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A Vocation Unto Death: Mortality and Politics in Max Weber's Thought

Abstract: In this paper I take up Weber's familiar interpretation of disenchanting modernity and the problem it poses for meaningful life—and in particular Weber's depiction of political life—from the less familiar perspective of the meaningfulness of death. By modeling meaningful, modern death on the idealized soldier who serves on the field of battle, Weber has attempted to push back the effects of a totally rationalized, progressive understanding of life and death. Yet when contrasted to older models of soldierly death, as seen in the model of the dying hero in Homer or the soldiers eulogized by Pericles, reliance on this model in disenchanting modernity is revealed to have a price. This model of meaning, which so heavily emphasizes individual conviction in the meaningfulness of service unto death, exacerbates the tendency for political rivalry to become political war. Aside from a slim moment of the choice of which cause one is willing to die for, it is not apparent that the meaningful life lived with soldierly devotion promotes any responsible accounting for the political—therefore potentially violent—consequences of one's actions.

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“We must live in awareness of death. Living with this awareness makes life serious, significant, truly productive and joyful. Keeping death in mind, we cannot help but work harder, knowing that death could interrupt the work we are doing.”

-L. Tolstoi

Max Weber’s famous lectures *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation* are, among other things, meditations on the meaning of life in an age of increasing rationalization and indefinite technological progress. Strikingly, Weber introduces the question of the meaning of death as a criterion for assessing the meaning of life. Referring to one of Tolstoi’s central thematic preoccupations, Weber states that “death has...no meaning for civilized man.” Rather than viewing Weber’s shifting emphasis from life to death as a purely rhetorical turn, this paper proposes that we consider the meaning of death as an essential component of Weber’s understanding of the meaning of life. Hence in this essay I take up Weber’s (by now) familiar interpretation of disenchanted modernity and the problem it poses for meaningful life—and in particular Weber’s depiction of *political* life—from the less familiar perspective of the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of death.¹

Death animates Weber’s understanding of the meaning of life in modernity in two potentially contradictory ways. Weber lays out the problem of death (with reference to Tolstoi) in an extended passage from *Science as a Vocation*, which I have reproduced here at some length:

What [Tolstoi] brooded about increasingly was whether or not death has a

¹ An extensive literature exists on the question of disenchantment in Max Weber’s thought. It is not my aim to represent a robust theory of disenchantment in this paper, or to attend to the existing literature on the subject. My intent in this paper is to focus more exclusively on the question of death and its role in Weber’s thought: a subject which in spite of its universal relevance to human experience, and seeming importance to Weber’s thinking, has been treated in a fragmented, or secondary way at best. Major exceptions include Harvey Goldman’s account (taken up below) and several more tangential treatments which will be considered as they are relevant.

meaning. His answer was that it had no meaning for a civilized person. His reasoning for this was that because the individual civilized life was situated within “progress” and infinity, it could not have an intrinsically meaningful end. For the man caught up in the chain of progress always has a further step in front of him; no one about to die can reach the pinnacle, for that lies beyond him in infinity. Abraham or any other peasant in olden times died “old and fulfilled by life” because he was part of an organic life cycle, because in the evening of his days his life had given him whatever it had to offer and because there were no riddles that he still wanted to solve. Hence he could have “enough” of life. A civilized man, however, who is inserted into a never-ending process by which civilization is enriched with ideas, knowledge and problems may become “tired of life,” but not fulfilled by it. For he can seize hold of only the minutest portion of the new ideas that the life of the mind continually produces, and what remains in his grasp is always merely provisional, never definitive. For this reason death is a meaningless event for him. And because death is meaningless, so to, is civilized life, since its senseless “progressivity” condemns death to meaninglessness.²

Weber’s immediate goal is to illustrate the fate of modern scientists, whose never-ending work dooms them to a life lacking any persistent meaning: within the infinite scope of scientific progress, any individual contributions to knowledge lose their value and must be expected to be overcome with time. However, the effects of this “progressivity” point to a broader concern the changing meaning of death for modern man in general. With an increasing number of potential accomplishments available to man in modern times, death becomes an uncontrollable, even arbitrary ending. This change rests on a broader “gulf between past and present,” brought about by the demystification and mechanization of the modern world.³

Yet Weber finds an exception to this general rule on the meaninglessness of modern death. One of the oldest and most explicit sorts of political service, the soldier’s

² Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation” in *Max Weber’s Science as a Vocation*, Edited by Peter Lassman and Irving Velody (Oxford University Press, London 1989) p. 13. This is importantly Weber’s account of Tolstoi. Tolstoi’s own writings on death are varied and seem at times to point to a different understanding of the meaning of human mortality than Weber represents here—namely one premised exclusively on religious salvation through the Christian faith. For a collection of Tolstoi’s writing on the subject, see Maureen Cote, *Death and The Meaning of Life: Selected Spiritual Writings of Lev Tolstoy* (Troista Books, 2000)

³ *Ibid*, 14

life and death on the field of battle provides a definitive model. Here death serves as a standard of meaning—through the individual’s commitment to the worthiness of a cause *unto* death. In his essay, *Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions*, Weber writes:

Death on the field of battle differs from death that is only man’s common lot. Since death is a fate that comes to everyone, nobody can ever say why it comes precisely to him and why it comes just when it does. As the values of culture increasingly unfold and are sublimated to immeasurable heights, such ordinary death marks an end where only a beginning makes sense. Death on the field of battle differs from this merely unavoidable dying in that in war, and in this massiveness *only* in war, the individual can *believe* that he knows he is dying ‘for’ something. The why and the wherefore of his facing death can, as a rule, be so indubitable to him that the problem of the “meaning” of death does not even occur to him. At least there may be no presuppositions for the emergence of the problem in its universal significance, which is the form in which religions of salvation are impelled to be concerned with the “meaning of death.” Only those who perish “in their callings” are in the same situation as the soldier who faces death on the battlefield.⁴

In one sense, we might think of this merely as an extension of ancient martial values, and for this reason the historical counter-example of the Attic soldier in the Athenian polis forms a natural point of comparison. In the unified Athenian polis, heroic death was valorized as part of life well lived, with the city serving as a memorializing community committed to the continuity of the polity: a community *for* which the soldier might give his life, and *through* which his life and death could be given context and meaning. But what should we make of this apparently unmediated belief in the value of self-sacrifice, or alternatively, the value of a “soldierly” death in the expressly modern context Weber describes? How are we to take the extension of this model of death to include individuals who perish in service to their calling? And what are the political implications of this stance?

⁴ Weber, Max “Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions.” In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* ed. H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (Oxford University Press, new York 1958) p. 335

This paper will address Weber's articulation of these questions in the following fashion. Part one will develop the problem of death in modernity and its ties to the meaning of life. Part two will take up Weber's exception: the soldier dying on the field of battle. Viewed as an ideal 'type,' this model of sacrifice serves as a political route to meaning by situating death in a meaningful context and community.⁵ As a point of useful comparison, I then take up the ancient counter-example of death within the context of the Athenian polis, in particular the meaning of death as addressed through the honoring of the war dead. The differences between these accounts indicate some troubling implications for modernity, which are taken up in part three. Finally, I argue this framing of death amplifies the violent character of Weberian politics. The soldierly model of meaning enhances the dangers of political life by emphasizing the importance of conviction in ways that undermine the ability for the individual, in all but exceptional cases, to bear the costs demanded by Weber's ethic of responsibility. Meaningful political life and politics more generally take on the somber, serious ethos of the battlefield, revealing the very high stakes Weber assigns to the political vocation: the choice to engage meaningfully in politics is a commitment unto death.⁶

I. The Progressive Ideal

⁵ With apologies to Weber's famous 'ideal types,' we might think of both the soldier's death and the representation of the Athenian polis and her war dead in this paper as similar sorts of construction. This idealization is perhaps not only useful but even important, as Weber's own account of the soldier's death is subject to the same sort of idealized construction—by Weber's argument, this is necessary for substantive reasons of rational consistency and typological clarity. (See Weber, "Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions," p. 324) For similar reasons, I have chosen idealized accounts (including primary sources) of the Greek polis and its function, and these ought to be read as such.

⁶ This paper will draw primarily from the text of Weber's two well known speeches, *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation*, as well as his essay, *Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions*. While other works are cited, death enlivens and connects the core themes of these texts in important ways. I have also chosen to focus on selections from two particularly well known Greek texts as counterpoint to Weber's thought—that of the Periclean funeral oration in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and Homer's *Odyssey*.

Death proves to be a useful means of identifying the ‘gulf between past and present’ Weber indicates, not in the least because it acts as a common point of human experience through time. For, while the fact of death is unchanging the ways in which death takes on meaning are not fixed. The changing *experience* of death illustrates the ways in which the question of meaning is problematized by modernity. Rather than signaling a natural point of meaningful completion, death becomes a troubling, even unreasonable, “...ending where only a beginning makes sense.⁷” To understand more fully the dimensions of this problem in Weber’s account, this section will consider the effects of progressive, modern science on the meaningfulness of life and death, followed by the broader ramifications of this for the meaningfulness of modern, “civilized” life.

Rather than aiming at a particular end or historical stage, Weber presents scientific progress as an ongoing *process* with infinite potential and aims. This explicitly denies the possibility of any teleological meaning being derived from science. The endless possibilities for expanding knowledge mean that the scientist’s life work can never be fully completed: there will always be more to learn, to understand, or to improve. Beyond its effect on the scientific vocation, this advance of knowledge transforms the landscape of human achievement in a more general way. Modern man can never be “satiated by life,” as ‘Abraham or any peasant of ancient times’ could be. In the latter case, the meaning of man’s life was defined by the “organic lifecycle.” Birth, maturity, reproduction, and death formed natural horizons for meaningful human accomplishment. Thus a patriarch such as Abraham could look back on his life, his progeny, and his undertakings with a sense of mastery and completion, “full” from life.

⁷ Weber, “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions.” p. 335

In contrast to this sense of satiety, modern man merely grows “tired” of life—for the range of possible achievement no longer bears any connection to the natural, temporal limitations of life imposed by man’s mortality. The sheer volume of subjects and skills that can be mastered in the modern world serves to devalue the limited range of what is possible in a single lifetime.⁸ If comprehensive achievement is the measure of a meaningful life, death “should never come.”⁹ Further, for those working towards an end that never comes and never *should* come, the value of individual contributions also becomes problematic. An infinite, progressive aim has the effect of diminishing individual contributions to little more than infinitesimal movements in an onwards march.

Far from being an unfortunate side effect of a progressive spirit, this belief in the fleeting significance of one’s lifework forms the central tenet of the progressive ideal.

Weber writes,

To be overtaken in science is, however—let me repeat—not only the fate of every one of us, but also our common goal. We cannot work without hoping that others will get further than we do. Such progress is in principle infinite, and here we come to *the problem of the meaning* of science...why should one do something which in reality never comes to an end and never can?¹⁰

The centrality of this ‘common goal’ to be overtaken shapes the divide between the pursuit of knowledge and the *meaningfulness* of such a pursuit. So long as the realm of knowledge is infinitely vast, the pursuit of science “for its own sake” cannot provide sufficient value to give life meaning. Thus, while Weber is happy to concede that scientific progress has undoubted technical and practical *value for life*, this must be seen as distinct from *giving life value*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, p. 14

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12

Weber holds that the optimistic belief that scientific reason itself might demonstrate the value of life becomes untenable following the scathing philosophical critique of Nietzsche, which revealed the emptiness of this attempt.¹¹ Faith in science is problematic on two counts. The first is that science undermines traditional sources of value by advancing the notion of “self-sufficient intellect” and natural causality. Both preclude the “ultimate stand...by virtue of a direct grasp of the world’s meaning” religious and mythological worldviews offer.¹²

Scientific progress is a fraction, indeed the most important fraction, of that process of intellectualization which we have been undergoing for millennia...It means...the knowledge of the belief that, *if one only wanted to*, one *could* find out any time; that there are in principle no *mysterious, incalculable powers at work*...One need no longer have recourse to magic in order to control or implore the spirits, as did the savage for whom such powers existed. Technology and calculations achieve that, and this more than anything else means intellectualization as such.¹³

By converting the world into calculable processes, intellectualization strips all activities of their transcendent, overarching meaning and reduces them to their empirical components. This creates a fragmented quality to life in which intellectualization, having undermined all overarching meta-narratives, cannot itself offer any guidance with regards to Tolstoi’s central questions, “how shall we act?” and “what shall we do?”

From this we can see how Weber takes up Tolstoi’s assertion about the meaninglessness of life and death for “civilized man in *general*.” The ‘disenchantment of the world’ matched by a reciprocal increase in rationalization is the defining characteristic of western civilization—not merely the scientific vocation. In modernity, the direction provided by unified worldviews, religious faith, and the political unity of the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15-17

¹² Stephen Kalberg, *Max Weber: Readings and Commentary on Modernity*, p. 319; also Weber in Kalberg, *Ibid*, p. 340

¹³ Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, p. 13-14; emphasis original

past are replaced with a multiplicity of unmoored values and activities. This leaves the individual in Weber's modern world in the precarious position of needing to *choose* cultural values. This position is precarious not because faith or politics (or any other venture) has become less meaningful, but because it is increasingly difficult for individuals to sort through the available cultural options and choose a meaningful path *before death*. Weber writes,

The "culture" of the individual certainly does not consist in the *quantity* of "cultural values" which he amasses; it consists of an articulated *selection* of culture values. But there is no guarantee that this selection has reached an end that would be meaningful to him precisely at the "accidental" time of his death.¹⁴

Thus the pursuit of meaning in modernity is a thoroughly uncertain venture, and it is death that throws this uncertainty into stark relief. The "accidental" timing of death—an event which generally arrives without regard for human planning—decreases the ability for the individual to judge whether investing in a venture will 'pay off' in any meaningful way.¹⁵ The problem of the meaning of life and death for civilized man is therefore a question of what guarantees *any* undertaking with value. For, while the modern world has as many sources of value as the ancient world, none of these intrinsically can offer any *guaranteed* meaning. As Gunter Abramowski writes, "As to which ultimate values we ought to subscribe, "a prophet or a saint" might well be able to pronounce, but none

¹⁴ Weber, in Kalberg, *Max Weber: Readings and Commentary on Modernity*, p. 342

¹⁵ The obvious and interesting exception to this is suicide. Weber's view of suicide is quite positive, and in personal accounts he treats suicide with a kind of heroic dignity. The ways in which suicide affects the meaning of death will be addressed briefly below, and has some similarity to the soldier's death as a meaningful end. For an account of Weber's take on suicide, see: Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography*, trans. Patrick Camiller, (Polity Press, Cambridge 2009) P, 541-2

exists...the “fundamental reality” [is] that we are destined to live in a god-forsaken prophet-less age...”¹⁶

This indicates another problem. For Weber, much as it had for Nietzsche, scientific knowledge assumes the burdens of faith and salvation in the modern age—namely, by providing the apparent means of mastering the human condition. As Tracy Strong and David Owen put succinctly, “if one accepts that certain beliefs and or practices can ensure one’s salvation, this implies that the world can be—difficult though it may be in practice—controlled.”¹⁷ Advances in knowledge and technical mastery provide ways of controlling the terms of our existence. Yet death remains obstinately outside of our control. This inconvenient fact throws the possibility of salvation through science into question, and harshly demarcates the limits of what the “self-sufficient intellect” can accomplish. No amount of internal, intellectual understanding of the world can alter the incontrovertible fact of death.

The changing experience of death thus gives urgency to the problem of finding definitive meaning in modernity. In addressing this problem, we find ourselves facing a gloomy prospect. The “mature” man wishing to face life and death as an adult must honestly both assess the world for what it is, and simultaneously find the means to affirm his own situation within it.¹⁸ The heroic stance demanded by this brutal confrontation

16 Gunter Abromowski, Larry W. Moore, William H. Swatos Jr., “Meaningful life in a Disenchanted World: Rational Science and Ethical Responsibility: (An Interpretation of Max Weber)” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring, 1982) p. 124

17 David Owen and Tracy Strong, “Max Weber’s Calling to Knowledge and Action.” In Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures* (Hackett Publishing, Cambridge 2004)

18 There seems to be a very strong gendered aspect to Weber’s account of life and meaningful death, and the “heroic stand” portrayed in the vocation lectures and echoed in the soldierly model is an explicitly masculine account. While this is too vast a topic to explore, some consideration of what this gendered model of meaning implies—particularly within the context of the vocational calling which is generally not thought of as a purely *masculine* phenomenon—would be worthwhile. In particular, it seems worth questioning whether due to this component of “manliness,” there is an alternative, idealized “feminine

with reality is not easy, nor is it one which Weber seems to expect from the majority of individuals.

Those who cannot bear the harsh demands of modernity may retreat into religious worldviews or traditional belief systems, though not without cost. We might view these as offering different ways to contextualize death such that it is no longer “arbitrary.” By direct appeal to ultimate meaning, universal, salvational religions and traditional worldviews situate death by ascribing it purpose in the name of some higher will (god or the community.)¹⁹ Alternatively, both offer solutions to the temporal problem posed by death: death marks a point of shattered temporal continuity for the individual. Salvational religions situate death into an ongoing continuum. Death becomes a point of *transition* (from the world of man to the kingdom of heaven, for instance) rather than an inexplicable endpoint. Traditional worldviews accomplish something similar by artificially imposing a horizon on meaningful accomplishment. By limiting the scope of what accomplishments have meaning—a life lived according to communal traditions and rules, for instance—death remains meaningful within a structure of identifiable, demarcated values that can be reached and matched.

In the modern context, however, the pervasive spread of faith in self-sufficient intellect directly conflicts with the requirements of both tradition and salvational religions, which for Weber *always* demand of their followers a “sacrifice of the intellect.”²⁰ He writes,

death” for modern woman. Or if women—still mostly relegated to the household and domestic roles at the time of Weber’s writing—largely avoid the problem of death experienced by modern man by leading lives circumscribed by traditional, demarcated gender roles.

¹⁹ Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, p. 13

²⁰ Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, p. 30-31

To anyone who is unable to endure the fate of the age like a man we must say that he should return to the welcoming and merciful embrace of the old churches— simply, silently, and without any of the usual bluster of the renegade. They will surely not make it hard for him. In the process, he will surely be forced to make a “sacrifice of the intellect” one way or the other. We shall not bear him a grudge if he can really do it, for such a sacrifice of the intellect in favor an unconditional religious commitment is one thing. But morally, it is a very different thing if one shirks his straightforward duty to preserve his intellectual integrity.²¹

While Weber treats this return to the “old churches” with a kind of dignity worthy of respect, he is clearly troubled by the possible consequences such a turn might entail.²² A willful turning away from the true state of the world tends to undercut taking responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions, and marks a deliberate choice not to confront the ethical reality of the modern age.²³

Individuals wishing to confront the circumstances of their lives must accept the impossibility of answering value-based questions by appeal to foundational truths on the one hand, and the impossibility of deriving meaning from scientific knowledge on the other. In this way Weber seems to take on a version of Nietzsche’s heroic *amor fati*.²⁴ The mature man embraces the chaotic world as it is, without appeal to anything other than his own heroic affirmation of his life and death to situate him. Conversely, as a response to the unbearable nature of reality there is a sense that meaning garnered through a return to religion is neither particularly heroic, nor particularly manly.²⁵

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 31

²² See Radkau, *Max Weber*, p. 532-34

²³ Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” p. 91-94, and “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions,” p. 327-8, 333-6. The ethical dangers of the demands of the universal ethic of religions against the demands of responsible worldly politics are several, most notably that a universal end has the tendency to justify morally ambiguous worldly actions. For this reason, Weber identifies the religious ethic as existing in tension with other value spheres in the world—of which politics is one.

²⁴ The relationship between Nietzsche and Weber has been convincingly explored by David Owen and Tracy Strong, “Max Weber’s Calling to Knowledge and Action.” And Ralph Schroeder, “Nietzsche and Weber: Two Prophets of the Modern Age” in Scott Lash and Sam Whimster (eds) *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity* (London: Unwin, 1987)

²⁵ See the contrasting language in this same section against the man who does take a heroic, mature stand.

The soldier's death, in contrast, is a specifically worldly, (and manly) form of meaningful death. Unlike religious or traditional framings of death, the soldier's death is notable in that it does not seem to reject the state of disenchanting modernity at all. In this sense it avoids the problematic retreat from reality and the intellectual sacrifice such a retreat entails. As an expressly political death, however, this route to meaning bears its own peculiarities.

II. A Brotherhood Unto Death

Weber discusses the example of the dying soldier at length in his essay, *Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions*. Death on the field of war differs from ordinary, "common" death for Weber in two major respects. First, it is situated in an unquestionably meaningful context from the perspective of the individual, thereby avoiding the problem of the "accidental" timing of death. Second, death is instrumental in defining a peculiar type of meaningful community—a "community unto death."²⁶ As a point of comparison, we might think of the soldier who dies for the Greek polis as a classical, "enchanted" version of the same sort of meaningful death as that which Weber outlines for the soldier in modernity. The differences between these two help to demonstrate the troubling implications of Weber's construction. It will be helpful here to discuss both in some detail.

The unique circumstances of dying in battle place death within a concrete, meaningful context. Where salvational religions offer some explanation for the "universal significance" of the meaning of death, meaning for the soldier facing death in battle

²⁶ Weber, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions," p. 335

arises because he “knows he is dying ‘for’ something.”²⁷ Specifically in this case, the soldier is facing death for the sake of the nation, the homeland, or as will be discussed shortly, for the brotherhood formed with his fellow soldiers. Death in battle is therefore not random or accidental, but rather is located within purposeful circumstances. This “location of death within a series of meaningful and consecrated events” is achieved through the “massiveness” of war: both as an external phenomenon which frames death in historical time, but also as the context for an essential *internal* consecration of death on the part of the individual.²⁸ It is the internal conviction at the time of death that one’s ‘ending’ has meaning which critically alleviates the perilous uncertainty of modern, disenchanted death.²⁹

Secondly, death on the battlefield—or even the *possibility* of death—forms the basis for a powerful commitment between individuals. Weber writes,

War does something to the warrior which, in its concrete meaning, is unique: it makes him experience a consecrated meaning of death which is characteristic only of death in war. The community of the army standing in the field today feels itself—as in the times of the war lords ‘following’—to be a community unto death, and the greatest of its kind.³⁰

As a “community unto death,” the connections between individuals are formed around the commitment to risk death in service of a common cause, a common ideal, or even a

²⁷ *ibid.* While there is not really room to discuss this point in detail, there is a large, unanswered question in Weber’s account on the significance (or insignificance) of voluntary versus involuntary military service. Soldiers who fight and die by draft face a death which is contextualized by war: a soldier knows what he is fighting for, and dying for, whether he supports it or not. And, arguably the soldiers who serve by force rather than choice are still members of a community bound by death simply due to the nature of the battlefield community. However, lacking a personal choice to serve in war, the reasons for the meaningfulness of this death as conferred by the state seem suspect, particularly with respect to Weber’s inclusion of service to the cause as an equally meaningful death—an extension which emphasizes the *conviction* of the individual as the critical component of meaning (this point will be addressed below.) As Weber was writing within the context of required military service for all Germans, and later as an observer of the horrors of WWI (also primarily manned through military draft), the question of what role choice plays with respect to the internal demands of meaning for the soldier is worth consideration.

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ *ibid*, p. 335-6

³⁰ *ibid*

charismatic individual. This connection has the effect of breaking down prior social barriers between individuals. As a shared, ultimate commitment to a cause, war “thereby makes for an unconditionally devoted and sacrificial community among the combatants and releases an active mass compassion and love for those who are in need.”³¹ As one of the oldest sorts of political service, the power of this kind of communal commitment is broad and far-reaching, but importantly is at odds with the scope of universal religious ethics of brotherliness. Political wars are more particular in their aims, and do not necessarily make claims to any sort of universal community.³² As such, from the perspective of religions with universal claims war “must be seen as a mere reflection of the technically sophisticated brutality of the struggle.”³³

This raises some questions about the overall implications of this model of meaning. It seems premised on both individual conviction and the *belief* in the meaning of one’s death, as well as the meaning garnered from a community bound to each other *unto* death. However, this communal aspect of death is limited by the range and nature of the cause, lending this avenue of meaning an ambiguous scope: does any community bound to death grant meaning, or is the “massiveness” of war decisive? This is rendered more difficult by Weber’s extension of the meaningfulness of the soldier’s death on the field of battle to encompass “those who die in the service of the calling.” This addition

31 *ibid* p. 335. The question of class as it pertains to military rank is not really addressed by Weber, but bears mentioning as a possible objection.

32 *ibid*, p. 336-7 Religious war is an exception to this, though Weber finds this to be more of an expression of a value system of ultimate ends which must be distinguished from wars (“devalued” from the perspectives of religions) that have “worldly” ends. However, this poses the interesting question as to whether the concerns Weber raises with regards to ethics of ultimate ends might not also carry over to *any* absolute commitment of life and death, even if that commitment is vocational in nature, which (aside from exceptional cases) would seem to displace individual responsibility.

33 *ibid*

was not original to the first publication of this essay³⁴ and raises several more questions about the implications of this model: in particular, where does the actual locus of “meaning” reside? Is it the individual’s choices, public recognition, or the accomplishments themselves which are meaningful? And must this version of meaning always be premised on the “sophisticated brutality” of war?

Where the precise locus of meaning lies in Weber’s account is made all the more unclear when one compares it to the classical understanding of heroic, military death—a model which Weber was certainly well acquainted. The function of the soldier’s death as a powerful collective, communally reinforcing experience in the polis is less obviously shared with Weber’s construction. In the former case, the meaning or meaninglessness of death depends in part on the context of death, but also on recognition and memorial. Death takes meaning in specific relation to the community of the polis: a view dependent on an understanding of time and value at odds with the progressive conditions of modernity Weber confronts. Briefly exploring how this idealized model of soldierly death works will help to reveal, by way of contrast, the uncertain dimensions of Weber’s own account.

The idea of immortality in Greek thought is tied to memory: one lived on in the minds and recollection of others. This understanding rests on a particular heroic ideal exemplified in the Homeric epics. In the words of Janet Coleman, the Homeric hero was portrayed as “chafing at the restrictiveness of mortality itself, which he attempts to override by performing a monumental, immortal deed to win him undying renown.”³⁵ In this spirit, we find Odysseus greeting Achilles in the kingdom of the dead as “blest,”

³⁴ Harvey Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, p. 66-67

³⁵ Janet Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: From Ancient Greece to Early Christianity* (Blackwell Publishing, London 2000) p. 41

saying: “There’s not a man in the world more blest than you/ there never has been, never will be one.”³⁶ As the man honored as the greatest warrior to live, never to be forgotten, Achilles is truly immortal. For this reason, Odysseus encourages him: “Grieve no more at dying, great Achilles.”³⁷

If doing great deeds was the route to immortality, it has to be recognized that such constant competition is not exactly politically expedient. Fame-seeking competitiveness between individuals occurs at the price of unity, not to mention the safety of those nominally under the protection of these would-be immortals. Thus the very means of thwarting death through one’s own actions form a particular political problem for the social community as a whole. “...[A] respect for law and justice will not be upheld in a world where there still exist admirers of the Homeric heroic ideals. Therefore, the heroic, aristocratic *arête* must be institutionally and legally restrained and then refocused.”³⁸

Military death provided a forum for restraining this impulse within the evolving city-state in the form of public funerals.³⁹ The annual, public funeral for the war dead, an

36 Homer, *Odyssey*, Book II, ln. 548-9, p. 265

37 *Ibid*, Book II, ln. 551-3, p. 265 Importantly, Odysseus does not *succeed* in comforting Achilles. In a passage which Nietzsche makes quite a bit of (see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Ed. by Michael Tanner, Trans., Shaun Whiteside (Penguin Books, London 2003). #3, p. 23) Achilles responds that he would rather be a slave living on earth than a king of the dead. The ability to overcome death through memorial is therefore worth viewing in tension with this heroic view of the value of the struggle of life itself. According to Nietzsche’s take, this struggle is more important than any *fame* such a struggle produces. However, this competitive striving typical in Homer’s heroic epics is institutionalized as much as funerary institutions and memorial by the policies and laws of the classical polis (See comments below on Pericles’ representation of envy for the war dead for an indication how.) Thus it seems plausible that the value of this heroic agonism takes on a new form, even in death, *through* the polis—the city’s dead remain as active competitors with the living members of the political community.

38 Coleman, *A History of Political Thought*, p. 42

³⁹See Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Zone Books, New York 2006) p. 47; also Thucydides, *A History of the Peloponnesian War*, Translated by Rex Warner (Penguin Classics, London 1972) ln. 34, p. 143. However, a list of the names of the war dead were kept and read publicly, which shows the enduring importance of both the individual act as well as the increasing emphasis on public sacrifice.

“inextricably political affair,”⁴⁰ allowed for the brave deeds of individuals to be retranslated and honored as acts done on behalf of the polis as a unit. The plural, public aspect of the speech (not individuals, but “the dead” are honored) allowed praise of the dead to become a kind of counsel for the living through the provision of an idealized account of Athens and her citizenry.⁴¹

Perikles’ funeral oration from Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War* provides a powerful illustration of this.⁴² Perikles states,

The man who knows the facts and loves the dead may well think that an oration tells less than what he knows and what he would like to hear: others who do not know so much may feel envy for the dead, and think the orator over-praises them, when he speaks of exploits that are beyond their own capacities. Praise of other people is tolerable only up to a certain point, the point where one still believes that one could do oneself some of the things one is hearing about.⁴³

That the praise of the dead might inspire envy is conspicuous: what it indicates is that the individual citizen might feel obligated to actively compete with the deeds of those no longer physically present *as if they were*. In essence, rather than being outdone and succeeded by subsequent generations, the dead themselves act as ever-present members of the community. Further, while their achievements are honored as particularly praiseworthy, the deeds of the dead form a kind of standard for the living to emulate. This stands in direct contrast to the progressive ideal Weber articulates, such as that of a

40 Simon Stow, “Pericles at Gettysburg and Ground Zero: Tragedy, Patriotism and Public Mourning” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 101, No. 2 (May 2007) p. 196

41 *Ibid.*, p.196

42 I focus here on Pericles’s funeral oration, largely because it is well known, but also because of the presentation of this speech as a oratory actually spoken publicly to the citizenry of Athens. This is in contrast to existing “published” examples of funeral orations probably never given before a live audience, such as those by Lysias, or the ironic “Menexenus” written by Plato—both of which nonetheless demonstrate similar structure, concerns, and themes as the Periclean oration in Thucydides. Versions of these texts are all available through the *Perseus Project* of Tufts University:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/> This speech has been interpreted many ways, and some readings will contrast with what I present here. See N. Loraux’s for a brief survey. *The Invention of Athens*, p. 31-34

43 Thucydides, *A History of the Peloponnesian War*, ln. 35, p. 144

modern scientific vocation, in which all individuals *expect* and even *hope* that their deeds will be outdone.

What is significant about this shift is that the source of meaning ceases to be mere fame garnered by individual actions, but instead becomes the specific domain of the political community as a whole. The polis acts as a forum in which death is given meaningful context—like Weber’s soldier, the Attic soldier’s death is “for” something. Yet also, through the attachment of one’s life and death to the victories and exploits of the city as a whole, the polis becomes the locus of shared glory. Thus the honor and recognition garnered from death in war are indebted *to the city*, just as the soldierly sacrifices themselves legitimate the city as worth dying for.

Perhaps most importantly, heroic death for the city would inspire a similar kind of service from others seeking immortal glory.

So and such they were, these men—worthy of their city...They gave her their lives, to her and to all of us, and for their own selves they won praises that never grow old, the most splendid of sepulchers—not the sepulcher in which their bodies are laid, but where their glory remains eternal in men’s minds, always there on the right occasion to stir others to speech or to action...it is for you to try to be like them.⁴⁴

To be “worthy of the city” was to measure up against the deeds—in speech and in action—undertaken in lives of others: “reflect that what made [Athens] great was men with the spirit of adventure, men who knew their duty, men who were ashamed to fall below a certain standard.” In this way the dialogue between the dead and the living played an ongoing role in the maintenance of the city as a unified body bound by common standards.⁴⁵ What makes the city great are the behaviors and norms of its

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, ln 43, p. 149

⁴⁵ It is important to note that the unity of the political body presented here is idealized—both in the way I am presenting the relationship of individual to polis as an “ideal type” as well as in the picture drawn by

citizens acting as an idealized whole. Similarly, competition between the living and the dead ensured the preservation of the city's greatness through time.

We can see a significant resonance here with the modern soldier described by Weber. The soldier who dies in service of the modern state knows that he is serving a greater cause than himself. And to the extent that his death occurs in the line of duty, it cannot be described as purely "accidental." Likewise, he has joined a community he can reasonably expect will honor and memorialize his sacrifice through time.⁴⁶ Both instances—the Athenian and the modern—attach the meaning of death to the continuity of the political and military community. One can go further and argue that such massive bloodshed in the name of the modern state still serves, in a sense, to legitimate it as an entity worth dying for.⁴⁷ However, it is not clear by Weber's account that the meaning of the soldier's death in modernity is conferred by the state, or any community of recognition.

The difference between the "collapsed temporality" of dead and living in the polis, and that of progressive time as articulated by Weber, indicates how the Attic understanding of meaningful death might be undermined by modernity, but also how such an articulation might entail harmful political consequences. If the deeds of the present render those of the past obsolete, and inevitably *will be rendered obsolete* by the

Pericles himself. Athens was frequently plagued by class conflict and civil war (as seen in later chapters of Thucydides or the writings of Aristotle, for instance.) However, idealization and formal equality served as a highly *pragmatic* means of dealing with the unique challenges of class in the context of ancient democracy. See *The Constitution of the Athenians*, by the "Old Oligarch," for a critical, contemporaneous account of how political unity and equality functioned in classical Athens in the face of class inequality. (available through Perseus, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>)

⁴⁶ One has merely to visit the center of Washington D.C. or nearby Arlington Cemetery to see how this is still the case. The question of how this sacrifice on the part of soldiers is politically utilized as a tool for critical self-reflection (as the public Funeral orations of the Athenians could be) is unfortunately less clear.

⁴⁷ Massive amounts of death and individual sacrifice in the name of a cause, however, are not necessarily arguments that *ought* to be seen as legitimating.

deeds of the future, not only does the present generation of actors lose its ability to overcome death (through the immortality of fame), but the political coherence of the polis as a *continuity* of norms is subverted. The progressive ideal underlying the modern scientific world can only provide continuity in the sense of ongoing *change*. The dead can no longer play a meaningful role as *active* bearers of common ends. Rather, they exist only in the passive voice, and only in the past.

From the perspective of the polis, this generates several problems. There is a reflexive aspect to the value of these ‘great deeds’ undertaken by individual actors needed to give their deaths meaning. These standards of behavior, upheld by the memory of the dead and the competitive drive to match the deeds of the past, are validated by the actions of the present living and those of the yet unknown future. The value of these standards as effective bearers of meaning is dependent both on the willingness of the present to hold the same norms as valid, but also the faith that future others will do the same. Lacking guaranteed continuity, it bears considering how meaning in the model of soldierly death may have changed as well.

III. Gods and Demons

The commitment unto death frames the soldier’s life and cause as meaningful—and we may understand this dynamic between soldier and state as largely preserved in modern times. However, what is most significant about Weber’s account is not simply that he turns to the soldier’s death as such, but that he sets it up *as a model* for all meaningful, modern death, including those who perish in “service to the calling.” Harvey Goldman makes the point in his book, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*:

[A]part from the soldier, the only others in the modern world to whom death may be equally unquestioned and hence meaningful, in Weber’s view, are those who

“perish ‘in the calling.’”...This remarkable claim, added [to the essay *Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions*] in 1920, reveals the significance of death as the limiting fact that governs not just meaning but meaningful action...⁴⁸

That Weber felt compelled to add this statement indicates the importance this ideal model of death grew to have in Weber’s thought. However, understanding meaning as arising from soldierly commitment has several significant consequences, not in the least that it clarifies certain components of Weber’s violent conception of politics.

By placing “those who perish” in service of their calling as the “only” others who experience meaningful death, Weber echoes his framing of Tolstoi’s question in *Science as a Vocation*: if death has no meaning for modern man, how can life have meaning? Soldierly service addresses this problem. Death has no meaning for modern man because it comes at an unpredictable moment, without regard for the myriad accomplishments and ideas which intellectualization offers up for man to grasp, if only his time were infinite. Given context through a soldierly commitment to a calling, however, the end imposed on the individual by death is framed as meaningful and important, and in turn, the activities of life are also given definitive framing. Weber’s response to Tolstoi has been to orient meaningful commitment towards death: the ultimate criterion for a meaningful life is commitment to a cause unto death.

Importantly, this is distinct from saying that death *alone* can give a life meaning. It is rather to say that a meaningful life takes into account the meaningfulness of death. The locus of meaning for Weber does not seem to be the moment of death as such, but rather (as is more conventionally understood) emerges from devoted service. Thus a life lived well can be said to have meaning independent of the nature of the individual’s death. However, Weber appears to understand meaningful service *as if it were* military

⁴⁸Harvey Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, p. 66-67

service; that is, as if service ideally can be explained by the individual in terms of ultimate meaning and sacrifice: the commitment to a calling should be read as a commitment *to serve unto death*.⁴⁹ In this sense, the meaning of death is an essential part of Weber's notion of a meaningful life. The individual who steps onto the battlefield of the cause knows that their life will have been given "for something," rather than merely signifying a random selection of commitments and activities undertaken for an arbitrary stretch of time.⁵⁰

The militarized nature of this model indicates the conflict latent in Weber's understanding of modern values and those who serve them. In a broader sense, we ought to examine this conflict in light of the larger changes Weber identifies between past and present. In Weber's representations of the Greeks in particular, he sets up an example of social and political life that differs radically the modern age: it is premised on unity. This unity is found through a common cultural heritage, religious beliefs, and in the polis: both as a community of norms and in the recognition of the polis as an end in and of itself.⁵¹ These structures served the valuable function of mitigating conflict by encompassing tensions within a single worldview, thereby allowing for the conceptual unity of the polity in spite of value conflicts.

⁴⁹ Weber, "Science as a Vocation." p. 26-28 The absolute choice of values seems in part to be premised here on their incompatibility. The language here is specifically religious "Which of the warring gods shall we serve?"

⁵⁰ That Weber is affected so powerfully by the idea of death on the battlefield is not wholly surprising given the historical context of his life's work, but his own experience with the military was rather ambivalent. See: Radkau, *Max Weber.*, p. 33-38, and 505-6.

⁵¹ Weber writes, "...if one could only find *the* correct concept of *the* beautiful, *the* good, or even perhaps of courage, of the soul or whatever, one could grasp its true essence. This in turn seemed to open the way to being able to know and teach proper behavior in life and above all as a citizen." Conceptual unity is assumed in the belief that "*the* correct concept of *the* beautiful, *the* good" could be discovered and commonly upheld. Weber, "Science as a Vocation" p. 16

The loss of unity destabilizes certain aspects of how the model of the soldier's death functions. Without a guaranteed community through time, the importance of memorial is lost in any over-arching sense. Indeed, soldierly service to the *calling*, unlike the polis or the state, does not necessarily seem to *require* the presence of others. This has a few implications. While it makes sense to think of an inner commitment unto death as meaningful—Socrates' famous stand in the *Apology* comes to mind as an example, as does Weber's appeal to the example of Luther⁵²—individual conviction alone cannot guarantee the *continuity* of a given belief or cause. This damages the core, dynamic relationship between the inward belief of the soldier and the external validation of that belief through time.

Without this *necessary* communal component, the idea that only a death given in service can have meaning—that in essence meaning requires a willingness to take on a kind of ultimate stance towards service that valorizes the commitment of the individual—seems oddly in keeping with a religious ethic of salvation.⁵³ Lacking any guarantee of communal recognition, meaning seems to become primarily a matter of faith; and it is through this faith, rather than the enduring *effect* or *recognition* of service, that meaning is garnered. There is a strange dissonance between this understanding of meaningful death and that found with the Attic soldier. It was not devotion alone that gave life and death meaning for the Greeks, so much as the guarantee of memorial by the living.

⁵² Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," p. 92

⁵³ Harvey Goldman argues we can identify a lurking metaphysics imbedded in Weber's account, insofar as service to a cause is in pursuit of *salvation*, not mere success of the cause: "The 'faith' to which one gives oneself, and the service of the purposes of the 'god' provide salvation and inner strength." The example of suicide seems to be an important mediating case in demarcating the limits of this view, as it places emphasis on the individual *commitment* to death, rather than the cause itself, as framing death. See Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, p. 71

Memory and recognition take on a secondary status in Weber's account—if any status at all—behind the internal conviction required for service to the deified cause of choice.

Yet if which cause the individual attaches herself to is secondary to the fact that *she commits*, the critical part of this dynamic is the individual *belief* that a calling is worth ultimate service and sacrifice. With this established, there seems to be very little preventing meaningfulness from arising out of a variety of commitments and attachments, so long as the individual *believes* these give life value. In light of this it is important to note that Weber recognized most individuals do not in actual practice maintain absolute devotion to a single cause. Rather, like the individual of ancient times, the individual chooses between causes as necessary to suit her circumstances. However Weber is adamant that modern individuals do not particularly like to be made aware of this fact, as it undermines the belief that their lives have a coherent meaning.⁵⁴ In its most essential form, meaningful death requires an absolute choice.

As the loss of unified belief in no way changes the fact that our lives are governed by forces over which we have no power, this absolutism is significant. Weber argues that we are, in a sense, still ruled by “gods.” He states in *Science as a Vocation*,

For here, too, different gods struggle with each other and will do for all time. It is just like in the old world, which was not yet disenchanted with its gods and demons, but in another sense. Just as Hellenic man sacrificed on this occasion to Aphrodite and on another to Apollo, and above all as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city—things are still the same today, but disenchanted and divested of the mythical but inwardly genuine flexibility of those customs. And destiny, certainly not ‘science’, prevails over these gods and their struggles.⁵⁵

These “gods” are perhaps most dangerous in their political manifestations: the nation, the cultural group, socialism, liberalism, capitalism, or pacifism. The limited social and

⁵⁴ Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” p. 26-29; also Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, p. 76-77

⁵⁵ Weber, “Science as a Vocation”, p. 23

political “space” of the world means that conflict between values is, and to a certain degree has always been, inevitable. Yet without any singular, overarching end—such as the polis or the functional worldview provided by the deities of the Greeks—this latent conflict is exacerbated by the demands of meaningful death, which require that the individual be able to give an internally coherent affirmation of the meaning of their soldierly stand. The choice and subsequent devotion to a cause as “the” god that gives life and death meaning in turn makes other gods into devils. Weber writes: “You serve...this god *and offend all others*, when you choose for [one particular] position.”⁵⁶ Causes which existed in tension—but not at *war*—with each other, thereby easily become enemy combatants.

Harvey Goldman points to the disturbing effects of this. Effectively, Weber has turned a unified landscape of competing values into a battlefield of gods and demons.⁵⁷ The need to “choose” one’s own god, and therefore also choose to make rivals *into devils* is startling.⁵⁸ Viewed from the vantage of the soldier’s death this move raises some troubling questions: it is almost as if Weber’s belief in the uniquely situating effects of the “massiveness” of war” and the soldier’s death in turn require that “meaningful” causes be *fought*.⁵⁹ If the sweeping brutality of war is actually a *necessary* component for

⁵⁶ Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, p. 26

⁵⁷ Goldman, *Politics, Death and the Devil*, p. 74-78

⁵⁸ See Goldman on this, quoting Weber: “According to one’s ultimate standpoint, one position is the devil and the other god, “and the individual must *decide*...which *for him* is god, and which is the devil.” (*ibid*, p. 75) See also Weber: “...life as a whole...means a series of ultimate decisions, through which the soul, as in Plato, *chooses* its own fate—which means the meaning of its action and being...” (*ibid*, p. 75-6)

⁵⁹ The passage in question (from Gerth and Mills translation): “Death on the field of battle differs from merely unavoidable dying in that in war, and in this massiveness *only* in war, the individual can believe he is dying ‘for’ something.” Weber, “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions,” p. 335 With respect to politics, taken up below, the language of fighting is used explicitly by Weber to distinguish the one who lives *for* politics from one who merely survives *off* it.

situating death, then the existence of conflict between causes would seem as important to meaning as individual devotion itself—a very bleak conclusion.⁶⁰

The natural objection to all this is that Weber’s account does not entirely remove the importance of the community and recognition. Here we might again think of the community of war found in both the ancient and modern community of soldiers, and the memorial of “the fallen” which both take on. Many causes (particularly large political “movements” or multi-generational social organizations) take on communal dimensions that can serve a similar function. Whereas the fragmentation of values in modernity seemingly destabilizes the communal aspect of meaningful death, this by no means dictates that *all* meaningful, modern commitments take place in a vacuum. As soldierly commitments on the field of battlefield result in powerful “communities unto death,” we might expect something similar to emerge within the context of the calling. This solidarity, however, is limited.

For Weber, the compassion born out of the “community unto death” is expressly bound to the “consummated threat of violence” war embodies.⁶¹ The socially leveling effects of this commitment take place only in light of the commitment to face death as part of a community (‘death makes equals of us all,’ but immanent threat of death suffices just fine.) Compassion from this commitment is directed at those “in need:” the community, group, or state which is being defended. Within the context of the state or the

⁶⁰ It has to be recognized that making the individual choice of death a central part of establishing meaning leaves open the possibility of rejecting *all* meaning: rather than choosing to die *for something*, one could merely *choose to die*. Significantly, death by suicide does have *meaning* according to the standards we have laid out: it does not occur randomly in time or without context, nor does it take place without some inner conviction on behalf of the individual. See, Weber in Kalperg, *Max Weber: Readings and Commentary on Modernity*, p. 342

⁶¹ Weber, “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions,” p. 333-5

polis, this compassion encompasses entire communities. However compassion is nonetheless limited by the boundaries of the community in question.⁶²

For instance, a massive political cause such as a labor rights movement might be fairly universal in its embrace, and therefore promote a significant amount of compassion even under the war-like conditions required for soldierly “brotherliness.” However the inverse holds as well. A commitment to a specifically ethnic cause would frame a meaningful community unto death at the cost of setting up other ethnicities—no matter how benign—as “threats.”⁶³ Thus the compassion borne out of this soldierly model may do little to alleviate its violence. In fact, projecting this notion of communities unto death onto the disenchanting landscape of values, a fitting description can be found in Weber’s representation of the followers of tribal deities: “[These] were only concerned with the interests of their respective associations. They had to fight other gods like themselves, just as their communities fought, and they had to prove their divine powers in this very struggle.”⁶⁴ By turning to the soldier’s death, Weber effectively amplifies the competition underlying the landscape of values and causes into conflicting enemy forces; a move which turns even the compassion unleashed by soldierly communities into the potential tools of tribalistic rivalry. Taking this understanding of meaningful death as a foundation for how one must engage in *life*—including political life—we are confronted with a brutal, war-like reality.

IV. Death and Politics

⁶² *ibid.* It is for this reason that universal religions, which claim to encompass all men, perceive the “brotherliness” of political war as ethical farce. For a discussion of Weber’s somewhat peculiar treatment of “religious” brotherliness, its limits, and its forms, see Robert Bellah, “Max Weber and World Denying Love” Humanities Center and Burke Lectureship on Religion and Societies (UCSD, October 30, 1997)

⁶³ This phenomenon need not be limited to “legitimate” political groups. Terrorist groups, or even social causes—such as the radical spectrum of environmentalism or animal rights activists—might be understood in this way.

⁶⁴ Weber, “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions,” p. 333

Weber's framing of the problem death poses for modern man adds urgency to the question of individual meaning, but also forms a standard against which meaningful commitments may be measured. Both aspects of this are reflected in Weber's construction of the political vocation, and each presents different problems. Viewed from the angle of soldierly death, Weber's ethical concerns about politics also take on new depth and importance. The sheer, heroic difficulty of balancing the demands of meaningful, soldierly commitment to a cause against the competing demands of responsible leadership indicate the very high stakes involved in political life, and Weber's pessimistic evaluation of the political vocation as well.

For Weber, the paradigmatic example of one who lives *off* politics is the political official, while the one who lives *for* politics is the charismatic leader and his following.⁶⁵ In the first sense, the individual relies on political activity for her economic security, while in the second politics is a cause served through inward and external devotion.

Weber writes,

According to his proper vocation the genuine official...will not engage in politics. Rather he should engage in impartial 'administration.' This also holds for the so-called 'political' administrator, at least officially, in so far as the *raison d'état*, that is, the vital interests of the ruling order, are not in question. *Sine ira et studio*, 'without scorn or bias,' he shall administer his office. Hence he shall not do precisely what the politician, the leader as well as his following, must always and necessarily do, namely, fight.⁶⁶

Both approaches to the political vocation require inward conviction, but for the official who lives off politics, this devotion is to an ongoing administrative *process*. In this respect, the political "officialdom" displays the characteristics of having undergone the process of rationalization: the official life is willfully disassociated from all values except

⁶⁵ Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 40

⁶⁶ *ibid*, p. 53-54

for the process of administration itself. Significantly, this bears the same problems of meaning as a life dedicated to the progressive ideal of science. The activity of the official remains “political” to the extent that it is concerned with coercive force, yet no individual contribution can be expected to have lasting importance—in fact the administrator must strive to *avoid* personal impact. Indeed, Weber’s characterization of the political official reminds one precisely of Tolstoi’s Ivan Ilych: the brilliant public servant who knew how to ‘turn off’ his personal, neighborly persona in service of his professional duties, yet ultimately knew very little about how to live, or how to die.

In contrast, the one who lives *for* politics, the “politician, the leader as well as his following” occupies quite a different category. While living in the same disenchanted world as the political official and modern scientist, the life of the politician is defined by ‘taking a stand’ and choosing between competing ends. What is further striking that Weber describes the life activity of the political leader as necessarily *fighting*.⁶⁷ This necessary “fight” is somewhat clarified by considering the role of conviction in political life. For Weber, the “meaning” of political causes is dependent on the inner belief of their adherents. He states,

The *nature* of the cause in whose service the politician strives for power and makes use of power is a matter of belief. He may serve nationally or universally human goals, social and ethical goals, or goals that are cultural, worldly or religious...but some belief or other must always be *present*. Otherwise, even what seems outwardly to be the most glorious political success will be cursed—and rightly so—because they will have no more meaning and purpose than events in the animal kingdom.⁶⁸

Taking these thoughts together, one can begin to see how a life dedicated to political service falls squarely into the soldierly model of meaningful service and death. Just as the inner conviction on the part of the soldier provides the situating context for a meaningful

⁶⁷ *ibid*, p. 92

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 79

death, it is an essential component of the politician's life. Meaningful political service, like other meaningful service to the calling, is ideally undertaken in light of a commitment unto death, and an absolute choice of values. That this life is necessarily oriented towards conflict reflects the battlefield of "gods and demons" Weber ascribes to modernity, of which political causes are perhaps the most dangerous because of their necessary ties to violent, coercive force. Service to the 'tribalistic deities' of the *political* cause thus would tend to push the latent competitiveness of the political realm into hostile relations analogous to those of war, where politicians *must* fight for their cause.⁶⁹

If one considers the political landscape this implies—a polity populated chiefly by soldiers for their causes—one begins to understand Weber's baleful prediction of the coming "polar night of icy darkness and hardness."⁷⁰ Martyr-like devotion to a single cause promotes attitudes that can only be articulated through political conflict and force, rather than compromise. Under Weber's modern characterization of the meaning of death as a critical component of the meaning of life, politics can only lead to stark, inevitable conflict.⁷¹

⁶⁹ What this "fighting" looks like is a little unclear. Weber is adamant that violence is central to politics, and discusses the perils of political leadership using the metaphorical language of war and heroic leadership (See, *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 89-91 in particular.) When citing the case of revolutionaries, "fighting" seems at times to be meant literally—with all the ethical risk that entails—while at other points in his description it seems to be more of a mentality held by the political leader and his followers. In the latter case, the effects of a hostile, war like *mentality* is nonetheless alarming in the context of politics—particularly massive, plural politics in which place so much currency in consensus and compromise. One has merely to look at the corrosive effects of such hostile politics ("You're with us, or you're against us.") to see the problems such an attitude might produce; and one cannot forget that even in the case of a mere mentality of war, the stakes in Weberian politics are always very high.

⁷⁰ Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," p. 27

⁷¹ This depiction of political life brings Weber into conversation with writers such as Carl Schmitt, who also place existential conflict at the heart of all "political" relationships. However, where Weber makes this sort of existential commitment the defining attribute of politics, specifically, Weber seems to assign it a broader function of determining meaning across the many "spheres" of life. See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2007)

Oddly, this depiction of political life bears a certain resemblance to the political life of the Homeric age of heroes. Here the great deed meant to win personal immortality is replaced by absolute service to the ‘impersonal god’ of the political cause. In as much as politics is characterized by violence (even if it is *legitimate* violence), the conflict between causes necessarily manifests itself forcefully. Any attempts to mediate this force through compromising would cut against the absolute commitment required for contextualizing death in a meaningful way. Thus in both cases—the ancient and modern—an attempt to overcome the problem of death creates a problem of politics. Just as the Homeric ideal of heroes vying to overcome death was not politically expedient, a politics resting on the ideal of soldierly service is not particularly politically expedient for the modern state, either: compromise is not a part of *soldierly* devotion.

From this vantage, one can understand the importance Weber attaches to choosing political causes with extreme care: these decisions are literally decisions of life and death. This is reflected in the two contradictory ethics Weber ascribes to political decision-making: the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction.⁷² These oppose one-another according to what criteria determine individual action: the person guided by an ethic of conviction acts according to the demands of an absolute faith, whether religious or moral, not with respect to consequences. The ethic of responsibility, in contrast, is precisely concerned with the consequences of a given action.

For Weber, very few individuals have the maturity or fortitude to navigate between these ethics successfully, and the difficulty of this is heightened by the

⁷²For an argument on how these two ethics may be completely incompatible, see Wolfgang Schluchter, “Value Neutrality and the Ethic of Responsibility” in Guenther Roth and Wolfgang Schluchter, *Weber’s Vision of History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) p. 85. However, this tension does not seem fatal by my reading, but rather speaks to the essential difficulty of the political vocation.

requirements of meaningful death. For while brutal honesty about the consequences of one's political actions is ethically necessary due to the violence politics entails, such honesty requires a kind of cool, rational evaluation which undermines the unquestioning conviction required for situating death in a meaningful context. It is only in those very rare instances when responsibility and individual belief meet that meaning can be maintained in a politically responsible way. And it is only the extraordinary man who is capable of such a feat:

[W]hen a mature human being...who feels the responsibility he bears for the consequences of his own actions with his entire soul and who acts in harmony with an ethic of responsibility reaches the point where he says, "Here I stand, I can do no other." That is authentically human and cannot fail to move us...in this sense an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility are not absolute antitheses but are mutually complementary, and only when taken together do they constitute the authentic human being who *is capable* of having a "vocation for politics."⁷³

Conclusion

By orienting his concept of meaning towards death, Weber has reasserted death as a politically relevant category. As a pivotal moment of meaning and meaninglessness, death helps to form the problematic for meaning in the modern world and serves to animate the question of political conflict found in Weber in important ways. By modeling meaningful service on the idealized soldier on the field of battle, Weber has attempted to push back the effects of a totally rationalized, progressive age. This has a price. This model of meaning exacerbates the tendency for political rivalry to become political war. Aside from the act of choosing which cause one is willing to die for, it is not apparent that the meaningful life lived with soldierly devotion requires any recognition of the political—therefore *violent*—consequences of one's actions.

⁷³ Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," p. 92

This lends a particular urgency to the core themes of *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation*. In a political landscape defined by soldierly devotion, the exercise of a strenuous ethic of responsibility is of paramount importance for leaders. If individuals must commit to their causes *unto death* in order to live meaningful lives—where politics, it must always be remembered, is defined by the exercise of coercive force and violence—the clear acknowledgement of the costs one’s actions will levy on others is essential. Science, from this perspective, is reinvigorated as the means by which future soldiers learn to critically evaluate the causes they might serve. Teachers, in turn, are driven to exorcise their own value-choices from the classrooms, compelled by the very real responsibility their influence over the captive student audience may have in decisions of life and death.

Death, indisputably one of the basic facts of the human condition, is nonetheless often swept aside in accounts of politics. Whether this tendency arises from a desire to avoid thinking about an uncomfortable subject, or because of the inconvenient problems such thinking tends to raise for the beliefs we prefer to hold about politics—that our institutions are somehow immortal, while we are not, or that they are at least characterized by a degree of permanence we can call on authoritatively—death poses significant problems for how we view politics that are worth addressing. While the conclusions stemming from the connections Weber draws between death and meaning are uncomfortable, they nonetheless deserve to be taken up as serious meditations on the nature of modernity, and our responsibilities as persons seeking meaning within it.

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