MORAL MAN IN A MORALLY IRRATIONAL WORLD:

Max Weber and the Limits of Reason

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Max Weber: harbinger of nihilism is a reputation Weber has gained in political theory circles as a consequence of his criticism of abstract rationalism. His most famous detractors are perhaps Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, who paint Weber as the greatest threat to overcoming what they consider the modern challenge to meaningful science. Voegelin and Strauss are merely two in a long history of interpreters more interested in using Weber for their own ends than in an earnest desire to understand him.[1] However, in the last few decades this has changed and a more complete picture of Weber has begun to emerge. Unfortunately, the early misrepresentations have proven stubbornly persistent. Weber, who is often referred to as the father of modern social science, still seems to many to be an unlikely candidate for a rejection of the Enlightenment faith in method and the unfettered power of human cognition to make sense of the world. And indeed, in some important ways Weber embraces, even enthusiastically, the modern critical spirit that was born in the age of Enlightenment. Weber was a champion of that aspect of the Enlightenment that refused to submit understanding to outer authority; he reserved that power to the wise, educated, and moral skeptic. After all Weber writes, "Scientific truth is only that which *claims* validity for all who *seek* truth."[2]

There is another strain of the Enlightenment, however, that there can be no doubt of Weber's wholehearted rejection: the Enlightenment's naive rationalism, scientism, and

[1] For one succinct description of this history see the Introduction in Sam Whimster's *Max Weber Rationality and Modernity*

[2] Max Weber, "Objectivity" in *Max Weber: Collected Methodological Writings* Eds Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster, Trans by Hans Henrik Bruun (London: Routledge, 2012) 121

progressivism, its assumption that human beings are basically homogeneous and can be rendered happy by the remorseless application of abstract scientific reason. Those *philosophes* who were intent on building a new science of man that mirrored and aspired to the same world-conquering results as Newtonian science had, in Weber's estimation, thoroughly misunderstood the nature of knowledge.

The Enlightenment trust in man's ability to attain total information and thus control over man's destiny depended upon a great faith in human reason and its power to uncover laws that govern human affairs. The personal God of the Middle Ages was replaced with the Great Clockmaker God, who devised his ingenious machine and set it in motion. This new God was totally remote and indifferent to appeals and supplications. Human nature, as a consequence of this outlook, was seen as no different from nature *tout-court.* It too was subject to immutable laws that could be uncovered by the application of the same scientific method through exercise of the same human faculty of reason. Of this strain of Enlightenment thinking there cannot be two opinions on Weber's position.

Max Weber makes clear on several occasions that what he thinks is important, what *really* matters in questions of epistemology is that human cognition is characterized by its separation into three "eternal, unbridgeable" permanent categories: reason, passion and a sense of proportion.[3] It is beyond the scope of this writing to explore exactly how Weber understands these three modes of cognition to come together in a specific personality type who is uniquely able to understand reality and thus to create moral meaning within it. We must limit ourselves here to a clarification of what Weber means

[3] In different writings he uses different names for the third category, including "the moral, " and "our conscience" while the first two seemed more or less fixed.

by just one of those modes of cognition, that mode into which the Enlightenment poured all its hopes and expectations—reason. Weber recognizes two different varieties of reason. The first he names intellectualism, a form of reason he "hates as if it were the very devil."[4] This is the Enlightenment overreliance on abstract reason as the master key with which to unlock all knowledge. The second type of reason is a kind that conforms to historical verities rather than mathematical precepts. It was disseminated to the population at large through Puritan asceticism, as will be explained later.

Western man's zealous faith in reason perhaps reached its zenith in the Enlightenment. This faith in reason is one of the defining traits of the West, according to Weber, and can find its nascent beginnings in Ancient Greece. In his famous speech "Science as Vocation," Weber writes that it is Socrates who first discovers the concept and its potential for reifying reality. This power of reification renders the world more malleable and easier to grasp through abstract reason. "Here, for the first time, there seemed to be an instrument with which you could grip someone in a logical vice so that he could not escape without admitting either that he knew nothing, or that this and nothing else was the truth, the *eternal* truth that was imperishable."[5] From there, writes Weber, the intellectual history of the West is marked by the unending quest to use abstract concepts to distill principles in their *essence,* that is to say, their true definition unburdened by the complexity of historical reality. This search stretches over centuries and takes on a variety of forms, each driven by the hope that the rational constructs or concepts can finally grasp reality and produce final knowledge. There emerges out of these hopes, according to Weber, the successive notions of reason as "'the path to true

[4] "Science as Vocation" in *The Vocation Lectures 27*
[5] Max Weber, "Science as a profession and vocation" in *Max Weber: Collected Methodological Writings* Eds Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster, Trans by Hans Henrik Bruun (London: Routledge, 2012) 343

being,' 'the path to true art,' 'the path to true nature,' 'the path to true God,' 'the path to true happiness'".[6] But all of these hopes prove to be unfounded—the tool is unequal to the task. The West's faith in reason, a hope it refuses to abandon even in the face of mounting evidence against its supremacy, proved fruitless. Reason alone could not supply definitive answers to any of the paths of truth. The long intellectual history of the West, argues Weber, supports the conclusion that this type of abstract reason is not capable of resolving man's most pressing quandaries, of unraveling the problem of determining by which principles he must live.

The omnipotence of reason is challenged, according to Weber, by two empirical realities: the first, the infinite, infinite complexity of the world. The second, what Weber terms the moral irrationality of the world. Weber's practical prescription for dealing with these, in his estimation, indisputable limits to reason is his infamous and much maligned facts-values distinction. We will need to analyze the challenges Weber saw to reason in some depth in order to understand why he proposed the facts-values distinction as a corrective and what it really meant. It is this aspect of Weber's thinking that has opened him up to criticisms of moral nihilism. However, such criticisms are only possible when Weber's own moral vision, which is anchored in the importance of the will in the development of the moral person as a prerequisite to the modern development of historical reasoning, is ignored. The Protestant Ethic, according to Weber ushered in a new paradigm of man. This man is uniquely capable of leading a meaningful life in the absence of outer authority because in the "rationalization" of his life, which is dependent upon an "iron-clad" strength of will, he uncovers a reason that eschews abstract

[6] Ibid 344

mathematical rationalism, or what Weber terms intellectualism, and functions within the infinite, complex and morally irrational historical world.

The first Enlightenment conceit that Weber rejected was the idea that man is capable of attaining total knowledge. It was the project of Diderot and the *encyclopedists* to catalog the totality of knowledge. If civilization were completely destroyed, they argued, it could be reconstructed by reference to their *encyclopedie.* The assumption that the world is finite and that man can now, or eventually, fathom it in its entirety is what underpins the hope that reality, with all its attendant difficulties, evils and sufferings, is a type of problem that can be solved. If reality is finite then conceivably at some point each discrete kernel of information can be placed into order relative to every other kernel. From there a system or formula can be derived that would be able to calculate the unfolding of events. Once reality is calculable it is also under man's power to manipulate to specific purposes. This type of thinking is at the heart of the search for law-like regularities in the sciences[7].

But this is a major error, according to Weber. The attempt to describe even a single "object" in reality discloses the infinite complexity of life that necessarily makes any reduction of reality into a formula an impossibility. Anytime a scientist attempts to "exhaustively" describe even one small part of experience "in all its individual components", writes Weber, he is confronted with the reality of an unfathomably infinite world. "As soon as we seek to reflect upon the way in which we encounter life in its immediate aspect, we see that it presents an absolutely infinite multiplicity of events 'within' and 'outside' ourselves…Events emerge and fade away successively and

[7] Throughout this essay the term "science" will be used in the German sense of *Wissenschaft.* That is to say, science will mean any systematic, rigorous, scholarly investigation of a subject, but it in the natural sciences, social sciences or humane sciences.

concurrently. And, even if we focus our attention on a single, isolated 'object'…the absolute infinitude of this multiplicity remains entirely undiminished in intensity."[8] The infinitude is both infinitely vast and infinite wide. "The causes that have determined any individual event are always *infinite* in number and *infinitely* varied in character."[9] Reality will always evade definitive capture because of its infinite, infinite complexity.

The second major challenge to reason that forces us to accept its limited powers, according to Weber, is the morally irrational nature of the world. The consequence of this limitation is that reason is not sufficient as a means to establish a final hierarchy of values. Or, in other words, science cannot in good faith give to the scientist's preferred values the veneer of finality and legitimacy normally granted to conclusions drawn on the basis of verifiable fact.

Values are insoluble, according to Weber. That is to say, there is a multitude of valid, rational ultimate values whose differences are incompatible and permanently in conflict with one another. This fact is in evidence when we consider the competing definitions of justice. No science, writes Weber, can determine if a political system based in the idea of justice as equal distribution of wealth or in the idea of justice as the distribution of wealth in proportion to work and talent is the true definition of justice. Both of these perspectives have their merits and arguments can be made for both. In the end the choice between them cannot be made on the basis of pure reason. Which definition of justice one takes as his own is decided by something other than reason. This is what Isaiah Berlin

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[8] Max Weber "The '*Objectivity'* of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy" in *Max Weber: Collected Methodological Writings* ed. Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster (London: Routledge, 2011) 114; hereafter "*Objectivity"* And again: "The immeasurable stream of events flows unendingly towards eternity. The cultural problems that move humankind constantly assume new forms and colourings; within that ever-infinite stream of individual events." Objectivity 121

[9] Objectivity 117

terms pluralism and it is a formidable challenge to the Enlightenment's monism. Berlin echoes Weber when he frames his example of value insolubility in the question of liberty versus equality. Which is true justice, liberty or equality? Rational arguments can be made for both and for different mixtures of each, and no science can determine one as the final truth. This is because science is based in reason and many completely rational arguments can be made for each of the possible definitions of truth and there can be no resolving the differing positions by reference to empirical facts. The implication is that the world is not a closed system; there is no definition of truth in its essence, divorced from the particular historical context it is found in.

Because of these two challenges to the power of reason Weber argues that there can be no doubt that science (into which he does not count philosophy) cannot be a tool for judging between values. Science *can* critically assess values. Though science cannot judge values this does not mean that it is impotent before them. Weber explains, "Criticism does not stop before value judgments."[10] Science must perform three important tasks in the face of values that, without crowning any one value, nevertheless, disqualify all those values that can be shown to be irrational.

According to Weber, the first and most important role for science as regards values is determining whether a goal, that is to say an ideal or a value, is practically meaningful, or meaningless based strictly on the judgment of whether or not the attainment of that goal is possible. This evaluation is made using the categories of "ends" and "means."

> Since we are, within the limits of our knowledge at any given time, able to make valid statements as to *what* means are appropriate or inappropriate for the achievement of an imagined goal, we can in this manner estimate the chances of achieving a certain end with certain means at our disposal; and consequently we can, against the background of any given historical situation, indirectly make a

[10] Objectivity 102

> critical evaluation of the choice of the goal itself as being practically meaningful, or as being meaningless under the given circumstance.[11]

If science can conclude that there are no means to reach a certain end, then, that ideal, or that value, it can be concluded, is in all circumstances practically meaningless.

The critical powers of science do not stop there. Once it has been ascertained that the ideal or value *is* possible, then science must elucidate what would be the collateral consequences of attaining a desired end. In clarifying these externalities the scientist "makes it possible for the acting person to weigh those unwanted effects against the desired effects of his action, and thereby [furnishing] an answer to the question: 'What is the '*cost*' of the attainment of the desired end, in terms of the foreseeable violation of *other* values?'"[12] Any person who wishes to act morally, what Weber calls "responsibly," will weigh his ideal, his ultimate value, against the likely consequences, intended and not, of its pursuit.

Finally, science can show what ideal or ultimate value a concrete goal is rooted in. Science can clarify into which larger context the attainment of a particular goal fits. That is to say, it answers the question of what kind of world a particular goal helps to build. "Indeed, it is obviously one of the most important tasks of any science of human cultural life to make accessible to the intellectual understanding those 'ideas' for which people, now as in the past, fight (or believe that they fight). That does not overstep the boundaries of a science that aims at an 'intellectual ordering of empirical reality.'"[13] For, Weber writes, it is over competing worldviews that men struggle. It is man's desire to see his vision of a beautiful and just world made manifest that impels him to action. However, it is not always the case that all striving people know exactly what their actions imply.

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[11] Ibid 102
[12] Ibid 102
[13] Ibid 102

Many men can see immediate or intermediate consequences, but science can show the meaning of those actions, or in other words, show in what ultimate worldview they are implicated.

Social science can help a person think through all these issues. However, that is where the role of science ends.

> The task of deciding what the result of this assessment should be is *not* one that science can perform; that decision must be taken by the striving person who, in accordance with his own conscience and his personal world view, weighs the values in question and chooses between them. Science can help him to be *conscious* of the fact that *any* action…will have consequences that imply *taking sides* in favor of certain values… To make the choice is his own affair.[14]

Science cannot relieve man of his burden and his responsibility to choose to which kind of world he will devote himself. "No (rational or empirical) scientific procedure of any kind whatsoever can decide [between competing values]. *Our* strictly empirical science can least of all presume to relieve the individual of the burden of his choice, and it should therefore not give the impression of being able to do so."[15] Regardless of whether or not we would like science "to establish a practical common denominator for our problems in the shape of generally valid ultimate ideals,"[16] Weber declares science to be impotent in this regard. The advance of empirical knowledge, no matter how complete it may become, will never produce 'world views.'[17] For Weber, the decisive argument proving that science has this fundamental limitation is not the "empirically demonstrable fact" that ultimate values are not static. Rather, it is for the reason that meaning does not reside outside man's creation of it. Empirical reality is not an agent that produces ultimate

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[14] Ibid 102

[15] Max Weber "The Meaning of "Value Freedom" in the Sociological and Economic Sciences." in *Max Weber: Collected Methodological Writings* ed. Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster (London: Routledge, 2011) 315

[16] Objectivity 104

[17] "We have to realize that the advance of empirical knowledge can never produce "world views", and that consequently, the most lofty ideals, those that move us most profoundly, will forever only be realized in a struggle against other ideals, [ideals] that are just as holy for others as ours are for us." Objectivity 105

values. Man is a cultural being, and by his actions, determined by his values, he infuses meaning into the world. "The fate of a cultural epoch that has eaten from the tree of knowledge is that it must realize that we cannot read off the *meaning* of events in this world from the results—however complete they may be—of our scrutiny of those events, but that we ourselves must be able to create that meaning."[18] Empirical reality outside of man's interaction with it is only a vast, ultimately chaotic infinity for Weber. We avoid nihilism only through our recognition that order and meaning come from the creative powers of man to forge it, but this is not a power given unto to him through the application of reason to the empirical.

The facts-values distinction is Weber's solution to this problem. Far from a declaration of allegiance to moral relativism, this distinction is merely meant to clarify that science and reason alone are not capable of doing intellectual work that goes beyond the scope of mere reason.[19] It is a recognition that truth is "transcendental."

The facts-values distinction holds that values are not soluble by reason and because reason is the tool of science in its quest to order empirical reality intellectually, science is not capable of judging between values. The consequence of this view is that science must abstain from championing any particular values. It may critically assess, but the final

[18] Objectivity 104

[19] Weber emphasizes that it is specifically the sciences that traffic in and are limited to that knowledge, which is not the whole of knowledge, that can be ascertained strictly through reason. However, Weber makes clear that even in this limited sphere reason is not to be understood as merely abstract. According to Weber, the purpose of the sciences is to create, as far as is possible, an intellectual ordering of reality. To attain such an ordering the scientist must ascertain what is and how it came to be. This is done primarily through causal imputation and ideal typical construction.

Causal imputation depends on a type of reasoning that is historical and not abstract. It is a skill that is honed through the development of what Weber names the historical imagination. Those who have read a great deal of history and have experienced much personally are for these reasons better able to do the work of causal imputation and thus of science.

burden of which among the competing equally rational values to choose, cannot be taken from individual man and foisted upon science.

There are many criticisms of this view, most of which assert that without science to judge between values, man descends into moral relativism and even nihilism (Voegelin, Strauss). If values cannot be judged then each value, no matter how repugnant, must be estimated to be equally choice-worthy as even the most noble. Furthermore, it reduces scientific study to irrelevance—a discipline limited to collecting inane facts. Any perusal of a modern social science journal lends at least some credence to this criticism.

This leaves the argument at an impasse. According to Weber, logic dictates that science is limited in its powers of critically assessing values; however, the failure to judge values leaves science in a condition of absurd irrelevance—a science that can only consider questions of means and not ends and reduces man's most important decision to blind choice.

This adumbration of the problem is certainly to some extent a caricature. However, the rough outline is necessary to clarify the nature of the problem and the role that Max Weber is thought to play. Unfortunately, it is based also in a failure to understand Weber's argument and intention. Weber himself must take responsibility for some of this misunderstanding as he ventures into these topics and makes forceful arguments in a multitude of writings that are never brought together into a single coherent thesis. Weber's arguments are thus taken as they are presented, piecemeal and truncated, without the *recul* needed to understand what is the true center of the problem that Weber is trying to unravel. Weber does argue that science is a much more limited discipline than

many would like to admit. He is unequivocal that real scientific work must absolutely refrain from those subjects and conclusions that depend upon the affirmation of one or another *Weltanshauungen*. However, where most are unable to follow, and thus assert baselessly that he is a moral nihilist, is in his particular understanding of reason rooted in historical knowledge and furthermore his assertion that reason is only one component of the broader process by which reality is ascertained. A moral life based in moral knowledge *is* possible for Weber. This knowledge is accessed by the *Berufsmensch*—the vocational man. The prototype for this person was forged through what Weber named "our last heroism," the era of the American Puritan, who ushered in modernity.

Weber's most read and likely most influential writing is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Ostensibly it is a sociological enquiry into the necessary cultural and societal prerequisites for the formation of capitalism. When it was first printed it was extremely controversial and met with much criticism. Weber complained that none of his critics had understood his thesis, and indeed it is still largely misunderstood. As Wilhelm Hennis notes, "The 'Weber-thesis' has long been misunderstood as a causal hypothesis on the origin of capitalism."[20] However, Weber explicitly states in the closing of part one of the *Protestant Ethic* that he is not making the simplistic argument that the Reformation invented the economic form of capitalism. According to Weber the nature of certain elements of Calvinism are such that they ushered in a new, modern, paradigm of man.[21] Before it was reprinted as a monograph Weber was given the opportunity to mitigate misunderstandings of his thesis by editing the volume. After rereading the manuscript,

[20] Wilhelm Hennis *Max Weber, Essays in Reconstruction* Trans Keith Tribe (London: Allen and Unwin, 1988) 26

[21] Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells "Introduction" in *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit of Capitalism' and Other Writings* Ed, Trans and Introduction by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Books, 2002) xvii

however, it appears that he was almost completely satisfied that it conveyed what he wished it to. He made very few changes, one of which was to add a footnote near the start of the essay in which he wrote: "If this essay makes any contribution at all, may it be to bring about the complexity of the only superficially simple concept of the rational"[22] This humble footnote may be a key in understanding Weber's moral vision.

In the *Protestant Ethic* Weber focuses on the impact that living an ascetic life had on the make up of society. The model of this ascetic lifestyle was the Calvinist man for whom in "one's *whole life* there is just the stark 'either or': either a state of grace or damnation."[23] Because there is no possibility in such a world to atone, no possibility to change one's fate, only the proof in action of either of these two drastically separate destinies, common Puritan man is pushed to become as disciplined and serious as the Medieval monk in the conduct of his life.[24] As Weber notes, the Puritans value "life as a task to be accomplished."[25] That task is to glorify God through work in a calling. "Only life governed by *constant reflection*, however, could be regarded as overcoming the *status naturalis*."[26] The intended effect of this "pressure for constant self-examination and thus for *systematic* regimentation of one's whole life"[27] is to "release man from the power of irrational impulses and from dependency on the world and nature, to subject him to the supremacy of the purposeful will, and to subordinate his actions to his own continual control and to the consideration of their ethical consequences."[28] He must move from

[22] Protestant Ethic p.194, n.9 as quoted in The Limits of Rationality: An Essay on the Social and Moral Thought of Max Weber by Rogers Brubaker (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984) 1
[23] Note 118 Protestant Ethic 80, 146
[24] "Never has the principle of "omnia in majorem dei gloriam" been taken with such deadly seriousness." Protestant Ethic 80
[25] Ibid 34
[26] Ibid 80
[27] Ibid 86
[28] Ibid 81

mere faith to consistent action, a rationalized and therefore meaningful life. In order for his activity to be pleasing to God every act has to be undertaken in the name of furthering his vocation. He has to closely consider each action to determine if it serves this purpose, that is to say, if it is rational. "Absolute self-control" is "the decisive practical ideal of Puritanism."[29] Puritan man exercises his will until he has developed it into something nearing absolute self-control. It is an iron-clad will that keeps him from faltering, "even once." If even one sin can be proof that he is damned and the fear of this fate creates almost unbearable tension, he does what is necessary to avoid that sin and thus reassures himself that he is indeed a member of the elect. As Weber explains,

> The consequence for the individual was the drive to *keep a methodical check* on his state of grace as shown in how he conducted his life and thus to ensure that his life was imbued with *asceticism.* This ascetic style of life, however, as we have seen, meant a *rational* shaping of one's whole existence in obedience to God's will. And this asceticism was no longer an *opus supererogationis,* but could be expected of everyone wanting to be sure of salvation. This *rationalization* of the conduct of life in the world with a view to the beyond is the *idea of the calling* characteristic of ascetic Protestantism.[30]

In order to escape from the "inhumane" tension and to achieve a sense of peace in his soul, Puritan man orients his entire life, in every moment, to the glorification of God through everyday work in his vocation. He avoids all acts that can not be explained as rationally serving this calling, that is to say, all acts that fail to appropriately consider the cause and effect calculus.

Weber argues that this kind of systematization of the conduct of life into asceticism is utterly new and that it revolutionized the whole world. The systematization of conduct under the regulation of the "purposive will" teaches man to recognize the regularities of life. The world is not a rationalized system as the naïve Enlightenment

[29] Ibid 81
[30] Ibid 104

philosophes hoped, but it does adhere to certain regularities of cause and effect. By making man an expert in this type of historical knowledge it allows him to act in ways that reliably bring about the consequences that he seeks. This is an essential step in allowing man to lead a meaningful life in the sense that Weber understands it, a meaningful life in the sense of living one's whole life in service to a cause greater than oneself. This is done by assuring that all the actions one undertakes serve to tangibly further the cause being served.

> The *goal* of asceticism was, in contrast to many widely held notions, to be able to lead a watchful, aware, alert life. The most urgent *task* was the eradication of *uninhibited* indulgence in instinctive pleasure. The most important *means* employed by asceticism was to bring *order* into the conduct of life of those who practiced it. All of these vital points are found equally clearly both in the rules of Catholic monasticism and in the principles of conduct of the Calvinists. It is to this methodical control of the whole man that both owe their tremendous world-conquering power.[31]

A truly rational life is a life in which all undertaken actions serve the ultimate value that animates a person's life. Puritan man exercises and strengthens his will until it is "iron-clad" and can resist the temptation of sin. The *Berufsmensch* then, is the person who eradicates that part of himself that wishes to only serve the self and its powerful desire for instinctive pleasure and does not serve the greater purpose toward which he has oriented his life. The greatest threat to becoming a vocational man, a *Berufsmensch,* is, according to Weber, this kind of self-serving, what he calls vanity.

For Weber, the moral life is something that only a certain type of person can live. The person who can lead the moral life is one who can effectively employ three modes of cognition in the search for truth. Those modes, though he uses some variety of terms, are reason, passion and a sense of proportion. Though he names them this way, Weber makes clear that these are not perfectly discrete categories and that, in fact, they each implicate

[31] Ibid 81-2

each other. A full explication of these categories is outside the scope of this work, however, for our purposes it is important to note that when Weber speaks of reason in this context he does not have in mind the abstract rationality of the *philosophes.* When politics is conducted only with the head it becomes a "frivolous intellectual game." This type of rationality Weber terms intellectualism and he considers it to be one of the gravest dangers to truth. Real knowledge must be "born of and nourished by" passion in order to be "genuinely human action" and thus have meaning. To live truly rationally, and not merely by "intellectualism", according to Weber, is not to live by abstract mathematical precepts that are ahistorical. The meaning of the rational for Weber is that which is grounded in the historically possible and undertaken in the systematic pursuit of ultimate values. Such comportment is only possible by passionate commitment to an ultimate value, a cause greater than oneself. In turn this is only possible through the eradication of vanity, which is only possible through an incredibly strong will oriented to a cause.

For Weber then, the facts-values distinction is an important tool for limiting science to the sphere of activity for which it is suited. However, this limit to science does not mean that the moral work of determining which life is a life worth living is beyond the realm of the possible. Such work in the modern world depends upon a well-formed character on the model of Puritan man. Because this prototypical human has learned to strengthen his will to the point of almost absolute self-control he unlocks the calculus of historical reasoning that was heretofore shrouded in the enchanted world. This is what differentiates modern man: it is his access to historical and philosophical reason with which he is able to organize his life in a meaningful way independent of outside

authority. And it is this man who is able to rationalize his life and thus to instantiate the good, moral life.

Some have criticized Weber's moral theory as mere formalism. His view of the moral life dependent as it is upon conformity to historical reasoning has been charged with being meaninglessly broad. These types of criticisms come from those who would wish for exactly what Weber says is impossible. They want either to themselves be granted the power, or else for some outer source, to determine with with final authority which is the right life. That is going too far. It is enough, writes Weber, to know that any ultimate value that is not rooted in a strengthening of will against hedonistic impulses, any value that serves the self, is disqualified from moral truth. Weber's moral vision is deceptively rigorous. Through his famous theory of the two ethics he makes clear that any ultimate value rooted in utopian impossibility is, in fact, a vehicle of self-aggrandizement and must be disqualified on this basis. It is the disciplining of one's expectations of ultimate values to reality, which is possible only with a honed ability to reason historically, that creates the parameters of pluralism that nevertheless exclude the immoral from its ranks.

Enlightenment faith in abstract reason will never create the perfectly rational world it dreams of. It does not produce "the 'summer's front'" but rather "a polar night of icy darkness and harshness,"[32] cautions Weber. If we are to avoid a descent into the horrors that the twentieth century provided as sufficient proof of the truth of Weber's warning it can only be done by commitment to seeing the world with all of its complexities, tensions and ambiguities and attempting to make sense of it and to fulfill the human need of ordering it empirically through the use of historical reason.

[32] "Politics as Vocation" in *The Vocation Lectures* 93