

**Spiritual Renewal and the Last Man: Leo Strauss's view of Max Weber's  
Moral and Political Thought**

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Abstract:

At the outset of his chapter entitled "Natural Right and the Distinction between Facts and Values" in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss strikingly asserts that Max Weber's ethically neutral social science leads to "nihilism." This assertion is most memorably associated with Strauss's view of Max Weber. But what really interests Strauss is not reproving Weber's supposed "nihilism," but disclosing the moral premise on which Weber's requirement of value-free social science is based. That is, Strauss considers Weber as a moral and political thinker. It becomes evident, as the essay progresses, that the nihilism that Weber fosters is not the "hard nihilism" of fascism, but rather the "soft nihilism" of liberal democracy. Far from abandoning the faith in natural right, as it was expressed in the *Declaration of Independence*, Weber, Strauss critically observes, took that ideal of natural right for granted. Strauss construes Weber's thought with great sensitivity and profundity. He goes astray, however, in supposing that Weber's liberal democratic convictions come into conflict with his apprehensions about the "last man," alluded to in the concluding section of Weber's *Protestant Ethic*.

Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, published in 1953, is his best known work.\* Not the least of the reasons for the relative notoriety of this particular book is the extensive and polemical consideration of Max Weber's thought in the chapter entitled "Natural Right and the Distinction between Facts and Values."<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, Strauss caustically criticizes the then accepted value-free approach to the study of social phenomenon and seems to belittle its most venerable exponent. Strauss's exposition gives the appearance of disputing Weber's ethically neutral approach from a moral absolutist point of view (see Bendix 1977: 263 n. 8; Mommsen 427; Almond 1990: 21-22). But as Strauss's deceptive style of writing is increasingly recognized--as he must have expected would happen since he calls attention to his dissembling--a different view of Max Weber suggests itself. Strauss's public opposition to the idea that values cannot be rationally supported might be more properly read as an "exoteric" position. That is, Strauss only means to give the impression, contra Weber, that he believes it is possible to acquire valid knowledge of how human beings ought to live. According to this view, Strauss essentially agrees as to the impossibility of rationally determining what is morally right, but holds that this truth should be concealed so that citizens can wholeheartedly believe in the rightness of their way of life (Holmes 1993: 63-66, Drury 1988, 1997:12).

Whatever Strauss may have really believed about acquiring rational knowledge of the right way to live--an issue I will return to below--Strauss's critical investigation of Weber's thought does not primarily represent an effort to contest Weber's distinction between facts and values. Rather, throughout the essay, Strauss is occupied with disclosing the premise on which Weber's distinction was based. The main point of Strauss's exposition, as Nasser Behnegar correctly emphasizes, is to show that Weber's position regarding the impossibility of acquiring genuine knowledge of values was "postulated under the impulse of a specific

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\* All unspecified references are to this book.

moral preference” (64, see Behnegar 2003:106-7, 114, 115, 118, 119, 130). In Strauss’s view, Weber postulated the rationally insoluble conflict of ultimate values not because he had determined--or demonstrated--that such a view is scientifically or axiologically correct. Rather it was Weber’s particular moral outlook that determined his value-free approach to the study of social phenomena. Consequently Strauss is interested in Weber as a moral and political thinker. That is, he is attentive to Weber’s view of the way human life ought to be lived both individually and collectively.

Scholars who have been influenced by a Straussian perspective are alert to Strauss’s view of Weber’s normative position. But, while Strauss’s adherents are more attuned to his meaning, there has been a disposition to accept his verdict about Max Weber without engaging in a corresponding, scrupulous consideration of Weber’s views (see Bloom 1987: 150; Pangle 1992: 39). This is the main flaw in Nasser Behnegar’s otherwise excellent and meticulous study *Leo Strauss, Max Weber, and the Scientific Study of Politics* (2003). Behnegar fails to raise questions about whether Strauss was correct in his understanding of Weber or openly challenge Strauss’s interpretation at any point.

This article attempts to ascertain Strauss’s view of Weber and considers whether (or to what extent) Strauss’s portrayal of Weber accords with what Weber, himself, indicated about his moral and political views. I am aware that such an endeavor encounters substantial obstacles not the least of which is Strauss’s abstruse style of writing. Strauss makes it clear that he writes in a deliberately confounding manner that involves creating a salutary “exoteric” teaching while communicating a deeper “esoteric” teaching “in between the lines” (Strauss 1952b: 36). In addition, he doesn’t simply present an interpretation of the thinkers he discusses; rather these luminaries--and lesser lights--serve as a medium through which Strauss discloses aspects of his own thought. This disclosure is not in the form of agreement or disagreement, but consists in interweaving threads of his own intricate tapestry into the

material on various thinkers. The difficulty in penetrating Strauss's multifaceted expositions should not, however, insulate his interpretation of a major thinker from critical analysis (Strauss 1989b, 30), though the analysis may be restricted to pointing out and interrogating some of his more obvious claims.

### **Strauss's Initial Assertions**

In the introduction to *Natural Right and History*, Strauss poignantly asserts that the former faith of Americans in natural right, which was expressed in the Declaration of Independence, has waned to the point of extinction. Strauss indicates that the American faith in natural right has been undermined by German thought. "It would not be first time," he says, gesturing toward Rome and Judea (Nietzsche 1967: 52-54) "that a nation defeated on the battlefield, and as it were, annihilated as a political being, has deprived its conquerors of the most sublime fruit of victory by imposing on them the yoke of its own thought" (2).

"Natural right" represents the idea that there is a right way to live by nature and this knowledge is available to human reason. According to Strauss, two contemporary schools of thought have made doubtful the possibility of natural right. These two schools of thought are "historicism," which views judgments about good or right as bound to a particular historical situation, and "positivism," which holds that science, the only activity through which genuine knowledge is acquired, is incompetent to validate any notion of good or right. Chapter One of *Natural Right and History* gives attention to historicism and Chapter Two considers social science positivism and its "greatest representative," Max Weber (36-80; Strauss 1959: 23).

By historicism, Strauss means the view that all thought is limited by its historical circumstances. In this view, no human idea--metaphysical or ethical--can be regarded as simply true or "finally universally valid," rather all thought is dependent on its historical context (19-21). In his considerations on historicism, Strauss observes that there is a paradox at the heart of the historicist view. The view that all thought is determined by historical

circumstances is a view that must also have been determined by historical circumstances. What is the status of the historicist insight? It seems that historicism “inconsistently exempts itself from its own verdict about all human thought” (25). Two solutions to this problem, which were devised by prominent historicists, are presented. First, there is the view of Hegel (and also Marx) that, while all previous thought had been determined by historical circumstances, human history has now arrived at an “absolute moment” when truth of the human situation has become evident because the final and rational human condition is being realized. Strauss distinguishes this Hegelian view from a second historicist view that refutes (and reviles) the idea that the contradictions of human existence have come to an end and fundamental riddles have been solved. According to this view, which Strauss refers to as “radical historicism,” the insight into the historicity of all thought also occurs in an absolute moment, but this a temporary insight into the character of human thought which will disappear again (27-28). The radical historicist repudiates the philosophical view that the whole is, in principle, intelligible. The idea of the intelligibility of the whole means, in the view of the radical historicist, that reality is complete in such a way that it can be predicted and mastered (30-31). The historicist counters that the ground of being is mysterious and not susceptible to mastery by rational thought (30-31, 1989b: 43). The ultimate groundlessness and mystery of all things is revealed in particular historical circumstances, but that insight is not accessible to rational thought. While the discussion of radical historicism in *Natural Right and History* points primarily to Martin Heidegger (see 1989b: 27-46), Strauss also sees Weber as sharing the radical historicist view in certain respects, as I will show.

In the beginning of the chapter on the distinction between facts and values, Strauss explains that what distinguishes Weber’s view from historicism is his notion that there are a number of timeless values (39). However, for Weber, there is no rational means of choosing one timeless value over another or to resolve the eternal conflict between irreconcilable

ultimate values (Weber 1946, 152). Science, in Weber's view can determine facts and their causes. In addition social science or social philosophy can provide the individual clarity about the internal consistency of value positions (42; Weber 1946, 152; Weber 1949, 54-55). But science cannot provide guidance as to which ultimate value position is choice worthy; there are no objective criteria to validate the principles in terms of which we act. The choice among absolutely heterogeneous values must be left to the "free, non-rational decision of each individual" (42). It is this view of the limitation of knowledge that Strauss initially and most dramatically takes issue with:

I contend that Weber's thesis leads to nihilism or to the view that every preference, however evil, base, or insane, has to be judged before the tribunal of reason to be as legitimate as any other preference (42).

Strauss indicates that he will follow Weber's thought "step by step" (42; see Strauss 1968: 203) and by doing so "we will inevitably reach a point beyond which the scene is darkened by the shadow of Hitler" (42).

These vivid remarks at the beginning of Strauss's essay are most memorably associated with his view of Max Weber. But it is important to observe that Strauss does not say that Weber's thought leads to Hitler. The nihilism that Strauss sees Weber's thought leading to, in the way that he characterizes it, is reminiscent of Plato's portrayal of the democratic man in the *Republic*. The individual nurtured in the democratic regime, according to Plato:

doesn't admit true speech or let it pass into the guardhouse, if someone says that there are some pleasures belonging to fine and good desires and some belonging to bad desires, and that the ones must be practiced and honored and the other checked and enslaved. Rather he shakes his head at all this and says that all are alike and must be honored on an equal basis (Plato 1968: 561c; see Eden 1987: 218-9; Bloom 1987: 143).

The nihilism that Weber fosters is not the "hard nihilism" of fascism, but rather the "soft nihilism" of liberal democracy. Weber's view ultimately sanctions the indiscriminate pursuit

of preferences characteristic of modern liberal democracy despite the fact that Weber, himself, according to Strauss, resists the descent into vulgarity (43-48; see Eden 1987).

Strauss demonstrates the necessary consequence of Weber's thought through a dialectical "step by step" interrogation of Weber's basic suppositions. While Weber tries to affirm some standard of human excellence, as Strauss presents Weber's views in the dialogue that Strauss constructs, the logic of Weber's position drives inexorably to a lowbrow "equality of all preferences" (see 5, 72; Strauss 1968: 221-222). "The final formulation of Weber's ethical principle," that survives this cross-examination, is the moral command: "'Thou shalt have preferences'—an Ought whose fulfilment [*sic*] is fully guaranteed by the Is" (47). Weber's doctrine of the "difference between facts and values rationally justifies the preference for liberal democracy--contrary to what is intended by that distinction itself" (Strauss 1968: 221).

Hitler's shadow, then, darkens the scene *beyond* philistine democracy and the aimless pursuit of every whim. The worst excesses of fascism loom beyond liberal democracy for essentially two reasons. First, what Strauss often refers to as the "crisis of liberalism" consists in the inability of liberalism to resist intolerance. Because liberalism is committed to the tolerance of all preferences and rejects absolutist positions, it ultimately becomes insupportable absolutism to maintain that tolerance is superior to intolerance. Despite what Strauss avers at the beginning of *Natural Right and History*, it turns out that it was not German thought that actually undermined American liberalism in Strauss's view; rather "the respect for diversity and individuality" and the aversion to absolutist positions, intrinsic to liberalism, finally undermined faith in the ideals of liberalism (5). "Liberal relativism has its roots in the natural right tradition of tolerance or in the notion that everyone has a natural right to the pursuit of happiness as he understands happiness; but in itself it is a seminary of intolerance" (6). Intellectual adherents of liberalism--such as contemporary scientific social

scientists for whom Strauss reserves some particularly contemptuous invective (49, 52-53)-- are oblivious to this contradiction or indifferent to this contradiction at the heart of liberalism (49, Strauss 1968: 203-223). When faced with resolution, "single-mindedness" and ruthlessness, such as confronted the German Weimar Republic in the late 1920's and early 1930s, liberal democracy has shown itself incapable of marshalling robust resistance to these forces. As a "young Jew born and raised in Germany" (Strauss 1965: 1), Strauss witnessed this disintegration of the Weimar regime. Clearly Strauss was profoundly affected by these events, but it is important to observe that he did not simply generalize his particular experience and suppose that such a danger necessarily threatened all liberal democracies. Strauss's reflections on Weimar Germany indicate that he was aware of unique circumstances in German history that contributed to the weakness of the Weimar regime while "there were other liberal democracies which were and remained strong" notwithstanding the "economic crisis of 1929" (Strauss 1965: 1).

The second and more important reason, in the context of this essay, that the shadow of fascism looms beyond liberal democracy is because the regime that promotes permissiveness, equality and material prosperity appears to the philosophers who influenced fascism as degrading to the human spirit. It was this revulsion to liberal democracy that shaped the views of Nietzsche who decried those "last men who have invented happiness" (Nietzsche 1966a: 17).<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, both of whom became affiliated with the Nazi party, felt a deep aversion to the perceived spirit-enfeebling character of liberalism. The greatest crisis of liberalism may consist in the possibility that the fascist criticism is compelling (see Strauss 1989a, 98, 1989b 29): "A view is not refuted by the fact that it happens to have been shared by Hitler" (42-43).

The preeminent critics of liberal democracy feared that this form of human life may well become global and enduring. Technological, bureaucratic civilization is likely to expand

and become ubiquitous (see Heidegger 1959: 38) bringing about “complete leveling and uniformity;” the “unity of the human race at the lowest level” (Strauss 1989b: 42). Irrespective of whether liberalism rests on an inner contradiction, the inability of liberalism to coherently resist intolerance is irrelevant from a practical point of view if there is no exigent intolerant position to resist. Anxiety about the banality of the universal, egalitarian and prosperous society as humankind’s final condition is the central theme of Strauss’s essay on Weber. Between the assertion about Weber’s thesis leading to nihilism and the observation about fascism looming beyond where Weber leads us, Strauss writes that Weber saw this alternative for Western civilization:

Either spiritual renewal (“wholly new prophets or a powerful renaissance of old thoughts and ideals”) or else “mechanized petrification varnished by a kind of convulsive sense of self-importance,” i.e., the extinction of every human possibility but that of “specialists without spirit or visions and voluptuaries without heart.” (42).

Strauss recurs throughout the essay to Weber’s prognostication about the consequences of modern capitalism at the end of the Protestant Ethic (42, 49, 62 and see 47, 39, 74). Although Talcott Parson translated “*letzten menschen*” as “the last stage” (Weber 1958, 182), it is well known that Weber, in fact, employed Nietzsche’s metaphor of the last man preceding the exclamation about specialists without spirit (Weber 1920, 204). Thus the translation should more properly read: “For [the last men] of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.”

### **Noble Warriors or the Golden Age**

In Strauss’s view, Weber’s memorable pronouncement at the end of the *Protestant Ethic* indicates that he shared Nietzsche’s apprehensions about the bleak prospects for humankind. Human history, for both, is moving toward a condition of dreary docility devoid of the challenges and ideals that lift human beings beyond dull animal instincts (44). Indeed Weber “rejected utilitarianism and every form of eudemonism” (43). He encouraged the rational

devotion to freely chosen ultimate values as exalting humanity “far above everything merely natural or above all brutes” (44, Weber 1949: 18). But the ability to consecrate oneself to something higher than oneself presupposes inner turmoil as opposed to docility and bovine contentment (Nietzsche 1966a, 17). The apparent correspondence between Weber’s apprehensions and Nietzsche’s is made explicit in the following observation:

“peace and universal happiness” appeared to [Weber] to be an illegitimate or fantastic goal. Even if that goal could be reached, he thought it would not be desirable; it would be the condition of “the last men who have invented happiness,” against whom Nietzsche had directed his “devastating criticism.” (65; see 134; Weber 1946: 143).

Strauss sees Weber’s advocacy of “power politics” and the need to conquer “elbow room” for the nation as reflecting his fundamental conviction that peace is “incompatible with a truly human life” (65; cf. 228).<sup>3</sup> Weber’s advocacy of the national interest would seem to share the combative spirit of Carl Schmitt’s affirmation of inter-group enmity. Indeed Schmitt attended Weber’s two famous lectures *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation*, delivered to the *Freistudentische Bund* (Free Student Union) in Munich in November 1917 and January 1919 respectively, and is regarded by some interpreters as Weber’s “legitimate pupil” (Habermas in Stammer ed. 1971: 66; Mommsen 1984: 382).

In his, *Concept of the Political*--first published in 1927, then refined and republished in 1932--Schmitt challenged apolitical liberalism by disclosing the existential ground of “the political”--the distinction between “friend and enemy” (Schmitt 1976: 26 and *passim*). The decisive character of the political is the ever present possibility of conflict between human groups and, ultimately, authorized bloodshed and the sacrifice of life (Schmitt 1976: 35). While Schmitt presented the conflict between human communities as the hard reality of the human condition, it is clear that he also valorized the political in contrast to “total depoliticization” and a “universal society” in which “there would no longer be nations in the form of political entities” (Schmitt 1976: 55). In his 1932 comments on Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*, Strauss brings Schmitt’s positive affirmation of the political to light

and exposes his abhorrence of a “world devoid of politics” (98).<sup>4</sup> In the last analysis, Strauss asserts, Schmitt’s affirmation of the political is “nothing other than the affirmation of the moral” (Strauss in Schmitt 1976: 99). Schmitt’s ultimate concern is with the quality of human existence or “a truly human life.” Strauss’s Weber shares this Schmittian preference for a world of deadly struggle because such a condition calls forth moral seriousness. As Nasser Behnegar observes in his commentary on this section of *Natural Right*, the “existence of conflict becomes the condition of nobility and hence something that is desired by noble natures” (Behnegar 2003: 117).

But, in Strauss’s view, Weber is surpassing in wishing to make conflict penetrate to the core human existence. An unqualified acceptance of a “warrior ethics” would leave the adherent with inner peace (65). Since conflict is the condition for “a truly human life,” the individual must also be inwardly strife-torn. “There must be an absolute duty directing us toward universal peace or universal brotherhood, a duty conflicting with the equally high duty that directs us to participate in ‘the eternal struggle’ for ‘elbow room’ for our nation. Conflict would not be extreme is guilt could be escaped” (65-66). According to Strauss, Schmitt associated all morality with “humanitarian-pacifist morality” and endeavored to negate it (Strauss in Schmitt 1976: 102). Weber, by contrast, was a true believer; he earnestly adhered to the humanitarian moral ideal. The pivot of Strauss’s essay is the insight that brotherly ethics had a genuine hold on Max Weber’s soul (see Strauss 1959: 240).

The religious ethic of brotherliness, in its most highly developed and rationalized form, for Weber, “goes beyond all barriers of social associations, often including that of one’s own faith” and is “sublimated into an ethics of intention” (Weber 1946: 330).<sup>5</sup> This ethic commands an inner attitude “of *caritas*, love for the sufferer *per se*, for one’s neighbor, for man, and finally for the enemy” (Weber 1946: 330; Weber 1920; 543-4). Following Kant, Weber held that any genuinely ethical imperative commands respect for the equal dignity of

all human beings by virtue of their shared capacity for rational self-determination (43).<sup>6</sup> Indeed a neo-Kantian conception of ethical imperatives is the starting point for Strauss's demonstration, discussed above, that Weber's position leads to vulgar nihilism. Weber endeavored to uphold the validity of "binding rational norms" or "ethical imperatives" over against "cultural values" and "vitalistic values" (43-47). But ultimately Strauss's Weber had to concede that "ethical imperatives" are not demonstrably more choice worthy than cultural values or vitalistic values or simply "being "engrossed with one's comfort and prestige" (47). Later in the chapter, in a more telling formulation of Weber's position, Strauss observes that Weber's

sociological explanation of Hindu thought is based on the premise that natural right "of any kind" presupposes the natural equality of all men, if not even a blessed state at the beginning and at the end (58).

This quotation, in the first place, alerts us that there is, for Strauss, a kind of "right" that is not the egalitarian natural right expressed in the Declaration of Independence (see 151, 156). But what is important to note at this point is Strauss's assertion that Weber took for granted that "natural right"--or the right way to live--necessarily presupposes the equality of human beings. A caste system or slavery cannot be compatible with the way to live dictated by egalitarian natural right (118).

Many of Strauss's citations to Weber's political writings refer to well-known passages in either Weber's youthful inaugural lecture--"The Nation State and Economic Policy"--presented at the University of Freiberg in 1895 or to "Politics as a Vocation" delivered in Munich in 1919 a year before he died in 1920. There are several interesting exceptions, however. Strauss cites a few passages from Weber's wartime writings the selection of which indicate that Strauss sees a naïve and misplaced faith in liberal democracy in Weber's thought. On page 73, note 31, Strauss points to two tragically mistaken predictions Weber made during the First World War: 1) "Our enemies know, or they will learn, that German

democracy will not conclude peace on bad terms--unless it wants to throw away its future” (Weber 1994: 132; 1921: 128) and 2) parliamentary institutions provide a “peaceful way of *eliminating* the Caesarist dictator when he has *lost* the trust of the masses” (1994: 222, 1921: 213). In another instance, in a footnote corresponding to Strauss’s observation about the “unintelligent, uninformed, deceitful, and irrational people” who are surveyed for public opinion polls (53 n. 18), reference is made to Weber’s praise of the British “democratic method” of explaining war aims to workers in a straightforward and matter of fact way as opposed to the more ineffective and deceptive approach of the German leaders (Weber 1921: 331).<sup>7</sup> These notes support Strauss’s fundamental contention that Weber took the way of life based on human equality for granted as the right way of life (while Strauss induces the reader to question this assumption).

What does Strauss mean, however, about “a blessed state at the beginning and at the end?” In the chapter following the chapter on Max Weber, entitled “The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right,” Strauss writes that the “doctrine of natural freedom and equality...allies itself with the doctrine of a golden age” (118). The expression “golden age” is a recurring trope in Strauss’s writings. In his *Seventh Letter*, Plato wrote that the rule of the Thirty Tyrants made the former (democratic) constitution look like “an age of gold” (Hamilton and Cairns ed.: 1575 [324d 7-8]; Strauss 1964:131). Strauss borrows this figure of speech to characterize the way that the discredited Weimar democracy appeared after the occurrence of the regime prepared by Nietzsche (1959: 55). The “golden age” derives from Hesiod’s ages of man in *Work and Days* and refers to the first of five successive ages--gold, silver, bronze, heroic and iron.<sup>8</sup> According to Hesiod, the golden race of mortals, who “led a blessed life under Kronos” (Strauss 1968: 39),

lived like gods, with carefree heart, remote from toil and misery. Wretched old age did not affect them either, but with hands and feet ever unchanged they enjoyed themselves in feasting, beyond all ills, and they died as if overcome by sleep. All good things were theirs, and the grain-giving soil bore its fruits of its own accord in

unstinted plenty, while they at leisure harvested their fields in contentment amid abundance (Hesiod 1999: 40).

The imagery of metals associated with the quality of human communal life is found in a number of other classical sources and also appears in the Old Testament in the Book of Daniel. In Daniel 2: 32-33; gold, silver, bronze and iron/clay are associated with four successively degenerate kingdoms. The image of four kingdoms emerges again in chapter seven of Daniel and the chapter ends with an apocalyptic vision of the coming of “one like a son of man” who is served by all men and nations (Daniel 7:13-14). The Book of Daniel has particularly influenced Christian millenarian movements. An especially radical and egalitarian puritan sect prominent during English Civil War called themselves Fifth Monarchy Men in reference to the coming of the fifth and final kingdom prophesied in Daniel. Various calculations about when the *parousia* would occur were rife during the seventeenth century. Many Fifth Monarchy members were persuaded by the calculation that Christ would return in the year 1,666 and inaugurate a golden age (Nisbet 1980:136-7). This messianic thousand year reign of Christ was envisaged by millenarians as an age during which human beings would enjoy “all fulnesse of all temporal blessings, as peace, safety riches, health” and all else that “can be had in this world” (quoted in Davis 1981: 35). Strauss wrote an early work on Hobbes and was certainly aware of the Fifth Monarchy Men and other millenarian movements that were active in the seventeenth century. It is likely that Strauss has millenarianism in mind when making the observation about the alliance of the natural right teaching and the “golden age” (Strauss 1949: 45; Strauss 1958: 32, 165-6; cf. Machiavelli 1950: 297). The modern natural right philosophers seem to have adopted the “golden age” ideal of peace, safety, health and ease as representing the best political regime in contrast to the ancient ideal of an aristocratic regime ruled by urban patrician gentlemen (142-143, 150 n. 24, 112-3). This is not to say that the early modern philosophers believed in divine providence. On the contrary, they directed much of their animus against irrational and

intolerant religiosity, but their political vision coincided with the millenarian ideal (see Comments on Schmitt 1976: 89-90). The early modern philosophers aimed to scientifically bring about the alleviation of earthly suffering or in Bacon's phrase, often quoted by Strauss, "the relief of man's estate." Science directed toward the "conquest of nature" would actualize peace and deliverance from misery and thereby make religion irrelevant (198). However, the condition aimed for by the modern philosophers apparently results the pitiful "last man," a denouement in connection with which Nietzsche uses the expression "blessed state" (Nietzsche 1957: 57).

Strauss seems to suggest that not only did Weber believe that "right" is necessarily associated with equality but may "even" have gone so far as to connect right with a providential view that looks forward to the extirpation of human suffering and a comfortable existence for all. The distinction between the view Strauss attributes to Weber and the view of the modern philosophers is clear when we consider that the early modern philosophers--most obviously Hobbes (184)--did not envisage a "blessed state" or "golden age" at the "beginning" or in the brutish "state of nature." In other words, in contrast to the modern philosophers, there is a genuinely religious impulse behind Weber's embrace of the millenarian ideal, in Strauss's view.

An authentic ethics, according to Strauss's Weber, requires an embracing concern for the human family and its destiny. However, as discussed above, Weber also seems to have shared Schmitt's view that inter-group conflict is the source of human dignity. The equality and peace, which it is morally imperative to promote, would deprive humanity of its dignity. National conflict elicits "human greatness and nobility" (Weber 1994: 15), but any genuine moral position, which is necessarily dedicated to the "preservation or restoration of natural freedom and equality," commands the end to "the division of the human race into distinct

national or ethnic groups” (118). Given the depth of Weber’s commitment to absolutely contradictory values, he apparently succeeds in embodying the most intense inner turmoil:

[Weber] postulated the insolubility of all value conflicts, because his soul craved a universe in which failure, that bastard of forceful sinning accompanied by still more forceful faith, instead of felicity and serenity, was to be the mark of human nobility (Strauss 1949: 23).

Weber was unable to affirm the debased character of the life of specialists without spirit and sensualists without heart, in Strauss’s view, not because of the prohibition against value judgments. On the contrary it was Weber’s inability to decide between mutually incompatible ideals that that led him to postulate the insolubility of values conflicts. Weber’s moral preference, according to Strauss, is for the tragic life (Strauss 1959: 23; Behnegar 2003: 114)--for a life lived in anguished openness to the chaos at the heart of existence.

Strauss has construed Weber’s thought in an interesting way that contributes to the on-going debate on Max Weber’s political thought. The main debate among Weber’s commentators, regarding his political thought, centers on whether Weber--who was an advocate of liberal democratic reform in Germany--was genuinely attached to liberal democracy or whether he advocated the adoption of parliamentary institutions only as a means of calling forth dynamic plebiscitary leaders who would advance the power interests of the nation. In the former view, Weber’s political writings reflect a genuine commitment to liberal ideals and to making liberal pluralism viable. The contrary view sees Weber’s liberalism as instrumental to his deepest concern for national greatness. What Strauss’s interpretation suggests is that both views are correct; that these contradictory views were held together in Weber’s tormented soul.

### **“Lasciate Ogni Speranza”**

While Strauss has grasped something significant in Weber’s outlook that merits serious consideration, there seems to be a fundamental flaw in this part of Strauss’s analysis, which is perhaps not a deliberate flaw, but a genuine oversight on Strauss’s part. On the basis of scant

textual evidence, Strauss assumes that Weber shared Nietzsche's angst about the "last man"--and Schmitt's aversion to liberal depoliticization--and saw modern liberal democracy as moving toward a stultifying, debased condition. Scholars influenced by Strauss have tended to unquestioningly follow this verdict. Francis Fukuyama, for one notable example, alludes to Weber as a figure who both anticipated and despaired of "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1992: 68-69). In a recent essay for the *New York Times* Book Review section, Fukuyama associates Weber's bleak vision of the modern world with democratization, peace and prosperity. Intriguingly Fukuyama hints at a reconsideration of his own dismal view of the "end of history," but still unquestioningly accepts the Straussian portrayal of Weber:

One must wonder whether it was not Weber's nostalgia for spiritual authenticity -- what one might term his Nietzscheanism -- that was misplaced, and whether living in the iron cage of modern rationalism is such a terrible thing after all (Fukuyama 2005).

This understanding of Weber has become almost canonical not requiring any further explanation or demonstration than a gesture towards a few lines in *The Protestant and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

At the risk of making Weber less interesting and inwardly torn, it is necessary to point out that Weber quite clearly distinguished his position from Nietzsche's. In the first place, Weber directly challenged Nietzsche's view that the salvation religions evolve out of "resentment" on the part of the disprivileged strata. For Weber, the essential characteristic of the religiosity of the negatively privileged strata is that it looks to a "future lying beyond the present," while positively privileged status groups are satisfied with the way things are; their "kingdom is of this world" (1968: 934; see Weber 1946: 276). Consequently, if we accept the view that Weber admired inner turmoil as the condition for human dignity, it is, for Weber, the self-satisfied *aristocratic ethos* that prevails against human dignity or "a truly human life" defined in terms of self-transcendence and devotion to a cause or ideal higher than the self. The "sense of dignity of the socially repressed strata," on the other hand,

is nourished most easily on the belief that a special “mission” is entrusted to them; their worth is guaranteed or constituted by an *ethical imperative*, or by their own functional *achievement*. Their value is thus moved into something beyond themselves, into a “task” placed before them by God (Weber 1946: 276-7; 1920: 248).

In contrast to Nietzsche, Weber did not view aristocratic society as the ground for nobility (see Nietzsche 1966b: 201 and *passim*). It is noteworthy that Strauss, who indicates parallels between Weber and Nietzsche and who cites a number of pages from Weber’s *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1921) and *Religionssoziologie I*, does not cite Weber’s few explicit references to Nietzsche (Weber 1921: 283, 286, 1922: 636-7 and 770-1; Weber 1920: 241).

Weber’s disdain for the self-satisfaction characteristic of privileged strata is connected with his concerns about a future of “[s]pecialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.” He did not anticipate irresistible democratic leveling in the future, but, on the contrary, feared that human history was moving toward a new aristocracy or a new type of bureaucratic caste system that would be more indestructible than previous highly stratified social systems (Weber 1994: 158-9). The dystopia toward which Weber saw human society moving would not see the end of the division of labor, but its entrenchment (see Titunik 1997; Strong in Horowitz and Maley 1994: 121-2, 126-7; cf. Strauss 1989b: 21). The “specialists without spirit” represent a new bureaucratic “caste” (Weber 1994: 69, 152) who minister to the needs of subjugated “sensualists without heart.” It was the privilege-related satisfaction and the “pacifism of social impotence” under a new aristocracy that alarmed Weber (1994: 159).

The writings most indicative of Weber’s political sympathies and his fears for the future --“Zur Lage der bürgerlichen Demokratie in Russland” and “Russlands Übergang zum Scheinkonstitutionalismus”--are not available in the edition of Weber’s *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* that Strauss cites in *Natural Right and History*. But it is reasonable to assume that he may have been aware of the two monographs a lengthy extract from the first of which appeared in the introduction to Gerth and Mills 1946 collection of Weber’s writings, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. The following was included in that extract:

The opportunities for democracy and individualism would look very bad today were we to rely upon the lawful effects of *material* interests for their development. For the development of material interests points, as distinctly as possible, in the opposite direction... everywhere the *house* is ready-made *for a new servitude* [*Gehause für die neue Horigkeit*] is ready everywhere . . . In the face of all this, those who constantly fear that in the world of the future *too much* “democracy” and “individualism” may exist and too little “authority,” “aristocracy” and “esteem for office,” or such like, may calm down. Only too much provision has been made to see to it that the trees of democratic individualism do not shoot into the sky. According to all experience, “history” relentlessly gives rebirth to “aristocracies” and “authorities;” and those who deem it necessary for themselves and for “the people,” may cling to them. . . We are “individualists” and partisans of “democratic” institutions “against the stream” of material constellations (Weber 1946: 71).<sup>9</sup>

Weber also makes it clear in the volume of political writings that Strauss relies on that he envisages a new caste system evolving out of current conditions (1921: 151-2, 146). A caste system, as Strauss observes (118), is intrinsically contrary to the understanding of “right” characteristic of “egalitarian natural right.” Thus there is no conflict between Weber’s idea of right and his fears for the future.

Weber’s student Roberto Michels, who was more genuinely Weber’s student than Carl Schmitt, coined the famous expression the “iron law oligarchy” (Michels 1999: 342-356). In view of the inevitable propensity toward oligarchy, Michels regarded Nietzsche’s fears about the “last man” as inconsequential: “The dread by which Nietzsche was at one time so greatly disturbed, that every individual might become a functionary of the mass, must be completely dissipated in the face of the truth that while all have the right to become functionaries, few only the possibility” (Michels 1999: 167). Interestingly, Nasser Behnegar, in his book on Strauss’s critique of Weber and scientific social science, quotes Michels on the irrelevance of Nietzsche (2003: 14). But Behnegar does not bring attention to the connection between Weber and Michels.

Not many commentators, I think, would dispute the claim that Weber seemed to be a tormented human being. Nor does Strauss go astray in suggesting that Weber valued inner conflict. Weber repeatedly made it clear that, for him, human excellence consists in resisting

natural and emotional impulses and acting in accordance with self-imposed duties (Weber 1949: 18; 1975: 192; see 1958: 119). There is a spirit of renunciation that suffuses Weber's moral temperament. Support for Strauss's understanding of Weber's moral stance can be found in a letter Weber wrote criticizing Freud's disciple, Otto Gross. Weber writes that

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. It seems to me that only the former category, the "heroic ethic," can call itself "idealism," and that to this category belong both the ethics of the *older* form of Christianity . . . and the Kantian ethics, both of which start, measured by their ideals, from a pessimistic assessment of the "nature" of the average man (Weber 1978b: 385-6).

Finally, it is not inconceivable that Weber would resist a condition of peace and happiness. But this is hardly unusual. Most human beings have an uneasy sense that there is something dehumanizing about the end of all struggle. Perhaps openness to this paradox at the heart of the human situation--that we both wish for and recoil from the end of conflict--is necessary for someone who wants to understand human things--the social scientist--or to shape human history--the politician. But whether and to what extent Weber experienced this paradox, a proper understanding of Weber's moral and political views cannot be based on the assumption that he shared Nietzsche's view of impending, degrading equality. Weber's moral commitment to human equality did not conflict with his apprehensions about the future. The "dream of peace and happiness," which Strauss references above, is not realizable in Weber's view. For those who cherish this dream, Weber counsels, the words over the door to the unknown future of human history are "lasciate ogni speranza"<sup>†</sup> (Weber 1994: 14-15). In so far as hierarchy persists, there will be tension in the human condition. The coerced

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<sup>†</sup> "Abandon all hope" ("all ye who enter here") is the inscription over the gates to hell in Dante's *Inferno*, Canto III, 9.

passivity of the socially impotent, in Weber's dystopian vision of the future, is not the same as peace.

### **Fundamental Alternatives and Fate**

Clearly, however, Strauss is correct in observing that Weber was concerned about the consequences of specifically modern developments or about the consequences of "the modern this-worldly irreligious experiment" (74). Weber did not simply envisage a reversion to old forms of "aristocracy," rather, as indicated above, he described a new, more inescapable caste system based on instrumental-rational domination through bureaucratic administration. Weber saw in Western civilization the progressive systematic regulation of human action and thought through uniform rules and procedures, which he theorized under the concept of "rationalization." Indeed, the rationalization and hence differentiation of various life spheres has brought to light the polytheism of ultimate values (Weber 1946: 147-8).

The rationalization of human thought--or the advance of science--progressively excludes truth claims or insights that have not been acquired through prescribed methods and procedures. Rational and empirical science has finally "worked through to the disenchantment of the world and its transformation into a causal mechanism" (Weber 1946: 350, 139, 155). The "empirical as well as the mathematically oriented view of the world" ultimately precludes the possibility of rationally conceiving reality as a meaningful whole (1946, 351). The advance of rational science necessarily shatters belief in gods and magical powers and, as a result, undermines the ideals that stir the human soul. In the modern world, the "most sublime values have retreated from public life" and the ideals that welded human communities have dissipated (Weber 1946: 155). Notwithstanding the corrosive affects of science on "devotion to causes," however, (73-74), Weber remained attached to the idea of empirical science (38, Weber 1946: 152).

It was in view of the thoroughgoing rationalization, intellectualization, and disenchantment of the world (Weber 1946: 155) that Weber counseled the intellectual integrity to accept that science cannot validate value judgments. If we are honest with ourselves we realize that studying the facts of human history and causal interrelation of various social phenomena might give us insight into the possible consequences of our choices, but cannot tell us which choice is finally valid. Because of evident limits of science, we are compelled by intellectual honesty, in Weber's view, to refrain from making judgments about the value of social phenomena under investigation and give up the pretense that we can derive value judgments from empirical facts.

Strauss responds to Weber's requirement of ethical neutrality by proposing that the prohibition of value judgments in the social sciences is untenable. He convincingly argues that the prohibition of value judgments, far from being consistent with intellectual honesty, fosters intellectual dishonesty. We cannot truthfully describe social phenomena without using evaluative language (49-50). A "strictly factual description" of acts that take place in a concentration camp, an account that excludes evaluative words such as "cruelty," would be a travesty (52). Strauss admires Weber because, in apparent contravention to his injunction to practice ethical neutrality, Weber constantly used the "appropriate language," the "language of praise and blame," when discussing social matters (52-54). In addition, in order to distinguish the phenomena that one necessarily describes in value-laden language--e.g. charisma, devotion, vanity, etc.--it is necessary to have an appreciation for differences of normative quality; these human phenomena only come to light through evaluation. Weber showed himself to be sensitive to the evaluative standards that are inherent in human situations. According to Strauss, Weber insisted on the evident superiority of Gretchen to a prostitute. Gretchen's tender vulnerability to seduction, in Goethe's tragedy *Faust*, is qualitatively different from a mercenary act lacking sentiment (52-53, cf. Weber 1958: 263-4

n. 22). Similarly, Weber inevitably made evaluative distinctions between effective and bumbling generals (53-54, see 128). “Weber had to choose between blindness to phenomena and values judgments. In his capacity as a practicing social scientist, he chose wisely” (52).

It would seem that Weber was a superior social scientist because he violated his own methodological principles in practice. In fact, however, as the essay progresses, Strauss revises his initial position and shows that Weber did not violate his methodological principles. Strauss acknowledges that according to Weber, “the objects of social science are constituted by reference to values,” which “presupposes appreciation of values” and the ability to make evaluative distinctions (63). But the value judgments through which the objects of social science come into view are necessarily provisional. Nine pages after adducing the examples of the apparent superiority of Gretchen and the resourceful general, Strauss demonstrates the inconclusive character of these value judgments. We may provisionally pass value judgments to the effect that Gretchen is nobler than a prostitute or that a strategic genius is better than a bumbling general, but these value judgments will change when considered from the standpoint of a more comprehensive view. From the viewpoint of a “radically ascetic position that condemns all sexuality” the “open degradation” of prostitution may appear a “cleaner thing” than sentimentalized, disguised sexuality (63; Weber). Similarly, from the standpoint that regards war as absolutely evil, a blundering general is preferable to a strategic genius (63). Weber does not abandon the language of praise and blame in discussing social phenomena, but he also points beyond these common sense value judgments to ultimate values among which the individual must make a criterionless choice.

Ultimately, Strauss does not depart as significantly from Weber’s view of the incompatibility of ultimate values as might initially be supposed. At the beginning of the chapter Strauss claims that for philosophy to be possible, all that is required is knowing what one does not know, that is “grasping the fundamental problems and therewith the

fundamental alternatives which are, in principle, coeval with human thought” (35, 125). Broadly speaking, Strauss also perceives there is an enduring conflict of ultimate viewpoints or what he calls “comprehensive views.” But while he shares Weber’s general outlook, Strauss distrusts Weber’s grounds for arriving at his conclusion regarding the insoluble conflict of ultimate values (Strauss 1949: 22-23). A proof of the rational insolubility of value conflicts would “require an effort of the magnitude of that which went into the conception and elaboration of the *Critique of Pure Reason*” (Strauss 1949: 22). Weber, however, limited his proofs to a few vague examples, “two or three” of which Strauss gives attention to in this chapter. The third proof is actually Strauss’s own view which he draws out of Weber’s other two examples.

The first “proof” Strauss considers is Weber’s notion of two opposed views of justice the choice between which cannot be demonstrated by reason: either it is just to reward talent or it is just to compensate for the inequitable distribution of talents by requiring more from gifted individuals (68-9; Weber 1949: 15-16; 1946: 355). Strauss does not show that this conflict can be resolved (except by reference to convenience or expediency) (69). He uses this example as an opportunity to raise the question of whether “it makes sense to say that nature committed and injustice by distributing her gifts unequally, whether it is the duty of society to remedy that injustice, and whether envy has a right to be heard” (68). This question points to Strauss’s view of natural right (151), which I will return to below. What is important to note at this juncture is that the sketch of two conceptions of justice is intended to adduce further evidence of Strauss’s main contention that Weber’s basic premise of the conflict of ultimate values was based on moral preference for inner turmoil.

In this instance, Weber is shown to be torn between “a brotherly otherworldly ethics and ‘the aristocracy of the intellect’” (Behnegar 2003: 118), which is the main form of the conflict between “ethical imperatives” and “cultural values” (Weber 1946: 354-5). In contrast

to “warrior ethics,” which, like brotherly ethics, gives life meaning (335, 356), the attainments of the “aristocracy based on the possession of rational culture” lead to “ever more devastating senselessness” (Weber 1946: 355-357). By following its own “inner-worldly norms” rational knowledge has created “the cosmos of natural causality” which stands in irreconcilable opposition to “the cosmos of ethical, compensatory causality” (Weber 1946: 355). The cultivation of cultural values or the ascent to the highest reaches of intellectual achievement is profoundly burdened with religious guilt (Weber 1946: 354-5). Strauss observes that Weber

needed the necessity of guilt. He had to combine the anguish bred by atheism (the absence of any redemption, or of any solace) with the anguish bred by revealed religion (the oppressive sense of guilt). Without that combination life would cease to be tragic and thus lose its depth (66).

The second “proof” of the insoluble conflict among values that Strauss briefly considers is the conflict between the “ethics of intention” and the “ethics of responsibility” (69-70). In the former case, the individual acts rightly irrespective of the possible consequences, whereas in the latter case “man’s responsibility extends to the foreseeable consequences of his actions” (69, see 64; Weber 1949: 16, 1946: 119-27)<sup>10</sup>. Again Strauss does not indicate how this tension might be resolved. Rather he uses this example to push toward the insoluble conflict which is at the root of both “proofs”: the conflict between otherworldly ethics and this-worldly ethics (70). Weber’s conception of the conflict of values points to the fundamental conflict between brotherly ethics and “the standards of human excellence or of human dignity which the unassisted mind discerns” (71). But since social science represents a this-worldly activity, the social scientist would seem to take for granted the superiority of the “this worldly” view. Weber, however, according to Strauss, did not take the superiority or even validity of the scientific view for granted. Science rests on the presupposition that what is produced by scientific work “is important in the sense that it is ‘worth being known.’” But that presupposition--or value judgment--“cannot be proved by

scientific means” (Weber 1946: 143; 71-72, cf. 39). In the last analysis, the choice in favor of science rests on faith (71).

Strauss famously reconstructs Weber’s thought as essentially embroiled in the conflict between reason and revelation, “human guidance or divine guidance” (74: 62-3). No alternative, Strauss avers, “is more fundamental than this” (74, Spinoza). In this section, Strauss gives the impression of allowing philosophy to be vanquished by faith (Kennington 1991: 238). The fact that philosophy (or “science in the full sense”) and revelation cannot refute each other would seem to constitute a refutation in favor of faith (75). But though Strauss gives the impression that this is an “awful” conclusion from which he must hastily depart (76), Strauss, in fact, vindicates philosophy by restoring the awareness of these antagonistic principles (see Strauss 1965). After raising the issue of divine guidance versus human guidance, Strauss approaches the “secular struggle” between philosophy and theology from a “bird’s-eye view” (75), which suggests that the awareness of the conflict between faith and reason is a comprehensive view that embraces this conflict. Recall that all that is required for philosophy to be possible is the awareness of fundamental alternatives. The perception of these alternatives already creates a philosophic awareness. The salubrious character of this “comprehensive view” of fundamental alternatives is also indicated by Strauss in another writing where he observes that the irreconcilable tension between philosophy and faith “is the secret of the vitality of the West” (1989b 73).

This vindication of the possibility of philosophy, however, does not solve the problem of “natural right.” While all that is required for philosophy to be possible is an awareness of fundamental alternatives, political philosophy is necessarily directed to answering the question of the right way to live (36). Thus the possibility political philosophy, which is a sub-field of philosophy (1949: 10), would seem to depend on its acquiring knowledge of ends that is beyond scope of philosophy proper. *Natural Right and History* is occupied with

showing that, notwithstanding this apparent difficulty, political philosophy is possible and natural right ascertainable. Human beings, as the classics observed, are distinguished from the brutes by the capacity for “speech or reason or understanding” (127, cf. Strauss 1952a: 9; Nietzsche 1957: 61). It follows, then, that the “good life” consists in the perfection of man’s nature to the highest degree. The good or “the life according to nature” is the life of the philosopher (113).

But how can we determine that the philosophic life of free inquiry is superior to the pious life of obedient devotion if philosophy cannot refute faith? The key to answering this question lies in an assertion made at the beginning of the chapter on Weber: “It is true that the successful quest for wisdom might lead to the result that wisdom is not the one thing needful. But this result would owe its relevance to the fact that it is the result of the quest for wisdom: the very disavowal of reason must be a reasonable disavowal” (36). What Strauss has produced at the end of the chapter--in presenting the antagonism between philosophy and faith--is a “reasonable disavowal” of reason. This demonstration confirms that the life engaged in the highest exercise of reason is the best life, whether or not reason leads to the conclusion that wisdom is the “one thing needful.” Natural right, or the right way to live, points to a social condition within which the philosophic life is possible and enticing. The fundamental characteristic of “nature,” for Strauss, it is necessary to observe, is that it is hierarchical. Natural gifts, the most significant of which is the gift for deeply contemplating the fundamental issues, are not distributed equally. The best regime is an order that is oriented to making the philosophic life--“the highest activity of man” (1949: 221; 134-5)--possible and this is the end by virtue of which it is justified:

If striving for knowledge of the eternal truth is the ultimate end of man, justice and moral virtue in general can be fully legitimated only by the fact that they are required for the sake of that ultimate end or that they are conditions of the philosophic life (151).

This is the unbrotherly insight of rational knowledge that Weber cannot accept with serenity. Strauss's interpretation of Weber is distinctive, in my view, because no other commentator has probed the egalitarian aspects of Weber's moral outlook with greater sensitivity and profundity, notwithstanding that his insights are vitiated by a misguided association of Weber apprehensions with Nietzsche's.

It would take us too far a field to examine Strauss's political philosophy more fully (and I am not certain that he finally succeeds in showing that the philosophic life is demonstrably superior to the life of faith). The important point to note is the contrast between Strauss's comprehensive view of fundamental alternatives and the comprehensive view which he supposes ultimately encompasses Weber's thought.

Weber's view, we discover, is part of or leads to a more comprehensive view, which is "the serious antagonist of political philosophy"--historicism (1949: 25-26; 8, 36, 38-39). As Richard Kennington notes, Strauss uses the expression "bird's eye view" only twice in *Natural Right and History* (1991: 238). The first time is in reference to the "experience of history" that underlies historicism (22) and the second time is in reference to the "secular struggle" between philosophy and theology. In effect the, two comprehensive views confront one another in *Natural Right and History*—philosophy and historicism, Plato and Heidegger (see Behnegar 2003: 55).

The real choice or alternative that confronted Weber was not the choice between reason and faith, but between heroically accepting the scientific world view imposed on him by fate or surrendering to the security of illusion (27, 48; Weber 1946: 155). When faced with the choice between "God or the Devil" (45), Weber chose the Devil of scientific intellectualism (Weber 1946: 152):

He despaired of the modern this-worldly irreligious experiment, and yet he remained attached to it because he was fated to believe in science as he understood it. The result of this conflict, which he could not resolve, was his belief that the conflict between values cannot be resolved by human reason (74).

Weber apparently was dedicated to science because he made a moral choice to “bear the fate of the times like a man” (Weber 1946: 155).

The idea that the scientific rationalism is a dispensation of fate moves towards the historicist thesis that “all human thought depends on fate, on something that thought cannot master and whose workings it cannot anticipate” (27).<sup>11</sup> Weber, according to Strauss, was influenced by historicism (73) and ultimately shared, though unreflectively, the historicist conception of “the whole” as mysterious and not in principle intelligible (30-31). It is this view that represents the most significant challenge to philosophy.

### **The Spirit of Weber’s Choice**

For sake of intellectual honesty, Weber did not make the sacrifice of the intellect and loose himself in “illusory security” (27). He devoted his life to scholarship, to the uncompromising quest for truth. But, for Strauss, Weber’s regard for “‘intellectual honesty’ is a trait of his character which has no basis but his nonrational preference for . . . ‘intellectual honesty’” (48, 72). In accordance with the insight that the choice for science is based on faith, Weber is seen to have made a moral choice in favor of the life devoted to the search for truth. That is, Weber did not genuinely prefer the life dedicated to reasoning, or philosophy, rather it seems Weber chose to act in accordance with a specific understanding of what moral dignity requires. As Strauss explains in an essay on Kurt Riezler, whom he compares with Weber, philosophy comes to mean “honorably coming to grief, obstinately [refusing] the delusion of redemption” (Strauss 1949: 245).

Strauss’s penetrating analysis draws out significant aspects of Weber’s thought. But the portrayal, taken as a whole, is overdrawn. Strauss disregards--or downplays--Weber’s genuine devotion to scholarship and his fascination with the human condition. If the impression created by Weber’s “Science as a Vocation” is of a grimly courageous confrontation with the ineluctable fact of disenchantment, the impression created by Weber’s

voluminous studies of human social reality is of a fascination with human life and knowing about human life in all of its bewildering complexity. Heinrich Rickert reveals that Weber's lecture on "Science as a Vocation" did not give an "adequate impression of the sheer personal delight that Weber himself felt in his scientific work" (1989: 81). Similarly, Marianne Weber relates that Weber would become animated while lecturing near the end of his life and, when asked why, he responded: "It's just that the facts themselves are so fabulously interesting" (Weber 1975: 605).

Even Weber's solemn admonition about the fragmentary character of any scientific achievement expressed something about the joy of pursuing science as a vocation. He declared that "[e]very scientific 'fulfillment' raises new 'questions'; it *asks* to be 'surpassed' and outdated. Whoever wishes to serve science has to resign himself to this fact . . . We cannot work without hoping that others will advance further than we have. In principle, this progress goes on *ad infinitum*" (Weber 1946: 138). But this capacity to set "new questions to the eternally inexhaustible flow of life" (Weber 1949: 84) was also part of the delight of scientific work.

Strauss only hints at the most important reason for Weber's insistence on the distinction between facts and values (34, 41, 58, 72). Weber wanted to prevent social science from being misappropriated for ideological agendas. Scholarship must not be used as an instrument to advance partisan causes, in Weber's view. By insisting on the distinction between empirical and normative knowledge, he aimed to defend the integrity of the scientific enterprise as the rigorous and disciplined search for "truth for its own sake." "This sort of knowledge has value . . . regardless of whether it produces 'prescriptions' for 'praxis'" (Weber 1975, 239, n. 11).

Strauss depreciates this idea that the "quest for truth" is "valuable in itself:"

those who regard the quest for truth as valuable in its self may regard such activities as the understanding of the genesis of a doctrine, or the editing of a text—nay, the

conjectural correction of any corrupt reading in any manuscript—as ends in themselves: the quest for truth has the same dignity as stamp collecting (72).

This is a baffling statement since Strauss also seems to love truth profoundly and deeply for its own sake. Curiously, however, if this was his position, he did not want to explicitly defend it. For Strauss, philosophy is inextricably embedded in a social context and must be constantly sensitive to that context (129-130). Philosophy evolves out of—and progressively refines—the opinions a society holds dear (Strauss 1949: 10). Philosophers cannot retreat to the enchanted garden where philosophy is indulged for its own sake, because this activity necessarily affects society. “For ‘while philosophy must beware of wishing to be edifying,’ it is of necessity edifying” (Strauss 1958: 299).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Much of the material in Strauss’s chapter on Max Weber was first published as Leo Strauss (1951) “The Social Science of Max Weber,” *Measure: A Critical Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2. (Spring). See Eden 1987: 233-4.

<sup>2</sup> Though it should be noted that Nietzsche preceded Zarathustra’s presentation of the “last man” by having Zarathustra consider that he should address the pride of his audience (17).

<sup>3</sup> Strauss observes that Weber puts the term “peace” in quotation marks, but did not take the same precaution when speaking of conflict (65). This suggests, Strauss infers, that, for Weber, “peace is phony, but war is real.” (65). One presumes, however, that Strauss noticed that Weber only put “peace” in quotation marks when speaking of the apparent “peace” behind the economic struggle of nations. Weber used the term “peace” (Frieden) four more times in the same paragraph without quotation marks (Weber 1921: 17-18). Moreover, in this passage, Weber indicates that, because of the population problem, among other reasons, a future of peace and happiness is impossible. Weber 1921: 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> He also criticizes Schmitt’s reliance on Hobbes. He shows that Hobbes’s thought underpins the apolitical liberalism that Schmitt opposes.

<sup>5</sup> I substituted “ethic of intention” for “ethic of absolute ends” to make the translation consistent with Strauss’s terminology. See Weber 1920: 543.

<sup>6</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the relatively neglected affinity between Kant and Weber see Kim 2004: 51-55, 96.

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<sup>7</sup> Nasser Behnegar provides a somewhat different interpretation of this reference, though he also sees the citation as pointing to Weber's "moral seriousness." See Behnegar 2003: 97-98.

<sup>8</sup> Strauss also brings attention to Plato's use of these ages in the *Republic* (1949: 36, see 1968: 38).

<sup>9</sup> The italics and many of the quotation marks in this passage were not reproduced in Gerth and Mills. I have added these in accordance with Weber's original. See Weber 1980: 63-4.

<sup>10</sup> For an especially excellent and poignant account of a political leader's experience of the conflict between moral duty and political effectiveness, see Kenneth Kaunda 1980.

<sup>11</sup> As Nasser Behnegar observes, Strauss' refutation of Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis is directed to weakening "the historical evidence in favor of historicism" (Behnegar 2003: 110). Strauss argues that capitalism was not unintentionally caused by the Protestant Ethic, but intentionally brought about by secular thinkers. The evidence Strauss adduces for this argument starts from the peculiar assertion that "no writer outside mental institutions ever justified the duty...to unlimited acquisition on any other ground than that of service to the common good" (60n). Irrespective of what has been written in this regard, it is perfectly plausible to suggest that ordinary people, believing in a doctrine of predestination, became anxious about their salvation and worked hard in their callings to prove to themselves that they were saved. Behnegar seems to want to rectify Strauss's argument in a note on p. 109. In this note he explicitly acknowledges that what was decisive in bringing about modern capitalism, for Weber, was the anxiety about salvation. But then Behnegar attempts to vindicate Strauss by commenting that "this [unbearableness of not knowing if one is saved] may be true for those who have been raised on the idea that man should control his own destiny, but is not necessarily true for those who do not hold this premise." In other words, à la Strauss, the philosophic transformation preceded the religious transformation and was decisive. But what seems clear, is that not knowing if one is saved is unbearable for people whose religious outlook does not allow them to influence their gods by magical means *or* by a change of heart (cf. 50). One does not need a philosophic transformation to explain that anxiety.

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