

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: a Natural Scientific Critique

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is widely recognized as one of the most outstanding contributions made by a sociologist to the understanding of the origins and development of modern capitalist society. Yet Weber himself felt towards the end of his life that his thesis had been fundamentally misunderstood. Critics such as Sombart and Brentano had mistakenly assumed that he was concerned with the impact of religious ethical teaching on the development of practical economic conduct:

We are interested rather in something entirely different: the influence of those psychological sanctions which, originating in religious belief and the practice of religion, gave a direction to practical conduct and held the individual to it. This is, to speak frankly, the point of the whole essay, which I had not expected to find so completely overlooked.¹

Since Weber's death the same kind of fundamental misinterpretation has repeatedly recurred: for example, two of the most important historians to comment on his work – R. H. Tawney and Kurt Samuelsson – have both assumed that it primarily concerned the ethical doctrines preached by the leaders of the Reformation,² rather than the

¹ 1. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Unwin University Books, pp. 97, 197, 217, fn3. Weber also felt that he had been misrepresented on the role of ethical doctrines on usury – this had not been a part of his main argument and has been a further source of misunderstanding of his work. See *Ibid*, pp. 200, 201.

² R. H. Tawney, "Foreword" to Max Weber, *op.cit.*; Kurt Samuelsson, *Religion and Economic Action*, 1957.

psychological effects of theological ideas propounded by them.³ Much of this misunderstanding of Weber's thesis is due to its notoriously fragmented nature: not only did he develop it in a number of sociological works other than *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* but he made some of his most important analytical statements in the rather obscure footnotes that he later attached to this work. In some respects virtually all of his writings can be seen as relevant to the thesis, which appears to have reflected certain central personal preoccupations.⁴

The major aim of this paper is to clarify the basic nature of Weber's substantive argument, and to critically evaluate its logical validity. In order to understand this basic argument, it is necessary to examine the methodological assumptions which form a concealed but important part of his analysis. The central methodological viewpoint of this paper is diametrically opposed to that adopted by Weber: whereas he rejected sociology as a natural science in favour of a definition of it as a historical cultural discipline dealing at the explanatory level in subjective meanings and values, the present work assumes that sociology is a natural science which treats social actions and behaviour as objects to be explained in a deterministic and causal manner. Weber objected to explanations made in the

³Weber wrote that *The Protestant Ethic* thesis was "a contribution to the understanding of the manner in which ideas became effective forces in history". Weber, *op.cit.*, p. go. Weber summarized his position about the role of ideas in historical explanation as follows: "Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the "world images" that have been created by "ideas" have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has pushed by the dynamic of interest." H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948, p. 280.

⁴ See Arthur Mitzman, *The Iron Cage: An Historical Interpretation of Max Weber*, 1970.

form of uniform or universal generalizations and was particularly averse to the application of evolutionary concepts of the kind employed in biology.

I will argue that Weber's methodology was incapable of explaining the results of his substantive work on the protestant ethic thesis, and that he was forced by the logic of his own analysis to continually resort to the evolutionary concept of rationalization. Weber's thesis, however, leads into complex areas beyond an evolutionary perspective, the most important being the psychological consequences of the process of rationalization (anxiety and guilt resulting from disenchantment). Again, it is argued that only a natural scientific, psychological, perspective can adequately account for the results of his substantive work. However, no amount of further analysis of the concepts of rationalization and disenchantment can solve the problem posed at the beginning of the protestant ethic thesis: Why did the process of rationalization occur in so many different spheres of social life in the occidental world, and not elsewhere? No attempt will be made to discuss this question in this paper, except where it has a bearing on the mode of Weber's own analysis.

The above summary can only give the most important outlines of the arguments involved, and to fully understand the issues arising out of Weber's work it is necessary to carefully consider a wide range of his methodological and substantive writings. Weber can be classified as a neo-Kantian with respect to his most fundamental methodological assumptions. Kant's distinction between the realm of "physical nature" and the realm of "individual freedom" is reflected in the following statement made by Weber:

every single important activity and ultimately life as a whole, if it is not to be permitted to run on as an event of nature but is instead to be consciously guided, is a series of ultimate decisions through which the soul – as in Plato – chooses its own

fate, i.e. the meaning of its activity and existence.⁵

Kant distinguished the science of physics from that of ethics, with the former formulating “laws of nature” and the latter dealing with “laws of freedom”.⁶ This distinction was incorporated into Rickert’s classification of the sciences into the “natural” and the “historical cultural” sciences – a classification accepted by Weber.⁷ Although Weber was a thorough-going historical determinist,⁸ the neo-Kantian distinction between the natural and historical cultural sciences had a fundamental influence on his methodological assumptions. He made a number of statements which reflected Rickert’s influence in this respect:

We can accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the action of the component individuals. The natural sciences on the other hand cannot do this, being limited to the formulation of causal uniformities in objects and events and the explanation of individual facts by applying them subjective understanding is the specific characteristic of sociological knowledge.⁹

It is a commonplace in the sociological literature that Weber attempted to combine and integrate the methods of both the natural and historical cultural sciences, but, in fact, he attempted this integration only to a very limited extent. The natural scientific

⁵ Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Free Press, 1949, p. 18. For a similar distinction made by Weber – between “freedom of action” and “the processes of nature” – see Dennis Wrong (ed.), *Max Weber*, Prentice Hall, 1970, p. 111. Also J. P. Mayer, *Max Weber and German Politics*, Faber, 1956, p. 35.

⁶ T. K. Abbott (ed.), *Kant's Theory of Ethics*, Longmans, 1927, p. 1.
⁷ Weber, *Methodology*, p. 135.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 123; W. G. Runciman, *A Critique of Max Weber's Philosophy of Social Science*, Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 50.

⁹ . Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Bedminster Press, 1968, Vol. 1, p. 15.

part of Weber's methodology was his acceptance of the necessity of empirical proof as a part of an historical determinist analysis; it was at the level of *theoretical explanation*, not the empirical testing of ideas, that he adopted the non-scientific methodology of subjective understanding. The contradiction between the determinism of his empirical historicism and the voluntarism of his explanatory methodology, seems to have escaped him, and the tension between a natural scientific explanation and a subjectivist methodology was never resolved:

the more precisely they (uniformities) are formulated from a point of view of natural science, the less they are accessible to subjective understanding. This is never the road to interpretation in terms of subjective meaning. On the contrary, both for sociology in the present, and for history, the object of cognition is the subjective meaning complex of action.¹⁰

The polarity between natural scientific and meaningful explanations was reflected in the assertion that "meaningfulness naturally does not coincide with laws as such, and the more general the law the less coincidence".¹¹ Not only did Weber emphasize this contrast but in some sense defined the aim of his own work as combating the natural scientific method, particularly when applied to the study of human affairs.¹² The reasons for Weber's hostility to the natural sciences are complex. He had a dislike of the reduction of "profound" metaphysical and religious preoccupations to questions answerable in terms of specialized technique and believed that the natural scientific attitude led to the "disenchantment of the world":

if these natural sciences lead to anything in this way, they are apt to make the belief that there is such a thing as the "meaning"

¹⁰ Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 13.

¹¹ Weber, *Methodology*, pp. 76-7.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 186-7.

of the universe die out at its very roots.¹³

It was partly for this reason that he hated “intellectualism as the worst devil”¹⁴, although his attitude towards scientific rationality was characterized by a complex and confused ambivalence. His hostility to the natural sciences was linked to the belief that there was an inevitable quality to the development of the “iron cage” of rationality; this largely explains his fascination with the distinctive rationality of the occidental world and his constant return to the theme of rationalization in his sociological work. But although this process of rationalization might appear to be itself a uniform generalization of the type favoured by the natural sciences, Weber was concerned to combat just such an iron sense of scientific inevitability:

When modern biology subsumed those aspects of reality which interested us *historically*, i.e. in all their concreteness, under a universally valid evolutionary principle, which at least had the appearance – but not the actuality – of embracing everything essential about the subject in a scheme of universally valid laws, this seemed to be the final twilight of all evaluative standpoints in all the sciences ... the naturalistic viewpoint in certain decisive problems has not yet been overcome.¹⁵

From this point of view, it might be said that it was Darwin's ghost, and not Marx's, that most haunted Weber.

¹³ Gerth & Mills, op. cit., p. 152. Weber's analysis of the “disenchantment of the world” appears to have been grounded on changes in his own personal religious beliefs. Mayer, op cit., pp. 24, 25, 117. As a result of the loss of “meaningfulness” associated with religious faith, “the intellectual seeks in various ways, the casuistry of which extends into infinity, to endow his life with a pervasive meaning, and thus to find unity with himself, with his fellow men, and with the cosmos”. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, Methuen, 1965, pp. 124, 125.

¹⁴ Gerth & Mills, op. cit., p. 152.

¹⁵ Weber, *Methodology*, pp. 86, 87.

The above passage indicates Weber's own interest in the study of history: "the understanding of the characteristic uniqueness of the reality in which we move".¹⁶ The historical cultural sciences were primarily interested in the unique and concrete flow of particular historical events. Analytical uniformities and generalizations might be occasionally useful as heuristic devices for understanding historical reality but this was rarely the case as "the specific meaning which a phenomenon has for us is naturally *not* to be found in those relationships which it shares with many other phenomena".¹⁷ It is for this reason that the ideal types employed by Weber are not analytical concepts but are "ideal" categories used for understanding the concrete motives of individuals in the actual historical process. This emphasis on individual action explains the sociological testament written by Weber towards the end of his life:

If I have become a sociologist (according to my letter of accreditation) it is mainly to exorcise the spectre of collective conceptions which still lingers among us. In other words, sociology itself can only proceed from the actions of one or more separate individuals and must therefore adopt strictly individualistic methods.¹⁸

One of the most important of these individualistic methods is of course the ideal type. In order to understand Weber's use of this much abused term, it is necessary to see it not only in terms of his individualism but also his "idealistic" concern for subjective meanings and value commitments. His problem was the construction of conceptual tools and methodological assumptions which would allow him to undertake an analysis of social meanings and cultural values

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 76, 77.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Mommsen, "Max Weber's Political Sociology and his Philosophy of World History", *International Social Science Journal*, vol. xvii (1965), p. 44, fn 2.

“logically in exactly the same way as causal analysis of personal actions”.¹⁹ In this idealistic formula, Weber is attempting to bridge the gap between individual actions and social values, but we shall see there are good logical reasons why he failed in this. It is not possible here to discuss Weber’s rather tortuous and confused analysis of ideal types but we may note the difficulty he had in constructing this conceptual bridge. He was forced to resort to metaphysical language to attempt to resolve this problem; e.g. in discussing ideal-typical analysis of political structures he wrote:

I am making it explicit to myself and others in an *interpretative* way the concrete, individual, and on that account, in the last analysis, unique form in which “ideas” – to employ for once a metaphysical usage – are “incorporated” into or “work themselves out” in the political structure in question ...²⁰

This resort to metaphysical language was in spite of an explicit rejection elsewhere of metaphysical notions such as a “group mind” and the “Hegelian idea” from which the individual components “emanate”.²¹ Although Weber rejected such philosophical idealism, in practice he smuggled some of its assumptions back into his work through constructs like the ideal-type – and in this respect he was a methodological rather than a philosophical idealist.

It was on the basis of these methodological assumptions that Weber undertook to explain the process of historical change in terms of the motivations of individuals, so that for example when he discussed the origin of socialist communities, he formulated the problem as follows:

The real empirical sociological investigation begins with the question: What motives determine and lead the individual members and participants in this socialistic community to behave in such a way that the community came into being in the first place

¹⁹ Weber, *Methodology*, p. 177.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 157.

²¹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. xxxviii.

and that it continues to exist?²²

The central logical difficulty of a sociological explanation made in terms of these methodological assumptions – what Parsons has called a voluntaristic theory of social action – was pointed out by Durkheim in his *Rules of Sociological Method*:

Where purpose reigns, there reigns also a more or less wide contingency; for there are no ends, and even fewer means, which necessarily control all men ... If, then, it were true that historic development took place in terms of ends clearly or obscurely felt, social facts should present the most infinite diversity; and all comparison should almost be impossible.²³

Of course where ends and values are brought about by social or biological forces (environment and heredity) social facts can be the result of purposive choices, but such choices simply become intermediary psychological processes between one social (or biological) fact and another. It is for this reason that Durkheim insisted that one social fact must be explained by another social fact, although he has other reasons for invoking the social which border on the metaphysical. In principle there is no logical reason why a social fact cannot be derived from a biological one, but given the fundamental biological similarity of human beings in all societies, the only social facts to be explained by biological factors must necessarily be universally applicable to all social situations. (Perhaps an example of this type is to be found in universal differences in social role between the sexes – although there are some sociologists who would dispute the assumption that these differences are due to biological distinctions.) Whatever the role of biological factors in universal cultural facts, it is indisputable that societal *variations* cannot be explained by an unchanging *constant*

²² Ibid., p. 18.

²³ Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Free Press Paperback, 1964, p. 94.

factor such as man's bio- logical nature (this assumes that there are no significant biological variations from one society to another). Similarly, voluntaristic choices made by individuals uninfluenced by environmental factors must necessarily result in a set of randomized personal aims. The most appropriate image to convey this effect is the statistician's scatter diagram: plot a number of individual points unrelated to each other and the result will be the absence of any focus or trend in the distribution of the points – in sociological terms an absence of a social fact involving shared expectations and social meanings.

Weber himself appears at times to have been aware of this logical difficulty in any voluntaristic theory of the origin of social factors. For example in *The Protestant Ethic* he wrote that

In order that a manner of life so well adapted to the peculiarities of capitalism could be selected at all, i.e. should come to dominate others, it had to originate somewhere, and not in isolated individuals alone, but as a way of life common to whole groups of men.²⁴

But it was at this point of trying to explain the origin of “a way of life common to whole groups of men” that Weber had the greatest difficulty. With some perplexity he stated at the beginning of *The Protestant Ethic*:

When we find again and again that, even in departments of life apparently mutually independent certain types of rationalization have developed in the Occident, and only there, it would be natural to suspect that the most important reason lay in differences of heredity. The author admits that he is inclined to think the importance of biological heredity very great. But ... it must be one of the tasks of sociological and historical investigation first to analyse all the influences and causal relationships which can be satisfactorily explained in terms of reaction to environmental

²⁴ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 55.

conditions.²⁵

Elsewhere, Weber speculated on the possibility that “there are typical relations between certain kinds of rationality and the cephalic index or skin colour or any other biologically inherited characteristic”.²⁶ We do not have to dwell on this flirtation with racist ideas, but merely note here that most sociologists would now reject the notion of racially determined culture patterns on empirical grounds. However, in the present context, the importance of these statements is that they reveal Weber’s uncertainty about explaining “a way of life common to whole groups of men”, such as the protestant ethic. His reference to an explanation in terms of environmental conditions is paradoxical, for he makes it very clear in his methodological writings that he is primarily interested in *historical* explanations – and although he occasionally invokes factors such as the geographical environment, this is seen by him as a heuristic device along with the other modes of natural scientific analysis for the main business of meaningful explanation of unique historical sequences. As one scholar of Weber’s works has recently put it: “Since he was concerned with the unique course of Western rationalization, he did not view it as a generic phenomenon ...”.²⁷

In a number of places however, Weber wrote of the process of rationalization as if it were an inevitable general “law of development”:

The increasing intervention of enacted norms is, from our point of view, only one of the components, however characteristic, of that process of rationalization and association whose growing penetration into all spheres of social action we shall have to trace

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 30, 31.

²⁶ Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation* (1947), p. 85.

²⁷ R. Bendix & G. Roth, *Scholarship and Partisanship: Essays on Max Weber*, University of California Press, 1971, p. 114.

as a most essential dynamic factor in development.²⁸

We have already seen how Weber believed that rationalization applied to many spheres of life in the occidental world and there are a number of other references to this process of general rationalization in his work, e.g. his statement in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* that rationalization applies “not only to a history of philosophy and to the history of any other intellectual activity but ... to every kind of history”.²⁹ He was careful however, as we have seen, to dissociate himself from metaphysical notions of history embodying “a group mind” or the development of the Hegelian “idea”, as well as rejecting the natural scientific conception of analytical laws of development.³⁰ This rejection of laws of development can be seen in part as a legitimate objection to the tendency of reifying the process of rationalization into a metaphysical proposition – and Weber appears to have had Marx particularly in mind when he formulated this objection, as well as contemporaries of his such as Sombart.³¹ But it is clear that Weber’s position on this was also determined by his commitment to the historical cultural sciences and antagonism to naturalistic methodology.

However, Weber was forced by the logic of his own arguments to refer constantly to a “law of development” in order to explain the process of rationalization. His most explicit reference to this is contained in the footnotes appended to *The Protestant Ethic* and is made in the context of a discussion of economic determinism:

... religious ideas themselves simply cannot be deduced from economic circumstances. They are in themselves, that is beyond

²⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. I., p. 333.

²⁹ Weber, *Methodology*, p. 34.

³⁰ Weber, *Methodology*, p. 101.

³¹ Weber, *Methodology*, p. 103; Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, pp. 76, 77, 284.

doubt the most powerful plastic elements of national character, and contain a law of development and a compelling force entirely their own.³²

Weber refers to “autonomous laws” in other parts of his work³³ and even uses evolutionary terminology, e.g. in his sociological study of music he states that “rationalization proper commences with the evolution of music into a professional art” and this is only one of a number of references to evolutionary rationalization in the sphere of music.³⁴

Although Weber was prepared to concede that any one historical development was the result of the interaction of a number of forces – economic, political, religious etc. – in practice his prime interest was in tracing the influence of religious rationalization. It is in this area of his work that he came nearest to formulating universal sociological principles:

Scientific progress is a fraction, the most important fraction, of the process of intellectualization which we have been undergoing for thousands of years ... this intellectualist rationalization ... means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted.³⁵

This process of intellectualization is based on

the metaphysical needs of the human mind as it is driven to reflect on ethical and religious questions, driven not by material need but by an inner compulsion to understand the world as a meaningful

³² Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, pp. 277, 278.

³³ Max Weber, *The Religion of China*, Free Press, 1951, pp. 241, 249.

³⁴ Max Weber, *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music* (1958), pp. 41, 40, 106, 107.

³⁵ Gerth & Mills, *op.cit.*, pp. 138, 139.

cosmos and to take up a position towards it.³⁶ It is this rationalization of metaphysical ideas that presumably constitutes the law of development of religious ideas referred to above.

Although this law of development appears at first sight to be an example of a non-naturalistic “idealistic” law, there is no reason why if it is stated in appropriate language it should not be accepted as a proper scientific proposition. Rationalization can be defined as a variable in continuum form which characterizes the process of social change; it is possible to see rationality as an emergent property of the human mind based on the biological structure of the human brain, a product of the process of natural selection during man’s biological evolution. The theme of rationalization has played a dominant intellectual role since at least the period of the Enlightenment, and nearly all the classic theories of social change have either explicitly or implicitly invoked the principle.

Perhaps the most important sociological exponents of this principle other than Weber were Comte and Marx: Comte used the principle and applied it to a notion of general cultural development primarily at the level of ideas; Marx applied it to developments of technology and the means of production. As we have seen, Weber himself was primarily interested in the rationalization of man’s need to understand the meaning of his life at a metaphysical level – and these very metaphysical questions were seen by him even in the first instance, as a function of rationality itself.³⁷ None of these theorists satisfactorily answer the fundamental question as to why rationalization takes place in one society rather than another – in Weber’s case of course the question being why did it develop so markedly in the occidental world and not elsewhere.

This argument about Weber’s use of the concept of

³⁶ Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, pp. 116, 117.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 6..

rationalization does not mean that he had abandoned an attempt to overcome the “naturalistic dogma”. As we have seen, he did not recognize the law of development of rationalization as being a natural scientific proposition, and it is clear that his neo-Kantian voluntarism profoundly influenced his analysis of the development of the protestant ethic. In his *General Economic History* he wrote:

In all times there has been but one means of breaking down the power of magic and establishing a rational conduct of life; this means is great rational prophecy.³⁸

And a prophet according to Weber was “a purely individual bearer of charisma”³⁹ – and “charisma knows only inner determination and inner constraint”.⁴⁰ Frequently Weber writes of charisma as if it were the source of the deep personal individual freedom that he admired so much; other times he sees it as a function of irrational forces often of a biological nature. The association of charisma with irrationality is seen by him as leading to unfreedom – and freedom here is seen as a function of a rationally developed ethic. This contradiction is the result of a marked ambivalence on Weber's part towards both rationality and charisma which come to have a different significance depending on the context in which he is using them.

The two forces of reason and charisma between them account for all the most important historical and social changes:

In traditionally stereotyped periods, charisma is the greatest revolutionary force. The equally revolutionary force of “reason” works from without by altering the situations of action, and hence

³⁸ Max Weber, *General Economic History*, Collier Books, 1961, p. 265.

³⁹ Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, p. 46.

⁴⁰ S. N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*, 1968, p. 20.

its problems, finally in this way changing men's attitudes towards them; or it intellectualizes the individual.⁴¹

There are obvious difficulties with this idea of charisma bringing about accumulative social changes. Inasmuch as the concept is used to refer to the profoundly personal creation of ultimate values,⁴² all the logical objections to voluntaristic theories of action discussed earlier in the paper would apply. Charisma in itself will over a long enough period of time and from one social situation to another neutralize itself through a process of randomization, except where it is influenced by a socially structured set of influences. But pure charisma as such is an individual phenomenon and analytically must be sharply distinguished from socially determined facts. Of course it is possible to imagine a single individual's charisma being so powerful as to overwhelm all rival charismas, but this could only account for the influence of charisma on a limited single cultural situation defined by the immediate personal contacts of the charismatic leader. Any influence beyond this will be expressed through ideas and thus becomes subject to the principle of randomization in the absence of socially determined choices. Sociological facts of the stature of capitalist culture had to originate "not in isolated individuals alone, but as a way of life common to whole groups of men". In actual historical situations charisma is associated with the complete range of ideas and ethics, so that for example the charisma of the Protestant reformers no doubt can be matched by that of their Jesuit opponents.

The analysis of the development of the protestant ethic appears to contain equal emphasis on the role of both intellectual rationalization and charismatic innovation. The

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 53, 54.

⁴² For an example of this see Weber's stress on Luther's personal experience and its importance for the disappearance of monasticism. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 121.

former refers basically to the level of ideas and changes in theological thinking; the latter to innovations in ethical doctrine propounded by the charismatic leaders of the Reformation. In this context it is easy to understand how many commentators on Weber's work have mistakenly assumed that ethical teaching was the major variable in the analysis. The question must be raised as to why Weber insisted that theological ideas had causal priority over ethical doctrine. The answer lies, I believe, in his uneasy awareness of the logical problems of voluntaristic explanations including those made in terms of charisma.

Of course the same problem could be raised with respect to theological ideas which can be said to also originate through the innovations of particular individuals. The difference is that developments of ideas can be classified according to the principle of increasing rationalization, whereas there is no obvious equivalent principle with which to classify changes in ethical doctrine. Weber did talk about the rationalization of ethical life, but although he is using the term rationalization here in a somewhat different sense to that used when applied to the level of ideas, in the last resort the concept returns the analysis back to the process of intellectual rationalization associated with the development of ideas.

It is now possible to understand why Weber not only gave priority to theological ideas in his analysis of the protestant ethic but also why he laid so much stress on Calvinist theology. According to Weber, Calvin's doctrine

is derived not, as with Luther, from religious experience, but from logical necessity of his thought; therefore its importance increases with every increase in the logical consistency of that religious thought ...⁴³

Logical consistency is one of Weber's main criteria of rationality and was viewed by him as the most important

⁴³ Ibid., p. 102.

characteristic defining theological rationality. It might be thought that he chose Calvinist theology as a key starting point of his analysis on empirical grounds, i.e. that he believed it to be empirically the most important of the theological doctrines that he considered. But Weber showed an uneasy awareness of a major problem in this part of his analysis:

the types of moral conduct in which we are interested may be found in a similar manner among the adherents of the most various denominations ... similar ethical maxims may be correlated with very different dogmatic foundations ... It would almost seem as though we had best completely ignore both the dogmatic foundations and the ethical theory and confine our attention to the moral practice so far as it can be determined.⁴⁴

Weber went on to reject this difficulty on empirical grounds, although he produced no evidence in any of his work to show that the Calvinists were any more thoroughly committed to the protestant ethic than any of the other Puritan groups with different theologies – such as the Arminian Quakers and Wesleyan Methodists. In fact a cursory examination of the evidence reveals that if anything the contrary is true and it is difficult to believe that Weber was unaware of this. If Calvinist theology was not chosen on empirical grounds – and Weber does not cite any evidence in support of this – it is likely that it was selected on theoretical grounds, specifically because of Weber’s pre-occupation with finding out “whose intellectual child”⁴⁵ the protestant ethic was in terms of the dominant notion of rationalization.

The logical consistency of Calvinist theology was outlined by Weber in a brief passage in *The Protestant Ethic*:

To assume that human merit or guilt play a part in determining; this destiny (of man) would be to think of God’s absolute free decrees, which have been settled from eternity, as subject to

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 97.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

change by human influence, an impossible contradiction ... His quite incomprehensible decrees have decided the fate of every individual and regulated the tiniest details of the cosmos from eternity.⁴⁶

In other words, if God is viewed as being totally omnipotent and omniscient – as Christians have traditionally assumed – it is logically impossible by definition for him not to know the results of his creative activities before the actual creation of the universe. It is also by definition impossible for such a God to diminish his own power and transfer part of it to man in the form of free-will – such a transfer would limit his power, contradicting his total omnipotence. Weber’s arguments about the psychological consequences of the Calvinist belief in predestination are very familiar and need only be touched on briefly here.

The Calvinist is faced with the problem of reconciling his need for salvation with his belief that it is impossible for him either to know or to be able to influence his salvation in any way. This creates acute metaphysical anxiety which is dealt with (this solution evolves over time) through using the ethical notion of success in one’s “calling” as a “sign” of salvation. Weber goes to great pains to point out that this solution is a psychological not a logical one to the problems posed by a belief in predestination – according to him, the logical outcome is “fatalistic resignation” but the Calvinist does not follow this path because of his overwhelming need to “prove” himself in the face of his omnipotent God (the Calvinist’s economic interests and social class position also predispose him to accept this illogical solution).⁴⁷ The doctrine of predestination creates a decisive psychological motive in the form of anxiety which is channelled into the active performance of a “calling” through the need of the

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 103, 104.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 232.

Calvinist to “prove” himself.

The doctrine of proving oneself before God was postulated by Weber as being common to all Puritan groups⁴⁸ – and inasmuch as it was a part of the “Christian ethic” it was a doctrine common to all Christians.⁴⁹ This however poses a problem in Weber’s analysis, for on the one hand he states that the doctrine was a part of the “Christian ethic” and on the other that “the actual evolution to the proof of faith through works, which is the characteristic of asceticism, is parallel to a gradual modification of the doctrines of Calvin”.⁵⁰ Implicit in the latter statement is the idea that the Calvinist’s belief in predestination had somehow led to a natural development of evolving the doctrine of proof – yet this doctrine would have been associated with Calvin’s original body of ethics as a part of the “Christian ethic”. Weber’s analysis could always be rescued from this objection by emphasizing the role of “practical interests” in determining the ethical consequences of the Calvinist’s belief in predestination,⁵¹ but this begins to shift the emphasis heavily away from a “spiritualistic” explanation towards an economic one.

Weber does however at one point relate the doctrine of proof to the mainstream of his sociological analysis:

Grace could not be guaranteed by any magical sacraments, by relief in the confession, nor by individual good works. That was only possible by proof in a specific type of conduct unmistakably different from the way of life of the natural man. From that followed for the individual an incentive methodically to supervise his own state of grace in his own conduct, and thus to penetrate it with asceticism.⁵²

This returns the discussion to the theme of rationalization – the

⁴⁸ Gerth & Mills, op. cit., p. 321.

⁴⁹ Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, p. 203.

⁵⁰ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 228

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 232.

⁵² Ibid., p. 153.

elimination of magical sacraments and religious ritual through the growth of scientific rationality. Weber distinguished a “subjectively rational” action from “one which uses the objectively correct means in accord with scientific knowledge”.⁵³ Although he did not explicitly state that the elimination of magic is due to the growth of scientific rather than subjective rationality, this is implicit in his analysis, i.e. it is the development of a rational scientific emphasis on empirical observations rather than the internal logical rationalization of magic itself, which is important in its disappearance.

Weber believed that this process played a key role in cultural development:

the complete elimination of salvation through the Church and the sacraments (in Puritanism) ... was what formed the absolutely decisive difference from Catholicism. That great historic process in the development of religions, the elimination of magic from the world which had begun with the old Hebrew prophets and, in conjunction with Hellenistic scientific thought, had repudiated all magical means to salvation as superstition and sin, came here (in Puritanism) to its logical conclusion. The genuine Puritan even rejected all signs of religious ceremony at the grave and buried his nearest and dearest without song or ritual in order that no superstition, no trust in the effects of magical and sacramental forces on salvation, should creep in.⁵⁴

The consequence of the elimination of magic was that

There was no place for the very human Catholic cycle of sin, repentance, atonement, release, followed by renewed sin. The moral conduct of the average man was thus deprived of its planless and unsystematic character and subjected to a consistent method for conduct as a whole.⁵⁵

⁵³ Weber, *Methodology*, p. 34.

⁵⁴ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, pp. 105, 106.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

This displacement of magic was not confined to any one Puritan denomination; according to Weber they were all equally affected by the process.⁵⁶ One of the most important features of the elimination of magic was the disappearance of the confessional: “it was a psychological stimulus to the development of their (the Puritans’) ethical attitude. The means to a periodical discharge of the emotional sense of sin was done away with”.⁵⁷

Although Weber did not develop this theme about the psychological consequences of the disappearance of institutional magic, he made a number of isolated points which are capable of being formulated more systematically. One of the consequences of the diminution of the role of the church and its administration of sacred ritual was that the Puritan’s “intercourse with his God was carried on in deep spiritual isolation”⁵⁸ and there “was a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness”.⁵⁹ The elimination of “the doctrine of salvation through the Church” culminated in the Quaker doctrine of the “significance of the inner testimony of the Spirit in reason and conscience”.⁶⁰

The final result of this process is that distinctive type of guilt and, so to speak, godless feeling of sin which characterizes modern man, precisely as a consequence of his organisation of ethics in the direction of a system based on an inner religious state, regardless of the metaphysical basis upon which the system was originally erected.⁶¹ The similarity of this part of Weber's analysis with that made by Durkheim in *Suicide* is too striking to be ignored. The elimination of institutionalized magic and ritual activities was seen by

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 119.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 106.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 107.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 104.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

⁶¹ Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, p. 206.

Durkheim as leading to an increase in the rate of “egoistic suicide” – an increase due to a decline in the amount of integration between the Protestant individual and his religious institutions (using this term to refer to both belief and activity). Integration protects the individual from excessive reliance on himself which when carried to the extreme produces deep feelings of melancholy and eventually suicide. Weber and Durkheim disagreed about the role of intellectual rationalization in bringing about these results: Durkheim saw the intellectualism of the “egoist” as a by product of general social disintegration rather than as a causal factor in the process. Neither Weber nor Durkheim gives an adequate account of how religious institutions function to protect individuals from these feelings of anxiety, guilt and depression, for they both lacked a satisfactory psychological framework necessary to achieve such an explanation.

Although Weber’s interpretations of social psychological situations are couched exclusively in ordinary language, it is possible to trace a set of psychological assumptions about the nature of the protestant ethic which are very similar to the postulates of psychoanalysis. When discussing puritan attitudes towards sport Weber wrote:

Sport was accepted if it served a rational purpose, that of recreation necessary for physical efficiency. But as a means for the spontaneous expression of undisciplined impulses, it was under suspicion; and in so far as it became purely a means of enjoyment, or awakened pride, raw instincts or the irrational gambling instinct, it was of course strictly condemned. Impulsive enjoyment of life, which leads away from work in a calling and from religion, was as such the enemy of rational asceticism ... ⁶²

The contrast between rational self-control on the one hand and the irrational acting out of impulses on the other is very similar to the distinction made by Freud between the super-ego and

⁶² Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 167.

the id. The similarity is perhaps more clearly revealed by a comment by Weber on the relationship between the protestant ethic and sexuality:

Rational ascetic alertness, self-control, and methodical planning of life are seriously threatened by the peculiar irrationality of the sexual act, which is ultimately and uniquely unsusceptible to rational organisation.⁶³

The language used by Weber in these passages reveals a meaning of the word “rational” which extends that already discussed in connection with intellectual rationality: ethical rationality is the equivalent of the constraint of biological and emotional impulses which by their very nature threaten the deliberate and conscious reflection of intellectual rationality. From the other side, intellectual rationality is in part responsible for the suppression of sexual spontaneity; historically there had been a gradual turning away from the naive naturalism of sex. The reason and significance of this evolution, however, involve the universal rationalization and intellectualization of culture.⁶⁴ Weber saw the results of this “turning away from the naive naturalism of sex” in very much the same way as did Freud: the sublimation of sexual energy into work and rationality. Weber summarized his position when writing that

the rejection of all naive surrender to the most intensive ways of experiencing existence, artistic and erotica, is as such only a negative attitude. But it is obvious that such a rejection could increase the force with which energies flow into rational achievement, both the ethical as well as the purely intellectual.⁶⁵

Weber (like Freud) was ambivalent about this process of sublimation of sexual and emotional energy, for rationality can proceed in a variety of directions; positively in that of a

⁶³ Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, p. 238.

⁶⁴ Gerth & Mills, op. cit., p. 344.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 350.

conscious rationalization of ultimate values; or negatively, at the expense not only of custom, but of emotional values.⁶⁶ It was presumably these negative consequences that led Weber to view “intellectualism as the worst devil”⁶⁷.

The characteristics of the protestant ethic – “rational ascetic alertness, self-control, and methodical planning of life” – are not according to Weber confined specifically to a religious context, but are also the ethical qualities included in the definition of the secularized spirit of capitalism. The title of Weber’s thesis is rather misleading in this respect: it suggests that the protestant ethic is a causally significant determinant of the independent spirit of capitalism, but it is clear from his methodological writings that they do not have a “determinate” relationship but rather have a “measure of inner affinity”.⁶⁸ The spirit of capitalism is nothing but a more secularized version of the protestant ethic which develops over time through the process of rationalization. Perhaps this is revealed most clearly in Weber's summary of the nature of the spirit of capitalism:

the *summum bonum* of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudaemonistic not to say hedonistic, admixture ... it expresses a type of feeling which is closely connected with certain religious ideas.⁶⁹

Weber went to great pains to dispel the idea (which some of his critics had mistakenly attributed to; him) that the spirit of capitalism was the same thing as acquisitiveness and greed for gain:

⁶⁶ Weber, *Theory of Economic and Social Organisation*, p. 112.

⁶⁷ There is some evidence that Weber failed to consummate his marriage because of sexual impotence. See Mitzman, op. cit., p. 276

⁶⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. xxxviii.

⁶⁹ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 53.

Unlimited greed for gain is not in the least identical with capitalism, and still less its spirit. Capitalism *may* even be identical with the restraint, or at least a rational tempering of this irrational impulse.⁷⁰

The language of this passage – “the restraint, or at least a rational tempering of this irrational impulse” – indicates the identical ethical and psychological nature of the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Both essentially are ethics which oppose what Freud called the pleasure principle and institutionalize ego and super-ego psychological forces. Weber does however qualify this point about acquisitiveness in stating that the Puritans did not struggle against rational acquisition, but against the irrational pursuit of wealth.⁷¹ The result of this ethic was that

When the limitation of consumption is combined with the release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save.⁷²

The combined results of the “compulsion to save” and diligent activity in a calling led, in interaction with economic and other forces, to the development of modern capitalism.

Although the overwhelming emphasis of Weber’s empirical analysis is on the causal influence of religious forces on economic development, he did also discuss the effect of economic factors on religious ideas and ethics. He explicitly stated that he believed this latter type of causal relationship to be of great importance:

For those to whom no causal explanation is adequate without an economic (or materialistic as it is unfortunately still called) interpretation, it may be remarked that I consider the influence of economic development on the fate of religious ideas to be very

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 171.

⁷² Ibid., p. 172.

important.⁷³

Weber's references to the economic determination of religious ideas are to be found scattered in rather piecemeal fashion in a number of his works. He located the protestant ethic in a Christian tradition associated distinctively with an urban status group of craftsmen and small traders:

The wandering craftsman first appears at the beginning of our era. Without him the spread of Christianity would have never been possible; it was in the beginning the religion of the wandering craftsmen, to whom the Apostle also belonged, and his proverb "he who does not work shall not eat" expressed their ethics.⁷⁴

Not only was this social group associated with the birth of Christianity, but during the Middle Ages it "remained the most pious, if not always the most orthodox, stratum of society".⁷⁵ It was the same group who formed the backbone of puritanism:

With great regularity we find the most genuine adherents of Puritanism among the classes which were rising from a lowly status, the small bourgeois and farmers.⁷⁶

Weber gave a number of reasons as to why this social group should be so predisposed towards puritanical Christianity. Primary among these reasons was the personal economic self-interest contained in the ownership of small amounts of property:

The appropriation of the means of production and personal control, however formal, over the process of work constitute among the strongest incentives to unlimited willingness to work. This is the fundamental basis of the extraordinary importance of small units in agriculture, whether in the form of small-scale proprietorship or small tenants who hope to rise to

⁷³ Ibid., p. 277 fn 84.

⁷⁴ Weber, *General Economic History*, p. 111.

⁷⁵ Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, p. 95.

⁷⁶ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 174.

the status of owner.⁷⁷

The acquisition of wealth destroys this ethic of work among this lower-middle class group; Weber illustrated this point by quoting Wesley's famous statement that "wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion".⁷⁸ The other major reason for the puritanism of this stratum lay according to Weber in its elimination of magical and traditional styles of thought (we have already discussed the ethical consequences of this intellectual development) – and this process of rationalization was essentially a function of the urban style of life of the lower-middle classes:

When one compares the life of a lower-middle class person, particularly the urban artisan or the small trader, with the life of the peasant, it is clear that middle class life has far less connection with nature. Consequently, dependence on magic for influencing the irrational forces of nature cannot play the same role for the urban dweller as for the farmer. At the same time, it is clear that the economic foundation of the urban man's life has a far more rational essential character, viz., calculability and capacity for purposive manipulation.⁷⁹

Weber's willingness to consider economic explanations is further illustrated by his position on the relationship between science and the process of rationalization: in his essay on science he summarized this when stating that "intellectualist rationalization" had been "created by science and scientifically oriented technology".⁸⁰ It is here that we see Marx's greatest influence over Weber. The location of religious ideas and ethics in an economic context does not however solve the fundamental problem that Weber set out to solve: "the special peculiarity of Occidental rationalism". Neither the

⁷⁷ Weber, *Theory of Economic and Social Organisation*, p. 242.

⁷⁸ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 175.

⁷⁹ Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, p. 97.

⁸⁰ Gerth & Mills, op. cit., p. 139.

emphasis on intellectualist or economic rationalization can explain why it was in the occidental world that rationality developed particularly in either or both these spheres. As we have seen Weber attempted to give an historical answer to the problem but raised a further difficulty which he never resolved: in criticizing a Marxist speaker at the first meeting of the German Sociological Association, Weber revealed his own position on the nature of historical explanation:

I would like to protest against the statement made by one of the speakers that some one factor, be it technology or economy, can be the “ultimate” or “true” cause of another. If we look at the causal lines, we see them run, at one time, from technical to economic and political matters, at another from political to religious and economic ones etc. There is no resting point.⁸¹

It is for this reason that he accepted that in the analysis of cultural phenomenon “the appearance of the result is, for every causally working empirical science determined not just from a certain moment but “from eternity”.⁸²

This infinite causal regress is clearly a very unsatisfactory mode of explanation, for in the last resort it explains both everything and nothing. Although in principle Weber was prepared to accept that causal explanation could be regressed infinitely, in his substantive work on the development of the protestant ethic he was “not primarily interested in the origin, antecedents, or history of these ascetic movements, but (took) their doctrines as given in a state of full development”.⁸³ It must be asked what principle enabled Weber to decide the point of departure for his analysis. In practice it

⁸¹ Bendix & Roth, op. cit., p. 242.

⁸² Weber, *Methodology*, p. 187.

⁸³ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 220. Weber did however make a number of substantive references to earlier historical developments and stated elsewhere that the “causal regress” of “present-day Christian capitalistic culture” might have to extend back “into the Middle Ages or Antiquity”. Weber, *Methodology*, p. 155.

was the principle of understanding which allowed him to meaningfully explain the “inner affinity” of the protestant ethic with the spirit of capitalism. The function of understanding in empirical causal analysis was “to establish the really decisive motives of human actions”,⁸⁴ and to enable Weber to break into the “eternal stream” of history for a point of departure of analysis. This point is necessarily a subjective rather than a material factor of analysis: Weber's methodology inescapably involved the understanding of subjective meanings. Material circumstances cannot be “understood” – a statement about them can only be invoked on Weber's methodology as a subsidiary heuristic device. The selection of puritan theology and the protestant ethic as a point of departure for Weber's analysis of the emergence of modern capitalism is therefore an example of a deeply partisan idealistic methodology.

The fundamental analytical problem that Weber set out to solve thus remains unanswered: what were the sociological factors responsible for the pervasive and systematic rationalization of occidental culture? Clearly Weber's references to a racial explanation of this cultural development form no basis whatsoever for a solution to this problem (the development of Japanese capitalism is by itself sufficient to discredit this purely speculative notion). Its solution lies far beyond the scope of this paper, although it is intended to return to this question in future work.

Weber's great achievement was to analyse the relationship between the disenchantment flowing from the process of rationalization and the evolution of the protestant ethic. This involved the sublimation of anxiety and guilt resulting from the destruction of protective belief and

⁸⁴ Weber, *Methodology*, p. 14. This notion that it is possible “to establish the really decisive motives of human actions” is reflected in Weber's conclusion that “the real roots of the religious ethics which led the way to the modern conception of a calling lay in the sects and heterodox movements, above all in Wyclif”. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 203.

institutional magic (e.g. the elimination of the confessional), into the rationalized, methodical and sober ethic associated with both puritanism and certain aspects of occidental capitalism. Further work is required to elaborate the nature of the psychological forces that were involved in this process and why they took the form that they did. Although the protestant ethic has come to influence cultures outside of its area of origin, the question raised by Weber for comparative sociology still remains: why did the process of rationalization first develop in Western Europe, and not elsewhere?

