

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Max Weber

Weber's thesis about the historical relationship between the rise of capitalism and the Protestant Reformation is one of the most widely discussed works in social science. He believed that modern capitalism is distinguished by its rationality, which involves the pursuit of profit through ethically controlled competition.

In the Middle Ages, however, there was no specific moral code which applied to economic activity. Thus, tradesmen, merchants, and financiers were free to use or even fraud for profit. But in the sixteenth century, new economic attitudes began to emerge from various Protestant denominations, most notably the Calvinists, who held that since one's calling in life was a duty to God, economic activity must be pursued in strict accordance with ethical rules. The Puritans went a step further to hold diligence in one's profession and the worldly success brought as a sign of one's salvation. In recognition of this distinctive Puritan contribution, Weber, in his writings, refers to all ascetic Protestant religions as

It should be noted that Weber regarded the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism with irony. He saw the early Protestants were driven by concern for their fate in the next world to transform this world into its modern form. But the materialism engendered by this transformation proved so alluring it killed off the spirituality that fostered it.

An Overview of Weber's Thesis

The dogma of strict Calvinism, the doctrine of predestination, makes it impossible for the church to perform sacraments whose reception can have any effect for eternal salvation. Moreover, the actual state of the believer is irrelevant to his fate, which is determined from eternity through God's immutable will.

The possibility of predestination to either salvation or damnation was naturally intolerable to the individual who searched for the *certitudo salutaris*, for an assurance that he belonged to the elect. He could find this assurance, on the one hand, in the conviction that he was acting according to the letter of the law and accord-

ing to reason, repressing all animal drives; on the other, he could find it in visible proofs that God blessed his work. "Good works" of the Catholic variety were meaningless in the face of God's unchangeable decree; however, for the believer and his community, his own ethical conduct and fate in the secular social order became supremely important as an indication of his state of grace. A person was judged elect or condemned as an entity; no confession and absolution could relieve him and change his position before God and, in contrast to Catholicism, no individual "good deed" could compensate for his sins. Therefore, the individual could only be sure of his state of grace if he felt reason to believe that, by adhering to a principle of methodical conduct, he pursued the sole correct path in all his action—that he worked for God's glory. Methodical conduct, the rational form of asceticism, is thus carried from the monastery into the world. The ascetic means are in principle identical: Rejected are all vain glorification of the self and of all other things of the flesh, feudal pride, the spontaneous enjoyment of art and life, "levity," all waste of money and time, eroticism, or any other activity that detracts from the rational work in one's private vocation and within the God-willed social order. The curtailment of all feudal ostentation and of all irrational consumption facilitates capital accumulation and the ever-renewed utilization of property for productive purposes.

Life is focused not on persons but on impersonal rational goals. Charity becomes an impersonal operation of poor relief for the greater glory of God. And since the success of work is the surest symptom that it pleases God, capitalist profit is one of the most important criteria for establishing that God's blessing rests on the enterprise.

It is clear that this style of life is very closely related to the self-justification that is customary for bourgeois acquisition: profit and property appear not as ends in themselves but as indications of personal ability. Here has been attained the union of religious postulate and bourgeois style of life that promotes capitalism. Of course, this was not the purpose of the Puritan ethic,

especially not the encouragement of money making; on the contrary, as in all Christian denominations, wealth was regarded as dangerous and full of temptation. However, just as the monasteries time and again brought this temptation on themselves by virtue of the ascetic rational work and conduct of their members, so did now the pious bourgeois who lived and worked ascetically.

The Contrast of Catholicism with Protestant Asceticism

The normal mediæval Catholic layman lived ethically, so to speak, from hand to mouth. In the first place he conscientiously fulfilled his traditional duties. But beyond that minimum his good works did not necessarily form a connected, or at least not a rationalized, system of life, but rather remained a succession of individual acts. He could use them as occasion demanded, to atone for particular sins, to better his chances for salvation, or, toward the end of his life, as a sort of insurance premium. Of course the Catholic ethic was an ethic of intentions. But the concrete *intentio* of the single act determined its value. And the single good or bad action was credited to the doer determining his temporal and eternal fate. Quite realistically the Church recognized that man was not an absolutely clearly defined unity to be judged one way or the other, but that his moral life was normally subject to conflicting motives and his action contradictory. Of course, it required as an ideal a change of life in principle. But it weakened just this requirement (for the average) by one of its most important means of power and education, the sacrament of absolution, the function of which was connected with the deepest roots of the peculiarly Catholic religion.

To the Catholic, the absolution of his Church was a compensation for his own imperfection. The priest was a magician who performed the miracle of transubstantiation, and who held the key to eternal life in his hand. One could turn to him in grief and penitence. He dispensed atonement, hope of grace, certainty of forgiveness, and thereby granted release from that tremendous tension to which the Calvinist was doomed by an inexorable fate, admitting of no mitigation. For him such friendly and human comforts did not exist. He could not hope to atone for hours of weakness or of thoughtlessness by increased good will at other times, as the Catholic or even the Lutheran could. The God of Calvinism demanded of his believers not single good works, but a life of good works combined into a unified system. There was no place for the very human Catholic cycle of sin, repentance, atonement, release, followed by renewed sin.

The moral conduct of the average man was deprived of its planless and unsystematic character, subjected to a consistent method for conduct as a whole. It is no accident that the name of Methodists stuck to the participants in the last great revival of Puritan ideas in the eighteenth century.

Only by a fundamental change in the whole meaning of life at every moment and in every action could the effects of grace . . . be proved.

The Effects of Protestant Asceticism on Everyday Life

If a demonstration of religious fidelity is still to be made within the institutional structure of the world, then the world, for the very reason that it inevitably remains a natural vessel of sin, becomes a challenge for the demonstration of the ascetic temper and for the strongest possible attacks against the world's sins. The world abides in the lowly state appropriate to its status as a created thing. Therefore, any sensuous surrender to the world's goods may imperil concentration upon and possession of the ultimate good of salvation, and may be a symptom of unholiness of spirit and impossibility of rebirth. Nevertheless, the world as a creation of God, whose power comes to expression in it despite its creatureliness, provides the only medium through which one's unique religious charisma may prove itself by means of rational ethical conduct, so that one may become and remain certain of one's own state of grace.

Hence, as the field provided for this active certification, the order of the world in which the ascetic is situated becomes for him a vocation which he must fulfill rationally. As a consequence, and although the enjoyment of wealth is forbidden to the ascetic, it becomes his vocation to engage in economic activity which is faithful to rationalized ethical requirements and which conforms to strict legality. If success supervenes upon such acquisitive activity, it is regarded as the manifestation of God's blessing upon the labor of the pious man and of God's pleasure with his economic pattern of life.

Certain other manifestations of inner-worldly asceticism must be noted. Any excess of emotional feeling for one's fellow man is prohibited as being a deification of the creaturely, which denies the unique value of the divine gift of grace. Yet it is man's vocation to participate rationally and soberly in the various rational, purposive institutions of the world and in their objective goals as set by God's creation. Similarly, any eroticism that tends to deify the human creature is proscribed. On the other hand, it is a divinely imposed vocation of man "to soberly produce children" (as the Puritans expressed it) within marriage. Then, too, there

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prohibition against the exercise of force by an individual against other human beings for reasons of passion or revenge, and above all for purely personal motives. However, it is divinely enjoined that the rationally ordered state shall suppress and punish sins and rebelliousness. Finally, all personal secular enjoyment of power is forbidden as a deification of the creaturely, though it is held that a rational legal order within society is pleasing to God.

The person who lives as a worldly ascetic is a rationalist, not only in the sense that he rationally systematizes his own personal patterning of life, but also in his rejection of everything that is ethically irrational, esthetic, or dependent upon his own emotional reactions to the world and its institutions. The distinctive goal always remains the alert, methodical control of one's own pattern of life and behavior.

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Waste of time is the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. The span of human life is infinitely short and precious to make sure of one's own election. Loss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury, even more sleep than is necessary for health, six to at most eight hours, is worthy of absolute moral condemnation. It does not yet hold that time is money, but the proposition is true in a certain spiritual sense. It is infinitely valuable because every hour lost is lost to labour for the glory of God. Thus inactive contemplation is also valueless, or even directly reprehensible if it is at the expense of one's daily work. For it is less pleasing to God than the active performance of His will in a calling.

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The sexual asceticism of Puritanism differs only in degree, not in fundamental principle, from that of monasticism; and on account of the Puritan conception of marriage, its practical influence is more far-reaching than that of the latter. For sexual intercourse is permitted, even within marriage, only as the means willed by God for the increase of His glory according to the commandment, "Be fruitful and multiply." Along with a moderate vegetable diet and cold baths, the same prescription is given for all sexual temptations as is used against religious doubts and a sense of moral unworthiness: "Work hard in your calling." But the most important thing was that even beyond that labour came to be considered in itself the end of life, ordained as such by God. St. Paul's "He who will not work shall not eat" holds unconditionally for everyone. Unwillingness to work is symptomatic of the lack of grace.

The Puritan aversion to sport was by no means simply one of principle. Sport was accepted if it served a rational purpose, that of recreation necessary for physical efficiency. But as a means for the spontaneous expression of undisciplined impulses, it was under suspicion; and in so far as it became purely a means of enjoyment, or awakened pride, raw instincts or the irrational gambling instinct, it was of course strictly condemned. Impulsive enjoyment of life, which leads away both from work in a calling and from religion, was as such the enemy of rational asceticism.

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The theatre was obnoxious to the Puritans, and with the strict exclusion of the erotic and of nudity from the realm of toleration, a radical view of either literature or art could not exist. The conceptions of idle talk, of superfluities, and of vain ostentation, all designations of an irrational attitude without objective purpose, thus not ascetic, and especially not serving the glory of God, but of man, were always at hand to serve in deciding in favour of sober utility as against any artistic tendencies. This was especially true in the case of decoration of the person, for instance clothing. That powerful tendency toward uniformity of life, which today so immensely aids the capitalistic interest in the standardization of production, had its ideal foundations in the repudiation of all idolatry of the flesh.

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One of the most notable economic effects of Calvinism was its destruction of the traditional forms of charity. First it eliminated miscellaneous almsgiving . . . and especially any benevolent attitude toward the beggar. For Calvinism held that the unsearchable God possessed good reasons for having distributed the gifts of fortune unequally. It never ceased to stress the notion that a man proved himself exclusively in his vocational work. Consequently, begging was explicitly stigmatized as a violation of the injunction to love one's neighbor, in this case the person from whom the beggar solicits.

What is more, all Puritan preachers proceeded from the assumption that the idleness of a person capable of work was inevitably his own fault. But it was felt necessary to organize charity systematically for those incapable of work, such as orphans and cripples, for the greater glory of God. This notion often resulted in such striking phenomena as dressing institutionalized or-

phans in uniforms reminiscent of fool's attire and parading them through the streets of Amsterdam to divine services with the greatest possible fanfare. Care for the poor was oriented to the goal of discouraging the slothful. In any case, charity itself became a rationalized "enterprise," and its religious significance was therefore eliminated or even transformed into the opposite significance. This was the situation in consistent ascetic and rationalized religions.

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The pious Puritan could demonstrate his religious merit through his economic activity because he did nothing ethically reprehensible, he did not resort to any lax interpretations of religious codes or to systems of double moralities, and he did not act in a manner that could be indifferent or even reprehensible in the general realm of ethical validity. On the contrary, the Puritan could demonstrate his religious merit precisely in his economic activity. He acted in business with the best possible conscience, since through his rationalistic and legal behavior in his business activity he was factually objectifying the rational methodology of his total life pattern. He legitimated his ethical pattern in his own eyes, and indeed within the circle of his own community, by the extent to which the absolute—not relativized—unassailability of his economic conduct remained beyond question. No really pious Puritan—and this is the crucial point—could have regarded as pleasing to God any profit derived from usury, exploitation of another's mistake, haggling and sharp dealing, or participation in political or colonial exploitation. Quakers and Baptists believed their religious merit to be certified before all mankind by such practices as their fixed prices and their absolutely reliable business relationships with everyone, unconditionally legal and devoid of cupidity. Precisely such practices promoted the irreligious to trade with them rather than with their own kind, and to entrust their money to the trust companies or limited liability enterprises of the religious sectarians rather than those of their own people—all of which made the religious sectarians wealthy, even as their business practices certified them before their God.

The Ironic Consequences of Protestant Asceticism

One of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism, and not only of that but of all modern culture, rational conduct on the basis of the idea of the

calling was born—that is what this discussion has to demonstrate—from the spirit of Christian asceticism.

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried into monastic cells into everyday life, and began to negate worldly morality, it did its part in building a tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps no other calling will so determine them until the last ton of fossil fuel is burnt.

Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goals have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. The idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, when, on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved."

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Review

1. In what ways are ascetic means and ascetic principles identical, according to Weber?
2. How does Weber define and describe the Puritan Ethic?
3. What function do the sacraments have for Catholics?
4. According to Weber, how has the rise of Protestantism determined the role of material goods to people?

Application

Interview a Catholic and a member of a very traditional Protestant denomination. Address the following, relating to each person's attitudes on each:

- a. Fate and salvation and the existence of an after-life.
- b. Money, wealth, profit, and property ownership.
- c. Work—a necessary evil, pleasure, means to salvation?
- d. Atonement for sins.
- e. Ascetism—a rational, disciplined life versus enjoyment of people and worldly pleasures.
- f. Time.
- g. Sex.
- h. Sports participation.
- i. Beggars, the poor, and charity.