

Closing Remarks: Notes on Weber and Characterology. Reading "Science as a Vocation" with Hunter and Tribe

Paul du Gay

Published: July 26, 2018

Abstract

In "Science as a Vocation", Weber encourages his audience to be "polytheistic", and to take on the persona specific to the life order within which they are engaged. In the absence of a universal moral norm, or a conclusive victory for one form of organized rationality over all others, Weber asks, how are individuals to develop "character"? Weber's concern is the cultivation of individuals willing and able to live up to the ethical demands placed upon them by their location within particular life-orders, whose life-conduct within those orders and powers — the university, the public bureau, the firm — can combine practical rationality with ethical seriousness. These notes consider Weber as a late, great exponent of the "ethics of office" and in so doing seek to indicate the continuing importance of his ethical stance.

Keywords: Weber; Hennis; Science as a Vocation; character; office; persona.

Paul du Gay: Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School (Denmark)

✉ pdg.ioa@cbs.dk

Paul du Gay is Professor in the Department of Organization (IOA) at Copenhagen Business School and Director of Research in the School of Management, Royal Holloway, University of London. His most recent book is *For Formal Organization: The Past in The Present and Future of Organization Theory* (OUP, 2017) (with Signe Vikkelsø). At CBS he directs the VELUX Foundation project "Office as a Vocation".

I.

To begin with we can note that as with all of Weber's essays and lectures, a dual character is evident in "Science as a Vocation". Although it was occasioned by current events and problems, it also points beyond its immediate context towards much wider considerations. Weber's discussion of the fate of "science" (as the disciplined pursuit of knowledge) in Germany, no matter how intense its immediate engagement (in an atmosphere of fractious ideological conflict, in a country destabilized by war, and delivered to activist students hungry for meaning and surrounded by intellectual prophets), always has implications for our fundamental understanding of the academic life (Owen & Strong, 2004). The aim, as ever with Weber, is to strive for clarity and in this instance to indicate what it means to practice that life with integrity and thus without illusions. In pursuing this aim, Weber presents his audience with some stark choices. To the extent that someone remains within the immanent order of a *Wissenschaft* — a publicly demonstrable knowledge based on distinctive procedures — they may pursue this calling in a relatively untroubled manner. Should someone demand to know, however, whether this *Wissenschaftliche* form of life is "meaningful" or "valuable" in some absolute sense — that is, on grounds that lie beyond all particular sciences or forms of life — then no answer can or should be given; for all meanings and values are immanent to particular ways of life (*Lebensführungen*) and existential orders (*Lebensordnungen*). As Hunter indicates in his contribution in this issue (Hunter, 2018), at this point, the best that an academic teacher can do is to clarify this fact — that is, the immanence of values to particular *Weltanschauungen* and the conduct of life they entail — and to refrain from promising to reveal an ultimate value-sphere or form of life.

For Weber, the teacher who promises the latter steps out of their *Wissenschaftliche* calling and into the shoes of the "academic prophet", whose claim to reveal the ultimate moral or metaphysical grounds for all of the life-orders can only be specious and demagogic (Hunter, 2018, p. 5).

It is perhaps this uncompromisingly ascetic stance that goes some little way to explaining both why so many of those who turned up to Weber's lecture left disappointed, and indeed, why no clear and present Weberian school of thought has existed over time in the manner it has for other so-called founding figures of sociology, such as Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim. Or indeed, why Weber has failed to attract the retinue of enthusiastic disciples attending contemporary intellectual figures such as Bourdieu, Butler, Foucault, or Latour, for instance. As Scaff (2014, p. 10) has argued, this may partly be explained by the fact that Weber was not at all interested "in elaborating an abstract body of thought that could be systematized, codified, simplified, and transmitted easily to others." However, despite this, there are a number of prestigious examples of those who have precisely attempted to bring Weber's work to bear on contemporary matters of concern in a distinctly "Weberian" manner, not least the two scholars whose essays constitute the basis of this special section of *Sociologica*.

II.

In a series of detailed studies, Wilhelm Hennis (1988; 2000) has convincingly argued that the work of Max Weber should be viewed as fundamentally concerned with questions of *character* and *conduct*, and that the work itself expresses a particular stance, attitude and intellectual comportment towards these questions. Hennis indicates that at the heart of Weber's work lies a moral anthropology at profound variance with both a positivistic and high theoretical social science, one which, in Weber's own words, had sought to

shift its location and change its conceptual apparatus so that it might regard the stream of events from the heights of reflective thought (Weber, 1949, as quoted in Hennis, 1988, p. 104).

In such a social science, the central problems preoccupying Weber — questions of *Lebensführung* (the conduct of life), of "personality" and "life-orders" (*Lebensordnungen*) — would have little interest. However, if we managed to descend from such heights, Hennis suggested, they might once again become very important indeed. Max Weber's work finds a place in the pre-history of this sort of abstracted or otherwise highfalutin social science only once his central problems, questions, and stance are neglected. For Weber, as Hennis indicates, no ultimate moral or philosophical justification for a given form of life is possible in modern societies,

because the different value systems of the world stand in conflict with one another (Weber, 1989, p. 22).

Between these different life orders there is frequently a battle of different gods of different religions. In “Science as a Vocation”, as Tribe indicates in this issue (2018), Weber encourages his audience to be “polytheistic”, and to take on the persona specific to the life order within which they are engaged. In the absence of a universal moral norm, or a conclusive victory for one form of organized rationality over all others, Weber asks, how are individuals to develop “character” or “personality” (*Persönlichkeit*)? In considering the future of modern societies, and the individuals existing within them, Weber’s deepest concern is the cultivation of individuals willing and able to live up to the ethical demands placed upon them by their location within particular life-orders, whose life-conduct within those distinctive orders and powers — the university, the public bureau, the firm, the parliament, — can combine practical rationality with ethical seriousness.

For Weber, the individual with “character” is one who is capable of personal dedication to a cause (*Sache*), or the instituted purposes of a given life-order, in a manner that “transcends individuality” (Hennis, 1988, p. 88). It is in this sense that it is possible, for example, for bureaucrats to be “personally” committed to the ethos and purposes of their distinctive office even though that ethos lies outside of their own personal (i.e. individual) moral predilections or principles. Lawyers too often refer to the “law” precisely in this way. As Weber puts it in *Science as a Vocation*, “Ladies and gentlemen: Personality is possessed in science by the man (*sic*) who serves only the needs of his subject, and this is true not only in science” (Weber, 1989, p. 11). The life-orders possess an inner regularity: “each of these orders makes a demand, forms, characterises, a variety of ‘impositions’ or perhaps opens up possibilities for future conduct, involves a formative tendency for the personality” (Hennis, 1988, p. 65). And these demands are specific and non-reducible. For Weber, then, there is no transcendental unity, no meta-virtue or meta-character appropriate to the performance of all institutionalized offices.

The possibility of different categories and practices of personhood requiring and expressing distinctive ethical comportments, irreducible to common underlying principles, appears quite foreign, though, to those for whom a common or universal form of moral judgment is held to reside in the figure and capacities of the self-reflective person or individual agent (Habermas, 1987, for example, as Hunter makes clear in his article in this volume). Weber’s context-specific, and thus “limited”, conception of “personality” cautions against the siren-calls of those — Weber names various socialists, anarchists, and *litterateurs* of his own time, and we could include numerous “prophets” from our own — seeking to hold onto, or re-establish, the idea of the “whole” or “complete” human being: an ultimate, supra-regional persona that could function as the normative benchmark for all others. For Weber, any ethic attempting to establish “substantively identical commandments applicable to all relationships” ends up adopting a stance that Jacques Maritain (1951, pp. 61–62) termed “hypermoralism”. Maritain argued that reflex attempts to judge political and governmental actions in terms of interpersonal ethics, for instance, put intolerable strains on the political system. For Maritain, unless one distinguished between the norms appropriate to the conduct of government and those appropriate to the conduct of personal relationships, for instance, one would quickly become disillusioned with public life and despair of the relevance of *any* moral consideration in government. This, of course, is a point that Weber makes in his other Munich lecture, “Politics as a Vocation” (Weber, 1994), and which preoccupies Hennis (2009) in his *Politics as a Practical Science*.

III.

As Scaff (2014, p. 170) has argued, Wilhelm Hennis places Weber in the lineage of those, starting with Thucydides, who have sought practical knowledge of the world as it “is”, and engaged in a quest for the sorts of prudential judgment that comes from an understanding of contextual specificity and the contingency of circumstance (and *fortuna*). The point of this proposition, however, is not simply to reconnect Weber with classical themes and a distinctive ethical tradition (notably the “ethics of office”), but simultaneously to render problematic the treatment of Weber by Parsons, Bendix, Habermas, and others seeking to position him as “a founder of social science who offers primarily an ‘approach’, a ‘paradigm’ or a ‘research program’ as his distinctive contribution to modern thought” (Scaff, 2014, p. 170). It is this sort of

Hennisian double-shuffle that Ian Hunter undertakes in his essay on Weber's Lecture (2018). Of central interest to Hunter is the second stage of Weber's analysis in *Science as a Vocation* — the question of conduct, comportment, and stance; in other words, what commitment to the vocation of science entails of those who would subject themselves to it.

In the vocation lecture, Weber characterizes the cultivation of this scientific self-restraint as an “‘ethical achievement’, though this may be too emotive a term for something that is so self-evident” (Weber, 1989, p. 22). By approaching “religious and moral values scientifically — that is by investigating them as particular historically conditioned ways of shaping conduct and viewing the world — the historical and social sciences can allow these values to be examined independently of their truth or falsity, that is, value-neutrally, and hence in an epistemic space able to be shared by those holding radically opposed religious and moral views” (Hunter, 2018, p. 6). Historically speaking, this is indeed a rare, remarkable, and fragile achievement, dependent as it is upon the contingent historical and pedagogical transmission of a certain ethical discipline and comportment; one that, as Hunter remorselessly shows in his analysis of the Frankfurt School critique of Weber (2017), is forever contested, not least by those academic prophets for whom “dispensing sacred goods and revelations” and continuing to meditate metaphysically “about the *meaning* of the world” is viewed as the requisite stance informing the practice of intellectual life. It also finds echoes in contemporary policy programmes committed to the ideals of “interdisciplinarity” and “scientific social responsibility”, for example, which seen in Weber's terms can often appear to be little more than institutionalized instances of the “feeble equivocation” that comes from lacking the courage to make up one's mind concerning one's “ultimate standpoint” or “stance”. As Weber makes clear in “*Science as a Vocation*”, different standpoints or stances cannot be superimposed or neatly combined to create some sort of “bigger picture”. Stances are not like angles that can be artfully arranged to create a fuller picture of reality — the sum of all angles. Rather they are rivals, engaged in battle and there is no innocent space above and beyond the fray. Stances are occupied with very different things — they each express a particular attitude, approach, and related comportment — and just like baking a cake and riding a bike cannot simply “be combined”. To think otherwise as an academic, Weber argues, is to “shirk one's straightforward duty to preserve his [sic] intellectual integrity.” For Weber, if it is to perform its central role of clarification, then science “must operate against the background assumption that there is a plurality of incompatible orientations to life” (Owen & Strong, 2004, p. xxxii). In all its uncompromising steeliness, “*Science as a Vocation*” continues to be something of a beacon shining a light on what is involved in taking up a particular stance and thus clarifying the commitments and comportment involved in acting on the basis of this in a way that is precisely designed to create a “sense of duty, clarity, and feeling of responsibility.”

References

- Habermas, J. (1987). *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hennis, W. (1988). *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Hennis, W. (2000). *Max Weber's Science of Man*. Newbury, Berks: Threshold Press.
- Hennis, W. (2009). *Politics as a Practical Science*. (Translated by K. Tribe). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hunter, I. (2017). "The Science of Vocations and Academic Prophecy: Some Weberian Themes." Seminar presented at the Velux *Office as a Vocation*, CBS Public-Private Seminar series, Copenhagen Business School, September.
- Hunter, I. (2018). Science as a Vocation, Philosophy as a Religion. *Sociologica*, 12(1), <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/8436>
- Maritain, J. (1951). *Man and the State*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Owen, D., & Strong, T. (2004). Introduction. In D. Owen & T.B.Strong (Eds.), *Max Weber: the Vocation Lectures*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Scaff, L. (2014). *Weber and the Weberians*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Tribe, K. (2018). Max Weber's "Science as a Vocation": Context, Genesis, Structure. *Sociologica*, 12(1), <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/8432>
- Weber, M. (1989). Science as a Vocation. In P. Lassman, I. Velody, & H. Martins (Eds.) *Max Weber's Science as a Vocation* (Translated by M. John). London: Unwin & Hyman.
- Weber, M. (1994). The Profession and Vocation of Politics. In P. Lassman & R. Speirs (Eds.), *Weber: Political Writings*. Cambridge: CUP.