

1 THE DUAL NATURE OF THE PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC AND THE BIRTH OF UTILITARIANISM

The Protestant Work Ethic as a Revaluation of Values

Would you quit working if you won a lottery big enough to enable you to live comfortably off the annual payout? Numerous surveys of Americans since 1980 find that a majority say they would keep working. Of those Americans who have won huge lotteries, 85–90 percent do continue working.¹ While the numbers are lower for people in low-paying unskilled jobs, these results reflect the continuing power of the Protestant work ethic in American life. Most Americans view work as something more than just a meal ticket. They view it as fulfilling a duty to contribute to society, as a source of pride, and as a locus of meaning.

From a historical point of view, these attitudes toward work are recent. For the vast majority of history, people have regarded work as a curse. The Bible says so (Gen. 3:19). Work was what people were forced to do. Those with means chose leisure. The Catholic Church in the Middle Ages did not particularly extol the value of work. It proclaimed numerous holidays. It praised giving alms to beggars. It created several orders of mendicant friars, who survived on begging. The republican tradition inherited from ancient Greece and Rome also valued leisure over work. Leisure was the domain of free citizens. Labor was what slaves and menial servants did. These attitudes persisted among the traditional English landlords during the Industrial Revolution.²

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By contrast, in the US today, people with high earnings are more likely to work overtime than low-paid workers.³ Many of the highest earners work more than 60 hours per week.⁴ This confirms the standard assumption of economists, that the supply curve of labor slopes forward – that is, that higher wages lead to people to work more. Far from being a law of human nature, this tendency is a legacy of the work ethic. US policy also discourages begging and imposes work requirements on poor people as a condition of access to numerous benefits.

These attitudes toward work reflect a dramatic revaluation of values that took place during the Reformation. Many Protestant denominations arising at that time reversed the values of work and leisure. Puritan poet John Milton captures this reversal in the voice of Adam upon the expulsion from Eden: “[W]ith labor I must earn my bread; what harm? Idleness had been worse.”⁵ Puritans put work at the center of life, and attacked most leisure as sinful idleness. Although few workers today toil in response to the theological anxieties that motivated early Protestants to adopt the work ethic, we have inherited their habits and attitudes toward work.

While the work ethic still holds sway in the US, it is a contested ideal. Sociologist Max Weber argued that it had replaced a “leisurely and comfortable attitude toward life” with a “hard frugality” that “legalized the exploitation of . . . [the] willingness to work” in the service of unlimited wealth accumulation. What began as an ascetic doctrine of self-denial in the quest for assurance of salvation had ironically generated a capitalist system in which “material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history.”⁶ Economist John Maynard Keynes looked forward to the day – which he predicted would have arrived by now – when productivity improvements would make a comfortable life available to all, and thereby move us to cast off the love of money as a “somewhat disgusting morbidity.” He hoped we would replace a culture of ceaseless toil in service to future material gain with a leisure society devoted to the present enjoyment of intrinsic goods.⁷ Recently, anarchist anthropologist David Graeber criticized the soul-killing work ethic that imagines that pointless labor builds character, and urged a radical reduction in the length of the workweek through the abolition of millions of “bullshit jobs” that inflict “spiritual violence” on those consigned to them.⁸

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So we should ask hard questions about the work ethic. Does it rationalize the exploitation of workers by subjecting them to relentless, stultifying toil for little reward? Or is it a worthy ideal that gives meaning and purpose to workers' lives? We should also investigate how the work ethic has shaped the ways we organize work, regulate economic institutions, and distribute income and wealth. Has it served to enhance the wealth and power of the One Percent? Or has it supported policies and movements that promote workers' dignity and standing?

I shall argue that the answer to all of these questions is “yes.” From the start, the work ethic has contained contradictory ideas, and been put to opposing purposes – some in favor of workers, and some against. Both sides have had profound effects on the history of political economy and public policy in Europe and North America since the seventeenth century. Much of this history can be narrated as a contest between progressive and conservative versions of the work ethic. Today the conservative version dominates in the US and has been advancing even in social democratic Europe.⁹ But conservative dominance was not always so. It need not be so in the future. To understand where we stand today with the work ethic, however, we must go back to its origins in the Protestant Reformation.

The Work Ethic: A Calvinist Solution to a Lutheran Problem

In his classic examination of the Protestant work ethic, Weber rightly criticized the assumption of “naive historical materialism” that ideas about how to live are a mere reflection of “economic situations.” The Puritan theologians who invented the work ethic were not trying to promote capitalism. Modern capitalism, founded on disciplined wage labor, was not yet on the scene, nor even anticipated. The Puritans' concerns were fundamentally religious, not economic.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Puritans were also notably practical people, obsessed with the consequences of conduct, dismissive of feelings and intentions that bear no fruit. Their contempt for emotional professions of faith and styles of worship,¹¹ and insistence that faith can be proved only by its fruits, also reflects a revulsion against social disorders that they thought were threatened by the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. Their sacralization of *work* enabled them to solve what they saw as

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a practical problem generated by the radical devaluation of *works* in Reformation theology.

Let's begin with Martin Luther's revolutionary doctrine of justification by faith alone. On Luther's view, due to our fallen state, all humans are mired in sin. We are utterly helpless to redeem ourselves through our own efforts. Hence, everyone deserves eternal damnation.¹² Our only salvation lies in the fact that Jesus atoned for humanity's sins in dying on the cross. God, in his mercy, has granted a pardon or justification to anyone who has faith in Jesus as their savior. This pardon is an entirely unmerited gift of God, as is faith itself, which we cannot will. Good works do nothing to save us.

To the extent that his followers' motives to avoid wrongdoing depended on belief in divine punishment, Luther's doctrine threatened to unleash social disorder. Luther's habit of expressing his theological claims in hyperbolic language magnified the problem. In the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther insisted that "the works of men" are "likely to be mortal sins."¹³ He meant only that those who do good works in the belief that this *earns* them salvation are arrogant in stealing glory from God, and in supposing that God owes humans anything as a matter of just deserts. Yet Luther's characteristic response to criticism of his polemical statements was to double down on them, rather than to temper his claims in view of their likely consequences. A few years later, in *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther insisted that, without faith, the most exalted works are not merely useless for salvation; they are *evil*.¹⁴ Some of his followers naturally concluded that as long as they had faith, they didn't have to avoid sin. And how could they, anyway, given that Luther insisted that the fall of man had made them slaves to sin, and that they lacked free will to resist it?

Luther was enraged by his followers' tendency to draw practical conclusions for this life from theological doctrines oriented to the next. Most notoriously, German peasants took Luther's doctrines of the priesthood of all believers – their right to interpret the Bible for themselves – and the freedom of laypeople to reject laws to which they have not consented as a license to revolt against their oppressive lords in the Peasants' War of 1524–25. Shocked by the conclusions his followers inferred from his premises, Luther urged the rulers to slaughter them mercilessly – and got a bloodbath.¹⁵ Even after that catastrophe, Luther found that he could not control his Wittenberg congregation's disorderliness. Many of his followers, confident that their faith alone secured

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them salvation without need for ministers – as Luther himself had taught them! – stopped attending church and refused to contribute to it. They became dissolute, even while Luther devoted his sermons to hectoring his congregation for a multitude of sins, including drunkenness, cursing, sexual licentiousness, cheating, and failure to give alms to the poor.¹⁶

Luther attempted to stem the tide of debauchery by arguing that good works necessarily followed from faith. “The law says, ‘Do this’, and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this’, and everything is already done.”¹⁷ Faith enables escape from the spiritual coercion of God’s law implied by the threat of damnation. Liberated from the threat of damnation, the truly faithful serve others freely. Love of God for his grace leads to brotherly love for humanity, and hence a wholehearted willingness to help one’s fellow human beings by working in one’s calling.¹⁸

With his conception of loving obedience to God through work in a calling, Luther thus supplied a seed of the worth ethic. However, Weber argues that Luther never developed the idea of a calling into a positive vision of the institutions needed to promote a systematic ethics of work. His economic thinking was “traditionalistic” in accepting economic arrangements as they were and discouraging people from acquiring more than their station in life requires.¹⁹ Luther also doesn’t ask them to reflect on how they should develop and direct their talents to most effectively help their fellow human beings. Hence, individuals don’t find inspiration in *seeking* and *choosing* their calling. They simply find themselves in some occupation by custom, law, or necessity, and perform the duties assigned to them.²⁰ The motive of brotherly love as the spontaneous outgrowth of faith is not subject to disciplined direction in a rationalized economic system oriented to efficiency, technological improvement, or economic growth.²¹

Luther’s followers were sure they had faith. But brotherly love did not necessarily follow from this. So they were not fully persuaded by his argument that good works follow from faith. If one knew in one’s heart that one has faith, and works really are worthless – even sinful if done without fear of God – then why should one put great effort into them? After all, Luther also said, “[h]e is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.”²²

John Calvin and his successors – including, in England and Scotland, Anglicans and Presbyterians – devised a solution to Luther’s

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problem. Without dissenting from Luther's theological pronouncements on the value of *works*,²³ they dramatically changed believers' practical orientation to *work*. It rested on three ideas: (1) a more stringent doctrine of predestination; (2) a shift from an introspective to a behavioral basis for knowledge of one's faith; and (3) a radical upgrading of the spiritual meaning of work. In the Lutheran view, God decided ahead of everyone's birth who would be saved. But anyone could attain assurance through their faith that they are among the saved. Faith is the sign of God's grace. Calvin advanced the doctrine of "double predestination," according to which God not only decided ahead of everyone's birth who would be saved, but also who would be damned.²⁴ Only a small elect would be saved.

The point of this terrifying doctrine was to deny people assurance that they are saved, and thereby to induce in everyone a permanent anxiety about their state of grace. For, on the Calvinistic view, one could never know simply from introspection that one has faith. Calvin thereby swiped away the relief from terror of damnation that Luther hoped to obtain from the doctrine of justification by faith.

Turn now to Puritan priest Richard Baxter, the consummate theologian of the Protestant work ethic, to complete the argument. Like other Reformed ministers, he holds that salvation cannot be earned by good works, but arrives unmerited through faith by the grace of God alone.²⁵ Yet one cannot know one's faith by mere introspection or feeling. Given our desperate desire to assure ourselves of salvation, we are too ready to deceive ourselves on this point. Rather, "[g]race is never apparent and sensible to the soul but while it is in action; therefore want of action must cause want of assurance."²⁶ Faith is manifest only in action. Moreover, the actions that count as evidence of faith are not ritualistic. Prayer, sacraments, and following monkish rules count for naught. The only actions that count as evidence of faith are ones that have independent consequences in the world – not *works* in the ritualistic sense, but *work*, in the productive sense. One gains assurance of one's faith only in ceaseless, disciplined work. Work that springs from faith gains exalted significance, in being done for the greater glory of God. Hence, "[g]ive diligence to make your calling and election sure."²⁷ Although salvation cannot be earned, God will not grant it "without our earnest seeking and labor."²⁸ Any relaxation from constant work, along with any indulgence in spontaneous pleasures, is a sign of lagging faith. So time must never be wasted on idle pleasures. It must be spent

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“wholly in the way of duty” in the service of God.²⁹ Worldly goods also must never be wasted, since God gave them to us to use in his service. “We must see that nothing of any use, be lost through satiety, negligence or contempt; for the smallest part is of God’s gifts and talents, given us, not to cast away, but to use as he would have us.”³⁰ Here we see the core virtues of the work ethic: industry, frugality, ascetic self-control.

The practical results of Baxter’s preaching were impressive. “Baxter’s activity in Kidderminster, a community absolutely debauched when he arrived . . . was almost unique in the history of the ministry for its success.”³¹ Where Luther complained of empty pews, Baxter converted Kidderminster from a town that had only one or two observant families per street to one in which nearly all turned out for his Sunday sermons.³² During his ministry, Kidderminster also enjoyed success in the weaving industry. Weber credits this success to his congregation’s internalization of the work ethic. Baxter was just one of many Calvinist preachers promoting the work ethic across England. Hence it is not surprising that some economic historians have detected an “industrious revolution” starting in the mid-seventeenth century prior to the Industrial Revolution, in which workers increased the intensity and duration of their labor.³³

Weber claims that the work ethic was stronger among Calvinists than Lutherans. He credits this difference to their distinctive views of how to attain self-knowledge. Do they know their state of grace by inner feeling, or external behavior?³⁴ The latter was key to solving the problem Calvinists saw in Luther’s view, that introspective knowledge of grace undermines social order.

Yet a morality that rests solely on spiritual coercion – in this case, on exploitation of anxiety over the certainty of salvation – can never be a creative force. It must also appeal to higher ideals of a worthy life. The work ethic sanctified work, turning it into a vehicle for higher purposes than bare survival. This idea could be taken in profoundly egalitarian directions.³⁵ It uplifted even the lowliest worker by sacralizing ordinary work and repudiating the idea that any particular calling – even the priesthood – is superior. The work ethic also changed the focus of morality from purely expressive acts of piety and self-denial to acts with positive worldly consequences. We shall see that this change, with its stress on practical, empirically observable results, led ultimately to an ultra-secular utilitarian moral theory. These facts are of immense importance for understanding the prospects for a progressive, pro-worker work ethic.

Two Sides of the Puritan Work Ethic

The central ideal of the work ethic is to engage in disciplined labor in a calling – a specialized occupation. Puritan minister William Perkins elaborates an early version of this ideal.³⁶ Robert Sanderson concisely summarizes it in a widely reprinted sermon. God has given “gifts” or abilities to each individual. Everyone has a duty to cultivate and use their abilities in some “settled course of life, with reference to business, office, or employment” for the glory of God and “for his own and the common good.”³⁷ God would not have given us these gifts if he had not intended that we use them. So it is wrong to waste our time and talents in idleness. There is too much to do: “Life must be preserved, families maintained, the poor relieved.”³⁸

God has called each person to service in a particular calling. How can you discover what that is? Don’t expect any special revelation to determine your calling. Explore your options, and choose the one that best fits your education, talents, and inclination.³⁹ In other words, find a way to systematically help others that also fulfills yourself by enabling you to exercise your talents in ways that sustain your interest and commitment. Sanderson thus develops the core ideas behind modern career counseling.

Steady work is needed not only to do good, but to avoid sin. Idleness leads people into temptation. Work in a calling amounts to effective ascetic discipline by keeping people too busy for them to succumb.⁴⁰ A generation later, Baxter adds a tone of moral panic to Sanderson’s genial career counseling. Because idleness and laxity at work are signs of flagging faith, wasting time should trigger spiritual alarm. “We can never do too much . . . Much precious time is already misspent.”⁴¹ He devotes an entire chapter of his five-volume *Christian Directory*, a comprehensive guide to Christian ethics, to effective time-management.⁴² We need to rest, but only to the extent needed to restore our capacity to labor. So “rest must always *follow* labor,” as its earned reward.⁴³ All that busyness takes a toll, but in the service of assurance of salvation. And the reward of salvation is *everlasting* rest, filled with “perfect endless enjoyment of God” in heaven.⁴⁴

We must not waste our time and talents because “we are [God’s] workmanship” sent to execute his purposes on Earth.⁴⁵ The same logic enjoins us from wasting any of the natural resources God provided us to carry out this task, for “there is nothing that is good so

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small, but some one hath need of it.”⁴⁶ “They are our Master’s stock,” “the tools by which we must do much of our Master’s work.”⁴⁷ Luxury consumption and vain entertainments are wasteful. The resources devoted to them would be better used promoting the public good and helping the needy. “[If] you let the poor lie languishing in necessities, whilst you are at great charges to entertain the rich without a necessity or greater good, you must answer it as an unfaithful servant.”⁴⁸ All must practice frugality, and avoid self-indulgence and “covetousness,” which Baxter defines as desiring more than what one needs to do one’s duty.⁴⁹

Weber interprets the work ethic as inherently antagonistic to the interests of workers. Although the Puritans’ motives for promoting the work ethic were religious, in effect they advanced the spirit of capitalism, getting the masses to labor and sacrifice in ways that maximized capitalists’ profits. Many passages in Baxter’s work support this interpretation. Baxter’s stress on work as a form of ascetic discipline rationalizes the consignment of workers to tedious drudgery: “Diligent labour mortifieth the flesh.”⁵⁰ He tells workers who take breaks from their toil that they are robbing their masters: “[U]se every minute . . . spend it wholly in the way of duty.”⁵¹ Weber claims that the Puritans bequeathed to us “an amazingly good, we may even say a pharisaically good, conscience in the acquisition of money, so long as it took place legally.”⁵² Indeed, Baxter insists that “he is commendable who . . . frugally getteth and saveth as much as he can.”⁵³ Given a choice among lawful callings, one has a duty to choose the highest-paying one.⁵⁴ Material inequality is justified: “God giveth not to all alike.” It is no sin to earn more than others through honest labor and saving.⁵⁵ Puritans frequently quote 2 Thess. 3:10: “[I]f any would not work, neither should he eat.”⁵⁶ They repeatedly berate able-bodied beggars as parasites. Beggars should not be relieved, as this robs the deserving poor of alms. Rather, they should be whipped and sent to a house of correction, where they will be forced to labor.⁵⁷ Baxter even allows the legitimacy of contracts into slavery, driven by the desperation of the poor.⁵⁸ Such readiness to resort to harsh and coercive treatment of the poor, and to praise the income and wealth maximization of the rich, expresses key attitudes of the conservative work ethic.

Yet Weber’s reading of the work ethic is blinkered. On the Puritans’ view, law is not the only thing that properly constrains material acquisition. Cambridge theologian William Perkins insisted that

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[t]hey profane their lives and callings that imploy them to get honours, pleasures, profits, worldly commodities, &c. for thus we live to another ende than God hath appointed, and thus we serve ourselves, and consequently neither God nor man.⁵⁹

One must seek worldly goods in the right spirit, only for the sake of serving God and other people, never simply in a self-serving way. Hence we may not in good conscience pursue methods of money making that undermine others' well-being, even if these methods are legal.

Puritans tempered even their harshest claims on workers – sometimes, to the point of contradiction. Consider slavery. Baxter insists that slavery can never make anyone wholly at the disposal of a master. Masters who treat their plantation slaves like beasts are more cruel and odious than cannibals.⁶⁰ Although Baxter does not explicitly call for the abolition of chattel slavery, it is impossible to reconcile the moral limits he places on slavery with the law, practice, and ideology of chattel slavery in the colonies. He argues that the laws should abolish the slave trade, require the emancipation of any infidel slave who converts to Christianity, and require slaveholders to teach Christianity to their slaves.⁶¹ Any regime that enforced these laws in the colonies would rapidly put chattel slavery out of existence.

Baxter allows slavery in four cases: (1) by contract in desperation; (2) as punishment for crime; (3) as restitution for theft, when the thief cannot otherwise pay compensation; and (4) of enemy soldiers captured in a just war. None of these cases permit hereditary slavery. In the first case, where innocents are enslaved, they are so only to a “degree.” Masters may not reduce such slaves to “misery,” must provide them whatever “comforts of life, which nature giveth to man as man,” and recognize a duty of charity to their slaves.⁶² This isn't chattel slavery, in which the worker is reduced to property and denied all rights. It's more like permanent indentured servitude. Even in the other cases, masters must recognize that “they are reasonable creatures as well as you, and born to as much natural liberty. If their sin have enslaved them to you, yet nature made them your equals.”⁶³ They are equally eligible for salvation as free persons, and are entitled to the same religious services. Masters even owe *more* to their slaves than to their free servants. As political philosophy, such pleas are wholly inadequate. One can hardly place people in subjection and then rely on moral exhortation to motivate their masters to treat them justly or charitably.