Varieties of Moral Beliefs in the Sociology of Religion

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Abstract
The article analyses the distinction in Weber’s writings between conviction ethics and other types of ethics. Schluchter has situated this distinction in a sociological manner rather than religious meanings, as that between heroic (elite) ethics and mass religiosity. I argue that an ethic of conviction, in the Sociology of Religion, belongs to Weber’s analysis of both ethical and exemplary prophecy; his analysis of priests and laity tends to obscure this point. Evil is overcome by an effort of inner conviction not priestly ritual. Contra Schluchter, ethical norms are not internalized and routinized into the convention of duty. Instead ethics are demonstrated by exemplary action of heroic individuals as religious virtuosi.

The second half of the article pursues the difference between ethical sanctification through institutional grace, on one hand, and a virtuoso conviction ethic, on the other. The former is attained by duty, the latter through the will of the individual and the belief that salvation is attained through faith alone. One important conclusion is that conviction ethic, prominently displayed in Politik als Beruf, is an outcome of a religious conviction ethics. Faith is pursued through will and exemplary deeds and action. This places the argument on Nietzschean rather than Kantian grounds. In choosing to act in an exemplary way out of conviction, the consequences of actions and one’s responsibility for them do not come into consideration. This renders conviction ethics consequential in their own right. Nietzschean moral autonomy puts the individual at moral risk. Weber demanded of these heroic moments intellectual honesty in place of self-deception. In rising to these moments, conviction ethics offer dignity to the modern individual.

Keywords: conviction ethics, exemplary ethics, religious ethics, Weber on ethics.

Why do I focus on the Sociology of Religion?
In his comprehensive analysis of Weber’s distinction between an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility, Wolfgang Schluchter reconstructs the distinction’s theoretical context and career. He carefully follows both the terminological and the substantive changes from the Inaugural Lecture at Freiburg to the ‘Politics as a Vocation’. Before discussing the different types of ethics and introducing
a typology, he adds that ‘in the sociology of religion Weber used the concept of an ethic of conviction mostly to denote a specific type of ethic. The ethic of responsibility does not show up in this context at all’ (Schluchter 1996: 62). The typology is connected to three fundamental distinctions: between heroic and everyday ethics, between ethical and cultural (especially political) values, and between ethics and happiness. Schluchter claims, however, that the first distinction is of subordinate importance for the typology. I would like to show that, as a consequence, a subcategory of the ethic of conviction that we can reconstruct from the ‘Sociology of Religion’ chapter of Economy and Society is missing from his typology.

Schluchter’s argument is based on the ‘Introduction’ to the comparative essays on the economic ethics of the world religions first published in 1915 (Weber 1972: 237-75): Weber took up ‘the distinction between heroic and everyday ethics’, but he ‘systematically transformed these concepts into the ethics or religiosity of virtuosi and of the masses’. In the 1920 edition, Schluchter adds, Weber supplemented the text with a commentary, where he ‘pointed to the intrinsic connection between heroism and virtuosity and to the fact that one has to remove from the concept of virtuosity’ any evaluative—especially any Nietzschean—connotation (Schluchter 1996: 62 n. 285). Although these categories enable us to distinguish between outstanding and average religious or ethical actions, they defy easy interpretation from a sociological viewpoint. Any social group can produce what are called virtuosi here, and the so-called masses cannot be bound to a socially or economically well-defined group. According to Schluchter, Weber refers here to general cultural differences, but ‘this cultural stratification is relatively independent of a specific type of ethic. For this reason, the distinction between virtuosi and the masses remains of subordinate importance for the typology’ (Schluchter 1996: 63).

As to the two versions of the ‘Introduction’, Schluchter is right. But we cannot say this about the ‘Sociology of Religion’ chapter of Economy and Society. Weber wrote this chapter in 1915, and here we cannot claim that the second distinction systematically replaced the first. Heroes are mentioned in both the religious and ethical context (although the expression ‘heroic ethic’ does not occur). ‘Everyday ethic’ and ‘everyday religiosity’ still appear together with the ethic or religiosity of the masses, and both are contrasted with ‘virtuous performances’. Concerning this chapter we cannot even claim that Weber connects the difference between moral and religious beliefs
only to cultural stratification. Here he dedicates a separate paragraph to the ethical or religious conception of individual social groups, status groups, or classes (Weber 1978: 468-518; 1976: 285-314). The contrast between virtuosi and masses does not rest on different social or economic characteristics, yet it can be connected to specific ethical types. A conviction ethic connected to virtuous performances emerges from this text. This ethic contains the threads leading to Nietzsche.

Within religious ethics two undifferentiated strands of the ethic of conviction appear. Both have to do with the fact that originally prophecy created inner coherence in ethics. Weber distinguished between ethical and exemplary prophecy. I will reconstruct the specific type of conviction ethic rooted in exemplary prophecy that I designate *exemplary ethics* in analogy to exemplary prophecy. I will begin by discussing Weber’s considerations that led me to this stage.

*Magic, religion, and ethics*

In Part II of the ‘Sociology of Religion’ Weber suggests that religious ethics ‘really begin with…purely magical norms of conduct’ (Weber 1978: 432; 1976: 264). Although he uses the expression ‘magical ethic’, the antecedent arguments and the conceptual distinctions introduced elsewhere support Schluchter’s claim that ‘a magical “ethic” is not an ethic in the strict sense of the word’ (Schluchter 1996: 70). On careful reading we are even surprised that Weber speaks at all about magical ethics.

At the end of Part I Weber introduced a conceptual distinction between magic and religion. Whenever ‘a plurality of settled communities with established local gods expanded the area of the political association’, the usual result was that the local gods were placed into the same pantheon. Here, ‘those deities that evinced the greatest regularity in their behavior, namely the gods of heaven and the stars, had a chance to achieve primacy’ (Weber 1978: 416-17; 1976: 255-56). In the case of these gods, having no (or a comparatively minor) role in everyday life, (we know this already from Part II) the character of the relation to the gods changes: while, according to an earlier naturalist conception, a god, a spirit or a demon may be coerced into man’s service by anyone holding the required charisma and using the proper means for such an end, the remote gods are rather honoured or served. Occasionally they can be addressed in prayer; this
means that the religious activity is already divine worship. A fundamental difference is starting to emerge: god is no longer conceived as a manifestation of some power, but as a lord who can be propitiated with sacrifices. He can fail or refuse cooperation at his pleasure, but he cannot be compelled with magical devices.

The argument continues by contrasting priests and magicians. The systematic and distinctively religious ethic appears here for the first time as a part of the *doctrine (Lehre)*, a defining characteristic of priesthood. It appears from the very beginning in contrast to magic. So far, we have learned that ethics were not mentioned in the context of magic, and that religious ethic emerging in priestly doctrine takes a principled stand against magic. Given these antecedents, the sudden appearance a few pages later of the concept of *magical ethic* is quite surprising.

It is all the more surprising as Weber discusses the priest’s role throughout Part II, although he formulated the direction of the continuation earlier at the end of point 2. After emphasizing that not every priesthood developed a religious ethic, he added that such developments ‘generally presupposed the operation of one or both of two forces outside the priesthood: *prophets*…and the *laity*. He will return to this point later. But before doing so, he remarks on ‘some typical trends of religious evolution which are set in motion by the existence of vested interests of priesthood in a cult’ (Weber 1978: 427; 1976: 260-61).

Thus, the text after the second point is digressive. Before discussing the role of prophets (Part III) and Laymen Associations (Part IV), he examines the role of priests. Right at the beginning, he finds a difference between magicians and priests that he did not mention earlier: while the magician himself is responsible, if he fails in influencing a god or a demon by entreaty or compulsion, the priest can pass that responsibility onto god. His entreaty was ineffective, because god was not sufficiently powerful. To be sure, the passing of responsibility can be hazardous, since it diminishes the priest’s prestige if it becomes common knowledge that the god he serves is insufficiently powerful. But he can defend the god against this charge, if he finds ‘ways of interpreting failures in such a manner that the responsibility falls, not upon the god, but upon the behavior of the god’s worshippers’. They did not honour their god sufficiently, or they neglected him in favour of other gods. It can happen, of course, that as a result of ever renewed failure the faithful join the worship of a more powerful god, unless the priest succeeds in
explaining ‘the wayward conduct of the old god in such a way that his prestige might not dwindle and might even be enhanced’. But something additional is required here, for not only the behaviour of men turns out to be inadequate, but it also turns out that god acts correctly or beneficially, even if he chastises the faithful with his wrath. In other words, ‘god may possess ethical qualities’ (Weber 1978: 428-29; 1976: 261-62), he or she might be categorized from an ethical point of view. The new kind of categorization, the activity’s evaluation is in principled contrast with magic that judges words and deeds from the viewpoint of success.

Accordingly, the character of the relation between men and god (again) changes: an ethical bond is also established between them. And since not only man, but also god has duties, namely to protect the order of the world, man cannot only treat the gods, but by his ethical behaviour and by respecting the divine order he can also bring about the goodwill of the gods. At this point the two primordial methods of influencing supernatural powers are completed with a third one. Besides subjecting gods to human purposes by means of magic and thus win their cooperation, man’s third choice is to bring about the god’s goodwill by ethical conduct. He regards god no longer as a capricious lord, but as the guarantor of an order that he created.

At this point Weber has a surprise in store for us. He starts to speak about magical ethics. He adds the following to what has been said: ‘To be sure, religious ethics do not really begin with this view’, but with the ‘purely magical norms of conduct, the infraction of which was regarded as a religious abomination’ subject to sanctions (Weber 1978: 432; 1976: 264). But from the way in which he develops his reasoning it seems as if he mentioned this only for the sake of symmetry.

As soon as Weber returns to the main line of reasoning, it turns out that if we speak about religion this no longer plays any role.

Whenever the belief in spirits became rationalized into belief in gods…the magical ethic of the spirit belief underwent a transformation too. This reorientation developed through the notion that whoever flouted divinely appointed norms would be overtaken by the ethical displeasure of the god who had these norms under his special care.

This idea, says Weber

forms a religious ethic out of the magical prescriptions which operate only with the notion of evil magic. Henceforth, transgression against the will of god is an ethical sin which burdens the conscience, quite apart from its direct results (Weber 1978: 437; 1976: 267).
Now, if a religious ethic emerges from magical prescription only if opposition to god’s will counts as such a sin that burdens conscience independently of consequences, then how must we understand Weber’s suggestion that a religious ethic begins with purely magical norms of conduct? Anyone who violates the magic prescriptions must suffer the consequences lest magic does evil to all members of the community: his act counts as dreadful or even as sacrilege, but not as an ethical offence that burdens conscience!

We have to keep in mind that this part of the text is a digression. Weber examines here only the role of priests, while earlier he has insisted that generally, in the emergence of religious ethic, forces outside of the priesthood, such as prophets and lay persons, also played a part. On the other hand, the religious ethic that appeared as an element characterizing the priesthood’s doctrine did not begin with behaviour norms magically motivated. Quite the contrary, its first step was that the priests opposed the success oriented magic: in case of failure they evaded responsibility by judging actions not from the viewpoint of success, but from an ethical viewpoint. God’s anger was attributed to the sins of the people and was due punishment. The next step was taken by the prophets and they burdened conscience with sin.

Prophecy

A short transition precedes Part III, which is on the prophets and their doctrine. Weber suggests here that, even in cases of ethical offences weighing on the conscience, independent of immediate consequences there remains a residue from the magical view about the untoward consequences of sins or the infraction of commands. This is one common characteristic of a religious ethic and a magical ethic. Another is that both are ‘frequently composed of a complex of heterogeneous prescriptions and prohibitions derived from the most diverse motives and occasions’ (Weber 1978: 437; 1976: 267). Finally, both regard sin as a manifestation of an evil or diabolical power that has a hold on man. Even the most sophisticated priestly doctrine cannot burden conscience with sin understood this way. Man’s actions are not governed by his conscience, rather it is the evil one who acts in man contrary to god’s will.

These heterogeneous elements of magical origin are framed into a systematized religious ethics by the prophet who transforms obeying god’s commands into an internalized ethical demand. He does not prescribe what has to be done, he communicates it as an inner
conviction. He is such an exceptional man that he can withstand evil relying only on his own power; he obeys only god. Just as the magician, he has personal charisma, and a personal call from god for proclaiming the doctrines. They are of a great variety, but they always ascribe a unified meaning to life and the world, to the social and natural events. They hold out the promise that whoever regulates his behaviour in accordance with the doctrines can liberate himself from evil and attain salvation. The most important elements of a religious conviction ethic already appear here. Goodness as opposed to evil is envisaged as a capacity for holiness, and for consistent behaviour. Freedom from evil and the hope for salvation suggest an irrational yearning to be good for its own sake. From here, an

almost infinite series of the most diverse conceptions, crossed again and again by purely magical notions, leads to the sublimation of piety as the enduring basis of a specific conduct of life, by virtue of the continuous motivation it engenders (Weber 1978: 438; 1976: 267).

Not every religious ethic went through the entire length of the road culminating in these conceptions. But if a religious ethic traversed the entire length, it was prophecy rather than priestly doctrine that played the most important role on this road.

In Part III, dealing with prophets, Weber distinguishes two fundamental types of prophecy. ‘The prophet may be primarily’, as in the case of Zoroaster and Muhammad, ‘an instrument for the proclamation of a god and his will.’ He

has received a commission from god, he demands obedience as an ethical duty. This type we shall term the ‘ethical prophet’. On the other hand, the prophet may be an exemplary man who, by his personal example, demonstrates to others the way to religious salvation, as in the case of Buddha.

Weber’s designation ‘for this second type is that of the “exemplary prophet”’ (Weber 1978: 447-48; 1976: 273; Weber’s italics). The prophetic revelation in both types involves a unified worldview that can be reached by a conscious viewpoint in the face of life’s problems and is supported by a meaningful and coherent attitude concerning these problems. Both ethical and exemplary prophecy bring inner coherence to ethics and enable reasoning about what to do in the world to be derived from a framework of meaning. Still, they are fundamentally different. For it is not irrelevant whether the prophet proclaims inner coherence or whether he exemplifies what is to be done.

The difference becomes noticeable when the prophetic requirements become part of everyday routine. The priest is a technician of
routine cults, while the ethical and exemplary prophet is a layman. In exercising his profession the priest is also in contact with laymen, and he must meet the needs of the laity. Accordingly, preaching and pastoral care evolved in the ethical type of congregational religion. Both are products of prophetically revealed religion. Preaching is only effective if it is based on outstanding personal achievement and it unfolds its power most strongly in periods of prophetic excitation. Pastoral care is effective in the workday world where preaching declines to an almost complete lack of influence upon the conduct of daily life. Both preaching and pastoral care are needed, since practical responsibilities compel the priesthood to adopt a position toward the numerous problems which had not been settled in the revelation. For easier orientation, the priesthood tried to systematize the casuistical treatment of ethical commandments and religious truth. This transformed the substantive demands into prescriptions of a casuistical and more rational character, in contrast to the prophetic ethics. But at the same time it brought about the loss of that unity which the prophet had introduced into the ethics: the derivation of an ought (i.e., what is to be done in a given situation) out of a distinctive ‘meaningful’ relation.

Thus, the transformation of the prophet’s requirements into everyday demands means the loss of that inner coherence that the prophet proclaimed: what is to be done can be deduced only mechanically, from positive injunctions and casuistry prepared for the laity, but not from a meaningful relation. ‘For this reason,’ adds Weber ‘the preoccupation of religion with an ethics of ultimate ends had necessarily to undergo a recession’ (Weber 1978: 465-66; 1976: 284).

Matters are different with personal exemplary behaviour. While the effect of outstanding achievement declines in the routine of everyday life, the very moment of such achievement’s occurrence rises above the everyday. Since people widely differ in their religious ability, such an outstanding moment can reoccur. Someone can appear at any time and demonstrate, by his personal example, the way to salvation. The extraordinary deed cannot be required of everyone, but is exemplary for persons who want to be saved. While relegating into the background what is not in the service of salvation, a virtuoso achievement can restore religiosity’s characteristic as conviction ethics, even if the prophetic demands become everyday demands. The example breaks the stereotype of individual norms, and it shows how to live and act exclusively guided by a holy conviction.
Summarizing what has been said so far: both types of prophecy are intended to organize life on the basis of ultimate ethical principles. With the transformation of prophetic requirements into everyday demands religiosity’s characteristic as conviction ethics is relegated to the background. Schluchter describes this characteristic as follows:

- ethical norms are separated from legal norms. Moreover, ethical norms are systematized and internalized. Obligatory action can now become action done out of a sense of duty… Whereas convention and law previously ruled the day, conviction now enters the picture.

According to Schluchter, a conviction replacing convention and law ‘is the central aspect’ of Weber’s analysis ‘in the comparative sociology of religion’ (Schluchter 1996: 71). This is indeed a central aspect for only one type of conviction ethic. But we can reconstruct another type from the chapter on ‘Sociology of Religion’: the exemplary ethic related to the achievements of virtuosi. Its defining characteristic is that the behaviour of a person determined by his conviction becomes manifest in individual actions. Not only convention and law, but all norms are relegated to the background. What remains in the foreground is the inner conviction governing that person. This conviction is independent from an internalized sense of duty. The exemplary deed which takes place in extraordinary moments, and rises above the everyday, is not motivated by a sense of duty and it does not create duty.

*Virtuosity and exemplary conduct*

In the sections on the different ways of salvation and its influence on the conduct of life, Weber distinguishes between two cases: salvation is the individual’s own accomplishment or his own labours are inadequate for salvation. In the second case, salvation is accessible only as a result of a human or divine saviour’s achievement. Acts of virtuosi are connected to both, but they do not always have import in the sense of demonstrating an ethical example.

Weber lists the deeds permitting the individual’s achievement of his own salvation under three different headings: purely ritual activity, good works, and self-perfection (a methodology of salvation). Their ethical significance varies in accordance with the influence they exert on the conduct of life.

Pure ritualism and magic do not have radically different effects. A religion of salvation, however, says Weber ‘may systematize the
purely formal and specific activities of ritual into a devotion with a distinctive religious mood (Andacht). This means that ‘the possession of an essentially ephemeral subjective state is striven after and this subjective state...has often only a negligible effect on behaviour once the ceremony is over’ (Weber 1978: 530; 1976: 328-29).

The influence of good works and social achievements can be felt in everyday life, but the individual deeds have ethical significance only within the context of an ethics of just retribution rewarding good and punishing evil. Good works become significant only if the individual action is understood as a symptom and expression of the total ethical personality. This could imply that a total personality pattern with positive qualifications, oriented to whatever religion demands may be acquired by training in goodness. Of primary importance in this training is the effort expended upon oneself, while the social or ethical quality of actions has only a secondary significance. This leads to the third possibility. Since good works with social orientation are now merely instruments of self-perfection, they become a methodology of salvation.

As long as methodical techniques stressed ethical conduct based on religious sentiment, one result was the overcoming of some desires and emotions of raw human nature. Yet, in every religion based on a systematic procedure of sanctification it was found that people differ widely in their religious capacities. Some do not have sufficient willpower for conquering their desires and base emotions, and only a few are capable of permanently maintaining the religious mood that assures the lasting certainty of grace. This is accessible only to the virtuosi. Religious virtuosity, however, ‘always leads to a radical ethico-religious critique of the relationship to society, the conventional virtues of which are inevitably unheroic and utilitarian’. According to this critique, not only is it the case that the natural virtues within the world do not guarantee salvation, but in fact they place salvation in peril ‘by producing illusions as to which alone is indispensable’. They produce, for example, illusions about the fulfilment of common obligations, although the average religious person meets them ‘at the expense of the uniquely necessary concentration on active achievements leading to salvation’ (Weber 1978: 542; 1976: 328-29). Those who were able to concentrate on such achievements ‘became a distinctive religious “status group” within the community of the faithful’ and they were acting only on their own salvation (Weber 1978: 539; 1976: 327). To be brief—the methodology of salvation always remains an ethic of virtuosi, but only
for persons possessing religious qualifications. It judges everyday actions according to radical principles; it may dismiss such actions without influencing them.

Here we find a glimmer of a *sui generis* virtuous religious conviction ethics. The virtuoso working methodically on his own salvation is led by his own holy conviction that relegates to the background not only law and convention, but also the ethical qualification of ordinary actions. This conviction cannot be connected to an interiorized sense of duty replacing law and convention: although the virtuoso achievement is inner directed, it is led by will and not by feelings of duty. While it is also true that the virtuoso shows the road to salvation by his own example, this has a very restricted ethical significance. For persons who were not given to reach the qualities necessary for virtuoso achievements could not follow the example, even if they wanted to enter the path of salvation.

The situation is different if salvation is not our own accomplishment, but is the result of the human or divine saviour’s achievements. From an ethical viewpoint, two among the many historical forms of this case are significant: salvation through institutional grace and salvation through faith alone.

If salvation supervenes by virtue of the grace which is distributed by some institutional organization, then it is universal for those who belong to the institution, and not only accessible to the religious virtuosi. From an ethical viewpoint this is problematical, for institutional grace tends to make obedience a cardinal virtue and a precondition of salvation. The resulting pattern of conduct is not systematization from within, it is not inner-directed, but it is directed by others, from a center outside of the self. As a consequence, religiosity’s conviction ethical characteristic recedes into the background. The ultimate religious value is neither ethical obligation nor ethical virtuosity, but pure obedience to the institution.

However, salvation may be linked with faith, and in this case neither religiosity’s conviction ethical character nor the possibility of salvation is endangered. Religious belief is closer to a feeling than an intellectual acceptance, it is a conviction rather than an insight, and religiosity based on faith alone ‘is a charisma that must be maintained by exercise of the believer’s will’ (Weber 1978: 572; 1976: 346). Although Weber wrote this only about Christian belief in providence, it is easy to see that if religiosity’s conviction ethical character is based on a saviour’s example, then the religion of belief can dispense with providence.

While originally faith implied acceptance of doctrines or certain dogmas, from a religious viewpoint the essential element is not such an acceptance, rather it is a declaration of confidence in and dedication to the person who preaches them. ‘The faith which was “accounted to Abraham to righteousness”’, says Weber ‘was no intellectual assertion of dogmas, but a reliance upon the promises of God’ (Weber 1978: 566; 1976: 342). To be sure, the attitude characteristic of religions of unlimited trust in god may produce various forms, according to which its influence on the faithful’s way of life varies as well, and every ‘religion of belief assumes the existence of a personal god, as well as of his intermediaries and prophets, in whose favor there must be a renunciation of self-righteousness and individual knowledge at some point or other’ (Weber 1978: 568; 1976: 344). Thus, unconditional trust is the faithful’s attitude toward god and his intermediaries.

We must not confuse what unconditional trust implies in two different cases. In the case of following doctrines, the attitude of trust implies that the faithful does not inquire into the consequences of his acts. He acts on the grounds of his pure or holy conviction, and he leaves to god the consequences of his action: god will arrange everything. A different situation arises when he follows an example; in this case he need not have faith in divine providence. If he regards the deeds bringing salvation as examples (as deeds of the human or divine saviour who shows the road to salvation to others by his own example), then his unconditional trust in god or his human intermediary is sufficient. In this case, religiosity’s conviction ethical character is based on demonstrating a personal example. And this no longer has limited ethical significance, for the example can be followed by anyone who wants to be saved.

To be brief, in the ‘Sociology of Religion’ we find the outline of a sui generis type of religious conviction ethics that attaches to outstanding and exemplary deeds. I will try to reconstruct the conceptually pure type of this ethic which should uncover the threads leading to Nietzsche.

**Exemplary ethics**

To save us from confusion, it may be useful to mention that so far I have talked about three types of conviction ethics: what Weber elsewhere called ‘conviction ethics’ and distinguished from the ethics of responsibility; what Schluchter called ‘religious conviction ethics’ as distinct from ‘non-religious conviction ethics’; and, finally, what can
be discovered in the chapter on ‘Sociology of Religion’ and is rooted in outstanding and exemplary deeds (here, religious deeds). This is what I call exemplary ethics.

It must be emphasized that I did not discover the traces of this type of ethics. Schluchter discusses the distinction between heroic and everyday ethics in earlier texts and letters, but from the viewpoint of a typology of ethics he attributes to it a subordinate role. He refers to an early letter by Weber stating that

one can divide all ‘ethics’, regardless of their substantive contents, into two large groups. One set makes demands of principle on human beings, which they are generally not able to meet, except at the great high points of their lives. They give direction to their pursuits as destinations on an unreachable horizon. These are ‘heroic ethics’. The other set contents itself with the acceptance of common human ‘nature’ as the maximum limit of demands. These are ‘everyday or average ethics’ (Durchschnittsethik, [italics original]) (Baumgarten 1964: 646; quoted by Schluchter 1996: 58).

The distinction between heroic and average ethics rests here on the level of demands that are raised to the acting person. Granted, this is not essential in Weber’s later understanding of ethics. Nevertheless, what emerges here is most important: there are among us human beings (regardless of whether we call them heroes or virtuosi) who are capable of outstanding achievement. The extraordinary moments that give rise to these outstanding deeds are moments of exemplary value in the sense that they show the way that must be followed. I would even venture to add that to the end of his life this insight had a continuing import in Weber’s understanding of ethics. Support for this assessment can be found in what he writes in ‘Politics as a Profession’ about that immensely moving moment when someone

who feels with his whole soul the responsibility he bears for the real consequences of his action, and who acts on the basis of an ethics of responsibility, says at some point, ‘Here I stand, I can do no other’. That is something genuinely human and profoundly moving. For it must be possible for each of us to find ourselves in such a situation at some point, if we are not inwardly dead (Weber 1994: 367-68; 1992: 250).

So far, I have argued that in the ‘Sociology of Religion’ chapter there is still a level of conviction ethics that is grounded on demonstrating personal example. Since this is relegated to the background in the later non-religious conviction ethics and its traces are rare, is it really important to consider it a separate type? It is important. For it permits us to take (à la Weber) a pure type as a point of departure,
and then show that although the exemplary ethics is very consequential conviction ethics, its non-religious version could lead to unwarranted consequences.

There is a non-negligible difference between religious and non-religious conviction ethics. To be sure, even in the case of religion, the conviction ethics does not suggest norms that have concrete content, but it offers maxims and principles of actions that are useful for deducing what must be done in concrete situations. Yet, the faithful can become aware of the content of these maxims: ‘to bring about a meaningful total relationship of the pattern of life to the goal of religious salvation’ (Weber 1978: 578; 1976: 349). The non-religious conviction ethics does not offer such an anchor. And this could become disturbing in case the principle governing the action does not create an unambiguous and self-evident duty. Cases of demonstrating personal example are always of this sort. Will governs the person demonstrating an example. An outstanding deed providing the example in extraordinary moments is not an action done from duty, and it does not create a duty.

**Will and extraordinary moment**— these are the two threads that permit me to recognize Nietzsche’s traces.\(^1\) Although the word ‘conviction ethics’ (Gesinnungsethik) refers to Kant, and Weber only refers to Kant, the will that does not engender a duty raises a suspicion, at least among imperfect beings ‘affected by needs and sensible motives’ as are human beings, for whom ‘the law has the form of an imperative’ commanding categorically (Kant 1993: 32). Looseness may be permissible in religious conviction ethics: the will governing the model providing person may not ground a duty, since the faithful follows the human or divine saviour’s example; in this case there is no need to take into account the imperfection of man’s will. (Following a prophet’s or virtuoso’s example is, of course, questionable.) In non-religious conviction ethics this leads to grave consequences. The will that does not ground any duty belongs, according to Kant, in the realm of wilful heteronomy and is contrary to the

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1. I am speaking about ‘traces’ in the same sense as Wilhelm Hennis in his outstanding essay ‘Die Spuren Nietzsches im Werk Max Webers’. Hennis suggests that although there are but few references to Nietzsche, we become aware of him as the intended target of Weber’s argument (Hennis 1987: 175-76). The here analyzed ‘exemplary ethics’ can be regarded as a further illustration of Hennis’ claim that the traces of Nietzsche are most explicit in the ‘Introduction’ to the comparative essays on the economic ethics of world religions and in the chapter on the ‘Sociology of Religion’ in Economy and Society (Hennis 1987: 179-80).
will’s autonomy. Its maxim could never be in the form of general legislation, and is contrary to the principle of pure practical reason, even if the action it engenders is occasionally consistent with the moral law. Thus Kant. Yet, according to Nietzsche, ‘the good old Kant’ had no other choice, for ‘he helped himself to (erschlichen) the “thing in itself”, and...was punished for this when the “categorical imperative” crept into (beschlichen) his heart’ (Nietzsche 2001: 188).

Nietzsche’s objection² amounts to the charge that Kant duplicates reality into a world that we can reach, but is valueless from a moral viewpoint, and an inaccessible self-sufficient world that is the source of all value. According to Nietzsche, the valuation serving as the ground of the distinctions is presented as absolute, but in reality it is bound to the limited perspective of a historical period. There is no unique, ultimate, and absolute valuation perspective. In every situation there is a valuation that is at work from our own perspective, and we either accept it or criticize it. If this is the case, then we must reach an absurd consequence that we are not bound to morality, for every value can only have validity for a given person, even after critical examination and a transvaluation of all values. We can escape this absurd consequence, if the acting person in an extraordinary moment of his life is capable of thinking and still willing what he now does, as if it had happened and will happen innumerable times. Provided that he says ‘yes’ to the eternal recurrence of his deed, he is qualified to create once and for all times a moral standard for his deed, even if an eternal moral world order does not exist. For in the moment when he is a yea-sayer, when he calls god the demon lurking behind him,³ the eternal return will be the perspective of his deed’s evaluation.

It is, of course, a further question whether the principle of the eternal return is sufficient for formulating an imperative ‘whatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return’ (Deleuze 1983: 68) replacing Kant’s categorical imperative.

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2. I rely here on the Hungarian study of Tamás Ullmann (2004).
3. ‘What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again...everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence... The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!” Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine”’ (Nietzsche 2001: 194).
I cannot pursue this thread, for it would lead us too far. Sufficient for my purpose is the insight that the ‘yes’ to the demon implies two claims. It says ‘yes, this is how I wanted it’. Whoever says this is no longer a plaything of the gods: he retakes his fate from the gods. In this sense, ‘this is how I wanted it’ is, at the same time, ‘this is how I myself wanted it’. Secondly, in the same moment as he says this, the perspective changes: this moment (also) remains forever with all details. But this is not just any moment. Rather it is an extraordinary moment in his life towering above the average of everyday. And it remains so in every detail: even afterwards it cannot be fitted in the everyday, it cannot be dulled by later consequences, it cannot be reinterpreted, it remains henceforth forever a moment towering above the everyday, a moment of exemplary value.

In this pure type it can be easily seen why the ethics of responsibility is not contrasted with exemplary ethics. Concerning the latter type of ethics the basic question, whether the intrinsic value of ethical conduct, the ‘pure will’ or the ‘conviction’, is sufficient for its justification, does not even arise. The deed is not judged relative to its consequences, for they simply do not count. The acting person is rendered free from everything in his life’s outstanding moment, and he says: I do this, for this is what I want. He does not act so, as to perform god’s will; nor does he act, because there is a moral world order; nor because there are unconditional and unquestionable commands and values; and not even because he is an extraordinary human being who performs this particular action. There is nothing or nothing counts grounding or justifying the action. In the extraordinary and exemplary moment that will forever remain extraordinary, when the outstanding deed is engendered, there is only the person’s action and pure will or conviction governing him. Clearly, whoever is so completely self-reliant can easily become a victim of self-deception, but consideration of the consequences does not affect this matter. Only intellectual honesty can save him: if he does not want to deceive anyone, not even himself, then he has set his foot on the field of morality.


5. ‘I will not deceive, not even myself; and with that we stand on moral ground’ (Nietzsche 2001: 201; italics original). Here I must add that intellectual honesty also plays a role in Weber’s thought: this is one of the concepts that permit us to uncover the traces leading to Nietzsche.
We can hardly conceive of a more consequential conviction ethics. It can be faulted precisely because it is so consequential. Its significance is restricted to the extraordinary moments, while in the everyday it is alien to life. This is problematical even in the case of religious conviction ethics. As the doctrine of predestined grace ‘continued to flow into the routine of everyday living and into the religion of the masses, its dour bleakness became more and more intolerable’. The determinism of predestination was and has remained

an instrument for the greatest possible systematization and centralization of the Gesinnungsethik. The ‘total personality’, as we would say today, has been provided with the accent of eternal value by ‘God’s election’, and not by any individual action of the person in question. There is a non-religious counterpart of this religious evaluation, one based on a mundane determinism. It is that distinctive type of ‘guilt’ and, so to speak, godless feeling of sin which characterizes modern secular man... Not that he has done a particular deed, but that by virtue of his unalterable qualities, acquired without his cooperation, he ‘is’ such that he could commit the deed (Weber 1978: 575-76; 1976: 348).

In short, the very consequential type of conviction ethics is alien to life. Moreover, it is not at all certain whether in non-religious contexts, when eternal salvation is not at issue, it is worthwhile to pay its cost.

To be sure, not only religion has its virtuosi. There are men among us who are capable of outstanding moral deeds, and the extraordinary moments when such deeds are brought about are undeniably of exemplary value. But they are not exemplary in the sense in which we talk about the exemplary value of religious achievements. The deeds of the divine or human saviour, or prophet, show how we must live in this world in order to gain eternal salvation in the other world. But can we say about the moral virtuoso’s achievement that it shows a way to life? In exactly what sense has the moral achievement exemplary value? What, if anything, follows from it concerning those situations when moral deeds have significance in our life in this world?

From what has been said so far it can be seen that this type of consequential conviction ethics in its non-religious alternative raises hard questions. Weber did not discuss explicitly these questions. What he thought about them can be gleaned from the fact that he differentiated the non-religious conviction ethics from the ethics of responsibility. Secondly, that he emphasized in life’s inner-worldly domain (e.g., in politics) the role of responsibility ethics. It carries weight that in later writings the type bearing Nietzsche’s traces is
relegated to the background, and is replaced by a Kantian conviction ethics (which is in itself insufficient: it is always completed with, or contrasted to an ethics of responsibility). But the primary evidence is that the extreme consequential type has never, not even in the last studies, completely disappeared from Weber’s work.

All this provides evidence that Weber’s conception of ethics is at variance with Kant’s views. Or, as Schluchter suggests, this ‘allows us to at least indirectly infer Weber’s critical position on Kant’ (Schluchter 1996: 87). However, the last mentioned evidence does not occur in Schluchter’s analysis. He came to the same conclusion from his understanding of Weber’s responsibility ethics as a separate type ‘as a viable ethical position for himself’ (Schluchter 1996: 87). This is indeed an indirect critique of Kant, for it implies the claim that following the Kantian model of conviction ethics is insufficient in our life. The emergence of exemplary ethics in the last writings sheds light on Weber’s judgment about the significance of heroism in the modern world that is without gods or prophets. In his last writings on science and politics, ‘he saw this world as a realm governed by tragic dilemmas’ that must be resolved by us alone. ‘Values deprived of the aura of holiness cannot lend their normative power’ from other than ourselves. In this world we cannot advance with a conviction ethics that follows Kant’s model, and that knows only unconditional duty, and that does not resonate with moral dilemmas. From this we can indeed derive what Weber thought about the significance of providing ethical examples. I will discuss in the conclusion the significance of ethical exemplification and what we can infer about Weber’s views on this topic.

**Back to Kant – and forward?**

As we saw, exemplary ethics in its non-religious alternative raises hard questions. Perhaps the most unmanageable problem is that although the heroes or virtuosi are capable of outstanding achievements in extraordinary moments, does anything follow from this concerning those situations where moral deeds have significance in our inner-worldly life? I would argue that these exceptional moments have paradigmatic value, but not in the sense that they show what is to be done in a given situation. In this sense moral virtuosity is indeed alien to life. Nonetheless, the situations that give rise to extraordinary deeds are unfortunately part of our life.

There are extreme situations in which we do not have any ground for deriving what is to be done. Nonetheless, moral choices are at issue. Since in these cases life and death choices are also involved, it is difficult to speak, and at times we believe we must not speak at all, about moral choices. To be sure, moral judgments about what has been done in such extreme situations may not be appropriate, but I speak here only about the moral risk of such choices. And not only in the sense of responsibility, but also whether we can maintain our moral autonomy in such situations. As far as I can see, our moral autonomy can be preserved, but not as Kant thought. More relevant here is what Weber wrote about values outside of ethics; about actions serving the ethical status and immanent dignity of these values; and about deeds performed only for guarding the flame of pure conviction—the Kantian ethics cannot help here. But *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* may illuminate the point.

First, we must recognize that there are deeds that resist our efforts for judging them unequivocally and definitively. They are like great works of art that are interpreted and reinterpreted, yet survive all interpretations. We must further recognize that our lived experience cannot always be fitted to what we know. There are situations where we find our previously acquired beliefs inadequate, unexamined, and at times even discredited. Also, there are disturbing deeds that deeply affect us. They turn over a new leaf in our lives, and like the great works of art they subvert our customary responses. These situations and such deeds drive our thinking off the beaten track. If so, what can be done?

An obvious possibility is negotiating in the expectation of a consensus. In this way moral autonomy can be preserved. For if we succeed in our negotiations—if we succeed in forming new principles that are acceptable for all—then the participants’ autonomy as legislators of values valid for all is reestablished. Yet, even if we succeed in building a consensus, we must be aware that the resulting principle is ‘a merely ideal norm’: not an objectively valid rule, but ‘an idea necessary for everyone’. It may become a standard for all, but we can only ‘ascribe exemplary validity to it’ (Kant 2000: 123-24). If this is our choice, then we merely follow reason’s regulative principle in service of a higher goal. This is unacceptable within Kantian moral philosophy, for if the deed is merely a means in service of another end, then its maxim cannot have the form of a general law. Hence in this way the condition that the will’s autonomy remains the moral law’s exclusive principle cannot be satisfied (Kant 1993:

but Weber does not agree with Kant on this topic. Although he also differentiated between ethics and other realms of value, instead of focusing on the difference, he emphasized what they have in common. Values for Weber are not valid because of their metaphysical characteristics, but because we consider them valid. We consider ethical values as unconditional and universal, while others we consider dependent on historical, cultural, or other conditions. But this does not diminish the validity of other values: ‘ethics is not the only thing in the world that is “valid”’ (Weber 1949: 15; 1985: 504). However, this means that even the moral imperative does not have the force of an objective law. Since there are clashing value-spheres, there could be ‘other value-spheres, the values of which can, under certain conditions, be realized by one who takes ethical “responsibility”’ (in the German text: ethische “Schuld”) upon himself’ (Weber 1949: 15; 1985: 504), negotiating is worthwhile, searching for a consensus is useful. Public debate (or what Kant called ‘the public use of reason’ in his essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’) can help us in sorting the values.

There is another possibility. The individual can say within his own realm, regardless of the circumstances, and without reference to other persons or things, thus I want it. Whoever says this preserves his moral autonomy. Perhaps he does not think about the demon lurking behind him or that he retakes his fate from the gods, he simply accepts it and with that his fate is his. Nor does he need to think of the eternal return. Relying exclusively on his free will, he accomplishes the outstanding, and in some cases even self-sacrificing moral deed, without regard to the circumstances (or the existential risks), this unique moment cannot be fitted into the everyday. Later consequences neither dull nor reinterpret it—forever it remains a moment of exemplary value. Kant could not have agreed to this view, since in this case the will does not ground a duty. In contrast, Weber held that the deeds preserving ‘the flame of pure conviction’ are significant, even if they ‘can and are only intended to have exemplary value’ (Weber 1994: 360; 1992: 238). Such a deed is not obligatory, it need not be followed unconditionally, yet it is significant. Weber does not say what its significance is; he says only that there is here ‘something genuinely human and profoundly moving. For it must be possible for each of us to find ourselves in such a situation at some point if we are not inwardly dead’ (Weber 1994: 367-68; 1992: 250). From the continuation of this passage we can infer his deep-rooted belief.
He writes:

In this respect, the ethics of conviction and the ethics 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’ (Weber 1994: 367-68; 1992: 250).

I suggest that this is not only valid for politics. Conviction and responsibility ethics together form the genuine human being who is capable of autonomous moral action in the modern world. The role of responsibility ethics is obvious: in a world that is irrational from an ethical viewpoint, where ‘evil consequences flow from an action done out of pure conviction’ (Weber 1994: 360; 1992: 237), the intrinsic value of ethical conduct is insufficient for its justification.

Taking into account Weber’s diagnosis of the modern world, it becomes clear that, in a world torn apart by moral dilemmas, the role of conviction ethics cannot be the same as for Kant. Conviction ethics provide for human dignity, according to Weber. And dignity is bestowed on modern man by seeking his own personal demon with an iron will, and by achieving what he is called to do. No doubt, such a moral dignity lends a convictional value to the deeds. For this reason we are inclined to consider them valid in the sense of showing a personal example. Still, Kant may have the last word: it is neither obligatory to show or to follow the example.

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