Max Weber is asking us to buy into a huge claim.

That the modern economic order is a fallout of the Protestant Reformation – never mind the Renaissance, or the rise of Scientific thought, or even the Industrial Revolution – but that a change in faith somehow revolutionized our economy is indeed quite an assertion, even for a great mind like Weber. But he has sold many thinkers on this claim, and for good reason. He proves his theory through a process of consideration and elimination of alternative explanations, then he proceeds to explain the logic of his own theory. As we will show, however, no theory is completely without flaws. While Weber makes a compelling and thorough case, he does so at the expense of other issues.

Weber argues that modern capitalism as it has developed in parts of Europe and particularly in the United States is unique and distinct from any previous incarnation of capitalism. Our capitalism is one that is rational, systematized, and the direct result of a particular frame of mind, and ideology or ethos of sorts, that he calls the spirit of capitalism. This spirit is best exemplified in Benjamin Franklin’s bit of advice to *Those That Would Be Rich*, with such all-American maxims like, “Time is money.” It is an ethic that requires the individual to increase his capital, which is “an end in itself.” Our vocation is our “calling,” and to earn, accumulate and save wealth is our very duty. This spirit is not simply greed, or an instinctive and unscrupulous quest for wealth. In fact, Weber points out that working solely for the purpose of accumulating money is quite
irrational to our human eschatological interests. But still we seek this wealth in a highly ordered and rational manner, and thus labor becomes an end in itself as well.

That the Protestant Reformation, with its fundamental asceticism, could result in a spirit of money-hoarding worker bees is difficult to swallow. Weber even refers to the systematized pursuit of profit illustrated in Franklin’s advice as a “philosophy of avarice.” Such was the traditionalistic view that was so great an obstacle to this spirit. Traditionalism held the spirit of capitalistic acquisition as turpitude. Surely the pious leaders of the Reformation would today be appalled with our preoccupation with such worldly pleasures as money as well!

And it is precisely this change – this drastic leap from turpitude to sanctity that the spirit of capitalism undergoes – that Weber tries to explain. His theory, that the Protestant ethic paves the way for this spirit to prevail, is of course not the only explanation. He proposes several others, for example, perhaps bourgeois capitalism was the result of science. But probably not, he admits, for how can we then account for the presence of science in India, yet the absence of our modern form of capitalism? Or, he goes on, perhaps the cause was the biological heredity of Western people, which he then dismisses as being vague. Weber proposes many alternative explanations to many of his points, like perhaps the reason more Protestants than Catholics are businessmen lies in educational discrepancies, or perhaps the reason is the Protestant son’s rebellion from his ascetic upbringing, and so on until he has exhausted the other possibilities and is left with one remaining option – that an intrinsic nature of Protestantism caused our modern form of capitalism. This is the strength of his theory. It asserts its truth by dismissing other potential truths. And, as we shall see, it is also an internally logical argument.
Weber lays out the particular aspects of Protestant theology as evolved from earlier Christian forms and shows how they have exalted capitalism to the highest, most pious economic order, specifically in the Occident. He situates his claims in the context of Protestantism’s development under Martin Luther and John Calvin, whose teachings generally shifted the focus of religious devotion from supernatural piety to careful attention to this-worldly concerns. Springing from a theology of predestination, where, concerned with the security if one’s eternal soul, the anxious Protestant spends his life on earth looking and working for signals of his chosenness by God. As a central indication of one’s chosenness, wealth here loses any stigma formerly attributed to it by other-worldly asceticism, and Protestants take up highly organized, routinized, and disciplined lives of work, which Weber calls worldly asceticism. Weber also relies on the centrality of calling—where men must carry out their worldly affairs to please God—to keep men focused on the essential nature of hard work and accumulation of capital.

One assessment of his theory is that it is not a simple causal argument. He describes an “affinity” between the Protestant ethic, the spirit of capitalism, and the ascendance of modern capitalism. However, he does not claim a one-directional causal chain, nor does he dismiss the interaction of various other socio-historical factors. It remained unclear to what extent he wishes to dismiss the structural explanations for the rise of modern capitalism.

Another assessment is that his theory is perhaps too embedded in a causal chain. Rather than seeing an “affinity” between religion and conduct (and therefore between religion and economic order), there is a definite causation. Weber’s discussion of
Protestantism’s capitalistic bent is thorough and convincing, but it sets up a one-sided dialogue, limiting the causal connection between the two. Weber doesn’t explicitly acknowledge the possible influences that factors such as history, politics, economics, and symbols may have had on Protestantism as readily as he asserts Protestantism’s influence on them. In other words religion and specific theologies may be as much a product of external cultural factors as they may help produce other cultural phenomena such as the economic order. In the least there exists a dialogue between theology and the rest of culture, as in the Jewish doctrine of Zionism, which, put forth in the Old Testament, gained momentum during the 20th century Jewish holocaust and plays out today in the religio-geo-political struggle between Palestine and Israel. Weber’s argument is less plausible because he shows Protestantism in a vacuum establishing the terms of the economic system, rather than as a response to or at least in dialogue with other aspects of culture.

In Weber’s final section he briefly mentions how members of an inevitable proletariat may be dealt with and understood alongside the call to accumulate as proof of chosenness. Of the unfortunates subjected to a life of work so that others may accumulate, he says: “the unequal distribution of goods in this world was special dispensation of Divine Providence, which in these differences, as in particular grace, pursued secret ends unknown to men” (177). It is unclear why the middle-class, anointed of God to accumulate wealth in a manifestation of rational, disciplined existence, would fail to raise a rational question about the workers subjected to enable their wealth, and their according inability to accumulate, especially given a.) new and old testament teachings on the piety of the poor and b.) when this disparity evolved into the current
theories of the productivity of low wages that Weber sites. Though Weber says that the labor of the modern worker was treated as much as a calling as was the business man’s attitude toward faithful accumulation of capital (179), he gives no attention whatever to the class tension that would rationally arise from this disparate calling nor, in theological terms, how a righteous (and rational) God could give such airplay to the righteousness of the poor in both Old and New Testaments of the biblical text and leave them all but subjected in the economic system.

Weber’s theories are mostly externally adequate; they flow from his observations of Protestant life, extensive understanding of Christian theologies, and ultimately the cultural spaces they inhabit. With the exception of his failure to note religion as a product of culture, the theory is externally adequate. And internally, the theory holds together as long as discussion is limited to specifically middle-class acting out of the Protestant ethic. Structurally, his logic produces a series of causal links, whether we view them as one-directional or dialogical. As a theoretical contribution, the work is irreplaceable, in its scope, depth, and richness. Weber gives us a model for how to think further, even if in so doing, we are prompted to critique his own work.

Works Cited