

Subsidiarity and the logic of gift in business

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Abstract

This article is the editorial introduction to the special issue “Subsidiarity and the Logic of Gift in Business.” It provides a conceptual overview of subsidiarity and the logic of gift in business and society and it introduces the five essays that compose the special issue. This introduction and the five essays open new perspectives on subsidiarity, a principle that enables people, organizations, and society to address different needs at the appropriate level, working to achieve human flourishing, and the common good.

KEYWORDS

business, ethics, business and society, subsidiarity, logic of gift

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this special issue (SI), we explore the meaning of subsidiarity for business. Subsidiarity has been the focus of several relatively recent articles in the field of business ethics and the social sciences that have created a body of scholarship, which we review in the next section. This academic conversation can be divided into a macro-level, meso-level, and micro-level. Macro-level articles consider the broad societal picture. Meso-level articles deal with subsidiarity as an organizational principle of good governance and business management. Finally, micro-level articles address the individual moral agency that can develop in the free spaces opened by subsidiarity. Examples of articles at each of these levels are provided in the next section.

However, in the business literature, there is no major monographic study on the principle of subsidiarity in business and society that makes it fruitful for the contemporary challenges of inequality and political division that beset our societies. Furthermore, the existing literature emphasizes subsidiarity as a principle of efficiency rather than one of perfection. Thus, the

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purpose of this SI is to fill this gap by analyzing what it means to call subsidiarity a “principle” (Bernard Guéry) and what new forms it can take in our present socio-economic circumstances (Germán Scalzo and Ana Marta González). In addition, the articles in this SI demonstrate how the principle of subsidiarity can be fruitfully applied to pressing social issues, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (Emery Koenig and Michael Naughton), and inequalities in housing (Andrew Gustafson). Finally, there is a contribution on the ethical value of the logic of gift in business (Domènec Melé), which complements the dialogue on subsidiarity with a humanistic perspective on gift and exchange in the context of business. In the remainder of this introductory essay, we present a general theoretical overview of subsidiarity in business and society and then sketch out the five contributions to this SI.

2 | THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF SUBSIDIARITY AND THE LOGIC OF GIFT IN BUSINESS AND SOCIETY

As stated above, the existing literature on subsidiarity in business and society can be divided roughly into publications dealing with issues of a macroperspective, mesoperspective, and microperspective. On the macro socio-economic level, Kelly (2004) reflects on subsidiarity and solidarity as principles that facilitate the sharing of the benefits of globalization. In a similar vein, Kelley (2010) chooses subsidiarity as insight that overcomes Peter Singer's solution for global poverty by redistributing surplus. Instead, Kelley affirms that subsidiarity would lead for-profit businesses to recognize the “bottom of the pyramid” as a business opportunity at the same time lifting poor populations out of destitution. In a similar vein, Albareda and Sison (2020) link subsidiarity with Elinor Ostrom's notion of “polycentricity.” (Ostrom, 2019, pp. 133–136) The result is a fascinating “bricolage” of virtue ethical theory on the common good of the firm and guidelines for the commons according to Ostrom. This article shows the intellectual fruitfulness and usefulness of the ethical principle of subsidiarity to an economic approach like that of Ostrom.

Some publications maintain a stronger emphasis on the macro societal implications of corporations run with subsidiarity in mind. Aßländer's analysis (2011), for instance, delivers important insights into the different traditions regarding corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the USA and Europe. He uses the principle of subsidiarity to extend the standard notion of CSR, conceptualizing corporations as intermediate actors bearing specific subsidiary co-responsibilities in society. For Sison and Fontrodona (2012), the principle of subsidiarity plays a central role in their analysis of the common good of the firm in the Aristotelian–Thomistic tradition: The principle of subsidiarity links the common good of the firm with the wider political common good. The article by Martini and Spataro (2018) has the merit of linking the writings of the Italian economist Giuseppe Toniolo, who developed the notion of subsidiarity before official Catholic teaching did, with modern currents of economic thought like civil economy and happiness economics. Building on his earlier essay, Aßländer (2020) uses the principle of subsidiarity to address how collective action can be organized in a more stratified manner and which responsibilities corporations must assume in the process of overcoming structural injustices.

On the mesolevel, Naughton, Buckeye, Goodpaster, and Maines (2015) apply the general notion of subsidiarity to the world of management and business. The principle of subsidiarity means that higher entities should not replace smaller entities in fulfilling their tasks, unless the smaller entities are unable to do so. For business, this means that each person and each group

should be empowered to develop their gifts in moral responsibility to their own calling and social relationships. As such, subsidiarity defends the personal freedom of individuals and of smaller groups against the power of collectives in organizations and in society, while at the same time ensuring harmony and balance. Subsidiarity is thus integral to the common good of a firm. Along similar lines, Cremers (2017) analyzes the limits of agency theory and how human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity can help overcome these limits. Cremers' specific focus is corporate governance. While subsidiarity is just one of the principles under consideration, it does play an important role in Cremers' study. In Cremers' analysis, subsidiarity helps business leaders to promote harmony and human flourishing in their companies, thus promoting the common good. Subsidiarity allows specialization and division of labor to occur without losing sight of cooperation toward a common goal. Alford and Naughton reflect on subsidiarity as a principle in job design (Alford & Naughton, 2001). Frémeaux (2020) analyzes diversity, equity, and inclusion from the viewpoint of the common good, particularly in light of subsidiarity. Based on the research of Sison and Fontrodona (2012), she presents subsidiarity as an outcome or application of the common good. The principles postulate that by contributing to the common good in a way that respects human development in freedom, individuals with diverse gifts can cooperate more effectively. Subsidiarity thus enables each member of an organization to receive and transmit autonomy, guidance, and cooperation.

On the individual ethical level, Melé (2003, 2012) presents management as a humanistic activity that builds communities of persons, imbued with an organizational culture that builds and fosters good character. Character requires free moral agency. Subsidiarity is implied in his analysis, even though it is not his focus. Sison and Fontrodona (2012), who focus on employee participation in businesses, do not mention subsidiarity either. However, employee participation is an application of subsidiarity. Participation is a manifestation of a business culture that recognizes individual gifts and makes them fruitful for the common good of the company. Individuals bring their gifts to the company and together create something uniquely new.

Like the ones just mentioned, other publications on business in society deal with issues that are closely connected with subsidiarity but do not reflect on the explicit link between their own topic and subsidiarity. Rethinking themes of business in society, like the orientation of business toward the common good, social and ecological concerns, and others from the viewpoint of subsidiarity generates new ethical insights. An example is the concept of freedom. The idea of responsible freedom is essential to establish more ethical forms of business. However, how is this actually done? Subsidiarity can answer this question at least partially because it provides space for individual freedom in organizational settings. In this sense and speaking from the perspective of humanistic management, Dierksmeier (2011) retraces the history of the notion of freedom in the history of economic thought. He shows how and why the idea of freedom was gradually removed from the canon of economics. He wishes to use the idea of responsible freedom as corrective and complementary to current business theory. Dierksmeier raises many further research questions in the final propositions of the article. The idea of responsible freedom is essential to construe more humanistic and thus more ethical forms of business. However, how is this done? Again, subsidiarity can answer a part of this question.

Over the last years, the "logic of gift" has been the subject of several publications (e.g. Baviera et al., 2016; Faldetta, 2011). They do not mention subsidiarity. However, the logic of gift and subsidiarity require each other. Encouraging the logic of gift fosters more humane relationships in business organizations and encourages individuals to be generous with their talents and gifts. The logic of gift in business does not and cannot mean giving things away as presents. The concept "gift" derives from that of "giving." There are many forms of giving:

giving human sense, purpose, and meaning to business interactions. Business activities can be mere *transactions* which give to others the meaning of cogs in a machine. However, they can also be *interactions* that give other persons the significance of being unique and unrepeatable humans that have no price but dignity. This kind of “gift” requires an attitude of warmheartedness and care. The notion of “gift” is also contained in forgiveness, a posture of comprehension and mercy in our dealings without which justice would become harsh and inhumane. Business dealings need to be crisp and clear, just and binding, but—as all things human—tempered by mercy and forgiveness to be fully humane. Business relationships can be exploitative, extractive, exclusive, unfair, unequal, greedy, treacherous, and so forth in the negative sense. They can also be empowering, distributive, inclusive, fair, equitable, temperate, loyal, and so forth in the positive sense. What our business activities are depends largely on the logic of gift. They are what we want them to be. They are what we give. The logic of gift complements the logic of exchange, typical of the market, and the logic of command, typical of law and government.

In their comprehensive analyses of the logic of gift, Baviera et al. (2016) and Faldetta (2018) build firmly on the notion of responsibility. The authors do not mention subsidiarity, but responsibility is an important collateral support for subsidiarity. Subsidiarity without responsibility could turn into a recipe for social disintegration: each person individually pursuing their own interests without commitment to the common good. Subsidiarity must always be seen in connection with solidarity. A business culture of respect for individual gifts and talents (subsidiarity) presupposes and fosters essential elements of social cohesion (solidarity), like trust and creativity. Managers are placed into this tension. They are constantly confronted with the question of how much autonomy they can give their employees, particularly in times of crises.

It is worth noting that nearly all the above-mentioned publications on subsidiarity in the business ethics literature explicitly recognize their indebtedness to Catholic Social Thought as the primary origin of the concept. Subsidiarity is indeed one of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. It goes back to the work of the Jesuit theologian Luigi Taparelli in the nineteenth century who used the concept of “hypotactic (the Greek equivalent of Latin *subsidium*) right.” As a concept used in official documents of the popes, subsidiarity was introduced in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* by Pius XI (1931). However, subsidiarity is not only a concept at home in the Catholic tradition. The Protestant traditions of Calvinism (e.g., Abram Kuyper) and other Christian denominations share the concept and practice of subsidiarity and have defended personal freedom with greater fervor than the Catholic tradition. Also, the Jewish tradition has made use of subsidiarity-like concepts. In Ex 18:13–26, for example, Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses devises a system based on the idea of subsidiarity: Lesser problems were to be handled by leaders of the people whom Moses had picked and instructed in the Law. This system freed Moses from caring for the minutia of the civil administration of the nation, a job too great for one man, and to be able to teach the people. Islam too knows the principle of subsidiarity in the relationship between Sharia and other sources of law. O'Brien (2013) reports on the role subsidiarity plays in Asia, notably in the philosophy of Mencius. Subsidiarity is not only a religious principle of social organization. It is also to be found in secular traditions, as in the Stoic teachings of Cicero or, closer to our time, federalism and European Law, both imbued by the philosophy of the Enlightenment. The Treaty on the European Union has enshrined the principle of subsidiarity in its Article 5 (1992). American federalism too has been recognized as an historical instantiation of the principle of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity thus is a recognized organizational principle, which is based on common sense and on cultural traditional wisdom.

There are myriad approaches, both religious and secular, which are not only useful for business and management but urgently necessary. This SI is a timely and fitting project that guides the field of business and management forward to greater relevance. Business publications frequently are at the cutting edge of social change and policymaking decisions. Stakeholder theory, CSR, creating shared value, and so on have had and still exercise a profound impact on business practice. Our world is presently characterized by growing domestic and global geopolitical and economic tensions and violence, produced by inequality and poverty that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. We face globalized challenges of war, climate change and depletion of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, and food insecurity. We argue that the principle of subsidiarity offers a middle ground and a way forward out of the impasse of partisan dichotomy and other violent divides.

Subsidiarity seeks the remedy that works best in the given cultural context. Subsidiarity avoids patronizing or culturally colonizing people in need and fosters community-based approaches. Subsidiarity and the logic of gift are essential building blocks for an economy that serves the human person and the common good of society thus enabling people to live in freedom. People wishing to incorporate a humanly meaningful dimension in their business practices should reflect on these principles. Ethics understood as the systematic reflection on the good life and how we can flourish by developing our potentialities (Aristotle, 2000; MacIntyre, 2007), when applied to business, calls for a reflection of the kind we perform together with the authors in this SI. There is a growing awareness of the importance of meaningfulness, purpose, and mindfulness at work that are interrelated and in part conditioned by subsidiarity and the logic of gift. The topic is sufficiently wide and diverse to include people of all religions and faiths or of none at all as long as they share the same desire for equity and humanism in business in the service of society's common good.

Nevertheless, the concept of subsidiarity and the word itself are rooted in the tradition of Catholic Social Thought. This can justify a brief excursus into the ongoing debate in Catholic academic literature about the nature of subsidiarity. This brief glance will be fruitful for secular non-religious studies of subsidiarity in business too (e.g., Fenwick, 2014).

The common tenor of contemporary reflections on subsidiarity in Catholic Social Thought underscores that subsidiarity is not merely a question of efficiency, in the sense of organizing procedures and distributing power to achieve the goals of political leadership or business executives. Understood in this way, "subsidiarity becomes a shallow, feeble principle" (Cahill, 2019, p. 415). Nor is it a principle of devolution or smallness of scale (Brennan, 2014, p. 39). Subsidiarity is something that fosters virtue. It is a principle of perfection not mere efficiency. In Catholic Social Thought, the higher instances are seen as enablers of participation in the common life of virtuous actors. Pope Francis associates subsidiarity with the ability of all to share the responsibility, make a contribution, and participate in the healing and regeneration of people. Subsidiarity sets in motion a double movement: from top to bottom and from bottom to top. Subsidiarity requires listening to the wisdom of the poor and humbler groups who are usually not taken into consideration. Everyone should be listened to. Social cohesion or solidarity among all members of society require subsidiarity (Francis, 2020). Many authors in the Catholic tradition, therefore, interpret subsidiarity as rooted in a precedent social ontology and in a Biblical vision of the human person (Brennan, 2014). Subsidiarity is more than a procedural principle.

For secular ethics, Catholic Social Thought on subsidiarity might be useful. Subsidiarity is interpreted as a force rooted in a transcendent vision of the human person. It opposes the modern dichotomy of the state and the individual, which excludes the right of partial societies in the state to exist. Subsidiarity, in contrast, allows these minor entities to be public spaces

in their own right (Cavanaugh, 2016, pp. 129–130). This view of subsidiarity is skeptical of the modern state's exclusive monopoly of social power and the absorption of all public concerns by the government because such policies suffocate civil society. This is subsidiarity's main contribution: “to say that associations exist independently of the state and prior to the state, and that the state should vindicate associational freedom out of respect for their prior claims to self-government” (Cahill, 2019, p. 417). Understood in this way, subsidiarity avoids condescension or patronizing treatment. Instead, it calls for the empowerment of individuals and communities. Subsidiarity is precisely a principle that defends freedom and imposes the duty on us all to give compassion and care for the pressing needs of the poor and the common good.

3 | THE ARTICLES IN THIS SI

The authors in this SI enrich the academic conversation with innovative and original contributions. As Guest Editors, we want to highlight that, while recognizing the relevance of all published articles for the advancement of scholarship on subsidiarity and the logic of gift in business, inclusion in the SI does not necessarily imply our endorsement of the very diverse ideas presented. Among the submissions received for this SI, we selected those that, in addition to academic quality, represent different perspectives on subsidiarity in business and society, including both theoretical contributions and applied reflections on current socio-economic scenarios.

Bernard Guéry contrasts the notion of subsidiarity as an ideal type in the sense of Max Weber with that of subsidiarity as a principle in the sense of Thomas Aquinas. Guéry argues that understanding subsidiarity as an ideal type is inadequate because it tends to push decision to the lowest possible level in an organization without considering whether that level is the proper one for the decision. Resourcing a wide range of works by Aquinas, Guéry analyzes the three levels of principles of reasoning that the medieval philosopher distinguished. The highest principles are the *dignitates* (e.g., the fact that the whole is greater than the parts). The principle of non-contradiction is another example for a principle on the level of *dignitates*. *Dignitas* is the Latin translation of the word *axioma*, which we use to speak of axiomatic assumptions. The second level of principles are the *suppositiones*. They are first inside and relative to a given science. They constitute the starting points for a particular science. The third kind of principle is a premise in an argument. Such a principle is relative to a specific demonstrative syllogism where it functions as the first premise. After this careful conceptual clarification, Guéry shows in which way subsidiarity is a universal principle of practical reasoning in the sense of Aquinas and what this means for business operations.

Germán Scalzo and Ana Marta González invite the reader to rethink subsidiarity in the context of the current Fourth Industrial Revolution. The introduction of AI-based technologies is forcing individuals and companies to reflect on a renewed conception of human work, whose distinctive product consists in the generation of relational goods. While the standard model of work connects work with employment and sees human work in the domain of the market or the state, the renewed conception of work needs to detach work from employment and acknowledge the generation of both material and non-material goods (relational goods). Relational goods are an uncountable wealth, and they are inspired by the logic of gift more than by market logic. Relational goods make it possible to build a new relationship between the state, market, and civil society. The acknowledgment of their irreplaceable role as a characteristic product of human work leads to the concept of circular subsidiarity. Taking this concept from

the Italian economist Zamagni (2018), Scalzo and González describe how circular subsidiarity is in action when the state, market, and organized civil society systematically interact to promote the common good of society. The authors affirm that the relational dimension of work, in addition to sustaining the productive dimension of work, leads to the reciprocal dynamic of circular subsidiarity.

Emery Koenig and Michael Naughton lead us into one of the specific challenges of the modern business environment: diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The authors play their piece with four hands, interspersing theory with practical experiences in business and mini cases. Their article makes subsidiarity fruitful for the management of corporations. It is structured in three arguments. The first argument articulates the contribution of subsidiarity as a primary principle of institutional life. Drawing on Catholic Social Tradition, the authors lay out a properly ordered understanding of gifts and how such gifts relate especially to diversity. The second section criticizes the increasing expectation of corporate leaders to adopt diversity metrics of gender and race related to proportional representation in areas of hiring, promotion, and retention. The authors argue that while such metrics can play a role in some organizations, their universality and rigidity of implementation create a three-fold disorder of fixation, rationalization, and detachment. Thirdly, Naughton and Koenig conclude their article by re-situating DEI within the primary principle of subsidiarity and its implications for leadership and institutional reforms and priorities. Throughout the article, the authors focus on the recognition of gifts in the balance between the dignity of the individual worker and the common good of the company. This article is a strong contribution to both the academic conversation on subsidiarity and on DEI.

Andrew Gustafson chooses to look at subsidiarity in the context of a specific socio-economic issue currently affecting home ownership in the United States. Under the provocative title “How Many Houses Should One Own?,” Gustafson applies the logic typical of Distributism as a possible solution to the takeover of the real estate market by investors, who, by inflating prices because of their presence, prevent families from acquiring their own place to live. Thinking of a family home as an essential place where individuals can flourish and prepare to contribute to the good of society, Gustafson argues for a broader distribution of home ownership, advocating for subsidiarity as a principle that works to guarantee to everyone the ownership of a family home. Home ownership fulfills a basic need of individuals, consequently enabling them to be responsible for their personal and civic duties. The author also reports on the criticisms that a subsidiarity-based and distributist approach receives (e.g., its “simplicity,” its proposal for distributing property, role of government, ways of organizing of the economy), and concludes with possible solutions to solve this problem (e.g., how to disincentivize investors and incentivize homeowners, and a proposal for an ethics of landlordism).

Domènec Melé presents the only article of the special issue specifically dedicated to the “logic of gift” in business. The author retrieves the anthropological and ethical foundations of the logic of gift, tapping into personalist philosophy for the understanding of the person as a co-existing and relational being. Melé presents the criterion of *do propter alterum* (I give for the other person’s sake) as foundational for the characterization of an authentic gift in contrast to the general commutative axiom *do ut des* (I give so that you give me). It can seem counterintuitive to discuss the logic of gift in a business context. However, Melé reviews existing literature and then analyzes the personalist and humanistic foundations of the logic of gift in business, also providing an overview of the practical benefits for the companies that combine gift and exchange. The development of personal virtues and of a humanistic organizational culture are among the fruits of the application of the logic of gift in business.

4 | FURTHER RESEARCH

Further conceptual reflection on and empirical analysis of subsidiarity can substantially contribute to the literature on business and management in society. Indeed, many questions related to subsidiarity are still open. Does subsidiarity, for example, help us understand the ways in which top-down approaches to business responsibility have important limitations? Does subsidiarity offer ways of thinking about localization in the expectations for responsible behavior? Does subsidiarity offer a middle ground between universalism and relativism? How does subsidiarity play into the creation of an organizational culture that fosters humanistic management? Is subsidiarity a personal virtue? How is employee participation specifically organized to allow the development of everybody's gifts? Does subsidiarity only affect systems, structures, and strategies, or does it also pertain to the set of individual virtues managers should aspire to? In which concrete ways does subsidiarity foster individual autonomy of employees and where are the limits? We sincerely hope that this SI motivates further research to address these and other questions.

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