Max Weber’s Disenchantment

Lineages of Kant and Channing

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ABSTRACT Weber’s disenchantment is that Kant’s reason fails to deliver on the promise. Kant’s promise is that reason in history will produce ‘progress’, produce ever greater quantities of reason culminating in a ‘rational kingdom of ends’. Weber’s Puritan studies put this claim to the test. They do so through Kant and Channing, who see the providential ‘determinism’ of predestination as an insult to reason and ‘freedom’. Calvinists respond to predestination’s insult with the ‘free force’ of ‘ideas’ – with reason, and with ‘good works in vocation’ for God’s glory. Yet this response fails to produce the rational-ascetic utopia that Kant predicts, and leads instead to the material sensuality of capitalism. Reason is thus irrational because it creates the capitalist conditions of its own negation, because, in short, freedom creates determinism.

KEYWORDS Calvinism, determinism, freedom, predestination, progress, Protestant ethic

Max Weber’s post-breakdown sociology takes a substantially new direction, a disenchanted direction in which he aims to create a world ‘free from all illusions’ (Aron, 1971: 92). Weber’s new thrust is a personal and a scholarly quest to wrest some meaning from the world, even if this meaning is disenchanted. He aims to answer this question: Is ‘reason’ as reasonable as Kant claims it to be? Weber reluctantly concludes in the negative. It is a reluctant conclusion because he has deep admiration for Kant, in fact he modelled his own person on the ‘Kantian personality’, one that is rigidly secured by the iron rod of reason. Kant predicts big things for this personality, that the categorical imperative would in fact drive history onward and upward as the dynamic of ‘progress’. Weber’s test of Kant and of his own person is whether reason ‘purposefully’ directs history towards the
progress that Kant predicts. Weber addresses this question armed with a methodology and substantive studies saturated with Kantian categories, above all Kant’s moral causality, specifically that species of causality that moves the Kantian personality into ‘action’. Weber disillusionment finds that the action generated by reason is not the source of progress at all, but the creator of those social conditions that eclipse the possibility of reason.¹

Religious ideas are traced from Antiquity to Reformation to predestination. Predestination strikes Weber as pivotal in the history of reason, because its determinism is the abject denial of reason and freedom. Kant and Channing so condemn it. They also say that the double decree’s deterministic denial is the prod that incites a response from reason. Not passivity, Kant and Channing charge, but virtuous activism is reason’s route to redemption. These thoughts find their way into Weber’s work as the Puritan’s response to providential determinism. Armed with an ethical imperative, and duty-bound to calling in vocation, the Puritan – the Kantian personality – strides into the future. Yet this bounty of reason led not to the noumenal paradise that Kant predicts, but to the annihilation of reason. Reason is crushed by the forces of its own creation, the materialistic determinism of capitalism. Weber’s disenchantment therefore, is this: reason is irrational!


Weber’s disenchanted sociology incorporates some of these themes, particularly fatalism as the companion of chaos. Featured throughout is the underlying ‘malevolence’ of Weber’s social reality (Turner, 1981: 10). However, my account of Weber’s disenchantment is aimed neither at denying nor at disparaging other attempts to thematize his work. Rather, it aims to dig a little deeper than most, and to lay bare the axiological undercurrents that motivate Weber’s empirical studies, especially those related to the Protestant ethic. The undercurrents in question reveal Weber the ‘philosophical sociologist’ whose work rests upon a ‘social philosophy’ (Löwith, 1982: 25). Nonetheless, Weber is deeply ambivalent about the philosophical enterprise. On the critical side, he sees philosophy as no
better equipped to get to the bottom of things than is any other discipline. How can philosophy possibly give us the ‘truth’ when nature itself is ‘metaphysically indeterminable’ (Honigsheim, 1968: 20; Weber, 1958c: 340)? Weber hence concludes that philosophical generalizations are ‘idle talk, nothing more’ (Jaspers, 1965: 255). Weber is also sceptical of philosophical categories intruding into substantive studies, leading inevitably to the erroneous conflation of metaphysical speculations (‘axiological dogmatics’) with empirical propositions (1949a: 120, 122–3, 169–70; 1949b: 50–1; 1975b: 197–8, 188–9, 255; 1977: 61, 77, 91, 115, 171).

Yet Weber cannot completely spurn philosophy, which can, on the other hand, sometimes make a useful contribution to the study of human behaviour (1949b: 59; 1975b: 103, 156). This is especially true of Kant’s philosophy, and Channing’s, too, for that matter. Hence, Weber chastises Schmoller’s claim that Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* can only acknowledge formal ethical truths. On the contrary, Weber insists that the formal character of Kantian propositions is not indifferent to substantive content (1949c: 9). Kant’s categories have substantive content because, though the moral law may be unattainable in a perfect sense, it is still imposed as a ‘duty’. It is duty that creates those obligations and the practical consequences Weber has in mind (1949c: 9). Thus the historical Puritan strove to do his duty, only to end up creating a ‘nullity’ of ‘specialists without spirit and sensualists without heart’. Therein lies Weber’s disenchantment with Kant’s reason, which, when put to empirical test, does not deliver on its promise of ever-expanding vistas of freedom and dignity. Instead, reason ends up in ‘mechanized petrifaction’. Weber’s pessimism tells us that all the ‘best intentions’ in the world are not necessarily going to produce ‘good results’. For these reasons Weber was wary of offering moral counsel to others; he had no system of values to preach on behalf of the world (Aron, 1971: 99), no ethical system, no rules of conduct and no ideal society (Brubaker, 1984: 91); Weber’s world was ‘morally uncertain’ (Stauth and Turner, 1988: 100). True, he clung tenaciously to Kant despite all his shortcomings, but this was an act of Weber’s ‘faith’ that he was not about to impose on others. I will deal more extensively with Weber’s ‘doctrine of faith’ in connection with disenchantment in future work.

**Weber’s Pessimistic Sociology of Reason**

Kant’s moral causality is omnipresent in Weber’s work and person. So established, Weber’s pessimistic sociology of reason is both the abnegation of self and the abnegation of Kant. For at the end of it all, reason is irrational. A summary of Kant familiarizes the reader with his thought, specifically the concept of moral causality. Weber’s methodology is designed to accommodate this causality, as are his substantive studies that trace the fate of religious ideas in history, ideas that culminate in predestination and the Puritan. Predestination is a critical development in the history of reason, critical because both Kant and Channing condemn
it as the prohibition of reason. This callous repudiation begs a response from reason, from the Kantian personality driven by denial, duty and dignity. Though the categorical imperative realized a heroic victory over providential determinism, it was a Pyrrhic victory. Reason won the battle but lost the war. Reason subdued providential determinism, only to create another demon it could not subdue – the materialistic determinism of capitalism. Kant predicts otherwise. His teleology says that reason will progress to more reason, eventuating in a rational kingdom of ends. Its failure to do so is Weber’s Kantian disenchantment, the irrationality of reason itself.

Kant’s reason: an overview

A brief survey of Kant’s idealism is indispensable for the grasp of Weber’s pessimistic sociology of the categorical imperative as this unfolds, not only in Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie, but also in the wider reach of his work. Kant’s concept of moral causality is pivotal. Kant’s idealism is well known for the two species of causality it posits: noumenal (moral) and phenomenal (natural) causality. Hume denies a priori reasoning and thus this causal distinction (1963: 91, 95, 98). Kant, meanwhile, rejects Hume by positing the metaphysical genesis of reason (1962: 9; 1964: 5–6, 8, 10, 436). ‘There are two modes of causality cogitable’, Kant writes: ‘the causality of nature, or of freedom’ (1964: 317). The causality of reason-freedom is sui generis, constituting as it does a primal beginning. In this a priori world of reason, freedom is the spontaneous origination of a state, the causality of which is not subordinated to another cause determined in time (1956: 102; 1964: 317). In the ‘phenomenal’ world of causality, by contrast, one event derives from a previous event (1964: 331). Everything in nature is the continuation of a series, an absolute beginning impossible in the natural world. Thus the actions of natural causes are themselves effects and presuppose causes preceding them in time. A primal action – an action that forms an absolute beginning – is beyond the causal power of phenomena (1964: 322). Hence reason does not exist in time and does not enter upon any state in which it did not formerly exist. Relative to new states and conditions, reason is determining but not determinable (1964: 328).

Free causality is not only independent of, but also in conflict with, natural causes (Kant, 1964: 317) – markedly so in ethics, legislation and religion, where ideas alone ‘render experience possible, although they never attain to full expression therein’ (1964: 221). Ideas originate not from impressions, but ‘from notions, which transcend the possibility of experience’ (1964: 222); ideas ‘can never be completely and adequately present in concreto’ (1964: 226). In this ethical universe, ideas, not nature, govern conduct.

For as regards nature, experience presents us with rules and is the source of truth, but in relation to ethical laws experience is the parent of illusion,
and it is in the highest degree reprehensible to limit or deduce the laws
which dictate what I ought to do, from what is done. (1964: 221)

Hence the will can initiate a new causal chain in nature (1964: 327), reason
refusing to follow the order of things presented by experience (1964: 324).4

A will moved by nature is a will captured by the hypothetical imperative,
by sensation, by self-interest and by the puerile quest for ‘happiness’, specifically
‘eudaemonism’ (Kant, 1990: 29, 58–9). The hypothetical imperative is a will
afflicted by ‘pathological feelings’ (1956: 79), by material objects in conspiracy
with the faculty of desire. All material practical principles belong to the principle
of self-love and one’s happiness (1977: 19). Kant dismisses the hedonistic-
eudaemonistic principles of Epicurus and John Stuart Mill, which can never serve
as a metaphysical foundation for morality. He also dismisses the ‘moral sense’
theory of Hume, based as it is on ‘feelings’. Feelings are an endless source of
variation from one person to another and are incapable of setting a standard of
good and evil (1990: 60). Those wills under control of the hypothetical imper-
ative – the heteronomy of self-interest – are ‘spurious’ and cannot be the
foundation of moral law (1990: 58–9), belonging as they do to the ‘lower faculty
of desire’ (1977: 23). ‘Empirical principles’ are always ensnared by happiness and
its correlates: ‘physical sensation’ and ‘moral feeling’.5

Rational principles, by contrast, rest on a rule that demands moral
perfection as this derives from ‘the rational concept of perfection’ (Kant, 1990:
59). Such an ideal is the business of the categorical imperative, which, bound by
duty, follows a command of reason under the spontaneity of reason’s causality,
under objective necessity, heedless of consequences (1990: 30–1, 59). Reason
formulates an absolute value for its own sake, as an end in itself. The good will is
unconcerned with how well it achieves a goal; rather, its goodness consists solely
in its own activity, in the way that it wills. ‘Even if the good will was unsuccessful
in putting its intentions into operation it would still be of greatest intrinsic value’
(1990: 10). We may value some things as means ‘but in respect for the law we
value the law for itself’ (1990: 17; also 1956: 84). Considering something as an
end in itself is an idea determined a priori (1952: 20). Duty, then, is objectively
practical action according to the law that excludes inclination as its determining
ground (1956: 83). As the Stoics knew so well, moral struggle is conflict with our
inclinations, which duty requires us to subdue (1960: 51). It is the duty of reason,
Kant concludes, to combat the determinism of nature that continuously assails the
senses. The virtuous will is free from nature, while the corrupted will is ruled by
nature.

Kant’s freedom is dignity. In the kingdom of ends, everything either has a
price or a dignity. The mark of an object valued by price is that it can, without
loss, be replaced by another of equivalent value. But if the value of something is
priceless, having no equivalent, we say it has dignity. All objects that are coveted
by our desires or needs have a market price. Things valued not from need but
from taste, from ‘purposeless enjoyment’, have an aesthetic price (Kant, 1977: 165; 1990: 52–3). ‘But that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself does not have mere relative worth (price) but an intrinsic worth (dignity)’ (1990: 51–2).

Weber, metaphysics and methodology

When Weber disposes of reason, he also disposes of his subjective self. Yet there was no more a devoted Kantian than Max Weber. The impact of Kant on Weber is recounted by his wife Marianne, who notes that in high school he read Spinoza, Schopenhauer and ‘especially’ Kant (1975: 45). Kant left the deepest and most lasting impression (1975: 88, 157). All his life, Marianne recounts, Weber vehemently rejected the belief that nature preshapes us in accordance with inevitable laws (1975: 85); he was, Marianne notes with some regret, ‘unable to give nature its due’ (1975: 91–2). ‘Freedom and human dignity were the ultimate and highest values whose realization should be made possible for everyone’ (1975: 306). In fact, Honigsheim (1968: 43) saw Weber as more Kantian than Kant, so prepared was Weber to take Kant’s ethic of autonomy far beyond anything envisaged by the philosopher. Jaspers writes that Weber ‘was absolutely obedient to the ethical law of reason in the Kantian sense’ (1965: 258, 261, 263), that Weber’s ‘[f]reedom was the medium for the growth of something above the personal: the idea, the spirit, the subject’ (1989: 25).

Weber also opposed eudaemonism. Instead, we should strive for freedom and dignity, even at the expense of our happiness (Marianne Weber, 1975: 306). Dignity is the structuring of existence by a moral obligation and the readiness to renounce on its behalf (1975: 364). Weber’s anti-eudaemonism goes to the heart of his ‘to see what we can withstand’ remark to Jaspers (Jaspers, 1989: 188–9). Further, the young Weber disliked Goethe for his ‘one-sided eudaemonism’, whereas the mature Weber embraced that Goethe who was no longer consumed by ‘“happiness,” but a titanic struggle for perfection’ (Marianne Weber, 1975: 154). The struggle is dramatized in Goethe’s Elective Affinities (1962).

So Weber was deeply committed to Kant on a personal level. Yet this commitment did not stop him from putting Kant’s ideas to the test, a test that would ultimately reveal those ideas to be fundamentally flawed.

Weber’s first step in this direction is to construct a methodology that makes room for the substantive content of Kant’s formal propositions. Not only Kant but also the neo-Kantians gave Weber the tools to construct a methodology that would accommodate moral causality. Yet Kant provides the initial impetus in the First Critique, where he stipulates that the critique of reason leads not only to the natural sciences, but most importantly to the ‘moral sciences’ (1964: 37, 222). In the Second Critique he calls for techniques that demonstrate how the laws of pure practical reason gain access to mind and influence its maxims. Kant calls this a ‘Methodology of Pure Practical Reason’ (1977: 155). Such a method-
ology transcends the natural sciences by separating ‘the empirical from the rational’ in a way that highlights each in its ‘pure state’ (1977: 167).

Windelband and Rickert took Kant’s advice, and so did Weber. Their mandate was to create a science that could quarter moral causality, and thereby establish Kant’s distinction between the natural and the moral sciences (1949b: 79–80; 1975b: 85). For his part, Weber claims that the sociocultural sciences must recognize the autonomy of the individual morality maker, which amounts to Kant’s subjectivism and Weber’s methodological individualism (Weber, 1949b: 78; 1975b: 119; 1981: 158). Further, if such a science is to have any pretense to objectivity, it must treat morality as facts. ‘History is not a valuing science,’ says Rickert, ‘but a value-relevant science’ (1986: 88). ‘Interpretive’ inquiry also recognizes the distinction between worlds natural and moral, assumes that, unlike dead nature, we operate on the basis of meaning – not just ideal meaning, but other forms as well (Rickert, 1986: 126, 157; Weber, 1949a: 122, 125; 1949b: 183; 1975b: 125, 186, 191, 194; 1977: 98–9, 109, 151). Continuity between Kant and interpretive sociology is strikingly revealed in the use each makes of the mean–ends formula to classify human action. These features, and others, deny the possibility of importing the methods of the natural sciences into the social sciences. The categorical imperative, empirically applied, ‘makes history a form of art’ that spurns nomological technique (Weber, 1949a: 145).


Weber the Kantian is consistent in rejecting a deterministic telos. If reason is moral freedom, then a deterministic telos has no place in the sociocultural sciences. Yet Weber is more of a Kantian than is Kant because Weber is more consistent. While Weber rejects determinism, Kant embraces the very same when he equates moral freedom with just such a telos, namely providential progress. Weber then puts Kant’s conflation to the test and finds no providential purpose in reason. On the contrary, Weber’s Kantian disenchantment discovers that reason is meaningless. On the road to this discovery, Weber’s social philosophy multifariously identifies reason as ‘ideas’, ‘value rationality’, ‘works’, ‘ultimate values’,
‘inner-worldly’, ‘ethical religiosity’, ‘heroic ethic’, ‘ethical imperatives’, ‘person-
on.\textsuperscript{11}

\section*{Ideas in history}

Kant further influenced Weber, specifically his study of ideas in history. Such study
is the empirical extension of Kant’s ‘Idea’ of history, an idea driven by reason and
a priori conceptions (Kant, 1963: 25). Kant sees beings in history as free agents
and as part of nature (1963: xviii), as ‘sensuous natures’ under empirical laws
(heteronomy), and as ‘supersensuous natures’ under noumenal laws (1977: 44).
Kant’s philosophy of history is a series of sketches with the repeated invitation for
the empirical historian to fill in the details (1963: xviii).

Weber accepts the invitation. Across history, he is concerned not only with
heteronomy, but more significantly with the ‘independence’ of ideas,\textsuperscript{12} with moral
causality. This type of causality is traced from Antiquity to predestination,
attention given along the way to the theodicy problem. Weber’s Puritan as the
Kantian personality confronts predestination with the free force of reason. The
confrontation is generated by predestination’s rebuff of reason, which is the
arousal of reason in a categorical imperative. Kant and Channing influence
Weber’s thinking, hostile as they are to predestination’s contempt of reason and
freedom. Not innate depravity from providential necessity, they say, but asceti-
cism, duty and initiative are reason’s pathway to the promise. While predestination
arouses the moral fervor of the Kantian personality, Kant and Channing claim that
Asiatic religions are disqualified from doing the same. Religion premised on
contemplation is the inertia of ‘feelings’ and destruction of the personality. Weber
builds these features into his Puritan studies. Yet the ‘triumph’ of the Kantian
personality was neither Weber’s nor the world’s triumph but its disenchantment.
The triumph of the Kantian personality was not the florescence but the destruc-
tion of reason, ground to powder on the factory floor.

Weber spares no effort in conveying the independence of ideas. Like Ibsen,
he holds that ‘ethical imperatives’ and ‘cultural values’ are distinct. Cultural values
can reject an ethic, just as an ethic can reject cultural values (Weber, 1949c: 15).
Only in the case of the sect do ethical imperatives and cultural values converge
(1949b: 52, 57).\textsuperscript{13}

If ideas cannot always be taken from culture, neither can they be seen as
some inevitable reflex of the economic situation (Weber, 1958b: 277; 1973: 143;
1978b: 401). Metaphysical reasons in part account for this. Weber asks Simmel to
identify that faculty of mind most concerned with eternity: ‘Reason!’ is Simmel’s
appealed to rational knowledge, which has followed its own autonomous and
inner-worldly norms’ (1959: 249; 1967a: 355; 1967c: 276, 77). Ideas are ‘the
most powerful plastic elements of national character, and contain a law of
development and a compelling force entirely their own’ (1958b: 278). Among other reasons, ideas have independence because they typically seek to resolve these non-material, other-worldly questions: ‘Am I one of the elect? And how can I be sure of this state of grace?’ (1958b: 110). Accordingly, a religious ethic obtains its primary approval not from political and material sources, but from ‘the content of its annunciation and promise’ (1967c: 270). Religious ideas arise from the realm of intellectualism, from

. . . the metaphysical needs of the human mind as it is driven to reflect on ethical and religious questions, driven not by material need but an inner compulsion to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and take up a position toward it. (1969: 117)

Ideas have autonomy in as much as they arise from the theodicy question: why do bad things happen to good people? This is particularly troubling for metaphysica naturalis. The metaphysician within asks: why is the universe so indifferent to my ethical postulates? Behind theodicy, Weber states, ‘lies a stand towards something in the actual world which is experienced as specifically “senseless”’. Most recoil from the abyss, burdened as they are by a ‘metaphysical need for a meaningful cosmos’ (1967c: 281).15

The problem of theodicy has been addressed in various ways (Weber, 1978b: 519), beyond purview of ‘a theoretical typology’ (1967a: 358). Three doctrines stand out: Zoroastrian dualism; the Hindu doctrine of karma; and the predestinarian decree of deus abscondidus (1967a: 358–9; 1967c: 275; 1978b: 523–4). Asiatic religions and/or ‘exemplary prophecy’ (1968: 330) stress contemplation as the pathway to the metaphysical promise. More significant for a capitalist future is the Western Judaeco–Christian branch, which culminates in ‘emissary prophecy’ and ‘ethical imperatives’ as the pathway to the promise (1959: 227). Old Testament monotheism created difficulties for the intellect insofar as an omnipotent ‘transcendental unitary god cannot be reconciled with the imperfection of the world that he has created and rules over’ (1978b: 117). The problem is particularly marked in Job: ‘In one form or another, the problem belongs everywhere among the factors determining religious evolution and the need for salvation’ (1978b: 519).

Pathways from theodicy proceeded through the medieval Church, Lutheranism and finally Calvinism. The ‘need’ for an ‘ethical’ account of the ‘meaning’ of the distribution of fortune produced increasingly rational conceptions. But as ‘magical’16 elements were progressively eliminated, the theodicy of suffering found more problems because “undeserved” woe was all too frequent; not “good” but “bad” men succeeded’ (Weber, 1967c: 275). The search for rational consistency culminated in predestination, which so enlarged the powers of God and so diminished those of man that it created an ethical chasm between depraved humanity and its Creator. So rendered, God is immune from the ethical claims of
His creatures, and human notions of justice inapplicable to His behaviour (1978b: 522). The renunciation of God’s benevolence is also the renunciation of the capacity of fallen human nature actively to retrieve meaning from the world (1967a: 359). We can only be the passive recipients of redemption (1958b: 103, 105, 90, 110, 114, 223, 232; 1978b: 175). With the appearance of predestination, therefore, the problem of theodicy disappears altogether (1978b: 522).

The great irony is that reason as creator of providential determinism engages in masochistic self-denial: Reason rejects the possibility of reason itself, of creativity, moral freedom and ethical responsibility. Yet *metaphysica naturalis* cannot be so readily subdued. The riposte of practical reason to the double decree was to secure meaning and salvation from a mundane calling (Weber, 1958b: 109, 203; 1967c: 277, 291; 1978b: 523). Demonstrable excellence in vocation was the ‘ought’ – the ethical imperative that impelled the Puritan (1967c: 276–7).

Reason’s rebuke of predestination was inspired by Kant and Channing. Kant says that innate evil is contrary to reason, that before the Fall we were born in goodness, and that after the Fall we were born in evil. Salvation is nonsensical in these circumstances because it implies a grandiose reversal of process, that intrinsic evil in some unfathomable way is reconstituted into intrinsic goodness (Kant, 1960: 16, 40–1, 46). Thereupon the guilty need only accept atonement to annihilate guilt without effort. Reason, by contrast, tells us we must improve ourselves to claim righteousness (1960: 107, 134). Kant’s words drip with contempt when he speaks on the mystery of election. On the one hand, the atonement presupposes something good in all of us, while, on the other, natural depravity is inability to do the good. Further, why should grace provide assistance to the elect by ‘unconditional decree’ instead of the merit of their works?

That one portion of our race should be destroyed for salvation, the other for eternal reprobation – this again yields no concept of divine justice but must be referred to a wisdom whose rule is for us a complete mystery. (1960: 134)

William Channing also condemns predestination as contrary to reason. Active in the first third of the 19th century, Channing had a wide readership in America and Britain and on the Continent. George Bancroft introduced Channing to Germany around 1836. Channing was deeply influenced by the Scottish School of philosophy founded by Thomas Reid (1710–96). Like Kant, the School’s inspiration was the rejection of Hume (Grave, 1960: 2, 4, 8). Still, Kant does not think much of the School and accuses Reid, Oswald, Beattie and Priestly of misunderstanding Hume. Kant the intellectual aristocrat ridicules the School for attempting to solve Hume’s refutation of causation by ‘common sense’, which is nothing more than ‘an appeal to the judgment of the crowd’ (1962: 8).

Members of the School who impressed Channing were Francis Hutcheson (*A System of Moral Philosophy, in Three Books*, 1755) and, particularly, Richard
Price (A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals, 1974, orig. 1787). Channing tells us that Price saved him from Locke, that Price gave him the Platonic doctrine of ideas and the foundation of his philosophy (Peabody, 1880: 368). Though more a Transcendentalist than anything else, Channing has a Kantian cast acquired from Price, who anticipated many of Kant’s doctrines (Edgell, 1955: 64). American, and, therefore, Channing’s, Transcendentalism was more religious, literary and romantic than philosophical: Ralph Waldo Emerson studied under and was an acquaintance of Channing.

Weber was exposed to Channing’s animus to predestination when he first read him in 1884 (Marianne Weber, 1975: 86–7). Weber subsequently wrote to his mother that

_This is the first time within my memory that something religious has had a more than objective interest_ for me, and I believe that in becoming acquainted with this great religious figure I have not spent my time quite uselessly [convalescing] after all. (1975: 86)

A year later, Weber wrote Alfred that religion is the foundation of the current social order. Nations which have come into being, he continues, the great deeds they have performed, law and even science, owe their origin to religious forces (1975: 100).

Thus Channing captures Weber’s attention because of their shared hostility to predestination. God has given us reason to interpret scripture, Channing states, and will call us to account if we let it sleep (1957: 5, 8, 9, 11, 50). Reason rejects innate depravity; for if we had this natural propensity to sin, we should be absolved from guilt (1957: 24). Calvin’s inscrutable and vengeful god is replaced by one who is eternally placable and disposed to forgive (1957: 27, 45). He does not govern tyrannically but ‘is infinitely good, kind and benevolent . . . good in disposition as well as in act; god not to a few, but to all’ (1957: 22).


One of the greatest of all errors is the attempt to exalt God, by making him the sole cause, the sole agent in the universe, by denying to the creature freedom of will and moral power, by making man a mere recipient and transmitter of a foreign impulse. (1970: 4)
Kant and Channing respond to the double decree with the Kantian personality. Marianne says Weber found Channing’s doctrine of freedom most compelling, a doctrine her husband had already obtained from Kant (1975: 87). Like Kant, Channing’s freedom is his distinction between free moral necessity and the determined necessity of nature or Providence. Channing states: ‘We are not mere material substances, subjected to an irresistible physical law, or mere animals subjected to resistless instincts; but are souls on which a moral law is written’ (1970: 6). Otherwise said, we are not wholly reason nor conscience, but have sensual appetites like those possessed by ‘inferior animals’ (1957: 105; 1970: 340). Channing insists that nature is powerless before our moral principles (1957: 94): ‘He in whom the conviction of duty is unfolded becomes subject in that moment to a law which no power in the universe can abrogate’ (1957: 114).

Channing’s reason is the highest faculty of mind because it alone can comprehend universal truths. Reason is constantly at work on information furnished by the senses, ordering and interpreting them according to its own great truths (1970: 234). Reason is the repository of a ‘moral instinct’ (1894: 384, 395) that comes equipped with God-given freedom (1957: 23; 1970: 1). Duty, says Channing, is the cornerstone of morality. The avoidance of duty is to wallow in sensuality, the ‘lower principle of our nature’ (1970: 341). This lower principle is manifest in the ‘slavish love of lucre’ (1970: 179); ‘the contemptible vanity and dissipation of fashionable life’ (1970: 344); and the pampering of the senses and loading the body with ‘idle trappings’ (1880: 63). Desires expand endlessly when unrestrained, such that we as rational creatures degenerate into the most ‘thorough sensualists’ (1970: 340). Sensuality corrupts reason inasmuch as we lose our freedom, become no better than nature when succumbing to it (1957: 87; 1970: 37, 173, 174). Duty, by contrast, is the ‘disinterested spirit’ (1894: 384) presupposed by Christianity (1957: 113; 1970: 4, 236). ‘Self-denial, then, is the will acting with power in the choice and prosecution of duty. . . . Duty is restraint imposing curbs on passion’ (1970: 9, 341, 343).

Duty, Kant tells us, is nothing other than personality – freedom from the mechanisms of nature and awareness that the personality makes and follows its own law solely out of respect for this law (1956: 89). ‘The idea of personality awakens respect; it places before our eyes the sublimity of our own nature (in its higher vocation)’ (1956: 90).

Preparatory to Weber’s own formulation of the Kantian personality, he frequently substitutes ‘asceticism’ for duty. In Catholicism, asceticism freed the monk from status naturae, from ‘dependence on the world and on nature’, by subjecting him to the ethical regulation of a supreme and purposeful will (1958b: 119; 1978b: 1168). Western monasticism was the first great religion to recruit asceticism in the rational development of crafts, industry and agriculture (1958b: 118; 1961: 267–8; 1969: 181–2; 1978b: 1169–70). Yet monasticism could not create the independent personality. The Reformation took additional steps in this
direction when it abolished the *consilia evangelica*, bringing other-worldly asceticism to an end (1958b: 174). For Calvinism, this meant that ‘*[t]he stern religious characters who had previously gone into monasteries had now to practice their religion in the life of the world*’ (1961: 267–8). Only in the Occident was this additional step taken by Protestantism, by ‘ascetic Protestantism’, so called because it introduced rational asceticism to the life of the world (1969: 182).19

The introduction of rational asceticism was the introduction of the Kantian personality into the life of the world. Weber here concedes Kant’s influence. When he speaks of the calling as the ‘loveless fulfillment of duty’, Weber has the ethical imperative in mind. Kant’s Scottish ancestry rooted in Pietism, Weber continues, has a conception of duty closely linked to the ideas of ascetic Protestantism (1958b: 270). Duty drove Weber’s Puritan, whose devotion to calling was irrational from the standpoint of ‘purely eudaemonistic self-interest’ (1958b: 78). Ascetic Protestants pursued their callings not from sensuous feelings, nor from inclinations, but from duty. ‘The Puritan, like every rational type of asceticism, tried to enable a man to maintain and act upon his constant motives, especially those which it taught him itself, against the emotions’ (1958b: 119, 161, 206–7, 212). The Kantian personality thus subdues providential necessity and nature’s necessity of the flesh. So endowed, this is a ‘heroic’ personality. The bourgeoisie developed a heroism in defense of Puritanism that ‘was “the last of our heroisms,” as Carlyle not without reason has remarked’ (1958b: 37, 112, 166). Only the ‘Kantian ethic’ can produce the ‘high points in life’; only the Kantian ethic can be called a ‘heroic ethic’; and only the heroic ethic can be called ‘idealism’ (Marianne Weber, 1975: 378).

Kant and Channing also shaped Weber’s thoughts on Asiatic religion. Such religions do not provide grounds for liberation of the Kantian personality. They fail because their soteriologies give an open invitation to ‘feelings’ in salvation achievement.

Channing’s deep mistrust of feelings is conveyed by this anecdote: when he handed a sonnet of Southey’s to a ‘lady’, he records her reaction as ‘pretty’. This seemingly trivial event evokes a powerful response from Channing, who accuses the unfortunate woman of pandering to feelings. Not the passivity of feelings but the activism of reason is Channing’s credo. There is no ‘moral merit’ in a feeling. I may shed an ocean of tears over human misery, but my feeling does nothing to alleviate this misery. Suddenly, ‘a cloud of error burst from my mind. I found that virtue did not consist in feeling, but in *acting from a sense of duty*’ (1880: 60–1).

Because oriental religions are consumed by feelings, they destroy the personality. In such religions, Channing charges, the devout are ‘*[s]wallowed up in his greatness’, assimilation that ‘has annihilated the creature’. ‘Perfection has been thought to lie in self-oblivion,’ he continues, ‘in losing oneself in the divinity, in establishing exclusive communion with God’ (1970: 3). Relying on feelings undermines reason and its quest for revelation (1957: 9). Channing
associates this mode of thought with despotism, the subjection of the believer to ‘One Infinite Power’ (1970: 3). When man is indistinguishable from this omni-present spirit, he has ‘no destiny to accomplish which would fill him with hope or rouse him to effort. In the East, the individual counted as nothing’ (1970: 3).

Kant has similar thoughts on oriental religions. ‘A knowledge of laws, and of morality’, he writes, ‘can scarcely be derived from any sort of feeling; still less can there be inferred or discovered from a feeling, certain evidence of divine influence’ (1960: 105). Instead of feelings, ‘the pure moral motive’ is the foundation of character – the consistent and practical habit of mind set by reason itself. ‘Such a motive gives a man power,’ Kant proclaims, ‘teaches him his own worth by pulling him away from sensuality’ (1977: 156). ‘The idea of personality awakens respect; it places before our eyes the sublimity of our own nature (in its [highest] vocation)’ (1956: 90). Mystical absorption and its reliance on feelings, by contrast, obliterates the personality. Kant calls illumination by the Godhead ‘fanaticism’ (1960: 78). Specifically criticized is the teaching of Lao-kiun, in which the believer is ‘swallowed up in the abyss of the Godhead through the fusion with it, and destruction of one’s personality’ (1963: 79).


Alien to Asiatic thought is salvation achievement addressed to the ‘demands of the day’. Uniquely Western is to pull oneself out of the mud by the forelock, thereby establishing ‘the personality’ (Weber, 1958c: 342). ‘Certainly, the dignity of the personality lies in the fact that for it there exists values about which it organizes its life’ (1949b: 54, 55, 111). The Puritan personified these ideals in whom ‘occupation and the inner ethical core of the personality formed an unbroken whole’ (1978a: 1124–25). Predestination and its ‘ethic of inwardness’ produced ‘ethical rigorism’ and the ‘total personality’ (1978b: 534, 573, 575).

**Weber’s Kantian Disenchantment**

The total personality failed to produce Kant’s utopia of reason (Barker, 1980; Sica, 1988: 133; Turner, 1981: 158). Reason realized instead mechanization and regimentation. Thus moral causality is irrational because it led not to the blossom of reason, but to the death of reason, specifically the sensuous mastery of pathologically afflicted natures in a capitalist economy. This outcome is tribute to
Weber’s commitment to scholarship and determination to face the music, devoted as he was to the Kantian personality and moved as he was by the heroic struggle of the Puritan (Jaspers, 1989: 23; Marianne Weber, 1975: 594). Weber’s scholarship discloses the bankruptcy of reason, and thus of self.

Kant’s optimism predicts otherwise. His teleology – his ‘secret design’ in history – champions reason as the engine of ‘progress’. Just as purpose is the regulative idea of nature, Kant exults, so must purpose be the regulative idea of human nature, particularly human nature in history (1952: 11, 18, 92). Kant’s ‘natural plan’ sees our capacities destined to evolve completely to their natural end (1963: 12). The use of reason does not proceed instinctively but requires trial, practice and instruction to progress from one level of insight to the next. Hence we can only become more reasonable, in ourselves, in the state and in international relations (1963: 13).

The history of mankind can be seen in the large, as the realization of Nature’s secret plan to bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed, and also bring forth that external relation among states which is perfectly adequate to this end. (1963: 21)

Kant’s historical design is ‘Providence’, or ‘the profound wisdom of a higher cause which predetermines the course of nature and directs it to the objective final end of the human race’ (1963: 106). So it goes that humanity has always been in progress towards the better, and will continue to be so (1963: 148). ‘The good deeds of men will become better and better and more and more numerous’ (1963: 113, 151). ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of pure practical reason and its righteousness, and your end (the blessing of perpetual peace) will necessarily follow’ (1963: 125). Beyond the ken of Kant’s insight is history without progress – life without purpose. ‘If we give up on this fundamental principle, we no longer have a lawful but an aimless course of nature, and blind chance takes the place of the guiding thread of reason’ (1963: 12–13). Weber abandoned this fundamental principle and went with blind chance. While Kant’s purpose is asphodel and sunlit days, Weber’s purposeless is ‘polar night’ – where the only paradise is a ‘fool’s paradise’ (Roth, 1978: xxxiii). Weber’s melancholy discarded the evolutionary belief in progress typical of liberal Protestantism (Honigsheim, 1968: 102).

There is irony in Weber’s repudiation of progress, for the empirical categories used to chart it are Kant’s metaphysical categories. When Weber claims that value rationality created instrumental rationality, he is also saying that Kant’s categorical imperative created the hypothetical imperative. Kant’s categorical imperative is a command in itself disinterested in ends (1990: 32–3). Similarly so for Weber’s value rationality, which ‘always’ involves ‘commands’ or ‘demands’ that are binding on the subject.
For, the more unconditionally the actor devotes himself to this value for its own sake, . . . to pure sentiment or beauty, to absolute goodness or devotion to duty, the less he is influenced by considerations of the consequences of his actions. (1978b: 25–6)

The similarity between Kant’s hypothetical imperative and Weber’s instrumental rationality is equally striking. Kant’s hypothetical imperative rests on empirical subjective interests that command the will to perform some action as a necessary means to some end desired by the will (1990: 31). The hypothetical imperative is a means to the achievement of ‘happiness’: ‘the action is not commanded absolutely but commanded as a means to another end’ (1990: 32). Thus Weber’s instrumental rationality is behaviour oriented to means considered adequate to attain clearly comprehended ends (1981: 151).

Action is instrumentally rational . . . when the end, the means and the secondary results are all taken into account and weighed. This involves rational consideration of alternative means to the end, of the relations of the end to secondary consequences, and finally of the relative importance of different possible ends. (1978b: 26)

Value rationality created instrumental rationality in a totally unintended way. Predestination, Weber states, is ‘[t]he principle of irrationality, and the lack of congruity in value between cause and effect’ (1973: 144). Thus when the subject enacts moral causality, when the subject pursues something as an end in itself, unintended consequences follow (1958b: 89, 90, 259; 1959: 235; 1978b: 26, 1200). It was reason’s insensitivity to consequences that occasioned the Kantian disenchantment of the world and of Weber. 24 Reason selected material means to achieve moral ends and obtained thereby its means. The *hiatus irrationalis* between Weber’s subject and social structure is that we ‘freely’ create only to be ‘dominated’ by the fruits of our freedom. Fate gave ‘ideal’ instructions to the historical switchman who unintentionally diverted reason onto a siding ruled by economic interests and instrumental rationality. 25 And when it threw the switch, reason transferred those qualities hitherto reserved for morality-making into money-making. A new mode of acquisition was created. This mode is neither *auri sacra fames*, nor an ‘uncontrolled impulse’, neither ‘political capitalism’, nor the ‘booty capitalism’ of Cortés and Pizarro (1958b: 17, 57, 68; 1961: 261). Rather, accumulation was transformed by reason into an ‘end in itself’, into an ‘ethic’ whose rules, when broken, constitute the neglect of ‘duty’ (1958b: 51, 62, 63, 73, 75).

**Conclusion**

This motivational juggernaut broke the back of traditional resistance to ethically unregulated acquisition. Therefrom, Kant’s pure will cleared the ground for
corrupted will. Fate decreed that reason’s great odyssey produced not moral might in a rational kingdom of ends, but the material-sensual determinism of capitalism. The Puritan strove to build The City on a Hill, and erected instead fortresses of finance. Kant’s great motto of the Enlightenment is ‘[h]ave the courage to use your own reason’ (1963: 3). Weber’s courage, his self-imposed disenchantment, uses reason to plot the collapse of reason. In realizing this end, Weber also follows Nietzsche: that we should force our ideas to their ultimate conclusions, even when these conclusions are devastating.

So Nietzsche also had an impact on Weber’s disenchantment, as did the early existentialism of Kierkegaard. The contributions of both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard will be pursued in future work. That work will reveal Weber as Nietzsche’s pupil on the irrationality of reason. It will also reveal the influence of Kierkegaard on the development of Weber’s ‘doctrine of faith’, that all knowledge is essentially ‘subjective’ and thus based on personal commitment. This explains why Weber’s faith ultimately remained with Kant, despite the absence of ‘solid grounds’ for doing so. Something of Weber’s faith in Kant can be seen in the following: while Weber is overtly critical of others who confound free moral causality with historical-teleological causality, he is manifestly benevolent in Kant’s case. When castigating Wundt, for instance, Weber alludes to Kant’s On History, remarking that ‘the philosopher’ is the archetype of all cultural and personality theories of Wundt’s sort, theories that are nevertheless ‘sadly degenerate version of Kant’. ‘In spite of all the contradictions which closer analysis reveals,’ Weber concludes, ‘Kant’s formulation of this position was grandiose and, in its logic, ruthlessly perspicuous’ (1975b: 118). Weber is steadfast in his commitment to Kant, despite the fact that his Puritan studies show reason to be an empty shell. It follows that if reason is an empty shell, then so is Weber for continuing to embrace it. Yet Weber’s doctrine of faith informed him that he would remain an empty shell whatever he ‘chose’ to believe in. Kant is just as ‘bad’ and just as ‘good’ as any other system of belief, so why not Kant, particularly when you ‘like’ him so much? Weber’s ultimate disenchantment, therefore, is that ‘belief’ is little more than a stab in the dark. Though he had an ‘inner need’ for ‘certainty’, Weber accepted the inevitability that such certainty would always elude him.

Notes

1. When Weber puts Kant’s reason to the test and comes up empty, he engages in a form of ‘self-mockery’ reported by Ungar (1984). He does so because when Weber destroys Kant’s reason, he also destroys the foundation of his own person, which was, and remained Kantian.

2. While Weber’s findings are the intellectual denial of his subjective self, they are the vindication of his objective scholarship. They are also a vindication of the man’s courage.

3. What I do and do not mean by moral causality needs to be aired. Moral causality does not imply some proof of metaphysical freedom. Indeed Kant himself is unable to deliver such a proof. Our own nature – the will – is a ‘thing in itself’ and can never be plumbed by a priori conceptions.
Kant arrives at a psychological proof of sorts in the *Foundation*, but the metaphysical proof eludes him (1990: 64–5, 71–2). What I do mean by moral causality follows Weber. Empirically, there are several types of ‘social action’, each with its own form of causality. Value rationality (moral causality), which corresponds to Kant’s reason, is one of these types. As we shall see, Weber’s value rationality can be independent of other forms of causality, say material causality or interests. So when I use the term ‘moral freedom’, or equivalents, I do so in this sense.

4. See also: ‘The words I ought express a species of necessity, and imply a connection with grounds which nature does not and cannot present to the mind of man’ (1964: 324).

5. Hume is a eudaemonist who claims that morality is comprised of ‘sentiments’, and a sentiment is a ‘feeling for the happiness of mankind’ (1964: 251, 259, 265). Both Kant and Weber reject eudaemonism for asceticism and the categorical imperative.

6. Weber’s marriage proposal letter, of sorts, to Marianne implicitly cautions his future wife not to have ‘physical expectations’ of him. Weber writes: ‘For when feeling rises high, you must control it to be able to steer yourself with sobriety’ (Marianne Weber, 1975: 179).

7. Weber obliquely notes that he does not like the philosophy of Mill (1967b: 147–8), the latter’s eudeamonism probably one reason among others.

8. Shades of the ideal type here. The ideal type has its genesis in Kant’s epistemology, which claims we can never know the thing in itself. All we can do is ‘idealize’ reality. The ideal type also comes from the active mind of idealism, whose task it is to impose order and meaning on the world (1949b: 106).

9. Continuity between Kant and interpretive sociology in relation to the means–ends formula will be made apparent in due course when ‘value rationality’ and ‘instrumental rationality’ are highlighted. Much ink has been spilled on the Weber–Rickert linkage, which need not concern us here other than to mention that Weber concedes his debt to Rickert on ‘value relevance’ (1949b: 50, 76). Rickert denies any Weberian debt, probably from politeness (1986: 9).

10. When Weber rejects the importation of metaphysical categories into empirical work, he has in mind the ‘total concepts’ just mentioned; total in the sense that all empirical categories can be derived from them.

11. Rickert says that if history is pursued as a science, transcendental assumptions are indispensable (1986: 26).

12. Ideal independence is pronounced during ideal inception. Subsequently, eschatological expectations recede via routinization when ideas strike an affinity with interests (1978b: 1180). Witness the attraction of civic strata to practical rationalism, to good works in a calling (1949b: 56; 1967c: 284). When Weber speaks of interests, he does so more as a Kantian – as phenomenon – than he does as a Marxist.


14. Weber’s significant reply to Simmel is that reason ‘is merely a cognitive ground . . . not a real ground . . . for bliss’ (1973: 149). By this, Weber alludes to the emptiness of reason, soon made apparent here.

15. No one was more burdened by this need than Weber himself.
16. The less contemplative mysticism and magic and the more doctrine, the greater the need of ‘rational apologetics’ (1967a: 351).

17. Channing also opposes the ‘infinite atonement’ of the Trinitarians, which is morbidly sin-centred and contrary to reason (1894: 397).

18. This is Hutcheson’s ‘moral sense’, and, to a lesser degree, Kant’s commands of duty ‘primordially engraved upon the heart of man through reason’ (1960: 79).

19. Also see Channing (1970: 4) and Kant (1960: 121) on the Church’s alleged misapplication of asceticism. Further, the Church was unable to promote methodical conduct because of the release offered via the confessional. Its knowledge of ‘“human nature”’, Weber states, ‘did not reckon with the fact that the individual is a closed unitary ethical personality’ (1961: 268).

20. Calvinists, by contrast, have an immunity to Caesarism (1958b: 224–5).


22. Nietzsche, by contrast, has nothing but admiration for Buddhism, which is without asceticism and a categorical imperative (1964: 147–8).


25. The switchman metaphor does not transcend methodological individualism (Hindess, 1987: 141). Rather, it confirms the Rickert/Weber insight that ‘there is in fact no historical representation without a real mental center’ (Rickert, 1986: 123). Just because the link is irrational does not mean it is beyond analysis. Further, the switchman does not obtain capitalism from ideas alone. Material, legal and political preconditions were also required (Hansen, 1963), elaborated by Weber in The City (1958a) and General Economic History (1961).

References


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