

## Maximilian Carl Max Weber (1864-1920)



### ✚ The Person

Max Weber was a German sociologist and political economist, who profoundly influenced social theory, social research, and the remit of sociology itself. Weber's major works dealt with the rationalization and so-called "disenchantment" which he associated with the rise of capitalism and modernity. Weber was, along with his associate Georg Simmel, a central figure in the establishment of methodological antipositivism; presenting sociology as a non-empirical field which must study social action through resolutely subjective means. He is typically cited, with Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx, as one of the three principal architects of modern social science, and has variously been described as the most important classic thinker in the social sciences.

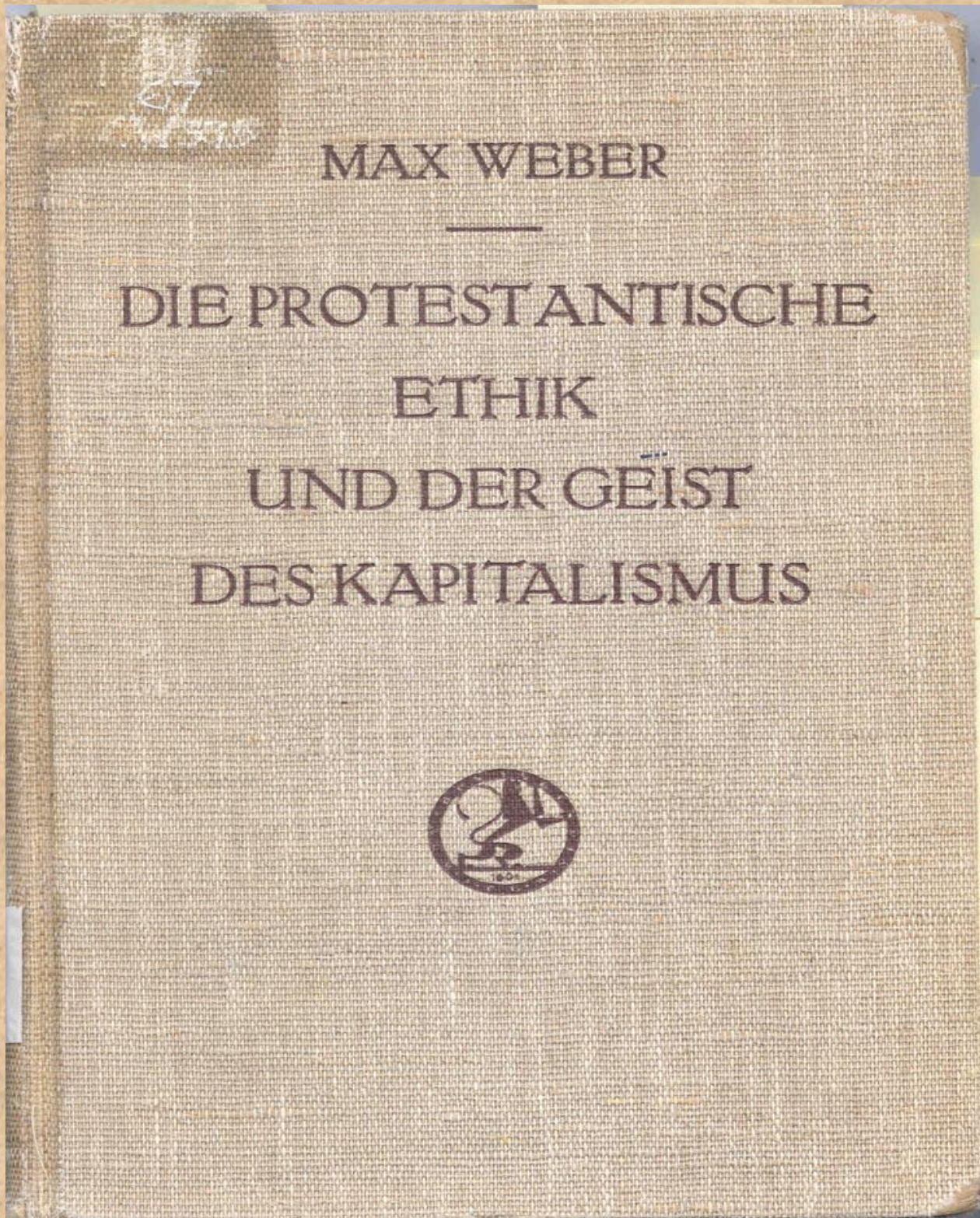
Weber is most famous for his thesis in economic sociology, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In this text, Weber argued that ascetic Protestantism particular to the Occident was one of the major "elective affinities" in determining the rise of capitalism, bureaucracy and the rational-legal nation-state. Contrary to Karl Marx, Weber did not consider the development of capitalism in purely material terms; he instead emphasised religious influences embedded into culture. The *Protestant Ethic* formed the earliest work in Weber's broader project in the sociology of religion: he would go on to examine the religion of China, the religion of India, and Ancient Judaism, with particular regard to the apparent non-development of Capitalism, and to differing forms of social stratification.

In another major work, *Politics as a Vocation*, Weber defined the state as an entity which claims a "monopoly on the legitimate use of violence", a definition that became pivotal to the study of modern Western political science. His analysis of bureaucracy in his *Economy and Society* is still central to the modern study of organizations. Weber was the first to recognize several diverse aspects of social authority, which he respectively categorized according to their charismatic, traditional, and legal forms. His analysis of bureaucracy thus noted that modern state institutions are based on a form of rational-legal authority. Weber's thought regarding the rationalizing and secularizing tendencies of modern Western society (sometimes described as the "Weber Thesis") would come to facilitate critical theory, particularly in the work of thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas.

#### 📌 The Ideal Type

The methodology of "ideal type" (*Idealtypus*) is testimony a broadly ethical intention of Weber. According to Weber's definition, "an ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view" according to which "*concrete individual* phenomena (...) are arranged into a unified analytical construct" (*Gedankenbild*); in its purely fictional nature, it is a methodological "utopia [that] cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality". Keenly aware of its fictional nature, the ideal type never seeks to claim its validity in terms of a reproduction of or a correspondence with social reality. Its validity can be ascertained only in terms of adequacy, which is too conveniently ignored by the proponents of positivism. This does not mean, however, that objectivity, limited as it is, can be gained by "weighing the various evaluations against one another and making a "statesman-like" compromise among them", which is often proposed as a solution by those sharing Weber's kind of methodological perspectivism. Such a practice, which Weber calls "syncretism," is not only impossible but also unethical, for it avoids "the practical duty to stand up for our own ideals"

⚡ This is the cover of the original German edition of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.



## ✚ The ethics of Conviction and Responsibility

Weber suggested two sets of ethical virtues that a proper political education should teach — the ethic of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) and the ethic of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*). According to the ethic of responsibility, on the one hand, an action is given meaning only as a cause of an effect, that is, only in terms of its causal relationship to the empirical world. The virtue lies in an objective understanding of the possible causal effect of an action and the calculated reorientation of the elements of an action in such a way as to achieve a desired consequence. An ethical question is thereby reduced to a question of technically correct procedure, and free action consists of choosing the correct means. By emphasizing the causality to which a free agent subscribes, in short, Weber prescribes an ethical integrity between action and consequences, instead of a Kantian emphasis on that between action and intention.

According to the ethic of conviction, on the other hand, a free agent should be able to choose autonomously not only the means, but also the end; “this concept of personality finds its ‘essence’ in the constancy of its inner relation to certain ultimate ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ of life”. In this respect, Weber’s problem arises from the recognition that the kind of rationality applied in choosing a means cannot be used in choosing an end. These two kinds of reasoning represent categorically distinct modes of rationality, a boundary further reinforced by modern value fragmentation. With no objectively ascertainable ground of choice provided, then, a free agent has to create a purpose *ex nihilo*: “ultimately life as a whole, if it is not to be permitted to run on as an event in 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”. This ultimate decision and the Kantian integrity between intention and action constitute the essence of what Weber calls an ethic of conviction.

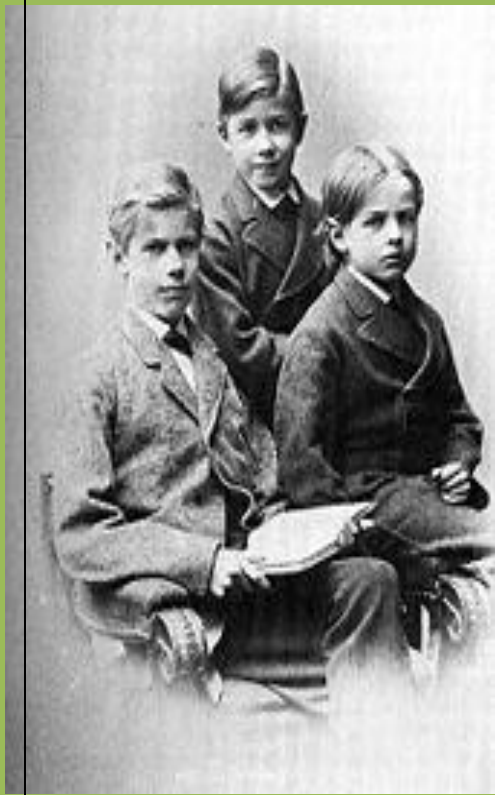
It is often held that the gulf between these two types of ethic is unbridgeable for Weber. Demanding an unmitigated integrity between one’s ultimate value and political action, that is to say, the *deontological* ethic of conviction cannot be reconciled with that of responsibility which is *consequentialist* in essence. In fact, Weber himself admitted the “abysmal contrast” that separates the two. This frank admission, nevertheless, cannot be taken to mean that he privileged the latter over the former as far as political education is concerned.

Weber clearly understood the deep tension between consequentialism and deontology, but he still insisted that they should be forcefully brought together. The former recognition only lends urgency to the latter agenda. Resolving this analytical inconsistency in terms of certain “ethical decrees” did not interest Weber at all. Instead, he sought for a moral character that can produce this “combination” with a sheer force of will. He called such a character a “politician with a sense of vocation”

*(Berufspolitiker)* who combines a passionate conviction in supra-mundane ideals that politics has to serve and a sober rational calculation of its realizability in this mundane world. Weber thus concluded: “the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility are not absolute opposites. They are complementary to one another, and only in combination do they produce the true human being who is *capable* of having a ‘vocation for politics’”.

In the end, Weber's ethical project is not about formal analysis of moral maxims, nor is it about substantive virtues that reflect some kind of ontic telos. It is too formal to be an Aristotelean virtue ethics, and it is too concerned with moral character to be a Kantian deontology narrowly understood. The goal of Weber's ethical project, rather, aims at cultivating a character who can willfully bring together these conflicting formal virtues to create what he calls “total personality” (*Gesamtpersönlichkeit*). It culminates in an ethical characterology or philosophical anthropology in which passion and reason are properly ordered by sheer force of individual volition. In this light, Weber's political virtue resides not simply in a subjective intensity of value commitment nor in a detached intellectual integrity, but in their willful combination in a unified soul.

Max Weber and his brothers, Alfred and Karl in 1879



Max Weber captured in his wife Marianne Weber's company by 1894



Here is Weber in 1917, three years before his death in 1920. He was active during the time of WW1 & his participation to the German politics is nowadays a controversial subject

