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## COMMENTARY - THE GOLDEN RULE OF "RECIPROCITY"

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# A PROPER OUTLOOK ON WORK

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We should take advantage of these difficult times to think about the nature of that fundamental human activity we call work. For this purpose, let us suppose that some of our fellow citizens decided to colonize a desert island. As soon as they arrive and settle in, it becomes clear that for their families to grow and their village to develop they must shift from a "domestic" self-sufficient economy to a "political" exchange economy, where each person must strive to make their skills useful to others and make the most of the skills others possess.

If those whose skills are not in demand fail to convince others of their usefulness, they soon have to learn a different trade to avoid becoming beggars dependent on charity. "Nobody but a beggar" - Adam Smith reminds us - "chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens" (*The Wealth of Nations*, 1776).

This simple exercise reveals three truths that are at once fundamental yet neglected: first, that our work turns goods into wealth and increases our wellbeing; second, that in a market economy work essentially involves a duty to reciprocate; and third, that an economic system breaks down when the chain of reciprocity is broken. Throughout history there have been other ways to organize community life. Although the earliest systems relied on a sacred hierarchy, the most relevant large-scale systems have been the various collectivist planned economies of the twentieth century. Global financial capitalism is among the alternative systems (which I call *civil*) that are not based on reciprocity but instead on greed and entitlements (entitlements deviate from the principles of healthy markets, because they eliminate reciprocity).

There is yet another far more fascinating alternative that often comes up in cultural critiques of modernity and the market. It is a "romantic" view which posits that reciprocal work and necessity should not determine what occupations exist on the "island". According to its proponents, it would be more dignified and ethical for people to choose their occupations without having to depend on others in the market and for the "State" to pay everyone fair wages (they do not explain where the revenue for this would come from nor who would produce it).

What would happen on the island if this last scenario were to be tried? Undoubtedly, there would be a surplus of enjoyable occupations because people would be reaping the intrinsic benefits of following their passions and favored vocations. A list of such occupations is easy to imagine: observing the stars, writing romances, collecting butterflies, studying economics etc. At the same time, the community would suffer from a shortage of many of the less enjoyable but necessary occupations: street cleaners, sewage technicians, miners, undertakers etc. In this society people would not interact properly, because they would be too busy pursuing their own selfish interests. The two lists would be much longer if people were moved from this hypothetical island into one of our complex cities, where many people have unpleasant jobs (certainly not pleasant enough to work happily eight hours a day for decades) that are useful to others and indispensable to society. During the long term labor crisis we currently face, we must bear in mind that the most characteristic feature of work is reciprocity, i.e., meeting the needs of others. Work brings us together and provides the main binding force of our society, even when reciprocity coexists with asymmetries of power, money, responsibility - such asymmetries are a threat to the existence and dignity of reciprocity. Work is an excellent cure for selfishness in all its forms, because it prompts people to walk a mile in another's shoes and ask themselves what skills they have that would be interesting to others.

One of the virtues that helps us live well in a market economy is empathy, which is the ability to anticipate and understand the needs and desires of others and make an effort to satisfy those needs. Civil markets are a social mechanism for the exchange of goods and services that would not exist if everyone only followed their own aspirations, inclinations and individual pleasure.

This perspective also allows us to grasp the proper meaning of the word “interest”. It involves something that is important to more than just the individual, and it is the reciprocal relationship between them (interests) that fosters interaction. Another issue concerns the culture of non-reciprocal work that threatens to infiltrate our businesses and organizations. Genuine reciprocity in our personal and working lives is not a simple matter, and it always requires a fair amount of creativity and commitment from all parties involved. Thus, shortcuts are often taken to avoid these difficulties. Consider that in pre-modern communities care giving was the duty of women whose “vocation” was to devote their entire lives to the care of others (especially males), and who were entitled to have their needs for care and attention satisfied by wives, daughters, sisters or nuns. The transfer of such concerns (possibly to civil society or the non-capitalist market) is a giant leap forward for humanity and dignity. The market can be a valuable ally of reciprocity, which is also a form of subsidiarity.

Choosing not to encourage or implement reciprocity at work is narrow-minded and a mistake. A social worker friend of mine recently visited the city jail to start an inmate work program to involve some of the young people there. “All I found was a bunch of lazybones”, he said. The work done by those young people was not genuine, because it lacked reciprocity, which was the consequence of simply trying to keep them busy instead of making them useful to others or even themselves. “I will not rest until these young people feel useful to our city”, he continued. He then did his utmost to find real work for them so that they could experience genuine reciprocity.

And he succeeded, even in this time of crisis, like so many other social and civil entrepreneurs. They innovate because they feel productive inclusion is not enough and are willing to try reciprocity, where all give and receive. I am convinced that our present crisis stems from having created too many “jobs” in the past decades - not only in the public sector - that stop short of reciprocity due to a lack of creativity and commitment on the part of employers, workers, and institutions. All the same, few experiences are more painful than feeling excluded from the reciprocity that permeates our shared lives. Retirement can often be a very painful experience if retirees do not continue to feel useful to their fellow citizens in other ways. Unemployment is tragic not only because of the income loss, but because one is excluded from the network of reciprocity: “the law of the Moderator of the world, which commands us to find ways to be useful to one another” (Antonio Genovesi, 1767). The way to recover from economic and social crises is to bring reciprocity back to work. To do that we must learn to look at the world around us through the eyes of others.

*Translated by Tomás Olcese*