



AN ENVIRONMENT FOR GROWTH: LEONARDO POLO ON LEADERSHIP

UN AMBIENTE PARA EL CRECIMIENTO: EL LIDERAZGO SEGÚN LEONARDO POLO

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Ethics is the science that studies the growth of human capacities [...]. This is the secret of human life: man must improve. This is where being and doing come together. In order to be able to subordinate doing to being and not to limit the result, it requires the growth of being.

L. Polo, 2015b, p. 451

Abstract: Leonardo Polo integrates elements of classical and contemporary thought. According to him, modern organisations provide a privileged context for analysing human behaviour, as they optimise the use of human time. This optimisation is achieved when organisations respect individual freedom, which is inherently proactive. As a result, organisations should prioritise fostering initiative and creativity, which are intrinsically collaborative processes.

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Leadership, therefore, is fundamentally defined as the capacity to cultivate environments in which all stakeholders can fulfil their potential while collectively striving towards ambitious, long-term objectives. Such an environment depends on the virtuous actions of leaders, who, guided by a forward-looking vision and clear and demanding goals, communicate effectively. To this end, leaders support the development of their subordinates through a process of guided mentorship, enabling them to become progressively more autonomous and actively engaged.

The successful attainment of shared objectives generates a sense of fulfilment, which serves as a foundation for sustained growth and continuous development.

This article seeks to establish connections between Polo's philosophical insights and contemporary theories of leadership and organisational psychology. These findings could provide educators and researchers in business studies with a deeper theoretical foundation for their proposals, while also offering philosophy scholars an avenue to engage with advancements in the behavioural sciences.

Keywords: person, work, freedom, business firm, time, proactivity, initiative, creativity, growth, command, initiative, communication, virtue, collaboration, fulfilment, joy, Servant Leadership, Abraham Maslow.

Resumen: Leonardo Polo sintetiza elementos del pensamiento clásico con el contemporáneo. Para él, las organizaciones modernas son un contexto privilegiado para estudiar el comportamiento humano porque optimizan el uso del tiempo humano. Lo optimizan si respetan la libertad de la persona, la cual es naturalmente proactiva. Por eso, las organizaciones deben poner en el centro la iniciativa y la creatividad, que es siempre en colaboración.

Por eso el liderazgo es fundamentalmente la capacidad de crear ambientes donde todos los actores puedan desarrollarse, mientras se esfuerzan por conseguir objetivos de largo alcance. Tal ambiente depende la actividad virtuosa de los directivos, que partiendo de una visión de largo alcance con objetivos exigentes, comunican eficazmente. Para esto, promueven un "acompañamiento" de los subordinados, que los haga cada vez más autónomos y participativos.

La conquista de objetivos compartidos genera una satisfacción que sirve como soporte del crecimiento permanente.



En este artículo se busca establecer conexiones entre el pensamiento de Polo y corrientes actuales sobre el liderazgo y la psicología de las organizaciones. Esto puede servir a los docentes e investigadores de ambientes empresariales a dar un sustento más profundo a sus propuestas, y a los estudiosos de filosofía a acercarse a los progresos de las ciencias del comportamiento.

Palabras clave: persona, trabajo, libertad, empresa, tiempo, proactividad, iniciativa, creatividad, crecimiento, mando, comunicación, virtud, colaboración, satisfacción, alegría, Servant Leadership, Abraham Maslow.

1. INTELLECTUALS AND MANAGEMENT

Warren Bennis (1998) recognised Abraham Maslow's intellectual courage as a pioneer in exploring the empowering role of work within large corporations. Maslow's collaboration with Andrew Kay at Non-linear Systems, profoundly shaped the final decade of his career. Through Kay, Maslow engaged with early works by Drucker and collaborated with figures such as Douglas McGregor and Chris Argyris. This collaboration introduced a unifying vision of the human person into corporate settings, framing it as an ethical model. Maslow's philosophical grounding in Gestalt psychology, influenced by his direct interactions with Kurt Goldstein, played a significant role in this development (Hoffman, 1988, pp. 96-110; Mercado, 2023, pp. 26-28).

Goldstein's concept of *self-actualisation* provided Maslow with a holistic, interconnected perspective on human development (Maslow, 1987, pp. 295-328; Hoffman, 1988, pp. 106-110). This holistic approach emphasises understanding phenomena through their interrelations.

While this paper does not aim to explore the methodological implications of this perspective —also applied by Leonardo Polo— or Polo's critique of self-actualisation, its primary focus is to highlight Polo's framework by drawing attention to a compelling parallel: both authors developed philosophical models of the human person that were enriched through their engagement with corporate environments.

Leonardo Polo (1926–2013) crafted a distinctive philosophical framework, drawing from Cartesian thought and its connections to thinkers like Hegel and



Heidegger. He further refined this framework using Aristotelian and Thomistic principles, advancing a bold notion of freedom as a capacity for self-gift. This concept transcends classical thought and avoids the extremes of radical autonomy prevalent in early 20th-century existentialism (McBride, 2022).

Polo explained (2015b, pp. 398-399) how he collaborated with business schools educators and philosophers, producing texts that, like Maslow's, translated dense theoretical ideas into accessible forms for broader audiences. Notably, Polo worked with Carlos Llano (1932-2010), who founded IPADE Business School, in the late 1960s. Llano combined speculative academic rigor with business acumen, culminating in works like *Antropología de la acción directiva* (Polo & Llano, 2019).

A recent article by Scalzo et al. (2022) has further illuminated Polo's contributions, particularly his integration of virtue ethics and Servant Leadership into his anthropological framework². Their work effectively articulates Polo's vision of freedom as a capacity for self-gift, a theme also central to this study³.

A unique aspect of the present article is its emphasis on synderesis in Polo's thought. Synderesis, or the "intuitive perception of the good", is a concept developed in Late Antiquity as an extension of the Aristotelian notion that all human actions are directed towards some good. According to a tradition that begins in the fourth century with Saint Jerome, it is held that the original moral impulse of human beings is to do good and to avoid evil. (Gismondi, G. (n.d.), Aquinas, 1948, I-II.94.1-2, Abbà, 2018, pp. 227-229).

The paper's main contribution, as suggested by its title, is the connection between Polo's anthropological insights and the creation of environments conducive to collective growth. In this context, the study bridges humanistic psychology and leadership theories, presenting a philosophically grounded

² Scalzo et al. (2022) describe Polo's thought as a "personalist approach". However, to avoid potential confusion with the personalist movement (as represented by thinkers such as Marcel, Maritain, and Mounier), it may be more appropriate to describe it more generically as a "person-centered approach".

³ Some of Polo's works have been recently translated into English (2023a and 2023b). Among the studies on his thought, Esclanda & Sellés (2015) published an introduction to Polo's thought, Mendz and Sellés (2024) wrote a paper on human growth within Polo's categories, Rubio (2025) offers an explanation of Polo's anthropology. Regarding management and leadership, Sellés (2013) summarised some principles from Polo's work. See Leonardo Polo Institute of Philosophy webpage (www.leonardopoloinstitute.org/).



perspective on organisational interactions. Polo's writings facilitate these links to management literature.

Finally, the concept of shared joy, briefly introduced here, reflects a multifaceted understanding of transcendence. Polo conceives transcendence as having a vertical dimension, rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which harmoniously integrates a horizontal dimension (Melé, 2022) —namely, the interpersonal growth highlighted in contemporary psychology since the Humanistic movement in psychology.

2. AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF OPENNESS

Leonardo Polo developed an insightful philosophical anthropology that exalts human freedom and the need to promote constructive relationships. He elaborated a set of ideas and a methodology for pursuing an anthropology of the human person rooted in classical philosophy.

He made use of a number of fundamental Aristotelian technical terms as in the distinctions of different modes of being: between act and potency, cause and effect, as well as substance and accident.

Anchoring Polo's fundamental thoughts on the human person is the notion of Creation, perceived according to the Judeo-Christian tradition and as an enrichment of Greek metaphysics. Its conceptual maturity reached its peak in the Middle Ages, especially with Thomas Aquinas and his distinction between "essence" and "act of being." Indeed, Polo's deepening of Aquinas' intellectual insights opened up a new pathway for understanding the human person's growth and flourishing by reframing philosophical anthropology and separating it from metaphysics (Polo, 2015e; Rubio, 2025).

This clear distinction allows for a much fuller understanding of freedom and its manifestations in human action, especially as applied to human relationships. Polo can, thus, unite descriptions and observations of human action from different philosophical traditions into a more complete conceptual framework.

When Polo treats the Aristotelian understanding of the intellect, he speaks of it as capable of getting the form of the things it happens to know, yet "without ceasing to be itself." This capacity is consonant with parts of our body, especially



our hands which are universal instruments that can take on various instrumental forms. Both our intelligence and bodies when working together, can help fashion new tools and technologies. Working together, they form an open, holistic system that brings about progress in the very process of perfecting the world and, simultaneously, perfecting themselves (Polo, 2008, pp. 26-27; 2016b, p. 65).

For Polo, this progress is also interior: human beings require care and education over a long period of time; it takes years to learn a rich and complex language; we need to reach maturity before we may harmonise potential action according to life objectives and plans. Polo (2008) sums up these two dimensions (i.e. improving the world and improving oneself) by saying that the human person is a *perfectible perfecter* (p. 210; 2018b, p. 124; 2016a, pp. 135-140) and a *problem solver* (2016b, pp. 25-4; Esclanda & Sellés, 2015, pp. 35-36).

This path toward enhancement and overall progress is not predetermined. Each person receives a call to appropriately use his natural and learned capacities while responding to environmental, familial and various changing social demands. Such indeterminacy requires freedom, which is where the activity of reason and will come into play.

Polo's thought is not simply a mean between the extremes represented by different forms of determinism and the existentialist claims that the human person actually creates or determines her own essence. For him, the human person is *untouchable*, (i.e. *a permanent act of being*) and yet, at the same time, a *perfectible essence*. The Thomistic distinction —act of being and essence— helps us understand both the universality of human nature as well as its capacity for growth or degeneration. In other words, concerning our human essence, we can improve or degrade ourselves through our good and bad choices and actions (Polo, 2015e; 2016a, pp. 309-312; Esclanda & Sellés, 2015, pp. 31-37).

3. HUMANS AS RADICALLY PROACTIVE BEINGS: A REVITALISED UNDERSTANDING OF SYNDERESIS

Experimental psychology has traditionally focused on the external activities of organisms, whereas classical psychology and personalist philosophy have sought to uncover the intrinsic principles underlying these activities.



Polo, along with other 20th-century thinkers, offers an interpretation of human activity that synthesises both perspectives. In this regard, his account of the principles of human activity represents a revitalised and profound extension of the classical concept of *synderesis*.

Polo expounds on the Thomistic articulation of *synderesis* —“do good (and avoid evil)” (Aquinas, 1948, I-II.94.1-2; Abbà, 2018, pp. 227-229)— arguing that each individual should strive to act to the fullest extent of his capabilities and continuously refine his behavior.

Although Polo (2008, p. 134) acknowledges the relevant role of negative commandments, at the same times considers that the “no” in terms of avoiding evil is not the first principle of human activity, because “the moral knowledge of principles impels [and] confirms that human beings should have initiative.” (p. 186) Moreover, developing our efforts to act is not an added duty or rule, “but rather [it is] the expansion of freedom: to pursue good and execute it without giving up and failing to act [and] not being lazy.” All these imply a permanent commitment on our part, that is, maintaining a general attitude while facing the lengthy task of living and coping with constant challenges to our individual plan of life. In this way each person remains committed to “the development of his existence by increasing what is real.” As Polo expressed it in exhortative terms:

Throw yourself into life, contribute, put something on your part, do not fall short. This is the great principle. Is this a moral norm in the strict sense? I do not think so. It is rather the connection of any norm with me (Polo, 2008, p. 186)⁴.

Polo emphasises the proactive character of human nature in a way that includes the idea of the “self-actualising individual” (Maslow, 1987, Chapter 11) and the “fully functioning person” (Rogers, 1963; 1983; 1995).

⁴For more on “doing good”, see Polo, 2008, pp. 60-62, 134, 206, 210. This relationship between the moral agent and normative principles lies at the heart of the Aristotelian and Thomistic understanding of practical reason. Rather than functioning as a decision-making mechanism for applying general rules to specific circumstances, it involves a commitment to a way of life shaped through personal choices. See also Abbà (2018) and Rhonheimer (2011).



Hence, he explains that moral activity is a challenging process of discovery, that is, of what reality demands from the knowing protagonist subject at every stage of his life and, through his rational free will, discerns the best path and means to cause a certain effect⁵. This is a core idea for the remainder for this study on Polo's thought.

4. THALES AND THE OIL PRESSES: SYNDERESIS AS A WORK IN PROGRESS

The intellectual evaluation of complex situations and the subsequent risk taking implies a harmonious interaction of human nature's highest powers. One of Polo's most thorough explanations of this harmonising capacity is found in a text he wrote on invention and creativity. He argues that human inventiveness depends on the same principle of "connecting the dots" or "understanding *systems*" used in the explanation of the human organism cited previously, that is, grasping interrelationships rather than analysing disconnected fragments of reality (Polo, 2016a, pp. 29-41)⁶, and then envision new possibilities.

Aristotle (2014b, 1258a-1259a36) illustrates the particular human ability to visualise opportunities and make choices as a coherent practice in his recounting of the story of Thales of Miletus⁷. In this passage, he explains how Thales had enriched himself by monopolising the oil presses of his city. His clever observations enabled him to foresee that the next olive harvest would be plentiful, and so he bought many oil presses in advance at a cheap price. Thus, when the harvest began, he could profitably rent them at a much higher value compared to that he had originally paid. In contrast to this ability

⁵ Polo devotes numerous pages to *synderesis* in his anthropological works, especially in 2015a, pp. 299-529. For references to other parallel texts see Mercado, 2018, pp. 31-32, and 2022a, pp. 112-113.

⁶ Complexity and systems-based treatments have also found their way into the management literature. See, for example, Senge (1990), Scharmer's "Theory U" (2009). Senge closely followed the work of Kurt Lewin, who shared the same scientific and cultural background with Goldstein. There are also essential overlaps in Sun Tzu's principles as a contemplative attitude towards phenomena to gain perspective, understand them, and engage in activity after grasping the deep dynamics of facts and processes.

⁷ On Thales' wisdom and detachment from material things, see Plato (2014, 281e) and Aristotle (2014a, 1141b3-8.)



to harmonise needs and opportunities, Aristotle (2014b, 1257b15-17) tells us about the case of King Midas, who could not in fact even organise the means to reap profits due of his intellect being obfuscated by his own greed.

5. AN ANTHROPOLOGY FOR THE NON-COMFORT ZONE

Polo (2015b, pp. 379, 397) uses the sociological term in vogue in the 1970s —“structuring structure”— to emphasise that commercial enterprises are a necessarily *flexible arrangement* of persons. This elasticity improves living conditions and helps refine colleagues’ capacities to respond to the demands of life. This flexibility is directly related to the ability to cope with and promote change. Today’s commercial enterprises are a relatively recent phenomenon, reaching levels of structuring of time and human activity that did not exist in prior eras, with the exception of military organisations. Critical progress in optimising time, both for improving work and life, has permeated other less dynamic institutions, such as schools and universities. In any case, Polo believed that all institutions require greater *humanisation*, and this happens through education, as in the offering colleagues the necessary “help to grow.” For him, institutional authorities ought to promote growth and the eventual flourishing of each person⁸.

The interplay of reason and will forms the very basis of the aforementioned ideas regarding openness (Mercado, 2021, pp. 58-59; Vargas, 2019). Openness means that humans can grow indefinitely, expanding their constructive activity through collaborative efforts. Polo (2015b, p. 239) understands openness also as the ability to fruitfully cope with a permanently evolving reality and, thus, proposes an attitude contrary to what he calls “installation”, that is “settling down” or “getting comfortable” which he thought was an anthropology for retired people. Openness implies the ability to correct oneself and dialogically renew one’s knowledge. Polo frequently underscored the importance of avoiding what is akin to “Hamlet’s existential crisis”, that is, a mix of perplexity and

⁸ The obviousness of the statement does not make it any less relevant. From a perspective based on non-violent communication, this point is frequently stressed by Miyashiro (2011).



immobility when facing life's challenges and major questions (Polo & Llano, 2019, p. 453; Polo, 2018b, p. 81). The limits of our knowledge should be more of an incentive to overcome them, little by little in cooperation with others, by helping each other understand the right choices rather than to giving up, while trapped in perplexed isolation like Hamlet, on resolving major challenges the good life demands of us.

All this highlights both the effusive character of the human person and her offering oneself enthusiastically in collaboration with others, in addition to the need to structure this impetus through the generation and promotion of both stable and flexible channels that strengthen it (Polo, 2016b, pp. 382-387).

6. ENVIRONMENTS FOR EXPANDING HUMAN POTENTIAL TO GIVE

Polo (2015b) describes any company (a publicly listed corporation, an LLC, a family business, et al.), among other things, as a private collaborative venture. He goes on to say that any enterprise is also “a discovery of something that is worth pursuing. It is like a distant goal, which is rediscovered as it develops” (p. 424). This vision integrates aspects of economic performance because the enterprise “is what the entrepreneur wants it to be in the future, even outliving its own members.”

Companies are, therefore, environments for expanding human potential in order to achieve long-term goals (Polo & Llano, 2019, pp. 412-413)⁹. They do not offer structures merely for satisfying the demands of a needy people. Polo counteracts Marx's materialist anthropology by arguing that human beings are best understood by identifying part of their essence with the already mentioned practical definition of a *perfectible perfecter*: motivation is not reduced to needing for “resources are not only material: over them the human cognitive endowment imposes its own inventive nature that transforms and elevates them” (Polo, 2008, p. 210)¹⁰.

⁹ This is the first of the three principles of organisations that Polo explains in 2015b, pp. 371-396. The other two involve communication, as explained in §9, below. See also Sellés (2013 §2).

¹⁰ See also 2016a, pp. 156-158. Polo (2015c, pp. 228-230, 235n11, 241; 325-331, 2008, p. 98, and 2015b, p. 197) linked his ideas to the notion of objective and subjective growth of the person developed by John Paul II in his social encyclical letter *Laborem Exercens*.



Organisations are there to serve individuals and society; and, in a different capacity, they also serve their own collaborators. However, for Polo (2015b, pp. 396-397) the human person's centrality means that all the actors "irradiate" from the core of the joint business project to give of themselves to building product and service structures (Sellés, 2013, §8). In more general terms, Polo (2008, pp. 98-101; 2015b, pp. 229-233) understands all dimensions of ownership and stewardship as channels for the essential unfolding of the person's being, which is naturally free and *giving (donal)*. This idea regarding human giving is at the core of Polo's transcendental anthropology (Polo, 2024). Scalzo et al. (2022, pp. 150-153) associate this notion with the classical idea of *munus* and further relate it to some core ideas of the Servant Leadership approach, that focuses on the growth and well-being of others¹¹.

From Taylorism to Motivation Theory, Polo (2015b, pp. 429-431) viewed certain aspects of different proposals favourably, as they progressively allocated greater emphasis to the interplay between production and individual development. Although companies are production centres, all organisational elements assume that the organisation itself arises out of the human person's development. The structure supports the dynamism of the higher faculties of the person, while activating his capacity to give (Sellés, 2020, pp. 15-16).

In his most philosophically dense writings, Polo (2022, pp. 522-525) calls this manifestation *freedom of destination* and explains it as the desire *to be more*, to grow *with* other persons. In short, according to Polo (2016a, pp. 138, 307) the most sublime activities of freedom can only be understood as forms of collaboration which is impossible without the virtues. The healthy tension between wanting and giving shows that we are continually launching ourselves in joint ventures with others towards a future that can be better than the present. Its thrust is based on the love of hope, which is the unceasing backbone of the human existence, and rooted in the will. Polo (2015b, p. 225; 2008, p. 167; 2016b, pp. 202-209) elucidates these connections within the framework

¹¹Robert Greenleaf wrote *The servant as a leader* in 1970. The central concept of Servant Leadership is that it originates from a desire to serve and empower others. See Greenleaf, Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/



of freedom conceived as a mission, wherein friendship and mutual assistance serve as essential pillars for personal development.

Polo's *Ethics* (2008) contains a more practical explanation of collaborative business ventures, emphasising the peculiarities of the person in her "effusive, contributing dimension" rather than merely in terms of the person's body-soul distinction. This is thanks to the fact that the person:

[it] is not subject to the laws of nature, but rather rises above them and enjoys a radical freedom. Because of this, his presence in the world through his nature is inventive. The human being takes from himself, gives of himself, contributes; we have called this 'manifestation'. The human being is a being who manifests himself and who can also refuse to do so (p. 97; see also Polo, 2015b, p. 381).

Hence "every human initiative is an initiative to give: the initiative to receive is not a primary [objective]" (Polo, 2015b, p. 324). The text proceeds to assert that human beings are inherently inclined to give and share. If our actions depended merely on our reactions to whatever we receive, there would be no genuine initiatives but merely reactions.

Initiative, as already stated, is inherent to human beings and closely tied to their *contributive* nature. Consequently, situations of disorder, where demoralization takes root, lead to *depersonalisation*: individuals unable to grow through acts of giving fail to fully embody and express the essence of human nature (Polo, 2019, pp. 265-285; 2015b, pp. 379, 392; 420-421).

This being *other-directed*, is coherent with the dynamism of human anthropology: our lives do not rely on some homeostatic equilibrium or the mere satisfaction of needs but on an overflowing of our good will that expands outwardly when it finds adequate channels¹². These channels allow individuals to combine their *surplus of good will* with the *surplus of other persons' good will*. Any outcome of human action is typically more significant when,

¹² Polo (2008, pp. 120-125; 2018c) agree with many other authors that homeostasis, a term taken from physics that greatly influenced biology and psychology, does not match the theoretical requirements of life and growth. See Martínez-Priego, C., García-Noblejas, B. P. & Roca, P. (2024, p. 9), and Vargas, A. I. (2019).



together, a good project is built together¹³. In terms of business, in this sense, the company must be subordinate to the growth of its stakeholders. According to Polo, the workplace represents the most advanced educational domain and is profoundly ethical, as it entails the meaningful utilisation of the time of human beings, i.e. the beings who can project themselves towards plans to be achieved in the future (Polo, 2015b, pp. 451-452; Polo & Llano, 2019, pp. 395-398).

7. THE BUSINESS FIRM AS A HIGHWAY AND NETWORK FOR SYNDERESIS

Building on the discussion in the previous paragraph regarding the essence of human nature and the harmonisation of individual freedoms, Polo (2008, pp. 77-82; 2016a, pp. 152-158) further elaborates on why this responsibility falls upon each individual. He asserts that our human nature involves the task of a constant acquisition of general character traits or habits. It can be said to be a flowering of the personality, and precisely insofar as it is about growth:

because the essence of man is only in so far as it grows (if it did not grow it would not depend on the person, and if this growth were not free, it would not be other than the essence of a physical organism ... This entails using the features of the type to perfect them. This perfecting use is the responsibility of virtues and is therefore ethical (Polo, 2008, p. 79).

It is within this ethical approach that Polo understands business companies as the best pathways for the development of the synderesis, where the person can do good and according to the best of her fundamental abilities¹⁴.

¹³ According to the Aristotelian explanation, Polo (2015e, pp. 42-43, 51, 61-64, and 2016a, pp. 54, 143-147, 271-273) stresses that form falls short of explaining the scope of activity. He thus coined the term *hyperformalisation* to indicate that acts modify the subject and its environment. Human beings must continue to perfect themselves by employing their abundant resources: this is one of the manifestations of what Polo calls *being additionally*.

¹⁴ For an exploration of the distinction between a comprehensive ethical perspective and deontology, see Kristjánsson & Fowers (2024, *passim*).



The human person grows when she interacts within a network of relationships. As people become more social, they improve in character. Central to the notion of interdependence is that of the ongoing improvement of all collaborative agents (Polo, 2015b, pp. 377-380; 2016a, pp. 65-68)¹⁵.

The indeterminacy defining our entry into the world demands that we also define what means we have at our disposal to improve the state into which we are born. We are called to establish or improve upon an order that guides our lives, to generate innovative contexts, and to create avenues of growth by producing new interconnections between people and things. By way of our free actions, we are therefore continuously achieving new syntheses in nature (Polo, 2015b, p. 381). Even our bodily structure makes us intervene in nature differently than animals do; moreover, we continually modify our environment to facilitate our actions to achieve the good (Polo, 2008, pp. 20-33; 196-199). Human inventiveness correlates with bodily strength and fragility (Polo, 2019, pp. 148-149, 207-209; 2016b, p. 66; Polo & Llano, 2019, pp. 326-327; 475). This is so, since people overcome adversity in various contexts and to varying degrees by mastering specific elements of their surroundings. Environment conditioning is much less relevant for human beings than for non-rational animals, which do not only survive, seek to live in an organised way to improve their quality of life (Aristotle, 2014b, 1279a19-21). That is why industriousness is considered virtuous and laziness a vice. Beyond living and living well, humans continually refine their way of handling their survival challenges, e. g. they incorporate beauty and science to transform mere feeding in the art and science of nutrition (Polo, 2008, pp. 28-29)¹⁶.

¹⁵ Polo (2015b, p. 377) refers to relationships in the various spheres of human life: e.g. the interrelation of inner powers is indispensable for organising life; his discourse on possession and giving concerns a deep understanding of relationships and the structure of institutions and organisations depend on them. Closely related to the foundations of Christian theology, Polo (2016a, pp. 65-68) asserts that the notion of intimacy only makes sense if other intimacies are involved. As noted by Lee, Ybarra, and González (2018), research on interpersonal relationships and employees' perceptions within companies remains at an early stage of development.

¹⁶ More radically: "man invents needs: it does not occur to the animal to eat cooked meat: the meat does not say so, because it can be eaten raw. The only being who discovers opportunities in fire is man" (Polo, 2016, p. 63).



On several occasions in his writings, Polo emphasises the importance of being creative together. Human dynamism brings diverse people together to form a community that is integrated, in terms of talent pools, and dialogical, in terms of cooperation (Polo, 2015b, pp. 382, 419). Concentrating energies and talent is indispensable to creatively overcoming the limits placed on us by our environment, for no one single person is self-sufficient. Not even small communities could improve their quality of life without taking care to breed connections between their own organisation and other networks. Technology is just one of the fruits of human collaboration and is necessarily ethical, as it may improve the ways of doing good.

Significantly, the last lines of Polo's *Ethics* (2008) refer to the serious issue of marginalisation, precisely in terms of not counting on others, while acting in isolation, when attempting to manage or govern our circumstances —like Hamlet:

To marginalise oneself is a vice; to marginalise others is also a vice. It is necessary to encourage the contrary attitude, to be attentive to others, to be interested in the qualities of others, in the possibility of their future contributions, to learn and to teach. It is truly advisable to count on others in everything we do in life (p. 229)¹⁷.

8. LEADERSHIP AS AN ENVIRONMENT

Polo states that business firms work well when they have long-term objectives. Any commercial venture, after all, is a plan for the future with respect to an imperfect present, not an already perfect Utopia. Companies, therefore, naturally promote the structuring of society to alleviate obstacles to help achieve their future objectives. This also prevents falling into routine, as there is an implicit constant need to transform means into ends through intermediate stages for achieving higher goals. This naturally leads to the generation of new endeavours and ideas to improve upon current means and processes. Avoiding mediocrity has moral value, and businesses can prevent mediocrity

¹⁷ See also Polo (2015e, pp. 376-377n).



and discouragement—as already hinted in §6 above— by setting high objectives and to meet them through accurate and creative planning. That is why making good use of human time (or wasting it) is morally relevant (Polo, 2008, p. 173), and companies are called upon to work toward new goals and objectives, setting about “new beginnings” after each successful achievement (Polo, 2015b, pp. 378-379, 448).

Businesses are places where an individual’s initiative should be coordinated with the initiatives of others: it is a forum for exercising one’s free action with the freedom and actions of others which, in turn, depends on internal growth and is promoted through the virtues (Polo, 2015b, pp. 424-425)¹⁸.

Polo concludes that cultivating initiative requires leadership, yet he asserts:

Leadership is not the leader, but that system of organisation by which all members of the institution perform better than in any other. This definition of leadership is the most relevant to the challenge of our time. Leadership is a system of collaboration (Polo, 2015b, pp. 379-380).

The same non-individualistic notion of leadership emerges in his comments on the importance of collegial governance which promotes participation in decision-making:

The leader is a system; it is leadership. The leader is never a person. No one is sufficient by himself alone to lead according to the virtue of fortitude and according to the virtue of temperance (Polo, 2015b, p. 418).

This way of understanding the management of companies focuses the manager’s responsibility more on the things to do so, and the best collaborative way of achieving them, so that others can develop their personal traits and qualities in the best possible way for achieving the shared objective. *Problem* (or *task*) *centeredness* is one of the personality traits of the self-actualising

¹⁸ At the basis of this exercise is personal freedom, which is only meaningful if other persons recognise it (Polo, 2015b, pp. 444-445). On the relevance of the awareness of personal development, see Sonenshein et al. (2013).



individual as explained by Maslow (1987, p. 159). Within organisations, this attitude becomes collective, and in Polo's view it is complementary to a virtue ethics perspective, i. e. based on the development and fostering of virtue in the workplace. Polo stresses the importance of virtues for the overall organisation of work:

Capturing [i.e. identifying] the virtuous character of others is the most critical thing in choosing entrepreneurs. An entrepreneur lacking ethical dispositions, who does not have at least 'in nuce' these virtues —the so-called cardinal virtues— is no good as an entrepreneur. If virtue is not personalised or incarnated, society starts turning into something else (Polo, 2015b, pp. 440-441).

This "something else" arises when examples of personal integrity cease to exist. Its consistent development is fostered by societies whose culture is based on codes of conduct, ethical norms and behavioural guidelines. When this standard of comportment are no longer firm points of reference, a bleak future, in moral terms, is imminent (Polo, 2015b, p. 441).

While the critical and skeptical observations of Tourish (2018) offer a valuable reminder of the limitations inherent in leaders as exemplars, their visibility and genuine integrity reinforce the classical notion that "ethics is learned from the righteous man" (Polo, 2015b, p. 439) rather than from books. Such visible and verifiable virtue emerges as a critical factor in inspiring others to adopt the same ethical framework, as recognised by Transformational Leadership (Parry & Proctor-Thompson, 2002), Servant Leadership (Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2018; Langhof & Guldenberg, 2020), and other scholarly proposals (Monzani et al., 2021).

9. WORK + LANGUAGE = DIRECTION

Polo discusses the relations between language, communication, work and truthfulness in several texts; in others, he connects them with the virtuous life in general and summarises the profound relationship between language, spirituality, and culture (Polo, 2016b, pp. 145-148).



In the section dedicated to “Work and Language” in his *Ethics* (2008), Polo explains that the use of language is the purest form of technique. He says associating verbs and nouns is fundamental to motivating collaboration: it is in language where the sense of command arises. This is why Polo (2008, p. 33) states the formula “work plus language equals direction” and explains that verbal instructions enable joint work and the organisation of tasks to occur which have immediate ethical repercussions in terms of commanding and obeying. For him, language is more relevant to coordinating human activities than productive processes because what is at stake is the enhancement of persons (Polo, 2015b, pp. 404-406, 410).

In this interaction, one person speaks and the other listens: one refers to a desired reality and how it should be “assembled;” the other understands and executes the order to his best ability or does not execute it at all. In this relationship, the value of truthfulness comes to the fore: referring to things as they are and respecting as valid the instructions stipulated for achieving a goal (Polo, 2008, pp. 33-34).

Maintaining a coherent relationship with reality and the other participants in the work requires a well-integrated character. In other words, to effectuate what is expected —assigning names and functions and passing on instructions— there is a need to develop virtues organically within an organisation. Polo and Llano (2019) state that virtuous character and its exemplary value rely on habits, which allow human beings to develop as free agents and within a non-homeostatic system, as already mentioned in §6 above. Habits pave the way for the development of true freedom and for a life marked by ongoing formation and learning.

In the same passage, Polo and Llano then underscore the importance of virtuous habits and learning for fostering of human relationships:

Habits are at the service of interpersonal relationships. Likewise, the difficulty of learning lies in its ordination to treating others as persons. The whole system of habits is required for such treatment to be adequate. From this follows the need for dialogue and also that truthfulness is at the service of the recognition of the dignity of the person. Freedom marks the coexistential character of the person (pp. 401-402) [emphasis added]



There is a substantial coincidence with a suggestion of P. F. Drucker to a manager in 1990:

Your first role ... is the personal. It is the relationship with people, the development of mutual confidence, the identification of people, the creation of a community. This is something only you can do. It cannot be measured or easily defined. But it is not only a key function. It is one only you can perform (Doerr, 2018, p. 176; Zak, 2013).

Llano and Polo emphasise that the action of leadership depends —as in Servant Leadership¹⁹— on a harmonious set of positive qualities which are indispensable for establishing and strengthening relations between collaborators. In this way, the person acquires the highest priority in the social fabric and this weighs upon manager with considerably more responsibility.

Polo stresses the two-way nature of this communicative relationship: “to command and to obey are correlative” and “the more information is created and communicated in the institution, the greater its fruitfulness” (Polo, 2015b, pp. 380, 389-394).

The correlation and alternation between commanding and obeying appears in the concluding paragraph of Polo’s *Ethics* (2008, pp. 221-229), and in *Filosofía y economía* (2015b, pp. 386-394). Here he records his opinions on the value of quality information in giving orders and successively uses them as a guide to establish the relevance of commanding, obeying and several associated notions.

Such intellectual functions are required to coordinate activities to intervene in natural processes in a way that satisfies the demands of the good life. Polo, therefore, connects these dimensions of rational comprehension with truthfulness and stresses the value of dialogue as a channel for constructive communication at all levels.

¹⁹ The Authors do not link their proposal with other leadership theories. It is evident that their view overlaps with Servant Leadership on the role of virtues and on being *other-oriented*. See Scalzo et al. (2022, p. 153).



10. PRACTICAL WISDOM, COMMANDING AND CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

Giving orders presupposes structured dialogue and the freedom for collaborative agents to act. What is more, the manager in charge must issue an order that can be clearly comprehended. This is why the rational value of giving orders is most significant in terms of having all the necessary elements to be understood and that it is executable:

People who are not well-informed work on their own, so they neither obey nor command. People who don't know what it's all about can't collaborate, they don't contribute anything to the common task. Strictly speaking, there is no common task without communication (Polo, 2015b, p. 380).

Additionally to the importance of clarity at different levels —protocols, job descriptions (pp. 404-406, 410)— the increasing remote work arrangements make more urgent the study of the consequences of isolation and quality information, as stressed by Lam et al. (2024), Darouei et al. (2022), and Kaur Bagga et al. (2023).

On the other hand, with the convincement that “the person as a free agent in history is the protagonist of innovation” (Polo, 2015b, p. 380) managers must presuppose that a subordinate colleague is intelligent and self-governing —with a great imaginative capacity for generating innovation (p. 366)— then there will be a deviation between what the manager thinks will be done (p. 354)²⁰ and the way and scope his subordinate actually executes the assigned task. Therefore, the manager must monitor the task's implementation and intervene to correct error or encourage a rectification which improves the project. This permanent feedback of our practical reasoning is embodied in the criteria of judgement and measurement systems which must be constantly improved (pp. 393-394).

For his part, the person who receives the order must understand it, ask for clarification, and report regularly on progress in whatever way is most appropriate. In some cases, communication systems may illustrate partial measurements.

²⁰ In that passage Polo makes us of Aristotle's observation that it is much more interesting to guide free humans than enslave people or even animals (Aristotle, 2014b, 1254a). On the degrading effects of dealing with subordinates as machines, see Polo & Llano, 2019, pp. 405-407, 412, 420.



However, in many other cases, it will be up to the practical wisdom of workers to report on the evolution of plans. In the same vein, the one who obeys is in a position to rearrange things, to improve the situation, and to correct himself. For Polo, this interaction is a privileged example of practical reason in Aristotelian terms: reason is, thus, “right reason” and “corrected reason” in a continuously adjustable flux of circumstances. In practice, corrective action means intensifying the appropriate decision and to make it more effective (Polo, 2015b, p. 393; 2008, pp. 177-178, 202-204; Mercado, 2022b, pp. 122-124).

Initiative relates to this co-creative communication, which is a virtuous interaction based on trust, on the one hand, and practical wisdom, on the other. Without trust, relationships deteriorate and, consequently, so too do joint business ventures (Polo, 2008, pp. 33-34, 228-229; 2015b, pp. 428, 440; Polo & Llano, 2019, Chapter 2).

Practical wisdom enables people to maintain a close connection with changing realities and try to adapt to them while seeking to obtain the same objective despite necessary modifications to the original plan (Polo, 2015b, p. 391; Kristjánsson, 2023, p. 440; Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024, Chapter 2.2). This attention to changing realities and being in frequent contact with team members avoids problems of despotism within a company. In other words, it avoids the rule of a single person over all others by holding them accountable (Polo, 2015b, pp. 394-395).

These ideas align with Doerr’s (2018, pp. 217-217, 226-227) assertion that one of the key purposes of structured and periodic feedback is to enable individuals performing tasks to take an increasingly prominent role in improving processes to achieve better results (Mercado, 2022a, pp. 134-135).

Polo (2015b, pp. 420; 447) often wrote about the importance of delegating tasks, without deepening in the severe challenges of down-to earth-delegating, as Kegan and Lahey do (2009, Chapter 5).

11. FAR-SIGHTED AND FLEXIBLE MANAGEMENT

There is a statement Polo makes that is worth quoting in its entirety, as it links the managerial role to the exercise of practical wisdom:



The one-sidedness or rigidity of command, the invariability of the order, is the death of command. Only he who knows how to modify his orders in accordance with the circumstances of those who execute them, that is to say, only he who knows he is commanded by those he commands, is a leader, a man who can devote himself to any kind of management, in the business firm, in the university, in politics, in the conditions of today's world.

Here, for Polo, alternating between commanding and obeying takes on a more radical position, as it refers to the power of the one who obeys, which has a decisive influence on the command. The two sentences concluding the above paragraph are severe:

He who does not do so is obsolete and cannot compete; he fails and causes those who have collaborated with him to fail because they drag them down to their ruin. It bankrupts the industry or the university, which sends people to the professional market who are not qualified (Polo, 2015b, p. 391).

On the other hand, working together and reviewing achievements and processes facilitates the selection of valuable collaborators, a task of paramount importance for the manager, who must always bear in mind the expiration of his position and think about succession with colleagues who are potentially better than he is (Polo, 2015b, pp. 389-391). Furthermore, (p. 420) he asserts that it is a matter of justice that everyone should be in the position for which he or she is best suited and that management must avoid rewarding incompetence.

Polo always combines the ability to adapt with the need to intervene effectively. In “La acción de gobierno” (The action of government) (2015b, pp. 401-422), he explains that *responsible action* is activity that effectively impacts reality without yielding to conformism and feelings of inevitability. He then breaks down the four factors that effectuate action: *knowledge*, *concrete activity*, *personal motives* and *institutional ends*. Knowledge is the ultimate guiding factor because those who plan and coordinate must know the whole picture.

That is why the person can —and often must— stop and think to understand the meaning of events and redirect them according to her rational discernment. The classical idea of the extra-temporality of knowledge makes it possible:



to influence the temporal in such a way that its course is not inevitable for man ... If we did not have a present or non-temporal dimension, which we call knowing, we would not be able to intervene in the temporal, we would not be capable of innovative actions (Polo, 2015b, p. 404).

In this way, effective intervention or “transformative effectiveness” rises from company goals that harbour personal motives and intentions. Managerial action continually is geared toward the alignment of individual motives with long term goals. As mentioned in other passages, a direct consequence of this constant focus is the revision and improvement of a company’s procedures and protocols.

12. CONCLUSION: THE JOY OF SHARING

As already stressed, in Polo’s view, the fruit of encountering of two or more freedoms is a shared initiative. Business is thus understood as the professionalisation of channels for people to grow, to create added value and to make quality products in joint collaboration for the benefit of all. In such collaborative partnerships, joy arises spontaneously.

Some projects aiming to measure the correlations and impacts of positive workplace relationships, such as the study by Fredrickson & Losada (2005), have been subject to severe criticism. Nevertheless, research on the constructive effects of relationships that foster positive emotions has continued to yield results that substantiate their significance (Fredrickson, 2013a, 2013b; Valenzuela, 2023, pp. 137-138). From a philosophical standpoint, these findings on workplace well-being allow diverse interpretations. For example, the rewarding experience of positive interactions, which sustains effort and facilitates daily cooperation, closely aligns with Aristotle’s conception of pleasure as an accompaniment to virtuous action (Aristotle, 2014a, 1099a; Mercado, 2021, p. 59). For the Stagirite (2014a), pleasure is an aspect of the perfection of the action “and completes the activity [...] as an end which supervenes as the bloom of youth does on those in the flower of their age” (1174b32-33).



The neurological aspects linked to this “virtuous enjoyment,” such as enhanced learning and increased openness to new ideas, have evolved from external observations to correlations with neurotransmitters and measurable impacts on overall health (Fredrickson, 2013a). Additionally, from a classical perspective, such harmonious coexistence necessitates the practice of various virtues. These constructive dispositions range from a commitment to justice to the cultivation of affability and genuine concern for others. Goleman’s concept of emotional intelligence, further refined through studies on the traits of emotionally intelligent leaders (Stern, 2023; Langhof et al., 2020, p. 43), transcends mere functionality and reflects principles deeply embedded in classical virtue ethics.

Polo makes a highly positive reading of human interaction, in which the joy of the shared task is not something accidental. Deep gratification actually strengthens relationships and help people grow. Gratification is not passing emotion or pleasure. Mere hedonism, on the other hand, erodes the capacity for enjoyment and bids persons to sensorial pleasures, limiting their capacity to savour deep enjoyment and to live together in joyous harmony (Seligman, 2003, pp. 102-115; Seligman et al., 2004, pp. 241-245; 499-506).

When Polo mentions his initiative to create a course syllabus on “The Aesthetics of the Company”, to a large extent he is referring to the enjoyment of sharing and growing while giving to others and enriching the business endeavour itself (2015b, p. 418). This goes hand in hand with experiencing beauty and catalyses positive works. This is also why celebration is expressed by the human spirit. For example, to celebrate the harvest is to share a moment of joyous collaboration in creating a surplus²¹. Joy, therefore, is a culmination of this process and success. As Polo (2018a) writes: “We are called to deal with important things [together], and from dealing with them joy is derived” (p. 44). He goes on to say, but “the greatest joy is produced by our neighbour” whom we celebrate and “joy is the pure essence that is found in [this] reality. The source of joy is the growth of the [other] person.”

²¹ On the deep anthropological meaning of the *fiesta*, see Polo (2015b, pp. 323-324; 2015c, pp. 47-48), and Sellés (2020, pp. 127-128).



Doing good things in partnership with others is a source of joy. Even though it is quite normal, since we naturally tend to share our co-creative powers, achieving the good is not always automatic. The right environment has to be created and cultivated by someone while considering the quality and costs of means used to achieve the good.

Polo's proposal on leadership is not a narcissistic one: it is simultaneously personal/individual and communitarian because leading is only possible through interaction with others. As already mentioned, Polo (2008, p. 229) subordinates the role of virtues to a collaborative dialogue and warns against isolation and self-marginalisation. That is why, even with respect to the cardinal virtues, there is also truthfulness and, above all, friendship. Polo (2008, p. 229) concludes that friendship is "the most important of the virtues according to Aristotle. Friendship demands respect, mutual esteem. What friendship can there be without dialogue?"

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