

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, in the US today, people with high earnings are more likely to work overtime than low-paid workers.<sup>3</sup> Many of the highest earners work more than 60 hours per week.<sup>4</sup> 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 reevaluation 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> 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

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.<sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup> 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*.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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

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.<sup>16</sup>

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.”<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.”<sup>22</sup>

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

problem. Without dissenting from Luther's theological pronouncements on the value of *works*,<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup> 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."<sup>27</sup> Although salvation cannot be earned, God will not grant it "without our earnest seeking and labor."<sup>28</sup> 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

“wholly in the way of duty” in the service of God.<sup>29</sup> 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.”<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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?<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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.”<sup>37</sup> 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.”<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> 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.”<sup>41</sup> He devotes an entire chapter of his five-volume *Christian Directory*, a comprehensive guide to Christian ethics, to effective time-management.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup>

We must not waste our time and talents because “we are [God’s] workmanship” sent to execute his purposes on Earth.<sup>45</sup> 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



small, but some one hath need of it.”<sup>46</sup> “They are our Master’s stock,” “the tools by which we must do much of our Master’s work.”<sup>47</sup> 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.”<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup>

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.”<sup>50</sup> 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.”<sup>51</sup> 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.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Baxter insists that “he is commendable who . . . frugally getteth and saveth as much as he can.”<sup>53</sup> Given a choice among lawful callings, one has a duty to choose the highest-paying one.<sup>54</sup> Material inequality is justified: “God giveth not to all alike.” It is no sin to earn more than others through honest labor and saving.<sup>55</sup> Puritans frequently quote 2 Thess. 3:10: “[I]f any would not work, neither should he eat.”<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup> Baxter even allows the legitimacy of contracts into slavery, driven by the desperation of the poor.<sup>58</sup> 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

[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.<sup>59</sup>

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.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup> 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.”<sup>63</sup> 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.

But as ethics, Baxter's pleas reflect a foundational moral egalitarianism that informs Puritan thinking about the work ethic.

Puritans did not merely lay moral constraints on how the lowest workers may be treated. More fundamentally, they promoted principles that uplifted the status of ordinary workers. This follows from their sanctification of work. Everyone must "spiritualize their callings and earthly businesses, by going about them in the strength and wisdom of the spirit of God."<sup>64</sup> The spiritualization of callings uplifts the dignity of the lowest worker. *Everyone* who engages in honest labor, however menial, is doing God's work. *All* productive labor promotes the glory of God in realizing God's purpose for humans on earth – that we contribute to preserving human life and helping people. God has instituted the different callings in society because all are needed to work together in their distinct offices to promote his purposes, like the different parts of a clock. Sanderson preaches that "[T]here is no member in the body so mean or small, but hath its proper faculty, function, and use, whereby it becometh useful to the whole body, and helpful to its fellow-members."<sup>65</sup> Everyone needs everyone else to do their part for their own work to fully realize God's purposes. The clock analogy implies a kind of egalitarianism in the value of work from God's point of view.<sup>66</sup> For virtually all of history, servants have been despised and mistreated, their labor held in contempt even though it is socially necessary. The Puritan work ethic exalts them. Puritans endowed work with profound meaning, thereby giving workers a reason to dedicate themselves to it beyond the desire to gain assurance of salvation.

Puritans drew conclusions for how workers should be treated from the equality and dignity of all labor. Baxter sternly warns masters that they must not rule their servants "tyrannically." Workers are entitled to safe, healthful conditions. They must be paid fair and living wages. Wage theft is an "odious oppression."<sup>67</sup> The deserving poor – not idlers, but the disabled and infirm unable to work, as well as poor able-bodied workers – are entitled to charity.

The doctrine of the calling beautifully illustrates how the Puritans turned a sacred duty into a liberty right. If everyone has a duty to work in their God-given calling, and each has the right to determine their calling for themselves in light of their personal talent, temperament, and tastes, it follows that each has the right to free choice of occupation. England in the seventeenth century had an increasingly dynamic economy that led to the rise of "masterless men" who had no

identifiable superior with the power to force them to work at any job in particular.<sup>68</sup> While insisting that the masterless choose some calling or other if they could find steady work, Puritans raised the freedom of the masterless to choose their calling from a contingent fact to a universal right.

Regarding the necessity of working in a calling, God is no respecter of persons.<sup>69</sup> So Puritans condemned the idle rich as well as the idle poor. This was a stunning moral innovation. (Moralists and policy makers had long only complained that the poor don't work hard enough.) "Gallants" – "those who think they need not labor due to birth, breeding, or estate," who waste their time on gambling, drinking, sports, and sleeping – are as sinful as monks and beggars, the other two classes of worthless idlers. "[T]he lowest worker deserves more than they."<sup>70</sup> The rich "are no more excused from service and work of one kind or another, than the poorest man."<sup>71</sup> From those to whom God has given much, much more labor is due. For God told *everyone*, "[i]n the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground."<sup>72</sup> The gentry sin in failing to educate their children in a calling. They especially fail their daughters, by letting them waste their time playing cards, adorning themselves, idly chatting, and leaving the rearing of their children to others. Most women would best spend their time as teachers, educating their children.<sup>73</sup>

Not every means of making money, even if positive laws allow it, counts as legitimate work in the eyes of God. Only work that promotes human well-being and advances the good of the commonwealth counts. Business models that merely extract value from others, or that oppress the disadvantaged, are sinful. Sanderson attacks monopolists, usurers, hucksters, engrossers (those who enclose land), and forestallers (those who buy up goods trying to corner the market). He denounces traders who export food from regions experiencing a famine.<sup>74</sup> Baxter castigates the slave trade. "To go as pirates and catch up poor negroes or people of another land, that never forfeited life or liberty, and to make them slaves, and sell them, is one of the worst kinds of thievery in the world." Slave traders are "incarnate devils" and "the common enemies of mankind."<sup>75</sup> Baxter also rejects sharp trading practices that take advantage of the ignorant, gullible, desperate, and poor, even if they are not strictly illegal or fraudulent. While market prices offer a benchmark for a just price, traders also must consider the interests of counterparties. Although they may ask for more than the

market price from the rich, if the latter are knowing and willing to pay it, they must ensure that both parties gain from any exchange between equals, and that the poor get an even better bargain than that.<sup>76</sup> Both justice and charity limit the interest one may charge on loans. Extracting interest is wrong “when you allow him not such a proportion of the gain as his labour, hazard, or poverty doth require; but because the money is yours, you will live at ease upon his labours.”<sup>77</sup>

Baxter condemns the exploitation of the poor by taking advantage of their weak bargaining position. Such behavior is “oppression,” which he defines as “the injuring of inferiors, who are unable to resist, or to right themselves; when men use their power to bear down right.”<sup>78</sup> Landlords are especially prone to oppress their tenants. “The voluptuous great ones of the world, do use their tenants and servants, but as their beasts, as if they had been made only to labour and toil for them.” Such oppressors are “antichrists,” who “make crosses for other men to bear,” and “tread on their brethren as stepping stones of their own advancement.”<sup>79</sup> Instead of charging what the market may bear, to maximize their profits, landlords and masters should renounce the covetousness that drives them to exploit their inferiors. “Mortify your own lusts . . . which maketh you think that you need so much, as tempteth you to get it by oppressing others. Know well how little is truly necessary!”<sup>80</sup> Poor, hardworking tenants may be entitled to pay less than market rents. If they have enjoyed below-market rents by custom for a long time, they acquire a conditional title to them. They may also hold other customary rights that preclude their eviction by enclosure.<sup>81</sup> Ordinary tenants should enjoy such below-market rents as to have a comfortable life, be cheerful at work, and not suffer from “such toil, and care, and pinching want, as shall make them more like slaves than freemen.”<sup>82</sup>

Here we see the basis of a pro-worker work ethic, in which honest laborers are entitled to dignity, meaningful work, decent material conditions, comfort, rest, freedom from oppression, and charity. Again, in relying on moral exhortation to secure such outcomes for workers, Baxter fell well short, especially in the face of a rising market society that pressed in opposite directions. Later advocates of the progressive work ethic understood that major political and legal reforms would be needed to vindicate workers’ entitlements.

Baxter didn’t stop with earthly rewards for hard workers. According to official Calvinist doctrine, steady disciplined work serves

only an epistemic function, as a *sign* of faith, and hence of grace. Yet Baxter, in exhorting all to labor diligently in their calling, could hardly avoid supposing that his flock would heed his message. “Doubt not but the recompense will be according to your labor . . . Work out your own salvation.”<sup>83</sup> He thereby slides into Arminianism, the heresy (from a Calvinistic point of view) that we have the free will to choose our salvation by accepting God’s grace, which is extended to all. For Baxter, we accept God’s grace in diligently manifesting our faith in work.

Arminianism is a natural response to a shift in perspective on sin. If the model for sin is lust – that is, any kind of sexual arousal outside marriage – it is obvious that we are helpless to avoid it through voluntary acts. The work ethic shifts the model for sin to sloth, which can be avoided by voluntary behavior in compliance with the work ethic. It is but a short step from there to conditional universalism, the view that, as Baxter put it, “God hath Enacted and Given a full Pardon of all Sin to all Mankind, with . . . Right to . . . Heaven, on condition of their acceptance of it.”<sup>84</sup> He had to contort himself to fit this Arminian doctrine with Calvin’s view of a tiny, predestined elect.

Thus, we see that the Puritan work ethic included both conservative and pro-worker ideals. The dual nature of the work ethic follows in part from the dual nature of work from the Puritans’ perspective. Work was both an ascetic discipline and a sanctified activity that glorifies God in promoting human welfare. When work is seen as an ascetic practice, it rationalizes the consignment of workers to stultifying toil. When it is seen as a sanctified activity glorifying God, it raises workers to the same level of awe formerly held by monkish occupants of holy office, while reducing the latter to the status of idle drones to be cast out of the hive.

More fundamentally, the dual nature of the work ethic reflects the duality at the heart of Christianity, its tension between egalitarianism and social hierarchy. Christianity emerged from Jesus’s apocalyptic prophecy, that God would – within the lifetimes of some who heard Jesus preach (Mark 9:1, 13:30) – overthrow the present oppressive rulers and bring his kingdom of justice to earth.<sup>85</sup> The Kingdom of God will reverse the fortunes of the high and the low: “[M]any that are first shall be last; and the last first” (Mark 10:31; cf. Luke 13:29–30). Servants – those who help others, who love their neighbors as themselves and thereby enact egalitarian justice – will inherit the earth under God’s rule: “The servant of all” will be first (Mark 9:35).

As Christianity spread to the Gentiles, eventually to become the established religion of the Roman Empire, the meaning of Jesus's prophecy required revision. This wasn't just to save it from the embarrassment that the timing of Jesus's prophecy for the arrival of God's direct rule of earth was off. The Roman Empire could hardly embrace a religion that called for God to overthrow it and send its rulers and masters to Hell! Yet the Church could hardly repudiate the foundational egalitarianism of souls: Christ died for everyone, so everyone is equally eligible for salvation, regardless of their station in life. Nor could it repudiate Jesus's egalitarian commandment, derived from the Old Testament (Lev. 19:18) to love one's neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:31). The solution to these difficulties was to remove egalitarian justice in time and place: it will be realized in the *next* life, not this one, and in heaven, not on earth. Social hierarchy, with all its oppression and injustice – including the institution of slavery – could thereby be preserved along with Jesus's teachings.

The Reformation threatened the stability of this solution. Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, along with the rise of literacy, printing, and translations of the Bible in the vernacular, freed ordinary people to interpret the Bible for themselves. Many Protestants read Jesus's apocalyptic prophecy as imminent, his egalitarian kingdom about to be established on earth. In seventeenth-century England, millennial sects proliferated. Their radical politics added to the agitation during the Civil War of 1642–51.<sup>86</sup> The Puritans preached against the radical sects. Yet they had their own brand of radicalism. Baxter ministered to the Parliamentary Army, which captured King Charles I and backed Cromwell's republic. Although he wished to restrain the radicalism of the Army, Baxter later refused to submit to the Restoration regime. His opposition to the prescribed rites of the Church of England under the 1662 Act of Uniformity led to his ejection from the ministry. He was prosecuted several times for holding nonconforming services. Overall, his politics and his theology tried to steer a middle course between radicalism and reaction.

Hence it is not surprising that Baxter's work ethic does not preach sacrifice alone in this world, with compensation entirely postponed to the next. A purely ascetic, conservative work ethic fit neither the times nor his temperament. Some goods had to be promised to workers in *this* life for the work ethic to inspire them as it did.

From the point of view of philosophical ethics, the dual character of the work ethic points to something more profound than a practical compromise. The concept of a calling – that God calls each person to a specialized occupation – presupposes a division of labor into which workers are sorted. It thereby mostly accepts the existing set of occupations, with its hierarchy of offices. Yet a foundational moral egalitarianism underwrites this hierarchy. The *moral* status of the lowest worker is equal to that of the highest. *All* are called to labor; the idle rich are not excused. Nor does much of the busyness of the rich, based on oppressing the downtrodden, count as work in the ethical sense, since it fails to benefit humanity. The leveling tendencies of Baxter’s ethical egalitarianism are so plain that Baxter feels forced to disavow them. He does this twice when railing against pomp and conspicuous consumption, allowing that what counts as excessive may vary by occupation.<sup>87</sup> Illustrating the universal duty of charity with the example of members of the early church, who held everything in common, Baxter insists that he isn’t teaching leveling, but only showing that all should “relieve their brethren as themselves.”<sup>88</sup>

Baxter needed an ethical theory to reconcile the tensions in the dual character of the work ethic. And he devised one. Here lies the most astonishing fact of all: Puritan theologians invented what was to become the most influential, and the most secular, foundational moral theory of modern times. This is utilitarianism, the doctrine that everyone’s fundamental moral duty is to maximize human welfare.

### **Christian Charity, Effective Altruism, and the Birth of Utilitarianism**

Let’s briefly skip ahead to the twenty-first century, and consider the ethical advice of Peter Singer, today’s most influential utilitarian moral philosopher. Singer tells us that “we should do the most good we can.”<sup>89</sup> This is the foundation of his doctrine of effective altruism. One might think that a natural way to follow this doctrine would be to work at a charity that does a lot of good. Singer counsels against this strategy for those with significant earning power. Instead, such people should make as much money as they can, and then give away as much as they can to effective charities. He reasons that, given the high number of talented applicants for jobs at effective charities, those with high earning



power can't do that much more good working at the charity than the person who would replace them. If they make a lot of money at a lucrative job and give most of it away to effective charities, they will do much more good than if they worked at a charity, and much more good also than the person who would replace them in the lucrative job, who is likely to spend most of their money on luxuries, or leave it to their privileged children. This is the logic of "earning to give."<sup>90</sup>

Singer cites John Wesley, the eighteenth-century minister who founded Methodism, as the earliest source for this argument. He is on the right track. Wesley launched the last revival of Puritanism, mixed with a heavy dose of Arminianism. Here he followed in Baxter's footsteps. Methodism was devoted to preaching the work ethic to poor and middle-class workers.<sup>91</sup> Wesley told his congregation to "[g]ain all you can by honest industry." "Do not waste" talent or money on "gratifying the desires of the flesh" or mere vanity. Then "give all you can" to help others.<sup>92</sup>

To modern eyes, the idea that utilitarianism could be derived from an ascetic theology is paradoxical. By the late eighteenth century, utilitarians had adopted a hedonistic conception of human well-being. How could a duty to mortify the flesh turn into a duty to impartially maximize pleasure? And how could a wholly secular, this-worldly morality arise from a stern Calvinist theology, overwhelmingly oriented to salvation?

Let's follow the logic that moves from a duty to mortify the flesh through ceaseless work to a duty of universal benevolence. According to Baxter, each individual must

frugally getteth and saveth as much as he can . . . [I]t is no sin, but a duty, to labour . . . for that honest increase and provision, which is the end of our labour; and therefore to choose a gainful calling rather than another.<sup>93</sup>

This leads to a tension with the requirements to mortify the flesh and waste nothing. All that wealth accumulation must be used, lest it go to waste.<sup>94</sup> But to spend it on oneself would lead to indulgence in sinful luxury, conspicuous consumption, and worldly pleasure. Baxter offers two solutions to this problem. One is to give some leeway to loving worldly goods for the instrumental good they do. We may eat nourishing food, engage in recreation, and so forth to maintain our health and restore our capacity to work, so that we may labor further in God's

service. However, one commits the sin of covetousness in “desiring more than is needful or useful to further us in our duty.”<sup>95</sup>

Yet the rich accumulate far more worldly goods than they could spend on themselves simply out of duty. Baxter tries to ward off the leveling implications of this thought by allowing that the rich may have greater needs for worldly goods than the poor. Wealthy officials may need to entertain others in the course of public service or business. “[L]et others pity the poor: I will pity the rich, who seem to be pinched with harder necessities than the poor,” because they have to waste time with such frivolity for the sake of the public interest. “The happy poor,” by contrast, get to spend their time “in the honest labours of their callings.” So they are far safer from the threats to their souls entailed by consorting with worldly pleasures.<sup>96</sup> This rationale for accumulation cannot go very far, however. One might allow that an ambassador must dress finely to display the dignity of the state he represents, and throw parties in a fancy house for foreign officials in the course of diplomacy for the public interest.<sup>97</sup> Yet Baxter concedes that successful private businessmen have less justification for such indulgence, and accumulate vastly more wealth than they could legitimately consume, even granting some leeway to the rich.<sup>98</sup>

Hence arises Baxter’s second and more fundamental solution to the problem of accumulating wealth beyond personal needs, an inevitable consequence for the successful businessman. The rich must do good by paying taxes for the public good, giving to their church (thereby helping to save souls), and giving to the poor. The duty of charity to the poor is very demanding. Everyone has a duty to labor to increase his wealth, so “that he may have the more to give to pious and charitable uses.”<sup>99</sup> Baxter expresses a thought later echoed by Singer:

[T]he portions or comeliest clothing of your children must rather be neglected, than the poor be suffered to perish. How else do I love my neighbour as myself, if I make so great a difference between myself and him?<sup>100</sup>

Singer, similarly, praises Alex Foster, who has committed to donating all the income from his business beyond \$15,000 per year, and Ian Ross, who has dedicated more than 95 percent of his income to charity, and limits himself to \$9,000 annually.<sup>101</sup> Baxter would heartily approve.

Thus Baxter backs his way into a strict utilitarian duty of universal benevolence as a way to reconcile the demands to ceaselessly

engage in productive labor, to waste nothing and put everything to use, and to refrain from indulging in worldly pleasures beyond what is necessary to restore our capacity to labor.

Here is Baxter's clearest statement of utilitarianism. What must we do to serve God? Baxter answers:

It is action that God is most served and honoured by . . . The public welfare, or the good of many, is to be valued above our own. Every man therefore is bound to do all the good he can to others, especially for the church and commonwealth. And this is not done by idleness, but by labour!<sup>102</sup>

The good of many is to be preferred before the good of a few, and public good to be valued above private . . . A continued good is greater than a short and transitory good.<sup>103</sup>

This is the Puritan root of utilitarianism.<sup>104</sup> All of us must practice "universal charity."<sup>105</sup> It is a strict duty to choose the greater good. Anything less is a sin – a waste of God-given resources of the earth and of one's personal energy and time, which God commands us to use for his glory.<sup>106</sup> In a life entirely devoted to duty, no supererogation is possible.<sup>107</sup> Secular utilitarianism simply discards the theological derivation of utilitarianism from the premise that we are God's workmanship and property, the instruments of his will on earth, obliged to pursue his purposes.