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Work Ethic

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Synonyms

[Work and duty](#); [Work and wealth](#); [Work and well-being](#)

Definition/Introduction

A work ethic is a value-based motivation for working. In the now developed world, three such values have been stressed over time: social status, duty, and wealth or, simply, money. Craft pride has also been proffered but is increasingly a victim of automation. Each will be considered here. First, however, a few remarks about how socio-economic conditions influence a society's stance regarding one's obligation to work.

Most people throughout recorded history have recognized a connection between work and well-being. A given society will accordingly expect a person to work inasmuch as its fully recognized members need that person's work. Sometimes work needing to be done has been done cooperatively, for example, in a monastery, in a commune, or wherever togetherness thrives. Where the work needing to be done is associated with a subset of

those in need of subsistence, a society usually introduces some basis for distinguishing between those obligated to work and those exempted. And where such a partitioning exists some sort of work ethic is likely to be espoused.

Work Ethic Based on Gaining Social Acceptance

Every society has had many tasks to perform that are necessary but not fulfilling or even pleasurable. One response to this state of affairs is to dream of an altered reality in which there is only leisure or, at worst, no unfulfilling work. Another is to carve out an exemption from work for those able to maximize the benefits of leisure and compel others to fill the gap as a basis for their social acceptability.

Jewish Talmudic lore, for example, promises a World to Come in which everyone will have ample harvest without effort. More broadly stated in apocalyptic literature: "For men there will be inner sincerity and freedom from care, no unwilling engagement with practical things, and no forced labor" (Charles 1913, 2: 518). One of Virgil's *Eclogues* also envisions a work-free future (Manuel and Manuel 1979, 73–74).

Stories about leisure past are found in many cultures. The Hebrew myth of Adam and Eve's relationship to work in and after Eden is well known, and a comparable myth is on ancient Sumerian tablets (Manuel and Manuel 1979, 36).

The Greeks also viewed work as a curse, due indirectly to Prometheus's upstart behavior, and believed that it was once otherwise. Hesiod, in his *Works and Days* (c. 700 B.C.) describes five races, one being a "golden race" of people who lived before the curse of work in a place where food grew bountifully without cultivation. Later tradition recalled this as a golden age in which nature did it all without assistance or, alternatively, some work was required. Philosophers favored the latter.

In his *Republic*, Plato (died c. 348 B.C.) envisioned a society in which the many would provide for the needs and wants of the few. Everyone in this society would be assigned for life to the role for which he or she is best suited "by nature." For most this would be unskilled labor or at best a craft or trade. The ruling guardians, however, would practice no manual art or craft. And philosophers, who focus on eternal ideas, would be the most "useless" of all citizens.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) propounded a curse theory of work and agreed with Plato that it is necessary for society as a whole. But he too exempted intellectuals, who can attain wisdom by grasping the ultimate causes of things. For this they need to contemplate, and to contemplate they must be free from concern about the necessities of life. So leisure used effectively leads to wisdom – not just any wisdom but the wisdom that knows inherently valuable arts like mathematics.

The ancient Athenians took this elitist attitude toward work quite seriously; but they did not disavow every form of work. Working on the land was good; not good was working for someone else for pay or doing work confined indoors, thereby subjecting one's body to deterioration through disuse. Whence their practice of enslaving others to do certain kinds of work. Other societies did likewise, often in imitation of the Greeks. Not the Spartans, to be sure. But the Romans of the Roman Republic in particular copied the Greeks' attitude regarding work. For them the most honorable pursuits were war and politics. As in Greece, freemen worked alongside slaves in many occupations, and by so doing they too lost status.

For centuries thereafter, eligibility for elite status was purportedly based on ability to learn. Those thus endowed – say, for example, the nobility – would rule a society; all others would be slaves or comparably dependent workers, as in a medieval feudal system. Maintaining such a system might well necessitate use of force. But no less helpful in this regard was a new form of work ethic.

Work Ethic Based on Duty

The elitist Greco-Roman attitudes toward work were gradually undermined over time by the more favorable assessment of work in the Judeo-Christian tradition. At its origins, Christianity was not uniformly supportive of work. Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, was focused on his mission. Accordingly, he persuaded hardworking men to abandon their trades and just follow him. Tentmaker Saint Paul, on the other hand, once said only those who work should be fed (2 Thes. 3:10). This ambivalence regarding work persisted down through the Middle Ages. But when sudden depopulation created an urgent need for more working people, new laws prohibited indolence and theologians began associating work with salvation.

Initially Christians embraced the curse theory of work, and as monasteries were founded the monks relied on lay workers for their physical needs. Then Saint Benedict (480–547) founded a monastic order in Italy based on the dual objectives of prayer and work, thereby, some say, removing the curse from work. His original rule divides up the hours of the day in different seasons between manual labor and sacred reading. By the time of the high Middle Ages, though, this espousal of manual labor had been reduced to a mere symbol as the monks left hard work to serfs and wage earners and engaged themselves in more honorific and less tiring crafts such as baking, gardening, and brewing (Le Goff 1980, 84).

Theological giant Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) separated contemplation and action on the basis of one's position in society. He agreed with Aristotle that contemplation is the highest

human endeavor, to which a select few might devote all their attention. He also agreed that only workers deserve to eat – but only if the work is necessary. It was necessary among the common people, so they had a right and a duty to work. They were not to rise beyond their “natural” station in life; but in turn they were entitled to a “just price” for their labor, i.e., a livelihood for self and family. But in cases of necessity, Aquinas notes, everything has to be owned in common, and anyone lacking the basics for survival is entitled enough to remedy this deficiency (1948, II–II, q. 66, a. 7).

A key weakness of this charitable stance is: how determine who is sufficiently deprived to merit care without working? In Aquinas’s time there was apparently a surplus pool of labor; so begging was an accepted practice, for example, by the Franciscan friars. But the surplus labor that existed in their day disappeared a mere half century later when the Black Death (bubonic plague) moved from China to Europe and in 5 years (1347–1352) killed from 75 to 200 million people, varying in intensity from 30% to 60% of the population of different countries. More restrictive outbreaks occurred up to 1654 (in Oslo). This decimation of population caused a severe labor shortage, laws to prevent wage increases, and mostly futile peasant revolts in England, France, Belgium, and Italy. To counter such social turbulence, religious leaders linked eternal salvation to having worked in life; and as economic growth became an ever more important social goal, they developed an ever larger list of salvific occupations. Then came the Protestant Reformers.

Martin Luther (1483–1546) still drew upon the just price theory to tell people to work at the trade or profession into which they were born. But he attributed equal value to any kind of work, active or contemplative, and stressed the religious dignity of one’s work as a vocation or calling. Thus in his little book about vagabonds, *Liber Vagatorum*, he linked the Reformation to the growing movement against beggars by endorsing almsgiving only to duly certified indigents.

John Calvin (1509–1564) pushed the religious significance of work farther, making it a necessary means to eternal salvation. Even though

committed to a rigorous doctrine of divine predestination, he insisted that the faith by which one is saved is expressed through methodical, disciplined, rational, uniform, and hence specialized work. Casual work is for this purpose inadequate, and dislike of work calls into question one’s being among the elect.

The secular side of society bolstered these warnings about damnation by imposing severe civil and criminal penalties on identified shirkers. But such measures proved inadequate; so what was to be done?

For one answer to this question, take the case of England in the sixteenth century. Past reliance on private alms and public punishment had not cured poverty. With people dying in the streets and early forms of enterprise emerging, the need for some level of public intervention became apparent. What resulted, especially during the reign of Elizabeth I (1533–1603), were the Poor Laws, which established almshouses and overseers of the poor as the nucleus of poor relief. In spite of this public generosity, published commentary at the time (e.g., by Richard Morison and Edward VI) stressed hard work as a solution for pressing social problems. Sir Walter Raleigh (like Cardinal Richelieu in France) thought a combination of hunger and religious goading would inspire labor discipline. Puritan sermonizers collaborated by denying heaven to the uncooperative.

An emphasis on labor as a duty could misfire if tactlessly applied to the indolent rich as well, and some preachers did just that. But others, especially after the restoration of oligarchy in 1660, were more careful to delimit the scope of the duty to those who were capable of nothing better. Late in the seventeenth century, however, John Locke argued that labor as well as inheritance is a basis for property rights (Hill 1967, 127).

Work Ethic Based on Wealth Attainment

Locke’s (1632–1704) view that labor can be a basis of ownership is readily understandable on the surface but has undergone widely diverse interpretations (Vaughn 1980). First off, it tells a

New World explorer he can own a piece of land if he works it (labor principle), takes only as much as he can use (no spoilage), and leaves enough and as good for others (sufficiency). How this acquisition theory applies in an established society is debatable. Locke probably is not inviting the bourgeoisie to appropriate inherited wealth. Nor is it likely that he is claiming that the “laboring class” has rights to anything more than subsistence. For, as viewed through a secularized Calvinist lens, the poor deserve little due to their inherent limitations. If they are unemployed, this is because of their moral depravity; if they are employed, they are too busy laboring to tend to anything that requires the exercise of reasoning power. In either case, they are not full citizens but natural resources that must be managed for the good of the nation. Labor, then, is the basis of property – not, however, for the untutored laborer but for an entrepreneur who chooses to work on and improve unclaimed goods. This being the case, poverty is a problem only if the poor are idle, not if the workers are poor (Larkin 1969, 54ff, 72; Macpherson 1972, 194–217; Cranston 1957, 424–427). And to advance this logic, David Hume (1711–1776) recommended imposing a tax on the poor to goad them into working more (Hume 1905, 247). This perpetuation of the duty-based work ethic was already being undone, though, by views such as Locke’s that focused on entrepreneurs.

So argued German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) (Weber 1938; Gilbert 1977). Analyzing the heaven-centered explanation of wealth and poverty, Weber concluded that preachers and other agents of attitude formation found motivation for entrepreneurial capitalism in the Puritan version of Calvinism: the theological notion of predestination is tied to the earthly goal of financial success (Tawney 1926).

Actually, Weber posited two work ethics. The narrowest of these is focused on money, i.e., making money is the single-minded goal of the work ethic (Weber 1938, 53). As Weber describes this ethic, it could be interiorized only by the actual or would-be entrepreneur. There is, however, a Calvinist-based corollary to the entrepreneurial work ethic that views poverty not as

circumstantial but as a direct result of its victim’s failure or refusal to work. This version of the work ethic has been applied even to the unpropertied wage laborer as an incentive to greater productivity, notably via a piecework system. The two versions taken together constitute a reward/punishment account of property and poverty respectively.

Insisting that capitalism dominates the worker as well as the entrepreneur, Weber notes that “traditionalist” (Catholic) attitudes with regard to making money limit progress, but, he believes, there are countermeasures. Motives can be shifted ideologically by recalling that Saint Paul made work a prerequisite to being fed, by emphasizing the link between a fixed calling and one’s niche in the hierarchy of labor, and by using “piece rates” (Weber 1938, 55, 57–59). In short, Weber read Calvin’s austere theology as providing the ideological underpinning for capitalism. According to Andrew Ure (1778–1857), though, what Calvin provided was a religious justification for the capitalist’s hard-nosed approach to discipline on the assembly line.

A Calvinist ideologue of the Industrial Revolution, Ure explained the need for hard work by associating a worker’s pain with that of the crucified Christ (Ure 1835, 423). Calvinism was not, however, the only basis for endorsing work at the time of the Industrial Revolution. Pierre Proudhon (1809–1865), for example, developed an anarchist glorification of labor around the idea that the value of work is directly proportional to how hard it is. Karl Marx (1818–1883), by comparison, was open to the possibility of a work-free utopia, as are some of his modern-day followers. Yet Andre Gorz (1923–2007), a neo-Marxist student of work, once asserted that “after the communist revolution we will work more, not less” (Gorz 1976, 58).

This discrepancy between Marxist and neo-Marxist views of work is due to a fundamental revision of Marx’s views by ideologues of the Soviet revolution. Marx himself rejected the duty-based work ethic as a device of capitalist exploitation of the working class. He distinguished between physical and intellectual labor and looked forward to the day when machines

would tend to the former and thereby leave people ample time for the latter. According to Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), this utopian state of affairs, in which the level of unemployment rather than full employment would be the measure of social wealth and freedom, can now be envisioned as an entirely feasible “(c)onsummation of technical progress” (Marcuse 1964, 35–37). But interpreters of Marx in the former Soviet Union took an altogether different tack, reendorsing in a secular frame of reference that very duty-based work ethic that Marx himself had repudiated.

Proclaiming the value of Soviet patriotism and love for the motherland, Soviet moralists endorsed work as the primordial purpose of life. Marx had sought to abolish alienated labor and saw socialism as a means to this end. The Soviet leaders, however, emphasized the need to compete effectively against capitalism, so called on every person to work according to his or her capabilities for the good of the people. Thus motivated they could not experience alienated labor as in a capitalist society. Under socialism Soviet style, one was to identify positively with the work to which one was assigned, whether or not Marx would say it fulfilled one’s potentialities. In every case, one labored for the State, all labor for the State was good by definition, so there was no (ideologically acceptable) basis for complaining about one’s work. In other words, a Weberian work ethic without religious overtones was official policy.

Wealth attainment, in short, has become the preeminent goal of work ethics extant in the developed world. In capitalist societies, wealth is being attained by clever entrepreneurs however engaged, and markets await the appearance of others comparably attracted to wealth. In numerous countries today (notably China and some African nations) seekers of wealth do so more collectively in fulfillment of national objectives. In post-communist Russia, the former Soviet work ethic is being transformed by entrepreneurial wealth-seeking, relative openness to free-market competition and the profit motive, and an influx of Western-acquired MBAs (Bohm 2013).

Work Ethic Based on Craft Pride

The early Industrial Revolution was driven largely by technological innovations that, together with ample supplies of labor, brought about multiple forms of progress at least in the Northern Hemisphere. As innovation expanded, so did the accompanying skills that were effectively employed. Increasingly, however, the emergence of ever more expansive automation has rendered once needed human intervention unnecessary. As a result many types of unskilled as well as skilled labor have become superfluous in developed countries.

This technological displacement of hands-on labor for production severely diminishes the relevance of a work ethic. Employers who face declining workforce needs inevitably resort to massive layoffs and outsourcing, and economists who study these phenomena have come up with no statistically adequate solutions. Politicians promise correctives, but the nature of such remains illusive. More learned assessments are varied, but two kinds are prevalent: the synchronist view that technology has changed only the conditions of work (for better or worse) and not the value of work, and the diachronist view that technology makes traditional evaluations of work irrelevant and inappropriate.

Synchronist evaluators of work endorse craftsmanship even in a technologically transformed environment. These include goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini (sixteenth century), pre-Revolution philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (eighteenth century), and more recently Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Ellul, and E. F. Schumacher (all twentieth century). The diachronous view that technology supersedes human craftsmanship is more widely espoused, especially among technology experts. As one writer puts it, “Accomplishing more work in less time, then leveraging that additional time to solve complex problems, spend time with family, or pursue a side venture is the new calling card of a 21st-century hard worker” (Jenkins 2016).

As numerous types of jobs cease to exist in the developed world, some analysts are beginning to recommend a guaranteed income for every adult; but ordinary people are still too embedded in duty-

based thinking to tolerate such a sensible solution to a rapidly emerging problem (Murray 2016). Meanwhile, in developing countries comparatively unskilled labor opportunities are plentiful albeit poorly paid and subject to so-called sweatshop conditions (Wong 2013). An able-bodied person who fails to participate in this highly imperfect economic system might be faulted for not abiding by a distorted but dominant work ethic.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Christianity and Business Ethics](#)
- ▶ [Company Socialization and Ethical Fit](#)
- ▶ [Ethics of Care](#)
- ▶ [Harassment in the Workplace](#)
- ▶ [Protestant Work Ethic](#)
- ▶ [Role of Philosophy in Business Ethics](#)
- ▶ [Weber](#)

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