

RESEARCH NOTE: READING NIETZSCHE AND WEBER:
AN ESSAY ON RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND THE HUMAN
SPIRIT IN MODERNITY

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Mid-American Review of Sociology, 1993, Vol XVII, No. 1: 45-55

This essay discusses the views of Max Weber and Friedrich Nietzsche on the questions of religion, science, and the human spirit in the modern age. The essay draws from Daybreak, Twilight of the Idols, and The Anti-Christ by Nietzsche, and The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and two other short essays by Weber, cognizant that relevant passages could be found in other works by both theorists. The essay seeks also to initiate critical discussion of the above issues within the social sciences, and calls upon social scientists, particularly sociologists, to carefully examine these issues, canonical work within the field, and our interpretations of famous theorists that we generally take for granted.

Contemporary social science, and I think sociology in particular, has neglected or ignored Nietzsche. In the past, Nietzsche was grossly misinterpreted by many, including his racist sister, Elizabeth Foerster-Nietzsche, and by Nazi dogmatists who appropriated bits of his work completely out of context. These associations, among others, perhaps account for a lack of interest among contemporary theorists to properly understand Nietzsche's work.

This is unfortunate, because close reading of the actual text reveals a social philosophy absolutely opposed to any totalizing scheme or ordering of experience and knowledge. Likewise, Nietzsche fervently opposes any totalitarian regime, especially those supported with dogmatic principles elevated to religious status that mystify the world on the basis of abstract faith or extrawordly 'truth' or 'divine' directives beyond the capability of human beings. The ideology of Nazi Germany typifies in almost pure form a secular religion constructed on faith in the mythical 'superhuman' or 'divine' attributes of the leader, who himself battles with the abstract and extrawordly forces of Fate and Destiny (see Fromm [1941] 1969).

Even a brief reading of virtually any text by Nietzsche reveals a profound contempt for such forms of social thought and organization, rather than admiration or support for totalizing ideologies premised on ideational abstraction, myth, or folklore. In short, Nietzsche detests transcendental ideas ungrounded in the real workings of the material world, yet which suppose supersedence over the activities of the here-and-now. On the contrary, he calls for an experienced-based perspective that seeks to uncover subtlety and create clarity through tireless refinement-- a type of incremental and perspectival knowledge acquired through methodical and critical inquiry that forever seeks, that forever

questions itself and everything else. Nietzsche agrees with Goethe's Faust, that "es irrt der Mensch, so lang er strebt" (a human being falters, so long as we struggle) and also that complacency damns us to stagnation, which opens the door to oppression, should we ever remark in our quest for knowledge: "verweile doch, du bist so schoen" (wait a moment, you are so rapturous).¹ The quest for those who seek knowledge is endless and indeterminate; it leads us to ultimate uncertainty-- the more we know, the more we don't know-- yet simultaneously challenges our human spirit to new heights even as we risk 'damnation.' The ravages of intelligence can be merciless.

Unfortunately, we in the social sciences have misread, misinterpreted, or simply failed to read Nietzsche carefully, if at all. We have accepted uncritically somebody else's interpretation, maybe based on somebody else's interpretation, to the point that our understanding amounts to little more than gossip. In general, the casual reader tends to notice or think about only the most outrageous statements in Nietzsche (of which there are many).

In addition to purposely exaggerated arguments, Nietzsche used various other stylistical devices to intentionally confuse the casual reader, to force interaction and analysis rather than passive reading and absorption-- as he said, to philosophize with a hammer. To this end, Nietzsche took great delight:

Nowadays it is not only my habit, it is also to my taste-- a malicious taste, perhaps?-- no longer to write anything which does not reduce to despair every sort of man who is 'in a hurry' (Nietzsche 1982: 5).

Furthermore, he asks us to do the one thing, to extend him the one courtesy which we have not accorded him. He asks us to "read well, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers... my patient friends... learn to read me well!" (Nietzsche 1982: 5). And yet, this is exactly what we have not done.

As I draw out Nietzsche's views on religion and science, and compare this to Weber, it should become quickly apparent just how poorly we have understood Nietzsche. However, some serious flaws remain even after careful reading-- most significantly-- his misogynistic attitude towards women. Although we should not ignore his absurdly crude and vicious arguments concerning women, and I definitely do not make excuses for it, they are not the focus of this paper.

Since sociologists hold Max Weber in much higher regard, I do not think he requires an introduction like the one I have just delivered to justify a serious discussion of Nietzsche. I think the well established 'Weber industry,' as it were, renders Weber as a timeless canon within sociology, and thus always a legitimate focus of discussion, though not always an open discussion. I will develop my interpretations of his thoughts on religion and science directly from his own writings, and generally conclude that we have misregarded Weber as well. Since this is an essay, I make no claims to a complete and systematic reading of either theorist, and expect that we could find relevant passages in other works by both authors. I seek mainly to inspire critical dialogue on issues that I

believe stand at the core of social scientific theory and research through a close reading of particular texts.

Weber initially creates two polar categories of religious types, or more specifically, two contrasting natures of religion: asceticism and mysticism. Each at the core generates a worldview that, because religious practice in general demands adherence through an abstract leap of faith, premises on omnipotent deity(ies), and the corresponding futility of human opposition to divine ordinance. Although both Weber and Nietzsche refer to christianity and other established religions for examples, they both define religion generally to include any set of beliefs organized into a dogmatic and unquestionable system (at least in its essential legitimacy) predicated on the irrationality of faith, regardless of how internally rational the system operates.

Asceticism in general becomes a religion that "operates within the world... [and] in mastering the world, seeks to tame what is creatural and wicked through work in worldly vocation" (Weber 1958b: 325). In contrast, mysticist religions intend a person to let go of the material world and join in a more ethereal generality of awareness abstracted completely from the specific realities encountered in lived experience. In both cases however, we see a negation of material reality; in mysticism, one rejects the affairs of life as mundane. In particular historical representations of asceticism, Weber notes that it also rejects the world, especially in those forms that seek to overcome "creatural wickedness in the actor's own nature. For then it enhances the concentration on the firmly established God-willed and active redemptory accomplishments to the point of avoiding any action in the orders of the world" (Weber 1958b: 326). Thus, Weber recognizes that, despite foundational differences, religion in practice tends to converge, wherein the general characteristics of religious thought and practice is rejection of the real world and its concerns. More specifically, religion denies the very things most closely associated with material or creatural existence: sexuality (not to be confused with sex for procreation), sensual pleasures in general, and most importantly for our discussion-- intellectual and scientific endeavor-- the discovery of human power and potential over and against divine power. As Weber states outright, "there is absolutely no religion working as a vital force which is not compelled at some point to demand the *credo non quod, sed quia absurdum*-- the sacrifice of the intellect" (Weber 1958b: 352).

Religion and science, the latter I will also refer to as intellectuality, necessarily conflict, because each makes sense of the world in fundamentally different ways:

Religion claims to offer an intimate stand towards the world by virtue of a direct grasp of the world's 'meaning'... It claims to unlock the meaning of the world not by means of the intellect but by virtue of a charisma of illumination... to those who make use of the respective technique and free themselves from the misleading and deceptive surrogates... the confined impressions of the senses and the empty abstractions of the intellect (Weber 1958b: 352).

Religion in all cases assumes a divinely ordained order to existence, which humans can grasp only through religious faith and practice, which eventually at some point requires a rejection of this world in favor of transcendent and irrational belief that hinges on faith. God will never impart meaning or salvation to the non-believer. In essence, religion sees the world and its creatures as imperfect-- less than divine. Whether through ascetic regulation in worldly action, or mystical abandonment of this world, all religions share the commonality of other-worldliness, that reliance on human effort alone always falls short and even damns us (a theme maintained by Goethe in *Faust*, although God intercedes to save Faust), because ultimately it is not ourselves or other humans we must please, but rather a transcendent God in some form.

Nietzsche sees religion as far more malicious towards humanity, and not just the negation of intellect and reason, but of life itself. Religion does not merely seek meaning instead of intellectual knowledge, but replaces the experiences of everyday life with an abstract doctrine that dictates behavior and moral values. Nietzsche firmly detests any grand scheme or system of external control and meaning, which he argues "belies a lack of integrity." Such abstractly derived beliefs always conflict with real life and form the eternal enemy of intellectual and material based knowledge, which is knowledge derived from lived experience, interpreted and implemented by the human will to expression and achievement. The more abstract a religious system, the farther removed from intellectual endeavor and lived human experience it becomes, and therefore denies everything human: feeling, emotion, sensuality, the will to meaning, the will to life.

Of the goals of religion, specifically the transcendence of the physical world into the divine, Nietzsche holds only the greatest contempt: "pure spirit is pure stupidity" (Nietzsche 1968: 135), the ultimate ignorance. The physical world is where we live, and where we must act-- since we are after all human, all too human. Nietzsche values our humanness above all, and precisely what we might consider a weakness, Nietzsche considers our greatest strength in the modern world.

Feeling and passion, experience and sensation are the essence of Nietzsche's analysis of modernity. These uniquely human things are not ideals or lofty virtues, but rather constitute a material core of human existence; with these attributes, humans become makers of life, of civilization, and develop understanding of human activity in the world. Modernity for Nietzsche creates a very complex, if not infinitely complex social system which affords great opportunity and purpose, a potential for freedom of mind and spirit, yet simultaneously creates great herds of nameless, faceless, passionless people who lack creativity and life force, who lack a will to live life rather than just survive the contradictory complexities of modernity. In the emergent herd mentality, we find at the core the comforting belief that "all truth is simple" to which Nietzsche responds: "is that not a compound lie?" (Nietzsche 1968: 33).

These compound lies are the ideologies of mass culture, and the representative institutions that govern activity, routinize the everyday, and separate people from social obligation. In earlier times, conventional religion served this function, but Nietzsche finds all such manifestations contemptible:

I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity (Nietzsche 1968: 35).

From here then, he launches a scathing de(cons)tructive attack on the representative idols of modernity, which culminates in *The Anti-Christ* with the dismantling of the ultimate system of control-- christianity.

The idols of modernity exist as apparitions that represent life, but in themselves are not real, nor substitutes, but only an illusionary representation systematically endowed as real by human failure to seize control over the systems of our own creation, whether bureaucratic, symbolic, cultural, or whatever. As we fail to critically challenge conventionality, our conventions appear separate from us, and in turn rule over us. The idols, or ideological symbols, and the systems of which they are a facet, instill to a previously unobtainable degree routine and complacency which Nietzsche identifies as the greatest bane of creativity, insight, and the spirit of modernity, which depends on such human endeavors:

...there is nothing more thoroughly harmful to freedom than liberal institutions. One knows, indeed, what they bring about: they undermine the will to power,... they make small, cowardly, and smug-- it is the herd animal which triumphs with them every time. Liberalism, in plain words, is reductio to the herd animal... (Nietzsche 1968: 102).

Nietzsche detests systems which create homogeneity and promote herd behavior with a corresponding herd consciousness of generalized weakness, futility, and nondescription rather than individual will to distinction, purpose, and meaning. The social leveling effect of the liberal institution² crushes the spirit even as it generalizes and distributes (though not equally) power, knowledge, and energy. The great innovator, the cultural renegade finds little opportunity when bureaucratic institutions are firmly entrenched.

The totality of modern institutional systems and their corresponding ideologies of control become a kind of Kafkaesque nightmare for Nietzsche, that bind the individual to society in a stuporous servitude. Without individual will and critical insight coupled with an internal and self-experience based integrity, leaders of a system can commit any atrocity and justify it on the highest, yet most abstract, moral grounds in the absence of dissent. The greatest abstraction from life, and thus the greatest 'evil,' is Christian doctrine, which here exemplifies Nietzsche's argument:

...we find that which has been revered as God not godlike, but pitiable, absurd, harmful, not merely an error but a crime against life... a religion like Christianity, which is at no point in contact with actuality,... I bring against the Christian church the most horrible charge any prosecutor has ever uttered. It has left nothing untouched by its depravity, it has made of every value a disvalue, of every truth a lie, of every kind of integrity a vileness of the soul... of holiness draining away all blood, all love, all hope for life; the Beyond as the will to deny reality of every kind... against life itself... When the natural consequences of an act are no longer 'natural,' but thought of as effected by the conceptual ghosts of superstition, by God, by spirits, by souls,... then the precondition for knowledge has been destroyed-- then one has committed the greatest crime against humanity (Nietzsche 1968: 172, 175, 196)

because humanity requires knowledge to build civilization, to render justice, to find meaning in life. Idealism, as described above, inverts meaning and values, and opens the door for exploitation, corruption, and oppression at the hands of those who control the earthly system built on extra-human or transcendental beliefs. More specifically, such systems absolve individual actors of responsibility, or even classes of people, and reduce humans to mere agents that serve some extrawordly directive, such as God's will, the need for profit, or whatever other source of meaning and purpose we worship as divine.

Weber argues similarly, that people may replace the traditional religious beliefs with various contemporary values, but in so doing may likewise deify the new values. Although, for example, the spirit of modern capitalism for Weber developed from Protestant religious teaching, most moderns have lost this historical connection, even as they maintain and augment the spirit of the belief:

Any relationship between religious beliefs and conduct is generally absent... The people filled with the spirit of capitalism today tend to be indifferent, if not hostile, to the Church. The thought of the pious boredom of paradise has little attraction for their active natures... (Weber 1958a: 70).

Weber expands the argument to say that since modern society "rests on mechanical foundations" (Weber 1958a: 181-182) of routinization and rationalization, no longer needs the support of religious type beliefs, at least not in the ideal-type. He anticipates a kind of empty functionality, a society in which people go through the motions, characterized by "mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance (Weber 1958a: 182) or "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" as Shakespeare said. Thus both Nietzsche and Weber hold that simple rejection of some traditional belief does not necessarily lead to enlightenment. For Nietzsche especially, we can dogmatize any of the modern forms of social organization, and thus grant them a religiosity no less transcendental than christianity. Nietzsche expects the rise of new secular religions, of which he names (vulgar) socialism as an example.

Both christianity and socialism create a totalizing ideology and level the human spirit and will of individual creators to a standardized mediocrity:

when the anarchist... demands with righteous indignation 'his rights,' 'justice,' 'equal rights,' he is only acting under the influence of his want of culture, which prevents his understanding why he is really suffering... 'if I am canaille, you ought to be so too': on the basis of this logic one makes revolutions... Whether one attributes one's feeling vile to others or to oneself-- the socialist does the former, the christian for example the latter-- makes no essential difference... And when the christian condemns, calumniates, and befouls the world, he does so from the same instinct from which the socialist worker condemns, calumniates, and befouls society: even the socialist too anticipates... even the Beyond-- why a beyond if not as a means of befouling the Here-and-Now? (Nietzsche 1968: 96-97).

Both systems are schemes designed not to alleviate suffering, but to teach people how to bear the injustice and cultural vacancy of modernity, to exist without meaning.

Moreover, we have become lax and allowed our institutions to rule over us in reified domination rather than serve us, "having lost all the instincts out of which institutions grow" (Nietzsche 1968: 103). Implicitly, Nietzsche emphasizes that the culture of interaction between human beings (culture) holds meaning and value in life; the institutions are only functional systems that at best fulfill the mundane requirements of society, but it is active, vigorous, thinking people that create meaning. Thus, the institutions of socialism and christianity fail for the same reason. They both fail in the Here-and-Now, and become programmatic codes of behavior focused on unreal and transcendental events-- the Revolution, or The Last Judgement. Yet ideas alone have no existence without adherents, and no social significance without material implementation. In other words, ideas do not exist separately from the people who wield them.

The priestly caste as a class of rulers has constructed a formal structure of control and rationalization around the fundamental fiction and irrationality of religious belief, which wields great power because of its abstraction and 'beyondness' in the minds of those lacking experiential knowledge to deconstruct the 'mystery of faith.' Nietzsche and Marx (see Marx and Engels 1970) seem in accord, in that both develop similar materialist perspectives that emphasize the real, corporeal world and actual experience. Religion serves only to perpetuate itself and maintain the privileges of the priestly caste, and may even devise a 'science' to 'investigate' the relationship of religious entities to the real world:

In Christianity neither morality nor religion come into contact with reality at any point. Nothing but imaginary causes (God, soul, ego, spirit, free will or unfree will); nothing but imaginary effects (sin, redemption, grace, forgiveness of sins). A traffic between imaginary beings (God, spirit, souls); an imaginary psychology... (repentance, sting of conscience,

temptation by the devil, the proximity of God, the last judgement, eternal life)... (Nietzsche 1968: 135).

Nietzsche argues that religion is not even a dream or an expression of some human condition projected to an ultimate conclusion, because such a conclusion develops from and mirrors reality. Instead, religion contemplates "a hatred of the natural... it is the expression of a profound discontent with the actual" (Nietzsche 1968: 135). So, Nietzsche concludes that:

A religion like Christianity,... which crumbles away as soon as actuality comes into contact with it at any point whatsoever, must naturally be a mortal enemy of the wisdom of the world, that is to say, of science (Nietzsche 1968: 173).

Furthermore, he sees religion in its routinized form, a mentioned before, as an instrument of control which a priestly class wields consciously and maliciously to maintain its position:

Has the famous story which stands at the beginning of the bible really been understood, the story of God's absolute terror of science?... This priestly book begins, as is only proper, with the priest's great difficulty: He has only one great danger, consequently God has only one great danger (Nietzsche 1968: 173).

That danger is worldly scientific knowledge derived from lived human experience and applied according to human purposes that demystifies existence and reveals human potential, and banishes the paralyzing ignorance of religious doctrine.

Once we recognize religion for what it is, as Weber calls us to do, or obliterate it from all remembrance, as Nietzsche rages, where and how then shall we venture using our science? Nietzsche seeks to develop the individual human spirit, freed from the restrictions of dogmatic ritual and belief that direct rather than serve human initiative, subvert rather than enhance creativity and progress. Nietzsche wants a method; he does not seek or even expect the possibility of ultimate and immutable truth, just as Faust discovers, but in essence seeks a way of life that renews itself through inquiry and challenge, through the very act of living:

We ourselves, we free spirits, are already a revaluation of all values, an incarnate declaration of war... The most valuable insights are the last to be discovered; but the most valuable insights are methods. All the methods, all the prerequisites of our present day scientificity have for millennia been the objects of the profoundest contempt: on their account... one was considered an enemy of God... our practices our quiet, cautious, mistrustful manner-- all this appeared... contemptible to mankind (Nietzsche 1968: 133).

In short, Nietzsche calls on each of us to create meaning, to live as Tennyson said: To strive, to seek to find, and not to yield!

Generally, Nietzsche holds that people suffer in modernity because of a lack of cultural spirit, of the will to creation, decision, discernment, and responsibility as a human being, as a Mensch. As he reiterates over and over, the systems of modernity hold "that which is most harmful to life is here called true, that which enhances, intensifies, affirms, justifies it and causes it to triumph is called false" (Nietzsche 1968: 130). Institutionalized and total systems, whether ideational or material, do not promote dissent or critical awareness. Only a culture of critical awareness, of profound intensity and creative force to challenge and remake knowledge, to push the boundaries of understanding outward can play this role in society: "Yes to life beyond death and change: true life is a collective continuation of life... For the eternal joy in creating to exist, for the will to life eternally to affirm itself" (Nietzsche 1968: 119-120) there must be hardship. This opposition does not crush those who dare face it (he is speaking of cultural struggle, not of militarism) but rather raises them to new levels: "what does not kill me makes me stronger" (Nietzsche 1968: 33).

I think that ultimately, Nietzsche sees society (at least in some form) as necessary; he is not an anarchist nor a relativist, but a social theorist. As he said, "it is a collective continuation of life" in real material terms that we seek, a social process and method of living unburdened by superstitious belief. Yet we cannot realistically hope to solve the complex problems of modern society, especially not with some grand scheme of transcendent salvation, but we can confront our problems with passion and determination, deal with them, and in the process comprehend and progress in the Here-and-Now.

Weber actually draws a similar conclusion, although his audience requires a different tone, and a perspective more compatible with established intellectual and academic practice. He argues that science at all times reveals its own shortcomings; the more we know, the more we realize we don't know. Knowledge is incremental and never absolute. Weber I think also sees science primarily as a method, which should never be dogmatized into a religion, which unfortunately academia has already done. In Weber we find this:

In science, each of us knows that what he has accomplished will be antiquated in ten, twenty, fifty years. This is the fate to which science is subjected; it is the very meaning of scientific work... Every scientific fulfillment raises new questions; it asks to be surpassed and outdated (Weber 1958b: 138).

The pursuit of knowledge does not in itself enlighten any of us, nor does it necessarily impact on our daily lives, because "the increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not... indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives" (Weber 1958b: 139). The accumulation of scientific knowledge means instead that one can in modern society learn nearly anything one desires, and in this capacity lies the potential for liberation, but

clearly, such liberation, such freedom through intellectuality is entirely social. Also, this carries tremendous ramifications that fundamentally change the meaning of life, and divert humanity away from the mysteries of religion:

...it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play,... this means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means... technical means and calculations perform the service. ...Now this process of disenchantment,... in general this progress to which science belongs as a link and motive force, do they have any meaning that go beyond the purely practical and technical? (Weber 1958b: 141).

Weber answers basically 'no.' Above all, science cannot answer the most important question: "what shall we do, and how shall we live? That science does not give an answer to this is indisputable" (Weber 1958b: 143). Science does impart clarity, and delineates various elements of existence from the generalisms of the pre-modern period, but in every instance requires interpretations such that adherence to some worldview negates some other position: "you serve this god, and you offend the other god when you decide to adhere to this position" (Weber 1958b: 151). We can at least remain consistent with our own values, although science cannot tell us what those values should be, unless we prefer the empty mechanization of technical proficiency and fail to recognize that "we are all enriched by the messy reality which is our lot" (Elshtain 1990: 118). Eventually, we must make decisions and confront life, drawing on the scientific "wisdom of the world" available at the moment and cognizant of the risk that this knowledge is always incomplete and imperfect.

At this point, only some people will join Nietzsche and the "hyperboreans" who boldly go where no one has gone before. Weber remains much more sympathetic to those who stay behind:

To the person who cannot bear the fate of the times... one must say: may he rather return silently, without the usual publicity build-up of renegades, but simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are open widely and compassionately for him (Weber 1958b: 155).

For those of us truly modern spirits, "we shall set to work and meet the demands of the day, in human relations as well as in our vocation." I prefer an attitude somewhere between Weber's sober practicality and Nietzsche's demanding exuberance. As e.e. cummings said: "there's a hell of a good universe next door. let's go!"

ENDNOTES

1. I have translated the German myself. In so doing, I have admittedly removed Goethe's sexist language, but retained the spirit of the phrases. There are

- probably better, more poetic translations available, but I think that mine express the relevant thoughts.
2. By "liberal," I think Nietzsche means generally the routinized, bureaucratic institutions of modern society. Thus, the contrasting form is not 'conservative' as in the American political sense, but rather social arrangements that historically precede the modern bureaucracy, such as feudal social contracts.

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