Spirit."

Cucinelli's use of spiritual, metaphysical, religious terms to describe his understanding of human dignity elides, to some degree, the conventionally understood divide between two types of human dignity: namely, we have the long-standing Christian view that human dignity is a result of "being made in God's image," and abides necessarily in any being that is dependent on a divine creator; meanwhile, in the Enlightenment view—at the heart of Kant's philosophy—human dignity is a function of individual autonomy. While Kant himself was motivated to "make room for faith," the traditions that inherited his work have largely used autonomy as a way to secularize the definition of human dignity, making it a matter of the social compact rather than (as it is for Christians and especially Catholics) a part of natural law—a feature at once indispensable and non-renounceable. A close reading of Cucinelli's references to human dignity provides evidence that he—perhaps for appealing to as many customers as

possible—takes Christian and Catholic ideas and describes them as *anonymous* religious creeds. Instead of a separation of religious faith and the marketplace, Cucinelli has decided to strip away as much as possible the specific names and signs that confirm Christian and Catholic allegiances so he can siphon away—and put to use—what appears to be the *universal*, though not necessarily secular, humanistic content. Cucinelli speaks of God and spirit, the divine and the transcendent, but always in the service of the human. While this may be a rhetorical strategy that protects the brand from seeming overly parochial or religiously partisan, it cannot hide—nor does Cucinelli appear to endeavor to hide—the Christian and Catholic-inflected origins of his thoughts on human dignity. The diminishment of overt references to Christianity and Catholicism in Cucinelli’s writing may simply be what happens when his heroes (especially St. Benedict and St. Francis) pass through his avid reading of the Stoics, such as Aurelius and Epictetus, and Renaissance humanists, such as Mirandola.

Cucinelli has turned Solomeo into a classroom—texts of famous works of philosophy, literature, and religion appear on small terracotta plaques on buildings throughout the town (custom ordered from and handmade in nearby Deruta). Even this architectural gesture reflects a crucial element of Cucinelli’s form of pedagogy, drawn as it is from the ancients: that we each need to read and re-read in order to be “reminded of core values,” and “remain focused on the activities that improve the quality of life.”<sup>42</sup> What the Greeks called *hypomnemata*: reminders to oneself that must be studied so that important and orienting ideas are continually moved to the forefront of one’s thoughts. Placed as they are near doorways and passages, the conspicuously displayed aphorisms invite a passerby to consider and re-consider his or her relation to the ideas expressed therein. The plaques function, not incidentally, as a tacit endorsement of specific humanistic ideals that Cucinelli has not written so much as authorized and commended to all who walk the streets of Solomeo—visitors and residents alike, salaried factory workers and high-paying clientele.

A recently renovated multi-floor space on West 57<sup>th</sup> Street in the heart of midtown Manhattan—that includes a library, a canteen, patios (including one with a sliver view of Central Park), as well as a showroom and offices—reflects an effort to export some aspects of life and work in Solomeo. Can the patterns and pathways of life in a very small village be translated effectively to the middle of a bustling metropolis? As business is conducted on one floor, and clients browse the collection on the next floor, one imagines that intellectual salons and colloquia might take place on the higher floors—but do they? New clothing arrives regularly from Solomeo along with new crates of books in the humanistic tradition. Yet to what extent can we, as observers to the creation of Cucinelli’s clothes philosophy, distinguish between the use of books as props (and propaganda?)—part of a savvy and stylish promotional campaign—and the use of

books as, well, the objects of study, and the sources from which we derive insight and guidance? Are all of Cucinelli's allusions to world-changing philosophers, saints, and scholars far-fetched—a playful invocation of an imagined life (much as we might find in the “world of Ralph Lauren”)—or are his proclamations part of an earnest and genuine faith in what he says?

## **2. THE CONDUCT OF BUSINESS AS OCCASION FOR STEWARDSHIP**

Philanthropy, understood as “the love of humankind,” is a disposition well-suited to the core sentiments of humanism—an intellectual tradition focused on the plane of the human: the love, care, and enrichment of human experience. Philanthropy is also closely allied with certain aspects of charity, and in Cucinelli's reading of Benedict, giving to others is not a form of false benevolence (for example, a way to dismiss the unseemly) but a bid for heightened conscientiousness on the part of the giver and receiver. Charity implies an intimate relationship since it is a gift presented as an expression of hope. The abbot, according to Benedict, must seek to serve others at the level of their need: “he must so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.”<sup>43</sup>

Cucinelli amply expresses his dedication to philanthropy and humanism in Solomeo, but he also applies his principles in his international business practices—again, both in ethical and fiscal terms. For example, Cucinelli personally and regularly visits the ranches in Tibet where goats are raised to supply his company with cashmere. He has developed personal relationships with the shepherds, and due to that human connection believes he has been able to improve the quality of his source material. Cucinelli contends that mutual knowledge—Cucinelli's of the life and immediate conditions of his purveyors, and the shepherds' of the man who transforms their hard-won raw materials into a finished product—contributes to a capitalism that is, in his words, “slightly more human.”<sup>44</sup> Prompted by a visit one of his daughters made to Malawi, Cucinelli funded the construction of a new hospital there. The philanthropy in Malawi thus far reflects the practical and immediate needs of its communities, but the intent is consistent with Cucinelli's wider vision: where the improvement of the conditions in which people live and work contributes to the enhancement of their abiding human dignity. In order to pursue this goal, one has to see who one is working with at all levels of the undertaking. Though, at present, Cucinelli has not yet visited Malawi but instead relied on his daughter's representation as a witness and a proxy.

Cucinelli's philanthropy is distinguished by its alignment with charity, or what Benedict XVI describes in *Caritas in Veritate* as the “logic of the gift” (§34, §36). Similarly, Cucinelli's development of an international brand also finds him reaching out to communities not just in the fashion worlds of Milan and New

York, but as mentioned, also goat-herders in Tibet and the health needs of children in Malawi. Where the American model of philanthropy can sometimes appear, somewhat cynically, as part of a business plan (for position promotion or even tax breaks), the approach Cucinelli takes resonates with the belief that one lives at the benefit and bequest of God, and so charity is a form of kinship, and even a proper form of the redistribution of wealth (§42). Benedict XVI writes:

Underneath the more visible process [of globalization], humanity itself is becoming increasingly interconnected; it is made up of individuals and peoples to whom this process should offer benefits and development, as they assume their respective responsibilities, singly and collectively. [ . . . ]

The processes of globalization, suitably understood and directed, open up the unprecedented possibility of large-scale redistribution of wealth on a world-wide scale. [ . . . ] The world-wide diffusion of forms of prosperity should not therefore be held up by projects that are self-centred, protectionist or at the service of private interests.

The way Cucinelli runs his company may be a representative example of what Wolfgang Grassl has designated a “hybrid” form of business—namely, the weaving together of the logic of the gift with the logic of the market. Grassl argues for something that seems empirically evident when reviewing Cucinelli’s success: “why hybridization of business occurs and why it is desirable.”<sup>45</sup>

Another way to approach the idea of replicating Cucinelli’s business philosophy is to consider ways in which businesses might find intellectual inspiration from their own humanistic traditions, insofar as they exist. As Cucinelli has drawn heavily from the models of Umbrian philosophy in St. Benedict and St. Francis, and developed ties with the University of Perugia and the spiritual center of Assisi, so might businesses in other countries explore the humanistic traditions that have informed their more local culture. If Cucinelli’s business philosophy seems too strongly tied to the temperament, customs, and mores of his Umbrian context, then perhaps businesses can find in their own communities the intellectual resources to develop humanistic commercial and philanthropic enterprises. Humanism is a trans-temporal, global phenomenon so it is very likely that there are rich strains of the tradition that are largely untapped for their capacity to contribute meaningfully to business practice and the amplification of human dignity.

The fashion industry is an environment in which the names of designers become the names of the corporations they run. At the Academy Awards they ask the guests “*Who* are you wearing?” From Ralph Lauren to Donna Karan, Alexander Wang to L’Wren Scott, Prada to Dior, Hilfiger to Chanel, the history of fashion is populated by important moments of transfiguration: when the name



of the individual becomes a brand or concept that transcends the individual. In the death of Alexander McQueen we see again how the autobiographical artifact of a personal name can survive the person and go on to represent specific design values and virtues. Cucinelli's emphasis on his custodial role suggests that he has absorbed the implications of creating a company that can survive him—and remain vital and successful when he is no longer its custodian. But Cucinelli's particular brand of humanistic business practice—including his many philanthropic undertakings—points to a further effort to separate the man from the brand. By focusing on perennial ideas and the construction of durable institutions that celebrate those ideas, Cucinelli is slowly attempting to de-personalize “Brunello Cucinelli” so that the brand can come to represent not just a particular “sportswear luxury” style but also, it would seem, a commitment to humanistic studies.<sup>46</sup> As Bill Gates gradually transformed corporate profits into the funds that give life to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, so there is precedent—as also seen in the universities founded by bequests from Carnegie, Vanderbilt, and Cornell—to show how the Accademia might become a philanthropic and educational force of its own. On this model of educational philanthropy, the clothing line becomes a manifestation of the company's core values, which includes a dedication to the quality of life of those who make quality products, and an aspiration to create conditions for thinking further about humanistic philosophy. In this way, as with the computer innovator and industrialist patrons, the profits from Cucinelli's corporate enterprise become the means for supporting other enterprises such as the Accademia Neohumanistica.

## CONCLUSION

While much of Brunello Cucinelli's entrepreneurial success may derive from intuitive principles of good business—the ethical treatment of workers, the jealous guarding of high standards of quality and craftsmanship, a savvy marketing campaign, and so on—I have turned attention to those less obvious, even at times mercurial, dimensions of his business practice. In particular, I have investigated the apparent paradox that lies at the heart of his recuperation of humanistic philosophy from Aristotle to Kant—namely, how the promotion of luxury in the context of modern capitalism seems at odds with the often ascetic, humble initiatives of religious thinking, for instance, as embodied by St. Benedict and St. Francis. Cucinelli's application of the humanistic tradition has, it would seem, transformed a literal understanding of “luxury” as a form of privilege, greed, refinement, and excess and made it seem a term of relevance to every employee, no matter his or her station. By treating labor as, again somewhat paradoxically, an activity associated with a philosophical notion of leisure, Cucinelli has created a business environment in which the protection and development of worker dignity is coupled with attention to issues of quality in

workmanship. Furthermore, I raised the question whether Cucinelli's model—and his success—were phenomena localized to central Umbria, or perhaps Italy, and not adaptable to business practices beyond those borders. I concluded that there are several dimensions of his application of humanism that would likely translate successfully to other companies; part of my consideration on this front included an in-depth examination of his work as a philanthropist and steward. Cucinelli's commitment to the restoration and construction of sites dedicated to the well-being of his workers, including a theatre and a library, suggest additional ways in which his vision—and his business ethics—may be profitably emulated outside of Italy.

In the meantime, theorists and practitioners who are engaged in assessing the relation of religion and philosophy to business ethics may find in Brunello Cucinelli—and his eponymous entrepreneurial enterprise—a worthwhile source for considering the translation of moral, religious, and aesthetic ideals into the everyday conduct of commerce. As this investigation may suggest, Cucinelli's diversely implemented, sometimes vague and contradictory, vision of neohumanism nevertheless presents a model of sufficient empirical success—beautiful products; bountiful profits; contented employees; prominent social, intellectual, architectural, and infrastructural initiatives—to warrant further critical investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Mead, "The Prince of Solomeo," *The New Yorker*, March 29, 2010, 79. More information: [www.DavidLaRocca.org](http://www.DavidLaRocca.org) Contact: [DavidLaRocca@Post.Harvard.edu](mailto:DavidLaRocca@Post.Harvard.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>5</sup> John Colapinto, "Just Have Less," *The New Yorker*, January 3, 2011, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Mead, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Colapinto, 37.

<sup>9</sup> St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed., Timothy Fry (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics), Chapter 39: 40.

<sup>10</sup> Colapinto, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict, Chapter 55: 53.

<sup>12</sup> Brunello Cucinelli, Press conference in Solomeo, November 12, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, P. Calefato, "Contemporary Luxury," *European Financial Review*, (December 11, 2012); N. Hennigs, K.-P. Wiedmann, C. Klarmann and S. Behrens, "The Concept of Luxury: A Global Phenomenon with Local Implications," *European Financial Review* (August 20, 2013); J. Hoffmann and I. Coste-Manière, *Global Luxury Trends* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Sophie de Rosee, "The World of Brunello Cucinelli, Designer," *Telegraph* (April 7, 2012).

- <sup>15</sup> For an informed analysis of Benedict XVI's ideas, including remarks on *Caritas et Veritate*, see Thomas R. Rourke, *The Social and Political Thought of Benedict XVI* (New York: Lexington Books, 2010).
- <sup>16</sup> Joseph Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1952), 2.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.
- <sup>18</sup> The editors. "Bradley Cooper and Fellow A-Listers Love Brunello," *New York Observer*, March 19, 2014.
- <sup>19</sup> See *Dartmouth College v. Woodward* (1819).
- <sup>20</sup> "Moral Person and Moral Manager: How Executives Develop a Reputation for Ethical Leadership," Linda Klebe Treviño, Laura Pincus Hartman, and Michael Brown, *California Management Review* 42, no. 4(Summer 2000): 141-142.
- <sup>21</sup> For criticism of the moral manager model of business, see for instance James E. Roper, "How is 'Business Ethics' Possible?," *Research in Ethical Issues in Organizations*, Vol. 6, 2005.
- <sup>22</sup> Peter K. A. Cardinal Turkson and Bishop Mario Toso, *Vocation of the Business Leader: A Reflection*.
- <sup>23</sup> L. Bruni and S. Zamagni, *Civil Economy: Efficiency, Equity, Public Happiness* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2007), 13. See also, L. Bruni, *L'Impresa Civile: Una Via Italiana all'Economia di Mercato* (Milan: EGEA, 2009).
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, trans. John Ladd (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), xv.
- <sup>26</sup> For more on posthumanism see for example: Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford University Press, 2003); Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Fordham University Press, 2008); Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, 1990); N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (University of Chicago, 1999); Steve Nichols, *The Post-Human Manifesto* (1988); Robert Pepperell, *The Post-Human Condition* (Oxford, 1995); and Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
- <sup>27</sup> Nick Bostrom, Director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford argues for, at least, the "possibility of posthuman dignity," though does not articulate how this kind of dignity might influence or transform the nature of commerce, in his "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity," *Bioethics* 19, no. 3(2005): 202-214.
- <sup>28</sup> George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2011).
- <sup>29</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
- <sup>30</sup> Richard Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 84.
- <sup>31</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality Without God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xii.
- <sup>32</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 2.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 14.
- <sup>34</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism'," *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 250.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.
- <sup>36</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man" in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1982), 109-136.
- <sup>37</sup> David Mikics, *Who Was Jacques Derrida?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 132.
- <sup>38</sup> Heidegger, 250.
- <sup>39</sup> Mikics, 136.

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<sup>40</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," *Essays and Poems*, (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 471; Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), 451.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida uses this passage from Foucault's *The Order of Things* as an epigraph for "The Ends of Man," 111. See also Mikics, 132-133.

<sup>42</sup> Brunello Cucinelli, Press conference at Teatro Cucinelli, Solomeo, November 11, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Benedict, Chapter 64: 63.

<sup>44</sup> Mead, 75.

<sup>45</sup> Wolfgang Grassl, "Hybrid Forms of Business: The Logic of the Gift in the Commercial World," *The Journal of Business Ethics* 100(2011): 109.

<sup>46</sup> Brunello Cucinelli, Press conference in Solomeo, November 12, 2010.