In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber does not set out to tell us about the general relationship between religious and economic organizations. Instead, he tells us about the “elective affinity” between the Protestant ethic and the spirit, or ethic, of capitalism (the systematic drive towards accumulating and perpetuating individual wealth, not for personal pleasure, but for reinvestment). Unlike Marx, Weber does not intend to pursue a path of determinism; Weber is not a “totalizer.” His project is to identify forces which converge to produce a particular outcome at a particular place and time. In this work, Weber identifies several forces derived from Calvinism which are factors in the rise of the phenomenon of modern, rational, “long-term” capitalists.

One of the central variables Weber identifies in his analysis of the modern ethos of capitalism is the dogma of predetermination. According to these teachings, one’s state of grace is decided from birth, and one is either elected or damned by God. Lacking any worldly means to determine who is among the saved and who is among the damned, Weber writes that only the chosen people, by default, have the ability to dedicate their “entire life to increasing God’s glory through actual good works” (68). This belief created a link between religious valuation and moral action (Weber, 69). Followers of these teachings could not isolate their good deeds to certain contexts; they had to reorganize their lives to systematically and methodically glorify God through their work in this life. According to Weber, Calvinism and entrepreneurialism both recognized the importance and centrality of the methodical life.
Another important variable identified by Weber was the requirement that followers practice asceticism within their everyday lives, as distinguished from the Catholic pursuit of the isolated, monastic life. Using the Bible as their guidebook, followers strictly condemned the “deification of human wants and desires” (Weber, 95). This, in turn, fostered a strict work ethic which required self-denial and limited the pursuit of pleasure. Weber found this value in the ethic of modern capitalism as well.

Besides demanding followers to follow an ascetic lifestyle, Protestants were encouraged by their religious convictions to pursue ascetic ideals by “testifying to one’s belief in a this-worldly vocational calling” (Weber, 74). This vocational calling attached a “religious significance to daily work” (Weber, 40). Thus, although nobody knew with certainty whether or not they were elect or damned, the harder they worked at their vocational calling, the more they glorified God. In addition, hard work would produce useful products for the “community” (Weber, 109). The Calvinistic idea of the calling was unique among the Protestant faiths and, in Weber’s view, revolutionized the way Calvinists labored.

Further, the Protestant work ethic, dogma relating to the glorification of God, and predestination doctrine all fed into, and perpetuated, each other: If you wanted to be saved, you worked hard and accumulated as much wealth as possible. And, if you produced wealth, it was evidence that God wanted you to be saved, since he would not allow anyone who would not be saved to glorify him by producing wealth. Thus Protestant Asceticism, Weber explains, “viewed the acquisition of wealth, when it was the fruit of work in a vocational calling, as God’s blessing.” (116).
According to the Protestant ethic there was no need for the “magical” elements of religion, such as the sacraments and confession, because everybody’s state of grace was predetermined. Instead, Protestants were encouraged by their beliefs to focus on self-reflection or the “inner light” (Weber, 95). In general, they saw the path towards God as a personal one. Weber asserts that that “the spiritual isolation of believers formed one of the roots for…individualism”, another variable aligned with the spirit of capitalism (60-61).

If a believer followed the prescription of hard work, self-denial, and individualism, it was possible that they would acquire, accumulate and perpetuate great personal wealth (Weber, 109). This was acceptable if the wealth was “attained within the dutiful performance of one’s vocational calling” (Weber, 109). In fact, a worker who did not make the most of opportunities put before him was considered abominable and detrimental to God’s glory (Weber, 109). However, once this wealth was achieved it was also expected that the person would protect and perpetuate it, rather than use it for the restful enjoyment of hedonistic comforts. Man was seen as subordinate to his material possessions, as a “steward” of his money. The only danger of profit was that it might tempt one not to continue working after a fortune had been amassed (115). While “the formation of capital through asceticism’s compulsive saving” seems logical, Weber also asserts that Protestants were encouraged to use profit and gain for “investment capital” which is against human nature (117). For Weber, the modern capitalists’ focus on reinvestment was rooted in Calvinistic teachings.

Weber’s work is clearly groundbreaking in many ways, not the least of which is his contribution to sociological methodology. However, we were concerned about
several flaws in the text. First, the work is presented as a stand-alone document when in reality it was part of a series meant to be read together. As a result, one might perceive his observations to be too narrow and specific. Although he never insinuates that the Protestant work ethic was the only catalyst of modern capitalism, and he suggests to the reader other areas which might be explored (i.e., works on other religions, work on law and its role in the development of capitalism in the West, etc.), he does not delve into these.

Further, Weber begins his study from the assumption that there is a relationship between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. As Stephen Kalberg notes in his introduction to the text, “In searching for the sources of the spirit of capitalism, Weber never pursued a trial-and-error pathway. Rather, he took the view, not uncommon in the Germany of his time, at the outset that religious beliefs influenced work habits and approaches to business, as well as life in general.” (Intro, xxvi). In our group discussions, some of us argued that Weber should not have assumed from the outset that any connection between religious and economic organization existed, while others noted that initial assumptions may prove necessary, and are acceptable, provided the remainder of the research and analysis are performed as subjectively as possible. In the end, we concluded that more background information on his topic selection would have been helpful.

Third, Weber asserts numerous times, specifically at the end of the work, that the religious variables which lend themselves to capitalism have been stripped away through time and have lost their original meanings (Weber, 124). In addition, he also writes that “The Puritan wanted to be a person with a vocational calling; today we are forced to be”
These statements imply that religion is weak in the modern world, that the modern work ethic – now merely a routinized part of a system from which we can not break free— has been completely divorced from its religious context. These claims, however, are debatable, and he does not support them with empirical evidence as he did his other arguments throughout his work.

Weber’s work identifies a series of rational, predictable, and routinized religious variables which have an elective affinity to the seemingly irrational spirit of capitalism. Specifically, Weber believed that there was a mutual recognition of concerns and values between Protestant ethics (specifically the teachings of Calvin) and the spirit of capitalism. His work is not intended to leave us with a total, deterministic understanding of the larger world. Instead, his focus was on understanding particular social actions within their given historical context.

This is not to say that Weber did not see the possibility of understanding what could happen outside the particular moment about which he wrote; he believed that social action is complex, but not unpredictable. So once we understand action, values, and purposes surrounding a particular phenomenon, there are a limited number of combinations of meanings and values that can occur. Thus, we can have a sense about what may happen in other times and places. In other words, we have an understanding from this work that there can be an elective affinity between religious and economic organizations, but we cannot, nor did Weber seek to, predict future outcomes or make wide-sweeping assumptions.