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INSTRUCTOR’S FOREWORD
The pursuit of wealth is often seen as a godless endeavor characterized by greed and ruthless ambition. With principles like individualism, practicality, and accumulation, the central values of our contemporary capitalistic society seem to be antagonistic with a higher morality. But not everyone believed that economy and faith were always discordant: prominent philosophers have argued that religious thinking is not only compatible with capitalism, but may even be responsible for it. In the Second Treatise of Government, Locke suggests that private property originates from labor, a moral duty that is supported by a theological basis. Similarly, in The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism, Weber retrospectively attributes modern capitalist culture to Calvinist ideals that stressed the fulfillment of a divine calling through disciplined work. Both texts integrate morality and economy through the idea that individual labor is a fulfillment of God’s expectations, authorizing the subsequent accumulation of property as a reflection of omnipotent will. While Locke acknowledges that the indefinite potential for wealth introduced an untraditional relationship between man and money, Weber argues that the inequality extends further: once only subordinate to God, humanity was now enslaved by the sanctified mindset of property accumulation. By establishing that a man-made economic system with capitalistic values originated from divine purpose, Locke substantiates Weber’s explanation for why modernity operates under an iron cage of acquisitiveness.

Imagining that mankind initially occupied a conceptual time period governed solely by God’s laws, Locke establishes a pre-societal state of nature characterized by equality and independence. In this
traditional state, mankind’s right to live freely and fairly was derived from a shared creator. Because all of humanity was “the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise maker,” man shared in “one community of nature” where “common equity is that measure God has set to the actions of man.” ¹ This equality meant that no person was inherently inferior to any other mortal being, for people answered only to God and his natural laws. These regulations stated that man was “bound to preserve himself” as well meant to recognize the “preservation of mankind” by not harming the “life, health, liberty, or possessions” of another.² Because each person was accountable for himself, an individualistic self-sufficiency was born from Locke’s definition of equality.

From this independent spirit, labor became a moral duty which fulfilled God’s intentions for the earth. Locke argues that God bequeathed “the world to men in common,” giving them “reason to make use of it to the best advantage of life and convenience.”³ Providence equipped humanity with the intellect and motive to work for their own survival and comfort. Ignoring these gifts from God would be irreverent and defy the decree for self-preservation. In order to utilize God-given reason and resources, man was “commanded to labor,” for the world was given to “the use of the industrious and rational, and labor was his title to it.”⁴ Not only is work the source of private property, but it also benefits the community: “He who appropriates land to himself by labor does not lessen, but increase the common stock of mankind: for the provisions serving to the support of human life, produced by one acre of cultivated land, are ten times more than those which are yielded by an acre of land lying waste in common.”⁵ By suggesting that God favors the diligent and productive, Locke assigns labor a chosen status. Because the Lord appreciates work, then it follows that private property must also be ordained. If labor and profit are moral duties, then what stopped people from cultivating more?

The equitable state of nature initially imposed organic restrictions on how much property one could remove from the commons. Described as limitations of sufficiency and spoilage, boundaries existed to keep people from misusing God’s gifts. The products of excessive cultivation must decay, which wastes God’s gifts; an avari-

² Ibid.
³ Ibid, 18.
⁴ Ibid, 21.
⁵ Ibid, 23.
cious person could also “invade his neighbor’s share,” contradicting the Lord’s command to preserve mankind. By restricting accretion to a practical and useful amount, natural law made certain that no person could abuse the commons and waste resources. To circumvent these expected constraints, mankind exploited a loophole within the otherwise equitable system. Humans consented to assign arbitrary value to money, whose inherent worthlessness and permanence made the sufficiency and spoilage clauses inapplicable. Although the laws of nature were still intact, money allowed humans to excuse themselves from these limitations.

A marker of emerging capitalistic ideals, this new potential for unrestrained profit removed humanity from the equitable state of nature. Locke writes that “As different degrees of industry were apt to give men possessions in different proportions, so this invention of money gave them the opportunity to continue and enlarge them.” This inequality introduced more tension and argument than people could deal with on their own. To protect their newly acquired property from contention, people were forced to make a concession: man agreed to subdue himself to majority rule. Mankind would “divest himself of his natural liberty, and put on the bonds of civil society” for “secure enjoyment of their properties.” Although this exchange was originally consensual, Locke believes that “the power that individuals gave to society can never revert to the individuals again.” When man-made government replaced God’s natural law as the moderator of inequality and the preserver of private property, humans permanently altered their traditional relationship with property. As people left the theological state of nature behind, they no longer needed to reconcile morality with economy: the latter could stand alone.

Published over two centuries later, Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* shares Locke’s theoretical trajectory from morality to economy. He postulates that modern values of independence and unrestricted property accrual originated from the Protestant conception of a personal duty to fulfill a divine calling. While Locke approaches the emergence of private property rights from a neutrally deistic standpoint, Weber blames this Calvinist theology for creating a suffocating atmosphere that was conducive to a capitalistic economic system. Contrasting modernity with a traditional state in which people only worked as much as necessary, he cynically defines

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7 Ibid, 29.
8 Ibid, 52.
9 Ibid, 123.
capitalism as an unnatural arrangement characterized by man’s servitude to the quest for boundless profit. This text and the *Two Treatises* share a common path: both credit the sanctity of individual labor with the rise of unnatural capitalistic values. However, Weber’s nuanced evaluation of the culminating state of affairs is marked by far more negativity.

Where Locke derives man’s independence from God, Weber believes that self-sufficiency results from the lonesome pressure of Calvinist doctrine. Unique to this branch of Protestantism, predestination stipulated that God had already decided who would be saved or damned. This trapped followers in a constant state of anxiety over their eternal salvation. Devoid of the priests, sacraments, and repentant rituals of the Catholic tradition, Calvinism fostered “inner loneliness of the single individual” as he was “forced to follow his path alone to meet a destiny which had been decreed for him from eternity.”\(^{10}\) This isolating force indirectly imbued followers with a self-reliant ethic, as Calvinists strove to convince themselves of their chosen status. In order to “disperse inner doubts and give the certainty of grace,” the sanctity of labor became an outlet to alleviate their anxiety.\(^ {11}\) Calvinists looked toward worldly productivity as the most suitable means for expressing inner piety and attaining the self-confidence that ensured one’s redemption.

Thus, the greatest parallel between Locke and Weber emerged: the moral sanctity of labor as a fulfillment of divine intentions. Branding work as a religious duty, Calvinists believed that “For everyone without exception, God’s Providence has prepared a calling, which he should profess and in which he should labor.”\(^ {12}\) This calling ascribed a sacred significance to daily activities, making continuous and systematic tasks essential to man’s perpetual search for God’s grace. Every person bore an individual responsibility to pursue this mission, for it was “the only way of living acceptably to God.”\(^ {13}\) Because “labor in a calling appears to him as the outwardly expression of brotherly love,” work became the central mode of following God’s plan and confirming that one was indeed chosen.\(^ {14}\) People would traditionally only earn as much was necessary for survival and comfort, but work was now as eternal as God. There was no point at which an individual could stop pursuing his calling, quit following the Lord’s

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11 Ibid, 67.

12 Ibid, 106.

13 Ibid, 40.

14 Ibid, 41.
will, or attain pure confidence in his salvation. Now even sufficient capital did “not exempt anyone from the unconditional command.”

Entrenched in Calvinist mentality, the divine mandate to labor endlessly meant that one’s earning potential was also unlimited.

Because Calvinists viewed hard work as an expression of godly devotion, it followed that resulting prosperity was a reflection of God’s grace. A surplus of money was a reflection of divine goodwill, and even the consequences of an industrial society became permissible. Echoing Locke’s statement of inevitable inequality, Weber suggests that Calvinist belief accounted for the “unequal distribution of the goods of this world [as] a special dispensation of Divine Providence.” Because economic success and its pitfalls were equally justified, the acquisitive could pursue prosperity with the confidence of sacred support. As secular temptations of wealth eroded religious validations, the psychological hold of greed increased.

Though Locke accepted mankind’s sacrifice of liberty as a neutral trade, Weber’s ultimate analysis is marked by sorrow. He pities humanity, likening the mentality of modern times to entrapment in an iron cage. He laments that the overwhelming power of the economic system plays too great and irrevocable a role in our daily lives: “The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so.”

Devoid of its former theological basis, economic accumulation runs rampant due to the hold that consumptive work and profit have over daily existence. Worst of all, Weber contends that this “irresistible force” has the potential to “determine the lives of individuals” until “the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.” Humans bartered their morality for economy, and the West must keep the spirit of capitalism for eternity.

Perhaps if Locke were given an additional two hundred years to observe and reflect, he would agree with the doctrine of the iron cage. He and Weber traced the same arc of thought, from traditional property limitations to a state of unrestrained profit through the theological consecration of labor. Their agreement on this trajectory lends validity to this theory of how modernity reached its current state, even if Locke’s version is missing the final piece. Maybe morality and economy are discordant after all. Unable to return from our current state to the individual freedoms of yore, we have all the time in the world to look around and judge for ourselves -- when we are not working, that is.

15 Ibid, 106
16 Ibid, 120.
17 Ibid, 123.
18 Ibid.
Works Cited