

THE VIRTUE OF INDUSTRY AND THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF WORK

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of changing conceptions of the virtue of industry between the medieval and early modern periods of Western Europe. The distinctive contribution of this paper is to show how a teleological concept of industry, where work is seen as perfective of both the individual and the community, was eventually supplanted by an externalized concept of industry that consists essentially in engaging in economically measurable and productive activities. The virtue of industry appears in both medieval and early modern discussions of work and character. One finds the virtue of industry mentioned as an antidote to the vice of sloth in monastic writings, sermons, and ethical treatises in medieval Western Europe. In the medieval understanding, the vice of sloth consists in the avoidance of purposive activities such as works of charity or prayerful contemplation. The virtue of industry is also found in the writings of a more modern figure such as Benjamin Franklin; but for Franklin, this virtue is primarily oriented toward outwardly visible activities that yield economically valuable goods. In this paper, I show how developments in the understanding of the virtue of industry contribute to a transition in seeing work as an intrinsically valuable activity that is perfective of the individual and the community to seeing work primarily as a practical and instrumentally valuable activity that consists in the production of commodifiable goods. This view culminates in the labour theory of value held by Adam Smith and David Ricardo.

Keywords: Industry, Sloth, Virtue, Work, Labour Theory of Value

Introduction: Industry and the Shifting Catalogue of the Virtues

The virtue of industry appears in both medieval and early modern discussions of work and character in Western Europe; however, it does so in the midst of a significant shift in the understanding of the nature of virtue and in the catalogue of particular virtues. The central task of this paper is to explore changing conceptions of the virtue of industry in the transition between medieval and early modern thought and to show how a primarily teleological and eudaimonistic concept of work was eventually supplanted by an instrumental and commodified concept of work.

In *After Virtue*, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre lays out a broad genealogy of predominant shifts in the respective accounts of the virtues in the ancient, medieval, and modern periods within Western moral philosophy. One of the core aspects of these shifts is that the catalogues of the virtues change: while different catalogues may overlap with one another, they place emphasis on different virtues, understand various virtues in different senses, and include new virtues while excluding old ones – for instance, pride is a virtue and humility a vice for Aristotle but the inverse is true for the New Testament. Given this instability, one may be tempted to think that linguistic continuity in the virtue-based terminology of various languages used in moral philosophy belies a conceptual continuity that does not exist. MacIntyre, however, argues that it is possible to tease out a common core of meaning within various catalogues of the virtues by seeing virtues as those dispositions necessary to sustain the pursuit of practices and the good within a narrative framework¹. The framework that shapes the catalogue of the virtues will itself be conditioned by social, historical, and cultural contexts that celebrate certain character types that are taken to embody moral excellence. Indeed, the Homeric virtues of courage, glory, and strength are understood through narratives celebrating the warrior as the paradigm of human excellence. For Aristotle, by contrast, the Athenian aristocrat represents the ideal through which the virtues can be understood.

When it comes to assessing the virtue of industry and the parallel vice of sloth in the respective medieval and modern catalogues of the virtues, it is worth noting variations in the character types taken to embody human excellence. For a medieval theologian like Thomas Aquinas, the perfected saint is the embodiment of virtue; whereas for a modern thinker like Benjamin Franklin, the diligent, self-sufficient entrepreneur is the paradigm of excellence. Understood in terms of these narrative types, it is easy to see that the virtue of industry in the saint and the virtue of industry in the entrepreneur will be ultimately quite different, even if there may be certain shared similarities. I will argue in this paper that the understanding of the virtue of industry that develops in the early modern period

¹ A. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1984, p. 219.

represents a transformation of seeing this virtue in the framework of the perfective (or eudaimonistic) activity of engaging in contemplative prayer or necessary work that benefits the community to seeing it in the context of the utilitarian activity of engaging in economically measurable and commercially productive labour. By setting up a contrast between medieval and modern views of industry and work, I argue that this transformation involves a shift in understanding work as an intrinsically valuable activity that perfects the individual and the community to seeing work primarily as an instrumentally valuable activity that consists in the production of commodifiable goods.

1. *Medieval Understandings of the Vice of Sloth and its Remedies*

In Canto XVIII of *Purgatorio*, Dante provides an allegorical description of the vice of sloth. While ascending the Mount of Purgatory, Dante is startled by a throng of runners who represent penitents being purged of the vice of *acedia*, or sloth². As Dante observes and listens to the throng, he comes to understand that sloth consists in the failure to pursue that which is good, a disposition ultimately rooted in a defective love – indeed, some in the throng shout the following: “Quick, quick, lest time be lost through lack of love, so that zeal in doing good may make grace green again”³. The examples

²The Italian word *acedia* derives from the Latin *acedia* (itself derivative from Greek). The word ‘*acedia*’ is difficult to translate in English since the word ‘sloth’ removes the connotations of *acedia* involving sadness and a lack of desire to pursue the good. Thomas Aquinas sets *acedia* against the virtue of charity, a sense entirely absent in the term ‘sloth’. For this reason, some modern discussions of this vice in English leave it untranslated as ‘*acedia*’. I have decided to use the word ‘sloth’ throughout this paper since I will be discussing the various connotations of this vice. For more on the context of this vice in *The Divine Comedy* – including the difficulty of translating it – see J. TAMBLING, *Dreaming the Siren: Dante and Melancholy* in «Forum for Modern Language Studies» XL, 1 (2004) pp. 56-69.

³ Translation taken from the English-Italian parallel version of *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume II – Purgatorio*, tr. C. Langdon, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1920, p. 215. On the preceding page is given the Italian text:

“Ratto, ratto, che il tempo non si perda

given of sloth are the Israelites who died before crossing the Jordan by lingering in the desert and the Trojans who stayed in Sicily rather than carry on to Latium with Aeneas. For Dante, the moral fault in these respective stories from the Old Testament of the Bible and the *Aeneid* consists in failing to pursue the good through intransigence – whether that be the promised land beyond the Jordan for the Israelites or the glory of Latium for the displaced Trojans.

In Dante's estimate, the remedy for the vice of sloth is to engage in purposive charitable activity; indeed, the penitents that we observe being perfected in Canto XVIII are in the midst of developing a "keen fervor", where they once displayed "a negligence and slowness manifest in their tepidity of doing good"⁴. It is clear that the vice of sloth has a teleological dimension as it hinders the virtuous disposition of using one's time and energy to pursue that which is good. In the context of *The Divine Comedy*, it is obvious that the model of virtue standing in contrast to the vice of sloth is that of the perfected saint whose energies are drawn into acts of heroic charity and contemplation of the beatific vision. The perfected saint represents the example for wayfarers, or *viatores*, to follow in this life. The contrast of sloth to virtuous charity can be found in Thomas Aquinas' discussion of the virtues.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas describes what we might understand as sloth under the heading of two separate vices, *acedia* and *negligentia*. The vice of *acedia* is opposed to the virtue of charity and consists in a kind of sadness that leads to a weariness of work⁵. This weariness consists in sadness over spiritual goods involving charity and yields a disposition indifferent to the pursuit of these goods⁶.

per poco amor!" gridavan gli altri appresso;
"chè studio di ben far grazia rinverda".

⁴ Ivi, p. 214:

"O gente, in cui fervore acuto adesso
ricompie forse negligenza e indugio,
da voi per tepidezza in ben far messo".

⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 35, a. 1, resp.

⁶ ID., *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 35, a. 2, resp. In the monastic writings of John Cassian, *acedia* is bound up with sadness. Gregory the Great goes so far as to leave *acedia* out of his catalogue of the virtues and replace it with *tristitia*. In Aquinas, however, *acedia* reappears as a distinctive vice, but it is still clearly associated with sadness.

The vice of *negligentia* – ultimately opposed to the virtue of prudence – directly contrasts with the traits of *diligentia*, *sollicitudo*, and *industria*⁷. For Aquinas, diligence involves due solicitude: the solicitous person will quickly execute those things counselled by practical reason and judged to be done⁸. Prudence also requires industry, which consists in making “provision both for oneself and for others, not only in matters necessary for salvation, but also in all things relating to human life”⁹. It is worth noting that industrious prudence is oriented not merely to the good of the individual but also to the common good¹⁰. Industrious activity is perfective of both the individual and the community.

In medieval preaching manuals, there is a clear emphasis on avoiding the vice of sloth through industrious labour that is oriented to good works. In a sermon against *acedia*, Alan of Lille warns those who may be afflicted by this vice to “turn from idleness (*otium*) to activity, from dangerous sloth (*torpor*) to the business of virtue”¹¹. Alan of Lille continues with an example drawn from the natural world and invites the listener to consider the industry (*industria*) of the ant who with great solicitude (*sollicitudo*) stores up grain in the summer for the winter. The analogy here is that we are to store up good deeds (*fructus bonorum operum*) in this life through industrious

⁷ In a book on Latin synonyms from 1701, the terms ‘*diligentia*’, ‘*industria*’, and ‘*sollicitudo*’ are identified with one another as synonyms, which suggests that the understanding of these terms as bound up with one another persisted into the early modern period (*Synonymorum, Epithetorum & Phrasium*, Martini Enderi 1701, p. 320). With regard to English, ALEXIS LITVINE notes that the terms ‘industry’ and ‘diligence’ are frequently collocated in early modern texts in England (*The Industrious Revolution, the Industrious Discourse, and the Development of Modern Economies* in «The Historical Journal», LVII, 2/2014, p. 568).

⁸ See THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 54, a. 1, resp. and *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 47, a. 9, resp.

⁹ ID., *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 47, a. 14, ad. 1 in vol. V, NovAntiqua, 2011, p. 549. The Latin is the following: “Est autem alia industria plenior, per quam aliquis sibi et aliis potest providere, non solum de his quae sunt necessaria ad salutem sed etiam de quibuscumque pertinentibus ad humanam vitam.”

¹⁰ ID., *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 47, a. 10, resp.

¹¹ ALAN OF LILLE, *Against Sloth* in ID., *The Art of Preaching*, tr. G.R. Evans, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 1982, p. 45. The Latin is the following: “...ab otio ad exercita, a pernicioso torpore ad virtutis negotium...” (*Summa de Arte Praedicandi in Patrologia Latina*, ed. by J.P. Migne, vol. CCX, p. 127).

activity so that we will perish through these deeds when the Day of Judgment comes. In a series of sermons to workers, Jacques de Vitry highlights the perfective character of work for both the individual and society. In a sermon devoted to farmers, vineyard laborers, and other workers, de Vitry holds that the *res publica* would not be able to exist without agricultural and manual labour and that this work is commended in scripture¹². Work, however, has a penitential character in that, when done virtuously, it involves sharing in the sufferings of Christ. The fruit of this labour is perfective of the individual in preparing one for salvation, but it is also perfective of the community in yielding good works that benefit others. For de Vitry, this has quite practical implications: he suggests, for example, that the virtuous artisan should devote some of their labour to the benefit of the poor – indeed, cobblers ought to provide free shoes to the poor, though they may demand a just price from those with money¹³.

While it would be naïve to suggest that the medieval view of industrious work is homogenous in character – especially given shifting valuations of the place and function of manual labourers, skilled artisans, and merchants in society¹⁴ – there is a general tendency to see industrious activity as virtuous in being perfective of both the individual and the community. The medieval view of the virtue of industry is essentially teleological in nature. This teleological emphasis leads to a contrast with modern views of industry in two specific areas. First, the medieval conception of this virtue is consistent with poverty – at least, the virtuous poverty of the monk occupied with spiritual labour rather than vicious poverty that is the result of

¹² J. DE VITRY, *Sermo LX ad agricolas et vinitores et alios operarios in Analecta novissima Spicilegii Solesmensis altera continuatio*, vol. II, ed. by J.B. Pitra, Typis Tusculanus 1888, p. 435.

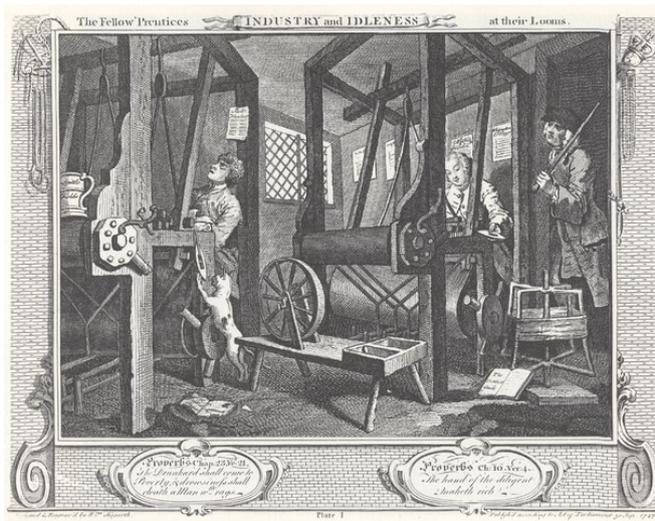
¹³ ID., *Sermo LXII ad artifices mechanicarum atrium*, cit., p. 437.

¹⁴ For shifting views on the value of these types of labour between the ancient and medieval periods with regard to Aristotle and Aristotelianism, see C. NEDERMAN, *Men at Work: Poesis, Politics and Labor in Aristotle and Some Aristotelians* in «Analyse & Kritik», XXX (2008) pp. 17-31. For shifting views in the medieval period with regard to *sermones ad status*, see B. VAN DEN HOVEN, *Work in Ancient and Medieval Thought*, J.C. Gieben, Amsterdam 1996, pp. 201-244.

negligent idleness¹⁵. The voluntary poverty of the religious is perfective and is compatible with the virtue of industry. Second, the medieval conception of this virtue is much less focused on the strict use of time and more on the pursuit of good works. The modern conception of the virtue of industry, however, is unambiguously opposed to poverty and concerns the effective use of measurable time.

2. *Modern Conceptions of the Virtue of Industry and the Vice of Idleness*

William Hogarth's *Industry and Idleness* is a series of engravings produced in 1747 that narrates the differences between the virtue of industry and the vice of idleness through the not-so-subtly-named characters, Francis Goodchild and Thomas Idle. In the first engraving (fig. 1), we see Goodchild and Idle on equal social footing as apprentices in a weaver's workshop.



¹⁵ While voluntary poverty is praised in the medieval period, especially among the Franciscans, one can nevertheless find condemnations of poverty due to idleness. Jacques de Vitry, for instance, recommends expelling from the community the otiose who will not work.

Figure 1¹⁶

The image draws out a contrast between the industry and idleness of these two respective characters: Goodchild weaves diligently at his loom while Idle is asleep, Goodchild's hand carefully guides his shuttle through the warp while a cat plays with Idle's shuttle, and Goodchild's weaving manual is in good condition while Idle has let his fall apart. As the master of the shop looks on, it is obvious that Goodchild will be rewarded while Idle will be punished and that the life trajectories of these two characters will diverge significantly, one for the better and one for the worse. Indeed, Hogarth inscribes Proverbs 23:21 beneath Idle: "The Drunkard shall come to Poverty & drowsiness cloath a Man with rags." Proverbs 10:4, however, is inscribed beneath Goodchild: "The hand of the diligent maketh rich." By the end of Hogarth's sequence of engravings, Goodchild has grown wealthy and moved up in social stature, eventually becoming the Lord Mayor of London. Idle, though, is eventually executed, his life mired in poverty, crime, and ignominy.

While Goodchild's diligent character is praised in Hogarth's engravings, the conception of the virtue of industry here is primarily concerned with economic activity and social stature rather than with the medieval emphasis on good works that perfect the individual and the community. The modern conception of the virtue of industry, so I will argue, is essentially instrumental in nature rather than teleological in being directed to commercially productive labour. Consider the following description of industry by Francis Hutcheson in *A System of Moral Philosophy*:

Industry is the natural mine of wealth, the fund of all stores for exportation, by the surplus of which, beyond the value of what a nation imports, it must increase in wealth and power. Diligent agriculture must furnish the necessaries of life, and the materials for all manufactures:

¹⁶ By W. HOGARTH - Scanned from *The genius of William Hogarth or Hogarth's Graphical Works*, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2714617>

and all mechanick arts should be encouraged to prepare them for use and exportation¹⁷.

It is clear from context that Hutcheson takes industry to be a virtue; indeed, he goes on to describe it as a habit and elsewhere recommends it as a disposition to be inculcated in children. The value of industry in his estimate consists in the production of commodifiable goods that increase the wealth and power of the nation. The view of the agriculture and mechanical arts here represents a striking contrast from the *sermones ad status* of de Vitry examined in the last section. While de Vitry thinks that farmers and artisans are to work for the benefit of the community, industrious labour is penitential and perfective of the individual. The medieval view of the virtue of industry is framed with teleological and religious meanings; by contrast, the modern view of industry is much more secular and commercial in nature¹⁸ and is bound up with a duty to improve one's nation through economic activity, which in the case of Hutcheson is framed by his mercantilist approach to economics¹⁹. The

¹⁷ F. HUTCHESON, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, vol. II, London, 1755, p. 318.

¹⁸ For more on these themes, see A. LITVINE, op. cit., pp. 531-570; some specific examples of the commercialization of industriousness discourse are discussed on p. 556 and following.

¹⁹ For more on Hutcheson's economics, see A.S. SKINNER, *Francis Hutcheson, 1694-1746*, in *A History of Scottish Economic Thought*, ed. by A. Dow and S. Dow, Routledge, London 2006, pp. 27-45. More generally, it is worth emphasizing that Hutcheson's broader philosophical commitments conflict with the medieval understanding of the virtue of industry as held by Aquinas. For Aquinas, *industria* is a virtue that falls explicitly within the bounds of the virtue of *prudentia*, one of the four cardinal virtues. Indeed, this virtue involves the exercise of practical wisdom – where Aquinas' *prudentia* functions in much the same way as Aristotle's *phronesis* – in providing for oneself and others. By contrast, the virtues of industry and prudence are separate in Hutcheson, the former consisting essentially in economically productive activity and the latter consisting in cautiously considering what is advantageous or hurtful in life having already acquired a high degree of moral excellence. For more on Hutcheson's use of prudence and how his ethics varies from a eudaimonistic approach with a meaningful role for *phronesis*, see A. MACINTYRE, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1988, pp. 260-280, especially pp. 275-276.

commercial nature of the virtue of industry is evident in a broad range of modern thinkers, including the influential writings of Benjamin Franklin.

In his *Autobiography*, Franklin lists industry among what he takes to be the thirteen necessary virtues and summarizes the essence of the virtue of industry in the following manner: “Lose no time; be always employ’d in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions”²⁰. In Franklin’s estimate, the virtue of industry is essentially concerned with the proper use of time. While Franklin prefaces his list of virtues by stating his goal of trying to achieve “moral perfection”, it is clear that his understanding of virtue is much less teleological than the predominant virtue ethics traditions of ancient and medieval moral philosophy. Franklin’s virtues are primarily focused on avoiding error in outward conduct rather than the formation of the internal character. Indeed, Franklin lists “cleanliness” amongst his virtues, which consists entirely in avoiding any uncleanliness of body, clothing, or habitation. In defining virtue, Aquinas makes a distinction between the “about which” of virtue (“*materiam circa quam*”) and the “in which” of virtue (“*materiam in qua*”) ²¹. The first involves the content of virtue, such as the specific actions to be performed under the headings of different virtues, and the second describes the subject, or person, that the virtues perfect in drawing her toward her proper end – the *felicitas* of this life and the *beatitudo* of the life to come. Franklin’s concept of virtue differs from Aquinas in that he focuses essentially on the “about which” of virtue rather than the “in which” of internal character formation; indeed, Franklin is almost entirely concerned with external actions, especially actions that yield economic success.

In describing the reasons for some of his early business success in Philadelphia, Franklin notes that he found it useful for his reputation to demonstrate an outward show of industry: “In order to secure my credit and character as a tradesman, I took care not only to be *in reality* industrious and frugal, but to avoid all appearances to

²⁰ B. FRANKLIN, *Autobiography in The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. I: *Autobiography, Letters and Misc. Writings 1725-1734*, Putnam & Sons, New York 1904, p. 189.

²¹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 55, a. 4, resp.

the contrary”²². Franklin goes on to describe how these appearances – wearing plain clothes, avoiding been seen at places associated with idleness, and pushing a wheelbarrow through the streets – contributed to his entrepreneurial success in printing and stationery. While Franklin clearly thinks that it is important to actually engage in industrious activity, his discussion of the value of appearances illustrates the instrumental way that he conceives of this virtue in terms of commercial success. This instrumentalization is also manifest in Franklin’s *The Way to Wealth*, where he recommends the virtues of industry and frugality as the key to generating wealth – recommendations accompanied by familiar aphorisms drawn from his *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, such as “early to bed, early to rise, makes one healthy, wealthy, and wise”²³. It is also worth noting that Franklin’s instrumental concept of virtue is essentially secular. Indeed, Franklin describes his frustration in listening to the sermons of his local Presbyterian minister, the content of which Franklin found to be overly confessional and insufficiently focused on practical morality; while justifying his leaving the church, Franklin laments that the focus of the minister was “rather to make us Presbyterians than good citizens”²⁴. While Franklin maintains a commitment to something of a civic religion – evident in his *Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion* – he identifies the virtue of industry not with the *viator* on the path to salvation, as do Aquinas and Dante, but rather with the hard-working entrepreneur building up the economic power of the nation.

According to MacIntyre, Franklin maintains something of a teleological form of ethics but understands the virtues in a utilitarian rather than an Aristotelian framework by seeing the virtues as a means to realizing external goods such as commercial success²⁵. In this sense, Franklin is a kind of transitional figure in the development of ethics who occupies a liminal space between virtue ethics and

²² B. FRANKLIN, *Autobiography*, p. 166.

²³ ID., *The Way to Wealth*, in ID., *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. II: *Letters and Misc. Writings 1735-1753*, Putnam & Sons, New York 1904, pp. 27-38.

²⁴ ID., *Autobiography*, cit., p. 187. While Franklin does seem to suggest in places that God wills us to be industrious, it is clear that Franklin’s concerns around this virtue are essentially secular unlike the more theological understandings of industry in the medieval authors discussed earlier in the paper.

²⁵ A. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*, cit., p. 185.

utilitarianism²⁶. But for MacIntyre, Franklin's ethics are ultimately incoherent: a meaningful account of the virtues requires a fundamental distinction between internal and external goods, but utilitarianism admits no such distinction²⁷. Thus, Franklin's utilitarianism conflicts with an Aristotelian account of the virtues. Furthermore, the lack of such a distinction in Franklin's ethics can help to understand his divergence from the Aristotelian understanding of the vice of *pleonexia*. In the Aristotelian framework, the immoderate acquisitiveness for external goods expressed through the vice of *pleonexia* conflicts with the internal goods of the virtue of justice oriented toward the perfection and flourishing of the individual and community. For Franklin's ethics, however, the lack of a distinction between internal and external goods precludes the possibility of making such a critique of *pleonexia*; accordingly, it is unsurprising that Franklin advocates for the unqualified acquisition of wealth and recommends to his readers the ways in which displays of the virtues can facilitate such acquisition²⁸.

The modern virtue of industry ultimately represents an externalization of the medieval understanding of industry by seeing this virtue not as an inward disposition manifest in works of charity and contemplation but rather as outward behaviour that consists in economically productive labour and an efficient use of time. While this transition is evident in taking the industrious entrepreneur rather than the perfected saint as the model of virtue²⁹, it is also evident in

²⁶ For more on this point, see P. MCMYLOR, *Moral Philosophy and Economic Sociology: What MacIntyre Learnt from Polanyi* in «International Review of Sociology / Revue Internationale de Sociologie», XIII, 2/2003, p. 404.

²⁷ A. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*, cit., pp. 198-199.

²⁸ Indeed, Max Weber argues that Franklin inverts the natural relationship between economic acquisition and the satisfaction of material needs by holding the former and not the latter to be the primary purpose of one's life; in Weber's estimate, Franklin subsumes the virtues to the external good of making money and thus serves as a waypoint in the development of the capitalist mindset (see M. WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Dover, Mineola 2003, pp. 52-54).

²⁹ This should be qualified with the recognition that the merchant and entrepreneur were still seen with moral suspicion by many in the modern period; but in terms of broad historical outlines, the person engaged in business – a person identified with the vices of greed and usury in certain medieval

analogies drawn from the natural world. In his exhortations to workers, de Vitry notes that bees are industrious in their natural tendency to perform good works and are an example to follow³⁰. This represents a striking contrast from Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*: according to Mandeville, bees are industrious, but they make the hive prosper through self-interest and vice rather than any virtue. While the value of industry to de Vitry is internal, the value to Mandeville is clearly external; indeed, the complete externalization of industry from the character of the individual is what permits Mandeville the following famous line: "Thus every part was full of Vice, Yet the whole Mass a Paradise"³¹. In the next section, I will argue that the externalization of industry yields a thoroughly commodified concept of work in the labour theory of value.

discussions – came to be seen with decreasing suspicion in the later medieval period and into the modern era. Indeed, Franklin clearly praises the figure of the industrious entrepreneur in his writings.

³⁰ "Apes quidem laboriosae sunt, et multa bona naturaliter habent in se" (J. DE VITRY, *Sermo LXI ad agricolas et alios operarios* in cit., p. 436).

³¹ B. DE MANDEVILLE, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, vol. I, ed. by F.B. Kaye, Oxford 1924, p. 24. For an interesting discussion of historical analogies employing bees in the contexts of ethics, politics, and religion, see D. ALLEN, *Burning the Fable of the Bees: The Incendiary Authority of Nature in The Moral Authority of Nature*, ed. by L. Daston and F. Vidal, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004, pp. 74-99. For a good discussion of the externalization of virtue in relation to Mandeville and his antecedents, see J.A. HERDT, *Putting on Virtue*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008, pp. 248-282. An interesting point raised by Herdt is that the externalization of virtue is shaped by the nominalist view that virtues are not of inherent but stipulated value (understood in a covenantal framework) and that a hyper-Augustinianism in the early modern period denies any distinction between worldly virtue and vice with the effect of denigrating the internal value of natural virtue. In terms of economics, it is worth noting Weber's suggestion that nominalists were comfortable with proto-capitalist modes of commerce that would be judged as an unethical form of acquisitiveness in a Thomistic analysis (see M. WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, cit., p. 73). Indeed, the nominalist view of virtue just described would seem to erode the distinction between internal and external goods on which a robust critique of the vice of *pleonexia* would rely.

3. *The Development of the Labour Theory of Value and the Commodification of Work*

The modern virtue of industry involves engaging in economically productive activity that yields commodifiable goods. What we see in the development of the labour theory of value in thinkers like John Locke, Adam Smith, and David Ricardo is that work becomes instrumentalized in the sense that its value is realized in commodities. Ricardo, for instance, begins *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* with the following statement: “The value of a commodity, or the quantity of any other commodity for which it will exchange, depends on the relative quantity of labour which is necessary for its production, and not on the greater or less compensation which is paid for that labour”³². This understanding requires an external conception of industry where the primary value of work is seen in the object produced rather than the perfection of the subject performing the work. Furthermore, the commodification of labour requires reconceptualizing the relationship between work and time.

The general pattern of work in Europe during the Middle Ages was oriented around the cycles of nature, such as the changing of the seasons and the rising and setting of the sun; in certain places, this pattern was also oriented by the cycles of the church, as the ringing of bells for the daily offices provided some structure for the work day. This cyclical view of time was undergirded by the understanding of time as related to motion, an understanding that Aquinas for instance adopts from Aristotle’s *Physics*. As Jacques Le Goff notes, this view of time is challenged by Peter Auriol who holds that the division of time does not have an extramental foundation in motion in the way suggested by the Aristotelian view of time³³. This position is likewise adopted by William of Ockham and forms the basis of the nominalist understanding of time as a human construct³⁴. In Le Goff’s estimate, the view of time as a human construct

³² D. RICARDO, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, Royal Economic Society, London 1973, p. 11.

³³ J. LE GOFF, *Time, Work, & Culture in the Middle Ages*, tr. A. Goldhammer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1980, p. 50.

³⁴ For an accessible introduction to medieval views of time, see A.A. SMITH II, *Time and the Medieval World* in «Philosophy Now» LXVII (2007).

contributes to the development of a more regimented accounting of time that culminates in the mechanical clock. The development of more precise measurements of time in the later medieval and early modern periods leads to the organization of work into increasingly more specified units of time³⁵. Furthermore, an important shift occurs in understanding the virtue of industry between the medieval and modern periods in seeing time less in qualitative terms and more in quantitative terms. In Dante's description of sloth, the penitents are chided not to lose time, but this is not time primarily understood in a quantitative sense; rather, what is at risk of being lost are opportunities to perform charitable works. By contrast, while Franklin clearly cares about using time in an economically productive manner, his description of the virtue of industry shows that the avoidance of wasting quantities of time is something that is of deep concern in and of itself.

The externalization of industry into the product of one's labour and the concern to regiment that labour in precise units of time permits work to be seen as an activity that can be measured and valued in monetary terms. In the *Second Treatise on Government*, John Locke lays out a partial labour theory of value:

To make [the value of labour] a little clearer, let us but trace some of the ordinary provisions of Life, through their several progresses, before they come to our use, and see how much they receive of their *value from Humane Industry*. Bread, Wine and Cloth, are things of daily use, and great plenty, yet notwithstanding, Acorns, Water, and Leaves, or Skins, must be our Bread, Drink and Clothing, did not *labour* furnish us with these more useful Commodities. For whatever *Bread* is more worth than Acorns, *Wine* than Water, and *Cloth* or *Silk* than Leaves, Skins, or Moss, that is wholly *owing to labour* and industry³⁶.

³⁵ For the historical context around this development, see LE GOFF's chapter 'Labor Time in the "Crisis" of the Fourteenth Century' in *Time, Work, & Culture in the Middle Ages*, pp. 43-52. In particular, Le Goff notes that the increasing precision of time manifests itself in an increasing concern with idleness as a waste of time in terms of quantity and in tensions between employers and workers around the development of work clocks that structure the day in a more regimented way than following the sun.

³⁶ J. LOCKE, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. by P. Laslett, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 297.

In Locke's view, it is the amount of labour applied to an object that sets its value – indeed, at various points in the chapter, he roughly estimates that labour provides up to 9/10 or 99/100 of an object's value. Unlike a full-fledged labour theory of value, Locke does not apply his view to an account of the relationship of units of labour and the prices of commodities in any systematic fashion. While Locke identifies industry as a virtue in places, his concept of industry represents a significant step toward the commodification of work in seeing the worth of labour as the measurable improvement of the value of raw materials in the production of useful goods that furnish the commonwealth with its stock of necessaries and conveniences.

A fuller commodification of work involves seeing labour in terms of its exchange value, a view held by Adam Smith and David Ricardo. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith says the following about labour:

Every man is rich or poor according to the degree in which he can afford to enjoy the necessaries, conveniencies, and amusements of human life. But after the division of labour has once thoroughly taken place, it is but a very small part of these with which a man's own labour can supply him. The far greater part of them he must derive from the labour of other people, and he must be rich or poor according to the quantity of that labour which he can command, or which he can afford to purchase. The value of any commodity, therefore, to the person who possesses it, and who means not to use or consume it himself, but to exchange it for other commodities, is equal to the quantity of labour which it enables him to purchase or command. Labour, therefore, is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities³⁷.

According to Smith, the exchange value of a commodity consists in the quantity of labour applied to its production³⁸. The object of

³⁷ A. SMITH, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, vol. I, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1976, p. 47.

³⁸ There has been some debate over whether Smith held a labour theory of value. Schumpeter, for instance, argues that Smith's theory is actually a cost-of-production model where value is determined by wages, rents, and profit corresponding to the three factors of production of labour, land, and capital.

exchange is not merely a particular good but rather the quantity of labour itself, and wealth is understood in terms of the quantity of labour in others that one is able to possess. In this sense, labour itself is a commodity in having an exchange value. Indeed, Smith goes on to describe labour as “the original purchase-money that was paid for all things”³⁹. For Smith, valuable labour realizes itself in commodifiable goods.

Smith makes a distinction between productive and unproductive labour: the former adds value to its object while the latter does not add value to any object⁴⁰. For Smith, productive labour yields a vendible commodity that endures beyond the activity of work; by contrast, unproductive labour “perishes in the very instance of its production”⁴¹. The manufacturer is the paradigm example of productive labour for Smith in that the work of the manufacturer is stored up in durable goods that possess exchange value. The work of the menial servant, however, is unproductive in leaving behind no store of value in a vendible commodity that could in turn be exchanged for some equal quantity of labour. Smith thinks that many other types of professions, some of which may be highly useful and respectable, are unproductive in this sense – the examples given by Smith being clergy, lawyers, physicians, and scholars. It is helpful here to refer to

For a defense of the view that Smith really did hold a labour theory of value in light of this objection, see J. HENRY, *Adam Smith and the Theory of Value. Chapter Six Considered*, in «History of Economics Review», XXXI, 1/2000, pp. 1-13.

³⁹ A. SMITH, *Wealth of Nations*, vol. I, cit., p. 48. While Smith treats labour as a commodity, he nevertheless recognizes the subjective value of labour in providing sustenance for workers. For this reason, Smith argues that wages should be sufficient for workers to support themselves and ideally a family (see *ivi*, p. 85); furthermore, Smith thinks that wages should be set at a high level since this will encourage the virtue of industry in workers. Relatedly, Ricardo holds that labour has both a natural and a market price. The natural price of labour is that price which enables labourers to support themselves and their family through the purchase of necessities and conveniences. The market price of labour is the result of supply and demand in the labour market. Ricardo notes that labourers flourish and are happy when the market price exceeds the natural price but miserable when the inverse is the case and the market price falls below the natural price (see D. RICARDO, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, cit., p. 94).

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 330.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 331.

the distinction that Smith makes earlier in the *Wealth of Nations* between use value and exchange value: the first refers to the utility of an object while the second refers to the power of an object to be used to purchase other goods⁴². In terms of understanding labour, the care of a physician, for example, may be highly useful; but it possesses no exchange value and is thus unproductive.

The labour theory of value favours work that is commodifiable in the production of exchangeable goods. In favouring this type of work, activities that do not produce commodifiable goods – domestic work, care work, and service work – are seen as less valuable; indeed, this is evident in the disparaging ways that Smith speaks of servants⁴³. What is evident in the labour theory of value is an instrumentalization of work that sees the primary value of labour in the production of commodifiable goods. While the labour theory of value as an explanation of commodity prices was eventually supplanted by the theory of marginal utility in the development of neoclassical economics, the basic view of work as a measurable and commodifiable activity persists to the present. Indeed, we have a tendency to identify work with wage labour and to see activities that do not measurably contribute to something like gross domestic product as outside the scope of the concept of work. This tendency is shaped in part by the historical development of the concept of work, which I have argued involves an externalization of the virtue of industry from a teleological activity perfective of the individual and the community to an outward economic activity that produces commodities.

Conclusion: The Nature of Work and the Development of Ethics

In this paper, I have traced some of the lineaments of the development of the modern concept of work in the changing views of the virtue of industry⁴⁴. It is worth briefly considering how this

⁴² Ivi, p. 44.

⁴³ The subject of domestic work is largely absent from the *Wealth of Nations*. For discussion of Smith and the devaluing of domestic labour, see J.W. BUDD, *The Thought of Work*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2011, pp. 56-57.

⁴⁴ For a much more thorough exploration of the development of the modern conception of work, see H. APPLEBAUM, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, SUNY Press, Albany 1992.

genealogical exploration of the virtue of industry expands upon some previous discourse concerning the factors underlying the emergence of a capitalist market society and its distinctive view of the nature of work. According to Max Weber, the distinctive feature of work within modern capitalism is that it involves the “rational organization of labour” (*die rationale Arbeitsorganisation*)⁴⁵. For Weber, this means that labour is subsumed within the disciplines of mathematics and mechanics and organized through rational legal and administrative structures. Furthermore, an essential aspect of “the spirit of capitalism” (*der Geist des Kapitalismus*) is that labour is seen as an end in itself and performed as a vocation⁴⁶. For this modern view of work to be possible, the teleological and eudaimonistic understanding of industry as a virtue had to be abandoned. Indeed, a teleological view of work cannot be reduced to mathematical formulation and mechanical application (even if we admit that workers may employ mathematics and mechanics in their work); the basic reason is that work in this view is ultimately an activity performed in accord with practical reason and oriented toward the perfection of the individual and community, which is a qualitative process involving variability that cannot be precisely formalized. As Karl Polanyi argues, the modern view of work as a commodity – and thus something amenable to quantification – involves the abstraction of the economic order from the social order⁴⁷. A teleological understanding of industry, however, sees work as embedded within a set of social relations and practices, which themselves cannot be neatly quantified. Thus, the teleological view of work conflicts with the identification of labour as a commodity that can be measured and quantified.

⁴⁵ M. WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, cit., p. 21ff.

⁴⁶ M. WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, cit., p. 62. In the preceding pages, Weber provides Franklin as a paradigmatic example of the spirit of capitalism in holding that labour oriented to amassing wealth is an end in itself.

⁴⁷ For Polanyi, of course, the representation of labour as a mere commodity is fictitious; indeed, he criticizes the commodification of work: “Labor is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, which in its turn is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored or mobilized...” (K. POLANYI, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Beacon Press, Boston 2001, p. 75).

The genealogy presented in this paper shows how the virtue of industry loses its teleological character and yields the modern concept of work as a commodity. This change is reflective of a broader trend in the development of early modern moral philosophy toward a jural conception of ethics in which morality consists in rules and imperatives rather than virtues and their relationship to happiness⁴⁸. Indeed, Locke defines virtue as deriving its obligatory force from the will of God, which is discoverable by natural reason and has the force of law⁴⁹; this is essentially to elide virtue and the natural law. By contrast, Aquinas holds that the natural law is directive in leading human beings to virtue. While one might maintain that both Locke and Aquinas fall within the natural law tradition in ethics, it is clear that there is a fundamental divergence between these two figures: Locke's ethics is jural in nature while Aquinas' ethics is eudaimonistic. It is beyond the scope of this paper to chart the development of jural ethics in any detail, but it is sufficient to note that the rule-based nature of early modern ethics was inhospitable to the teleology of earlier forms of eudaimonistic ethics⁵⁰. Accordingly, there is no

⁴⁸ Henry Sidgwick marks the adoption of a quasi-jural conception of ethics as the divide between modern and pre-modern moral philosophy, though he recognizes that this divide is not a sharp one but rather a gradual transition (H. SIDGWICK, *The Methods of Ethics*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1981, pp. 105-116). G.E.M. Anscombe argues that one of the distinctive characteristics of modern moral thinking is the employment of the term 'ought' in a jural sense – i.e., being obligated or morally bound by law – in a conceptual framework that does not include any idea of an ultimate lawgiver (see G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, in «Philosophy», XXXIII, 124, 1958, pp. 1-19). For a discussion of the nature of modern moral philosophy in relation to the natural law tradition, see T. IRWIN, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. 2, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, pp. 70-87.

⁴⁹ J. LOCKE, *Virtue B*, in *Political Essays*, ed. by M. Goldie, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 287.

⁵⁰ It is also worth noting that one can find a parallel trend in natural philosophy in the early modern period with the transition from teleological to nomological modes of explanation in the description of natural phenomena in terms of scientific laws. For more on how these respective trends in early modern moral and natural philosophy intersect one another, see *Natural Laws and Laws of Nature in Early Modern Europe: Jurisprudence, Theology, Moral and Natural Philosophy*, ed. by L. Daston and M. Stolleis, Ashgate, Farnham 2008. Both moral and natural philosophy in the early modern period share the same drive

real conceptual space in early modern ethics for understanding industry as a virtue perfective of the individual and the community. Instead, industry becomes understood as a duty to labour at things that generate wealth and an instrumentally valuable activity measurable in terms of commodities.

One of the benefits of taking a genealogical approach to looking at the concept of work is that an appreciation of history can help us to imagine alternative conceptions of work beyond a commodified view of labour. Indeed, it is here that a genealogical approach has value in seeing that the identification of work with economically measurable and productive activity epitomized in wage labour is not a universal and necessary conception of work but rather a contingent historical development. This understanding creates space for alternate visions of the nature of work. In particular, the medieval virtue-based understanding of work as perfective of the individual and the community provides a way to think of work as an activity that extends beyond wage labour. Furthermore, the resurgence of virtue ethics in the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond has yielded some fruitful applications of the virtues to addressing challenges around the realities of modern work⁵¹. It is easy to slip into the assumption that the economic structures that surround us, including

to mathematize knowledge and I would argue that this emphasis on mathematization ultimately leads to the project of trying to model and understand human behaviour, such as work, in formal and quantitative terms. It is, of course, an interesting question to consider to what extent such a project is possible; for an argument that the social sciences should move beyond trying to emulate the natural sciences in this regard, see B. FLYVBJERG, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001.

⁵¹ See, for instance, the following titles: R. SOLOMON, *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1992; R. BEADLE and K. KNIGHT, *Virtue and Meaningful Work*, in «Business Ethics Quarterly», XXII, 2/2012, pp. 433-450; and G. MOORE, *Virtue at Work: Ethics for Individuals, Managers, and Organizations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017. For related topics in psychology, see the work of Amy Wrzesniewski and Barry Schwartz, especially the following: A. WRZESNIEWSKI and J.E. DUTTON, *Crafting a Job: Revisioning Employees as Active Crafters of their Work*, in «Academy of Management Review», XXVI, 2/2001, pp. 179-201; and B. SCHWARTZ, *Why We Work*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2015.

the nature of work, are necessary and cannot be other than they are; but an examination of the history of these structures provides us with the conceptual resources to consider anew the meaning of work and its role in human life.