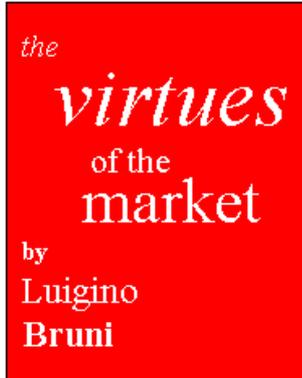


# WORK: MOTIVATING PEOPLE IS NOT A QUESTION OF INCENTIVES

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*Many economists have drawn the conclusion that these instruments produce the opposite effect, because they are in direct conflict with the intrinsic motivations of those who work. That is why there's need to find new mechanisms...*

Work understood as a virtue is a modern conquest. In the ancient world (not only Greek and Roman, and even in the East), slaves worked. Free men – citizens – were liberated from work thanks to the slaves that worked for them, and they were able to dedicate themselves to activities more worthy of free men, like philosophy, politics and exercise. During the Christian Medieval period, work began to be affirmed as a virtue thanks to monastic charisms. It began to be seen as a good activity in itself, as way to reach happiness. The monastics began to affirm that the monk is also a worker (this is one of the meanings of the Benedictine motto “ora et labora”). Slowly, work begins to emerge, having to conquer its own space in a still very “platonian world” which gives it lower moral and spiritual status compared to intellectual activities. We had to wait until very recent times (practically until the 19th century) before manual laborers would vote and have access to public positions. The market economy contributed to definitively raise work from an inferior status and making it always more an important protagonist in the life of the free man, who was founding democracies and republics (art. 1).

Yet even today, work is subject to tensions: it is praised and exulted on one hand, enslaved to consumption and speculation on the other. During this time of economic and social crisis, work is perhaps the most urgent question we're facing. It calls us to a deeper reflection (and a considerably newer one compared to the ideological debates of the 20th century) on what is considered as work, and on what role work has within our lives.

Again, let's begin with two everyday situations. I'm invited to dinner; I bring a tray of pastries, and my host says “thanks”. I drink a coffee at the train station, and after I've paid a price, I say, “thanks” to the waiter. These are two thank-yous said in seemingly very different contexts: gift and friendship in the first, contract and anonymity in the second. Still, we use the same word, “thanks”. Why? What is common between these two so apparently distant facts, at least in the culture of our market society? The first thing they have in common is that they are free meetings between human beings. We would never say “thanks” to an automatic coffee machine, or we smile when we mistakenly answer “you're welcome” to the mechanical voice that thanks us after paying our highway toll with a credit card. I'm convinced that the thank-you which we say not only to our friends but also to waiters, bakers or cashiers at the supermarket, is not only good manners or habits. That thank-you expresses recognition that, even when we're doing nothing more than our duty, by working, there is always *something more* than the duty and which transforms that exchange into a *truly* human act. Besides, we could say that work truly beings when we go beyond the agreement of a contract and put all of ourselves into making lunch, tightening a screw, cleaning a bathroom or giving a lesson at school. One truly works when you begin to add “Mario” when addressing Mr. Rossi or “Luigino” when addressing Professor Bruni. Instead, when one stops before crossing this

threshold, work remains too similar to what that automatic coffee machine does, and we therefore stop ourselves before the door of humanness's *oikos* (home), without entering.

### The competitive factor

This is where we find an important paradox which is at the heart of current businesses and organizations. Workers and directors of every business, if they are good and honest, know that work is truly work and brings the fruits of efficiency and effectiveness when it expresses an excess to what is laid out in one's contract or duty – when it is a *gift* (as N. Alter's most recent book *Donner et prendre* reminds us). Especially in complex, modern organizations, if the worker does not freely give his passions, his intelligence, his intrinsic motivations, no incentive control or sanction will be able to obtain the best that he has to give, and this also becomes an essential competitive factor for the success of the very business. Today, it is always truer that the success of businesses in international competition depends above all on human capital, on people and on their intelligence and creativity. They are the ones that make the business grow and produce wealth when they risk all of themselves in carrying out a certain profession or in following a certain task within an organization.

Whoever works in any organization knows that the motivational and, I dare say, spiritual dimensions cannot be bought or programmed. Rather, they must be understood by the worker as expressions of his reciprocity, of his gift. I can buy loans with opportune incentives, but I cannot buy on the work market what truly serves my business to be able to live and grow. In other words, I can buy and control what enters and leaves the office, I can verify *what* you do during the eight hours of work, but I cannot control or buy *how* you work, with how much "soul", passion and creativity you live those eight hours of work per day. The clauses and characteristics of working contracts stop just before entering in the things that truly count in a human work relationship, which lasts years and receives life from all those dimensions that no contract can foresee or specify. It's like saying that, with normal work contracts and incentives, one is only able to "buy" the less important part of work and the human worker – that activity which is too similar to the functions of a machine. But with such contracts, one cannot obtain those deeper and qualitative dimensions of work activity, the ones on which a great part of even a business's economic success depends (and that's the point!). And the various incentive mechanisms that I can find, necessarily being external and extrinsic instruments, cannot but be partial and imperfect. In the worst cases (ever more frequent, and much studied by economists), these instruments produce the opposite effect, as monetary incentives often enter into conflict with workers' intrinsic motivations.

### Who benefits from the incentives?

This is where the paradox emerges – when one realizes that businesses (always more of them), and organizations in general, over the last two centuries of capitalism, have built a systems of incentives and wages that is not able to recognize that "something more" which is the gift present in human work. If businesses use classical incentives (like money) to recognize the gift contained in work, that "something more" of gift becomes reabsorbed into contract and duty. Therefore, it disappears as gift. Instead, in order to avoid this disappearance of gift, businesses and their directors do nothing, and as time goes by, a worker's surplus production grows less, producing sadness and cynicism in him, and worse results for the business. I believe that this impossibility to compensate the surplus in work is one of the reasons why, in all kinds of work (from laborers to university professors), people almost always have a deep crisis after the first few years. They realize that after having given the best of them to that organization without feeling truly recognized for what they have truly given, which is always immensely greater than the value of the wages received. We feel so much less valued than what we're worth because organizations don't find the language to

express all that is found between the stipend and the gift of one's life. I'm convinced that people often change jobs because they are looking for recognition that almost never comes.

During this phase of epochal change, even in work and business culture, the most difficult art that business and organization directors must learn and nourish is the art of finding mechanisms we know can recognize (at least partially) the gift present in work, in every job. At the same time, we workers should not ask too much from our jobs, knowing that work is important but can never be the full expression of our need to give and receive gifts, our vocation to reciprocity. Work has its seasons: it has a beginning and an end; it has times of illness and fragility. But our need for reciprocity accompanies us and grows throughout our lives, preceding and outliving work. And without knowing how to signal and recognize the limit of work in the economy of our life (and in our community), work will always be either servant or master, never "brother work".

So, one truly works, and work is fully a virtue, when we recognize that "something more" in our own work and in that of others which goes beyond the words of a contract. And we truly live when we recognize that there is something more in life than just work.