The Protestant Work Ethic and COVID-19

—Abigail Towers

The changes brought about by COVID-19 left many people jobless, working from home, or working significantly fewer hours. Our main task in a day was no longer occupying the time that it previously had, nor did it look the same. This disruption brought to light questions that many people found themselves asking, such as: Why do we view work the way that we do? Why do we attach moral values to those who work "well," for example, working hard or often? Why must one work even if it is at the cost of one's health or safety? Further, what role does work play in our self-identity? These questions all point to a work ethic, one that has existed in the underpinnings of our society for generations and that shows no sign of leaving.

The overall goal of this project, which was funded by a Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) grant from the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research, was to understand *how* we in the West view work through an analysis of COVID-19's effect on work-life and the societal norms and attachments to work. Then, using the writings of philosophers such as Max Weber, Martin Heidegger, and Hannah Arendt, evaluating *why* we view work the way that we do in the West. After analyzing and connecting these sources, I culminated my findings in a formal project report and summarized those results here.

Abigail Towers

The Historical and Modern Work Ethic

I began my research by reading *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to explore the history of this work ethic in the West. Max Weber was a German sociologist who wrote *The Protestant Ethic* to explore the connection between Protestantism and the West's "spirit of capitalism." This spirit, he clarifies, is the modern work ethic, which he traces back to ascetic Protestantism in roughly sixteenth-century America.

Because religion was an integral part of society during that time, many ideals once held for religious reasons have been secularized and maintained out of tradition. Due to the doctrine of predestination, the early Protestant religions that he focuses on—Calvinism, Pietism, and Methodism—needed evidence to show that individuals would receive salvation, so they introduced the idea of a vocational calling. One who wanted to know they had God's favor would, as Protestants asserted, bring glory to God by working hard and succeeding in their calling. Through finding success, that individual could safely assume that they would receive salvation. As religion's influence subsided over time, the idea of a calling that one had a

duty towards remained, and moral attachments without religious meaning were solidified for those who committed themselves to their work. This, according to Weber, is the foundation of modern capitalism, and the same work ethic that we see today.

Next, to further my understanding of this modern work ethic, I read articles pertaining to work-life disruption and COVID-19. These articles covered the anxieties surrounding the pandemic, surveys of workers, reflections on self-identity, and more. I found that there was significant anxiety related to health dangers and loss of income, but also anxiety around the loss of self-value or authenticity due to the drastic change of one's normal role in society. There was also a duty to one's role that stemmed beyond financial responsibility, as noted in one article that interviewed hotel workers. Many insisted on there being an inherent obligation to their work, even though their health was at risk. I found the inherency of this obligation especially interesting because as Weber points out, this modern work ethic is taken as self-evident or inherent, yet the religious ties that gave it its original meaning have since faded, leaving the ethic hollow.

Heidegger and Arendt on the Work Ethic

I then moved into the more complex philosophy of the project: Heidegger and Arendt. I began by reading Heidegger's *Being and Time* and *The Question Concerning Technology*, both of which give perspective as to why the work ethic has been so embedded into our society. I then read Arendt's *Labor, Work, Action,* where she examines the hierarchy of these three groups and asks how one might live an active life.

Heidegger would say that we are "thrown" into a history that is not our own—that history being the work ethic—and this causes us to be inauthentic. The "They" (simplified, this would be akin to "society" as a collective, ex. "They say that…") tell us how to live and how to think. This idea connects to the "self-evidence" of the work ethic as well as the different societal expectations about how we ought to view work. Heidegger also says that we are task-oriented, in the sense that we move from task to task without looking at the bigger picture, and that life itself is viewed as a chain of tasks. Within this context the term "enframing" is relevant, which is his idea that we as humans can only see things from our perspective. Heidegger calls for us to try to step outside these ways of thinking in order to understand the overall goal or direction in which we are going. When considered in the context of the work ethic, doing so would allow one to evaluate the real purpose behind work, and whether it can be found lacking.

Concerning Arendt's ideas, she wrote that no matter which way you flip the system of labor, work, and action, work will always be valued for something outside of it (like for salvation in the Protestant ethic). Similar to Heidegger, she says that work lacks an overall goal, and is a cycle with no end. Arendt would insist that it is necessary for us to ask ourselves *why* we work, and that we purposefully engage with our work for a goal that we have set for ourselves, not for something outside of it.

While this is an extremely simplified overview of Heidegger's and Arendt's views and their application to modern day, these concepts help to provide more philosophical context to the work ethic beyond the historical analysis provided by Weber.

Response to the Work Ethic

To finish, I'd like to give some potential answers to a question brought up by my research: How should one respond to this work ethic? Largely it is an individual decision; one may be content to work and hold the ethic to be self-evident. For those who find themselves lacking

authenticity or self-value outside of work, one could invest more time in themselves and their identity. Although I did not have time to fully analyze his works, this would be in line with John Dewey's philosophy, that seeking an education beyond simply for a career can be a way of fulfillment. As far as addressing work itself, one could take into consideration Arendt's idea that we must choose our path and make it our own. This could mean taking a more creative approach or simply shifting one's mindset around work.

 I believe that it is important within the discipline of philosophy to connect ideas from primary philosophers to modern times to better understand ourselves as a society and as individuals. It keeps many philosophers' works relevant and promotes philosophical discussion, as well as turning our attention to important issues we face now, whether they be social, political, economic, or more. Especially during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it can tell us how to deal with the problems we are experiencing.

Personally, I had not considered the complex view of work that we hold until beginning this research, and I believe that it will have a lasting impact as I begin a career. I have only scratched the surface with this project, and I am excited about the research possibilities that stem from it. There are many ways to respond to the modern work ethic, but it is prudent—regardless of what one chooses—to evaluate where one finds their self-identity, and whether that is a sustainable mode of fulfillment even in times of crisis.

Author and Mentor Bios

Abigail Towers, from Hancock, New Hampshire, will graduate from UNH in May 2025 with a dual major in philosophy and history. Through the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP), she wanted to conduct a research project that would be of interest to people not just in her academic disciplines but to a wider audience as well. From this project Abigail expanded her knowledge of the philosophies of Weber, Heidegger, and Arendt, while learning how to apply their philosophies to the problems individuals faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. For Abigail, the most enjoyable part of the process was the many conversations she had with people of different ages, backgrounds, and work experience. Overall, conducting this research helped her develop important skills she uses on a daily basis in her undergraduate studies, and that she will carry forward in her career and future projects. Moving forward Abigail plans to continue to expand on her knowledge and research skills through other opportunities at UNH and beyond.

Matthew J Dowd is a senior lecturer in the philosophy department. He began working at the University of New Hampshire as an adjunct professor in 2006. He specializes in teaching existentialism, continental philosophy, philosophy of art, and social and political philosophy. He also conducts research involving phenomenology of spatiality, phenomenology of history,

Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Edmund Husserl. This was Dr. Dowd's first time mentoring an *Inquiry* author. He believes that there are often technical issues and ideas that need to be opened to a general audience, and that Abigail's research achieves this goal. The ideas she presents pertain to everyone, so the information being discussed can impact the entirety of *Inquiry*'s audience. Dr. Dowd found this research endeavor to be fun and instructive, and the overall mentoring experience worth doing again.