

[Closing remarks for farewell conference in honor of Klaas van Berkel; March 4/5, 2020]

Max Weber addressed his invited speech 'Wissenschaft als Beruf' to members of the 'Freistudentische Bund' in Munich, as the first instalment of a series of four lectures under the overall title of 'Geistige Arbeit als Beruf' (only two of these lectures materialized, the other one being delivered a year and a half later by Weber as well, under the title 'Politik als Beruf'). He gave the former speech on November 7, 1917, when the war was in its third year and its outcome as yet hard, not to say impossible, to predict. The mood among progressive German youth was on the move toward an increasingly pacifist and also anti-intellectualist stance. 'Erlebnis' ('experience') and 'Persönlichkeit' (personality, character) were the two focal points of what many students were aiming at by way of replacement of what they were coming to regard as dry-as-dust, "lebensfern" scholarship (that is, far removed from the well-springs of life itself). In 'Wissenschaft als Beruf' Weber is out, more than anything else, to address the concerns that he takes to underlie that fashionable tendency, so as the better to counter it. To this end he develops in his speech for about hundred students of both sexes a range of specific concepts and broad conceptions that had been been at the heart of his own creative scholarly work for over a decade. Within three years of the speech (and one year of its delayed publication) Weber was to die, just 56 years old, of a pneumonia brought about by that early predecessor of Covid-19, the Spanish flu, and that is how 'Wissenschaft als Beruf' reads today as a grand summing-up of very substantial portions of his entire scholarly career.

He opened the speech with a cold shower about the scholarly life if conceived of as *nothing but* a profession, assuring his audience that, to a very large extent, it depends on sheer *chance*. What he has to tell them in this regard comes close to pestering — he portrays the standard pathway toward an academic career, in realistic terms to be sure, yet at the same time in just about as cold-blooded and almost cynical a manner as he possibly could. And then he makes a U-turn. He concludes: "Soviel schien nötig, über die äußeren Bedingungen des Gelehrtenberufs zu sagen", to add at once, with a tinge of self-mocking irony: "Ich glaube nun aber, Sie wollen in Wirklichkeit von etwas anderem: von dem *inneren* Berufe zur Wissenschaft, hören."

How to translate into English these two sentences, whose succession marks the crucial transition toward Weber's true subject in the lecture? 'Wissenschaft', first of all, is more than just science; it covers scholarship in the social sciences and the humanities just as well. Further, the word 'Beruf' in Weber's time stood for not one but two cognate yet distinct concepts for which, in English as well as in Dutch, there are, indeed, two distinct terms. In Dutch 'beroep' and 'roeping'; in English 'profession' and 'vocation' or, if you prefer, 'calling'. So the two sentences that mark the decisive transition in Weber's speech may be translated thus: "So much it has seemed necessary to say about the outer conditions of the scholarly profession. However, I believe that you really want to hear me speak about something else; namely, about the *inner* calling". And indeed, from here on Weber goes out of his way to meet his student audience on their own terrain of what various limitations science and scholarship are subject to, all the while drawing the boundaries in ways quite distinct from that anti-intellectualist current he found it (on political grounds chiefly) so urgent to oppose.

So, science and scholarship as a calling is the main topic of the speech. But who or what is *doing* the calling? Weber switches throughout his speech between the secular and the religious meaning of a person's sense of being called to a certain task – between experiencing your calling as coming from inside yourself, or from on high. And it is easy to assume that for Weber himself, who so visibly experienced his dedication to the scholarly life as a calling, this was not so much God calling him as, rather (to refer to the final sentence in which his impassioned speech culminates) his own, private 'demon' which wants to be obeyed. Or take the other, related conception so prominent in 'Wissenschaft als Beruf' that figures in the very title of our conference yesterday and today, "die Entzauberung der Welt", 'the disenchantment of the world'. Since science and religion have in our time become so deeply polarized entities, with science standing for reason and religion for the very embodiment of irrationality, we might be inclined to read Weber as squarely at the side of the former, the science pole. But that judgment should be qualified. With the rise of modern science, and more than a little assisted in this regard by certain Calvinist doctrines, our world, so Weber argued, has lost its enchantment, in that it has been stripped of all magic and made susceptible to rational calculation:

Science and scholarship today are a 'vocation' *professionally* organized in special disciplines in the service of self-clarification and knowledge of how facts hang together. It is not the gift of grace of seers and prophets dispensing salvation goods (*Heilsgüter*) and revelations, nor does it partake of the contemplation of sages and philosophers about the world's ultimate *meaning*. This, to be sure, is the inescapable condition of our historical situation which, so long as we remain true to ourselves, we cannot evade.

Indeed, there *is* no way of evading it:

... to him who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man one must say: let him rather return silently, without the usual publicity build-up of the renegade, but simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him. Indeed, they do not make it hard for him. One way or another he must – that is inevitable – bring the 'sacrifice of the intellect'.

At first sight the opposition between science and religion is drawn here at least as sharply as we encounter with militant atheists and their 'warfare' view of the relation between them – atheists of let us say the Richard Dawkins type. And yes, Weber, too, sharpens the opposition even further when he speaks of an "unbridgeable tension between the value spheres of 'science' and of religious salvation".

All that may be so, and yet Even the passionate tone of voice so clearly present in this and similar statements makes you pause for a while and observe that, while Weber does consider the tension to be inescapable, it grieves him all the same. The tension that he sketches is just as clearly present within his own person. The whole tenor of the concluding crescendo of his lecture is that we must recognize that inescapable tension and not run away from it. We must face it "like a man" in the most Prussian-Protestant sense of that word: straightforward, tough as nails and without leaving ourselves the slightest wiggle room. Weber does not himself make the 'sacrifice of the intellect', and yet he feels a lack. A little earlier in his lecture he talks about "the truly religiously 'musical' man" and "the fundamental fact that he is destined to live in a time alienated from God and devoid of prophets". A good many of his other pronouncements, and of the facts of his life, show that he regarded himself not only as "unmusical in religious matters" (a truly wonderful expression) but also as a "religious cripple". He just does not have the gift, and regards that as a regrettable lack. We may perhaps wish we *could* return to the time of unbroken belief, but those who, with Weber, feel themselves to be above make-belief *cannot* return. When he commits himself to a plurality of values, to the conviction that our lives are marked by conflicting ultimate values that are irreconcilable in the

end but between which we have to *make a choice*, then he immediately adopts the metaphor of the *polytheist*. It is not for nothing that Weber devoted a very substantial part of his career to the almost obsessive comparison of the most diverse religious phenomena as they have made their appearance in the history of the great world religions. It is not for nothing that the human quest for salvation takes center stage in that comparison. It is not for nothing that, when his wife Marianne and his nephew Eduard heard him ranting and raging in barely comprehensible German behind the door of his study, she explained to Eduard, with an allusion to the bible book of Job: “Der Max hadert wieder mit Gott” (“Max is quarrelling with God again”).

I confess that I feel tempted to go on and demonstrate for you how the conceptions and the sentiments that come up in Weber’s address to those students on November 7, 1917, really formed but the brief summing up of perhaps the most inspiring text ever written by Weber, which is not his famous treatise on the Calvinist ethic and the spirit of capitalism, but a 37 pages-long piece entitled ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ (‘Intermediary Reflection’) that he wrote in first draft in or around 1910. In it he discusses the inevitable tension between the kind of ethic towards which a religion of salvation is almost bound to drift and the world in which that ethic must be played out. He analyzes five principal ways in which this tension *either* explodes *or* receives solutions that are practically feasible and (if at all feasible) enduring as well. He successively analyses that explosiveness *and* the practical resolvability of that tension in five separate but, naturally, interrelated ‘spheres’: the economic, the political, the aesthetic, the erotic and the intellectual. His analysis of the last-mentioned sphere, the intellectual, is the one on which he draws for lengthy passages in ‘Wissenschaft als Beruf’. Throughout the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ Weber conceives of religion as a pre-eminently *rationaly* operating force in the development of humanity. In our time an appeal to the rationality of science (often taken as an absolute) often goes hand in hand with a rejection of religion out of hand as a hobby of blindly blundering obscurantists. That is definitely not how Weber saw it. Indeed, in the ‘Intermediate Reflection’ he expounds at length on the rationalizing effect that in all great civilizations has proceeded from religion. It is only in the Western world of the 16th / 17th centuries, in the Calvinist ethic and in the rise of modern science, that Weber signals the shift from religion as a rationalizing force to the *irrationality* that, as part and parcel of the disenchantment of the world, has become the sphere of religion in Weber’s, and even more so in our own modern times.

So much, then, for some possibly useful pointers toward the context in which Weber came up with that powerful, deeply influential concept of disenchantment. And it is with that context uppermost in mind (with ‘calling’, ‘profession’, and, indeed, ‘disenchantment’ as the key terms) that I have been listening yesterday and today to the various lectures presented by you all. It would surely be out of the question for me to comment on each and every lecture that we have been attending during these two days. If I were to say a few, inevitably superficial words on each and every one of them, in maybe two or three lines at most, you would quite rightly begin to yawn within minutes; if, to avoid such boredom, I would omit some, the omitted speakers would have every right to feel offended. So instead of these two inattractive options I just reserve my comments for those lectures which, given my own view of Weber’s work, have rung a bell with me personally.

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