Gods of the Marketplace: The "Work Ethic" from Max Weber to Universal Basic Income

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> Christian asceticism, at first fleeing from the world into solitude, had already ruled the world which it had renounced from the monastery and through the Church. But it had, on the whole, left the naturally spontaneous character of daily life in the world untouched. Now it strode into the market-place of life, slammed the door of the monastery behind it, and undertook to penetrate just that daily routine of life with its methodicalness, to fashion it into a life in the world, but neither of nor for this world.[1]
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> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

The passage above captures the essence of Max Weber's famous and controversial essay, as well a deep paradox of capitalism itself. It emerged from Christianity but is, at least in explicit form, antithetical to core Christian values. Now, more than 100 years after the essay first appeared, Weber's characterization seems more apt than ever. The enigmatic description of daily life in the market system being, like monasticism, "in the world but neither of nor for this world" makes a great deal of sense if we consider enterprises like convenience stores, which know no Sabbath rests or even sleep cycles; convenience store clerks, like monks in a monastery, will reliably be awake at 3 a.m. Weber's essay seems ever fresh, continually vindicated if not by every intellectual defense, then certainly by the otherworldly ways of the contemporary world.

Weber's thesis is very amenable to the perspective of generative anthropology (GA), of the human scene with center and periphery. Weber saw work (and accumulating and investing capital) as deeply entwined with a religious framework. For GA, exchange in general, and the market system specifically, are key concerns, as is of course religion, the sacred.[2] Yet it would be fair to say that GA's key reference point to the market has been Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis, at least to judge by the number of Chronicles Eric Gans

has devoted to it.[3] In this reflection I propose, at a minimum, that engagement with Max Weber and "Weberians" (not excluding Francis Fukuyama himself, who took a Weberian turn in 1995)[4] might cast new light on Weber's thesis and, reciprocally, extend the outlook of GA in relation to the market.[5]

Yet there also looms a larger question about the nature of work itself: how it defines, and is defined by, *the human*—the anthropology of work. That penetration "into just that daily routine" of life that Weber described above is entering a critical stage with increasing automation, the growing ubiquity of artificial intelligence, and now the proposal for a "Universal Basic Income" (UBI). On the one hand (so I will argue), these developments are quite consistent with Weber's thesis on the "capitalist spirit"—the frenetic productivity ironically unleashed by what was originally the spirit of asceticism. On the other hand, the developments obviously undermine the premise of the famous "work ethic"—that civic virtue derived from Max Weber, though never articulated as such in his thesis. The "work ethic" is no longer self-evident or axiomatic, to say the least; what *is* the point of working when, it can be argued, there is no need for it?

This lingering question, the *anthropological* question about the nature and value of work, hovers over this outline and reflection, whether it is addressed indirectly or directly. In the next section I overview Weber's thesis as well as its popularization in the "work ethic" meme. In the third section, I review a string of thinkers, most of whom came to different specific conclusions than Weber but all of whom, in one way or another, looked at religion and the market through a "Weberian" framework. In the concluding section, I consider the "work ethic" in light of automation, AI, and UBI, and return to the question of the anthropology of work.

Max Weber and the "Work Ethic"

Weber's famous essay on Protestantism was part of a much larger project. Weber had examined Hinduism, Judaism, and Confucianism, and was planning (though never undertook) a similar study on Islam.[6] Weber was narrowing the focus in his search for the origins of the modern market system: Why the West? Why Christianity? Why especially *Protestant* Christianity? Why, even more specifically, Calvinism?

The first part of Weber's answer involved Martin Luther, who (in Weber's interpretation) introduced the idea of a "call" or "calling," wherein one's occupation in one's station in life took on the dimension of a religious vocation.[7] However, the more important part of Weber's thesis was Calvinism, specifically the practical consequences following from the doctrine of predestination.[8]

Devout Calvinists and puritans were concerned about the state of their souls, but according to doctrine could do nothing to affect their eternal destiny. The sacrament of confession was eliminated, and without cycles of repentance and absolution, believers developed a tortured

private conscience (also consequential for the modern sense of individuality). How could they know that they were in a state of grace, that they were among the elect?[9]

Weber proposed that the solution for Calvinists and puritans was to look for *signs of election*. This meant, firstly, not engaging in sinful pleasures or selfish indulgences: Protestant asceticism. Secondly, it meant living a productive life, as in Luther's sense of a "calling," but now in a very augmented form. Paradoxically, for those who did not believe in works (this irony was not lost on critical Lutherans),[10] Calvinist striving became a signature trait. Enterprise and profit also became a religious virtue, a sign of election. Yet one did not enjoy the fruits of this heightened productivity. Because of the asceticism, much capital was available for productive use, and there followed mutually reinforcing effects: more capital feeding into ever more productive enterprises.[11]

The "Protestant ethic" is not an explicit doctrine or moral code but rather a habit of thought and behavior that arose in relation to economic activity. In fact, exactly what Weber meant by the "Protestant ethic" and the "spirit of capitalism" has been controversial, since he never explicitly defined them. However, if we consider them as mutually self-defining in the sense above, they seem clear enough. For Weber, the "Protestant ethic" is asceticism combined with extreme productivity; the "spirit of capitalism" is productivity and profit for its own sake, not for personal indulgence. The fact that economic actors were acting *for profit but not greed* tended over time to loosen strictures against economic practices that would previously have been understood as immoral.[12] The "Protestant ethic" thus morphed into the "spirit of capitalism."

As the new spirit of enterprise unfolded historically, profitability, initially a sign of righteousness, became even more detached from morality. (This "value neutral" arena of the market remains a troubling paradox for Christians.) Weber's illustrative example is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as compared to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress* is obsessed with his eternal destiny, while Robinson Crusoe is obsessed with *enterprise*—though he also does a little missionary work on the side.[13] As this "capitalist spirit" increasingly interpenetrated life and society, it took on a life of its own, disengaging even more from religion, and making its own rules. Weber called the completion of this process the "iron cage": society became more rationalized, uniform, efficient, methodical, bureaucratic.[14] Exit was not an option.

It should go without saying that neither Luther nor Calvin had any notion of unleashing the secularized market system on the world, let alone the consumer ethos of the present day. Luther was an economic idealist who decried the "profit motive."[15] The Reformation was, after all, initially a protest of monetary corruption in the Catholic Church. Calvin, going far beyond Luther, wanted *more* religion in society, not less.[16] Either would be appalled at the practical consequences Weber outlined. Nevertheless, Weber argued, both men, however unintentionally, let the genie out of the bottle.

Meanwhile, though Weber's was a *critical* theory, the "Protestant ethic" has undergone its own mutation as the "Protestant work ethic," or simply "work ethic." This cultural meme denotes a civic virtue, rather than what Weber described: a religious neurosis. The "work ethic" is a staple of the cultural imagination, particularly in North America. It is a sign of character, of one's capacity for integration into the market system, and this implies traits like hard work, discipline, and of course "delayed gratification." Delayed gratification is surely a secularized version of the Calvinism's heavenly rewards—an earthly rather than heavenly payoff promised, or at least suggested, for the future.

The idea of "delayed gratification" brings this overview around to GA and the originary scene. It is difficult to think of "delayed gratification" in this context without thinking of "deferred appropriation"; a proto-human reaches for an appetitive central object, then the gesture is halted when it becomes apparent that appropriation will unleash the violent resentment of others on the periphery. The "aborted gesture of appropriation" becomes the first sign, designating both the desirability of the object and the dire necessity of not reaching for it. Appropriation, and peaceful rending and distribution, must wait. The sign, in the meantime, becomes the first act of symbolic communication. It launches hominization, and introduces a sign system that transcends the dangerous, corruptible material world.[17]

The permanent deferral implied by Protestant asceticism—looking forward to transcendent heavenly rewards beyond time—connects, from the standpoint of GA, the private scene of the modern individual conscience to the scene of human origins. Just as important is the devolved bourgeois counterpart, "delayed gratification," wherein one puts off (but does not abjure) enjoying the earthly fruits of one's labors; one looks forward to the promise of the good life on earth. These two versions of deferral could be considered part of the continuing unfolding of the originary event as it shapes thought and behavior. Yet a different (and not mutually exclusive) way to look at it is that GA may itself be a *product* of the "Protestant ethic." That is, "deferred appropriation" as described by GA projects a sensible bourgeois restraint back upon the scene of origin. This observation parallels the critiques of GA that it is a kind of "social contract" theory. Yet, as with that critique, this is really an opportunity for GA to clarify its self-description and sharpen its self-knowledge.[18]

Weber among "Weberians"

Weber's essay is considered "one of the most influential and provocative ever written,"[19] and, unsurprisingly, has also faced unending objections.[20] In this section I review a string of thinkers that positively engaged Weber's thesis: R. H. Tawney, Amintore Fanfani, Christopher Dawson, Michael Novak, Francis Fukuyama, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, and Venkatesh Rao. I call them "Weberian" for convenience; they usually disagreed with Weber's specific conclusions. However, they all adopted a similar framework for looking at religion and the market system, and each contributed, in their way, complementary insights that deepen the overall effect of Weber's approach. All of them are worth considering from a GA perspective.

It goes without saying, considering the vast number of scholars who have taken up Weber's thesis, that this selection is limited and selective.

R. H. Tawney

Religion and the Rise of Capitalism (1926) was written by the socialist historian R. H. Tawney.[21] It is in many ways a superior study to Weber's and is *the* book to read for a single account of early capitalism's complex relation to Christianity. Tawney did not focus, as Weber did, upon a single anthropological thesis and was much more comprehensive, yet also openly indebted to Weber.[22] Tawney's detailed commentaries on Luther and especially Calvin are particularly valuable supplements to Weber. Tawney thought Luther quite naïve on economics, while Calvin was very much a man of the world, a revolutionary; Calvin was Lenin to Luther's Marx.[23]

Tawney gave much more credit to the great commercial centers both before the Reformation (e.g., Florence) and during it (e.g., Antwerp). For Tawney, the relation between Calvinism and capitalism was more like chicken and egg. It was not so much that Calvinism *produced* capitalists as that Calvinism *attracted* certain kinds of people, specifically, a rising and dynamic new economic class. Calvin's thorough, methodical, streamlined theological system appealed to these new players, who were "men of affairs," like Calvin himself, movers and shakers. Calvinism took root precisely in areas, mostly urban centers, where this new class was gaining influence.[24]

From a GA perspective, then, the social and economic revolution described in Tawney's account had less to do with the private scene of individual conscience as described by Weber, and more with the resentments of a rising class on the periphery against the aristocracy at the center, which stood in its way. Yet the religious significance was more than coincidental for Tawney; he saw that Calvinism and the new "capitalist spirit" had mutually reinforcing effects very much along the lines that Weber described, with truly transformative effects on the world.

Amintore Fanfani

Amintore Fanfani's well-known *Catholicism, Capitalism and Protestantism* (1935) is considered a dissent from Weber, but in fact resonates with agreement, albeit from a reverse perspective.[25] For Fanfani, Weber's thesis simply elucidated the fundamental flaws of capitalism and Protestantism.[26] Fanfani took more care than Weber to define what he meant by the "capitalist spirit." For Fanfani, it was essentially cultural acceptance of profit for profit's sake—a point which helps to clarify Weber's thesis.[27]

Fanfani's critique implied an idealistic call to return to the true faith (Catholicism), integrated within a just, humane, organic social order, and to systems like the Medieval guilds that would regulate economic activity.[28] Reiterated in GA terms, the sacred center

of European life was to be restored in this vision, and everyone would have their rightful place on the periphery.

Fanfani was initially the progressive Catholic traditionalist represented by this book (based on his doctoral thesis). Later, Fanfani became a fascist sympathizer. Eventually, he became Italy's prime minister and an influential Christian Democrat.[29] John F. Kennedy's "Great Society" as well as the political tradition represented by politicians such as Angela Merkel could be considered part of Fanfani's legacy.

Chistopher Dawson

The great but now neglected Catholic historian Christopher Dawson responded to Weber's thesis much differently in his essay "Catholicism and the Bourgeois Mind" (1935).[30] Unlike Fanfani, Dawson had no idea of turning back the clock, but he did want to take stock of where we were, and where we had been.

For Dawson, this started by recognizing the universal triumph of the bourgeois ethos: "[I]t is no use hunting for the bourgeois. For we are all bourgeois and our civilization is bourgeois from top to bottom." Instead of Marxist class struggle, "we have seen the bourgeois culture, the bourgeois mind, and even the bourgeois standard of life advancing and expanding until they became diffused throughout the whole social organism and dominated the whole spirit of modern civilization."[31] Dawson's characterization recalls the opening epigraph from Weber, and in a similar way remains uncannily accurate. Even North Korea, that rare bastion of communist totalitarianism, must showcase a bourgeois lifestyle among its citizens as a sign of success; even a "Potemkin village" must appear bourgeois.

But it was not always so. Dawson recalled the time, between the Reformation and the Revolution, when there was also a Counter-Reformation, and hence two views of life fighting for the soul of the West: the bourgeois spirit and the Baroque spirit. The latter "spent its capital lavishly, recklessly, and splendidly, whether to the glory of God or for the adornment of human life." Baroque culture was

> passionate and ecstatic, and finds its supreme expression in the art of music and in religious mysticism. We have only to compare Bernini with the brothers Adam, or St. Teresa with Hannah More to feel the difference in the spirit and rhythm of the two cultures. The bourgeois culture has the mechanical rhythm of a clock, the Baroque the musical rhythm of a fugue or sonata.[32]

Dawson elaborated,

> The ideal of bourgeois culture is to maintain a respectable average standard. Its maxims are "honesty is the best policy," "Do as you would be done by," "The greatest

> happiness for the greatest number." But the Baroque spirit lives in and for the triumphant moment of creative ecstasy. It will have all or nothing.[33]

Recalling this lost stream in Western civilization fills in important gaps in Weber's thesis and has several implications. First, from the standpoint of GA and the originary scene, the "bourgeois spirit" emphasizes *deferral* (e.g. "delayed gratification") and the equality of the sparagmos ("the greatest good for the greatest number"), while the "Baroque spirit" emphasizes *appropriation* and aesthetic differentiation (e.g. "all or nothing," living for "the moment of creative ecstasy"). The two views of economic activity (and of life) thus replay the originary scene in very different ways. However, and to return to an earlier question, the emphasis on appropriation seems frankly inconsistent with the originary scene. GA can thus be seen in this context as a *product* of bourgeois culture, that is, of the "Protestant ethic." Because *deferral* is so central, it is difficult to imagine how GA could have emerged from a Baroque culture.

Secondly, the lost world of the "Baroque spirit" is not actually lost but exists as a substratum of civilization. It continually pokes up its head in movements like Romanticism, the Pre-Raphaelites, or the Woodstock generation—for what are they if not a recrudescence of the Baroque spirit? There are even Japanese subcultures that idolize the Baroque ethos of Europe as the apex of self-expression, passion, and authenticity.[34] Since so much of GA's historical and aesthetic analysis has focused on the Romantics—in GA, the adaptation of the scenic center of aesthetic uniqueness to the market system—it may be worthwhile to extend such analyses to the Baroque spirit and to the Counter-Reformation.[35] Or, to put it somewhat more abrasively, Romanticism was a way for the bourgeois spirit to co-opt the Baroque spirit—conversely, a way for the Baroque spirit to "sell out" while maintaining a posture of rebellion and personal uniqueness (e.g. like the rebel musicians of the Woodstock generation "selling out" to the record industry).

Finally, Dawson's characterization flips cultural stereotypes about religion and secularism (though no doubt reinforcing others). For Dawson, it is bourgeois culture (secularized Protestantism) that is "uptight" and "repressed," while Baroque culture (religious and mystical) is self-indulgent and ecstatic. Moreover, from an economic perspective, Dawson's characterization wrecks another stereotype; Catholicism (in the standard Weberian view) idealizes poverty, hence Catholic regions have been under-developed.[36] In fact (according to Dawson) the Baroque ethos was not impoverished but spendthrift; Baroque culture flagrantly expended resources on cultural adornments like art, music and architecture. One cannot help but notice these profuse vestiges in the "impoverished" regions of the Counter-Reformation, not excluding the host country for the 2018 GA conference—the Baroque splendor of Western civilization. To appropriate Harry Lime's quip in *The Third Man*, Baroque culture facilitated this great flourishing of human creativity, while bourgeois culture, however frenetic its economic activity, gave us the cuckoo clock.[37]

Michael Novak

Jumping ahead to the "end of history," the collapse of communism in Europe obviously entailed a re-assessment of capitalism, often in the triumphalist mode typified by Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).[38] Michael Novak's provocatively titled book *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was very much in this spirit, but his title framed it in explicitly in Weberian terms.[39] Novak considered the vindication of democracy and free markets in light both of Weber's thesis and a century of Catholic social teaching culminating in John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* (1991).[40] Novak's chief contribution here was to bring Catholic social teaching and John Paul II into this Weberian conversation, which typically proceeds as if neither existed. This is a serious deficit considering that John Paul II in particular was a major intellectual figure, had experienced both fascist and communist totalitarianism, and played no small role in the bloodless collapse of the latter.

However, interpreting John Paul II on capitalism is not a straightforward matter, and there is a tendency to see, particularly in *Centesimus Annus*, what one wants to see.[41] John Paul II appeared friendlier toward capitalism than his papal predecessors, and this encouraged Novak to enlist John Paul II's teaching in support of "neo-conservative" political and economic policies. Novak's Catholic perspective was, at any rate, quite different from Fanfani's or Dawson's.

Weber, Novak argued, was wrong: the capitalist spirit is both "Catholic" (in line with Catholic social teaching) and "catholic," universal, e.g., as demonstrated by Japan's astonishing economic success at the time. Novak's strategy, and his apologia for the capitalist ethos, are exemplified in the following passage:

> At the inmost heart of the capitalist system . . . is confidence in the creative capacity of the human person. As Catholic theology teaches, and as experience verifies, such confidence is well-placed. Each person is made in the image of God, the Creator. Each is called to be a co-creator and given the vocation to act creatively. Every co-creator is free, that is, expected both to assume responsibility and show initiative.[42]

Here Novak paraphrases John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (1981).[43] On its own, the encyclical does indeed articulate a compelling Catholic "work ethic," moreover one upon which many other religious traditions might find much common ground. From a GA perspective the formulation above could also be articulated in terms of center, periphery, and the originary scene. Even considering its implicit atheism, GA is friendly to the idea of "co-creation with God"—which is in a sense a direct paraphrase of GA's originary hypothesis.[44] At any rate, like Dawson's "Baroque spirit," *Laborem Exercens* also puts human creativity in the foreground.

At the same time, by inserting "At the inmost heart of the capitalist system" at the head of

the paragraph above, Novak attempted to stamp the Catholic social tradition as pro-capitalist, and conversely, to stamp capitalism as somehow magisterial. This was a highly problematic maneuver at best, since the Catholic social teaching has consistently condemned not just socialist collectivism, but the profit motive pursued for its own sake.[45] Novak wanted to argue that the core of capitalism is *not* the profit motive, but human creativity and resourcefulness. Here then was the real difference between Novak and Weber; it was less about sectarian distinctions than the nature of the capitalist enterprise itself. For Weber, the capitalist spirit *was* the profit motive. For Novak, it was the resourcefulness and creativity that drive it and are recognized and encouraged by it.

Twenty-five years later, Novak's characterization seems strangely dated and almost touchingly naïve, while Weber's thesis remains uncannily on target. As I argue further on, automatization, AI and Universal Basic Income are utterly consistent with the "spirit of capitalism" as Weber describes it, but these developments do not reflect "confidence in the creative capacity of the human person." In short, Novak over-estimated capitalism's capacity to reflect human creativity, and wildly under-estimated its capacity to obliterate it; Novak did not grasp the "spirit of capitalism."

Francis Fukuyama

The universality of capitalism (the small "c" part of Novak's thesis) was explored in another largely forgotten book from the same period, Francis Fukuyama's own *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (1995).[46] In his enormously more influential *The End of History*, Fukuyama's fundamental anthropology had been Hegel's master-slave dialectic; Fukuyama had devoted an entire chapter to it.[47] In *Trust*, Fukuyama dropped Hegel almost completely and markedly shifted to a Weberian perspective. There were good reasons for this. As Fukuyama observed the center of gravity of capitalism shifting to Asia, he began asking the same sort of questions that Weber had asked about the West: Why Asia? Why East Asia? Why specifically Buddhist and Confucian societies?

Fukuyama's observations do not date as badly as Novak's, precisely because we are still seeing the momentum of capitalism shift to East Asia. However, the perpetual tussle of master and slave seems to fail in modelling the complex relation that labor and economic activity seemed to have with their cultural and religious context. The master-slave dialectic might be considered, like dueling twins in René Girard's analyses,[48] a mythological construct, at least as far as the market is concerned.

Fukuyama's shift to a Weberian framework is significant considering GA and the sustained attention Eric Gans has given to Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis.[49] Gans has never accepted Fukyama's "end of history" uncritically or without qualification, but it would also be fair to say that it has served as Gans' default reference for the free market and liberal democracy after the Cold War.[50] To this extent, GA might be well-served by integrating

Weber's approach into its economic perspective, since Fukuyama himself felt compelled to move in that direction.

Specifically, we can consider the master-slave dialectic: while it has informed Gans in analyzing "victimary thinking" (identity politics),[51] this Hegelian element plays no part of Gans' endorsement of Fukuyama's "end of history"—that is, of the basic premises of liberal democracy and the market system. Yet for Fukuyama, they were inseparable from that dialectic in *The End of History*. However, within a few years, this Hegelian focus was abandoned in *Trust*, implying Fukuyama was distancing himself from the "end of history" thesis itself. Simply put, to suggest that GA move toward a Weberian perspective is to suggest that it move from the Fukuyama of the *End of History* to the Fukuyama of *Trust*.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy

In *Economy and the Future: A Crisis of Faith* (2014), Jean-Pierre Dupuy does develop a "victimary" model of the market, but one that is mimetic and sacrificial.[52] With like-minded students of René Girard, especially Paul Dumouchel and André Orléan, Dupuy has long focused on the market's *sacred* nature.[53] The market is paradoxical and "irrational" (i.e., contra neoclassical economics and "rational choice" theory). The paradox is Girardian: Satan casts out Satan; sacrificial frenzy continually resolves to fix market value. The economy can be seen as a secularized scapegoat mechanism, or conversely as a sacralized secularism—in either case, a new scene of the sacred.

Dupuy, Orléan and Dumouchel approach the market in ways that should be of obvious interest to GA: they see the market as paradoxical; they see the paradox as "sacred" and generative; they see its resolution as the ongoing transformation of sacrificial dynamics into peaceful, albeit mimetically fraught, transactions. While there are obvious differences with GA, these parallels are quite striking. Dupuy's book suggests that dialogue between GA and this "school" of mimetic thinkers may be long overdue, and Weber may provide the most favorable context for pursuing it.

Weber's thesis is a centerpiece in Dupuy's book, Dupuy being the most "Weberian" thinker so far considered. (He provides some of the most illuminating commentary on Weber I have encountered.) For Dupuy, Weber's thesis articulates a generative, pragmatic paradox which many critics, somewhat understandably, fail to understand.[54] Dupuy argues that even Weber did not fully appreciate the potency of his thesis.[55] The archetypal Calvinist *should* choose fatalism but instead chooses striving;[56] the Calvinist "elects election," chooses the future, from the present, to determine the past (predestination).[57] The apparent irrationality of this process, especially the religious self-contradiction vis-à-vis predestination, is indeed a stumbling block for critics.

Yet, Dupuy argues, making much use of psychological studies on "irrational" rewards, Weber's archetypal Calvinist is making a *rational* choice, is being "rationally irrational."**[58]**

Making the future already true in the present, the Calvinist makes predestination "counterfactually" true in the past—making it true by acting as if it were true—despite the fact that "works" should not be able to influence such outcomes either way. Dupuy proposes that this "counterfactual" paradox in relation to past, present, and future underlies the market system itself. Activity in the market rests on faith in a future yet to come into being, which in turn requires that faith to be brought into being.[59] Without this secularized faith, a projection from the past of a present guarantee of future reward, the economy would collapse in an instant.

Venkatesh Rao

As the "work ethic"—the cultural meme—crawls into its terminal stages, Venkatesh Rao could be considered its prophet of doom. Rao's blogged series "The Gervais Principle" (2009-2013) is a brilliant though excruciatingly cynical and self-consciously satirical anatomy of company hierarchies.[60] This extended commentary on Ricki Gervais' television series *The Office* has only one direct reference to Weber, and that an ironic one, yet Rao's religious intuition makes him a consummate Weberian, and his insider analysis is a kind of religious anthropology of the postmodern workplace.

In a sense, Rao reintroduces the master-slave dialectic and synthesizes it with a Weberian outlook, turning Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis inside out. Despite the comic and irreverent nature his delivery, I believe that Rao should be taken seriously as a social thinker and self-described tragic realist.[61] The levels of his corporate pyramid have a direct bearing both on Weber's "Protestant ethic" and the derivative cultural mythos about the "work ethic."

Rao's breakdown of the company hierarchy is adopted directly from a cartoon by Hugh MacLeod [62]

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> Hugh MacLeod's cartoon is a pitch-perfect symbol of an unorthodox school of management based on the axiom that organizations don't suffer pathologies; they are intrinsically pathological constructs. Idealized organizations are not perfect. They are perfectly pathological. So while most management literature is about striving relentlessly towards an ideal by executing organization theories completely, this school . . . would recommend that you do the bare minimum organizing to prevent chaos, and then stop. Let a natural, if declawed, individualist Darwinism operate beyond that point. The result is the MacLeod hierarchy. It may be horrible, but like democracy, it is the best you can do.[63]

The last, devastating indictment of things as they are, combined with blithe acceptance of the same, is characteristic of Rao. It should be emphasized that Rao is speaking as a corporate insider, not as a denouncer of capitalism, and his series has been applauded by capitalist entrepreneurs.[64]

There is, of course, *no good place to be* on MacLeod's pyramid, though the bottom seems to be the least horrible. In Rao's analysis, its layers can be seen to correspond to Weber's thesis and the commentators we have been considering.[65] The "loser" laity at the bottom are the equivalent of Weber's and Dupuy's "fatalists"—the rational non-strivers. They know the score but go through the motions. "Losers" in Rao analysis "are not social losers (as in the opposite of 'cool'), but people who have struck bad bargains economically—giving up capitalist striving for steady paychecks." They "mortgage their lives away, and hope to die before their money runs out."[66]

It bears emphasis that being a "loser"—making enough to get by, not obsessing about work, though not being idle—would have been the normal way of understanding work in traditional Judeo-Christian civilization before Weber's dynamic took hold. The so-called "losers" would have simply been ordinary, properly oriented, reasonably well-adjusted human beings, not demoralized and/or cynical wage slaves.

"Losers" have characteristically been the cultural antiheroes at the center of the narrative in movies and television. Gervais' great innovation, for Rao, is that he moved the "clueless" to the narrative center.[67]

"Clueless" middle management in Rao's analysis are the only individuals who still hold to a "work ethic." More specifically, they are the only true believers in the company, while those on the other levels of the pyramid are functionally atheist. The "clueless" serve as a priestly class overseeing empty rituals. They could be considered the equivalent of pre-Calvinist reformers in Weber's thesis, viewing the workplace as a "calling"—which for the "clueless" has become a secularized religion of its own. "Clueless" are promoted to middle management not on *the merits* of their overachievement but because their overachievement, which is pointless, demonstrates a cluelessness which serves specific ends for the sociopaths.[68]

"Cluelessness," as embodied for instance in Steve Carell's character Michael, gives Gervais' series its signature cringeworthiness, but from the contorted and brittle perspective of middle management. This highlights a mistake that artistic or literary-minded critics make when they comment on the series.[69] For Rao, the cringeworthiness is not really the aesthetic aim but a secondary effect of cluelessness, which is the essential point.[70] While the "clueless" are true believers in the system, they are also the most vulnerable and helpless within it; they are tragicomic Kafkaesque figures. Further, the narrative frame of middle management, connecting, above and below, to the other levels of the company

hierarchy, provides a revelatory perspective on the sociopathic nature of the whole organization and its interactions.

The deeper Rao gets into his analysis, the more explicitly religious he becomes. The "sociopath" gods at the top of the pyramid cap Rao's analysis. "The Sociopath (capitalized) layer comprises *the Darwinian/Protestant Ethic will-to-power types* who drive an organization to function despite itself" (emphasis mine).[71] They

> enter and exit organizations at will, at any stage, and do whatever it takes to come out on top. They contribute creativity in early stages of a[n] organization's life, neurotic leadership in the middle stages, and cold-bloodedness in the later stages, where they drive decisions like mergers, acquisitions and layoffs that others are too scared or too compassionate to drive.[72]

Note that, in Rao's sole reference to Weber, the "Protestant Ethic" type—the Calvinist striver—has devolved to the Darwinist, individualistic "will to power" type. Sociopaths, the elect, see past the delusions that operate at the lower levels of the company hierarchy. Yet, because they do see through it all, they sink into their own nihilistic existential dilemmas.

> . . . what Sociopaths ultimately do with their lives . . . [is] generate amoral power from increasing inner emptiness, transforming themselves into forces of nature . . . .
>
> As a side-effect, they also manufacture transient meanings to fuel the theaters of religiosity (including various secular religions) that lend meaning to lives of Losers and the Clueless . . . .
>
> When Sociopath stories end, the Loser and Clueless stories that continue become bereft of meaning; sound and fury signifying nothing. When Sociopaths turn their attentions *en masse* to new frontiers, they leave behind complete cargo cults that continue to function for a while.[73]

In Rao's surreally cynical vision, the "capitalist spirit," having sprung from religion, now generates its own religious ecology, in the service of its (sociopath) gods. Much of Rao's analysis could be restated—albeit in a warped and inside-out way—in terms of "recognition"–the master-slave dialectic that informed so much of Fukuyama's *End of History*.[74]

Mechanization, AI, UBI, and the Anthropology of Work

Michael Novak's critique of Weber fell short because he misunderstood the nature of the "capitalist spirit" in a way Weber did not. The accelerated automatization of human tasks, the increasingly ubiquitous presence of artificial intelligence (AI), and now the proposal for a Universal Basic Income (UBI), in which people would get a salary for doing nothing, press

this point home. UBI may be denounced by some opponents as socialist,[75] but in fact it is swiftly gaining acceptance among free market advocates,[76] and could be reasonably be considered the triumph of the "capitalist spirit." The insane energy generated from the "Protestant ethic"—productivity and profit as ends in themselves, pursued with religious zeal—generate an efficiency and surplus that make such developments rather inevitable. The issue in this context is not whether UBI would be a good or bad thing—it may turn out to be either, or both—but the fact that it is utterly consistent with Weber's thesis on "the spirit of capitalism." This is the insight of the animated movie *WALL-E*, which depicts universal sedentary leisure not as a socialist paradise but as a smoothly operating consumerist utopia/dystopia, populated by congenial, sedentary, perpetually distracted humans and their solicitous robot caretakers.[77]

Automatization, AI, and UBI are certainly game changers concerning the "work ethic"—not Weber's thesis, but the cultural meme derived from it. "Delayed gratification" is based on expectation of future reward which, at least in principle and even from a very practical point of view, may soon be available anytime, for free. More plainly, a concerned parent or social commentator cannot realistically appeal to the "work ethic" in the face of these sweeping developments—*unless* he or she intuitively means something other about work than the "work ethic" ever spelled out, e.g., the intrinsic value of work in character building, creativity, socialization, mental or physical health, or the like.[78]

Yet this would be not a mythical "work ethic" but an *anthropology of work*, such as is articulated in the Catholic social encyclicals, particularly John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens*. There is a good case to be made for abandoning the idea of a "work ethic" as a civic virtue, not just because it has become meaningless from a pragmatic point of view, but because it was always meaningless from an intellectual point of view: Weber, as pointed out earlier, was describing a *religious neurosis*, not a civic virtue.

This is not at all to say that work does not have ethical dimensions, but rather that these dimensions need to be articulated in an anthropologically coherent way. How does work give meaning to, or get meaning from, what GA calls "the human"? Weber's thesis leads to but did make any pretense of answering this question. The burden of even formulating it as such seems to have fallen largely on Catholic social teaching. Yet the social encyclicals, especially since John Paul II, explicitly appeal to universality and include a call for others to take up such questions in good faith.

Sadly, with the Catholic Church currently engulfed yet again in abuse scandals and internal disarray, it has lost much credibility as a social voice and will need to, at best, focus inward to clean its own house. By the same token, however, there is so much untapped good in the social encyclicals that it becomes, perhaps, a special responsibility for sympathetic thinkers of other religious traditions, or of a secular perspective, to carry it forward. Weber and our "Weberians" have established that Christians specifically, for better and worse, birthed the

“capitalist spirit”; Christian denominations have the onus of grappling with its anthropological consequences.

It should go without saying in this context that GA is uniquely positioned to articulate an anthropology of work—so essential in defining the human and the human scene. Given GA’s perspective on center and periphery, the communal dimensions of work come into especially sharp focus, going beyond even the great social encyclicals in this respect. In the GA literature, Andrew Bartlett’s *Mad Scientist, Impossible Human* has laid foundations for such a perspective on work, though his is ironically a literary analysis of non-human creations in canonical science fiction.[79] As I put it in a previous essay,

> In addressing the objectification of the human vis-à-vis science and technology, Bartlett takes pains to articulate an alternate vision of the human as communally situated, both humanized and humanizing through participation in labor, consumption, and exchange, as well as social, romantic, family, and community life: the agony and horror of Mary Shelley’s monster is that he cannot share in any of this.[80]

René Girard’s mimetic theory, however profound and insightful, has a limited capacity for this anthropological task, because, as I also observed previously, “mimetic theory . . . cannot comprehend social cohesion as anything other than an effluence of sacrificial violence.”[81]

The anthropology of work is another reason for GA to adopt a more Weberian view. In *The End of History*, Fukuyama treated increasingly questionable assumptions about work as explicable via the “master-slave dialectic” (e.g., the overworked Japanese salaryman of the 1980s who got a sense of “recognition”).[82] Rao—to the extent that we should take his satiric vision seriously—has underscored the illusory nature of such “recognition.” It is in fact a concept which Fukuyama himself abandoned when he turned to a Weberian perspective in *Trust*. Fukuyama needed to take religion and culture into account, recognizing, at least intuitively, that work must be tethered to a sacred center, through which it derives most of its human value.

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Notes

[1] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2001), 101.

[2] See part 8 of Eric Gans' "A Brief Introduction to Generative Anthropology," http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/gaintro/

[3] Gans takes issue with elements of Fukuyama's thesis, including the phrase "end of history" itself, but it often serves as a kind of descriptive shorthand for Gans when referring to liberal democracy and the market system in general. For a representative sample, see Eric Gans, "Ending History," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 174, July 7, 1999, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw174.htm; "*La mondialisation*," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 227, February 3, 2001, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw227.htm; "Obama and Fukuyama," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 503, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw503.htm; "The Realm of Freedom," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 498, October 10, 2015, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw498.htm; "Three Post Election Thoughts," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 527, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw527.htm

[4] Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995).

[5] Peter Goldman has explored the connection between Weber and GA. See especially the last portion of Goldman's "John Milton on Ecclesiastical Free Markets and Weber's Protestant Ethic," *Anthropoetics*, 22, no. 2 (Spring 2017), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2202/2202goldman

[6] See Anthony Gidden's introduction to Max Weber's *Ethic*, xiii-xvi.

[7] Weber, 39-50.

[8] Ibid., 51-101.

[9] Ibid., 60-65.

[10] Ibid, 70.

[11] Ibid, 115-116.

[12] As will also be noted further on, this point in Weber's thesis, the "spirit of capitalism" defined as cultural acceptance of capitalism, was probably best worked out by Amintore Fanfani in *Catholicism, Capitalism and Protestantism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), 122-153.

[13] Weber, 119.

[14] Ibid., 123.

[15] Weber, 42-43.

[16] R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), 118.

[17] See Eric Gans, "The Originary Hypothesis (Stanford Version)," paragraphs 6-11, *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 402, November 20, 2010, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw402/

[18] Ibid., paragraphs 2-4. Gans faced that critique squarely and as a result extended the interpretive reach of GA, mainly by refuting the critique while at the same time refusing to dismiss the "social contract"—a great originary intuition of the Enlightenment. One fruit of Gans' response was his sweeping study *The Scenic Imagination* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008).

[19] David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 174.

[20] Giddens, xviii-xxiii.

[21] Tawney (note 16).

[22] Tawney, xii-xv.

[23] Ibid., 102.

[24] Ibid., 104-105.

[25] Fanfani (note 12).

[26] Ibid, note 12.

[27] Ibid., 28-29.

[28] See for instance, ibid., 158-159.

[29] "Amintore Fanfani," Obituary, *The Guardian*, November 22, 1999, https://www.theguardian.com/news/1999/nov/22/guardianobituaries1

[30] Republished in Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History*, ed. John J. Mulloy

(Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2002), 211-223.

[31] Ibid., 211.

[32] Ibid., 218.

[33] Ibid., 218.

[34] See my "Subculture, Conformity, and Sacrifice: *Kamikaze Girls* through a Mimetic Lens," *Apocalypse Deferred: Girard and Japan*, ed. Jeremiah L. Alberg (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 149-168.

[35] See Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 216-217. See also chapters 10 and 11, "The Romantic Esthetic" and "The Modernist Esthetic" (164-206), which usefully parallel and complement Dawson's observations.

[36] Data on comparative economic development strikingly corroborates Weber's thesis over more than four centuries. Reformation countries, particularly Calvinist ones, consistently out-performed Counter-Reformation countries economically, producing 80% of the wealth from the time of the reformation even up to 1980. The data is summarized by historian Pierre Chaunu and quoted by Jean-Pierre Dupuy in *Economy and the Future: A Crisis of Faith*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 91-92.

[37] Orson Welles, chapter 14, *The Third Man*, directed by Carol Reed, screenplay by Graham Greene (London: London Film Productions, 1949). It can be noted that Harry's "entrepreneurial spirit" belies this psychopathic grandiosity—associating his criminal atrocities with Renaissance genius. Harry is no Machiavelli, but a bourgeois aberration.

[38] *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

[39] *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

[40] *Centesimus Annus* (Vatican: The Holy See, 1991), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html

[41] See for instance the commentary on *Centesimus Annus* by Thomas Storck, Appendix II, "What Does Centesimus Annus Really Teach?", *An Economics of Justice and Charity: Catholic Social Teaching, Its Development and Contemporary Relevance* (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2017), 130-142.

[42] Novak, preface, xv.

[43] *Laborem Exercens* (Vatican: The Holy See, 1981), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html

[44] This is typically stated in the paradoxical form, "God creates man, man creates God." For a fuller explication see part 2 of Eric Gans' plenary address for the 2018 GA conference in Warsaw, "In the beginning was the word: GA as a religious anthropology—Part 2," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 591 (July 21, 2018), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw591/. Parts 1 and 2 were republished together in the conference volume, *Generative Anthropology and Transdisciplinary Inquiry: Religion, Science, Language, Culture*, ed. Magdalena Złocka-Dąbrowska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie, 2018), 21-34.

[45] See Storck, 145-146.

[46] *Trust* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995).

[47] *End of History*, 143-152.

[48] A notable example is Girard's discussion of Romulus and Remus and founding myth in *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 88-94.

[49] See note 3.

[50] See for instance Gans' "Liberal Democracy Today," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 609, February 16, 2019, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw609/ For my own summary and commentary on Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis, including a review of Gans' frequent yet qualified and nuanced endorsement of it, see "Scenes of Distress: Reflections on Francis Fukuyama's 'End of History,'" *Anthropoetics*, 22, no. 2 (Spring, 2017), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2202/2202taylor/

[51] For but one example see Eric Gans, "The Crisis of Christianity," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 491, July 18, 2015, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw491/

[52] Dupuy, note 36.

[53] See for instance Dupuy's "Panic and the Paradoxes of the Social Order," *Passions in Economy, Politics, and the Media: In Discussion with Christian Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Palaver and Petra Steinmair-Posel (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2005), 215-234; Paul Dumouchel's, *The Ambivalence of Scarcity and Other Essays* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 3-138; André Orléan's "Money and Mimetic Speculation," *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard*, ed. Paul Dumouchel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press,

1988), 101-112; Orléan's *The Empire of Value: A New Foundation for Economics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014).

[54] *Economy and the Future*, 91.

[55] Ibid., 99.

[56] Ibid., 92-93.

[57] Ibid., 108-111.

[58] Ibid., 106-109.

[59] Ibid, 110-125.

[60] The Gervais Principle, Part I-VI, *ribbonfarm* (October 7, 2009-May 16, 2013), https://www.ribbonfarm.com/the-gervais-principle/

[61] See Rao's short lecture sponsored by the *Economist*, "The Gervais Principle," online video segment, *YouTube* (May 5, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJYa68AnECY

[62] Hugh MacLeod, "company hierarchy," *gapingvoid Culture Design Group* (June 27, 2004), https://www.gapingvoid.com/blog/2004/06/27/company-hierarchy/

[63] Rao, Part I, par. 4.

[64] Note 61.

[65] Rao's psychosocial analyses within and between the groups cannot be treated here but constitute perhaps the most brilliant element of his series. This would be a worthy subject of GA explication in itself; center, periphery, and generative paradox suffuse Rao's analyses.

[66] Rao, Part I, par. 8.

[67] Ibid., par. 30.

[68] Ibid., par. 31.

[69] Ibid., par. 3. "Keep in mind that this is an interpretation of The Office as management science; the truth in the art. Literary/artistic critics don't really seem to get it."

[70] Rao, Part IV, par. 95-103 ("Empathy, or Why You Losers Cringe at Michael's Actions"). The aesthetics of "cringeworthiness," including in *The Office*, have been subjects of GA analysis. See Kyle Karthauser, "Popular Culture After Postmodernism: *Borat*, *Family Guy*,

The Office, and the Awkwardness of Being Earnest," *Anthropoetics*, 15, no. 2 (Spring 2010) http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1502/1502karthauser/. See also the paper by Marina Ludwigs for the 2018 GA conference, "Cringing and Other Desacralizing Affects in Post-Millennial Aesthetics," appearing in *Anthropoetics*, 24, no. 1 (Fall 2018) http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2401/2401ludwigs/ Ludwigs' essay was also published in print in the conference volume, ed. Złocka-Dąbrowska: "Faithless: Desacralization as an Aesthetic Strategy in Some Recent films," 45-61. But again, from Rao's perspective (and if he is right, from Gervais'), cringeworthiness in *The Office* is a secondary effect of "cluelessness" and its primary function is not the aesthetic affront to the audience.

[71] Rao, Part I, par. 5.

[72] Ibid., par. 9.

[73] Rao, Part VI, par. 12-14.

[74] Note 47. In this sense, Rao appropriates aspects of Fukuyama's thesis that Gans has rejected.

[75] See for instance Sheldon Richman, "Universal Basic Income Proposal Still Fails to Pass Libertarian Scrutiny," *Reason* (May 13, 2018), https://reason.com/archives/2018/05/13/universal-basic-income-still-fails

[76] UBI is central to the platform of presidential candidate Andrew Yang. See the interview segment with Joe Rogan, "Presidential Candidate Andrew Yang's Case for UBI," *Youtube* (February 12, 2019) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAtyv8NpbFQ UBI has also been positively considered by Eric Weinstein as a response to automatization and economic dislocation. See his short lecture "Capitalism 2.0 Will Include a Heavy Dose of Socialism," sponsored by Big Think, *YouTube* (June 4, 2017) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzTmBnaiMdE

[77] *WALL-E*, directed by Andrew Stanton (Los Angeles: Disney Pixar, 2008).

[78] A review article for a recent book, *Men Without Work: America's Invisible Crisis,* by Nicholas Eberstadt (West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania: Templeton Press, 2016), describes the human toll of worklessness in recent years, especially among millions of men. See Michael Cook, "America's Ghost Legions of Idle Men," *Intellectual Takeout* (October 18, 2018), https://www.intellectualtakeout.org/blog/americas-ghost-legions-idle-men?fbclid=IwAR2F8VlM43oVXdT7csGgQJcaOqUjUE6e_9QI6w9ExcNZ_gip5bvnsfGuxdE

[79] *Mad Scientist, Impossible Human: An Essay in Generative Anthropology* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group: 2014).

[80] See again “Scenes of Distress: Reflections on Francis Fukuyama’s ‘End of History,’” par. 44.

[81] Ibid., par. 43.

[82] Note 47.

[83] “Gods of the Marketplace: The Work Ethic from Max Weber to Venkatesh Rao.” Złocka-Dąbrowska, 77-100.