

The “Last Man” Problem: Nietzsche and Weber on Political Attitudes to Suffering

Introduction

Modern European ways of thinking about political authority and legitimacy have evolved over hundreds of years, largely in the context of different religious, predominantly Christian, world views. It is only relatively recently that the question of how they might need to be adapted in largely secular societies has arisen. One set of relevant questions will be entirely theoretical, concerning the adaptations that will have to be made to normative notions such as legitimacy, if they are to be reconceived on the basis of entirely secular assumptions. Another set of questions must have more sociological content: which forms of political authority are likely to be accepted as legitimate in secular societies, and which are likely to be ruled out as requiring some religious justification? No thinker has paid greater attention to this constellation of problems than Max Weber. With regard to the latter, especially, he provides us with an incomparably rich analysis of the potential effects of secularization.

One striking and unique feature of this analysis is its focus on the problem of how human beings deal with suffering. For Weber, this question is deeply relevant to the justification of political power, since that power is necessarily coercive and its means are those of force or violence. The problem of political legitimacy is that of justifying violence, or the infliction of non-voluntary suffering. Such justifications of course take place in an overall context of justification and for two millennia this context has incorporated theodicies, which have made overall sense of both voluntary and non-voluntary suffering for human beings. Weber therefore sets out to examine the potential effects of doing without any such theodicy. His conclusions, I

shall claim in this paper, are pessimistic ones for secular political thought, and I want consider whether they are unduly pessimistic.

I shall argue that underlying Weber's view of secularism is a deeply Nietzschean set of assumptions concerning our attitudes to suffering and, in particular, our need for suffering to have meaning.¹ In Weber's evocative conclusion to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he laments a process of secularization that dissolves a spiritually meaningful form of worldly asceticism into "pure utilitarianism" (*PE*, 125; *GARS*, I, 205). He claims that this cultural development culminates in the arrogance of those "last men" (*letzte Menschen*) who imagine themselves to be the apex of civilization, whilst being merely "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" (*PE* 125; *GARS*, I, 204). In his final published lecture on *Science as a Vocation*, he again recalls Nietzsche's "devastating criticism of those 'last men'" who 'invented happiness'" (*FMW* 143; *GAW* 598). The problem to which he is referring with these references to the "last man" is a complex and interesting one.

The image derives from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Here Nietzsche describes a being who seeks only a comfortable life, entertainment, distraction, and an agreeable enough death. He writes:

The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small.

His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest.

¹ Helpful general discussions of Nietzsche's influence on Weber may be found in Eden (1983), Hennis (1998), Fleischmann (1964, p. 190-237), and Hartung (1994, p. 302-18). Many interesting insights into the relationship between these thinkers may also be found in Mitzman (1969) and Scaff (1989). Articles on more specific aspects of Nietzsche's influence on Weber are discussed in footnotes below.

‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one’s neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth.

Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully. A fool, whoever still stumbles over stones or human beings! A little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the end, for an agreeable death.

One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion.

No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels differently goes into a madhouse.

‘Formerly all the world was mad’, say the most refined, and they blink.

One is clever and knows everything that has ever happened: so there is no end of derision. One still quarrels, but one is soon reconciled – else it might spoil the digestion.

One has one’s little pleasure for the day and one’s little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health.

‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink. (Z I, Prologue,

5)

In other words, the last man views suffering always as something that should simply be eradicated, never as something meaningful. This exclusive hedonism, on Nietzsche’s view, generates a form of human life that is contemptible. Many subsequent thinkers have found in this image a gripping and apparently simple illustration of what is wrong with secular cultures, or, more recently, with the secularism of liberal democratic politics.² But an examination of the rhetorical force of the image reveals that the underlying assumptions are in fact complex.

² Cf. e.g. Strauss (1989) and Fukuyama (1992, p. 303-12).

The rhetorical force is supposed to derive from the fact that we recognize in ourselves the “last man” and yet at the same time find such a being contemptible. This evaluation presupposes what we might call an ideal of the dignity of humanity, according to which humans should pursue ends other than the merely animalistic ones of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. We will refer to this as the anti-hedonistic ideal. But at the same time the image of the “last man” draws our attention to the fact that, insofar as we recognize ourselves in this being, we are subject to a failure of commitment to non-hedonistic values. We seem unable to reconcile ourselves to simple hedonism or to live up to the anti-hedonistic ideal.

So the threat to the dignity of humanity derives, for Nietzsche, from our unwillingness to suffer or to make others suffer for the sake of great human goals, even as we acknowledge such goals to be what makes the spectacle of human life on this planet something worthwhile and valuable. This is in part, for Nietzsche, a political problem, since secular political ideals, be they liberal, democratic or socialist, seem to him to be exclusively hedonistic; they encourage us to view suffering, he claims, as something that is simply to be abolished (*BGE* 44).

Subsequent critics of secularism have followed Nietzsche in associating cultural concerns, about secularization with a critique of liberal and democratic political ideas.³ But it is still only Max Weber who has engaged in the kind of detailed analysis of religion that would yield a precise account of what secularism is supposed to deprive us of, how this deprivation occurs, or how we should understand its potential political effects.

The “last man” problem raises an immediate question about how we could have arrived at such a predicament. In his writings on the sociology of religion, Weber offers us a uniquely detailed explanation of how this could have come about. The anti-hedonistic ideal may be seen to arise from the need for an overall meaning or purpose for human suffering, or what I shall call the *theodicy-demand*. He sees this demand as an ineliminable feature of human psychology, even

³ Cf. e.g. Schmitt (1996), Morgenthau (1946, 1974), Strauss (1995) and Fukuyama (1992).

under secular conditions. So under such conditions we are presented with the theodicy-demand minus a theodicy. We then find ourselves simultaneously committed to an anti-hedonistic ideal and unable to sustain our commitment to non-hedonistic values.⁴

The “last man” problem, then, does not simply betray an anti-egalitarian fear of social leveling that is peripheral to Weber’s core concerns.⁵ It in fact unites what have been identified as two of the two central issues in Weber’s work. Wilhelm Hennis (1988a, 1988b) has argued that the question of the type of human being fostered by a given form of society is Weber’s “central concern.” Friedrich Tenbruck (1980, p. 316-351), on the other hand, has identified the central theme in his work as the fundamental role of theodicies in impelling rationalization. Properly understood, the “last man” problem allows us to see the essential unity of these two themes. It brings together the issues that are of most importance to Weber.

I shall claim that Weber, following Nietzsche, hopes to resolve the dilemma that the “last man” problem presents to us in the direction of the anti-hedonistic ideal, rather than a capitulation to hedonism. This position is expressed in his early, explicit anti-eudaimonism but it persists in the later writings in a more sophisticated form.⁸ Not only does Weber come to see the theodicy-

⁴ David Owen (2000, p. 252-265) has discussed illuminatingly the importance of Nietzsche’s “last man” idea for Weber’s conception of social science (though not specifically for his understanding of politics). However, Owen does not discuss the fact that the rhetorical force of the image derives from the persistence of the anti-hedonistic ideal and hence does not elaborate its relation to the persistence of what I shall call the theodicy-demand.

⁵ Regina Titunik (1997, p. 680-80) repudiates the view that Weber fears a “future of equalized and diminished ‘last men,’” but she views the “last man” image as an expression of a fear of the social leveling promoted by democratization.

⁸ The values of the “last man” have been described by Nietzsche and his followers as being either eudaimonistic, utilitarian, or hedonistic. I will refer to the basic idea of minimizing suffering as

demand as basic to human cultures, he also comes to hold the view that the maintenance of stable forms of political authority demands that it be met.

Modern states, Weber insists, must have rulers. Power cannot be distributed equally within them. Some people will have to obey others. This means that rulers must be accepted as legitimate by those over whom they rule. In order for this to be the case, people must accept that there are ends that can be legitimately coerced. And the problem of legitimate coercion or violence, Weber sees, is precisely the problem of what meaning suffering (and in particular non-voluntary suffering) has for us.⁹ He views an encroaching hedonism as a threat to political legitimacy. It shrinks the sphere of possible ends for which coercion will seem justified.

So Weber sees secularism as generating a general cultural problem: that of a psychologically ineliminable theodicy-demand minus a theodicy. But he also identifies a specifically political component to this problem: that of a politically ineliminable legitimacy-demand minus political ends that can be accepted as legitimate. His later espousal of charismatic

“hedonistic” and will take eudaimonism and utilitarianism to be more complex views which might incorporate hedonism. For both Nietzsche and Weber, I shall claim, the fundamental issue is the hedonistic aspect of those larger views.

⁹ Others who have the problem of meaningful existence as one of Weber’s central concerns have taken his views on political legitimacy to be relatively detached from this concern. Cf. e.g. Shafir (1985, p. 516-30). Shafir follows Jeffrey Alexander (1983, p. 77-83) in claiming that Weber, in his explicitly political studies, views obedience to political authorities “as a matter of formal obligation, entirely uninspired by the problem of meaning.” However, as we shall see, in one of the key texts where Weber outlines his typology of legitimacy, his *Politics as a Vocation* address, his argument culminates in a discussion of the central importance of the theodicy problem to the way in which “legitimate violence” is justified. And his emphasis on the religious origins of political values also indicates the interrelatedness of these issues in his thought.

leadership is intended, I shall claim, to fill the gap left by religion in these two areas and it does so in a way that mimics quite precisely the kind of religious solution to the theodicy-demand that he views as most successful.

If we do not wish to accept Weber's political recommendations, and they have been widely derided, an exposition of the way in which they are motivated by his Nietzschean critique of secularism will allow us to assess where we might want to depart from this critique. I shall argue, in particular, that his claims about the theodicy-demand, or the problem of the meaning of suffering, are controversial, even as extrapolations from his own sociology of religion. They impel him to entertain a range of political attitudes to suffering that might otherwise be narrowed in a more humane direction.

Making Sense of Suffering

I shall claim that Weber's affinity with Nietzsche so far as the "last man" problem is concerned arises from his adopting a key Nietzschean claim concerning our psychological need for an overall justification of human suffering. They both adopt what I shall call a holistic view of justifying suffering. It is a psychological, rather than a normative claim, and it concerns the amount of justification that will satisfy us sufficiently to support motivations of certain kinds, more specifically, our motivation to act in accordance with non-hedonistic values.

On Nietzsche's view, the main problem confronting human beings is not that we suffer, but rather that most of our suffering is meaningless. He claims that "what actually arouses indignation over suffering is not the suffering itself, but the senselessness of suffering" (*GM*, II, 7).¹⁰ Unlike pleasure, Nietzsche insists, suffering always provokes the question "why?" Whereas

¹⁰ Cf. also *TI, Arrows and Epigrams*, 12: "If you have your 'why?' in life, you can get along with almost any 'how?' People *don't* strive for happiness, only the English do."

the pursuit of pleasure might be an end in itself, requiring no further justifications, enduring suffering ordinarily requires some further justification.

When human beings act in the world they will bring upon themselves many forms of frustration and pain, small and great. On Nietzsche's view, action that entails suffering gives rise to a demand for justifications. We will inevitably ask "suffering for what?" and the kind of answer we are looking for will posit an end that seems sufficiently to justify our suffering (*GM*, III, 28). If that justifying end is a hedonistic one, that is, if we expect some hedonic compensation, a relatively simple calculation will tell us how much suffering we ought to endure. If we are pursuing some non-hedonistic value, there may be no fixed amount of suffering that human beings will universally find acceptable as the cost of achieving it, but within any human culture we will be operating with some set of norms for how much suffering is justified for what ends. However, our motivation to pursue non-hedonistic ends is, on Nietzsche's view, a fragile affair and one that is vulnerable to a particular form of debilitating skepticism or despair.

This despair arises from awareness of the following set of facts about the world. Following Schopenhauer, Nietzsche holds, first, that whatever we do to try to diminish it, suffering will always outweigh pleasure for any of earth's creatures, including us. Second, most of our suffering will not seem justified in relation to any purposes that are realizable by human beings. Schopenhauer himself says: "If suffering is not the first and immediate object of our life, then our existence is the most inexpedient and inappropriate thing in the world (Schopenhauer 2001, vol. I, ch. XII)." Disease and mortality are ineliminable features of any creature's life. Unlike the other animals, we inevitably suffer psychologically as well as physically, owing to our reflective awareness of mortality. And if our sense of loss at the thought of our own death seems mitigated by our attachment to others, we need only remember that everyone we love is going to

die too.¹² Besides these natural and ineliminable features of the human condition, we impose all sorts of gratuitous suffering on one another as a result of either base cruelty or stupidity. Ultimately, most of the suffering that we experience will have to seem unjustified, at least if we are limited to all available natural explanations or narratives.

On Nietzsche's view, this raises a problem for non-hedonistic human motivations. The insight into the inevitability of meaningless suffering, he insists, paralyses the will. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he sees this view of human life as a distinctively Dionysian one and says of it:

Dionysian man is similar to Hamlet: both have gazed into the true essence of things, they have *acquired knowledge* and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal essence of things; they regard it as laughable or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint' (BT 7).

And Nietzsche continues to insist, throughout his work, that knowledge of the truth about the human condition presents a motivational danger to us. Restating the central message of *The Birth of Tragedy* in *The Gay Science*, he writes: "*Honesty* would lead to nausea and suicide. But now there is a counterforce against our honesty that helps us to avoid such consequences: art as the *good* will to appearance. [...] As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* for us" (GS 107). Our motivation to act can only be sustained by delusion.

¹² Joshua Foa Dienstag (2006) emphasizes the central role that these pessimistic insights of Schopenhauer's play. David Owen, like Dienstag, stresses Nietzsche's awareness of the ineliminability of "intensional" forms of suffering, that is, those that depend of self-consciousness, such as knowledge of our dependence on chance and of our own mortality: cf. Owen (2000, p. 258-9). As we shall see, both Nietzsche and Weber certainly share a preoccupation with these psychological forms of suffering, but the overall range of varieties of suffering with which they are concerned is very broad.

What Nietzsche seems to suggest is that acknowledgement of the truth will lead to a sense of ultimate futility that is motivationally debilitating. This is not the more familiar anxiety about futility that is generated by the question “What is the point of it all?”; i.e. the worry that we have no reason to act unless some end is intrinsically motivating, but in fact no human ends are; we would need some authoritative end given by God to get the whole process of justification off the ground. Nietzsche seems to have no problem with merely human ends being intrinsically motivating. His concern derives instead from the more specific Schopenhauerean problem with suffering. I think we can reconstruct it in the following way.

When we act in accordance with our values, we are adopting a picture of the way the world should be and aiming to shape the world to fit this picture. And in doing so, since predicted pain and pleasure have to be factored into our practical reasoning, we are necessarily operating with a sense of how much suffering is justified by what ends. Once our sense of these norms for justified suffering is engaged, we are bound to acknowledge that we are suffering too much, that no ends we are likely to achieve can possibly justify the misery that most people experience in the course of a human life. And this thought is a paralyzing one so far as our practical calculations are concerned.

Nietzsche’s concern about the meaning of suffering, then, seems to presuppose a holistic view of the way in which suffering can be made to seem justified. Insofar as we must engage in action in the world, and this action is liable to entail suffering and sacrifice of various sorts, an overall theodicy has to be the necessary psychological anchor for all our motivations. I shall refer to this holistic requirement as the theodicy-demand. The most important role of religion in human life has been its fulfillment. The ascetic ideal espoused in the Judaeo-Christian tradition has, for reasons that we shall explore, played this role most successfully:

Except for the ascetic ideal: man, the *animal* man, had no meaning up to now. His “existence” on earth had no purpose; “What is man for, actually?” – was a question without an answer; there was no *will* for man and earth; behind every great human

destiny sounded the even louder refrain “in vain!” *This* is what the ascetic ideal meant: something was *missing*, there was an immense *lacuna* around man, - he himself could think of no justification or explanation or affirmation, he *suffered* from the problem of what he meant. Other things made him suffer too, in the main he was a *sickly* animal: but suffering itself was *not* his problem, but the fact that there was no answer to the question he screamed, “Suffering for *what?*” Man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer, does *not* deny suffering as such: he *wills* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a *purpose* of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, *not* the suffering, was the curse which has so far blanketed mankind[...] (*GM*, III, 28)

The theodicy-demand is presented as a fundamental feature of human psychology and much of Nietzsche’s work addresses the question of how this basic psychological need can be met once the religious solutions that we have evolved have been discredited.

Weber seems to share with Nietzsche these two important premises: first, the claim that suffering inevitably outweighs pleasure in human life; and second, the distinctively Nietzschean holistic view of justifications for suffering. And it is on the basis of these two premises that he sees the theodicy-demand as a persistent feature of human psychology. The first can be found throughout his work, going as far back as his inaugural lecture of 1895. Here he criticizes the “vulgar conception of political economy” which “consists in devising recipes for universal happiness,” and sees its justification as that of “adding to the ‘balance of pleasure’ [*Lustbilanz*] in human existence.” He insists that “[a]s far as the dream of peace and human happiness is concerned, the words written over the portal into the unknown future of human history are: ‘*lasciate ogni speranza*’ [abandon all hope...]” (*PW* 14-15; *GPS*, 12).

In Weber’s later work, most famously in the *Politics as a Vocation* lecture, he stresses the extent to which meaningless suffering is the inevitable outcome of even the most carefully planned purposive action. The problem of unintended consequences constantly mocks the pretensions of instrumental reason. The perpetual possibility of unpredictable bad effects in any

human action, but particularly the large-scale, collective forms of action in which politics engages us, make rational calculations about the justifications of means by ends impossible (PW 360; GPS 552). Weber calls this the “ethical irrationality of the world” (PW 361-2; GPS 533). Not only do we experience unjustified suffering as a result of our natural condition in the world, the very pursuit of the ends that we feel would justify our suffering generates a further, meaningless excess of it.

Like Nietzsche, Weber holds that meaningless suffering is psychologically unacceptable to us, and that the demand for a justification of particular instances of suffering that we experience will inevitably generate a demand for justification *tout court*. In *The Economic Ethic of the World Religions* he discusses the variety of beliefs that have evolved in response to this problem, saying: “Behind them always lies a stand towards something in the actual world which is experienced as specifically “senseless” [*sinnlos*]. Thus, the demand has been implied: that the world order in its totality is, could, and should somehow be a meaningful “cosmos” (*FMW* 281; *GARS*, I, 253). Religious rationalization has resulted, he tells us, from this “metaphysical need for a meaningful cosmos” (*FMW* 281, *GARS*, 3). This essay, intended as an introduction to Weber’s series of detailed studies of world religions (written in 1913), is, as Friedrich Tenbruck has pointed out, the place where Weber first clearly articulates his general claims about the way in which practical reasoning evokes the theodicy-demand.¹³ He then reiterates the view in the

¹³ Cf. Tenbruck (1980, p. 337), where he summarizes the position of the essay thus:

[H]uman action is not sufficiently successful. In the encounter with the world there occur surplus experiences that demand elucidation. These experiences originate from the experience of suffering that derive directly from deprivation or social injustice. The original solution to this was the search for charisma [...] – that is, a magic-based superiority over the insecurities of a world full of suffering.

Also, 337-8:

Zwischenbetrachtung essay of 1915, known in English as *Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions*.¹⁴ On the basis of his researches into the development of religious beliefs, he concludes that their role is not primarily explanatory but rather justificatory. As such, they are responses to a need that is an ineradicable feature of human psychology.¹⁵

Weber does not state quite as boldly as Nietzsche that the meaning of suffering, rather than suffering itself, is the problem for us. Unlike Nietzsche, in examining the ways in which religions have responded to the problem of suffering, he stresses the extent to which a hedonistic desire for the cessation of suffering, or for some future hedonic compensation, has found expression in them. At the same time he insists that this compensation-demand is characteristically a demand of the “mass” and not of the intellectual strata from whom prophets have emerged and hence whose ideas have been the primary forces in shaping religious

For Weber, the purposive-rational orientation encloses a perpetual need, a search for charisma that lies beyond the everyday; charisma promises an immediate deliverance from the uncertainty of action, and the desire that action should result in success goes hand in hand with the reality of the uncertainty of action.

He continues (338): “every charismatic explanation reaches out beyond itself so long as a unified and comprehensive elucidation of the lack of meaning in the world has not been attained, as is sought by articulated theodicies.”

¹⁴ Cf. *FMW*, 353; *GARS*, I, 567:

all religions have demanded as a specific presupposition that the course of the world be somehow *meaningful* [*sinnvoll*], at least in so far as it touches on the interests of men. As we have seen, this claim naturally emerged first as the problem of unjust suffering...

¹⁵ Cf. *FMW*, 275; *GARS*, I, 246, on the “metaphysical conception of God and the world, which the ineradicable demand (*das unausrottbare Bedürfnis*) for a theodicy called forth.”

doctrines.¹⁶ It is also a demand which, since it cannot be fulfilled in this world, can only exacerbate the need for a theodicy. Weber tells us in the *Religious Rejections* essay that,

In so far as appearances show, the actual course of the world has been little concerned with this postulate of compensation. The ethically unmotivated inequality in the distribution of happiness and misery, for which a compensation has seemed conceivable, has remained irrational; and so has the brute fact that suffering exists (*FMW* 354; *GARS*, I, 567).

We should not infer from Weber's claims about the hedonic compensation-demands of the mass that the non-hedonistic theodicy-demand is restricted to the class of intellectuals. He does hold that intellectuals are the ones who have generally supplied the narratives which attempt to satisfy it. But for Weber, as for Nietzsche, reflection on our justifications for action tends, for anyone, to raise the problem of whether any ends can justify suffering overall. In the religion section of *Economy and Society*, he makes clear that the working classes, too, insist on a satisfactory solution to the theodicy problem and that their increasing disbelief in religion stems from their awareness that it has in fact offered no stable solution. He writes:

a recent questionnaire submitted to thousands of German workers disclosed the fact that their rejection of the god-idea was motivated, not by scientific arguments, but by their difficulty in reconciling the idea of providence with the injustice and imperfection of the social order (*ES*, I, 519; *WG* 315).

We might suspect that underlying both Nietzsche and Weber's attribution to humans of this universal psychological tendency, or "metaphysical need", there is really a normative claim about our justifications for suffering. The theodicy-demand would then be seen as one that any rational person ought to raise. As we shall see though, neither is committed to such a normative claim and in fact both of them offer suggestions as to how our world-view might be rationally

¹⁶ Also, *ES* 490-2; *GW* 299. On this distinction between the typical demands of different social classes, Cf. Shafir (1985).

reoriented in order to dispense with the psychological need. But neither of them fully follows through on the strain in their work that would permit such a resolution.

Instead, they both remain convinced that the theodicy-demand will persist in secular cultures and therefore continue to be preoccupied with the question of how the theodicy-demand can be met. Religions have developed various non-rational means of addressing the theodicy-demand. When Weber imports conceptions (such as “charisma” and “vocation”) from his sociology of religion to fill the gaps that he perceives in secular political thought, he is presupposing a specific, Nietzschean picture of these non-rational means and how they might be adapted.

Addressing the theodicy-demand

On the interpretation of the theodicy-demand that I have set out, meeting it requires an overall interpretation of the meaning of suffering. This does not mean that the particular justification for every instance of suffering has to be transparent to us, only that we can have faith that there is some justification. On Weber’s view, there can be no a priori answer to the question of what will count as a satisfactory overall justification for us. But human cultures do exhibit common tendencies, which he describes in a schematic fashion in his later writings on the sociology of religion, particularly the sections on religion published in *Economy and Society* (written 1911-1913), the introductory essay on *The Economic Ethic of the World Religions* (written in 1913), the *Zwischenbetrachtung* essay, (1915), and the two lectures, *Politics as a Vocation*, and *Science as a Vocation* (delivered in 1918). I shall claim that we can still detect Nietzsche’s influence in these writings, where Weber sets out the constraints that must govern any possible solutions.

Nietzsche’s own studies of religions, and specifically of the various ways in which they have addressed the theodicy-demand, begin in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871). Although Nietzsche’s philosophical views on many topics undergo considerable development and change across his

career, we find significant continuity in his later writings with the framework laid out here for understanding the problem of the meaning of suffering. In his famous dichotomy of the Dionysian and the Apolline, he lays out two ways in which the theodicy-demand can be met. The first is to achieve obliviousness to the demand, though this is not a strategy that can be incorporated into our practical lives. The second is to develop some narrative that might supply us with a satisfactory solution, one that can be integrated into our ordinary motivations to act.

The obliviousness strategy was, on Nietzsche's view, successfully adopted in the orgiastic cults of Dionysus and the art-forms to which they gave rise. In the Dionysian experience, the Greeks felt themselves to be "absorbed, elevated, and extinguished" (*BT 7*). They felt a sense of oneness with the rest of existence which gave them solace, for in such a state life is experienced not as a state of suffering but as something "indestructibly mighty and pleasurable" (*BT 7*). However, this kind of experience can only be available to humans as an extraordinary and transient state. It is not compatible with their functioning in the world. For that, what is required is not simply some way of halting the demand for justifications for suffering, but a narrative that satisfactorily meets this demand.

The role of Apolline art, Nietzsche claims, was precisely to facilitate action by providing some form of theodicy, that is, a satisfaction of our demand for justifications. Thus he interprets the image of the Sophoclean hero. The figure of the suffering Oedipus, on Nietzsche's interpretation, shows his audience that as a suffering being the hero achieves a state of passivity in which he becomes a vessel of the gods. He thereby exerts on the world "a magical, beneficent force which remains effective even after his death" (*BT 9*). Aeschylus's Prometheus, on the other hand, provides us with an example of suffering as a punishment from the gods, though one that must be endured by any human being who strives for noble ends (*BT 9*). On both of these views,

suffering that is senseless from the point of view of merely human purposes may be seem justified in relation to supra-human purposes that we find authoritative.¹⁷

Although we can escape the grip of the theodicy-demand temporarily through the attainment of certain extraordinary psychological states, if we are to be able to act in the world, we will need suffering to make sense in relation to purposes. Most non-voluntary suffering cannot be justified by any human purpose, but it may still seem justified to us in the light of a purpose that is authoritative for us.¹⁸ Religions have therefore addressed the theodicy-demand by justifying suffering in relation to supra-human purposes.

The supra-human purposes of the Greek gods could serve as justifying ends, thereby ending the regress of justifications, because they had inherent authority by virtue of issuing from an authoritative source. The aesthetic perfection of the gods conferred on them such authority, for life viewed in this aesthetically perfected form seemed to be worth living.¹⁹ In his *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche describes the way in which the purposes of these gods justified human suffering. The Greeks, he says, imputed to these ideal beings the same delight in cruelty that they felt themselves.²⁰ So for the Greeks, although most human suffering had to seem futile

¹⁷ Nietzsche tells us that Promethean virtue gives us an insight into “the ethical foundation of pessimistic tragedy, its *justification* of the evil in human life, both in the sense of human guilt and in the sense of the suffering brought about by it.” (*BT* 9)

¹⁸ This distinction is made by Bernard Williams (2006, p. 333), who sees it as central to Nietzsche’s approach to the problem of suffering.

¹⁹ Cf. *BT*, 3: “gods justify the life of men by living it themselves – the only satisfactory theodicy! Under the bright sunshine of such gods existence is felt to be worth attaining.”

²⁰ *GM*, II, 7: The Greeks “could certainly think of offering their gods no more acceptable a side-dish to their happiness than the joys of cruelty.”

from the point of view of any merely human purposes, the supra-human purposes of the gods who delighted in it could provide it with a meaning.

At the end of the *Genealogy*, however, Nietzsche claims that it is only the ascetic ideal, promoted by Christianity, which first succeeds fully in addressing the theodicy-demand. Up to now, he tells us, suffering had no meaning and man was “like a leaf in the breeze, the plaything of the absurd, of ‘non-sense’”, but on the basis of the interpretation permitted by the ascetic ideal “he could *will* something, no matter what, why, and how he did it at first, the *will itself was saved*” (*GM*, III, p. 28; italics by F.N.). So why should Nietzsche, having claimed that the Greeks had a theodicy of their own, nevertheless go on to state that it was the ascetic ideal that first saved the human will from the debilitating effects of meaningless suffering?

The underlying view seems to be that the polytheistic religious beliefs of the Greeks could not fully meet the theodicy-demand, as they could not supply the faith that suffering is, overall, normatively intelligible. They did meet the bare demand that non-voluntary suffering, which makes sense in relation to no human purposes, seem meaningful in relation to some authoritative purposes. They thereby conferred the sense of meaningfulness that is minimally required to prevent the debilitating consequences of perceived meaninglessness. But the pantheon of Greek gods did not otherwise support practical reasoning, since it could not provide a coherent set of purposes that might be continuous and consistent with human purposes in the world. In such a polytheistic universe, there are many gods with unpredictable wills and often clashing purposes, so there can be no overall normative coherence. Hence the fact that rationalism is taken by Nietzsche to be so profoundly antagonistic to such a culture.

The ascetic ideal, on the other hand, supplies the faith that all human suffering is, in principle normatively intelligible. Suffering is meaningful in relation to a single god’s coherent and consistent will.²¹ So even if this will cannot be fully comprehended by limited human

²¹ Cf. *GM* III, 23; italics by F.N.:

intelligences, it still makes sense for us to aim, insofar as we do understand God's purposes, for rational integration of our own purposes with them. Any apparently antinomian suffering can be taken to reveal simply the limits of our understanding.

The *Genealogy*, described by Weber as Nietzsche's "brilliant essay," is an important touchstone for his own account of religious development (*FMW*, 270; *GARS*, I, 241).²² He defends Nietzsche's view that it is only a version of the ascetic ideal that has succeeded in meeting the theodicy-demand, by providing a solution that is satisfactory from the point of view of our practical reasoning. Like Nietzsche, Weber sees in the history of religion two distinct ways of addressing the theodicy-demand. One attempts to extinguish the demand, or render us oblivious to it; the other attempts to provide a solution. The first gives rise to mysticism. The second achieves its most refined form in an ascetic tradition. In Weber's analyses of these traditions, particularly of the latter, he extends and deepens Nietzsche's insights into the way in which fulfillment of the theodicy-demand has supported our commitment to non-hedonistic ends.

The ascetic ideal expresses one will. [...] The ascetic ideal has a *goal*, - which is so general, that all the interests of human existence appear petty and narrow when measured against it; it inexorably interprets epochs, peoples, man, all with reference to this one goal, it permits of no other interpretation, no other goal, and rejects, denies, affirms, confirms only with reference to *its* interpretation (- and was there ever a system of interpretation more fully thought through?); it does not subject itself to any power, in fact, it believes in its superiority over any power, in its unconditional *superiority of rank* over any other power, - it believes there is nothing on earth of any power which does not first have to receive a meaning, a right to existence, a value from it, as a tool to *its* work, as a way and means to *its* goal, to *one* goal...

²² The strong affinities between Nietzsche's *Genealogy* and Weber's essay on *The Economic Ethic of the World Religions* are discussed by Tracy Strong in (1992, p. 9-18).

The obliviousness strategy must either be temporary or, if prolonged, will be incompatible with any purposeful functioning in the world. In his essay on *The Economic Ethic of the World Religions*, Weber tells us that primitive religious experience consists in the attainment of extraordinary psychological states that are sought as a temporary refuge from the ordinary human experiences of distress, hunger, sickness and suffering. The alcoholic intoxication of the Dionysian is one of the examples that he provides, along with totemic meat-orgies, cannibalistic feasts, and intoxication by hashish, opium, and nicotine (*FMW*, 278-80; *GARS*, I, 249-51). In striving to make this form of redemption permanent, intellectuals have made the “inexpressible contents” of such experiences the focus of more sustained contemplation (*FMW*, 282; *GARS*, I, 254). They have attempted to live in such a way that their entire lives are pervaded by mystic experience. But the religious mystic’s attempt to sustain this sense of charismatic illumination requires withdrawal from the world and is only available as a way of life to those who can live off the labor of others (*ES*, 547; *WG* 331). For those in a position to live such a life, reasoning may be stilled by the force of non-rational psychological experiences. But this requires removing oneself from the realm of action that provokes the demand for justifications.²³

The strategy of devising a solution, on the other hand, through the articulation of a theodicy, has generated attempts to integrate entirely our purposes in the world with the theodicy narrative in which justifications come to a satisfactory end. Weber in fact sees this aspiration to

²³ Both Nietzsche’s and Weber’s understandings of the obliviousness strategy as manifested, respectively, in the Dionysian and mystical worldviews, are indebted to Schopenhauer.

Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is directly derived from Schopenhauer’s conception of the Will and of music as an immediate expression of it. Weber’s conception of mysticism is shaped by his reading of Tolstoy, who himself adopted a Schopenhauerean worldview. Neither finds satisfactory the withdrawal from the world that Schopenhauer’s philosophy of resignation entails.

rational integration as the primary motor of rationalization in the West.²⁴ The demands that it makes, however, are complex, and stable solutions have seldom been found.

The theodicy-demand is raised, because our norms for how much suffering is justified by what ends reveal an inevitable surplus of suffering, so far as merely human purposes are concerned. This surplus might be rendered meaningful in relation to supra-human purposes, if those are taken to be justifying ends for us. This raises the demand for normative coherence: we will want our own ends in the world and these ultimately authoritative, justifying ends to be consistent and continuous with one another. Ethical religions of salvation have aimed for such consistency and continuity. But it is no easy task to generate a seamless web of justifications.

Weber sees that the fundamental problem facing such an aspiration is the ubiquitous “incongruity between destiny and merit [*der Inkongruenz zwischen Schicksal und Verdienst*]” (*FMW*, 275; *GARS*, I, 246-7). Practical rationality requires that we ask not simply “Why suffering?” but also “Why me?” If suffering is to be explained, for example, by reference to the purposes of an ethical deity who rewards and punishes, we will want the relationship between action and reward to be intelligible to us. But it is very difficult to make sense of the distribution of suffering in the world, and few theodicies have proved satisfactory from this point of view.²⁵ In fact, Weber tells us:

²⁴ Cf. Tenbruck (1980).

²⁵ In discussing the need to solve this distribution problem, Weber again displays his indebtedness to Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*, invoking Nietzsche’s distinction between “slave morality” and the values of the “masters”: “Und keineswegs nur nach einer “Sklavenmoral”, sondern auch an den eigenen Maßstäben der Herrenschaft gemessen, waren es allzu oft nicht die Besten, sondern die “Schlechten”, denen es am besten geriet.” *FMW*, 275; *GARS*, I, 246. Weber then goes on to borrow Nietzsche’s term “*Ressentiment*” and discuss the extent to which it has influenced theodicies of suffering.

The metaphysical conception of God and of the world, which the ineradicable demand for a theodicy called forth, could produce only a few systems of ideas on the whole – as we shall see, only three. These three gave rationally satisfactory answers to the questioning for the basis of the incongruity between destiny and merit: the Indian doctrine of Karma, Zoroastrian dualism, and the predestination decree of the *deus absconditus*. These solutions are rationally closed; in pure form, they are found only as exceptions (*FMW*, 275; *GARS*, I, 247).

A “rationally closed” solution must be one which supports practical reasoning, insofar as it presupposes the faith that suffering is justified and also allows us to explore the nature of the justifications, but which nevertheless brings the demand for rational justifications to a halt at some acceptable point.

This kind of “rational closure” must involve acceptance of the limits of merely human reason. The demand for justifications is not satisfied rationally; it comes to a halt before some non-rational faith. But this faith must be such that it preserves our sense that our reasons in principle form a complete and coherent system, even where ultimate justifications remain inaccessible to our limited intelligence. Our human inability to explain suffering in a way that seems compatible with the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent God has been met, for example, by hypothesizing “an unimaginably great ethical chasm between the transcendental god and the human being continuously enmeshed in the toils of new sin.” This view, which Weber claims is initially formulated in the Book of Job, makes God’s justice ultimately incomprehensible to men. (*ES*, I, 522; *WG* 317). But it preserves their faith that suffering is justified in ways unknown to them.

The admission of incomprehensibility turns out to be an enabling one so far as human action is concerned. For this non-transparent sense of justification can support a commitment to a thoroughly non-hedonistic mode of living: the rational and methodical patterns of action engaged in by the ascetic. The inner-worldly ascetic, for Weber, is the man of vocation: “it suffices for

him that through his rational actions in this world he is personally executing the will of god, which is unsearchable in its ultimate significance” (*ES*, I, 547-8; *WG* 331-2).²⁶ The ascetic may take on voluntary suffering in the faith that some justifying end, however inscrutable, is being served. Calvinism represents, for Weber, the perfection of this fostering of non-hedonistic ends under the aegis of a non-transparent but presumed rational theodicy. It supports, for example, the forms of economic behavior described in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as being “so irrational from the standpoint of merely eudaimonistic self-interest” (*PE* 38; *GARS*, I, 62).

Successful theodicies of this kind provide us with justifications for the natural and inevitable forms of suffering that any human beings must endure. But more essentially, they support human motivations that require us to add to the overall balance of suffering in the world, whether this means individuals taking on voluntary suffering themselves or inflicting non-voluntary suffering on others. Faith in the existence of some authoritative, supra-human justifying end makes it possible for us to tolerate an overall extent of suffering that would seem utterly excessive from the point of view of any merely human ends.

One important feature of this expansion of our capacity to tolerate suffering is the way in which it expands the range of politically permissible ends and obligations. It makes tolerable a distribution of suffering in a society that might otherwise be seen to require some political remedy. Weber claims that religions have devised various means of reconciling people to vast

²⁶ Cf. also:

The ascetic, when he wishes to act within the world, that is, to practice inner-worldly asceticism, must become afflicted with a sort of happy stupidity regarding any questions about the meaning of the world, for he must not worry about such questions. Hence, it is no accident that inner-worldly asceticism reached its most consistent development on the foundation of the Calvinist god’s absolute inexplicability, utter remoteness from every human criterion, and unsearchableness as to his motives.

discrepancies in their standard of living and have sanctified different orders of life with different ethics, including differential degrees of political power. He sees here a parallel between the Hindu caste system and the Catholic ethic that differentiates between the modes of life permitted for the monk, the knight, and the burgher (*PW* 363; *GPS* 555).

But more importantly, theodicies may render acceptable state-inflicted violence that is necessary in the maintenance of political power or the pursuit of political ends. As Weber repeatedly stresses, “the specific means of *legitimate violence per se* in the hands of human associations is what gives all the ethical problems of politics their particular character” (*PW* 364; *GPS* 556).²⁷ If the state finds it necessary to employ violent means, that is, to inflict non-voluntary suffering, a theodicy that simply convinces people that the extent of suffering in their world is not excessive will already be playing an important justificatory role. And a theodicy that promotes attachment to non-hedonistic ends will help to legitimize the use of force in pursuit of those ends; it will expand the range of ends that can acceptably be pursued through coercive means. But theodicies have gone even further than this in justifying state power. As Weber points out, “Normal Protestantism [...] legitimated the state absolutely (and thus its means, violence) as a divine institution, and gave its blessing to the legitimate authoritarian state in particular” (*PW* 364; *GPS* 555-6). Calvinism and Islam, similarly, he claims, have sanctified the use of state

²⁷ Cf. also *Religious Rejections* in *FMW*, 334; *GARS*, 547:

it is absolutely essential for every political association to appeal to the naked violence of coercive means in the face of outsiders as well as in the face of internal enemies. It is only this very appeal to violence that constitutes a political association in our terminology. The state is an association that claims the monopoly of the *legitimate use of violence*, and cannot be defined in any other manner.

Bryan Turner takes this emphasis on politics as violence to be derived from Nietzsche. Cf. Turner (1982, p. 372).

violence where the state is understood as the essential means of defending the faith (*PW* 364; *GPS* 556).

The modern state, then, has had to justify both the distribution of suffering, within the society that it rules, and also its own infliction of non-voluntary suffering on its subjects and others. It has hitherto done so in an overall context of justifications for suffering that has been shaped by theodicies. To be sure, there have been tensions between religious ethics and the pragmatic demands of politics, but these have frequently collapsed into compromises, motivated, Weber tells us, “by the usefulness and the use of religious organizations for the political taming of the masses and, especially, by the need of the powers-that-be for the religious consecration of legitimacy” (*MW*, 337-8; *GARS*, I, 551).

Since the modern state has evolved in this justificatory context, the question must arise of what impact secularization will have on the perception of its legitimacy. In particular, if justification of the pursuit of non-hedonistic ends requires belief in supra-human purposes, will there still be ends that can be commonly accepted as justifying force or violence once such purposes are discredited?

We shall see that Weber’s response to this question involves an attempt to provide some substitute for meaning-conferring supra-human purposes. This attempted solution reveals the dangers that lie within the theodicy-demand thesis. If we accept the ineliminability of such a demand we will be vulnerable to a specific set of concerns about political life, that is, to anxieties about the affront to human dignity that is constituted by the politics of the “last man.” And as we shall see, the attempt to address these concerns by way of fulfilling the theodicy-demand leads to an expansion of the permissible range of attitudes to suffering in politics. This expansion will appear unnecessary and inhumane if the underlying concerns are ill-founded, which I shall suggest they are.

The Politics of the Last Man

Nietzsche himself condemns liberal and socialist political values as crudely hedonistic. He tells us that in Europe and America we now find “narrow, restricted, chained-up” types of spirit, who

are un-free and ridiculously superficial, particularly given their basic tendency to think that *all* human misery and wrongdoing is caused by traditional social structures: which lands truth happily on its head! What they want to strive for with all their might is the universal, green pasture happiness of the herd, with security, safety, contentment, and an easier life for all. Their two most well-sung songs and doctrines are called: “equal rights” and “sympathy for all that suffers” – and they view suffering itself as something that needs to be *abolished*. (*BGE 44*)

This exclusive hedonism naturally follows, for Nietzsche, from the loss of the supra-human purposes that supplied a justificatory context in which suffering for the sake of non-hedonistic goals made sense to us. Weber’s approach to modern politics is clearly more nuanced, but he shares with Nietzsche the worry that secularism will entail unmitigated hedonism in our political values.

On the view shared by Nietzsche and Weber, in the absence of a solution to the theodicy-demand our commitment to non-hedonistic ends will be endangered, for our suffering will already seem excessive and our primary aim will be to diminish it. For Nietzsche, it is this very general claim that seems to lie behind his concerns about secular political values. Weber, on the other hand, supplies a more detailed account of the kind of justifications, besides the overall, holistic one, that theodicies have supplied. He traces in detail relationships between specific theodicy narratives and forms of political legitimation. And he is therefore able to state a more precise view of what is lacking in secular political values.

For Weber, theodicies have provided answers not just to the question, “Why suffer?” but also to the question “Why me?” They have justified unequal distributions of suffering in the

societies where they have been accepted. This kind of justification has reconciled people to their roles in articulated, hierarchical societies.²⁸ In its absence, we might then expect the evident “incongruity between destiny and merit” to promote a questioning of social roles and to motivate demands for political change oriented around the redistribution of social goods. It would be crude, however, to take this to imply simply a demand for “social leveling” or for an equal distribution of material goods. Unlike Nietzsche, Weber resists such an interpretation of progressive political movements. He sees that the ethical motivations underlying the socialist movement, for example, are complex. He understands the basic problem that socialism seeks to address not as that of inequality *simpliciter*, but as that of alienation, or “the rule of things over men,” where the fault lies in a system which fails to address the real needs of human beings and in which no particular individuals can be held accountable.²⁹ What socialism demands, therefore, is a more fully human form of social, economic, and political organization, one which places the basic conditions of life in the hands of real human beings, to be shaped by real human needs.

However, Weber also sees a discrepancy between this political ideal and the actual motivations of fallible human creatures. Here we do find in his work a strongly Nietzschean tendency. The motivational structure that in fact drives the socialist movement is described in unmistakably Nietzschean terms. The actual socialist leader, he tells us, needs a human “apparatus”:

He must promise these people the necessary inner and outward prizes – rewards in heaven or on earth – because the apparatus will not function otherwise. Under the conditions of modern class-warfare the inner rewards are the satisfaction of hatred and

²⁸ Cf. *ES* 490-2; *WG* 298-300, where Weber tells us that the privileged classes have achieved, through belief in salvation religions, confidence in their own worthiness, whilst the unprivileged classes have acquired the hope of some future compensation.

²⁹ *Socialism*, in *PW*, 284

revenge, of *ressentiment* and the need for the pseudo-ethical feeling of being in the right, the desire to slander one's opponents and make heretics of them. The outward rewards are adventure, victory, booty, power and prebends. The success of the leader is entirely dependent on the functioning of his apparatus. He is therefore dependent on *its* motives, not his own. He is dependent also on the possibility of providing those prizes *permanently* to his following, the Red Guard, the informers, the agitators he needs. Given these conditions of his activity, what he actually achieves does not, therefore, lie in his own hands but is, rather, prescribed for him by the, in ethical terms, predominantly base or common (*gemein*) motives prompting the actions of his following (*PW* 364-5; *GPS* 556).

The demand for compensation that salvation religions once addressed is here seen to have degenerated into a purely egoistic demand for personal reward and an unmitigated resentment of the privileged.

Neither is this egoistic self-concern confined to the unprivileged strata of society. The intellectual classes too, on Weber's view, display both egoism and hedonism in their pursuit of purely private and individualistic forms of secular salvation. In his *Religious Rejections* essay Weber describes the way in which aesthetic experience comes to serve this function, with music in particular constituting "an irresponsible *Ersatz* for primary religious experience" (*FMW* 342-3; *GARS*, I, 556). The erotic life too, and particularly extramarital sexual life, Weber tells us, provides a means of escape from the ultimately futile cultural existence of human beings, a flight into animality and reunion with nature. (*FMW* 346; *GARS*, I, 560). Like the mystic's strategy of dealing with the theodicy-demand by generating temporary obliviousness to it, these forms of secular salvation require detachment from the realm of practical judgment and action.

This retreat from the ultimate meaninglessness of human endeavors manifests itself directly, Weber claims, in the intellectual's retreat from political responsibility. The conflict

between the need for meaningfulness and the experience of the actual, empirical realities of our existence prompts the intellectual's disengagement from the real political and institutional conditions that structure life in this world:

This may be an escape into loneliness, or in its more modern form, e.g., in the case of Rousseau, to a nature unspoiled by human institutions. Again, it may be a world-fleeing romanticism, like the flight to the "people", untouched by social conventions, characteristic of the Russian *narodnichestvo*. It may be more contemplative, or more actively ascetic; it may primarily seek individual salvation or collective revolutionary transformation of the world in the direction of a more ethical status. All these doctrines are equally appropriate to apolitical intellectualism (*ES* 506; *WG* 308).

It seems, then, that the loss of the theodicies, which reconciled human social beings to their inherited social orders, must lead to fragmentation and individualism. In the face of a new dissatisfaction with their social world, neither the privileged nor the unprivileged classes seem able to retain the kind of motivations that would permit them to reshape that world in accordance with higher human values. Weber tells us that "the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendent realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations" (*FMW* 155; *GAW* 612).

As we have seen, on Weber's account theodicies have also played a further, more direct role, in political legitimation. They have assisted states in justifying the infliction of non-voluntary suffering on human beings, which is a necessary feature of states *qua* entities that are defined precisely by their coercive powers. Under secular conditions, the general preparedness to suffer and to inflict non-voluntary suffering must be diminished simply by the insight that the balance of human suffering already exceeds what can be justified by any merely human ends. But also the specific justifications for inflicting suffering that states have hitherto invoked, for example pursuit of the non-hedonistic ends of defending the true faith or realizing God's glory

through earthly greatness, must be discredited. Throughout his work, Weber displays concern that the narrow hedonism and utilitarianism of secular subjects will rule out their finding any common, non-hedonistic ends legitimate. They will refuse to acknowledge any non-hedonistic ends as justifications for political coercion.

In his 1895 inaugural address, Weber exhorts Germans to embrace the goals of honor and greatness in world politics. He fears that economic developments are threatening the “political instincts” with decay, and warns his fellow political economists: “It would be a great misfortune if economic science were also to strive towards the same goal by breeding a soft, eudaimonistic outlook, in however spiritualized a form, behind the illusion of independent ‘socio-political’ ideals” (*PW* 27; *GPS* 24). He speaks of “that unspeakably philistine softening of sensibility, however much it may command affection and respect in human terms, which believes it is possible to replace political with ‘ethical’ ideals, and ingenuously to identify these in turn with optimistic hopes of happiness” (*PW* 27; *GPS* 24). In his earliest work he is already decrying the politics of the “last man.” And these sentiments are echoed in 1916, when he berates the “pacifism of American ‘ladies’ (of both sexes)” as well as Swiss anti-militarism as displaying a failure to comprehend the “tragic historical obligations incumbent on any nation organized as a *Machtstaat*” (*PW* 77; *GPS* 144). The basic tendency of these pacifists, he claims, is to object not just to war, but to “each and every law of the social world” insofar as the constitution of that world necessarily involves the infliction of suffering for the sake of common goals.

So does Weber fear that states, as inherently coercive forms of political organization, will no longer be accepted as legitimate, that they will be subject to the disintegrative forces of an incipient anarchism? Far from it. His concern is rather that states and their actions will be accepted on the basis of deeply entrenched structures of legitimation comprised by an inflexible

grid of utilitarian calculations and pragmatic reasons of state. The process of legitimation will have become entirely impervious to any other substantive values.³⁰

In *Economy and Society*, Weber charts the way in which the last attempt to make legitimation a genuinely moral form of assessment, the natural law tradition, inevitably degenerated, in its secular form, into a non-moral form of practical calculation. In this tradition, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Weber tells us, “nature” and “reason” became the substantive criteria by which legitimacy should be judged. The voluntary rational contract, and on the basis of it the establishment of legitimately acquired rights, specified the way in which they were to shape political life (*ES* 869; *WG* 498). But when brought into relation with existing political realities, compromise became necessary. Weber tells us that many institutions in the prevailing system “could not be legitimated except on practical utilitarian grounds. By “justifying” them, natural law “reason” easily slipped into utilitarian thinking” (*ES* 870; *WG* 499).

The shift from a substantive moral doctrine to a form of politically expedient calculation can be traced, Weber claims, by examining the shifting meaning of the term “reasonableness” (*Vernünftigkeit*). He tells us that:

in purely formal natural law, the reasonable is that which is derivable from the eternal order of nature and logic, both being readily blended with one another. But from the beginning, the English concept of “reasonable” contained by implication the meaning of “rational” in the sense of “practically appropriate.” From this it could be concluded that what would lead in practice to absurd consequences cannot constitute the law desired by nature and reason. This signified the express introduction of substantive presuppositions into the concept of reason which had in fact always been implicit in it (*ES* 870; *WG* 499).

³⁰ Cf. *Religious Rejections* in *FMW*, 334; *GARS*, I, 547: “By virtue of its depersonalization, the bureaucratic state, in important points, is less accessible to substantive moralization than were the patriarchal orders of the past.”

Formal natural law doctrines were thereby transformed in technically substantive ones, which were taken up, Weber tells us, by the socialist movement. But before they could achieve any practical influence over the administration of justice, he claims, they were already “being disintegrated by the rapidly growing positivistic and relativistic-evolutionistic skepticism” that was spreading amongst the intellectual strata (*ES* 874; *WG* 502). Legal positivism, he claims, has since advanced irresistibly.

Weber’s sociological observations concerning modern politics therefore seem to bear out the view underlying his account of theodicies and their justificatory role. Absent such theodicies, non-hedonistic ends will fail to find support as legitimate bases for political coercion, except insofar as they are justified by the raw pragmatism of reasons of state. The more controversial aspects of Weber’s later political thought are intended, I shall argue, to address precisely this problem.

The aristocratic solution

It is natural that both Nietzsche and Weber should want to resolve the “last man” problem in the direction of the anti-hedonistic ideal since, given the overall extent of inevitable suffering that they perceive in human life, it is bound to seem unsatisfactory from a narrowly hedonistic point of view. What we need are purposes or ends that can justify that suffering. Nietzsche and Weber both find that no merely human purposes are adequate to this task. In the absence of belief in supra-human purposes, Nietzsche suggests that we posit *super*-human goals that can take their place. Many of the more inhumane aspects of his thought follow from this proposal, so it is worth examining the extent to which Weber himself endorses such a solution.

In his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche has Zarathustra proclaim: “It is time mankind set himself a goal. It is time that mankind plant the seed of his highest hope” (*ZI*, Prologue, 5) In relation to this goal, the suffering of humanity might have a meaning. The goal, of course, is that

of the over-man, or super-man. Zarathustra says: “I teach you the *Übermensch*. The *Übermensch* is the meaning of the earth” (Z, I, 3). The self-overcoming of humanity is the meaning-generating end for the sake of which we may not only tolerate but actually will suffering. Rather than the contemptible spectacle of the “last man” we can aspire to promote a higher being. The evolution of just a few specimens of humanity to a new stage of greatness will justify the whole dismal spectacle of human baseness and misery.³¹

Nietzsche makes clear that he does not just hold that voluntary suffering is justified in pursuit of this goal. Rather, non-voluntary suffering may be inflicted on others for its sake. For it is a means of overcoming the whole attitude to suffering embraced by the secular moralist, who desires only that suffering be diminished. He states this forcefully in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Whether it is hedonism or pessimism, utilitarianism or eudaimonism – all these ways of thinking that measure the value of things in accordance with *pleasure* and *pain*, which are mere epiphenomena and wholly secondary, are ways of thinking that stay in the foreground and naïvetés on which everyone conscious of *creative* powers will look down not without derision, nor without pity. [...] You want, if possible – and there is no more insane “if possible” – to *abolish suffering*. And we? It really seems that *we* would rather have it higher and worse than ever. Well-being as you understand it – that is no goal, that seems to us as an *end*, a state that soon makes man ridiculous and contemptible – that makes his destruction *desirable*.

³¹ Cf. *BGE* 258, italics by F.N:

the essential feature of a good, healthy aristocracy is that it does *not* feel that it is a function (whether of the kingdom or of the community) but instead feels itself to be the *meaning* and highest justification (of the kingdom or community),- and, consequently, that it accepts in good conscience the sacrifice of countless people who have to be pushed down and shrunk into incomplete human beings, into slaves, into tools, all *for the sake of the aristocracy*.

The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering – do you not know that only *this* discipline had created all enhancements of man so far? That tension of the soul in unhappiness which cultivates its strength, its shudders face to face with great ruin, its inventiveness and courage in enduring, preserving, interpreting, and exploiting suffering, and whatever has been granted to it of profundity, secret, mask, spirit, cunning, greatness – was it not granted to it through suffering, through the discipline of great suffering?
(*BGE* 225)

Nietzsche clearly holds that we must be prepared to will the suffering of others and to accept the “sacrifice of countless people who have to be pushed down and shrunk into incomplete human beings, into slaves, into tools,” for the sake of his goal (*BGE* 258). The advent of a new aristocracy, the emergence of super-human beings, becomes the justifying end which, if we embrace it, will provide the kind of holistic justification that we need for human suffering. All of the apparently futile misery suffered by mere humans will turn out to be worthwhile, if it provides the conditions for the emergence of these beings. Since even greater suffering than we naturally experience may be justified by this purpose, its embrace will support an attachment to a variety of non-hedonistic ends.

If human beings are to aspire to overcome their limited human state and achieve this higher state of being, we might expect such a goal to foster a rich array of non-hedonistic values. Humanity will be guided in its aspirations by whatever qualities the *Übermensch* is supposed to embody. But Nietzsche’s vision of these qualities remains relatively opaque. He offers us no concrete vision of precisely what kind of achievements would provide sufficient justification for present human suffering. In effect, he asks us to adopt the faith that there are such goals and that our suffering will be justified by some future, inscrutable state of affairs. In this sense, his solution mirrors the solutions of the successful theodicies that Weber has described. So does Weber himself adopt the same strategy?

Weber seems to share with Nietzsche the view that the “last man” dilemma should be resolved in the direction of the anti-hedonistic ideal, rather than a capitulation to hedonism. In his inaugural address on *The Nation State and Economic Policy*, Weber says:

The question which stirs us as we think beyond the grave of our own generation is not the *well-being* human beings will enjoy in the future but what kind of people they will *be*[...]. We do not want to breed well-being in people but rather those characteristics which we think of as constituting the human greatness and nobility of our nature (*PW* 15; *GPS* 12-13).³²

He suggests, in other words, that rather than simply seeking a diminishment of suffering, we should adopt a purpose, human greatness, which serves as a justifying end for it.

This view is reiterated in 1916 in a brief address now entitled *Between Two Laws*. Weber here excoriates the American pacifists, defending the war not by maintaining that it will lead to any overall diminishment of human suffering, but by claiming that the suffering that it entails is meaningful insofar as it is justified by a non-hedonistic end. He contrasts this with the meaningless suffering entailed by the division of labor, which is tolerated by the pacifists and which is a greater evil insofar as it is for the most part meaningless in terms of any higher human goals:

This is just another form of man’s struggle with man, one in which not millions but hundreds of millions of people, year after year, waste away in body and soul, sink without trace, or lead an existence truly much more bereft of any recognizable ‘meaning’ (*Sinn*) than the commitment of everybody ...to the cause of honor (*Ehre*), which means, simply, commitment to the historical obligations imposed on one’s nation by fate (*PW* 78; *GPS* 145).

³² David Owen draws attention to the striking similarity of this passage to Nietzsche’s own statements of concern with the kind of human being which future generations must breed. Cf. Owen (1992, p. 79-91).

For Weber, as for Nietzsche, the problem is not suffering *per se*, but meaningless suffering. He goes on to claim that the pacifists “are in opposition not just to war [...] but ultimately to each and every law of the social world, if this seeks to be a *place of worldly ‘culture’*, one devoted to the beauty, dignity, honor and greatness of man as a creature on this earth” (*PW* 78; *GPS* 145). Weber does, then, seem to adopt the view that human greatness is a value which trumps hedonism and which justifies extensive human suffering, both voluntary and non-voluntary.

So the problem faced by both Nietzsche and Weber is how human beings who are in the grip of the “last man” predicament can be made to embrace the higher, redemptive goals that would give life meaning. Nietzsche struggles with this problem throughout his career. In spite of grandiose claims in *Ecce Homo* about the world-transformative impact that his philosophy would have, he never identified any mechanism by which he might secure the needed transformation, or reevaluation of values.³³ Weber, on the other hand, claims to have discovered in his analyses of religion the kind of mechanism that can play this transformative role. It is of course charisma.

In *Politics as a Vocation*, Weber famously recommends charismatic leadership as the only means by which the mechanisms of modern politics can be made permeable by substantive human values.³⁴ In his earlier writings on charismatic authority, Weber has identified it as a means of galvanizing popular support without simply deferring to the popular will, but rather transforming that will through a display of extraordinary and compelling qualities. He writes:

the power of charisma rests upon the belief in revelation and in heroes, upon the conviction that certain manifestations – whether they be of a religious, ethical, artistic, scientific, political or other kind – are important and valuable; it rests upon “heroism” of

³³ Cf. Shaw (2007).

³⁴ *PW* 351; *GPS* 544 : “the only choice lies between a leadership democracy with a ‘machine’ and democracy without a leader, which means rule by the ‘professional politician’ who has no vocation, the type of man who lacks those inner, charismatic qualities which make a leader.”

an ascetic, military, judicial, magical or whichever kind. Charismatic belief revolutionizes men “from within” and shapes material and social conditions according to its revolutionary will (*ES* 1116; *WG* 657-8).

Unlike the socialist leaders who, we have seen, he describes as being subservient to the base motivations of their followers, the charismatic leader is able to co-opt the will of his followers to support his own values.³⁵

This galvanizing of the popular will in the service of common values is necessary, on Weber’s view, if a people is to have agency in world history and not simply be shaped passively by the machinery of modern bureaucratic, capitalist societies. In his essay on *Parliament and Government in Germany*, Weber employs the concept of a *Herrenvolk*, a “nation of masters” which controls its own affairs, to express this kind of political dignity (*PW* 269; *GPS* 442). Charisma is the means through which a leader can form such a people.

In *Economy and Society*, the raw, primitive power of charisma is described in Nietzschean terms as the power of the “blond beast” (*ES* 1112; *WG* 654). Nietzsche himself employs the blond beast metaphor, in his *Genealogy*, to describe such a brute, people-forming power.³⁶ But the kind of charismatic leadership which Weber ultimately recommends, though it employs this form of power, is ethically complex. The inner qualities of the charismatic leader envisaged by Weber are to constrain the use of this power, so that it is exercised out of a sense of

³⁵ Cf. *ES* 1113; *WG* 655: the charismatic leader “does not derive his claims from the will of his followers, in the manner of an election; rather, it is their *duty* to recognize his charisma.”

³⁶ Cf. Nietzsche, *GM* II, 17:

I used the word ‘state’: it is obvious what is meant by this – some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and master race, which, organized on a war footing, and with the power to organize, unscrupulously lays its dreadful paws on a populace which, though it might be vastly greater in number, is still shapeless and shifting.

responsibility to the people and not contempt for them.³⁷ Weber, seeing such contempt exhibited by contemporary “Nietzscheans,” explicitly warns against a superficial appropriation of Nietzsche’s idea of an aristocracy based on the “pathos of distance.”³⁸

After experiencing the horrors of World War I, Weber is especially concerned to specify that political judgment must be constrained by an ethic of responsibility. The endorsement of such an ethic seems to place some distance between Weber and Nietzsche, so far as their preparedness to inflict suffering for the sake of their higher, meaning-giving ends is concerned. It is therefore worth examining precisely what kind of constraints this ethic implies and whether it exempts Weber from the concerns about inhumanity that Nietzsche’s work raises.

³⁷ Cf. *ES* 1114; *WG* 656, on the religious model of the charismatic leader:

his divine mission must prove itself by *bringing well-being* to his faithful followers; if they do not fare well, he obviously is not the god-sent master. It is clear that this very serious meaning of genuine charisma is radically different from the convenient pretensions of the present “divine right of kings,” which harks back to the “inscrutable” will of the Lord, “to whom alone the monarch is responsible.” The very opposite is true of the genuinely charismatic ruler, who is responsible to the ruled – responsible, that is, to prove that he himself is indeed the master willed by God.

³⁸ On the “pathos of distance”, cf. *BGE* 257. Weber writes in *Suffrage and Democracy in Germany*, *PW* 122-3:

Various ‘prophecies’ produced under the influence of Nietzsche are based on a misconception, for ‘distance’ is certainly not to be achieved by standing on a pedestal of some ‘aristocratic’ contrast between oneself and the ‘all too many’; indeed, on the contrary, distance is always inauthentic if it needs this inner support nowadays.

David Owen has argued that we can find in Weber a much deeper and more genuinely Nietzschean account of and commitment to the pathos of distance. Cf. Owen (1991).

Weber distinguishes, in *Politics as a Vocation*, between the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility. The former is typified by the Christian who “does what is right and places the outcome in God’s hands,” whereas the latter weighs ends carefully against the necessary means, that is, where this includes all of the foreseeable consequences of acting to promote those ends (*PW* 359-60; *GPS* 551-2). The proponent of the ethic of responsibility, then, tries to take into account what Weber calls the “ethical irrationality of the world,” that is, the dangerous and violent means often required to achieve political ends, the inevitable shortcomings of men in pursuing them, and the unintended consequences which so often follow (*PW* 360; *GPS* 552).

The ethic of responsibility seems to indicate a humane desire to diminish human suffering. But it seeks to do so only along one specific dimension. It aims to eliminate *futile* suffering. It follows from Weber’s conviction that suffering should be meaningful, that is, justified by intrinsically valuable ends. The necessary means of politics is violence, or the infliction of suffering. But the ends to be achieved by such violence often cannot, owing to the problem of unintended consequences, be assured. So even political actors with good motivations can generate a great deal of futile suffering. The leader who adopts the ethic of responsibility strives to limit such futile suffering and to ensure that suffering is, as far as possible, meaningful in relation to their goals.

This preoccupation with minimizing futile suffering does seem to distinguish Weber from Nietzsche, even though it ought logically to follow from Nietzsche’s own conception of meaning-generating goals. But it remains the case that Weber, like Nietzsche, believes that political life should be shaped not by an overall desire to diminish suffering *per se*, but rather by the aim of making suffering as meaningful as possible. Charismatic, meaning-conferring leaders should be

prepared to encourage voluntary suffering and inflict non-voluntary suffering for the sake of the non-hedonistic goals that make the spectacle of human life on this planet worthwhile.³⁹

In Weber's work as in Nietzsche's the content of these goals remains inscrutable. We are only told that the charismatic leader must have a passionate devotion to a cause, "to the god or demon who commands that cause" (*PW* 353; *GPS* 545). Weber lapses here into irrationalism and obscurity. True to his own understanding of what constitutes a successful theodicy, he brings to a halt the demand for justifications before the bare faith that there is some justification that will make human existence in all its suffering worthwhile. From there he asks us to follow blindly whichever charismatic leader succeeds in commanding our devotion. His surrogate religious solution, like the solution of the Calvinist, is "rationally closed."

Disenchantment and the demise of the theodicy-demand

Weber's political thought, in aiming to resolve the "last man" problem in the direction of the anti-hedonistic ideal, seems to make permissible a broad range of political attitudes to suffering, whether it is voluntary or non-voluntary, natural and inevitable, or deliberately inflicted. He preserves the rich array of attitudes and meanings that belief in supra-human purposes once permitted us. I want to suggest, however, that insofar as this is justified, on his view, by our need to satisfy the theodicy-demand, its basis is questionable. His own insights into secularization, and particularly his account of disenchantment, seem to deny the inevitable

³⁹ Tracy Strong views Weber's conception of charismatic leadership as a secularized religious ethics, which aims to fulfill our need for redemption. He claims that since Weber, unlike Nietzsche, does not explicitly repudiate the moral point of view, his own vision may be more insidious, more permissive, and more dangerous. Cf. Strong (1992, p. 15) and (2002, p. 15-41; at p.41).

persistence of such a demand. And if we do not take that demand to be psychologically basic, we do not, I shall argue, need to fear that all of our non-hedonistic motivations are under threat. Disenchantment itself ought to solve the “last man” problem for us.

The Schopenhauerean assumption that I have attributed to both Nietzsche and Weber consists in the following claim: suffering will always outweigh pleasure in human life and this extent of suffering will always seem unjustified by any merely human ends. According to this kind of holistic calculus, we will always, if we are confined to merely naturalistic narratives, be suffering too much. This insight will inhibit our motivation to take on even more suffering as a means to non-hedonistic ends and we will slide into the exclusive hedonism of the last man. But the holistic calculus seems to me to be flawed. It adopts a notion of justification derived from suffering which results from intentional human actions and illegitimately extends it to all suffering. Even on Nietzsche’s and Weber’s own views, I shall claim, this is an error. Much of the suffering that we undergo (illnesses, the deaths of loved ones, the fear of one’s own death etc. etc.) should not raise any demand for justification and although it will inevitably be burdensome to us, even unbearably so, it should not weigh on us as being unjustified. If it does, we are still operating with an essentially theistic view of the world.

Suffering is often clearly justification-apt. The way in which it becomes so is through interaction with intentions. We might intentionally take on suffering for the sake of some end and will wonder whether the amount of suffering is justified by the end. Or non-voluntary suffering might be intentionally inflicted on us for the sake of ends that we hold to be justified or unjustified, and to an extent that we find justified or unjustified by those ends. Or we might undergo non-voluntary suffering that could have been avoided through some intentional action of a third party; if suffering is intentionally allowed the question of whether it is justified by some end again arises. But the justification-aptness of suffering always relies on some such intentional relation of means to ends. In the absence of this intentional structure (for example in the case of unavoidable natural occurrences) it is simply not justification-apt.

We have to distinguish, then, between suffering that is not justification-apt and unjustified suffering. Suffering will be unjustified if it is inflicted to no just end, or if it outweighs the ends that it is intended to serve. But suffering that is not intentionally caused or allowed is not unjustified; it is justification-inapt.

In a world invested with interfering gods and spirits, many kinds of suffering, including being struck by lightning or getting cancer, might seem to be the product of intentional actions and hence be deemed justification-apt; they will provoke the questions “Why?” or “Why me?” or “Why so much?”. In a monotheistic universe in which an omnipotent and omniscient God is ultimately responsible for everything that happens, all forms of suffering are justification-apt; it is all either intentionally caused or allowed by God. It makes sense for the theist to demand an overall justification for everything that happens and to want to account for the precise extent of suffering in the world.

The Schopenhauerean calculus adopted by Nietzsche and Weber treats all suffering implicitly in this theistic way. The entirety of human suffering is treated as justification-apt, but in the absence of a theodicy the demand for justifications cannot for the most part be met; most of our suffering appears unjustified. “Only as an aesthetic phenomenon,” Nietzsche tells us, “can the world seem justified.” But the mistake here is to hold that all the suffering in the world requires justification.

If we make that mistake it will always seem that our suffering outweighs any human ends, so no merely human ends that we adopt can possibly justify an increase in it; hence the apparent threat to non-hedonistic motivations. Once we acknowledge that much of our suffering is not unjustified but normatively insignificant that threat should disappear. Suffering that is not intentionally caused should not be weighed against our ends or purposes.

If Weber had followed through consistently on his own insights he would have come to this conclusion and the “last man” problem would have lost its traction for him. For on Weber’s

construal, disenchantment involves precisely the replacement of belief in intentional causes by mechanical causes. Intellectualization, he tells us:

means principally that there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service' (*FMW* 139; *GAW* 594).

And Weber remarks at several points that this essentially mechanistic worldview not only robs the world of meaning, it erodes the very demand for meaning. He goes as far as to say:

Who – aside from certain big children who are indeed found in the natural sciences – still believes that the findings of astronomy, biology, physics, or chemistry could teach us anything about the *meaning* of the world? If there is any such “meaning,” along what road could one come upon its tracks? If these natural sciences lead to anything in this way, they are apt to make the belief that there is such a thing as the “meaning” of the universe die out in its very roots (*FMW* 142; *GAW* 597).

In other words, the mechanistic worldview in no way relates events or states of affairs in the world to supra-human purposes, so the very belief in such purposes becomes irrelevant to us. But it also follows that this worldview cancels the demand for justifications since this demand only arises in relation to intentions or purposes.⁴⁰ Weber comes tantalizing close, then, to

⁴⁰ Nietzsche himself acknowledges this in *GS* 109, where he writes:

let us beware of thinking that the world is a living being. [...]. How could we reproach or praise the universe! Let us beware of attributing to it heartlessness or unreason or their opposites: it is neither perfect, nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it want to become any of these things; in no way does it strive to imitate man! In no way do our aesthetic and moral judgments apply to it! [...] Once you know that there are no purposes, you also know that there is no accident, for only against a world of purposes does the word ‘accident’ have a meaning.

acknowledging that on a secular worldview the theodicy-demand disappears. It no longer makes sense to demand a holistic justification for suffering *tout court*. But Weber refrains, perhaps on account of his persisting religious sensibilities, from drawing this conclusion.⁴¹ The “last man” problem appears to be a vestige of a religious worldview, the product not of secularization but of incomplete secularization.

Conclusion

If the “last man” problem is deflated, our commitment to taking on voluntary suffering for the sake of non-hedonistic ends, such as art or human understanding, no longer appears to be threatened. But might Weber nevertheless be justifiably concerned about secular politics? Politics, on Weber’s view, has to involve the infliction (or threat of infliction) of non-voluntary suffering. Secularism in politics deprives us of the justifying role of theodicies that, as Weber points out, have previously supported the infliction and toleration of non-voluntary suffering. And if we deny the persistence of the theodicy-demand, we will also be deprived of the secular theodicy-substitutes proposed by Nietzsche and Weber. Secularism, then, necessarily narrows the

But he does not follow through on this claim when it comes to assessing the demand for an overall meaning for suffering, which he apparently continues to see as a basic feature of human psychology.

⁴¹ Cf. *ES* 506; *WG* 308: “As intellectualism suppresses belief in magic, the world’s processes become disenchanted, lose their magical significance, and henceforth simply ‘are’ and ‘happen’ but no longer signify anything.” However, Weber sees this development not as diminishing the demand for meaning, but rather exacerbating it: “As a consequence, there is a growing demand that the world and the total pattern of life be subject to an order that is significant and meaningful.”

realm of legitimate coercion. Does this mean that secularism commits us to political hedonism, or that no non-hedonistic ends will be held to justify coercion?

It may still be the case that secular leaders can galvanize populations around non-hedonistic ends for the sake of which coercion is held to be legitimate. But Weber's basic intuition about the implications of secularism for politics may be correct: it seems plausible that it will be much harder to generate agreement on such ends in the absence of the kind of ultimate justifications that theodicies provide. If that is the case, it might turn out that secularism is less conducive to legitimating political coercion for any end other than the hedonistic one of promoting an overall reduction in suffering. And secularism does not just place restrictions on the deliberate infliction of suffering; it also constrains our interpretations of the suffering that results from natural, non-intentional causes. Disease, for example, cannot be regarded as a punishment, devastating hurricanes as a test, or famine as a purge of the sinful. If no such "meanings" for non-voluntary suffering are permissible, we lack any justification for tolerating it where it is avoidable. Secularism would then seem to commit us to the eradication of natural, non-voluntary suffering where this is possible. This would seem to imply, then, an implicit aspiration to eradicate non-voluntary suffering, and hence to delegitimize any coercion for non-hedonistic ends.

So Weber's work does seem to raise interesting questions about the implications of secularism for politics. These will apply to polities that are secular by virtue of deep change in popular belief and also to those liberal polities that are secular by virtue of excluding religious arguments from the public realm. I doubt that these questions can be answered a priori. But if it did turn out that secular polities were peculiarly susceptible to the hedonism that Nietzsche and Weber describe, the question would be whether we should view this outcome as a threat to human dignity, or as the attainment of a distinctively humane form of politics. If Weber does give us reason to believe that secularism tends to promote the political ideal of eliminating non-voluntary suffering, this will indeed be a victory for the ideal of those who, as Nietzsche puts it, proclaim

“‘sympathy for all that suffers’ – and [who] view suffering itself as something that needs to be *abolished*.” But this ideal need not be viewed as a threat to human dignity, even if we hold that our dignity does indeed require the attainment of non-hedonistic ends. Rather, it might reasonably be understood as a necessary precondition for the existence of the kind of society in which our highest dignity can be realized through the voluntary pursuit of those ends. If modern secular polities are in fact oriented by that ideal, as contemporary proponents of the “last man” thesis have claimed, we might, against Nietzsche and Weber, consider it an unrivalled achievement in the long, bloody history of human politics.

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