Weber's Moral Vision

Weber presents himself as an empirical scientist, not as a moral philosopher. It is true that he has no moral philosophy in the traditional sense. He elaborates no rules of individual conduct, harbors no vision of an ideal society. And the standard terms of moral argument—good, right, ought, should—are conspicuously absent from his vocabulary. Yet the whole of his scientific work is informed by a fundamentally moral impulse—by a passionate concern with the ‘fate of man’ in contemporary capitalist civilization (Löwith, 1982, p. 20). This concern is embodied in Weber's empirical interpretation of modernity in terms of its 'specific and peculiar rationalism' and in his moral response to this rationalized world. The former I have explored in the preceding chapters; the latter—the set of ideas and ideals comprising Weber's moral response to modernity—I explore in this chapter.

Weber's moral thought is highly idiosyncratic, and it invites criticism in a number of respects. In this chapter, however, my aim is neither to criticize nor to defend Weber's views but simply to reconstruct them from his very sketchy remarks on the subject and to present them in a clear and systematic manner. I focus on his conception of the nature and limits of moral rationality, and on his view of the relation between the freedom and moral rationality of the individual and the supra-individual rationality of the modern social order.

THE ETHIC OF PERSONALITY: FROM PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY TO MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Weber's fact-value distinction is perhaps his best known contribution to moral philosophy. Echoing Hume, who was the first
to question the legitimacy of deriving 'ought' from 'is', Weber insists on the absolute logical heterogeneity of empirical propositions and normative judgments (M, pp. 51, 58; R&K p. 274). This distinction, however, is more likely to obscure than to clarify the status of Weber's own moral ideals. For these ideals are derived from certain ideas about the nature of man—ideas that are at once empirical and normative. These ideas make up Weber's philosophical anthropology, his conception of the essence of human being, of what it is that distinguishes human life from other natural processes.3

At the heart of Weber's philosophical anthropology is the concept of meaning. Meaning is the essential property of human action; it is what distinguishes human actions from other natural events. Not all human behavior is meaningful, but conduct that is not meaningful is not specifically human; such conduct has more in common with non-human natural events than with meaningful action.

Meaning is intrinsically linked with rationality. Although Weber does not attempt to define 'meaning', he does delimit the domain of meaningful action through two kinds of examples: paradigmatic cases and borderline cases. Paradigmatic of unambiguously meaningful action are the two types of rational action: means–ends rational (zweckrational) and value-rational (wert-rational) action. These have in common a self-consciousness on the part of the actor about his action: in both cases the actor knows what he is doing and does it deliberately. Zweckrational action is guided by the actor's conscious weighing of his ends, the various possible means to these ends, and the probable secondary consequences of employing these means. Similarly, wert-rational action is marked by the 'clearly self-conscious formulation of the ultimate values governing the action and the consistently planned orientation of its detailed course to these values' (E&S, p. 25). Paradigmatically, then, meaningful action is action that is rational in the sense of deliberately planned and consciously guided.

The outer limits of meaningful action are marked by two borderline cases: traditional and affectual behavior. In contrast to the two types of rational action, these have in common the actor's relative lack of conscious awareness of and deliberate control over his conduct. The degree of awareness and control—and thus the degree of 'meaningfulness' of traditional and affectual behavior—varies from case to case. On the one hand, strictly traditional behavior is 'very often a matter of almost automatic reaction to habitual stimuli'. Similarly, purely affectual behavior may take the form of an 'uncontrolled reaction to some exceptional stimulus' (E&S, p. 25). In these cases, conduct passes from the domain of meaningful action—and thereby from the domain of truly human action—to the realm of merely reactive behavior. On the other hand, an actor may deliberately and self-consciously persist in traditional patterns of action, or he may deliberately decide to release consciously experienced emotional tension in a certain way. In these cases conduct is no longer purely traditional or purely affectual: it has an important rational component and is therefore meaningful.

Action is meaningful, then, in so far as it is rational, meaning consciously guided. Freedom, too, is intrinsically linked with rationality:

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. (M, pp. 124–5)

Rational action, then, is at the same time free and meaningful action. Together, these qualities distinguish human actions from other events in nature. Truly human action is rational, free and meaningful; natural events are non-rational, unfree and devoid of meaning.

Not all human conduct, of course, is rational, free and meaningful; much, indeed most human behavior falls below the threshold of the truly human. Thus consciously meaningful action is only a 'marginal case': 'In the great majority of cases actual action goes on in a state of inarticulate half-consciousness or actual unconsciousness of its subjective meaning' (E&S, p. 21). Some human conduct—the behavior of the insane, for example—shares fully the non-rationality, unfreedom and
meaninglessness of natural events; most falls somewhere in between the poles of the truly human and the merely natural. Weber's conception of truly human action is thus not a conception of typically human action: it is a polar concept, an ideally typical limiting case.

Weber's conception of the truly human applies not only to individual actions but also to human life as a whole. Just as it is meaning that distinguishes a truly human individual action from an event in nature, so it is meaning that distinguishes a truly human life from a chain of natural events. A human life, like an individual action, is meaningful in so far as it is consciously guided, i.e. in so far as it is rational, in the broadest sense of this term. And just as a consciously guided individual action is a free action, so too a consciously guided life—and only such a life—can be considered free.

Meaning, rationality and freedom, however, have a different significance in reference to a human life as a whole than they do in reference to a single action. Morally neutral when applied to a single action, they become morally charged when applied to life as a whole. Thus for an individual action to be meaningful, it is sufficient that it be consciously oriented to some purpose, however insignificant. Swatting a fly is every bit as meaningful, in itself, as rescuing children from a burning building. A meaningful action can just as well be morally indifferent or even blameworthy as morally praiseworthy. A meaningful life, in contrast, is one endowed with dignity and thereby, in Weber's view, with moral worth. Meaning and moral dignity derive from the systematic integration of individual actions into a unified life pattern based on certain fundamental values. A life that lacks this systematic unity is not a meaningful life, even if it is composed of a string of meaningful actions.

Rationality, too, is a concept that is morally neutral on the level of individual action but morally charged on the level of life as a whole. While the rationality of an individual action may depend solely on the appropriateness of the means to a single given end, whatever its value and whatever its relation to other ends, the rationality of a life as a whole depends on the coherence of an individual's ends and values, the constancy over time with which he pursues these ends and values, and the clarity of his self-understanding. The rationality of an individual action, in short, may be no more than a matter of efficiency; the rationality of a complete life, on the other hand, is always a matter of integrity.

Freedom, finally, has a deeper and richer meaning when applied to life as a whole than it does when applied to an individual action. For a single action to be free, it is sufficient that it be uncoerced by physical or psychic factors beyond the agent's conscious control. Life as a whole, in contrast, has the potential to be free not in the merely negative sense of being uncoerced, but in the positive sense of being autonomous, i.e. guided by norms of the individual's own making.

Weber's philosophical anthropology is summed up in his conception of personality. (Personality, for Weber, is not a psychological but a philosophical concept.) The qualities that distinguish a truly human action from an event in nature—meaning, rationality and freedom—converge in this conception:

The freer the action . . . i.e. the less it has the character of a natural event, the more the concept of personality comes into play. The essence of personality lies in the constancy of its inner relation to certain ultimate values and life-meanings, which, in the course of action, turn into purposes and are thus translated into teleologically rational action. (GAW, p. 132; R&K, p. 192)

Here Weber presents personality as a methodological ideal type. Only in so far as individuals have personalities can science genuinely understand individuals and their actions. Natural events, however regular, can never be 'understood', in Weber's special sense of this term, for they have no intrinsic meaning. They can be explained by being subsumed under general laws, but they cannot be understood in terms of their meaning. To the extent that human lives remain natural events, they too can be explained but not understood. But to the extent that individuals become personalities, their lives cease to be mere events in nature; they become consciously guided, meaningful, and therefore understandable. Personality, then, is what distinguishes the truly human and the merely natural from the point of
view of science: the truly human personality and his actions are understandable; the 'natural' man and his conduct are not.

But personality is also what distinguishes the truly human and the merely natural from the point of view of moral philosophy: personality is a moral ideal as well as a methodological ideal type. Weber regards as 'objectively valuable [his emphasis] those innermost elements of the "personality", those highest and most ultimate value judgments which determine our conduct and give meaning and significance to our life' (M, p. 55). The morally charged qualities that distinguish a truly human life from an event in nature—dignity, integrity and autonomy—are inherent in the concept of personality. Thus Weber emphasizes the 'dignity of the "personality" ', which 'lies in the fact that for it there exist values about which it organizes its life' (M, p. 55). Integrity, too, is bound up with the idea of personality, for personality is constituted by the 'constancy of its inner relation to certain ultimate values and life-meanings' (GAW, p. 132; R&K, p. 192, emphasis added). Autonomy, finally, derives from the individual's deliberate shaping of his own personality through his choice of the ultimate values and meanings that are to structure his life-activity.

Personality, however, is a purely formal moral ideal. To become a personality, an individual must be committed to certain fundamental values, but he need not be committed to any particular values. Any value or complex of values to which the individual can consciously and consistently orient his existence is as good as any other. More broadly, Weber's philosophical anthropology and moral philosophy as a whole are purely formal. Every truly human life, according to Weber, has the same form: it is oriented to some central value or complex of values. Weber affirms this form as a central moral ideal: every person, in his view, should orient his life to some central value. But while the form of the truly human life is fixed, the content varies widely: the central values to which life can be oriented range from purely personal values 'within the sphere of the person's "individuality" ' (M, p. 55) to suprapersonal intellectual, cultural, moral, religious, social or political values. And within any one of these domains—within the political domain, for example—there is a plurality of irreconcilably opposed

ultimate value positions to which an individual can orient his life. Weber's philosophical anthropology is silent about what the content of the truly human life is, and his moral philosophy is silent about what this content should be.4

Despite its formal character, Weber's ethic of personality imposes arduous demands on individuals. To be a personality, one must systematically unify the whole of one's existence. To consistently observe certain standards in one's external conduct is not enough: one's ultimate value-orientation, whatever its substantive content, must inform inner bearing as well as external conduct. Such thoroughgoing unity does not come naturally: it can be achieved (or rather approached: to be a personality is not a goal that one can achieve once and for all, but an ideal that one can at best approximate) only through a continuous and strenuous conscious effort. For only through vigilant awareness and active exertion can the individual progress from a 'natural' to a 'truly human' state, from a life governed by the chaotic impulses of his raw, unformed, given nature to one governed by the coherent values and meanings of his consciously formed personality.

In the rigor of its demands, Weber's ethic of personality is a heroic ethic, an aristocratic ethic, an ethic of virtuosi—to use terms he himself employs. Weber distinguishes explicitly between 'heroic' and 'average' ethics, for example, in a letter criticizing a pseudo-Freudian attempt to construe mental health as a moral ideal:

All systems of ethics, no matter what their substantive content, can be divided into two main groups. There is the 'heroic' ethic, which imposes on men demands of principle to which they are generally not able to do justice, except at the high points of their lives, but which serve as signposts pointing the way for man's endless striving. Or there is the 'ethic of the mean', which is content to accept man's everyday 'nature' as setting a maximum for the demands which can be made. (STr, pp. 385-6)

A heroic ethic may well start from a 'pessimistic assessment of the "nature" of the average man' (STr, p. 386). Unlike the ethic of the mean, however, it is not content to accept this average
nature as normatively valid, as setting a limit to the ethical demands that can 'reasonably' be made. Instead, it imposes on men arduous demands that can be realized only by the select few and only 'at the high points of their lives'. In this sense, Weber's is clearly a heroic ethic.

A radical bifurcation of humanity is implicit in this aristocratic moral philosophy. The mass of men are condemned to the meaninglessness of a merely natural existence; only the ethical-virtuosi are privileged to lead a truly human existence. No special dignity inheres in human nature as such. As Walter Kaufmann (1967, p. 512) has written about Nietzsche's moral philosophy, to which Weber's bears a striking resemblance:

such dignity is not *gegeben* but *aufgegeben*, not a fact but a goal that few approach . . . to raise ourselves above the senseless flux, we must cease being merely human, all-too-human. We must be hard against ourselves and overcome ourselves; we must become creators instead of remaining mere creatures.

In Weber's as well as Nietzsche's moral vision, few succeed in becoming creators of their personalities, in bestowing meaning and dignity on their lives; most remain mere creatures, mired in the meaningless flux of the merely natural. And for the latter, in Weber's as in Nietzsche's moral universe, there is no redemption.

THE LIMITS OF MORAL RATIONALITY

There is a disturbing paradox at the heart of Weber's moral philosophy. The truly human life is one that is guided by reason. To live a life informed by reason, an individual must become a personality. To become a personality, he must commit himself to certain fundamental values. But this commitment, though it is the foundation of every personality, and thus of every rational life, cannot itself be guided by reason, for in Weber's view there is no rational way of deciding among the plurality of conflicting possible value commitments. Every rational life, in short, is founded on a non-rational choice.

This paradox arises from the disjunction between the *anthropological* perspective on reason that informs the normative strand of Weber's moral philosophy and the *logical* perspective on reason that informs his metaethical views. Anthropologically understood, reason is a distinctively human power of conscious self-formation. Through the exercise of reason, an individual can transform unconscious impulses and semi-conscious habits into conscious purposes, integrate these purposes into a systematic life plan, and in this way consciously shape and create a personality out of the tangle of contradictory impulses that comprise raw, unformed human nature. This broad anthropological understanding of reason underlies Weber's normative ethic. Grounded in a conception of the distinction between rational man and irrational nature (including raw human nature), this ethic bids men become personalities and thereby realize their true humanity through the exercise of reason. It is by virtue of his unwavering commitment to reason in this anthropological sense that Weber can be understood as an advocate of the values of the Enlightenment and, in particular, as a defender of moral rationality.

Conjoined with Weber's essentially anthropological ethic of self-realization through reason, however, is a metaethical theory emphasizing the narrowly limited moral significance of reason. The perspective that informs this metaethical theory is that of logic, not philosophical anthropology; reason is conceived narrowly as a power of determining empirical truths and making logical deductions, not broadly as a self-formative power. Reason in this restricted sense can resolve moral disagreements that are based on factual disagreements, and it can criticize inconsistencies in moral argument. Fully rational and conclusive moral argument, however, is impossible in principle. To be sure, actions can be justified in terms of value judgments, and particular value judgments in terms of more general ones. But every such chain of reasoning eventually reaches some ultimate value judgment or value-orientation that cannot be rationally (i.e. empirically or logically) justified. There is an irreducible plurality of conflicting ultimate values, and among these the individual must simply choose.

Both Weber's normative ethic and his metaethical theory emphasize the central moral significance of choice. But while the one conceives choice as a conscious, deliberate,
commitment-founding, personality-forming and in these respects rational event, the other conceives choice as unguided by criteria and therefore non-rational. It is thus because rationality has both a broad anthropological sense and a narrow logical meaning in Weber's thought that a rational (in the anthropological sense) and therefore truly human life can be held to depend on a non-rational (in the logical sense) and therefore arbitrary choice.

In its emphasis on the moral significance of choice, Weber's moral thought displays a marked affinity with that of existentialism. This affinity is comprised by a shared conception of man as a self-creating being, a shared emphasis on the limits of moral rationality, and a shared conception of autonomy as a central moral ideal.

For existentilists, as for Weber, man makes himself, forms his own nature, creates his own personality through his choices. The central doctrine of existentialism, according to Alisdair Macintyre (1967, p. 149), is that 'men do not have fixed natures that limit or determine their choices, but rather it is their choices that bring whatever nature they have into being'. Similarly, Weber claims that '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 ... chooses its own fate, i.e. the meaning of its activity and existence' (M, p. 18).

A second theme common to Weber and existentialist thinkers is that the most fundamental choices are necessarily non-rational. For while rational choice—choice governed by criteria—is possible, there are various conflicting criteria of rationality. These criteria must themselves be chosen, and this choice cannot be a rational one (cf. Macintyre, 1967, p. 149).

The final and most crucial similarity between the moral thought of Weber and that of existentialist thinkers is their overriding concern with autonomy. In Kant's classic formulation, autonomy is the condition of being subject only to self-created and self-imposed obligations; heteronomy, in contrast, is the condition of being subject to obligations that one has not created. This morally charged opposition between autonomy and heteronomy persists in the moral thought of Weber and the existentialists, but the connection established by Kant between autonomy and rationality is severed. For Kant, autonomy resides in the rule-making of the 'rational will'—a will that can adopt as its own ruling principles only maxims that can be universalized. Universality is a necessary and sufficient condition of the rationality—and thus the rightness—of a moral principle; autonomous moral legislation is thus purely rational, having nothing to do with arbitrariness or choice (Olafson, 1967, pp. 39-40). For Weber and the existentialists, in contrast (and for Nietzsche, whose ideas deeply influenced their work), autonomy resides not only in the formulation of universal laws but in the value-creating activity of a will unconstrained by any criteria—except, in Weber's case, by the criterion of self-consistency. Autonomous moral legislation depends on criterionless choice.

MORAL CHOICE IN THE MODERN WORLD

Despite his proto-existentialist emphasis on criterionless choice, Weber remains committed to moral rationality as an ideal—and not only to reason in the anthropological sense but to the moral significance of logical and scientific rationality. This commitment to moral rationality is manifest in his conception of the role of science in what might be called moral education (though Weber does not use this expression): a strictly rational enterprise that helps individuals 'gain clarity' about their choices (FMW, p. 151; Levine, 1981b). For Weber as well as for existentialist thinkers, ultimate choices are necessarily non-rational, for they cannot be guided by any objective criteria (since choice-guiding criteria must themselves be chosen). But for Weber there is none the less an element of rationality in choice. For while fundamental choices cannot be rationally governed, they can be rationally framed. Choice situations, that is, can be rationally analyzed, and the logical implications and empirical consequences of the various possible choices can be specified. Choice occurs, in short, between rationally delineable alternatives. It is this rational analysis of choice situations that is in Weber's view the task of moral education, for it permits individuals to gain clarity about their choices, and thus to choose in full awareness of what they are embracing and of what they are forgoing.
Moral education employs both empirical and philosophical analysis to help individuals gain clarity about their choices. Empirical analysis, to begin with, can call attention to what Weber calls ‘inconvenient facts’—facts that do not fit individuals’ party opinions or personal world-views. To make students acknowledge such facts is in Weber’s view ‘the primary task of a useful teacher’; it is not a ‘mere intellectual task’ but a genuine ‘moral achievement’ (FMW, p. 147). More generally, empirical analysis can help individuals gain clarity about particular socio-ethical problems by specifying the probable consequences—especially those that are unintended but none the less scientifically foreseeable—of alternative courses of action. Such analysis often reveals that some ends can be achieved only with morally dubious means, or that the realization of a desired end entails undesirable secondary consequences. When this is the case, moral education can confront the individual with the necessity of choosing between the end and the unavoidable means, or between the end and the undesired secondary consequences (M, p. 23). But while the teacher, as moral educator, can help the individual to recognize that he must choose, he cannot help the individual to determine how he must choose: moral education, as Weber conceives it, is strictly formal.

While empirical analysis helps individuals gain clarity about their evaluative response to particular problems of social life, philosophical analysis helps them gain clarity about their value-orientations—about the meaning and structure of their lives as a whole. Philosophical analysis does this by forcing individuals to consider the relations between their evaluative stands on particular socio-ethical issues and the ‘ultimate weltanschauliche position[s]’ from which such particular evaluations can be consistently derived:

we [teachers] can and should state: In terms of its meaning, such and such a practical stand can be derived with inner consistency, and hence integrity, from this or that ultimate weltanschauliche position. Perhaps it can only be derived from one such fundamental position, or maybe from several, but it cannot be derived from these or those other positions. Figuratively speaking, you serve this god and you offend the other god when you decide to adhere to this position ... Thus we can

... force the individual, or at least we can help him, to give himself an account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct ... [A] teacher who succeeds in this ... stands in the service of ‘moral’ forces; he fulfills the duty of bringing about clarity and a sense of responsibility. (GAW, p. 550; FMW, pp. 151–2)

Clarity and responsibility are intrinsically linked; together they are a precondition of genuine moral autonomy. For only responsible ultimate value choices, only those made in full awareness of their logical implications, have moral dignity and contribute to moral development; all other choices are simply arbitrary acts, incapable of furthering the development of autonomous moral personality.¹²

Moral education is not confined to the classroom: it embraces all activities that help individuals gain clarity about the choices they face. Thus Weber’s interpretation of modern society in terms of its peculiar rationality falls within the province of moral education, for it elucidates what is in Weber’s view the fundamental moral problem of modernity: the problem of how individuals can preserve their true humanity—their autonomy, dignity and integrity—in the modern rationalized world.

From the point of view of the basic moral task of individuals—to develop autonomous personalities—the pervasive rationalization of social life poses a triple threat. First, the scientific disenchantment of the world makes more arduous the task of defining the meaning of life—a task that is a precondition for becoming a personality. For with the development of the scientific view of the world as a structure of causal relationships, it becomes increasingly difficult to conceive of the world as having an objective meaning. As a result, it is less and less likely that the individual will be able to derive the meaning of his life from any generally accepted conception of the meaning of the world as a whole. Instead, the individual is thrown back on his own resources. Starting from scratch, each individual must create anew the meaning of his own life. The task of forging on one’s own an integral life-meaning is an arduous one, and one to which many individuals fail to measure up, allowing their lives instead ‘to run on as an event in nature’ (M, p. 18).

Secondly, the rationalization of the modern economic and
political order endangers human freedom.\textsuperscript{13} Though modern capitalism is dependent on formally free labor, it is the locus of a powerful though impersonal form of coercion, employing as a sanction the ‘loss or decrease of economic power and, under certain conditions . . . the very loss of one’s economic existence’:

The private enterprise system transforms into objects of ‘labor market transactions’ even those personal and authoritarian-hierarchial relations which actually exist in the capitalistic enterprise. While the authoritarian relationships are thus drained of all normal sentimental content, authoritarian constraint not only continues but, at least under certain circumstances, even increases. The more comprehensive the realm of structures whose existence depends in a specific way on ‘discipline’—that of capitalist commercial establishments—the more relentlessly can authoritarian constraint be exercised within them, and the smaller will be the circle of those in whose hands the power to use this type of constraint is concentrated and who also hold the power to have such authority guaranteed to them by the legal order. (E&S, p. 731)

An even more serious threat to freedom, according to Weber, is posed by the apparently inexorable extension of bureaucratic control over social life (Mommsen, 1974). Characterizing bureaucracy as ‘that animated machine . . . busy fabricating the shell of bondage which men will perhaps be forced to inhabit some day, as powerless as the fellahs of ancient Egypt’, Weber asks: ‘How can one possibly save any remnants of “individualist” freedom?’ (E&S, pp. 1402–3).

The final—and most insidious—threat posed by the process of rationalization to the development of autonomous moral personality derives from the increasing predominance of the instrumentally rational (\textit{zweckrational}) orientation of action (Mommsen, 1974). While the ever-widening reach of the formally rational mechanisms of capitalism and bureaucracy threatens to curtail individual freedom from without, the steady diffusion of the \textit{zweckrational} orientation threatens to subvert individual autonomy from within. This idea is not explicitly developed by Weber, but it is implicit in the structure of his moral thought.

The threat to individual autonomy posed by the increasing salience of \textit{Zweckrationalität} is not readily apparent. \textit{Zweckrationalität} appears to maximize individual freedom: the individual with a purely \textit{zweckrational} orientation is by definition unhampered by the constraints of tradition, strong emotion, or ultimate value commitments. Yet this individual is free only in a purely negative sense. Consider two individuals. One is the embodiment of pure \textit{Zweckrationalität}.\textsuperscript{14} He is committed to no ultimate values and carried away by no violent emotions; he observes no customs, follows no habits, and abides by no rules—except, of course, the rules of marginal utility. He does nothing without a conscious decision, and every decision involves a similar calculation. He takes stock of his wants, orders them according to urgency, calculates the cost of satisfying them, predicts the secondary repercussions of pursuing them, and weighs costs against benefits—all without reference to ultimate values. The second individual, in contrast, does not simply consult his ‘given subjective wants’ (E&S, p. 26) in order to decide how to act. Instead, he derives his ends from his value commitments. He possesses a personality—a concept, it will be recalled, that ‘entails a constant and intrinsic relation to certain “values” and “meanings” of life, “values” and “meanings” which are forged into purposes and thereby translated into rational-teleological action’ (R&K, p. 192). This individual consciously strives to shape his life in accordance with his chosen ultimate value commitments.

Which individual is freer? The first individual, to be sure, is not bound, as is the second, by any ultimate value commitments, and is thus completely unfettered in his decisions. But in a deeper sense the first individual is less free. For he does not really choose his ends; his agenda of ends is in fact determined by his given subjective wants—by his ‘raw’ nature rather than by his consciously formed personality. In Kant’s language, the first individual, far from being free, is at the beck and call of inclination: ‘reason merely supplies a practical rule [in this case, the principles of marginal utility] for meeting the need of inclination’ (1964, p. 81n). \textit{Given} wants guide the first individual in his selection of ends; \textit{chosen} ultimate values guide the second. Only the second individual is autonomous in Weber’s sense. For
autonomy does not connote the radical 'freedom from inner bonds' (inneren Ungebundenheit; W&G, p. 22) that characterizes pure Zweckrationalität, but rather the capacity of an individual to create his own moral personality by committing himself to certain ultimate values and meanings and organizing his life around them. Pure Zweckrationalität, in short, is morally dangerous because it is incompatible with genuine autonomy.

Faced with this threefold threat to the development of autonomous moral personality, the individual must make a fundamental choice. On the one hand, he may decide to reject the modern rationalized world. Thus, for example, instead of struggling on his own to create a meaning for his life, he may consciously and deliberately make the necessary 'sacrifice of the intellect' and 'return to the old churches, whose arms are opened widely and compassionately for him' (GAW, p. 554; FMW, p. 155). Instead of working to defend individual freedom within the modern rationalized politico-economic order, he may seek freedom from this rationalized world (Löwith, 1982, p. 52) and strive to realize his fundamental values in the interstices of the modern social order, in those spheres of social life, such as the 'brotherliness of direct and personal human relations' (FMW, p. 155), that have remained relatively untouched by the dynamic of rationalization. Or instead of trying to combine a commitment to ultimate values with the rational calculation of consequences involved in the zweckrational orientation of action, he may reject Zweckrationalität completely in favor of pure Wertrationalität (value-rationality) and orient his action to the realization of some absolute value or unconditional demand, paying no heed to the probable consequences of his action.

On the other hand, the individual may accept—indeed affirm—the modern rationalized world as the arena in which he will strive to become a personality. This is what Weber himself chooses to do, though he acknowledges the dignity of the conscious, deliberate, internally consistent decision to reject this world and argues that such a decision cannot be rationally criticized. Aware that the modern world harbors grave moral dangers, Weber sees it as offering at the same time a unique moral opportunity—the opportunity to achieve the special kind of dignity he associates with the 'ethic of responsibility' (Schluchter, 1979). This dignity attaches above all to the politician who, forced to consider the use of morally dubious means to realize important ends, is 'aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul' (FMW, p. 127; cf. Chapter 3, pp. 70–1 above). But the ethic of responsibility is not a specifically political ethic; it is rather an extremely general ethical orientation applicable to many domains of social life.

Weber defines the ethic of responsibility in opposition to the ethic of conviction (Gesinnungsethik). They differ decisively with respect to what Weber calls the 'very first question' of ethics (FMW, p. 339):

(a) whether the intrinsic value [Eigenwert] of ethical conduct—the 'pure will' or the 'conscience' [Gesinnung] as it used to be called—is sufficient for its justification, following the maxim of the Christian moralists: 'The Christian acts rightly and leaves the consequences of his action to God'; or
(b) whether the responsibility for the foreseeable—as possible or probable—consequences of the action is to be taken into consideration . . . Both [points of view] invoke ethical maxims. But these maxims are in eternal conflict—a conflict which cannot be resolved by means of ethics alone. (GAW, p. 467; M, p. 16; cf. FMW, pp. 120–8, 339)

The believer in an ethic of conviction, who takes the former attitude, considers the foreseeable consequences of his action ethically irrelevant; the believer in an ethic of responsibility, who takes the latter attitude, considers them ethically relevant in the highest degree, and feels personally responsible for them. The conflict between these two ethical orientations, Weber argues, 'cannot be resolved by means of ethics alone'. Each individual must resolve it for himself through an extra-ethical choice.

The choice between an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility is ultimately a choice between two modes of rationality. Here again we encounter the central paradox of Weber's moral philosophy: in order to live a rational (meaning consciously guided) life, an individual must make a criterionless and in this sense non-rational choice between two irreconcilably opposed modes of rationality. To choose to be guided by an ethic
of conviction is to adopt a purely wertrational (value-rational) orientation: it is to act, according to Weber’s definition of Wertrationalität, which could serve equally well as a definition of the ethic of conviction, on the basis of a ‘conscious belief in the unconditional, intrinsic value (Eigenwert) of some ethical, esthetic, religious or other form of behavior as such, independently of its consequences’ (W&G, p. 17; E&S, pp. 24–5). Adopting an ethic of conviction thus entails the unreserved rejection, as ethically barren, of all rational reckoning of means and ends, all calculating of consequences—the rejection, in short, of the central elements of rational purposeful (zweckrational) action. To choose to be guided by an ethic of responsibility, on the other hand, is to commit oneself to precisely these central elements of Zweckrationalität. It is to reason in terms of means and ends; to ‘give an account of the foreseeable results of one’s action’ (FMW, p. 120); to ‘rationally weigh not only means against ends but ends against secondary consequences and finally also the various possible ends against one another’, as Weber puts it in his definition of Zweckrationalität (W&G, p. 18; E&S, p. 26).

Yet the ethic of responsibility is not identical with pure Zweckrationalität. For pure Zweckrationalität, as I argued above, precludes any reference to ultimate value commitments: ends are determined by the urgency of an individual’s ‘given subjective wants’ and by the ease of satisfying them, not by their ‘worth’ from the point of view of a system of ultimate values. The ethic of responsibility, on the other hand, is not merely compatible with a commitment to ultimate values, but demands just such a commitment. For responsibility is empty unless it is responsibility to some ‘substantive purpose’ (FMW, p. 116), unless it is informed by ‘passionate devotion to a “cause”’ (FMW, p. 115).

Far from being identical with pure Zweckrationalität, the ethic of responsibility can best be understood as an attempt by Weber to integrate Wertrationalität and Zweckrationalität, the passionate commitment to ultimate values with the dispassionate analysis of alternative means of pursuing them. Thus Weber argues that the politician must weld ‘warm passion’ to a ‘cool sense of proportion’—must combine passionate devotion to a cause with the ‘ability to let realities work upon him with inner concentration and calmness’ (FMW, p. 115). Put somewhat differently, the ethic of responsibility is an attempt by Weber to integrate reason in the anthropological sense with scientific rationality. Reason in the anthropological sense, it will be recalled (see pp. 98–100 above), is the distinctively human power to give meaning and dignity to one’s life by adhering to a central value-orientation; while scientific rationality, as it relates to action, is the power to act on the basis of empirical knowledge of the causal relations linking ends, means and secondary consequences. The ethic of responsibility requires on the one hand that the development of personality through the exercise of reason in the anthropological sense be disciplined by the cool skepticism of scientific rationality so as to maximize the chances of actually realizing the values to which one is committed. It requires, in short, that ends determined in a wertrational manner be pursued with means selected in a zweckrational manner. On the other hand, the ethic of responsibility requires that scientific rationality serve reason in the anthropological sense, that the calculating attitude of Zweckrationalität be subordinated to the pursuit of ends chosen in a wertrational manner. For scientific rationality alone affords no basis for the conduct of life; in and of itself, like pure Zweckrationalität, it is ethically barren. Only by integrating the wertrational and zweckrational orientations, by joining reason in the anthropological sense to scientific rationality, can an individual live a truly human life within the modern rationalized world.

**WEBER’S MORAL TEMPERAMENT**

To choose between an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility, then, is to choose between two modes of rationality: between pure Wertrationalität and a synthesis of Wert- and Zweckrationalität. The choice cannot itself be a rational one, for it is precisely the criteria of rationality that must be chosen. Weber’s own allegiance to the ethic of responsibility—and thus to a synthesis of Wert- and Zweckrationalität—reflects his deeply ambivalent attitude toward the processes of rationalization that have shaped and that continue...
to shape modern Western culture. Weber recognizes that the modern social world harbors grave moral dangers—dangers that arise directly from its specific and peculiar rationality. The ‘tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order’, based on the purely formal rationality of the market, ‘determine[s] the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force’ (PE, p. 181). Bureaucracy, because of its unsurpassable technical rationality the ‘only really inescapable power’, threatens to develop a stranglehold over all of social life, condemning man to ‘social impotence’ (E&S, p. 1403). Modern science, construing the world as a causal mechanism, has eroded older conceptions of the world as a meaningful cosmos and thereby saddled individuals with the arduous task of creating meaning for the world on their own. And the permeation of Zweckrationalität into all domains of social life threatens to take place ‘at the expense of any commitment to ultimate values’ (W&G, p. 22; E&S, p. 30), thus ‘ethically neutralizing’ the world (Schluchter, 1981, p. 51). In view of these serious threats to the development of autonomous moral personality—threats that are inherent in the modern rationalized social world—Weber acknowledges the dignity of those who deliberately reject this world in order to lead their lives outside the domain of the rationalized institutional orders.

Yet while he recognizes the legitimacy of a stance of uncompromising rejection of the modern world, Weber is himself committed to a radically this-worldly moral perspective: committed, that is, to struggling to lead a truly human life within the modern rationalized world. Like the Puritan ascetic, whom he so movingly portrays in his studies of religion, Weber too ‘affirms individual rational activity within the institutional framework [Ordnungen] of the world, affirming it to be his responsibility as well as his means for securing certification of his state of grace’ (E&S, p. 548). More precisely, he affirms the ethical significance of rational action ‘within the institutions of the world but in opposition to them’ (E&S, p. 542). This ethos of engaged opposition, of responsible struggle, is crystallized in his attitude toward bureaucracy. Appalled by ‘the idea that the world should be filled with nothing but those cogs who cling to a little post and strive for a somewhat greater one’, Weber does not ask how it is possible to escape from the bureaucratized realms of life. Instead, he identifies the ‘central question’ as ‘what we have to set against this [bureaucratic] machinery, in order to preserve a remnant of humanity from this parcelling-out of the soul, from this exclusive rule of bureaucratic life ideals’ (quoted in Mitzman, 1971, p. 178).

The moral life, for Weber, is framed by a series of tensions: between ultimate values and recalcitrant reality, between warm passion and a cool sense of proportion, between ends and means, between Wertrationalität and Zweckrationalität, between reason in the anthropological sense and scientific rationality, between idealistic striving and realistic adaptation to the possible—between, in sum, the ethically rationalized personality, committed to certain standards of substantive rationality, and the ethically neutral social world, governed by mechanisms of purely formal rationality. These tensions can be definitively resolved in two ways: by abandoning one’s ideals, one’s ultimate value commitments, and learning to adjust or adapt to the world as it is (and to oneself as one happens to be) in a purely zweckrational manner; or by denying the significance of what Benjamin Nelson (1971, p. 162) has called the ‘social reality principle’, by rejecting a concern with the consequences of one’s action and striving to realize one’s values in a purely wertrational manner. Weber rejects the first way of resolving the tensions on principled grounds as incompatible with the core requirement of a truly human life—that the individual give his life a coherent meaning and direction by committing himself to certain ultimate values and orienting his action to their realization; he rejects the second way of resolving them on personal grounds as indicative of an inability to ‘bear the fate of the times like a man’ (FMW, p. 155). For Weber himself, or for any individual committed to struggling to realize ultimate values within the modern rationalized world, the tensions can never be resolved: they constitute the enduring framework within which all moral conduct takes place (cf. Schluchter, 1979, p. 53).

What Raymond Aron (1971, p. 93) has called a ‘metaphysics of struggle’, part Darwinian, part Nietzschean, lies at the founda-
tion of Weber's thought. Weber repeatedly emphasizes the inevitability of conflict—among nations, among classes, among individuals, and, not least, within each individual. Moreover, he affirms the value—the 'productivity', in Löwith's expression (1982, p. 57)—of conflict and contradiction. 'The highest ideals', for Weber, are 'formed only in the struggle with other ideals' (M, p. 57), the highest personalities only 'in the struggle against the difficulties which life presents' (M, p. 53).

In his emphasis on the inevitability of conflict and tension in social life, Weber stands allied in moral temperament with his contemporary Sigmund Freud (Levine, 1981b). Both reject conceptions of a happy and harmonious social existence as illusory and disdain the impulse toward reconciliation and reunion as immature (Rieff, 1961, pp. xxii, 292). Both combine an unwavering commitment to scientific rationality with a keen awareness of its limited moral significance. Both aim to advance individual autonomy, to help individuals 'reach heightened levels of self-conscious free choice' (Levine, 1981b, p. 9) through a strenuous 'training in lucidity' (Rieff, 1961, p. xxii). At the center of their austere moral visions is not a new type of society but a new type of individual: one who harbors neither nostalgia for a golden past nor hope for a redeeming future but who, possessing a 'trained relentlessness in viewing the realities of life' (FMW, pp. 126–7), is able to measure up to the 'demands of the day' (FMW, p. 156).

NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

1 Others who have emphasized the moral impulse underlying Weber's scholarly work include Henrich (1952, pp. 105–31); Abramowski (1966, pp. 14–15, 161–85); Nelson (1965); Mitzman (1971); Mømmsen (1974, esp. ch. 5); Schlicchter (1979); and Levine (1981a, 1981b).
3 The rootedness of Weber's moral thought in his philosophical anthropology has been stressed by M. W. Löwisch (1982) and Henrich (1952, pp. 108ff).
4 This silence on the content of the truly human life has exposed Weber to the charge of nihilism—a charge developed most forcefully by Leo Strauss in chapter 2 of Natural Right and History (1953); see also Factor and Turner (1979, p. 312).
5 See Fleischmann (1964) for an analysis of the influence of Nietzsche on Weber's social and moral thought.
6 This paradox is central not only to Weber's moral thought but also to his empirical work. In a passage about different paths of religious rationalization, for example, Weber notes that 'the various great rational and methodical [religious] ways of life rest on irrational presuppositions' (GAR, p. 253; FMW, p. 281).
7 By 'anthropological perspective' I mean the perspective of philosophical anthropology—broadly understood as the philosophical study of man.
8 For interpretations of Weber as a partisan of endangered Enlightenment values, see Henrich (1952, p. 122); Hughes (1958, p. 334); and Bendix (1962, p. 9).
9 The account of moral reasoning given by some contemporary analytical moral philosophers is strikingly similar to that suggested by Weber: justificatory reasoning [according to R. M. Hare and other analytical philosophers] must always terminate with the assertion of some rule or principle for which no further reason can be given . . . The terminus of justification is . . . a choice unguided by criteria. Each individual implicitly or explicitly has to adopt his or her own first principles on the basis of such a choice. The utterance of any universal principle is in the end an expression of the preferences of an individual will and for that will its principles have and can have only such authority as it chooses to confer upon them by adopting them. Alisdair MacIntyre's After Virtue (1981), from which this passage is drawn (pp. 19–20), is among other things a sustained and intriguing criticism of this tradition in moral philosophy and thus—for the most part indirectly—of Weber's metaethical theory.
10 Criteria of rationality must be chosen even in the simplest choice situation—even when an unambiguous end is given and the task is to select the technically most rational means to this end. For what counts as the technically most rational solution depends on the standard of technical rationality that is adopted. Perhaps the standard is to realize the end in the shortest time, or with the lowest risk of serious injury or accident, or in a way that yields the most durable result. In any event, the various technically rational principles conflict with one another and a compromise can never be achieved from an 'objective' standpoint but only from that of the concrete interests involved at the time' (M, p. 35).
11 Olafson (1967) interprets existentialist moral thought in terms of the 'progressive elaboration of the idea of moral autonomy and [the] substitution of this idea for the older conception of moral truth' (p. xiv). For an interesting discussion of the idea of autonomy in Weber's moral thought, see Levine (1981b).
12 Responsibility for one's ultimate value choices, meaning a clear, self-conscious awareness of their logical implications, must be distinguished from the feeling of responsibility for the empirically foreseeable consequences of one's actions that is required by the 'ethic of responsibility'. The former is a prerequisite of genuine moral autonomy for all individuals; the latter is the core of one of the two major ethical orientations distinguished by Weber—orientations between which the individual must simply choose.
For a nuanced analysis of Weber's conception of the relation between rationality and freedom, see Levine (1981a).

Weber describes the purely zweckrational orientation as follows. Instead of 'deciding between alternative and conflicting ends in terms of a rational orientation to a system of values', the actor may simply take his ends as 'given subjective wants and arrange them in a scale of consciously assessed relative urgency. He may then orient his action to this scale in such a way that they are satisfied as far as possible in order of urgency, as formulated in the principle of "marginal utility"' (E&S, p. 26). While such purely zweckrational action is only a 'limiting case', this limiting case is increasingly approximated in reality (cf. n. 5 to Chapter 1 above).

The analogy is more than a superficial one. For while Weber, in a letter to Ferdinand Tönnies, describes himself as 'absolutely unmusical in religious matters' (Schluchter, 1979, p. 82, n. 44), his moral reflections nevertheless center on the quasi-religious problem of how man can redeem himself from the meaningless flux of a merely natural existence and achieve, if not a distinctively religious state of grace, at least the ennobling dignity of a truly human life.

Bibliography

(For Weber's works, see pp. vii–viii)

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