Humanism is, in some sense, traceable to any community of *homo sapiens* that has regarded itself, its values, its virtues as paramount, even sacrosanct. In the West, humanism has ebbed and flowed in relation to culture, religion, politics, technology, and economics; today, this remains very much the case. If we can spot moments of peerless intensity—the ancient Greece that was home to Socrates and Plato, the Rome of antiquity that produced Cicero and Seneca, the Italian Renaissance that found company with Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and, in the modern era, various strains of Protestantism and liberalism, with the likes of Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill—we can also take stock of the particular moment in the history of humanism that we currently inhabit.
Cultural historian, Yuval Noah Harari, in works such as *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*, has provided a broad context in which to think our *human-ness*—what makes us what we are, at once different from other species and like one another within a species. As Harari shifts his scale of interest from ontogeny to phylogeny—and across vast swaths of time—he offers an especially useful heuristic for thinking about our appointed topic, humanistic management, since Harari, in part, traces the abiding relationship between capitalism and humanism. I can briefly gloss one of his illuminating points on this perhaps unexpected intermingling by saying that where we have for centuries perceived capitalism’s willingness to tolerate, support, and even at times celebrate humanism (e.g., with attention to factors such as improved working conditions; labor laws that prohibit children from service; retraining and re-education; supplying a living wage, health and social benefits, retirement and pension planning, and the like), Harari announces, and perhaps also admonishes, that now “humanism *with* capitalism is a relic.” Moreover, the distance between capitalism and humanism is widening with each passing season as the impact of post-human technologies—for example, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and algorithmic-based systems—become the standard operating procedures for doing the business of capitalism (from banks to boardrooms, from pensions to personal financial decision-making). Despite the increase of the human population on earth—and the attendant human impact on the climate, as framed, for example, in terms of the Anthropocene—the uncanny fact remains that we are, concurrently, heading for an age of the post-human; this notion is most tersely and evocatively expressed as the separation of intelligence from consciousness. While humans may remain for some time the most conscious of animate creatures, our intelligence may, and likely will, fade from pre-eminence. If this is the case, and evidence suggests that we are already deeply immersed in this twofold transformation—viz., (1) capitalism’s separation from humanism and (2) the separation of intelligence from consciousness—humanism needs not only new explicators and defenders, but also new models for study and reflection, and, when possible, emulation. In what follows here, I aim to articulate some of the ways in which a concrete illustration of humanistic management in business practice at Brunello Cucinelli may provide some indication of how
humanism can retain its vital alignment with—and integration within—capitalism’s onward development, and even account, in its own way, for the increasing nonhuman basis of intelligence.

Part I

Brunello Cucinelli is the founder of an eponymous line of high-end, luxury fashion apparel and accessories. As surprising as it sounds at first blush (and perhaps surprisingly incongruous), Cucinelli, who I will address by surname in what follows to help distinguish him from the name of his closely-held publically-traded corporate entity, has a long-standing interest in and devotion to humanistic strains of thinking as they are found globally, but especially in the West, and more specifically emerging out of Italy and the native regions familiar to his birthplace, Umbria. Thus, Benedict of Norcia (c.480-547) and Francis of Assisi (c.1181-1226) can be singled out both for their physical proximity to Solomeo (and Cucinelli’s hometown, Castel Rigone) and for their intellectual support of his cultivated application of their teaching to his type of humanistic management. The epicenter of the Italian Renaissance, Florence, is fewer than a hundred miles away, while conceptually its contributions to global humanistic thought are immanent in Cucinelli’s small Italian hill town and the international clothing empire he runs from its parapets.

I will not rehearse here my earlier research on Brunello Cucinelli—most perspicuously in two journal articles (one addressed to the essential role of literary and philosophical humanism in Cucinelli’s business practice and a second devoted to the company’s philanthropic and stewardship activities—issues that lie beyond the appointed purview of the present volume) and also in a documentary film I directed, *Brunello Cucinelli: A New Philosophy of Clothes* (Fine Print Film, 2013). In these articles, in this film, and in interviews, I have articulated the rich and rigorous philosophical grounding of Cucinelli’s enterprise in the world of business. In what follows, then, I want to supplement, extend, and update my existing research by doing two things:
First, take up the mandate of the volume by focusing on the management practices of the company Brunello Cucinelli, which has been helmed since its inception forty years ago, in 1978, by the man who gave the company his name, Brunello Cucinelli. I will avoid, then, allusion to and engagement with Cucinelli’s philanthropic initiatives, which are at once inventive, generous, and pronounced (again, these projects are discussed in my prior work4). As our editors usefully define it: “humanistic management is about how a business earns its money, not how it spends its money.” The following notes will be attuned, then, to the way Cucinelli’s management style, principles, and practices enact humanism and illuminate humanistic traits—especially in relation to his employees, the running of his factories, engagement with suppliers, approach to retail operations and the products they purvey, and like enterprises devoted to improving the bottom line. In the case of Brunello Cucinelli, we glean a first lesson in his humanistic management style: the allocation of the company’s profits to initiatives beneficial to his employees, their work environment, and the continual improvement of the production process and its products, is at the core of his sense of “how a business earns its money.”

The Dignity of Labor

A major, founding touchstone for thinking with Cucinelli about how to run a business so that it can make money is the notion of the dignity of labor. There are many valences to this notion, among them that an employee feels respected by his employer; that she feels she is well-trained and capable of doing her assigned tasks with finesse and competence; that she feels sufficiently remunerated for her time, effort, and output; and lastly, that she feels part of a community of laborers and managers who respect her and one another. These four axes are elemental to Cucinelli’s vision for creating the conditions for a corporate environment in which even the prospects of profits can be imagined; for example, Cucinelli’s abiding concern with worker dignity would forestall any attempt, especially consciously, to put corporate profits ahead of it. If one doesn’t have
contented, motivated employees—people who feel genuinely valued by the company—there is no reason to undertake a capitalist initiative.

**From Dignity Follows Quality**

Managers are often charged with monitoring “quality control,” a broad enough category to include the quality of the workforce (are they well-trained? are they efficient? are they making what they are supposed to make? and so on) and also, more familiarly, the quality of the products. For Cucinelli, there is a through-line between quality of workers and quality of products; if you focus on the care of the worker as, say, a Benedictine abbot might for his brothers at the abbey, then you can rest easy that the fruits of their labors will be the best they can be.5

**Capitalism Must Be a Humanistic Endeavor**

As we are building precepts—dignity, quality—we find time and again that Cucinelli regards humanism as absolutely necessary to the evolution of capitalism. That is, humanism is neither a hindrance nor an irritant to the ambitions of a capitalist regime, but, instead, the guiding force for how capitalism should conduct itself. Cucinelli’s brand of humanism—often referred to, by him, as a neohumanism—makes itself known in and through these normative injunctions and ethical imperatives. That there is nothing capitalism *should* do besides maximize profits is anathema to Cucinelli’s vision of capitalism’s still-deferred promise. Indeed, under Cucinelli’s management, profits are the *beginning* and not the end of his humanistic preoccupations, since available equity can be used to promote, in his parlance, the human spirit. Build a library, a theater, an elementary school, and a hospital; restore a church, a town square, or an ancient ruin; plant a grove of trees, harvest olives for oil and grapes for wine; and give workers a raise, time off, or some form of social support—these are what profits are for. Again, the quality of the end product, its viability on the open market, and the return of yet-more-profits will take
care of themselves if these immanent, human needs and desires are first addressed.

Additional mantras of this sort can be adduced (and have been in my prior research⁶), but their service, however briefly or loquaciously these are described, find humanism heeding close to the business of capitalism. The double entendre is intentional; it is meant to keep close at hand Harari’s notion that the very activity of business (at the heart of capitalism’s workings) is increasingly being jobbed-out to computational algorithms. Much of the global stock market—from moment to moment—is already running ahead of, or beyond, human control, even if we are simultaneously meant to believe that humans make ultimate and essential decisions now and again (e.g., setting interest rates and where to invest/divest). As neoliberal incarnations of capitalism continue to spread—with their heedless obsession with outcomes, ratings/rankings, and the pernicious recalibration (often diminishment) of human capital—management is increasingly, perhaps at a level never-before seen, in need of humanistic models.

Consider a glimpse into different realms of “business”: where for generations, centuries in fact, capitalist business operated on market principles, the academy seemed part of an archaic world, a vestige of a lost age (among other ages, we might call it an age of humanistic inquiry—as in ancient Greece and Rome, later the Renaissance, and more recently, various Enlightenments and Romantićisms). Today, the academy has shifted almost entirely to control beneath a neoliberal order; the humanistic qualities, credentials, and occupations that defined the academy for most of its existence are extinct, or nearly so.⁷ Indeed, the very notion of “the Humanities” appears increasingly evacuated, displaced, and replaced by those fields that show promising return on investment (ROI). The cutting edge of the academic humanities, we are told, involves “data mining” (a fit trope for the logic capitalistic extraction). Gone is the need, the allowance, for close reading. While academic bureaucrats are given substantial raises, tenured faculty are swapped out for temporary adjuncts; while new infrastructure populates the campus (a Welcome Center here, a sports stadium there), departments (indeed, whole programs, including academic presses) are underfunded and occasionally simply shuttered. If we are addressing broad trends, the academy is, by and large, no longer a
location in which humanistic inquiry can flourish—mainly because the vested interests (a lovely sartorial pun if ever there was one, and ironical too) are hostile to humanism’s claim for our time, attention, and value. In a lamentable coda to this crisis, it has been argued that the severe—perhaps irrecoverable—damage done to the humanities in the academy was largely self-inflicted.  

It is all the more intriguing that—in an uncanny and unexpected reversal—we have discovered in Cucinelli’s company a redoubt in which capitalism has come to announce (indeed, preserve, protect, and develop) the virtues, even profitability!, of humanism. Far from exploiting workers (as academic adjuncts are), reducing options for inquiry (as academic departments have), and generally laying waste to the potential for academic work in the humanities to bestow—and secure—the dignity of labor (as the ruling elites of corporatized academy are wont to do), Cucinelli has with full, unironic commitment conceived and built a neohumanistic academy (equipped as it is with a so-called Neohumanistic Aurelian Library, and across a piazza from a massive Palladian theater constructed after Cucinelli’s design). It bears repeating—in part because it is rather rare and, in some measure, counterintuitive—that Cucinelli does not see the creation of these humanistic institutions as how the company spends its money, but rather how the business earns its money. This last point needs some elaboration.

Theories of entrepreneurship, such as offered by J. P. Kuehlwein, who has interviewed me for his *Ueber-Brands* podcast and during research for his coauthored book, *Rethinking Prestige Branding: Secrets of the Ueber-Brands* (with Wolfgang Shaefer 2015), might point out how Cucinelli’s management style (bracketing its humanism in principle or practice) is, in fact, in keeping with the corporatized, neoliberal approach to “building a brand.” If that is the case, then we might wonder how we can “unbracket” the humanism to allow its enrichment of management practices; the onus of answering for what we would have to lose would be on those who entrench to avoid it, that is, who aim to keep humanism bracketed.

Some anonymous readers of my earlier work on Cucinelli have leveled what we might call a cynical reading of his work, which, regrettably, may be the only way we have come to allow ourselves to think about corporate
management (“humanistic” in name only, or by some other name that “virtue signals” but does not instantiate its practices and summon its hoped-for effects); such critics say, I might add, with kind of blithe confidence and untroubled dismissiveness, that Cucinelli is using humanism as a marketing ploy (e.g., as one might accuse a company’s bid for “environmental friendliness” as a scandal of “green washing”). The cynical reading is thus part and parcel of a skeptical one: Cucinelli builds academies, schools, theaters, libraries, and, indeed, quotes from Marcus Aurelius and Kant as part of an attempt to align his business with certain values that are commodified and thus monetized. The brand is, on this reading, a kind of cult one can “buy into” by buying off the rack. Membership, like entraée into so many coveted guilds, can be had at a price.

And yet, as a counterpoint to the cynical reading, we can see that the vast majority of Cucinelli’s adoption of humanistic principles for the management of his company never reach the website or catalog, the runway or the retail shop. There is no label on the clothes that admits, nay advertises, “humanism” as an ingredient of product or production. Most of his customers, for better or worse, remain casually unaware of—and perhaps even actively indifferent to—the ethics that pervades the day-to-day operations of the factory and other managerial aspects of the company. In a world where social media can lead to a sudden and severe boycott of goods on account of the purported or presumed moral failing of their corporate owners (e.g., fossil fuel frackers, child labor exploiters, and fascist regime supporters—and far lesser infractions inveighed by “cancel culture”), it certainly would not likely hurt Cucinelli’s bottom line to have it broadcast that he aims at (and it would seem achieves) a high degree of loyalty from suppliers, worker dignity, customer satisfaction, and the like. But whether the humanistic programs Cucinelli does in fact instantiate in his corporate hometown of Solomeo reveal a positive correlation with profits remains at the level of speculation. One would need to interview each of his customers and ask: “Was your purchase from Brunello Cucinelli motivated by anything besides your admiration and desire for the products you acquired?”

As that question stands for the sort of social scientific motivation to track a causative relationship between brand and profit, I wish to point
our attention to things we do know, and don’t need to speculate about, namely that Cucinelli’s pronounced commitment to humanistic values is largely conducted away from the klieg lights and press kits. One indication of his sentiment—at once sincere and enacted—derives from him speaking about how most corporations have a twenty- or thirty-year plan for success. (We can pause to notice that that’s about the length of an average career, another indication that selfish, proximate motives are involved in the mainstream discourse of corporate arcs.) Cucinelli, contrariwise, speaks of a five hundred-year plan. Clearly, for a man in his late-sixties, he doesn’t presume to have much to do with the vast swath of that future. Indeed, as revenue neared half-a-billion in 2015, and Cucinelli’s net worth is purported to be $1.4 billion in 2020, there seems little reason for him to make such far-reaching claims. Can any reader mention another global entrepreneur who has spoken in such concrete, declarative terms about a vast, unknown future? Some visionaries come mind: Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos. And yet are they pursuing such an expansive time horizon while simultaneously not giving short-shrift to imminent issues of worker dignity? Moon shots and Mars landings, electric cars and delivery drones, may derive from their concentrated wealth, but what of the lives of the laborers who make all that possible? Are we enriched on the way to their extra-terrestrial obsessions?

While the official, corporate website—www.shop.brunellocucinelli.com—might stick to the exhibition of attractive clothes (and thus as a portal for purchasing them), the online presence—at www.brunellocucinelli.com—also makes a practice of articulating and advocating humanistic principles, especially as they are in league and in line with the mandates of the market. In this respect, prospective customers may encounter an ideology of humanistic management according to Cucinelli; whether this sways their purchase one way or another remains to be researched.

Since when he was a boy, he witnessed his father working in an unwelcoming environment and became a close observer of the world, thus developing his dream to promote a concept of work that ensured “being moral and economic dignity.” This is a key element to understand his personality and the success of his business, which Brunello considers not only as a
wealth-generating entity, but also as a framework to develop and nurture his dream of a capitalism that enhances the human being. His knowledge of the great figures of the past has always fed his dreams and ideals, but he is always looking ahead towards the distant future, and each action and accomplishment of his is designed to last over the centuries.9

The website describes how the “increasingly international market welcomed his made in Italy products” and by these acquisitions—figured as a form of medieval patronage—“enabled him to implement his ideals.” After decades of steady growth, the company went public on the Italian Stock Exchange, Borsa Italiana (call letters BC), a decision, it is noted, that “was not driven by financial reasons alone, as Brunello saw a wider participation in his business activity as an opportunity to spread his ideals of a new capitalism, a truly Humanistic Capitalism.” Indeed, when Cucinelli was greeted on the day of his company’s initial public offering, he remarked: “This listing shows that romanticism and enlightenment are compatible with a humanist form of capitalism,” after which he presented the chief executive of Borsa Italiana with a sixteenth-century edition of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics.10

As part of his restoration of the Umbrian hill town, Solomeo, Cucinelli hired local craftsmen to build what became known as Teatro Cucinelli. The structure has since hosted myriad talks, conferences, plays, operas, and other performances. (During the COVID-19 pandemic, Cucinelli used the stage—and the empty seats before him—as a venue for a solo twenty-minute speech, in which he drew from poets, parables, and parents, to encourage us to consider how the crisis can spur our thinking and growth, and in turn the betterment of humanity.) By an easy measure, the theater has become the heart of the cultural life of Solomeo, and since so many employees work in the town or very near it, the theater and its offerings are part of their patrimony as well. The construction of the Teatro and the adjacent Forum of the Arts by Umbrian master craftsmen has led to the more recent founding of the Solomeo School of Arts and Crafts. Established in 2013 and inspired by the ideas and ideologies of essayist and aesthete, John Ruskin, and famed Arts & Crafts innovator, William Morris, the SSAC is devoted to training current and future generations in craftsmanship. Cucinelli regards craftsmanship
itself—whether with stone and mortar, or needle and thread—as elemental to the humanistic enterprise. In any age that is speeding toward AI dominance in factories—where the productivity of computers and robots has already displaced millions and promises to displace millions more—Cucinelli’s turn toward craftsmanship, tradecraft, can seem at once naïve and antediluvian, if not also perilous, for any talk of a five hundred-year plan.

And yet, despite the way Cucinelli’s projects challenge dominant corporatism and the dictates of neoliberal order, his business continues to expand (a new factory was constructed in 2017), his profits increase year after year. While he quotes Kant from memory, and alludes to the sayings of Roman emperors and Greek poets, Cucinelli presses on—founding the Project for Beauty in 2014. Part of its first phase was the creation of three substantive parks in the valley below Solomeo, land that has been reclaimed from abandoned factories.

This initiative symbolizes the crucial value of earth, “from which all things are,” as Xenophanes put it. With this project Brunello highlights the duty to restore the dignity of the land and, feeling like a sort of small custodian of the creation, he shows that “Beauty will save the world” whenever the world will in turn save Beauty.11

Of his many attempts to have capitalism serve humanism, and in turn for humanism to make capitalism a milieu for the creation and maintenance of human dignity, the Project for Beauty is especially poignant. Pushing aside the question about corporate business practice (e.g., in the boardroom), or the factory floor, the retail shop, or indeed even a concern with the products made by the company, Cucinelli and his foundation, cofounded with his wife, Federica, attend to the earth, plant trees and vineyards, and reflect on their roles as custodians. Looking at these newly-planted trees and vines, one gets an immediate sense of the tenability of his five hundred-year plan.
Part II

While the first part of this chapter has shown that Cucinelli and his eponymous company antagonize the prevailing ideological trends and philosophical tenets of corporate global capitalism (including its appointed pace and priorities), the second part will turn to what might be described as anthropological, even ethnographic, depictions of life in the company—something like a glimpse inside the day-to-day operations. Though Cucinelli has conflated, inverted, and otherwise confounded, the logic of this assignment—for example, by challenging the very notion that “humanistic management is about how a business earns its money, not how it spends its money,” I will attempt, in the space remaining, to translate the prevailing humanistic management skills, techniques, and procedures at the company so they might be understood by communities outside of Solomeo and the corporate culture of Brunello Cucinelli. To substantiate my claims, and enrich the dialogue between management inside the company and the models on offer outside it, I will relate details from a series of conversations conducted in the Spring of 2018 with Giorgiana Magnolfi, senior public relations and marketing director at Brunello Cucinelli, and company employee for more than a decade.

When I presented Magnolfi with my mandate—to address humanistic management in so far as that activity is “about how a business earns its money, not how it spends its money,” she offered me a knowing smile. “These are not separable, or opposed, for my boss,” she explained. “Mr. Cucinelli sees his practice of humanistic management as a comprehensive project—ranging from the ethical treatment of the suppliers from whom he sources materials to the workers who cook for the banquets that celebrate a new season of clothes.” When Magnolfi engages the professional language of marketing and management practice, for example, when gesturing toward the company’s stance on “sustainability,” she pivots quite rapidly from some abstract discussion of “the earth,” and related environmental concerns, such as global warming, to a highly proximate focus on the people who work for the company. “How are the humans doing?” she asks rhetorically. In an age that is preoccupied, perhaps to a fault, with politically correct corporate speech—for example, that would keep
everything at abstract, depersonalized levels—Magnolfi turns unapologetically to reflections on imminent concerns. She begins, “If you teach humans to be ethical,” and she concludes with a sage’s certainty, “they will sustain the earth.”

Magnolfi has done her homework on sustainability as it is discussed in the contemporary corporate—and global—agenda. She confidently reports that “the company would qualify for several of the criteria in the United Nations charter for sustainable corporations.” She refers to the UN’s “Global Compact,” launched in 2000, and described as “a call to companies everywhere to voluntarily align their operations and strategies with ten universally accepted principles in the areas of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption, and to take action in support of UN goals and issues. The UN Global Compact is a leadership platform for the development, implementation and disclosure of responsible corporate policies and practices.” From the company’s perspective, the environment always implies a hidden premise: “it is a humane environment.” Magnolfi is quick to reframe any corporate or marketing abstractions in anthropomorphic language, but even more boldly, anthropocentric terms. She speaks of Brunello Cucinelli as if it were a small village store, operating to serve its workers and local community, and as a natural effect of that care, satisfying its customers with products worthy of their appreciation. And in a genuine sense, aside from markers of scale, this is an accurate description of the company—in its embodied practices in Solomeo and in its representative locations beyond it. Magnolfi emphasizes that Cucinelli doesn’t tolerate hubris from his employees, much less harassment and other forms of degradation; rather, the goal is ever on “how you treat people”—with a focus on being an active, positive contributor to a community based on tolerance, shared interests, and also shared resources. This last point is not a nod to socialism, but rather to the vital social benefits of a capitalist corporation that holds tight to its humanistic priorities: the people first, and the rest will follow.

With abundant profits, a corporate hegemon such as Cucinelli has the power to “spread the wealth,” and he chooses to do this by means of continual improvement of working conditions, but also by attending to the intellectual, social, and spiritual lives of his employees. Perhaps this is too much interference for a standard laissez faire entrepreneur, and yet, as we
see with Elon Musk, Larry Page, Mark Zuckerberg, and Richard Branson, corporations can shape the values of the people who work for them but also who buy from them—and perhaps, even more importantly, those who don’t! As Tristan Harris has said, if you aren’t buying a product, you are the product. Consider, as a study in contrasts, how Zuckerberg’s abiding corporate credo has been “move fast and break things,” while Cucinelli’s has been the fostering of a series of mutually-enriching, highly-complementary, seemingly atemporal humanistic philosophies that seek the cultivation of and care for the human soul; indeed, given Cucinelli’s attention to physical as well as spiritual restoration, we might say his credo is precisely the opposite of Facebook’s founder: slow down and fix things. If we are eager to judge success by profits alone, then Zuckerberg may be acclaimed more successful (at present, his net worth is one hundred times more than Cucinelli); when we are thinking of the corporate management of human workers, such a de facto conclusion should give us pause.

While locals in Umbria, who are not the company’s employees, will praise Cucinelli’s repair of earthquake damage to historic sites such as Norcia (hometown of St. Benedict and the monastery where he prayed) and Perugia (not far from Assisi, where St. Francis began his practice of humble service to the poor), Magnolfi finds these specific acts as representative of, as she says, “an overall desire—and hope—to create a work environment, as well as contribute to a broader community, where people are meant to respect one another, and when necessary, lift one another; instead of being individuals solely out for their own mark, each person operates as part of a greater whole, keeping in mind along the way the goals of the company and also the community. The two are truly one in this vision of things.” With such a sentiment at hand, we glean how the corpus of the corporation requires individual and communal notions of “bodies” in the service of one another. Moreover, seeing how closely the local medieval humanists (viz., Benedict, Assisi) are to Cucinelli’s vision, we can, without wincing at the pun, appreciate the difference between a profit motive and the motivation of prophets. What animates the dedicated behavior and developed talents of loyal workers?—Not the boss’s bottom line; rather, employees want to be sustained by a sense that their work has meaning in itself and also as part of a network of contributions.
by others. By these means, individual human dignity emerges as a kind of epiphenomenon of corporate humanistic management.

We, the audience of this company’s approach to humanistic management—if not (also) prospective customers of the company’s wares—may ask questions that radiate beyond the bespoke practices at Brunello Cucinelli: What incentivizes the behavior of those who would “work for” capitalists, entrepreneurs, and managers? Thinking as an equity holder, looking out to a sea of employees, one could ask oneself: What if my motive for profit first addressed worker dignity—treat ing it, perhaps, as the very condition for envisioning corporate success? Or, for that matter, what if the care of the customer became a priority alongside standards of product quality? Returning to the management methods in place for decades in Solomeo, we see how, in reply to the first series of questions, Cucinelli draws inspiration from a cadre of humanists—from Socrates and Aurelius to Benedict and Kant—and on the second front, from the likes of Theodor Levitt, a Harvard business professor, who argued for the preeminence of the customer. (Levitt was an early and decisive influence on Cucinelli). Cucinelli’s regard for employees and customers is coupled with the standard (now expected) concern for quality control with respect to products, but his ratios of attention and his sense of priorities (viz., that employees and customers are priorities) remain distinctive when compared with the dominant forms of profit-centric, capitalistic management in the age of AI and data-driven algorithms. Indeed, in the context of a luxury fashion brand, it’s highly consequential that we are told “style is an algorithm; no one is original anymore, not even you.” Decision-making by managers—and customers alike—has been disrupted by the rise of the machines and machine learning. Incrementally, and at a conspicuous rate, the human factor is being driven out.

A still further valence of “management”—in the sense that Cucinelli’s capacious humanism affords, and no doubt, demands—finds his corporate largesse extending to the students at the School of Arts and Crafts in Solomeo: the company pays for student education in tailoring, patterning, as well as masonry and other “arts of craft.” Upon graduation, paid internships keep the talented graduates close to Solomeo, encouraging them to contribute new ideas to the company that was so generous with them. The loyalty exhibited on both sides of the relationship—from corporate
sponsor to striving artisan—adds another degree of social stability and interpersonal satisfaction; and, to be sure, in this context, there is still plenty of room for individual expressions of pride in accomplishment. Some models of corporate capitalism would identify these educational initiatives as tax write-offs or loss leaders, and, as it happens, such may be technically the case for Brunello Cucinelli, though, as he would say, not spiritually. Yet the point, given Cucinelli’s management priorities, is not to pursue only those things that either guarantee fiscal profit or otherwise enhance the brand (even if enhanced by virtue of financial losses). In this way, as a corporate head, Cucinelli is decidedly uncynical. One need only read his recent collection of remarks—*Brunello Cucinelli: The Dream of Solomeo; My Life and the Idea of Humanistic Capitalism* (Feltrinelli 2018)—to suss out his sincere demeanour and positive outlook. As befits such an approach, Cucinelli, is a steady student of Kant, and quotes from the German metaphysician and ethicist as if he were speaking his own sentiments: “Two things fill me with wonder, the starry sky above and the moral law within.” Again, the motivation for profit derives from a motive discerned by a prophet: Kant has illuminated for Cucinelli the way in which one’s intention is the limit situation for good works, not the common tack that mainly seeks utilitarian and financially advantageous outcomes.

For Brunello Cucinelli—the company, its founder, and its current CEO—“humanistic management” is a phrase always in translation and action as a humanistic *ethos*. Humanism, on this view, predates and thus precedes the capitalist venture—and yet, is absolutely vital to it, and must be retained. As in any anthropocentric *Weltanschauung* worthy of the name, the people come first. (Umbria’s, and especially nearby Florence’s, medieval confluence of humanism and a market economy—no less in the textile trade—provides a rich scene for exploring their symbiosis, a hybridity that continues to inspire Cucinelli in his twenty-first-century endeavors.) Cucinelli’s intense focus on the experiences of his immediate accomplices in business—his family, his coworkers at the top of the corporate structure, his employees at all levels (foreign and domestic, full-time and part-time, consultant or associate), his suppliers and his retailers, craftsmen and students of craft, and so on and so forth—radicalizes his humanism so that it permeates the entire enterprise. His hallmark
virtues—among them a focus on beauty, emphasis on the value of what is created, and dignity in and through labor—achieve their particular sheen in the light of his embodied practice of their emergence (e.g., in factories, farms, forests, schools, showrooms, theaters, libraries, and the like). The market analyst, the actuary, the business guru may find much to eschew and dismiss in Cucinelli’s special, even rarefied, approach to humanistic management. And yet, his results reveal his unintended defense: happy workers, esteemed products, and upward profits—“gracious growth,” as he puts.17

Notes

1. Cf. Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2015) and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2017). This specific quotation was gleaned from a conversation Harari had with Russell Brand in the *Under the Skin* (podcast), 10 March 2018, #48: “Noah’s Arc—What is the Future for Sapiens?”

2. Cf. David LaRocca, “Brunello Cucinelli: A Humanistic Approach to Luxury, Philanthropy, and Stewardship,” *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics*, vol. 3 (2014a), article 9; “A New Philosophy of Clothes: Brunello Cucinelli’s Neohumanistic Business Ethics,” *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics*, vol. 3 (2014b), article 10. See also the documentary film, *Brunello Cucinelli: A New Philosophy of Clothes*, dir. David LaRocca (Fine Print Film, color, 38 min., 2013).

3. J. P. Kuehlwein interviews David LaRocca, “Building a Brand on Bricks and Beliefs—Brunello Cucinelli,” 5 October 2015 (https://masstoclass.wordpress.com/2015/10/05/building-a-brand-on-bricks-and-believes-brunello-cucinelli-podcast-episode-02/). Marc Vander Maas interviews David LaRocca, “On Brunello Cucinelli’s New Philosophy of Clothes,” 21 December 2016, Radio Free Acton, The Acton Institute (https://soundcloud.com/actoninstitute/david-larocca-on-bruno-cucinelli’s-new-philosophy-of-clothes#t=0:00).

4. LaRocca (2014b, p. 6).

5. For more on the trope of the Benedictine abbot, see LaRocca (2014a).

6. See notes 2 and 3.
7. My remarks in this paragraph are informed by Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

8. As a representative set of reflections on this topic, see Eric Bennett, “Dear Humanities Prof: We Are the Problem,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (13 April 2018).

9. From the corporate website http://www.brunellocucinelli.com/en/brunello-cucinelli.html (Accessed 4 April 2018).

10. Michael Rose, “Cucinelli’s stellar debut seen boosting Italy IPO appeal,” *Reuters* (27 April 2012).

11. From the corporate website http://www.brunellocucinelli.com/en/brunello-cucinelli.html (Accessed 4 April 2018).

12. http://www.un.org/en/sections/resources-different-audiences/business/ (Accessed 4 April 2018).

13. See data on these claims as represented in “The Meaning of Work,” *Ted Radio Hour* (2 October 2015) https://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/443411154/the-meaning-of-work.

14. On this line of inquiry, see LaRocca (2014a).

15. For more on Levitt’s influence on Cucinelli, see LaRocca (2014b).

16. Kyle Chayka, “Style is an Algorithm,” *Racked* (17 April 2018), racked.com.

17. A phrase drawn from conversations with Giorgiana Magnolfi, Spring 2018.

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