



Morality and self-employment: how owners of small and medium sized firms in Halle perceive their work

Author: Sylvia Terpe

July 13, 2017

This blog post will highlight various meanings of 'morality' in the context of self-employed work in my field site. Some of these meanings are specific to self-employment, others can be found in employed work too. The discussion does not address all sources of and possible relations between the various dimensions of morality. It simply shows the manifold meanings I encountered in my interviews with the owners of small and medium sized firms in Halle. The interviews lasted between one and three hours, half of my interviewees I met twice. When my interlocutors learned that I am a local myself, but hardly know 'how it is to be self-employed', most of them opened up quickly and talked eagerly about the ups and downs in their lives as entrepreneurs. Since my theoretical approach is based on the assumption that moral ideas, moral beliefs and moral commitments are deeply connected to emotional life¹, emotional expressions of these moral meanings are also addressed.

Occupational ethos: being proud of what one does

One theme that was touched by almost all of my interlocutors was their *occupational ethos* (*Berufsethos*). Depending on the activities, this referred to specialised knowledge and skills and a general sense that one should be good at what one does. Often, my interviewees talked with pride and passion about their work. It was part of their self-understanding as entrepreneurs to sell 'good' and 'high-grade' products and services. A retailer specializing in shoes said: "I just cannot sell crap. That would hurt me." Besides the professional competence, this ethos also included virtues like reliability, punctuality and honesty.

This occupational ethos did not depend on economic success. Rather, some interviewees addressed the problem of finding the 'right balance' between what they regarded as the best service or product and what they perceived as reasonable from an economic perspective. One interlocutor in advertising asked rhetorically: "Shall I send the customer home although I know

the flyer looks awful?" Another master craftsman told me how difficult it was for him "to adjust [i.e. raise] the prices" for his leather goods repair service. In highly competitive branches, this ethos was perceived as being under pressure by "the market" or by "unfair practices" of competitors. At the same time the ethos was invoked to differentiate themselves from competitors who were lacking it and just looking for quick profits.



The shop of a large drugstore chain (left) and, on the opposite side of the road, a family-run drugstore founded in 1900.

Lack of recognition: anger and sadness about disrespect for one's work

At times, the occupational ethos was associated with an indignant reaction towards customers perceived as looking for bargains and discounts. This emotional reaction reveals another moral dimension of self-employed work: a felt *lack of recognition* (*fehlende Anerkennung*).² This was a very prominent theme in the interviews and surfaced in at least four variants. In addition to disparaging references to customers who did not appreciate one's work and tried to haggle over the price, many interviewees expressed anger about the "politicians" who made life difficult for entrepreneurs. In this variant, lack of recognition was at times coupled with negative opinions about salaried work, emphasizing the difference between "the burdens of self-employment" and a supposed "easy way of employed life". A third, (relatively rare) variant of lack of recognition referred to the impression that young people did not want to take up their occupation any more. These interviewees expressed anger and contempt for "a fussy youth" (*wählerische Jugend*) which feels certain kinds of work to be below their dignity.

In addition to anger, indignation and contempt, another emotion related to a perceived lack of recognition was one of disappointment and sadness. Identifiable human actors seemed to be missing in these cases. It was rather "society" in general which was regarded as lacking appreciation for one's work. At times, blame was attached to "technological changes". This was often coupled with the sentiment that "nothing can be done about it". For example, a printer who owns a traditional offset printing press declared ruefully: "Printing technology developed a lot in the last decades. One can get good quality with digital printing. Only a few enthusiasts still appreciate offset printing. But what can you do?" This fourth variant of a perceived lack of recognition is most common among firms which have run into economic

difficulties and can hardly survive if they cling on to their traditional products and services.

Responsibility for employees: taking care of employees

Another moral meaning attached to self-employed work was *responsibility for one's employees*. This meaning was articulated in statements like "one has to take care of one's folks" (*man muss sich um seine Leute kümmern*), in notions of fair payment and in attention to the needs of employees with young children or older parents. However, these topics were addressed by only some interviewees. Furthermore, some apparent articulations of commitments to moral values might be more accurately interpreted as acknowledgement of the normative obligations demanded by legal rules. For example, one of my interlocutors said that he had to "take care that there is always enough work for everybody", because he does "not like to fire" people. That could be seen as an expression of a value commitment. Yet the same person complained about the labour law which made it "very difficult to release staff". The latter statement rather indicates a felt normative obligation.

Is there a general work ethic?

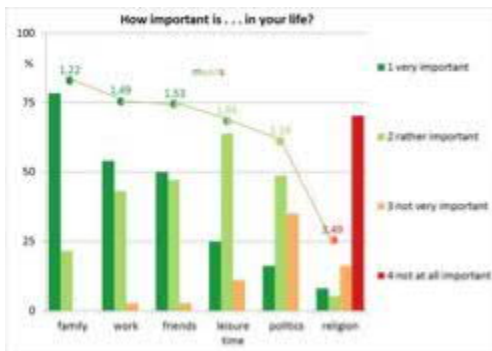
Finally, is there such a thing as a *general work ethic* which appreciates work as a moral value in itself? Max Weber described one dimension of such a work ethic in his famous study of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*:

"Couldn't the old man be satisfied with his \$75,000 a year and retire? No! The frontage of the store must be widened to 400 feet. Why? That beats everything, he says. Evenings, when his wife and daughter read together, he longs for bed. Sundays, in order to know when the day will be over, he checks his watch every five minutes. What a miserable existence! In this manner the son-in-law (who had emigrated from Germany) of this prosperous dry-goods-man from a city on the Ohio River offered his judgment. Such a judgment would surely appear to the 'old man' as completely incomprehensible. It could be easily dismissed as a symptom of the lack of energy of the Germans".³

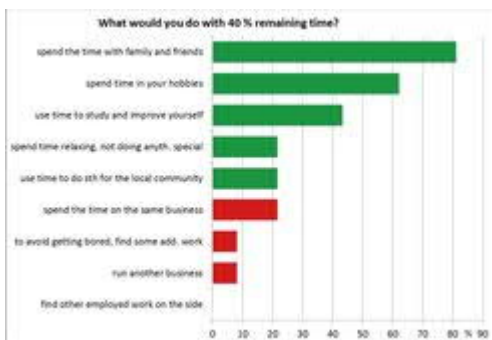
This dimension of a work ethic emphasizes the subordination of all other domains of life to work. Life is dedicated to work. Such a work ethic is not to be confused with an occupational ethos: one can be passionate about one's occupation, yet at the same time not regard work as the be all and end all of one's life.

How can one classify the owners of small and medium sized firms in Halle in this respect? A very preliminary answer can be given by referring to some statements made in a questionnaire which was answered by 37 of my 41 interviewees. One question asked about the "importance" of "family", "friends", "leisure time", "politics", "work" and "religion" for one's life. Respondents could indicate whether they regarded these spheres of life as "very important", "rather

important", "not very important" or "not at all important". Comparing the frequencies and means of the different items, "work" is positioned second, behind "family" and directly followed by "friends". While "family" is regarded by almost 80 per cent as "very important", only every second respondent says the same for work.



Another instructive question asked: "Imagine you only had to work 60 per cent of what you do now to keep your current living standard. What would you do with the remaining 40 per cent of your time?" The answers show that the majority of respondents would rather spend their time with family and friends, pursuing their hobbies and (less common) their education (*Bildung*). The 'old man' in Weber's example would certainly not have selected the first two items; he would have specified business and work related options. Yet the three items related to (self-employed) work were chosen by only some of my interlocutors. Allowing for multiple answers (respondents could choose up to three items), only 32 per cent of all respondents selected one of these three answers (red bars in Fig 2). No one declared that they would fill in the windfall time allocation by seeking out "employed work".



Taken together, these figures might indicate that between 30 and 50 per cent of my respondents showed signs of a work ethic similar to that described by Weber. To validate this conclusion further analysis of qualitative data is necessary. The figures do not mean that the others have no work ethic at all. It may be less strong, in the sense that they do not regard work as the only purpose of their lives, but they may still appreciate work. In further analysis I shall be exploring how this appreciation is articulated.

Notes

¹ On the relation between (moral) values and emotions, see Joas, Hans (2000). *The Genesis of Values*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

² On recognition, see Honneth, Axel (1996). *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

³ Weber, Max (2011). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. The Revised 1920 Edition*. Translated and Introduced by Stephen Kalberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

© 2003-2022, Max-Planck-Gesellschaft