

Catholic and Protestant Ethics in the Foundation of CSR: a Theoretical Exploration

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Abstract

This study delves into the evolving Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) discourse by examining its ethical foundations rooted in Catholic and Protestant traditions. Existing CSR theories often neglect the significant influence of these religious and cultural values on corporate behavior, resulting in a gap between contemporary business practices and their philosophical and theological origins. The research seeks to bridge this gap by exploring how the ethical principles of Anglo-Saxon (Protestant) and Southern (Catholic) capitalism shape different CSR approaches. Employing an integrative literature review, the study draws from philosophy, economic and business thought, and business ethics to provide a comprehensive analysis. The findings demonstrate that Protestant ethics, emphasizing individual responsibility and self-regulation, align with CSR models prioritizing economic efficiency and profit. Conversely, Catholic ethics, grounded in community and the common good, supports CSR frameworks focusing on social cohesion and collective well-being. This research offers a novel theoretical framework that highlights CSR's cultural and ethical underpinnings, providing valuable insights for firms seeking to harmonize their CSR strategies with ethical values.

Keywords

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); Business Ethics; Catholic Ethics; Protestant Ethics; Capitalism.

Introduction

The current socio-economic context is characterized by the diffusion of several global problems, defined by scholars as "grand challenges" (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016; Ricciardi et al., 2021). They are defined as "specific critical barrier(s) that, if removed, would help solve an important societal problem with a high likelihood of global impact through widespread implementation" (George et al., 2016, p. 1881). For this reason, they impose new responsibilities on companies (George et al., 2016). These challenges cannot be addressed through traditional approaches and require a collective effort involving governments, international organizations, and businesses (Drucker, 1993). Within this framework, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) assumes a central role, becoming the mechanism through which companies can actively contribute to solving global crises by integrating socially and ethically responsible practices into their strategies (Zsolnai, 2010).

CSR can be seen as the operational translation of business ethics principles: while business ethics provide a moral guide for corporate decision-making, CSR represents the practical application of these values, transforming ethical concerns into concrete actions (Hemingway & MacLagan, 2004). In response to the global challenges, companies are called upon to develop policies that go beyond mere profit, addressing

these crises through sustainable and collaborative approaches in line with the concept of social responsibility.

Indeed, although CSR has been analyzed from various perspectives and classifications (Altman, 1998; Brummer, 1991; Carroll, 2021; Colle & Gonella, 2003; Frederick, 1998; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Lozano et al., 2016), it has rarely been examined from a historical perspective (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Coronella et al., 2018; Husted, 2015; Schrempf-Stirling et al., 2016; Vogel, 1991). In particular, there is a lack of in-depth studies exploring how ethical differences influence the nature and implementation of CSR. Frederick (1998), for instance, examined the transition of CSR from philosophical ethics to concrete action but did not clearly connect these actions with the distinct ethical foundations of the firm.

This study, drawing on the theoretical framework of Garriga and Melé (2004), seeks to fill that gap by examining the relationship between the ethical foundations of the firm and the diverse interpretations of CSR, with particular attention to the distinctions between catholic and protestant ethics. By linking CSR practices to these ethical traditions, it becomes possible to understand how Catholic ethics, with its emphasis on social cohesion and the common good, shapes the institutional view of the firm. In contrast, Protestant ethics, focusing on individual responsibility and market efficiency, aligns with the contractual view. This connection offers a deeper insight into how firms adopt different approaches to CSR based on these historical, ethical frameworks.

To achieve this objective, this study adopts an integrative literature review as the primary methodology (Snyder, 2019). This approach allows for the synthesis and integration of diverse theoretical perspectives, offering a comprehensive view of the relationships between CSR, the theory of the firm, and the ethical assumptions derived from the study of the history of economic thought.

The structure of this work is as follows. First, a theoretical background on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and business ethics, mapping the research field and justifying the study's objective. The methodology employed is then outlined. The paper's core focuses on the religious ethical traditions, specifically Catholic and Protestant ethics, derived from the selected philosophical literature, alongside a review of business and management literature that aligns with these ethical concepts. A framework is then presented that integrates these ethical perspectives with corporate responsibility in line with the contractual and institutional view of the firm. Finally, the conclusions address the study's limitations and implications for future research.

Literature review

The firms are no longer viewed purely as entities focused on generating economic and financial outcomes, as they operate in an increasingly interconnected social and political landscape. Instead, they are recognized as key players with responsibility for environmental stewardship (Bennett et al., 2018), capable of creating both positive environmental and social impacts. However, they may also produce negative effects, such as environmental harm and adverse social consequences.

In 1953, in *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*, Bowen argued that large corporations, as powerful social entities, profoundly impact society. He defined social responsibility as the obligation of business leaders to pursue policies and make decisions in alignment with societal values and objectives (Bowen, 2013). Over time, various definitions have emerged, reflecting a growing recognition of the ethical obligations of businesses. One of the most influential definitions comes from the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (1999), which highlights CSR as “the commitment of businesses to behave ethically and to contribute to sustainable economic development by working with all relevant stakeholders to improve their lives in ways that are good for business, the sustainable development agenda, and society at large.” Similarly, the European Commission (2001) describes CSR as “a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis.”

Therefore, CSR is based on firms' voluntary commitment to pursue objectives beyond economic profit, including social, environmental, and ethical aspects. This voluntary commitment is closely tied to ethics, as it reflects the moral responsibility of the firm toward society and its stakeholders (Gazzola & Colombo, 2014). From an ethical standpoint, CSR is grounded in the idea that firms, as social actors, have moral obligations to their shareholders and the community, workers, and the environment.

The ethical approach can be linked to various theories. A distinction can be made between normative ethical theories and theological ethical systems. The former provides guidelines on what is morally right or wrong, for example, deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics (Kagan, 2018). The latter are grounded in specific religious traditions and their interpretations of moral duties. This study considers the religious traditions of Catholic and Protestant ethics. Catholic ethics emphasize social cohesion, community, and the common good, with a focus on personal relationships and institutional mediation.

In contrast, Protestant ethics prioritize individual responsibility, self-regulation, and institutional support, fostering impersonal market transactions and mutual social control. These differences are rooted in the theological and organizational structures of the two religions, where Catholicism emphasizes salvation through good works and the Church as an intermediary. At the same time, Protestantism focuses on salvation through divine grace, enforced primarily through social interactions. Max Weber's theory in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) argued that Protestant values, particularly Calvinist teachings, encouraged a strong work ethic and rational economic behavior, aiding the rise of modern capitalism (Weber, 2003). Weber suggested that Protestants, more than Catholics, were driven by the belief that hard work and economic success were signs of divine favor. However, recent empirical studies challenge this work ethic hypothesis, finding no evidence that Protestants are more efficient workers than Catholics (Guiso et al., 2003). Instead, these studies support a social ethic hypothesis, where Protestant values promote greater mutual social control, institutional support, and shared values (Glaeser & Glendon, 1998). Novak (1993) critiques Weber's view, arguing that Catholic intellectuals of the early 20th century misunderstood capitalism as an individualistic system. Over time, history has demonstrated that capitalism prospers when supported by a culture grounded in

opportunity, cooperation, and social initiative. These principles align more with Catholic perspectives on the common good than Weber initially recognized.

The differing ethical traditions of Catholicism and Protestantism directly influence approaches to CSR. As formally modeled by Hemingway and MacLagan (2004), the values and interests of corporate managers, such as religious beliefs, can significantly shape CSR decisions. Indeed, these beliefs provide a framework of ethical norms that guide individual behavior in both personal and professional contexts (Barrera & Amore, 2024).

Methodology

This study uses a literature review as its research methodology, offering a valuable tool for theoretical development (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Torraco, 2005) and a foundation for building conceptual models (Snyder, 2019). An integrative literature review was chosen, common in business and management studies, as it enables the evaluation, critique, and synthesis of literature on a specific topic, promoting new theoretical insights (Torraco, 2005). This methodology is particularly effective for combining perspectives from different research fields facilitating the creation of preliminary theoretical models (Snyder, 2019). To maximize its potential, research questions are broad and flexible, allowing for exploring unexpected connections and integrating interdisciplinary knowledge (Snyder, 2019).

As shown in Table 1, the research strategy is iterative and flexible rather than systematic, avoiding a rigid protocol that might limit interdisciplinary exploration. This approach allows for the inclusion of a broader range of sources, integrating studies that might not strictly fit systematic criteria to develop a richer theoretical framework that captures the complexity of the subject. The study considers key contributions from various ethical traditions and economic disciplines, focusing on how Catholic and Protestant ethics shape views on CSR. Foundational texts on corporate responsibility are analyzed alongside international and national academic articles to build an interdisciplinary framework. The selection of sources was iterative, balancing historical and contemporary perspectives to address the divide between contractual and institutional views of the firm. The qualitative analysis of the texts emphasizes deep interpretation, exploring the links between ethics, theories of the firm, and CSR without relying on data quantification. This approach aims to bridge the gap between modern business ethics and its philosophical roots, constructing a new theoretical framework that integrates ethical and religious dimensions with contemporary corporate responsibility.

The review is organized into thematic sections that examine how ethical traditions shape corporate actions and societal engagement (Table 2).

Table 1. Methodological approach to research
(Source: Snyder, 2019; author's elaboration)

Approach	Integrative literature review
Typical purpose	Critique, synthesize, and develop new perspectives
Research questions	Broad and flexible, spanning multiple disciplines
Search strategy	Iterative and non-systematic, allowing interdisciplinary connections

Sample characteristics	Research articles, books, philosophical works, and texts from business ethics and economic thought
Analysis and evaluation	Qualitative, focusing on deep interpretation and critical synthesis
Example of contribution	New theoretical framework integrating ethical foundations of CSR and business practices

Table 2. Review structure.
(Source: author's elaboration)

Religious Ethics	Theories of the Firm	CSR Theories
Catholic Ethics	Institutional Approach	Integrative Theories
Protestant Ethics	Contractual Approach	Ethical Theories Instrumental Theories Political Theories

Results and discussion

Figure 1 presents the overarching structure of the discussion, illustrating the connections between religious, ethical foundations, theories of the firm, and CSR theories. It highlights how different ethical traditions, specifically Catholic and Protestant ethics, inform distinct business approaches. These, in turn, shape the interpretation and application of CSR theories.

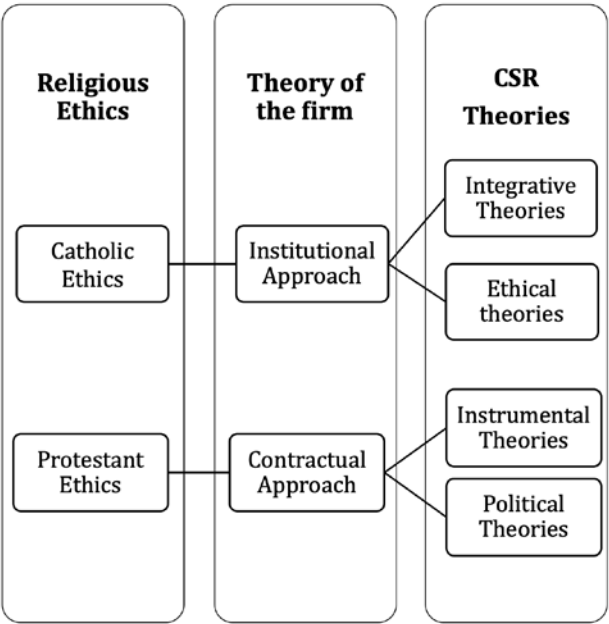


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework.
(Source: author's elaboration)

The different views of the firm can be understood in relation to the roots of economic thought. To grasp the differences between the two business perspectives, it is essential

to examine the birth of modern economics, shaped by two distinct spirits: the "spirit of the North" and the "spirit of the South," as highlighted by Bruni (2018).

Renaissance Humanism inspired the "spirit of the South," drawing from the intellectual heritage of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. It presents a positive view of human nature, where individuals are capable of good actions in the public sphere. In contrast, influenced by the Reformation, the northern modern economy adopts a more pessimistic anthropology, where the common good is not intentionally sought but emerges as an indirect result of individuals pursuing their private interests (Weber, 1905). This approach contrasts with the Southern tradition, which views the common good as a conscious goal, even at the expense of personal interests.

Fanfani (1934) distinguishes between voluntarism and naturalism. Voluntarism, rooted in the Greco-Roman and Scholastic traditions, sees humans as naturally social but prone to selfishness, requiring institutions to promote virtues and contain vices. This view, typical of the Catholic tradition, regards the common good as a project to be built through institutions rather than as the result of selfish interests. On the other hand, the more pessimistic Protestant anthropology sees the common good as an emergent outcome of individual actions within an economic order that regulates itself through natural laws without the need for intermediary institutions.

The relationship between Catholic and Protestant ethics serves as the theoretical and historical foundation for the development of distinct business models. This study examines the distinction between the contractual and institutional perspectives of the firm (Ferrando, 2010; Lai, 2004).

The institutional approach views the firm as more than just a collection of contracts between individuals; it is an institution (this expression refers to a stable and organized group of individuals who, united by common goals and values, collaborate to achieve long-term objectives, guiding their actions through a set of shared rules and standards of behavior) with a social and economic role that extends beyond profit generation. In this perspective, the firm is deeply embedded in the social fabric, responsible for contributing to the common good and promoting social cohesion. Catholic ethics, with its focus on the common good, social cohesion, and the importance of community, aligns closely with the institutional approach. It promotes the idea that firms are not merely economic entities but also social actors responsible for contributing to the betterment of society. According to this view, the firm plays an essential role in balancing individual and collective interests and strengthening social bonds through its interactions with various societal institutions. This connection between the firm and its broader social purpose reflects the Catholic emphasis on solidarity, justice, and the moral obligation to promote all welfare.

On the other hand, the contractual approach views the firm as a construct based on agreements and contracts between individuals, both within the organization and in its interactions with the market. These contracts form the foundation of the firm's operations, aligning the interests of each party involved in economic exchanges. In this view, the firm is not a natural entity but an artificial legal construct explicitly designed to engage in contracts. The firm's existence is inherently tied to its contractual relationships: without them, it would not function. This perspective reflects a rational approach in which each party seeks to maximize its utility. In this context, the firm is

seen as a mechanism to facilitate efficient market transactions rather than as a social institution with broader responsibilities. This approach aligns with Protestant ethics, which stresses personal responsibility, self-regulation, and institutional frameworks to support impersonal market transactions. At the heart of this view is the concept of mutual social control, where individuals adhere to contracts not only out of legal necessity but also due to social norms and shared values. This combination of contractual obligations and social pressures ensures relationship stability and promotes efficient economic exchanges, making the firm a key actor in maintaining a well-functioning market system.

The institutional and contractual views of the firm offer distinct practical implications for businesses when developing CSR strategies. For instance, firms operating within Catholic or Southern European contexts may prioritize the common good, social cohesion, and the well-being of stakeholders over short-term profitability. This translates into CSR practices that integrate social values directly into the firm's core mission, influencing long-term sustainability efforts and deepening stakeholder engagement. On the other hand, firms rooted in Protestant or Northern economic systems may adopt CSR as a tool to maximize economic efficiency and respond to societal pressures indirectly, aligning more closely with individualistic, profit-driven goals. This contrast between approaches highlights the importance for managers to adapt CSR strategies according to the cultural and ethical environment in which their firms operate, ensuring alignment with societal values and expectations.

The distinction between these two approaches provides a valuable framework for interpreting CSR theories. In this work, the framework proposed by Garriga and Melé (2004) is considered, which categorizes CSR theories into four groups: instrumental theories, political theories, integrative theories, and ethical theories. The first group includes theories that view the firm as a tool for wealth creation, with wealth generation being the only social responsibility, in line with Friedman (2007). The second group emphasizes the social power of businesses and the responsibilities associated with this power in the political arena. The third group includes theories that consider the business's obligation to integrate social demands into its operations, arguing that the continuity and development of the company depend on society. Finally, the fourth group embeds the relationship between business and society within ethical values, positing CSR primarily as an ethical obligation.

The contractual view of the firm aligns with instrumental and political CSR theories, both of which reflect the "Northern" and Protestant model. In instrumental theories, the firm's primary goal is profit maximization. CSR is seen as a tool to achieve financial success, much like the contractual view where the common good is an indirect result of profit-driven actions. Similarly, political theories emphasize the power and influence firms hold within political and societal structures, where firms engage in CSR to maintain or enhance their legitimacy and power. Both approaches treat the firm as an aggregation of individual contracts, with societal benefits emerging indirectly through economic interactions.

On the other hand, the institutional view of the firm aligns with integrative and ethical CSR theories, which reflect the "Southern" and Catholic tradition. In integrative theories, the firm is deeply embedded within the social fabric, and CSR is a means to respond to societal demands and contribute to the common good. This mirrors the

institutional perspective where the firm is seen as a socially responsible entity, contributing to societal well-being through collaboration and reciprocity. Ethical theories emphasize the moral obligations of firms to pursue what is right, based on ethical values that prioritize social cohesion and the common good, again echoing the institutional view's focus on social responsibility, cooperation, and long-term value creation for society.

The study reveals that religious and cultural traditions significantly shape Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices. Protestant and Catholic ethical frameworks influence how firms perceive their role in society, particularly in terms of balancing individual interests and the common good. These findings contribute to ongoing research by offering a clear theoretical framework that links cultural and religious values with distinct approaches to CSR.

The results suggest that CSR strategies cannot be universally applied without considering these ethical underpinnings. Future research should investigate how these frameworks operate in diverse industries and cultural contexts, testing whether the identified ethical distinctions hold true in practice.

From a societal perspective, understanding the ethical foundations of firms enables policymakers to develop CSR regulations that align with their regions' cultural and religious values. Businesses can use this knowledge to tailor CSR initiatives that resonate with the values of their stakeholders, enhancing societal trust and corporate legitimacy. In summary, acknowledging the historical and cultural foundations of CSR enables businesses and policymakers to design initiatives that align with the values of their communities. By doing so, they can enhance societal well-being while simultaneously driving corporate success.

Conclusions

This research facilitates the connection and comparison of different theoretical approaches to CSR. On the one hand, it highlights CSR theories associated with a contractual view of the firm (instrumental and political theories). These perspectives align with Protestant economic thought, which emphasizes individualism and economic efficiency as expressions of social responsibility (Friedman, 1970). On the other hand, ethical and integrative theories reflect an institutional view of the firm, which is more closely tied to Catholic ethics. In this framework, the firm is seen as an integral part of the social fabric, with a moral responsibility to promote the common good and social cohesion (Bruni & Zamagni, 2004). This perspective emphasizes community and social capital as key elements for sustainable economic development, contrasting with the individualistic tendencies of modern capitalism.

By comparing the institutional and contractual views of the firm, this research sheds light on how these models are rooted in different cultural and religious traditions. It provides a theoretical framework that links CSR to broader historical and philosophical contexts, offering insights into how economic thought shapes business ethics and corporate responsibilities. This connection enriches the ongoing academic debate on CSR, emphasizing the role of ethical and religious influences in shaping corporate practices.

The findings have significant implications for both research and business practice. For research, the theoretical framework developed here encourages further exploration into how cultural and religious values influence CSR practices. There is a need to empirically investigate whether the ethical distinctions drawn in this study hold true across different industries and regions, especially considering varying regulatory frameworks and market conditions. Future studies should explore how firms in diverse contexts implement CSR strategies that align with their cultural and ethical backgrounds. Moreover, examining the intersection between CSR and other religious traditions, such as Orthodox Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, could broaden the current understanding of how ethical values shape business responsibilities in various cultural contexts.

In practice, businesses should consider the ethical foundations of their CSR strategies, ensuring that their actions align with their stakeholders' cultural and religious values. Firms operating in regions with strong Catholic or Protestant traditions may benefit from integrating these ethical perspectives into their CSR initiatives, fostering stronger community ties and promoting long-term social and economic sustainability. Recognizing the ethical roots of CSR enhances corporate legitimacy and helps businesses navigate complex societal challenges with greater moral clarity.

This study's focus on the theoretical analysis of CSR within the framework of economic thought may limit its direct applicability to specific industries or regions where other factors, such as regulatory environments or market pressures, play a more significant role. Additionally, while the research draws connections between ethical models and CSR, empirical validation of these theoretical links remains an area for further exploration. Future research could examine how firms operationalize CSR strategies in different contexts and whether the theoretical distinctions identified in this study hold in practice. Another limitation is the distinct separation made between the contractual and institutional approaches. The literature suggests a theoretical convergence between these two models, and future research could delve deeper into this evolution. While this study aimed to investigate the ethical foundations of different CSR perspectives, future work could develop an integrated CSR framework that incorporates both Catholic and Protestant ethical viewpoints. Such an approach would further enrich the understanding of CSR practices, helping to bridge the gap between business ethics and religious traditions.

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