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WEBER'S "POLITICS AS A VOCATION": SOME AMERICAN CONSIDERATIONS

ALAN MITTLEMAN*

In "Politics as a Vocation," a lecture delivered at the University of Munich in January 1919, Max Weber argued for a morality requisite to politics. He explored the idea of politics as a vocation or calling (*Beruf*) and inquired into what are the ethical consequences of such a calling.

In this essay, I reflect on whether Weber's political morality has relevance to our American circumstances. Should we be guided in our public life by what Weber called the ethic of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*), as opposed to its permanent alternative, the ethic of absolute ends (*Gesinnungsethik*)? On its face, the answer appears obvious. Who would not prefer, for public life, a sober, prudential ethic—one that weighs ends and means or balances intentions and consequences—over a purist moralism? The one is about compromise and adjustment. The other is about sanctification or salvation. Surely the latter has limited applicability to a democratic politics. This facile response, however, ignores at least two important considerations.

First, change in American political life often has been driven by eruptive purist moralism. Such crusades as abolitionism, temperance, women's suffrage, the civil rights movement, opposition to various wars, indeed, the Revolution itself drew their energy from morally uncompromising zealotry stoked by religious conviction. The ongoing, heavy engagement of religious persons and groups in American political life seems a standing offense to Weber's concept of political morality, at least at first blush. Although religion-rich politics in America constitutes, in Weberian terms, the routinization of charisma (consider the Christian Coalition today compared with fifteen years ago when it was led

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by the charismatic Ralph Reed), there is plenty of non-routinized charisma at work as well.¹ Presidential elections, especially close ones, sometimes turn on the indefinable, charismatic attributes (or the deficit thereof) of the candidates. Weber did not exempt the United States from his dark predictions of an increasingly “disenchanted” secular modernity, but in this he seems mistaken. Part of American exceptionalism *vis-à-vis* Europe is surely its selective resistance to secularization, displayed in the religious moralism of its politics. “Values voters,” who vote against their “rational” interests, confound somewhat the Weberian assumption of inexorable secularization.² As difficult as it is for politics to accommodate fervent religion, it is part of the American tradition and has arguably, to take a non-Weberian stance, contributed much good over the centuries. Biblical religion is one of the “two wings,” in Michael Novak’s felicitous phrase, on which the American eagle takes flight.³ Can the continuing salience of Judeo-Christian religiosity in our politics square with Weberian political morality?

Second, Weber’s ethic has come in for tremendous criticism from the cultural Right as fundamentally antithetical to America’s founding principles. In Leo Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* and in his disciple Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, Weber is the needle through which Nietzschean toxins enter the American bloodstream. Strauss and Bloom believe that America rises or falls on the basis of the idea of natural right—that there is a truly just way of life capable of being known by natural reason and lived out in political society—and that Weber dooms and damns all of this through value-freedom. Weber, as these critics see him, tears the foundations out from under ethics and makes ethics depend on irrational acts of will.⁴ No one way

1. There is literature on the disenchanting effects of political engagement by former Moral Majority insiders. See, e.g., ED DOBSON & ED HINDSON, *THE SEDUCTION OF POWER* (1988); CAL THOMAS & ED DOBSON, *BLINDED BY MIGHT* (1999).

2. For a lively argument on how an orientation toward social values allegedly undercuts rational, economic interests, see THOMAS FRANK, *WHAT’S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS?: HOW CONSERVATIVES WON THE HEART OF AMERICA* (2004).

3. MICHAEL NOVAK, *ON TWO WINGS: HUMBLE FAITH AND COMMON SENSE AT THE AMERICAN FOUNDING* 27 (2002).

4. A representative citation from Strauss:

The thought of the present age is characterized by disenchantment or unqualified ‘this-worldliness,’ or irreligion. What claims to be freedom from delusions is as much and as little delusion as the faiths which prevailed in the past and which may prevail in the future. We are irreligious because fate forces us to be irreligious and for no other reason. . . . [Weber] was certain that all devotion to causes or ideals

of moral thought or moral life is better than any other. Humanity is condemned to an incessant battle of gods and demons. The best that one can do is stare into the abyss and act with dignity and probity. This is the only upright response to the ontological reality of nihilism. But when upright men such as Weber—the ones who still draw guidance, if only out of custom and habit, from traditions of religious morality—depart from the scene, it is all *reductio ad Hitlerum*, a war of all against all.

There is truth in such criticism. But it is also true that Weber did not understand himself as a relativist or a nihilist. His vaunted "value freedom" (*Wertfreiheit*) in scientific work was less a philosophical judgment about the human condition than a methodological rule for the conduct of inquiry.⁵ And where it did function as a philosophical judgment about the human condition, it was meant to guarantee the dignity of scientific inquiry or of historical-political action by heroic personalities, free of the constraints of deference to traditional authority, bureaucratic limitation or inner fragmentation. Weber believed in an ideal of human excellence, shaped by the "inner worldly asceticism" of his Reformed Protestant past.⁶ Weber represents, for a self-consciously secular age, the moral intensity and austerity of Ameri-

has its roots in religious faith and, therefore, that the decline of religious faith will ultimately lead to the extinction of all causes or ideals. He tended to see before him the alternative of either complete spiritual emptiness or religious revival. He despaired of the modern this-worldly irreligious experiment, and yet he remained attached to it because he was fated to believe in science as he understood it. The result of this conflict, which he could not resolve, was his belief that *the conflict between values cannot be resolved by human reason*.

LEO STRAUSS, *NATURAL RIGHT AND HISTORY* 73–74 (1953) (emphasis added). Strauss here objects to a) the notion that reason is largely subject to fate, that is, reason is in thrall to the irrational, and b) that reason cannot resolve conflicts of values, that is, reason cannot, by nature, decide which way of life is naturally right.

For Bloom's treatment of Weber, which is much more harsh and much less subtle than Strauss', see ALLAN BLOOM, *THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND* 150 (1987). Also to be considered are the natural right arguments of the great scholar of Lincoln's political thought, Harry Jaffa. Although Jaffa does not refer to Weber by name, his polemic against "value-free" appraisals of Lincoln implies disapproval of the Weberian project. See, e.g., HARRY V. JAFFA, *A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE COMING OF THE CIVIL WAR* 75–77 (2000).

5. In a previous article, I defend Weber in some detail against Strauss' criticisms. See Alan Mittleman, *Leo Strauss and Relativism: The Critique of Max Weber*, 29 *RELIGION* 15 (1999).

6. This reading of Weber follows the persuasive interpretation in the fourth chapter of HARRY LIEBERSOHN, *FATE AND UTOPIA IN GERMAN SOCIOLOGY 1870–1923* (1988).

can Puritanism.⁷ So, against critics such as Strauss or Bloom, their insights into the incompatibility of Weber and natural right notwithstanding, I would argue that Weber's political morality, rightly understood, is highly germane to American circumstances and is fully compatible with American tradition. As evidence for this, I will analyze Abraham Lincoln's response to slavery in the 1850s as exemplary of a political "ethic of responsibility" in contrast to the abolitionists' "ethic of absolute ends." Far from a corrosive intruder into American culture, Weber helpfully describes the framework within which principled actors make political decisions, without prejudice to their principles.

At the heart of Weber's essay, "Politics as a Vocation,"⁸ is the concept of vocation or calling (*Beruf*). Weber used the term in two senses—the idea of profession, in the quite ordinary sense of career, and "calling" in the more elevated sense of chosen response to one's destiny, or to a divine commission. The English word "vocation" has the same connotations as Weber's *Beruf*. There are two types of politicians: professional politicians—those with, in both senses of the term, a calling (*Berufspolitiker*)—and occasional, non-professional politicians (*Gelegenheitspolitiker*)—as for example appointees to honorary offices. Weber's essay is devoted to analyzing the emergence and sociological categorization of politicians by vocation, in the course of which he explored the rise of the modern state, without which politics as a demographically significant profession is not possible. His essay proceeds by careful distinctions between, *inter alia*, the state and sub-political organizations, politics, and administration, and, most germane to our purposes, "living off" and "living for" politics. Professional politicians live either from politics—that is, they make their living off politics (*von der Politik*)—or they live for the sake of politics (*für die Politik*). To live for politics is to grant political life high moral purpose and meaning. Living for politics represents vocation or calling in the second, more elevated sense of the term. I shall focus on this sense of politics as moral and spiritual purpose.

Weber developed his concept of calling earlier in his justly famous *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.⁹ There he argues that the concept of a calling, although anticipated by early

7. *Id.*

8. MAX WEBER, *Politics as a Vocation*, in FROM MAX WEBER: ESSAYS IN SOCIOLOGY 78–79 (H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills eds. & trans., 1946) [hereinafter FROM MAX WEBER]. All citations of German terms are from *Politik als Beruf*, in MAX WEBER, GESAMMELTE POLITISCHE SCHRIFTEN 493–548 (1958).

9. MAX WEBER, *THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM* 80 (Talcott Parsons trans., Scribner's 1958).

Jewish literature and medieval German mysticism, emerges in a substantial way only during the Reformation and only among Protestants. Luther set the stage for the more consequential development of the concept (consequential, that is, for the flourishing of capitalism) in Calvinism. For Luther, who rejected the otherworldliness and asceticism of monasticism, "the valuation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs [was] the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume."¹⁰ Monastic contemplativeness has a negative value: renunciation of the duties of this world is the product of selfishness, as is withdrawing from temporal obligations. One detects here an anticipation of the criticism that Weber reserves for the *Gesinnungsethiker*, the moral absolutist who holds to spiritual purity over worldly responsibility, in *Politics as a Vocation*. In Luther's view, "the fulfillment of worldly duties is under all circumstances the only way to live acceptably to God."¹¹

What does this actually mean? Weber sees Luther's conception of the calling as traditionalistic; that is, it defers to past norms and orders. Traditionalism, in Weber's conceptual vocabulary, is a form of authority opposed to charisma. The former provides cultural replication and stasis, the latter upheaval and change.¹² "The individual should remain once and for all in the station and calling in which God had placed him and should restrain his worldly activity within the limits imposed by his established station in life."¹³ Luther arrived at this judgment through his reliance on St. Paul, who counseled indifference to worldly change of status because of his intense eschatological anticipation and insistence on absolute obedience to God, which entails the acceptance of things as they are, at least of the socio-economic things.¹⁴

Weber saw a dramatic shift in the concept of calling with Calvin. Calvinism, with its difficult doctrine of double predestination, imparts an urgency and salience to worldly activity that is lacking in both Catholicism and Lutheranism. Not knowing whether one is among the predestined elect or the predestined

10. *Id.* at 81.

11. *Id.*

12. MAX WEBER, *The Social Psychology of the World Religions*, in FROM MAX WEBER, *supra* note 8, at 295–96. In *Politics as a Vocation*, Weber also distinguishes between charisma, tradition, and law as modes of authority. WEBER, *Politics as a Vocation*, *supra* note 8, at 78–79.

13. WEBER, *supra* note 9, at 85.

14. Weber was highly critical of Lutheranism, especially in its Prussian state-supported contemporary incarnation. He saw Lutheran fatalism as a principle cause for the political passivity and immaturity of the German middle class. See LIEBERSOHN, *supra* note 6, at 95.

damned, one can glean a sign from the intensity of one's own activity: the more disciplined, systematic and intense, the better. "Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. The span of human life is infinitely short and precious to make sure of one's own election."¹⁵ For Luther, calling implied resignation to one's worldly fate—acceptance of one's social role and its requisite responsibilities. For Calvin, calling implied the active choice of productive effort. Even the wealthy should work.

For everyone without exception God's Providence has prepared a calling, which he should profess and in which he should labour. And this calling is not, as it was for the Lutheran, a fate to which he must submit and which he must make the best of, but God's commandment to the individual to work for the divine glory.¹⁶

To Calvin, the conscientiousness with which a man pursues his calling provides evidence of his state of grace. Calling implies a methodical, worldly asceticism. Far from mere resignation to fate, it is chosen, enacted, affirmed. Its keynote is responsibility—the prudent care for this world. This sober worldliness is very much at the heart of Weber's concept of political morality. To get there, however, requires one more step.

At the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber writes darkly of the tragic dimension of modernity, the world of the "iron cage." Modern capitalism did not arise because of Reformed Protestant ideas, but those ideas, in concert with other historical and economic currents, helped to generate and institutionalize it. "Puritan worldly asceticism" is one of its essential elements. But the religious basis of the modern order has long been forgotten and "victorious capitalism, since it [now] rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer."¹⁷ The concept of a calling in modernity has been emptied of content. It is as if Luther has taken his revenge, and resignation to fate must again prevail: "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so."¹⁸ Bureaucratized, machine-like society compels its denizens with irresistible force to labor and live in jobs and roles that have no spiritual significance, to be "[s]pecialists without spirit, sensualists without heart."¹⁹ The only hope that Weber held out for culture as a whole is for a new eruption of charisma: new prophets may arise, filling the world

15. WEBER, *supra* note 9, at 157.

16. *Id.* at 160.

17. *Id.* at 181–82.

18. *Id.* at 181.

19. *Id.* at 182.

again with enchantment and spirit. In the interim, the individual must comport himself with tragic dignity, eschewing all enthusiasms and illusions, bearing responsibility for our worldly condition with probity. And then a more proximate glimmer of hope: individual accomplishment within a calling can express at least a localized charisma. The individual can achieve a heroic integration of personality (*Persönlichkeit*) that transcends the prison of the iron cage.

In *Politics as a Vocation*, Weber filled out the moral program for the achievement of *Persönlichkeit* by the principal actor in the history of our time, the politician. He thus redeemed the concept of calling from the evisceration of meaning it suffers at the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He articulated a normative political ethics, which restores content to the concept of a calling.

"Politics," Weber remarked with a characteristic flash of color, "is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective."²⁰ Negotiating the balance between passion and perspective, the inner vibrancy of the calling for politics and the prudence and dignity of effectuating it through the exercise of power, is the problem of Weber's ethics. Politics is always about power, the domination of men by men through the means of violence over which the modern state has a monopoly. But politics ought never to be about mere power politics—the exercise of power for morally unworthy reasons.²¹ There is an ethic that ought to govern the exercise of power.²² Crucially, however, this ethic is different from those ethics that ought to prevail in other departments of life, such as "the relations to one's wife, to the greengrocer, the son, the competitor, the friend, the defendant."²³ Weber is a moral pluralist, in a qualified sense. The ethics of responsibility appropriate to power cannot be translated wholly and entirely into other social spheres, such as familial or friendship relations. Attempts to import the language or normative judgment of religious ethics, for example, into politics are pernicious. The purity and absolutism of the *Sermon on the Mount*, if it is not to be debased, can have no home in a modern politics. Weber would have no truck with Niebuhrian Christian realism. To take Jesus' ethics seriously is an all or nothing at all, consequences-be-damned matter.

20. WEBER, *Politics as a Vocation*, *supra* note 8, at 128.

21. *Id.* at 118–19.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

'[T]urn the other cheek': This command is unconditional and does not question the source of the other's authority to strike. Except for a saint it is an ethic of indignity. This is it: one must be saintly in everything; at least in intention, one must live like Jesus, the apostles, St. Francis, and their like. *Then* this ethic makes sense and expresses a kind of dignity; otherwise it does not. For if it is said, in line with the acosmic ethic of love, 'Resist not him that is evil with force,' for the politician the reverse proposition holds, 'thou *shalt* resist evil by force,' or else you are responsible for the evil winning out.²⁴

What, then, are the moral features of the political ethics of responsibility? The politician must have passion (*Leidenschaft*), a feeling of responsibility (*Verantwortungsgefühl*), and a sense of proportion (*Augenmaß*). Passion connotes a deep source of energy and commitment, rather than a superficial craving for experience or excitement. "Politics is made with the head, not with other parts of the body or soul. And yet devotion to politics, if it is not to be frivolous intellectual play but rather genuinely human conduct, can be born and nourished from passion alone."²⁵ By passion, however, Weber intended a disciplined *and detached* devotion. The passionate soul—here a Platonic element—requires a "firm taming,"²⁶ a "habituation to detachment in every sense of the word."²⁷ The sin of vanity, of pursuing power for "personal self-intoxication, instead of exclusively entering the service of 'the cause'"²⁸ is one of the primal sins of politics. The politician must be passionate and detached; "[h]ence his *distance* to things and men. 'Lack of distance' *per se* is one of the deadly sins of every politician."²⁹ Weber refers to this canalized passion as matter-of-factness (*Sachlichkeit*) or objectivity.³⁰

24. *Id.* at 119–20.

25. WEBER, *Politics as a Vocation*, *supra* note 8, at 115.

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.* at 116.

28. *Id.*

29. *Id.* at 115.

30. In his discussion of appropriate political attitudes toward the German defeat in the just concluded Great War, he condemns the efforts of the Allies to ascribe guilt to the Germans or righteousness to themselves as morally inappropriate for politicians. The correct political attitude is: "We lost the war. You have won it. That is now all over. Now let us discuss what conclusions must be drawn according to the *objective* interests that came into play and what is the main thing in view of the responsibility towards the *future*." WEBER, *Politics as a Vocation*, *supra* note 8, at 118. Earlier, he had likened such moralizing to a man who falls in love with another woman and leaves his partner. Rather than just accept the *Sachlichkeit* of the situation, the man insists on rationalizing it to him-

Passion for a cause, both disciplined and detached, is indicative of the calling for politics, in the higher sense, and separates the one who lives off politics from the one who lives for it. The display of passion and the inference of a calling convey charisma, establishing or enhancing the authority of the politician in the eyes of his followers. As we enter into the connection between passion, calling, and charisma, however, we inevitably raise, once again, the question of religion and religious ethics in relation to politics and political ethics. I mentioned previously that Weber was a *qualified* moral pluralist. By this I mean that, despite his categorical opposition to an alleged political ethics of responsibility and a religious "absolute ethic" or "ethic of ultimate ends," Weber cannot dispense with a religious dimension to politics and political ethics. (Religious and political ethics cannot be fully segregated into plural moral universes. Hence, Weber's is a qualified pluralism.) If the work of a politician is to have "inner strength," then his politics must serve a cause and "[e]xactly what the cause, in the service of which the politician strives for power and uses power, looks like is a matter of faith."³¹ His faith may lead him to serve "national, humanitarian, social, ethical, cultural, worldly, or religious ends,"³² but "some kind of faith must always exist."³³

There appears to be no ultimate standpoint, no position of natural right, for example, from which to decide what cause to serve. "Here, to be sure, ultimate *Weltanschauungen* clash, world views among which in the end one has to make a choice."³⁴ Weber does not resolve this problem on the level of theory: we experience the irrationality of the world; we experience the tragedy of political action in history. Short of a new revelation that compels our assent, we are left with ignorance of our ultimate bearings. But he does resolve the clash of worldviews, of gods and demons, in a practical way, that is, as a matter of political ethics. First, political ethics imposes a negative limit: salvation and utopia are excluded from politics. This narrows the range of worldviews from which one might choose. Weber is categorical:

He who seeks the salvation of the soul, of his own and of others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics, for the quite different tasks of politics can only be solved by violence. The genius or demon of politics lives in an inner

self—the first woman was not worthy of his love, or she has disappointed him, etc. Weber finds the refusal to accept unvarnished reality cowardly.

31. WEBER, *Politics as a Vocation*, *supra* note 8, at 117.

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.*

tension with the god of love, as well as with the Christian God as expressed by the church.³⁵

This opposition is, of course, fundamental to the Christianity of Augustine, but for Weber, living without Augustine's certainties, the opposition cannot be resolved by subordinating politics to the church. The two are equal and competitive. Nonetheless, in a practical way, he stands with Machiavelli, who in his *History of Florence*, "has one of his heroes praise those citizens who deemed the greatness of their native city higher than the salvation of their souls."³⁶ Politics is defined by its means (i.e., the use of compelling force), and not by its ends. To be busy with these means limits the range of ends that can be realized. Pursuing ends, however well intentioned, which are inappropriate to the means of politics will damage the ends and discredit them for generations. The politician, for whom passion must always be paired with responsibility for consequences, will lose both his ideals and his own soul if he sins against the realism that the responsible exercise of power requires. "[W]hat is decisive is the trained relentlessness in viewing the realities of life, and the ability to face such realities and to measure up to them inwardly."³⁷

The relative reduction of worldviews that can be pursued by means of politics is a substantive limitation on political action. Weber does not necessarily advocate a prudent minimalism—in his own politics he sometimes favored bold state action, but always for the sake of plausible political ends, and through the use of empirically effective political means. Purist ideologies, such as pacifism or utopian socialism, fail such a test. The second resolution of the problem of moral incommensurability is more a matter of method than of substance. As we have seen, Weber argues for a consequentialist ethic: an ethic of responsibility, over what, from a political vantage point, can only appear reckless; that is, an ethic of ultimate ends. The practitioner of responsibility knows that all choices are, in a sense, bad. Everything involves a trade-off; every trade-off involves a loss. To deny

35. *Id.* at 126. One must raise a question about the sharpness of the dichotomy that Weber maintains between a religious ethic, such as the Sermon on the Mount, and a political ethic. From the point of view of the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic tradition there is much more bridging between *Gesinnung* and *Verantwortung* than Weber would allow for. In America, where a Judaic sensibility has given the "Judeo" side of the Judeo-Christian ethic more than a politically correct passing mention, the dichotomy appears less plausible than in a German environment with lingering traces of Lutheran pietism.

36. *Id.*

37. *Id.* at 126–27.

this is to evince a "shoddy and superficially blasé attitude towards the meaning of human conduct; and it has no relation whatsoever to the knowledge of tragedy with which all action, but especially political action, is truly interwoven."³⁸ The politician who is true to his calling "is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul. He then acts by following an ethic of responsibility and somewhere he reaches the point where he says: "'Here I stand; I can do no other.'"³⁹ Thus, the ethic of responsibility is, in the end, not alien to the purest religious convictions, such as those exemplified by Luther's "Ich kann nicht anders, hier stehe ich!" The politician who has a calling for politics has made a choice with his whole soul to live in disciplined fidelity to an ethic of responsibility. That ethic, although its *métier* is negotiation, adjustment, and compromise, has come to acquire an absolute and sacred worth in his moral economy. It is taken with the same seriousness as the saint takes his path of uncompromising purity.

Weber's reconstitution of political calling in a religious mode suggests another implication. The politician who has responsibility for political judgment and decision must also live with himself when he is, literally and metaphorically, out of office. Decisions rest on the conscience, and nothing in Weber's writings suggests an amoral Machiavellianism, where all political decisions can be excused or justified by appeal to *raison d'état*. His moral pluralism is, as discussed, a qualified one. The ethics by which we live in private life and the decisions we have to make in public life both pull in different directions and interpenetrate. This is not to say that all political decisions can be brought before the bar of non-political ethics and condemned. Rather, we must observe, with sobriety and awe, the sublime tension between the moral frameworks. The mature man (*ein reifer Mensch*) must struggle to contain the tension between the frameworks in an inner unity of soul in the achievement of *Persönlichkeit*.

And every one of us who is not spiritually dead must realize the possibility of finding himself at some time in that position. In so far as this is true, an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine man—a man who *can* have the "calling for politics."⁴⁰

38. *Id.* at 117.

39. *Id.* at 127 (quotation omitted).

40. *Id.*

Abraham Lincoln inarguably had a calling for politics in both the ordinary sense of wishing to make his living from politics and in the elevated sense of a man of destiny whose task was to serve his nation in its most critical hour through politics. As much as Lincoln was devoted to the natural right proposition that "all men are created equal," he was also committed to political courses of action through which to effectuate that truth. To Lincoln, the political evil of disunion was more grievous than the pure moral evil of slavery. The political cause of the union, which acquired a mystical sacralty for him, was the highest cause. As Lincoln wrote in a letter to the *New York Tribune* during the war:

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.⁴¹

Lincoln believed strongly in the evil of slavery, but he drew a quite Weberian distinction between moral evil and political evil. In his 1854 speech at Peoria against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which overturned the Missouri Compromise and brought slavery into the western territories, Lincoln's arguments, although supported by moral conviction, were essentially political and economic. Slavery discourages the industry and productivity of the majority, which alone can lead to economic growth.⁴² Self-government is a fundamental principle among us, but "no man is good enough to govern another man, *without that other's consent*."⁴³ (He appealed here, not to Almighty God or to natural right, but to the Declaration of Independence, which is the relevant political foundation and the "sheet anchor of American republicanism.")⁴⁴ The spirit of compromise is necessary for democratic government: if the Missouri Compromise were overturned, how would factions be able to reach compromises in the future?⁴⁵ Lincoln also addressed the discomfort of fellow Whigs,

41. MARK E. NEELY, JR., *THE LAST BEST HOPE OF EARTH: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE PROMISE OF AMERICA* 111 (1993).

42. *See* I *THE AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION* 518 (David A. Hollinger & Charles Capper eds., 2001).

43. *Id.*

44. *Id.*

45. *See id.* at 520.

The spirit of mutual concession—that spirit which first gave us the constitution, and which has thrice saved the Union—we shall have strangled and cast from us forever . . . But restore the compromise,

who wanted to restore the Compromise but felt ill at ease in aligning themselves with the abolitionists. With exemplary political morality, he counseled them to "[s]tand with anybody that stands right. Stand with him while he is right and part with him when he goes wrong. Stand with the abolitionist in restoring the Missouri Compromise; and stand against him when he attempts to repeal the fugitive slave law."⁴⁶ Such examples of balancing underlying religious and moral conviction with a political ethic could be multiplied, right up to the language and timing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln's ethic of political responsibility led Frederick Douglass to remark, "Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined."⁴⁷

Lincoln not only subordinated the religious-moral imperative of eradicating slavery to his political cause of preserving the Union, but he also embodied, in a fully tragic vision, the competing gods and demons of which Weber wrote. In his Second Inaugural Address, he asserted both the rightness of the Union's cause and the judgment of God against her:

Both [sides] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those

and what then? We thereby restore the national faith, the national confidence, the national feeling of brotherhood. We thereby reinstate the spirit of concession and compromise—that spirit which has never failed us in past perils, and which may be safely trusted for all the future.

Id.

46. *Id.* at 520–21.

47. NEELY, *supra* note 41, at 97.

divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."⁴⁸

Lincoln was not, of course, a moral relativist. He believed in God—not in resolute, but irrational, commitment. (Although Weber did not believe in God, he was no relativist either. Strauss' attempt to portray him as a bridge between Nietzsche and Heidegger violates one of Strauss' own key principles: to understand a writer as he understood himself.) In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln expressed both the necessity and the tragedy of political action. The cause of the North is just, but the North is also unjust; the whole nation bears the guilt of centuries of slavery. Both sides read the same Bible and prayed to the same God yet have reached opposite conclusions about what He intends. Even though the bloodshed may yet last generations, God is utterly just and neither side has a right to complain. God's justice, different from and superior to man's, makes relative the justice we effectuate through politics. Nonetheless, our justice is not divorced from His. There is, however, enough space between them so that we can never wrap our deeds in the cloak of His truth. Although Lincoln's idiom is quite different from Weber's, the tragic sense of the irreconcilability of different moral scales is similar. Both Lincoln and Weber's politician with a calling assume responsibility for the world without illusion or vanity.

Given the enormity of slavery's evil, Lincoln's prudential and political approach toward containing and ending it does not seem like an admirable policy today. However, it is unfair to judge the moral-political actors of the past solely by the moral clarities of the present. Indeed, they might not have become clear were it not for the struggle of those whom we now presume to judge. A better yardstick is whether those actors were true to an ethic of political responsibility: whether they judged competing claims and policies by rational and immanent standards of success as well as by adherence to foundational constitutional

48. 1 THE AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION, *supra* note 42, at 528–29.

principles, and whether they followed what the Declaration of Independence called the dictates of prudence.⁴⁹

A vision of political responsibility that comprehends both empirical consequences and fidelity to fundamental norms is much needed in the contemporary American polity. The morally conflicted choices we face on such issues as expansion of stem cell research, the status of *Roe v. Wade*,⁵⁰ the definition of marriage, or a foreign policy promoting the democratization of foreign states do not lend themselves to simplistic reduction. Nonetheless, partisans of the secular left or of the religious right fool themselves into thinking that such issues can be decided along a single axis of judgment, whether it be adjudicating rights claims, maximizing benefits, or promoting fidelity to a presumptive biblical morality. To take Weber seriously is to cast doubt on the claim that religiously informed ethics can be translated substantially into politics or policy. Doing so would also cast doubt on the claim that politics can or should be "liberated" or disentangled from religion. It has never been clear, in the American experience, where the sacred work ends and the profane begins. Yet within this field of conflicting forces, Weberian attention to the means and ends proper to politics could yet dispel some of the moral confusion and combativeness of our culture wars, without, as the example of Lincoln shows, emptying our public life of moral principle.

49. The Declaration of Independence para. 2 (U.S. 1776) ("Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; . . .").

50. 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

