

Brunello Cucinelli's Humanistic Capitalism: Notes on the Relationship Between Business and Humanities

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What is and what can the relationship between business and humanities be? Can humanistic knowledge connect with and contribute to managerial development today? This paper will attempt to understand whether this might be the case and how.

As Thomas Merton wrote:

Our life, as individual persons and as members of a perplexed and struggling race, provokes us with the evidence that it must have meaning. Part of the meaning still escapes us. Yet our purpose in life is to discover this meaning, and live according to it. We have, therefore, something to live for. The process of living, of growing up, and becoming a person, is precisely the gradually increasing awareness of what that something is¹.

Ultimately, at the heart of every business venture, as with every creative idea, there is a need to start something meaningful, and this is almost always connected to an individual need or quality. After all, Coca-Cola was conceived by one man, just as the idea for Apple came from one person. It is then obviously necessary to move from the individual level to the organizational level, as only in this way can a productive, organized business be built. But the idea almost always starts with an individual intuition. And intuition is always strongly linked to something human, to giving voice to a need and finding an answer to it, which underlies the search for meaning. A meaning that can become a business, to which one then dedicates one's entire life, and to which one can link the lives of others.

I believe there is a lot of humanism in this. The advent and development of AI only reinforces this idea, as semantically its core is centered on something eminently human, such as intelligence. Furthermore, of course, the basic purpose of AI is to help humans in their daily needs. It is only humans who need it and

can create it, we could say almost in their image.

A notable example of this is the entrepreneur Brunello Cucinelli, the "king of cashmere." Born into a poor family in a remote town in Umbria near Perugia, after living in the countryside and devoting himself to university studies with little success, he developed a specific interest that targeted a potentially existing but unexplored market area: dyeing cashmere sweaters, which until then had been produced exclusively in the natural color of the wool. A simple idea, perhaps even a niche one, but one that has the potential to revolutionize buyers' tastes. As the entrepreneur continually states and has also published in one of his writings, the meaning or objective behind this business idea was another, namely to do business while restoring economic and moral dignity to workers, in practice establishing a new economic model with strong social implications, in the name of what he calls "humanistic capitalism." According to what he states in his interviews, the idea, or rather, the need to work for the dignity of workers came to him when he saw his father returning from work at the factory with teary eyes, as he was often humiliated. Thus, in Cucinelli's case, the meaning of his life, truly in Merton's terms, at a certain point became "to live and work for the moral and economic dignity of human beings", giving birth to "a business that made healthy profits, but did so with ethics, dignity, and morals," as he stated in the speech he delivered at the G20 official meeting held in Rome in 2021. The remaining words of his speech are even more eloquent in explaining the intrinsic meaning of his company's mission:

I wanted a small portion of the company's profits to go toward improving humanity as a whole, and I wanted people to work reasonable hours and be connected for the right amount of time, so as to harmonize technology and humanism and restore a healthy balance between mind, soul, and body, because the soul

¹Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (Harcourt Brace: New York, 1955), p. xi.

and body also need to be nourished every day.... Our company is located in Solomeo, a small medieval village dating back to the 14th century, near Assisi. We work in old factories built in the last century, some of which have been restored and embellished to bring them up to date, while others have been demolished and the land has been returned to agricultural use, especially vineyards, olive groves, orchards, and wheat fields. Thus, in the end, we can say that we have not consumed our beloved land. We have restored the village by listening to the wise words of our masters and have built a theater that we consider a secular temple of art, then a monument to human dignity, and an immense park called "Project for Beauty." And now we will build a universal library; for this idea, we were inspired by the great Ptolemy I of Alexandria as well as Emperor Hadrian when he said: "Books have shown me the way of life; as an adult, life has made me understand the content of books. Those who build libraries will have built public granaries for future generations." This is our idea of Human Sustainability and what we call Humanistic Capitalism. In bidding you farewell and thanking you, I hope that my heart has suggested the right words for a request made, I like to believe, on behalf of all humanity: Oh my esteemed and powerful pro-tempore guardians of Creation, you who are responsible for the beauty of the world, we beg you, show us the way of life. May Creation protect us and enlighten us towards a new universal Humanism².

The cornerstones of Cucinelli's vision are many and clear, as they appear in his speech, and they all contribute to defining his idea of Humanistic Capitalism. Cucinelli's is a form of humanism which, as we will explain in more detail shortly, does not refer exclusively to the classical and Renaissance traditions typical of Italian culture, but aims to harmonize the legacy of these traditions with the current advances of technology. From this point of view, the series of seminars entitled "Universal Symposium on the Soul and the Economy," organized by the Umbrian entrepreneur in his hometown of Solomeo and now in its third edition this year, seems very significant. During these meetings, innovators, thinkers, and philanthropists, many from Silicon Valley, gathered to discuss particularly topical issues such as the relationship between humans and technology, ethics and AI, seeking new forms of dialogue and possibilities of balance between principles often unjustly seen as antithetical³. From the first edition of the symposium, held in 2019, which saw the participation of Jeff Bezos, Ruzwana Bashir, founder and CEO of Peek, Dick Costolo, former CEO of Twitter, Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn, Drew Houston, co-founder and CEO of Dropbox, Lynn Jurich, co-founder and former CEO of Sunrun, Nirav Tolia, co-founder and CEO of Nextdoor, and Marc Benioff, founder, president and CEO of Salesforce, to that of 2025, among whose participants Yuval Noah Harari and Reid Hoffman stood out, the 2024 edition had many distinguished guests including executives and founders of some of the major American tech companies, from IBM to Microsoft, and from Adyen to Acumen, and saw the awarding of an honorary

doctorate in Human Sciences to Reid Hoffman. Hoffman, whom Cucinelli called his friend, expressed the same desire to synthesize technology and humanism in his acceptance speech for his doctorate at the University of Perugia. He encourages interpreting and utilizing technology not to destroy humanity, but to integrate its different components and to improve its life, as humans have always tried to do throughout their history. "It's the same with humans and technology", Hoffman claims, "The synthesis is not a cyborg, but a better human. We arrive at ourselves, amplified and improved through technology.... It's not human vs. AI. It's human with AI.... It's synthesis." It is this vision of humanized technology, of – as Cucinelli calls it – "Human Artificial Intelligence" which seems to describe the primary meaning of the "new universal humanism" promoted by Cucinelli and mentioned by him in his speech for the G20, which has been taken up and adopted by many others as well. After all, it was the Rector of the University of Perugia, Maurizio Oliviero, who announced the opening of an interdisciplinary chair called "New Universal Humanism." This course, the first of its kind in Italy, will be open to students from all faculties and will involve both teachers and entrepreneurs. An idea conceived to accompany what Oliviero defines as "the new Renaissance we are experiencing today with the development of artificial intelligence."

Solomeo, a small medieval town dating back to the 14th century, is Cucinelli's realm. The entrepreneur restored the town completely, after purchasing almost all its properties – "all the houses except one, mine," a resident told me during one of my visits to the hilltop town – to build his synthesis between tradition and future. It is in the streets of this charming village, among its admirably restored Renaissance architecture and in its small, typical Italian village square, that the greats of global business and technology have relocated from Silicon Valley to a remote, thousand-year-old village to discuss the "soul and economy." Together with his town, it is "our beloved land" that Cucinelli mentions more than once in his speech. And this reference to the earth opens to something much broader. Earth as territory, that of Solomeo and Umbria to which Cucinelli refers, but also land as landscape, in its infinite nuances like those one sees in the Umbrian and Tuscan countryside, and which recall the motifs of Italian Renaissance painters with its recognizable shades, as seen, for example, in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's paintings dedicated to the effects of Good Government in the countryside, with its recognizable shades, as seen, for instance, in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's paintings dedicated to the effects of Good Government in the countryside; land as color, a color that both recalls the shades of the earth and gives Cucinelli's clothing, with its soft shades of white, gray, hemp, havana, its characterizing sober elegance, which seems to almost reconstruct a lost ideal of Renaissance harmony.⁴ It is also a land that brings one back to the simplicity of country life of yesteryear, which played such an important role in the entrepreneur's childhood, proud of his peasant origins, with its peaceful, balanced rhythms, respectful of nature and the human spirit. The reference to "our land" is therefore a reference

²Brunello Cucinelli, Speech delivered at Rome G20 Meeting (2021):

<https://www.voguebusiness.com/fashion/brunello-cucinelli-calls-for-dignity-and-morals-at-g20> (accessed August 2025. All other links in this article have been accessed in the same month and year)

³Fabrizio Conti, "The Uses of the Past: History, Humanism, and Liberal Arts Education", in *Humanisms and Beyond: Past, Present, and Future of the Humanities in Liberal Arts Education*, edited by Fabrizio Conti and Stefan Sorgner (Budapest: Trivent, 2023), pp. 57-78.

⁴Reid Hoffman, University of Perugia Speech, May 24, 2024: <https://www.reidhoffman.org/perugia-speech/>

⁵David LaRocca, "A New Philosophy of Clothes: Brunello Cucinelli's Neohumanistic Business Ethics", *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics*, Vol 3 (2015), Article 10: 1-24.

that opens to natural, aesthetic, cultural, but also spiritual dimensions, since that is the land of Benedict of Nursia and Francis of Assisi, to both of whom the Umbrian entrepreneur often refers. This is a spiritual, mental dimension, which is also the focus of the entrepreneur's attention with regard to his employees. It is precisely this emphasis on the spirit that, as has been pointed out, constitutes one of the most distinctive aspects of Cucinelli's vision, which sets him apart from other industrial companies that also seem to pay particular attention to the care of their employees, including from a cultural or educational point of view, just as Cucinelli does.⁵

All this is in line with the “project for beauty” that Cucinelli refers to in his speech. That is about a beauty that reflects that of the fashion he produces, both an ideal beauty and a beauty of forms, the beauty of Humanism embodied in the restoration of the village of Solomeo, with the construction of the theater as well as the Universal Library, for which the Umbrian entrepreneur was inspired by Emperor Hadrian with the importance he attached to books, the true centerpiece of every humanistic culture.

It is this ideal of providing tools for cultural elevation that Cucinelli calls “human sustainability” and which, he insists, is the core of Humanistic Capitalism. Central to all that is the ideal of human dignity: an ideal of respect and human value that is also a corporate goal that determines the style of relationships between colleagues and customers. Human dignity is a principle that, as mentioned above, is closely linked both to Cucinelli's personal and intimate experience and to a very specific humanistic theme. As the Umbrian entrepreneur often recounts, his father's negative experience in the workplace, where his dignity as a man and as a worker was constantly trampled upon, was what led him to develop the goal of restoring moral and economic dignity to work. This goal, following classical and humanistic inspiration, became universal, as evidenced by the monument called “Tribute to the Dignity of Man,” located in the Park of Beauty in Solomeo, an exedra inspired by Greek-Roman architecture, made of travertine blocks, composed of five arches representing the five continents and built according to the proportions of classical architecture, as described by Vitruvius and Palladius.

It is human dignity that represents the common thread running through what Cucinelli programmatically calls the construction of a “new universal Humanism.” Through this, and more precisely, through one of its most specific forms, which is Humanistic Capitalism, the Umbrian entrepreneur aims to renew the way business is done by combining profit with a purpose that almost transcends it, through the level and quality of attention devoted to issues such as social responsibility and the dignity of work. The reference to the concepts – including spiritual ones – of the humanistic tradition is an integral part of what Cucinelli's

corporate identity is, so much so that Cucinelli wanted the Benedictine monk Cassian Folsom, former prior of the monastery of Norcia, on his board of directors to ensure respect for a certain type of ethics that fosters the dignity of workers. Back to ‘human dignity’.

The theme is central in the entire humanistic and Renaissance traditions, and behind it, there is Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's famous oration on the Dignity of Man, dating back to 1486. This is a text of primary importance in the history of philosophy and Western thought as it marks a pivotal step in the path towards the construction of the individual as capable of reflecting on himself and on his potential and aspirations. Thus, behind the motive of the dignity of man, there is the development of a process of self-understanding without which, very certainly, further steps in the philosophical and scientific advances of human civilizations would not have been possible.

The centrality of man and his being part of a divine plan that transcends himself seems to be relevant also in Cucinelli's approach to life and enterprise. The reason behind human dignity, which in Renaissance terms points to its excellence, is simple and profound at the same time, and in Pico's text, God himself utters these words when speaking to the primordial man, Adam:

We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer.⁶

The centrality of man within the idea of creation, and therefore his special responsibility for the whole, along with his intrinsic freedom, the “free will” philosophers still discuss, or in other words, his indeterminate nature as opposed to the nature of other beings, are the tenets of that excellence. One might ask, how do such complex philosophical and ethical considerations relate to the work of an entrepreneur? One answer may lie in Cucinelli's entrepreneurial vision and in the nature of humanistic capitalism itself. As the entrepreneur indicated in his speech to the convocation committee at Perugia, one of the four criteria according to which he decided to divide the profits of his company was

⁶Conti, “The Uses of the Past: History”, p.69.

⁷LaRocca, “A New Philosophy of Clothes”, 17.

⁸Vivek Oberoi, “Why Ethical Luxury Is the Post-COVID Gold — And What That Means for Your Business”, Entrepreneur, July 14, 2025

⁹Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), p. 109

¹⁰Theodora Koullias, “Retail Practice Beyond ‘quiet luxury’: Brunello Cucinelli's billion-dollar growth formula”, McKinsey & Company (October 2023): 1-5

¹¹Oberoi, “Why Ethical Luxury Is the Post-COVID Gold”

¹²Alain-Philippe Durand and Ken S. McAllister, “Humanities = Jobs: The Tactics of Contrarian Entrepreneurial Humanists”, ADE Bulletin 159 □ ADFL Bulletin 47.2 (2022): 82-98

“to “embellishing the world”, a concept that can encompass any type of initiative: to help a person in difficulty, but also to restore a church, build a hospital, a crèche, a theatre or a library ... and I should add that in this case I was inspired by the great mind of one of my mentors, the emperor Hadrian, when he said: “I feel responsible for all the beauty in the world.””

“This – Cucinelli concludes – is the underlying philosophy of the enterprise”. This is also, we must add, the core of what humanistic capitalism means. Thus, we return to where we started, to the search for meaning, for significance, so typical of human experience, and as Cucinelli shows, increasingly intrinsic even to the experience of the entrepreneur, especially in the luxury sector, which today sees the rise of more sophisticated, engaged and conscious lifestyles. It is not by chance that, in the aftermath of the economic crisis that affected also luxury consumer goods as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, some brands (or non-brands, if you will) such as, precisely, Cucinelli, but also Loro Piana, Hermes, Chanel, have resisted better than others, even increasing their revenues. New consumers seem to favor “timeless” products that are uninfluenced by fashion trends, those products that are perceived as maintaining their value beyond the mutability of circumstances and that are seen as highly inspirational, conscientious, ethical, in a word, meaningful.⁸ At the heart of those trends may still be the importance of giving meaning to one's actions in life as well as to what a company does and how it does it. Viktor Frankl had already pointed out how “Everyone has his specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment.”⁹ Cucinelli made an enterprise out of his vocation. Consumers are drawn today to brands that carry history, authenticity, and values. Cucinelli has therefore effectively intercepted a need for “quiet luxury”, where simplicity, quality, and subtlety reflect personal meaning rather than external validation. Luxury, therefore, dives into cultural depths and, by tapping into craftsmanship, heritage, and artistry, creates emotional bonds beyond aesthetics.

That approach has been proven to generate value for both the customer and the producer. Cucinelli's attention to the customer is equal to its attention to those who produce, especially given the artisanal base represented by the approximately 400 workshops that produce for the Umbrian fashion house. As Massimo Caronna, Cucinelli's North America CEO, recalls, Cucinelli often says: “I'm not worried about who's going to buy the product, but I'm worried about who's going to produce the product.”¹⁰ Securing production is one of the biggest concerns in Italy today, which is why Cucinelli was recently persuaded to take a joint minority stake in some of its cashmere yarn producers. It is about a “contrarian approach to growth”, an approach, once again, that has something intrinsically humanistic in it. As Caronna recalls, during COVID-19, while most businesses moved online, Cucinelli doubled down on opening physical stores, while also launching the “Brunello Cucinelli for Humanity” project, through which excess products were donated to those in need. The humanistic approach to business, “humanistic capitalism,” is reflected in these and other choices, such as the “Solomeo Togetherness,” a week in which, after the end of the pan-

demic, about 600 Cucinelli employees from around the world were brought to the 14th century town of Solomeo—just like the “big names” of Silicon Valley—to talk about the company's values, converse, and hug each other, after the distance imposed by Covid.

That the alliance between business and humanities can be fruitful, or rather, that a humanistic approach and education can not only find space but also be applied in the “real world,” seems to be confirmed by these trends inherent in the business world, just as in the world of luxury shows. After all, as has been said, “Luxury isn't about more anymore. It's about meaning.” Stories, values, ethics, and the ability to tell them with clarity are the winning tools capable of rewriting the rules of the luxury industry. This is what “Contrarian Entrepreneurial Humanism” entails.¹² It is about the ability to translate humanities skills into market value, by using critical thinking, communication, cultural literacy, and creativity with purpose and awareness; by developing the ability to think “differently”, in questioning what the others do and seeing possibilities where others may only see limits; by embracing interdisciplinarity, which can generate productive new ways of interrelating humanities and technologies; by being able to establish and maintain ample networking systems, putting differences together in a fruitful and ordered way; by advocating for flexibility and inclusivity as opposed to the rigidity of the established models or well-known paths. Humanistic capitalism is a business model that can revolutionize the relationship between the world of production and labor, as well as the humanities. Soft skills, which have been “essential” skills, those skills that one can learn, especially through the humanistic type of learning, can be seen as related to the world of labor in general, as well as to Humanistic Capitalism in particular:

No entrepreneur, diplomat, engineer, or health-care worker can succeed, no careers nor industries flourish—not anywhere in the world—without applying the essential skills we practice and teach in the humanities. [...] Communication, critical thinking, adaptability, intercultural competence—skills such as these are the basis of great literature teachers, historians, and translators, to be sure; they also make for great scientists, engineers, and corporate executives, the kinds of leaders and workers who will challenge inhumane practices and champion ideas that open rather than foreclose opportunities and justice for all.¹³

It is this ethical, “human” aspect of work that is particularly close to Cucinelli's way of thinking and his goal of “making the world more beautiful” or workplaces “fairer and more dignified.” Thus, what has been defined as the principle of “qualitative rarity,” which represents a particularly important lever in the growth of the luxury sector, would be meaningless if it were not properly communicated, if it did not itself become an essential lever in the development of the luxury industry, blending emotional perception and the actual quality of the product. Cucinelli's idea of luxury is directly linked to this concept of rarity and exclusivity. As Cucinelli himself stated, “Ideally, the product should feel exclusive to its user—as if made solely for him.”¹⁴

¹³Durand and McAllister, “Humanities = Jobs”: 86, 91.

¹⁴Jean-Noël Kapferer, “Abundant rarity: The key to luxury growth”, *Business Horizons* Volume 55, Issue 5, (September–October 2012): 453-462; David LaRocca, “Brunello Cucinelli: A Humanistic Approach to Luxury, Philanthropy, and Stewardship”, *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics*, Vol. 3, Art. 9 (July 2014): 4.

¹⁵George Anders, *You can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a “Useless” Liberal Arts Education* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017), pp. 247-48.

All this appears to follow a broader trend in business and the world of work. In turn, this trend has significant roots in education and in a perspective that is humanistic in nature. Such a perspective points to the nature of work as something able to give one meaning, or rather, as Joseph Conrad says in his *Heart of Darkness*, “the chance to find yourself”, which implicitly means transcending the economist’s view of work as a habitual exchange of labor for money. Yes, work provides paychecks, which translate into food, shelter, clothing, and modern-day luxury. But something bigger is in play too. Work’s full significance touches on entirely different factors-simultaneously more ethereal and more essential. Work is how you establish your identity.... In the decades since Conrad set down his fountain pen, work has been transformed-at least for college graduates- into something safer, more comfortable, and more sustaining for the human spirit.¹⁵

It is not difficult to find an exact correspondence between these trends and Brunello Cucinelli's vision. In his book, *The Dream of Solomeo*, Cucinelli describes his town as a “spiritual hamlet” (“borgo dello spirito”), centered on its castle and the theatre, with a truly humanistic flavor, while the entrepreneur recalls his love for books, reflection, ideas, and capitalism, in a combination of themes typical of the Renaissance, such as Cucinelli's desire to dedicate his book and his memories to young people.¹⁶ Cucinelli's “human” capitalism is thus reconstructed in a web of memories of life lived, of love for places, for those places in his native Umbria, home of Francis of Assisi, with his messages of peace and attention to every living being as well as Benedict of Norcia, founder of Western monasticism with his monasteries, true prototypes of managerial and ethical organization that Cucinelli takes as a model, in the quest for a universal dimension that embraces private business and sense of community, profit and gift, ties with the past and vision of the future, with at its center the rediscovery of a new, more humane and sustainable way of relating between all these elements. It is a dimension that, as is worth rediscovering, and I have tried to do so, has the power to connect seemingly distant areas of action and fields, such as business, humanism, and the educational tradition of the liberal arts. Perhaps surprisingly, all this does not refer to the past, but to current and future trends in the business world. “Curiosity, creativity, and empathy aren’t untruly traits that must be reined in to ensure success. Just the opposite. The human touch has never been more essential in the workplace than it is today. ... The job market is quietly creating thousands of openings a week for people who can bring a humanist’s grace to our rapidly evolving high-tech future”, Anders highlights, linking it to liberal arts education.¹⁷ These are motives that can be seen very well represented by Cucinelli’s business model, and the ties of such a model with the Italian Renaissance tradition are clear and openly communicated.

Both more intellectually refined references to the Renaissance and more popular ones can be found in Cucinelli’s approach to Humanism. Every year in July, for several days, the Renaissance Festival in Solomeo takes place, attracting people from beyond the region to enjoy shows, stalls with vendors in costume, fire-eaters, jesters, dancers, waders, acrobats, sculptors, painters

and food typical of the Renaissance tradition, where Brunello's wife and daughters take an active part in the preparations and he is also always present, often sitting at the bar in the town small square, chatting quietly with whoever happens to be there. This is a popular way to celebrate the Renaissance. But in the newly built “universal library”, in the Palladio-style theatre, in the numerous aphorisms from philosophers and thinkers from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment disseminated throughout the walls and doors of Solomeo, the numerous philanthropic, cultural, and artistic projects sponsored by Cucinelli’s Foundation, his own Aurelian Neohumanistic Academy, all this point to a more sophisticated approach to and use of the Renaissance, with his synthesis of philosophical and artistic models, embracing spiritual values and human attention to create universal patterns, this is a clear reference to a specific cultural tradition.

It is about the Italian Renaissance, that great intellectual and artistic movement that began in the 15th century, and Humanism, the cultural trajectory that made it possible, which had already begun in the previous century, were the driving forces behind the most innovative and stylistically significant works produced at the time, not only in Italy but throughout Europe. Proof of this is that Leonardo da Vinci's “Vitruvian Man” was chosen to represent Italian identity on 1-euro coins: a man of perfect proportions and balance, a universal man, according to the Renaissance model, or rather a man who “can do anything if he wants to,” as the great Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti wrote. Humanism and the Renaissance changed man's relationship with himself forever. Man finally became aware of himself and his potential. He wanted to know, understand, and represent, and in doing so, he created a style. He did so with a visual perspective that was different from the past, and he did so by rediscovering classical culture and once again exalting the beauty of forms, including feminine ones, as in the incomparable paintings of Sandro Botticelli, such as his *Venus*, an unrivalled synthesis of Renaissance art and Neoplatonic philosophy in the Florence of the Medici era.

The Renaissance ideal of beauty is what Cucinelli refers to. An ideal can be admired in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, the Town Hall of Siena, the papal rooms and the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, as well as in the Villa Farnesina in Rome and many other places throughout Italy. It represents the quintessence of the beauty search, and at the same time, the achievement of an absolute peak in Italian artistic production, in its relationship between stylistic innovation and classical tradition, which is also a never-ending dialogue between politics and spirituality, geometry and philosophy, literature and iconography. Additionally, Renaissance beauty is also influenced by the landscape. Such as the Val d'Orcia countryside, south of Siena, with its well-ordered and tidy fields in different shades of pastel colors, so close to the colors that Cucinelli favors in his clothing. It is the same landscape that one can still admire today in the fourteenth-century fresco depicting the effects of Good Government in the countryside by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. The same care for beauty, Cucinelli likes to tell, he used to see in the fields when he was a child, and his father showed him how the furrows made by the oxen

¹⁶Brunelli Cucinelli, *Il Sogno di Solomeo: La mia vita e l'idea del capitalismo umanistico* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2018)

¹⁷Anders, *You can Do Anything*, p. 4.

¹⁸Brunello Cucinelli, *Letter to His Father*: <https://www.brunellocucinelli.com/it/thoughts/letter-to-my-father.html>

¹⁹Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988)

²⁰Conti, “The Uses of the Past”, pp. 62-63.

should be straight, “because they are more beautiful.”¹⁸

In a certain sense, as it has been said, the Renaissance represents that almost perfect union between power and imagination. Lauro Martines effectively captured that concept in the title of one of his important books, which is a hallmark of this Renaissance identity that is also specifically Italian.¹⁹ The proliferation of courts at that time represented the multiplication—not the flattening—of places of power, which, however, invested—certainly also for self-celebratory purposes—in cultural enterprises aimed at the creative pursuit of beauty and the production of meaning through imagination.

The relationship between Humanism and the Renaissance is essential and has the power to link the Classical past to the core of developments from which all potentialities of modernity stem.

As I wrote elsewhere

Humanism, and the Renaissance deriving from it, in the mind of their theorists had the power to extend man's potential to infinity, in a word, to globalize him. After all, it was a man called “universal”, capable of anything and without preordained limits, to represent the Renaissance anthropological model par excellence ... The central category of *humanitas* ... could be used ... as a synonym of humanity common to all human beings – as in Terence's famous “I am a human being and I reckon nothing human alien to me” (“*homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto*”: *Heauton Timoroumenos* 77) or in Creon's denial of burial for Polynices being described as a lack of *humanitas* in Statius' *Thebaid* (12.165-6), with *humanitas* as a synonym of philanthropy and very close to our modern understanding of the word.²⁰

Thus, *humanitas*, humanism as a synonym of those aspects that should mostly represent one's being human: open curiosity, interest in all human things, which in turn generates that peculiar sense of care that is philanthropy. All elements that certainly can be found in Brunello Cucinelli's attitude to the world and business model. There is an interesting and intrinsically educational aspect in Cucinelli's model, a pedagogical function that it shares with others, both in theory and in a practical sense. Carnegie, Vanderbilt, Cornell, they were all great entrepreneurs and philanthropists with generative ties to the world of academia. Cucinelli is also strongly related to schools and universities, and he likes to speak to students and young people in general. A point to which we will get back. What has been defined his “educational philanthropy as stewardship” is truly humanistic. Every means becomes an educational means in Cucinelli's experience. Establishing a library, building a theatre, sponsoring concerts and symposia, inspiring a neo-humanistic academy, as well as a new university chair on humanistic²¹ studies. The aim is to shape a new type of working environment, but also a new type of society, more humane, more polite, more respectful.

The co-founder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project, late Italian literature professor Pier Massimo Forni, put together both academic and community outreach activities to highlight the significance of civility, manners, and politeness in contemporary

society and to encourage civility-based initiatives on university campuses around the USA. Forni wrote: “Being civil means being constantly aware of others [...]; when we approach others assuming that they are good, honest, and sensitive, we often encourage them to be just that.”²² Also, Forni continues, “One day, while lecturing on the *Divine Comedy*, I looked at my students and realized that I wanted them to be kind human beings more than I wanted them to know about Dante. I told them that if they knew everything about Dante and then they went out and treated an elderly lady on the bus unkindly, I'd feel that I had failed as a teacher.” This strikingly connects both to the humanistic and Renaissance tradition and to what Cucinelli also claims. Behind the urge to invest in a different way of seeing the others and deal with them – be they neighbors, customers, employees, or students – there seems to be an approach based on specific cultural patterns, and these cultural patterns rest on the humanistic tradition. In the 1st century AD, the Latin author Valerius Maximus's *Dictorum et factorum memorabilium libri novem* (Nine books of memorable deeds and sayings) elaborates on the importance of human traits such as *humaneness*, *kindness*, and *compassion* (*benignitas*, *miserecordia*, *mansuetudo* and *clementia*). That is a text that entered humanism through the commentary written by the monk Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, the closest friend to Francis Petrarch, the first humanist.²³

When a 1996 Brunello Cucinelli advertising campaign proclaimed “We need a new Humanism,” accompanied by a photo of a young, smiling Cucinelli with an elegantly dressed woman, standing in a library around a monk seated at a table leafing through an ancient volume, I think it would be much easier to understand that advertisement if we put it into context with what has just been said. The advertising poster itself explains the nature of the message and its specific cultural reference when it states:

“The pictures accompanying this year's collection speak of passion for work: of men who are privileged to feel emotion for what they do, witnesses of a new humanism for which we feel the need. A humanism of sensibility, consciousness, serene dignity, a humanism far from the noises that crowd our times, yet living and vital, growing out of a passion for the arts of which they are masters. That is what we are looking for every day in what we do. Without it, our history would have been different.”²⁴

More recently, Cucinelli returned to the theme of Humanism with another means of communication, one of his several letters—themselves a classically humanistic medium, which unites the entrepreneur with Roman generals and politicians as well as Renaissance intellectuals—a letter dated April 28, 2025, significantly titled “Letter to young people for a humanistic revolution.”²⁵ In this letter, the entrepreneur, now almost a poet, speaks of the past and the future, of their inseparable and fruitful bond, of a new era to be created thanks to a return to humanistic values, celebrating the central role that young people play for him, and at the same time the importance of education, reading, and libraries. It would be useful to compare these ideal images with a Renaissance fresco that evokes and represents the same theme: the boy reading Cicero by Vincenzo Foppa of Milan (1464).

²¹LaRocca, “Brunello Cucinelli: A Humanistic Approach to Luxury, Philanthropy, and Stewardship”: 14 ff.

²²Conti, “The Uses of the Past”, pp. 67-68; Pier Massimo Forni, *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct* (New York: Griffin, 2002), p. 9.

²³Conti, “The Uses of the Past”, p. 67.

²⁴<https://www.brunellocucinelli.com/en/communication/campaigns/campaign-1996.html>

The thematic nodes of the fresco and the letter are the same: the centrality of youth as a potential that can be realized through commitment, training, and culture—humanistic culture, which gives the possibility to innovate and create new possibilities. As happened with Cicero, homo novus, the first of his family to achieve something important, just like Cucinelli, and, hopefully, many other young people to come²⁶.

Cucinelli is constantly in dialogue with the past, but at the same time, he looks to the future, which humanistically preserves and nurtures his roots. Thus, Cucinelli's letter to his father and the one to young people are in direct dialogue and feed into the common thread that runs through both the entrepreneur's personal and heartfelt experience as well as the cultural trajectory that leads from the age of the Classics to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment through humanistic roots.

While recent scientific literature is increasingly highlighting the relationship between sustainable luxury and increased sales, the question is whether Cucinelli's case simply follows this trend, expressing more of a marketing strategy. Although this dimension is certainly present, an attentive analysis of Cucinelli's history and corporate dimension shows that there is more to it than that. This is a strong cultural dimension that is rooted in the founder's personal experience as well as in a cultural context that, as I have tried to show, is much bigger than him.

The key element here is the entrepreneur's ability to build his company solidly around a vision, to the point that it now defines the uniqueness of the company itself and therefore of its product. That vision is a natural characteristic of Cucinelli's business dimension, so strongly related to the place where he, just like his company, was born and where it still operates today, as well as to the peculiar social dimension that revolves around the enterprise of which workers are an integral part. As it was said, while such a specificity would seem to make Cucinelli's business model irreproducible, his application of humanistic principles such as philanthropy and stewardship might be translated successfully to other companies. Such a possibility rests exactly on the fact that Cucinelli's business model, although being rooted in the personal experience and intuition of its founder, has expanded itself through the categories of something much larger, both in spatial and cultural terms: the experience of Humanism and the Renaissance, with the role they played in shaping and transforming a vision of man, and together with it, clearly, of doing business. This is, to conclude, also about the alliance between the world of business and that of the humanities, an alliance that, as the experience of Brunello Cucinelli shows, is not only possible but can even be advantageous, as at its center, there lays the possibility to construct a new meaning for what one does, produces, and purchases.²⁷

²⁵<https://www.brunellocucinelli.com/it/thoughts/letter-to-the-youth-for-a-humanistic-revolution.html>

²⁶Luming Zhao, Jiayi Peng, and Shubin Yu, "Sustainable Luxury and Consumer Purchase Intention: A Systematic Literature Review", SAGE Open, Volume 13, Issue 4, October 2023

²⁷LaRocca, "Brunello Cucinelli: A Humanistic Approach to Luxury, Philanthropy, and Stewardship": 9-14.