

The Fate of Reason: Max Weber and the Problem of (Ir)Rationality

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We are fundamentally inclined to claim that *the falsest judgments. . . are the most indispensable* for us; that without accepting the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, *without a constant falsification of the world* by means of numbers, *man could not live*—that renouncing false judgments would mean renouncing life and a denial of life.

There are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena—

—*Friedrich Nietzsche*¹

The fate of an epoch which has eaten of the tree of knowledge is that it must know that we cannot learn the *meaning* of the world from the results of its analysis, be it ever so perfect; it must rather be in a position to create this meaning itself

—*Max Weber*²

¹*Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 12, 85 [italics added].

²"Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy," in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and eds. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1949), p. 57.

Introduction

The importance of the concept of "rationality" in the work of Weber is well known; Rogers Brubaker identified it as "a great unifying theme" in Weber's work.³ Whether or not it was the "major theme" of his *oeuvre*, the problem of rationality was certainly a master category in Weber's thought that permeates his voluminous writings.⁴ Weber's exploration of his rationalization thesis was central to his magnificent *Religionssoziologie*, which included his renowned Protestant Ethic, as well as his prolific works on ancient Judaism, India and China.⁵

Weber's ideas on rationality have continued to generate an enormous deluge of secondary literature. But Weber's complementary development of the notion of irrationality has not received comparable attention. While this critical neglect is unfortunate, it is understandable given the amorphous, generally undeveloped nature of *das Irrationalitätsproblem* in Weber's own work. I wish to explore the problem of irrationality in Weber and suggest that it is logically and substantively central to his concept of rationality. Logically, irrationality is the necessary antithesis of rationality; but irrationality is also substantively central to Weber's notion of rationality. Weber's substantial literary investment in religion—which he believed to be the quintessential institutional expression of irrationality in the modern world—and his contention that religion was a decisive catalyst in the historical origins of modern culture demonstrate the centrality of irrationality to Weber's project. Weber saw irrationality as intrinsically resistant to rational analysis, yet he obliquely acknowledged its importance by his analysis of nonrational orientations in his typologies of action and authority (i.e., traditional and affectual action, traditional and charismatic authority), and by his refusal to ignore conspicuous social expressions of irrationality (e.g., charisma, nationalism, ethnicity, sexual-

³Rogers Brubaker, *The Limits of Rationality: An Essay on the Social and Moral Thought of Max Weber* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), p. 1.

⁴On the issue of the "thematic unity" in Weber, see Friedrich H. Tenbruck, "The Problem of Thematic Unity in the Works of Max Weber," *British Journal of Sociology* 31 (1980), pp. 316-51. Against Tenbruck, Bendix, Schluchter and others, Wilhelm Hennis strongly disputes the central role of the concept of rationality in Weber's work. See his "Max Weber's Central Question," in *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*, trans. Keith Tribe (London: Allen & Unwin, 1988), pp. 21-61, 198-212.

⁵*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [=PESC], trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958 [1930]). Parsons' translation of PESC is based on the second German edition (1920); the first edition appeared in 1904-05. English translations of Weber's other works in the *Religionssoziologie* include: *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, trans. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press, 1958 [German: 1916-17]); *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. Hans H. Gerth (New York: The Free Press, 1951 [German: 1915]); *Ancient Judaism*, Trans. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press, 1952 [German 1917-19]).

ity). Perhaps most importantly, Weber acknowledged the importance of the irrational in human life by his persistent fascination with religion.

The Problem of (Ir)Rationality in Weber

The "Superficially Simple Concept of the Rational"

Weber's pervasive reliance on "rational" and its cognates (rationality, rationalization, etc.) confronts the discerning reader with a potentially intransigent semantic problem. The terms appear in Weber's writings constantly, and its meaning is only superficially apparent. Indeed, Steven Lukes remarked that Weber's usage was "irredeemably opaque and shifting."⁶ There are at least two levels of complexity to this problem. First, Weber's usage of the term "rational-" does seem confused and confusing; his obsessive reliance on the term seems to indicate that the concept of rationality possessed "some great private meaning" for him.⁷ The term rational (and cognates) appears at least sixty times⁸ in the 16 pages of Weber's monumental "Introduction" (*Vorbemerkung*, 1920) to his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie [=GARS]*.⁹ This pervasive invocation of rationality in Weber's turgid prose appears like some mantric appeal to a profound, yet vaguely defined quality of rationality. Arnold Eisen provocatively suggested that:

[Weber's] use of rational not only reminds us of the interlocking processes of history and the unity of culture, not only illuminates the parallel processes which have developed mathematics, law, the sciences, the arts, . . . but also attempts, by fiat as

⁶"Some Problems About Rationality," in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), p.206.

⁷Alan Sica, *Weber, Irrationality, and Social Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 193-4, 64. Although I have attempted to plot my own course through Weber's thought, the influence of Sica's book pervades this essay.

⁸See Thomas W. Segady, "Rationality and Irrationality: New Directions in Weberian Theory, Critique, and Research," p. 89.

⁹7th photomechanisch gedruckte Auflage, 3 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1978 [1920]), I:1-16. The piece was translated by Talcott Parsons and appears at the beginning of his translation of PESC. Of course, the original text of PESC was written in 1904/05, then revised for the 1920 edition of GARS. The "Introduction" was initially composed by Weber in 1920 as a general introduction to his *Religionssoziologie*. In fact, the "Introduction" may have been Weber's last composition before his death on June 14, 1920. See Benjamin Nelson, "Max Weber's 'Author's Introduction' (1920): A Master Clue to his Main Aims," *Sociological Inquiry* 44 (1974), pp. 269-78. Nelson cites Johannes Wincklemann, *Max Weber: Die Protestantische Ethik*, 2 vols. (Munich: Sieberstern Taschenbuch, 1968), p. 534.

it were, to impose a unity of meaning on a world made more united by this very act of comprehension.¹⁰

But a second level of complexity indicates that even for Weber the concept of "the rational" was substantively evasive. He acknowledged the multifarious nature of his conceptualization of rationality and argued in his *PESC* that "If this essay makes any contribution at all, may it be to bring out the complexity of the only superficially simple concept of the rational."¹¹ To regard the historical process of rationalization as a triumphalist, unilinear dynamic of sociocultural evolution fundamentally misconstrues Weber's intentions and ignores his frequently expressed uncertainties over the impact of rationalization on human freedom and autonomy. Weber argued that "the history of rationalism shows a development which by no means follows parallel lines in the various departments of life."¹² The concept of rationalization in Weber referred to a multidimensional, multidirectional dynamic operative in the historical process that simplistic notions of cultural progress or developmental determinism could not accommodate.¹³

Predictably, Weberian scholars have made numerous attempts at "rationalizing" Weber's elusive concept of rationality. Many appear willing to dismiss Weber's usage of "rational" and its cognates as hopelessly opaque (e.g., Lukes), while others have invested considerable analytic energy arguing for definite consistency in Weber's usage. Bendix believed rationality had for Weber at least three distinct but interrelated meanings.¹⁴ Eisen thought he could discern at least six different meanings, and Brubaker argued that there are no less than sixteen meanings of rationality in Weber's writings.¹⁵

¹⁰Arnold Eisen, "The Meanings and Confusions of Weberian 'Rationality,'" *British Journal of Sociology* 29 (1978), p. 68.

¹¹*PESC*, 194n9.

¹²*PESC*, p. 77.

¹³See especially Guenther Roth, "Rationalization in Max Weber's Developmental History," in *Max Weber, Rationality, and Modernity*, eds. Scott Lash and Sam Whimster (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp. 75-91.

¹⁴Bendix argued that Weber used rationality in the following ways: as the manifestation of individual freedom; as a synonym for conceptual or theoretical clarity; and in reference to the differing substantive meaning of rationality embodied in the various life-spheres of human activity. See Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1962 [1960]), pp. 278-9n33.

¹⁵Arnold Eisen, "The Meanings and Confusions of Weberian 'Rationality,'" pp. 57-70. Eisen's six meanings are: purpose, calculability, control, logical coherence, universality and system. Brubaker, *The Limits of Rationality*, p. 2. Brubaker lists the following meanings apparent in Weber's usage: deliberate, systematic, calculable, impersonal, instrumental, exact, quantitative, rule-

Ann Swidler insisted that rationalism, rationalization and rationality have distinct meanings in Weber's lexicon.¹⁶ Weber himself made numerous attempts to differentiate various dimensions of rationality. At the level of intellectual activity, Weber spoke of rationality as "an increasing theoretical mastery of reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract concepts." A more abstract definition reveals that rationality is "the methodical attainment of a definitely given and practical end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means."¹⁷ While Weber's usage seems certainly "far from univocal," the notions of calculability, technical efficiency, logical elaboration, impersonal formalization, and self-conscious deployment of the most efficient means to a given end all fall within the semantic domain of Weber's concept of "rationality."¹⁸

Weber's Typology of Social Action

Weber's well-known typology of social action is located on "a continuum of decreasing rationality," and illustrates well the rationality/irrationality nexus in Weber's thought.¹⁹ (1) Instrumentally

governed, predictable, methodical, purposeful, sober, scrupulous, efficacious, intelligible, and consistent.

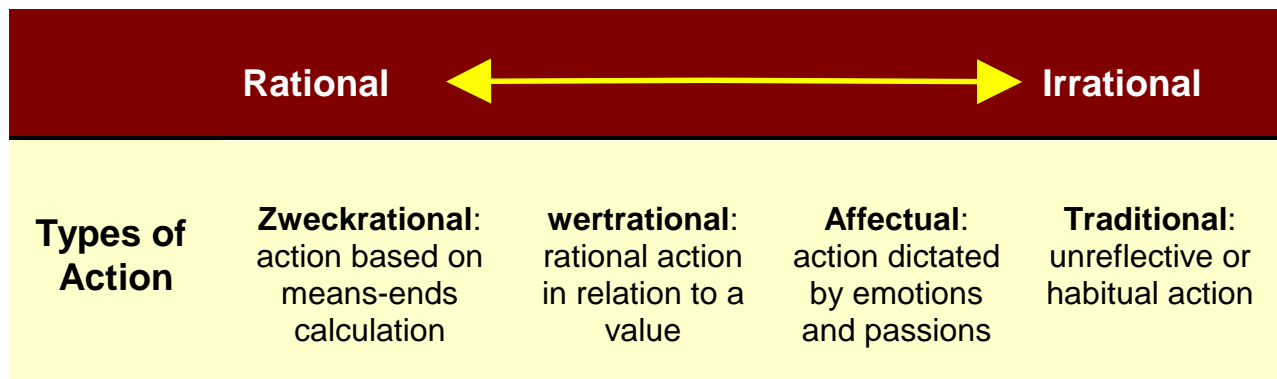
¹⁶Ann Swidler, "The Concept of Rationality in the Work of Max Weber," *Sociological Inquiry* 43 (1973), pp. 35-42. According to Swidler, rationalism refers to "efficient orientation of means to ends," rationalization to "the systematization of ideas," and rationality to "the control of action by ideas." *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁷"The Social Psychology of the World Religions," [=SPWR], in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 293.

¹⁸The quote is from Brubaker, *The Limits of Rationality*, p. 30. Additional sources that address Weber's concept of rationality include: Martin Albrow, *Max Weber's Construction of Social Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 115-34; J. E. T. Eldridge, ed., *Max Weber: The Interpretation of Social Reality* (London: Michael Joseph, 1971), pp. 53-70; Stephen Kalberg, "Max Weber's Types of Rationality," *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1980), pp. 1145-79; Donald N. Levine, *The Flight from Ambiguity: Essays on Social and Cultural Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), especially pp. 142-78; Wolfgang Schluchter, *The Rise of Western Rationalism: Max Weber's Developmental History*, trans. Guenther Roth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); *idem.*, *Rationalism, Religion, and Domination: A Weberian Perspective* trans. Neil Solomon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Thomas W. Segady, "Rationality and Irrationality: New Directions in Weberian Theory, Critique, and Research," *Sociological Spectrum* 8 (1988), 85-100.

¹⁹Ferdinand Kogler, "The Concept of 'Rationalization' and Cultural Pessimism in Max Weber's Sociology," *Sociological Quarterly* 5 (1964), p. 360; for Weber's summary of types of social action, see his "Types of Social Action," in *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive*

rational action (*Zweckrationalität*) is action thoroughly dominated by means-ends calculation. Weber argued that instrumentally rational action occurs "when the end, the means, and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighed."²⁰ The actor considers alternative means, compares the value of a given end with its secondary consequences and weighs the relative importance of various ends. Weber considered *zweckrational* action an ideal-typical example of the most rationally conceivable social action. (2) Value-rational action (*Wertrationalität*) is the "self-conscious formulation of the ultimate values governing the actor and the consistently planned orientation of its detailed course to these values."²¹ From the perspective of *zweckrational* action, value-rational action will always appear irrational, since *Wertrationalität* orients action to a chosen value or end, without regard for consequences. (3) *Affectual action* is action dominated by the actor's emotions or passions. (4) *Traditional action* is dominated by the "ingrained habituation" of tradition or custom. The following chart plots Weber's types of social action on a continuum of rationality—irrationality:



These ideal types of social action are for Weber "conceptually pure forms" and as such they do not necessarily correspond to empirical behavior. He acknowledged that *zweckrational* action in its conceptual purity does not exist in social reality; Weber confessed that "the orientation of action wholly to the rational achievement of ends without relation to fundamental values is, to be sure, essentially only a limiting case."²² The function of this conceptually pure model of rational action, so Weber argued, was to facilitate the understanding of social action. Even though Weber's model of instrumentally rational action had no true empirical referent, it could nonetheless serve as a heuristic index to isolate deviations from this conceptual norm. Weber explains that it is helpful to:

Sociology [=E&S], eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1:24-6.

²⁰E&S, 1:26.

²¹E&S, 1:25.

²²E&S, 1:26.

treat all irrational, affectually determined elements of behavior as factors of deviation from a conceptually pure type of rational action. . . . Only in this way is it possible *to assess the causal significance of irrational factors* as accounting for the deviations from this type. The construction of a purely rational course of action in such cases serves the sociologist as a type (ideal type) which has the merit of clear understandability and lack of ambiguity. By comparison with this it is possible to understand *the ways in which actual action is influenced by irrational factors* of all sorts, such as affects and errors, in that they account for the deviation from *the line of conduct which would be expected on the hypothesis that the action were purely rational*.²³

In response to the charge that this theoretical "expectation" of "purely rational" action introduced a rationalistic bias, Weber contended that this type of rational action was merely a "methodological device" that "certainly does not involve a belief in the actual predominance of rational elements in human life."²⁴ That disclaimer, however, is not entirely convincing. Weber assumed elsewhere that the "imperative of consistency" to act and think with logical or teleological consistency "has and always has had power over man."²⁵ This clearly presents an "over-rationalized" model of human action that privileges instrumentally rational action both methodologically and normatively. The other action orientations appear as "residual categories" defined primarily by their deviation from this conceptually pure model of rational action, and only secondarily by purely substantive considerations.

For Weber, however, this ideal conceptualization of rational behavior did not require grounding in empirical reality. It was an "ideal type," which is:

formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical* construct (*Gedankenbild*). In its conceptual purity, this mental construct (*Gedankenbild*) cannot be found empirically in reality. . . .²⁶

This raises the question, however, whether ideal types had only nominalist value for Weber. As Weber's quote above indicates, the type must have *some* foundation in empirical reality to accord it some modicum of plausibility. Weber's fetishized "limiting case" of rational action is then perhaps

²³E&S, 1:6 [italics added].

²⁴E&S, 1:6-7.

²⁵"Religious Rejections of the World and Their Direction," in Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, p. 324 [=RRWD].

²⁶"'Objectivity' Social Science and Social Policy," p. 90.

like the beacon of a flashlight in a dark room, exposing only the infinitesimally small fragment of reality that happens to fall within the purview of the beacon.²⁷

Weber's typology of action manifests a misplaced preoccupation with instrumentally rational action; it "asserts the paramount nature of *zweckrational* action" in Weber's theoretical conceptualization of human action.²⁸ Yet, to his credit, Weber manifested a persistent fascination with human irrationality. That fascination is evidenced by his prolific contributions to the sociology of religion and his analysis of charisma. Weber regarded religion as the most important institutional expression of irrationality, and charisma as the most irrational and revolutionary force in politics. Some of Weber's most provocative observations on irrationality can be found in his celebrated essay, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Direction."²⁹ In his analysis of the disparate trajectories of rationality within the various life-spheres, Weber speaks of sexual love as "the greatest irrational force of life," of eroticism as "a gate into the most irrational and thereby real kernel of life." The meaning of sexual pleasure between persons is found in "the unique meaning which one creature in his irrationality has for another" that is "externally inaccessible to any rational endeavor."³⁰ If Weber's formal, public preoccupation was with the conceptually pure but empirically elusive type of *zweckrational* action, the "subterranean Weber" manifested a deep and evasive fascination with irrationality.³¹

Formal and Substantive Rationality

In Weber's work a fundamental tension appears between formal and substantive rationality. Formal rationality denotes the pursuit of the most efficient and technically correct means within the bounds of accepted scientific knowledge; it displays an inherent tendency toward maximum calculability, escalating impersonality and general indifference to all substantive considerations. Substantive rationality denotes action oriented to means considered appropriate or correct for a chosen end or value; it is "rationality from the point of view of some particular substantive end, value or belief."³² If value considerations dominate substantive rationality, formal rationality focuses on the pursuit of efficient and calculable means, and is generally devoid of substantive commitments or considerations. Substantive rationality is dominated by ends, formal rationality by means; an increase in one orientation leads to the reduction of the other.

²⁷I am particularly indebted to Sica, Weber, *Irrationality and Social Order*, pp. 186-92 for this paragraph.

²⁸Sica, Weber, *Irrationality and Social Order*, p. 71.

²⁹In Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, pp. 323-59.

³⁰RRWD, pp. 343, 345, 347.

³¹On this point, see Sica, Weber, *Irrationality and Social Order*, pp. 107-9, 117, 127, 152.

³²Brubaker, *The Limits of Rationality*, p. 4.

Perhaps the best example of formal rationality in Weber's thought is found in his theory of modern bureaucracy. For Weber, bureaucracy is characterized by increasing formalization, technical efficiency and specialized technical expertise. When fully developed, it is dominated by pervasive impersonality, operating *sine ira et studio*, without hatred or passion, increasingly resistant to substantive moralizing about compassion, fraternity, equality or *caritas*. Formal rationality is increasingly characterized by abstraction, impersonality and quantification, even to the extent of "quantifying even the unquantifiable."³³ Weber argued that:

Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is "dehumanized," the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation.³⁴

Given the needs of mass administration, however, Weber believed that bureaucratic administration was "completely indispensable" for the effective maintenance of social order.³⁵

Substantive Rationality and the Irrationalization of Religion

For Weber, Puritan Christianity was the quintessential example of substantive rationality.³⁶ In Weber's presentation, the ideal-typical Puritan systematically arranged his lifestyle with ruthless consistency, rejecting all forms of tradition, art, pleasure and personal loyalties that could potentially threaten or compromise his absolute commitment to the pursuit of God's glory and personal salvation. Weber's Puritan demonstrated a relentless inner-worldly asceticism that valued "restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling." Whatever material gain or financial success resulted from this pious rationalization of conduct was but an equivocal sign of eternal assurance and divine favor.

But history for Weber was riddled with the irony and paradox of unintended consequences. The internal logic of formal rationality produces escalating indifference and outright hostility to all substantive considerations. This results, Weber argued, in a system where the cultivation and pursuit of efficient means is elevated to a position functionally equivalent to substantive value, increasingly exposing the system to accusations of substantive *irrationality*. This dehumanizing domination of

³³Jukka Gronow, "The Element of Irrationality: Max Weber's Diagnosis of Modern Culture," *Acta Sociologica* 31 (1988), 327-9.

³⁴E&S, 2:975.

³⁵E&S, 1:223.

³⁶In addition to Weber's classic treatment of Puritanism in PESC, see also: *Religion of China*, 226-49 ("Conclusions: Confucianism and Puritanism"); E&S, 2:1196-1200; *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight (New York: Collier Books, 1961 [1927]), pp. 258-70.

means over values prompted Weber's famous characterization of modern society as an "iron cage" from which there is no escape, where humans are held hostage in an oppressively efficient, inexorable social order that subverts human freedom and dignity.³⁷ On the other hand, as religion—specifically in the form of Puritan Christianity—becomes increasingly rationalized, its substantive values become increasingly "irrationalized" and remote from the practical systematization of conduct in the world. The result, Weber argued, was a world denuded of all magical significance, a world in which there were, in principle, no mysterious or incalculable forces. The "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*) was the ironic result of a religious orientation whose commitment to a transcendent deity and a meaningful cosmos appeared increasingly irrelevant and irrational to a morally incredulous humanity.

In his monumental and provocatively dense essay, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions," Weber traced the development of the various "spheres of value" or "life orders." At first each value sphere (Weber mentions the economic, political, aesthetic, erotic and intellectual spheres) coexisted peacefully and intimately with religion. But each sphere, in obedience to its own immanent laws oriented to different values and objectives, became increasingly autonomous and inimical to religion, and mutually antagonistic with the other value spheres. The original unitary, magical cosmos now confronts humanity as a fragmented, agonistic universe characterized by a polytheism of values where "the various spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other."³⁸ This morally splintered world "knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another," where "the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion."³⁹ These mutually incompatible value spheres confront the individual with a demand for choice, but provide no decisive criteria to inform that choice. For Weber, that choice to "serve one god and offend another" is ultimately arbitrary and irrational. "The fate (*das Schicksal*) of an epoch which has eaten of the tree of knowledge" is to create meaning for itself, not discover it in the fabric of the universe.⁴⁰

Religion itself is necessarily involved in this inexorable process of rationalization. In Weber's reconstruction, religion was originally quite at home in the world. It was preoccupied with practical and mundane interests; it focused primarily on "the quite solid goods of this world."⁴¹ But given the

³⁷See PESC, p. 181. On the controversy surrounding Parsons' translation of "the iron cage," see note 65 below.

³⁸"Science as a Vocation," in Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, p. 147.

³⁹"Science as a Vocation," p. 152.

⁴⁰"'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy," p. 57; for the German text, see Weber's *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* [=GAW], ed. Johannes Winckelmann, 5th ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1982, p. 154.

⁴¹SPWR, p. 277; cf. E&S 1:399.

human compulsion to understand the world as "a meaningful cosmos," and the "imperative of consistency" that "has and always has had power over man," an interminable conflict arose between the world as "empirical reality" and the world as a "meaningful totality."⁴² The intellectual systematization of thought increasingly perceived the universe as a mechanical, cause-and-effect cosmos in which there were, in principle, "no mysterious incalculable forces." All knowledge of the universe was ultimately amenable to scientific calculation and analysis. The world was disenchanted, and one "need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits," since "Technical means and calculations perform the service."⁴³

The persistent attempts to sustain a "meaningfully and ethically oriented cosmos" were invariably countered by intellectual refutations.⁴⁴ As this intellectual demystification of the universe became more systematic, religion inversely became more "other-worldly" and "irrationalized."⁴⁵ Religion's foci increasingly shifted from the "quite solid goods of this world" to metaphysical concerns with salvation, sin, and theodicy. Weber believed that:

the ultimate question of all metaphysics has always been something like this: if the world as a whole and life in particular were to have a meaning, what might it be, and *how would the world have to look in order to correspond to it?*⁴⁶

This tension, Weber argued, between "the experience of the irrationality of the world" and the persistent human need for meaning, "has been the driving force of all religious evolution."⁴⁷ In the agonistic dialectic of value-spheres, religion was internally engaged in its own rationalization trajectory, producing its own systematization of thought that ironically contributed to its progressive "alienation" and "irrationalization."⁴⁸

⁴²The quotes are from E&S, 1:499; RRWD, p. 324; E&S, 1:451, respectively.

⁴³"Science as a Vocation," p. 139.

⁴⁴RRWD, p. 351.

⁴⁵E&S, 1:424; RRWD, p. 351.

⁴⁶E&S, 1:451 [italics added].

⁴⁷"Politics as a Vocation," in Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, p. 123.

⁴⁸RRWD, p. 357. Weber expressed this idea more generally in "Science as a Vocation" (p. 143):

...the spheres of the irrational, the only spheres that intellectualism has not yet touched, are now raised into consciousness and put under its lens This method of emancipation from intellectualism *may well bring about the very opposite* of what those who take to it conceive as its goal [italics added].

With the evolution of culture, however, that insistent human need for meaning grew increasingly problematic; the disenchantment of the world confronted humanity with "devastating senselessness" and the chronic "threat of meaninglessness."⁴⁹ If religion's "flight from the world" continued to satisfy the needs of "the masses" by accommodating them with saviors, rituals and magic, intellectuals were ever more confronted with the unremitting dilemma of their human need for meaning in a disenchanted, morally fragmented cosmos. Weber's diagnosis is sobering:

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the "disenchantment of the world." Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations.⁵⁰

In this radically disenchanted world, humans must choose their own values, invent their own moral criteria and construct their own meaning in a world no longer inhabited by gods or influenced by magic.

Righteous Intentions, Carnal Consequences: Irrationality and the Foundations of Western Rationalization

For Weber, history is not like a taxi that can be arbitrarily stopped or redirected at one's fancy; the consequences of one's actions may paradoxically result in unanticipated effects radically different or even hostile to the actor's original intentions.⁵¹ The ruthless logic of Calvin's notion of predestination appeared to demand fatalistic resignation in the face of the irreversible divine decree that consigned the soul's fate to eternal bliss or perdition.⁵² But the early Calvinist entrepreneur resisted such a fateful and psychologically untenable posture toward the world; the "magnificent consistency" that appeared to demand fatalistic resignation before the *decretum horrible* inevitably produced "a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual."⁵³ Instead of resignation, Weber's Puritan discerned evidence of divine approval and the possibility of the *certitudo salutis* in successful engagement in economic activity in God's fallen world. While rejecting the world as hopelessly corrupt and permeated with sin, the Puritan nonetheless envisioned it as the proper arena for pious engagement. Weber's ideal-typical Puritan tenaciously pursued the

⁴⁹E&S, 1:355, 357.

⁵⁰"Science as a Vocation," p. 155.

⁵¹The "taxi" metaphor is adapted from Weber's "Politics as a Vocation," p. 119.

⁵²Weber's statements on fatalism as the logical result of predestination are found in PESC, 232n66; E&S 1:573. Note also that Weber here (PESC, p. 232n66) associates that idea of human resistance to fatalism with Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence.

⁵³PESC, p. 104. Cf. p. 232n66: "The practical interests cut off the fatalistic consequences of logic."

greater glory of God in his mundane economic tasks, his worldly occupation now transformed into a spiritual "calling" by which he manifested his righteous devotion and perceived evidence of divine approval.

Weber's monumental Protestant Ethic was not a simple idealist refutation of Marxist attempts to reduce religious and moral forces to epiphenomenal manifestations of economic interests.⁵⁴ While Weber did believe "the influence of economic development on the fate of religious ideas to be very important," he hoped to subvert the crass economic materialism he perceived in the Marxism of his day.⁵⁵ But Weber was not interested in simply pursuing the inverted idealist thesis that religious ideas determine social and economic forces. Weber hoped to contribute "to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history."⁵⁶ He wished to explore the complex and ironic interaction of ideas and material forces, the "mutual adaptation" of religion and economics,

⁵⁴See PESC, p. 27 (Weber declares his intention to focus on the influence of religious ideas on the modern economic ethos), p. 183 (Weber contends that his study is not a "one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation"), p. 277n84. See Weber's later contributions to his thesis: "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism," in Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, 302-22, 450-59 (notes); "Anticritical Last Word on The Spirit of Capitalism," trans. with intro. by Wallace M. Davis, *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (1978), pp. 1105-1131. The literature on "the Protestant Ethic debate" is enormous. Classic summaries of research and literature include: Ephraim Fischhoff, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," *Social Research* 2 (1944), pp. 61-77; David Little, "Representative Literature Critical of The Protestant Ethic," in *his Religion, Order, and Law: A Study in Pre-Revolutionary England* (New York: Harper & Row Pub., 1969), pp. 226-37; Benjamin Nelson, "Weber's Protestant Ethic: Its Origins, Wanderings, and Foreseeable Futures," in *Beyond the Classics?: Essays in the Scientific Study of Religion*, eds. Charles Y. Glock and Phillip E. Hammond (New York: Harper & Row, Pub., 1973), pp. 71-130. Ehud Sprinzak provides a helpful summary of the major arguments against the thesis. Those arguments (i.e., mislocated capitalism, misinterpreted Protestantism, misunderstood Catholicism, and misplaced causality) were, according to Sprinzak, generally anticipated and invalidated by Weber. See "Weber's Thesis as an Historical Explanation," *History and Theory* 11 (1972), pp. 294-320. For the recent state of the debate, see Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth, eds., *Weber's Protestant Ethic: Origins, Evidence, Contexts* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute/Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁵⁵PESC, p. 277n84. On the Marx-Weber nexus see Robert J. Antonio and Ronald M. Glassman, eds., *A Weber-Marx Dialogue* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1985); Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Karl Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, trans. Hans Fantel (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982 [German, 1932]).

⁵⁶PESC, p. 90.

in the course of human history in general, and in the evolution of "Occidental rationalism" in particular.⁵⁷

Part of Weber's argument in the Protestant Ethic is that there was an extraordinary convergence, an "elective affinity," between the ideals and tendencies of early modern capitalism and of Protestant Calvinism, especially in the guise of Puritan Christianity.⁵⁸ Central to Weber's project was the claim that those early irrational concerns with divine approval and eternal salvation played a critical role in the emergence of western economic and cultural rationalism. But Weber claimed no validity for the "foolish and doctrinaire thesis" that modern Western capitalism could not have arisen without these Protestant tendencies; he intended rather "to ascertain whether and to what extent religious forces have taken part in the qualitative formation and the quantitative expansion of that spirit [of capitalism] over the world."⁵⁹ The inner-worldly asceticism of Puritanism in principle rejected the world as irreparably depraved, yet it passionately embraced this fallen world as the proper object of righteous transformation and as the arena in which to manifest God's glory. According to Weber, this serendipitous convergence of religious and secular interests profoundly affected the course of economic rationalism, and more generally influenced the nature and structure of Western culture.

Yet, in the serpentine course of Western rationalization, those otherworldly values and commitments of Puritanism gradually lost both their metaphysical credibility and motivational significance. For the Puritan, material success in his calling was a sign of divine favor and potentially of eternal assurance; the spontaneous enjoyment of the sensual distractions of the world was irrational and "without objective purpose."⁶⁰ But in the modern world this once pivotal nexus between "the Protestant ethic" and "the spirit of capitalism" no longer obtains. The modern capitalist engages in the endless accumulation of capital, the economic systematization of life in the service of greater profits, simply as an end in itself and for "the irrational sense of having done his job well."⁶¹ Given that "what is rational from one point of view may well be irrational from another," to the Puritan this pursuit of profit and economic success for its own sake would appear pointless, irrational and

⁵⁷PESC, p. 277n84.

⁵⁸The term "elective affinity" (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) derives from Goethe. The significance of Goethe's influence on Weber has not been adequately assessed. See, e.g., Stephen A. Kent, "Weber, Goethe, and the Nietzschean Allusion: Capturing the Source of the 'Iron Cage' Metaphor," *Sociological Analysis* 44 (1983), pp. 297-319.

⁵⁹PESC, p. 90.

⁶⁰Cf. PESC, pp. 53, 119, 169.

⁶¹PESC, p. 71.

blasphemous.⁶² But those original religious objectives, those "irrational" concerns (from yet another perspective) with divine approval and worldly success in a pious calling, became gradually unnecessary to the successful operation of economic capitalism. Once institutionalized in the social and economic structures of the western world, that system no longer required religion's services for its sustenance.

From Weber's perspective, those early irrational concerns with divine approval and eternal salvation played a critical role in the emergence of western economic and cultural rationalism. With the general escalation of western rationalism, however, the world was increasingly transformed from an enchanted garden into a cause-and-effect mechanism, existing in a universe devoid of magical or mysterious forces. Ironically, it was Puritanism that cultivated this radical liquidation of magic, as it rejected all forms of magical manipulation, mystical flight from the world and ritualistic salvation. Weber observed that "nowhere has the complete disenchantment of the world been carried through with greater consistency."⁶³ In the transition to the modern world, "the world's processes become disenchanted, lose their magical significance, and henceforth simply 'are' and 'happen' but no longer signify anything."⁶⁴ "The world's processes" are now simply events of nature, completely demystified and stripped of meaning. The traditional and magical foundations of the medieval world slowly crumbled before the ruthless and inexorable process of rationalization.

Fate and Freedom in a Disenchanted World

This disenchanted cosmos is at least partially the result of the unintended consequences of an inner-worldly asceticism that rationalized life and meaning around its "irrational" quest for divine approval and eternal salvation. The escalation of formal rationality, pursuing its means in blatant disregard of all substantive considerations, now confronts humanity as a coercive, inexorable force characterized by increasing abstraction, impersonality and the quantification of values. This is Weber's gloomy diagnosis:

*The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate world morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today *determine* the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with*

⁶²PESC, 26; cf. Weber's comment on p. 194n9: "A thing is never irrational in itself, but only from a particular point of view. For the unbeliever every religious way of life is irrational, for the hedonist every ascetic standard"

⁶³*Religion of China*, p. 226.

⁶⁴E&S, 1:506.

economic acquisition, with *irresistible force*. *Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.* In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the "saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment." *But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.*⁶⁵

Weber's assessment clearly reveals the malevolent and even demonic potential that he perceived in an institutionalized, morally vacuous rationality. Clearly, Weber harbored a deep ambivalence toward reason and its impact on human history and culture. On the one hand, Weber appears as an advocate of reason and the Enlightenment, extolling the spectacular and diverse contributions of rationality to human cultural in general, and to Western civilization in particular. This triumphalist rehearsal of reason's legacy is particularly conspicuous in Weber's 1920 "Introduction"; the reader finds scarcely any hint of rationality's toxic potential.⁶⁶ On the other hand, numerous passages in Weber—from various stages of his life—reveal Weber's foreboding reflections on the demonic potential of institutionalized rationality. In his 1920 "Introduction," Weber spoke of capitalism as "the most fateful force in our modern life."⁶⁷ In the Protestant Ethic Weber argued at the present time "material goods have gained an increasing and finally inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history."⁶⁸ He feared that "the rosy blush" of the Enlightenment was

⁶⁵PESC, p. 181 [italics added]. In German the last sentence is: "*Aber aus dem Mantel ließ das Verhängnis ein stahlhartes Gehäuse werden.*" GARS, 1:203. On Weber's use of the "iron cage" metaphor, see Edward A. Tiryakian, "The Sociological Import of a Metaphor: Tracking the Source of Max Weber's 'Iron Cage'," *Sociological Inquiry* 51 (1981), pp. 27-33 [pp. 35-6 contains a letter from Talcott Parsons on his translation of the term]; Stephen P. Turner, "Bunyan's Cage and Weber's Casing," *Sociological Inquiry* 52 (1982), pp. 84-87; Stephen A. Kent, "Weber, Goethe, and the Nietzschean Allusion: Capturing the Source of the 'Iron Cage' Metaphor." Tiryakian argues that the phrase "iron cage" is an allusion by Weber to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which one of the characters was trapped inside an iron cage of despair. Kent argues that "casing (or housing) hard as steel" is a better translation of *ein stahlhartes Gehäuse*, and that the allusion to Bunyan exists only in the imagination—and English translation—of Parsons. Kent also notes that Parsons' translation has consistently suppressed Weber's clear allusions and quotations of Nietzsche and Goethe.

⁶⁶See PESC, 13-31.

⁶⁷PESC, p. 17. The word "fate" (usually *Schicksal*) reoccurs in Weber with provocative regularity. See, e.g., "Science as a Vocation," p. 138 (it is the "fate" of science to be surpassed); PESC, p. 17 (capitalism is the most "fateful force" in modern life); p. 181 ("fate" decreed that the cloak would become an "iron cage"); p. 232n66 ("fatalism" is the logical consequence of predestination = E&S, 1:573); p. 277n84 (the economic influence on the "fate" of religious ideas is very important); E&S, 2:1148 (it is the "fate" of charisma to recede before traditionalism and rationalization).

⁶⁸PESC, p. 181. Because there is no critical edition of the original 1904/05 version of *Die protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' des Kapitalismus*, it is impossible to know whether particular comments reflect Weber's intellectual state of mind in 1904/05 or 1920, when the essay was

"irretrievably fading."⁶⁹ There was still some residue of equivocation in Weber, as he contemplated the possibility that "entirely new prophets will arise, or [that] there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals" in this "cage of the future."⁷⁰ But Weber placed little hope in those nostalgic expectations of charismatic deliverance; he elsewhere observed that the relentless advancement of rationalization "takes over ever larger areas" and "more and more restricts the importance of charisma."⁷¹ At the conclusion of his "Politics as a Vocation" (originally delivered in 1918), Weber warned his audience that "Not a summer's bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness."⁷²

It is difficult to ignore or dilute the importance of these gloomy currents in Weber.⁷³ Certainly Weber was a product of his age and reflected the cultural malaise that pervaded the European intellectual community of his time. With regard to Weber's German context, Fritz Ringer observed that:

The social and cultural strains [that rapid German industrialization] engendered were unusually severe, and above all, the German academics reacted to the dislocation with such desperate intensity that the specter of a "soulless" modern age came to haunt everything they said and wrote, no matter what the subject. By the early 1920's, they were deeply convinced that they were living through a profound crisis, a "crisis of culture," of "learning," of "values," or of the "spirit."⁷⁴

reprinted with substantial alterations. On this problem, see Harry Liebersohn, *Fate and Utopia in German Sociology, 1870-1923* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), p. 226n44.

⁶⁹PESC, p. 182.

⁷⁰PESC, p. 182.

⁷¹E&S, 2:1156.

⁷²"Politics as a Vocation," p. 128.

⁷³Steven Seidman's attempts to rescue Weber from the charge of cultural pessimism seem misguided. To his credit, Seidman acknowledged that there is in Weber a dual perspective toward modernity and the impact of rationality. But Seidman's assertions that Weber "was not a cultural pessimist" and that he merely appropriated "the rhetoric of cultural pessimism," are unpersuasive. Seidman's argument seems consistently to minimize Weber's profound anxieties over the threat of rationality to human freedom and autonomy. See Steven Seidman, "Modernity, Meaning, and Cultural Pessimism in Max Weber," *Sociological Analysis* 44 (1983), 267-78.

⁷⁴Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 3. The following sources are also helpful in contextualizing Weber's cultural pessimism: H. Stuart Hughes, *Society and Consciousness: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (New York: Alfred A.

Weber's disturbing ruminations over the plight of humanity in this "cage of the future" were a kind of ideal-typical speculation.⁷⁵ They isolated those ubiquitous and powerful dynamics of institutionalized rationality operative in the present, and projected them into the future. Weber acknowledged that such ideal-typical constructions fictionalize reality—which for him was inevitable since human minds have no unmediated access to "reality" as such—but he also contended that they are necessary and useful analytic devices. They aspire to "bring order into the chaos of those facts which we have drawn into the field circumscribed by our *interest*"; they attempt the "analytical rearrangement of the immediately given reality." But those ideal-typical constructions are always in tension with the progression of knowledge; they are necessarily in process of "perpetual reconstruction" since:

The history of the social sciences is and remains a continuous process passing from the attempt to order reality analytically through the construction of concepts . . . and the reformulation anew of concepts on the foundations thus transformed The relationship between concept and reality in the cultural sciences involves the transitoriness of all such syntheses.⁷⁶

Weber's philosophical heritage subverted all attempts to construct a totalizing, deterministic system, and would temper any Spenglerian-type prophecies concerning the fate of humanity. Weber emphatically rejected the notion that history follows certain inexorable laws, and it is important to note that Weber did not explain the process of rationalization "by reference to the power of blind, objective laws." There is in Weber "no place for a one-dimensional, unilinear and so ineluctable developmental process."⁷⁷ Displaying his Neo-Kantian heritage, Weber insisted that "reality" was not an object of contemplation; humans have access to it only through concepts formulated

Knopf, 1958); Harry Liebersohn, *Fate and Utopia in German Sociology, 1870-1923*; Lawrence A. Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). See also the following works of Harvey Goldman: *Max Weber and Thomas Mann: Calling and the Shaping of the Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); *Politics, Death, and the Devil: Self and Power in Max Weber and Thomas Mann* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁷⁵This is similar to Weiss' suggestion that Weber's prognostications were a kind of Kantian "prophetic history" (*wahrsagender Geschichte*). "On the Irreversibility of Western Rationalization and Max Weber's Alleged Fatalism," p. 160.

⁷⁶All the quotes in this paragraph are from Weber's "'Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy," pp. 104-5.

⁷⁷Johannes Weiss, "On the Irreversibility of Western Rationalization and Max Weber's Alleged Fatalism," in *Max Weber, Rationality, and Modernity*, pp. 155, 160. In the same volume, see also Guenther Roth, "Rationalization in Max Weber's Developmental History," pp. 75-91.

consciously or otherwise.⁷⁸ History is a "stream of immeasurable events [*der Strom des unermesslichen Geschehens*] [that] flows unendingly towards eternity." Culture is "a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which *human beings* confer meaning and significance."⁷⁹ Reality is infinitely complex, irrational in the sense that it is rendered intelligible or rational only by the imposition of concepts and values.⁸⁰ "The cultural problems," Weber argued, and the finite segment of reality upon which humans confer significance, are "constantly subject to change," with the result that "The points of departure of the cultural sciences remain changeable throughout the limitless future."⁸¹

For Weber, then, the construction and application of ideal types was necessarily a heuristic and provisional endeavor. Those constructions could only approximate reality and could never claim to capture it, since "Life with its irrational reality and its store of possible meanings is inexhaustible."⁸² The state of human knowledge, Weber insisted, is necessarily plastic and perspectival; there can be no final or absolute knowledge of reality. In his famous address to students of Munich University, Weber declared that:

⁷⁸On Weber's Neo-Kantian heritage, see: Guy Oakes, "Weber and the Southwest German School: The Genesis of the Concept of the Historical Individual," in *Max Weber and His Contemporaries*, eds. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987, pp. 434-46. For an overview of Neo-Kantianism, see the helpful article by Lewis White Beck, "Neo-Kantianism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1967 ed., 5:468-73.

⁷⁹"'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy," pp. 84 (=GAW, p. 184), 81. In German the second quote is: "»Kultur« ist ein vom Standpunkt des Menschen aus mit Sinn und Bedeutung bedachter endlicher Ausschnitt aus der sinnlosen Unendlichkeit des Weltgeschehens," GAW, p. 180.

⁸⁰This reflects an obvious affinity with Heinrich Rickert's notion of reality, "the infinite manifold of which scorns every conception," and about whose "intrinsic and essential nature," "there is nothing at all that we can say." See *Rickert's The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science: A Logical Introduction to the Historical Sciences* (Abridged Edition), trans. and ed. Guy Oakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 52-3, cf. pp. 214-5.

⁸¹"'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy," p. 84. Similarly, Weber argues that: "The concrete form in which value-relevance occurs remains perpetually in flux, ever subject to change in the dimly seen future of human culture. The light which emanates from those highest evaluative ideas always falls on an ever changing finite segment of the vast chaotic stream of events, which flows away through time," p. 111 [italics added].

⁸²"'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy," p. 111. The German is: "*das Leben in seiner irrationalen Wirklichkeit und sein Gehalt an möglichen Bedeutungen sind unausschöpfbar.*" GAW, p. 213.

In science, each of us knows that what he has accomplished will be antiquated in ten, twenty, fifty years. That is the fate to which science is subjected; it is the very *meaning* of scientific work Every scientific "fulfillment" raises new "questions"; it *asks* to be "surpassed" and outdated. Whoever wishes to serve science has to resign himself to this fact. Scientific works will be surpassed scientifically—let that be repeated—for it is our common fate and, more, our common goal In principle, this progress goes on *ad infinitum*.⁸³

Another recurrent motif is Weber's recognition of the cunning of history, in which the original intentions of actors are refracted and transformed, spawning new trajectories and unintended consequences, sometimes radically divergent from their originator's intentions. The "logical" conclusion, Weber argued, of the doctrine of predestination was "fatalism" and moral resignation before the inscrutable and awesome intentions of divine wisdom. But Weber perceived that resignation was precisely what did *not* happen in the course of history. Instead, unable to bear the psychological strain of spiritual uncertainty, the Puritan entrepreneur engaged systematically in his "calling." The Puritan found some basis—however "illogical"—for eternal assurance and emotional solace in the inevitable economic success of his inner-worldly asceticism. This recognition of the ironic nature of history makes any attempt to speak definitively of the future appear dubious and futile. The labyrinthine course of history can be known only by careful analysis of the past, not by prophetic contemplation of the future.

Perhaps what is ultimately compelling about Weber's diagnosis of the fate of reason is precisely his evasive ambivalence, his ambiguous dualism. At least two dimensions appear evident in Weber's assessment of modernity and rationality. On the one hand, Weber's recognition of the profound contributions of rationality to the advancement of culture reflect his Enlightenment inheritance. Weber associated rationality with human freedom, autonomy and dignity, insisting that:

we associate the highest measure of an empirical "feeling of freedom" with those actions which we are conscious of performing rationally—i.e., *in the absence of physical and psychic "coercion," emotional "affects" and "accidental" disturbances of the clarity of judgment*, in which we pursue a clearly perceived end by "means" which are the most adequate in accordance with the extent of our knowledge, i.e., in accordance with empirical *rules*.⁸⁴

But Weber's intellectual lineage included not only the Enlightenment's "rosy blush," but also the brooding and melancholic legacies of Calvin and Nietzsche.⁸⁵ From this perspective one senses in

⁸³"Science as a Vocation," p. 135.

⁸⁴"Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences," *in The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, pp. 124-5.

⁸⁵The quotes are from PESC, p. 182. I have only recently begun to appreciate the importance of Nietzsche to Weber's thought. Sica refers to Weber's "carefully managed addiction to Nietzsche"

Weber an awareness of "a Calvinistic problematic of evil logic," that reveals a fateful, even demonic, potential operative in the process of rationalization.⁸⁶ Clearly Weber thought he detected concrete and arguably irreversible trajectories in the larger process of rationalization, e.g., the escalation of bureaucratization and quantification of life that increasingly threatened the human need for meaning, autonomy and freedom. Yet Weber's own theoretical orientation demanded humility from the *Wissenschaftlicher*, since the progression of human knowledge continued *ad infinitum* and it is the "fate" of human knowledge to be surpassed. All totalizing claims to knowledge appear to him as unpardonable *hubris*; for Max Weber demanded nothing less than heroic devotion to rigorous scientific analysis combined with ritual humility before the infinite complexity of empirical reality.

Summary

The concept of rationality in Weber refers both to a type of social action and to a complex and multidirectional world-historical process. If Weber's formal theoretical analyses of social action appear inordinately preoccupied with instrumentally rational behavior, his writings display Weber's recurrent fascination with the irrational. Weber's development of the concepts of formal and substantive rationality demonstrates an essential antagonism between means and ends, formal efficiency and substantive commitment. The process of rationalization in the West manifests the dominance of a formal rationality increasingly hostile to all substantive moralizing. While bureaucratic administration—the most salient example of formal rationality in the modern world—is indispensable to the orderly and efficient functioning of mass society, it increasingly dehumanizes life with its impersonality and quantification of values.

(Weber, *Irrationality, and Social Order*, p. 109). On Nietzsche's influence on Weber, so also: Eugène Fleischmann, "De Weber à Nietzsche," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 5 (1964): 190-238; Robert Eden, *Political Leadership and Nihilism: A Study of Weber and Nietzsche* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1983); idem., "Bad Conscience of a Nietzschean Age: Weber's Calling for Science," *Review of Politics* 45 (1983): 366-92; idem., "Weber and Nietzsche: Questioning the Liberation of Social Science from Historicism," in *Max Weber and His Contemporaries*, pp. 405-21; Kent, "Weber, Goethe, and the Nietzschean Allusion: Capturing the Source of the 'Iron Cage' Metaphor," 297-320; Wilhelm Hennis, "The Traces of Nietzsche in the Work of Max Weber," in his *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*, pp. 146-62; Arthur Mitzman, *The Iron Cage: An Historical Interpretation of Max Weber* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969); Ralph Schroeder, "Nietzsche and Weber: Two 'Prophets' of the Modern World," in *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*, pp. 207-21; William A. Shapiro, "The Nietzschean Roots of Max Weber's Social Science," Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1978; Lawrence A. Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage*, esp. pp. 127-33.

⁸⁶See Bryan S. Turner, *For Weber: Essays on the Sociology of Fate* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 10-13; Robert J. Holton and Bryan S. Turner, *Max Weber on Economy and Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989), pp. 100-2.

History appeared to Weber as a process increasingly subject to the rationalizing tendencies released into the world by devout and well-intentioned ethical prophets. The results proved critical for religion: the world was eventually transformed from a meaningful totality into a disenchanting causal mechanism in which things simply "are" and events simply "happen." While the eruption of charismatic forces might temporarily disrupt that inexorable historical process, charisma has always proved evanescent, subject to routinization and bureaucratic domestication.

That rationalizing tendency is operative in all spheres of human existence, pushing ideas and values toward their logical extremes, increasingly cultivating differentiation among value spheres that are progressively antagonistic with each other. The rational mastery of the world pushes religion toward increasing irrationalization, as it steadily becomes more otherworldly and the world more disenchanting. Individuals must choose their own values in the world, but the demystified cosmos does not supply those values. Human value orientations are ultimately based on irrational criteria; one must finally choose to serve one god, and offend the others.

For Weber, humans are driven by what are ultimately contradictory impulses. Humans are by nature meaning-seeking creatures; they are inclined to perceive the cosmos in which they live as a meaningful totality. Yet humans also operate, Weber argued, under "the imperative of consistency," a tenacious will-to-truth that demands explication for suffering and evil. In Weber's tragic discursive world, humans are increasingly victimized by their own toxic will-to-truth, by their (ironically) misanthropic need to account rationally for the world.

There is in Weber's work a recurrent acknowledgment of the irony of history. Actions have consequences that escape their author's intentions; those actions materialize in social and historical formations that constitute and constrain human autonomy. The Puritan entrepreneur engaged in his calling, systematically pursuing economic success in the fallen world, desperately seeking therein an equivocal hint of divine approval and eternal assurance. But those pious intentions were implicated in a larger process; they were rendered increasingly irrelevant to the efficient functioning of the modern capitalist system. That oppressively efficient process of institutionalized rationality now confronts humanity with coercive, inexorable force, increasingly threatening human autonomy and freedom. At one moment Weber contemplated the possibility that "new prophets" could arise and that "old ideas and ideals" might be reborn to reinvigorate the "iron cage" of modernity.⁸⁷ But the inexorable logic of Weber's own position rendered the possibility of enduring charismatic intervention in that demystified cosmos improbable. The modern, secularized Puritan can only accept his fate and trudge relentlessly onward, making whatever contribution he can to the interminable "progress" of knowledge and science.

Weber frequently appears as an advocate of the Enlightenment, triumphantly narrating the manifold virtues of reason. But there is also in Weber a subterranean current that continuously surfaces, disrupting the narrative tranquility that the triumphalist rhetoric of reason provides. That

⁸⁷PESC, p. 182.

irrepressible countertext reveals Weber's brooding ambivalence toward the legacy of reason in the modern world, and insinuates that perhaps reason conspires in its own subversion.

One wonders what has happened to Weber's meaning-seeking creature who devises—like the ideal-typical Puritan who resists the fatalistic implications of divine predestination—ingenious schemes to subvert the misanthropic consequences of the human will-to-knowledge. But Weber's apocalyptic reflections on the fate of humanity's mechanized existence in a bureaucratized dystopia are conspicuously incongruent with his presentation of the irony and cunning of history. Weber's neo-Kantian perception of culture as a "finite segment of the meaningless totality of reality in its infinite complexity upon which humans confer meaning and significance" requires that ideal-typical constructions—whether of human action or prognostications—are fluid and constantly subject to change and contestation. All totalizing claims to knowledge are necessarily anticipated and subverted by Weber's own philosophical agenda.

Epilogue: Life and Sanity in the Iron Cage

The fruit of the tree of knowledge, which is distasteful to the complacent but which is, nonetheless, inescapable, consists in the insight that every single important activity and ultimately life as a whole, if it is not to be permitted to run on as an event in nature but is instead to be consciously guided, is *a series of ultimate decisions through which the soul. . . choose its own fate*, i.e., the meaning of its activity and existence.

—Max Weber⁸⁸

Since it is well-known that Weber repeatedly suffered from some kind of psychological disorder, one can hardly resist the temptation to link his morose prognostications of life in a mechanized dystopia with Weber's personal struggles.⁸⁹ Thus Alan Sica suggests a linkage between Weber's struggle with his own "undeniable outbreak of gross irrationality" and mental illness, and his inability to resolve successfully the tension between irrationality and rationality. According to Sica, Weber instead embraced a "psychologically untenable" position in which he was unable "either to abandon the pursuit of the irrational altogether or to take on the challenge" with "thoroughness and zeal."⁹⁰

⁸⁸"The Meaning of Ethical Neutrality," p. 18 [italics added].

⁸⁹Shortly after the death of his father, Weber experienced a severe psychological condition that required several years (approximately 1897-1902) of convalescence and institutionalization. See especially Marianne Weber's narrative of the episode in *Max Weber: A Biography*, trans. Harry Zohn (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988), pp. 226-64.

⁹⁰Sica, *Weber, Irrationality and Social Order*, pp. 113, 107, 117. The classic work in this psychologizing genre is Arthur Mitzman's *The Iron Cage* (1969).

Weber's arguable apotheosis of reason was perhaps then his attempt to exorcise those demons of irrationality that troubled his own soul.

Weber's narrative persona impresses the reader as a kind of modern, secularized Puritan, tragically victimized by his own self-destructive will-to-truth that has rendered his world disenchanting and meaningless. He is engaged in a heroic struggle, embraced in mortal combat with the polarized claims of reason and meaning, intellect and passion, knowledge and life. Perhaps it was precisely in that agonistic space that Weber could simultaneously satisfy both his ascetic sense of uncompromising honesty and his own obdurate need for meaning-in-the-world. In her rich biography of Weber, Marianne Weber recalled that:

One day, when Weber was asked what his scholarship meant to him, he replied: 'I want to see how much I can stand.' What did he mean by that? Perhaps that he regarded it as his task to endure the *antinomies* of existence and, further, to exert to the utmost his freedom from illusions and yet to keep his ideals inviolate and preserve his ability to devote himself to them.⁹¹

Intellectual contemplation and reflection as a form of inner-worldly salvation, hammered with the uncompromised reality of a disenchanting, morally vacuous world, confronted with the realization that the course of human knowledge progresses *ad infinitum*. That is our fate, said Weber, indeed, our goal. Perhaps somewhere along this infinite trajectory of intellectualization others will find a way to serve both this intractable, inexhaustible, perhaps self-destructive, will-to-knowledge—Weber's life "without illusions"—and also the irrational human demand for life saturated with meaning and purpose. But then again, Weber was not one passively to accept his fate. For Weber declared that:

nothing is gained by yearning and tarrying along, and we shall act differently. We shall set to work and meet the "demands of the day," in human relations as well as in our vocation. This, however, is plain and simple, if each finds and obeys the demon who holds the fibers of his very life.⁹²

Perhaps Weber still harbored some quixotic residue of hope in the magic of reason to redeem humanity from that oppressive dystopia of its own making. But certainly fatalistic resignation before the inscrutable demands of some *deus absconditus* had no place in Weber's moral inventory.

⁹¹Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography*, p. 678.

⁹²"Science as a Vocation," p. 156.