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[Weber, Max 1864-1920]

III

WEBER

Political Writings

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The Profession and Vocation of Politics¹

The lecture which I am to give at your request will necessarily disappoint you in various ways. You are bound to expect a talk on the profession of politics to take a stand on the topical questions of the day. Yet that will only happen at the end of my lecture in a purely formal way and in response to particular questions concerning the significance of political action within our conduct of life as a whole. What must be completely excluded from today's lecture, on the other hand, are all questions concerning the *brand* of politics one *ought* to practise, which is to say the *content* one ought to give to one's political activity. For this has nothing to do with the general question of what the profession of politics is and what it can mean. Let us get straight down to things.

What do we understand by politics (*Politik*)? The term is an extraordinarily broad one, embracing every kind of independent *leadership* (*leitende*) activity. We talk about the banks' policies on foreign

¹ 'Politik als Beruf' appeared as a brochure in the series *Geistige Arbeit als Beruf. Vier Vorträge vor dem Freistudentischen Bund*. ('Intellectual work as a vocation. Four lectures to the Union of Free Students.') (Munich and Leipzig, 1919). Following the editorial change first made by Marianne Weber in the *Gesammelten politischen Schriften* and adopted by the editors of the new *Gesamtausgabe*, the tenth paragraph ('All organised rule . . . means of administration') has been shifted from its clearly erroneous position in the first edition, and certain misprints (e.g. *entlehnte* for *entlohnnte*) corrected. Weber's essay is based on a lecture given in Munich in January 1919 but not published until October of that year. Here it appears after the 'President of the Reich' since this article actually appeared in print first; in conception, however, the lecture is clearly the earlier piece. In the title the term *Beruf* has been translated as 'profession and vocation' because the essay deals both with the business and organisation (*Betrieb*) of politics and also with the inner vocation of the dedicated politician.

exchange, the bank-rate policy of the *Reichsbank*, the policy of a union during a strike, one can speak of the educational policy of the community in a town or village, of the policies of the management committee leading a club, and finally we even talk about the policies of an astute wife in her efforts to guide her husband. Naturally, our reflections this evening are not based on a concept as broad as this. Today we shall use the term only to mean the leadership, or the exercise of influence on the leadership, of a *political* association (*Verband*), which today means a *state*.

Yet what is a 'political' association, considered from a sociological point of view? What is a 'state'? This too cannot be defined sociologically in terms of the content of its activities. There is hardly a task which has not been undertaken by some political association at some time or other, but equally there is no task of which it could be said that it is always, far less *exclusively*, the preserve of those associations which are defined as political (in today's language: states) or which were the historical predecessors of the modern state. In the last analysis the modern state can only be defined sociologically in terms of a specific *means* (*Mittel*) which is peculiar to the state, as it is to all other political associations, namely physical violence (*Gewaltsamkeit*). 'Every state is founded on force (*Gewalt*)', as Trotsky once said at Brest-Litovsk. That is indeed correct. If there existed only social formations in which violence was unknown as a means, *then* the concept of the 'state' would have disappeared; *then* that condition would have arisen which one would define, in this particular sense of the word, as 'anarchy'. Violence is, of course, not the normal or sole means used by the state. There is no question of that. But it is the means *specific* to the state. At the present moment² the relation between the state and violence is a particularly intimate one. In the past the most diverse kinds of association – beginning with the clan – have regarded physical violence as a quite normal instrument. Nowadays, by contrast, we have to say that a state is that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical*

² As Weber was speaking, Germany was in the throes of the so-called 'German Revolution' which broke out in November 1918 and had reached a new peak of intensity in January 1919. In Munich, where Weber was addressing these remarks to students, the 'Soviet Republic of Bavaria' had been proclaimed. Intellectuals, such as Kurt Eisner and Ernst Toller, were prominently involved, prompting Weber to return yet again to the recurrent theme of the role played by 'littérateurs' in politics.

violence within a certain territory, this 'territory' being another of the defining characteristics of the state. For the specific feature of the present is that the right to use physical violence is attributed to any and all other associations or individuals only to the extent that the *state* for its part permits this to happen. The state is held to be the sole source of the 'right' to use violence.

In our terms, then, 'politics' would mean striving for a share of power or for influence on the distribution of power, whether it be between states or between the groups of people contained within a single state.

Essentially, this corresponds to ordinary usage. If one says that a question is a 'political' question, or that a minister or official is a 'political' official, or that a decision is determined 'politically', what is meant in each case is that interests in the distribution, preservation or transfer of power play a decisive role in answering that question, determining this decision or defining the sphere of activity of the official in question. Anyone engaged in politics is striving for power, either power as a means to attain other goals (which may be ideal or selfish), or power 'for its own sake', which is to say, in order to enjoy the feeling of prestige given by power.

Just like the political associations which preceded it historically, the state is a relationship of *rule* (*Herrschaft*) by human beings over human beings, and one that rests on the legitimate use of violence (that is, violence that is held to be legitimate). For the state to remain in existence, those who are ruled must *submit* to the authority claimed by whoever rules at any given time. When do people do this, and why? What inner justifications and what external means support this rule?

To begin with the inner justifications: there are in principle three grounds *legitimizing* any rule.³ Firstly, there is the authority of 'the eternal past', of *custom*, hallowed by the fact that it has held sway from time immemorial and by a habitual predisposition to preserve it. This is 'traditional' rule, as exercised by the patriarch and the patrimonial prince of the old type. Then there is the authority of the exceptional, personal '*gift of grace*', or charisma, the entirely personal devotion to, and personal trust in, revelations, heroism, or other qual-

³ Weber discusses his classification of the forms of legitimate rule in *Economy and Society*; see, ch. 3 in particular.

ities of leadership in an individual. This is 'charismatic' rule, as exercised by the prophet or, in the field of politics, by the chosen war-lord or the plebiscitarian ruler, the great demagogue and leader of a political party. Finally, there is rule by virtue of 'legality', by virtue of belief in the validity of legal *statute* and the appropriate (*sachlich*) juridical 'competence' founded on rationally devised rules. This type of rule rests on a predisposition to fulfil one's statutory obligations obediently. It is rule of the kind exercised by the modern 'servant of the state' and all those bearers of power who resemble him in this respect. It goes without saying that the submission of the ruled is in reality determined to a very great extent not only by motives of fear and hope (fear of revenge from magical powers or from the holder of power, hope of reward in this life or in the hereafter), but also by interests of the most diverse kinds. We shall return to this point shortly. But when one asks what are the reasons 'legitimizing' their submission, one does indeed encounter these three 'pure' types. These notions of legitimacy and their inner justification are of very considerable importance for the structure of rule. Admittedly, the pure types are rarely found in reality, but it is not possible today to go into the extremely intricate variants, transitional forms and combinations of these pure types in detail. That is a problem for a 'general science of the state'.⁴

Here we are interested above all in the second of the three types: rule by virtue of devotion to the purely personal 'charisma' of the 'leader' on the part of those who obey him. For this is where the idea of *vocation* (*Beruf*) in its highest form has its roots. Devotion to the charisma of the prophet or the war-lord or the exceptional demagogue in the *ekklesia*⁵ or in parliament means that the leader is personally regarded as someone who is inwardly 'called' to the task of leading men, and that the led submit to him, not because of custom or statute, but because they believe in him. Of course, he himself, provided he is something more than an ephemeral, narrow and vain upstart, lives for his cause (*Sache*), 'aspires after his work',⁶ whereas

⁴ Weber was much influenced by the work of his colleague G. Jellinek, particularly by his *Allgemeine Staatslehre* ('General theory or science of the state') (Berlin, 1900).

⁵ The 'ekklesia' was the assembly of all free citizens in the city-states of Ancient Greece.

⁶ The phrase 'trachtet nach seinem Werke' probably alludes to words spoken by Nietzsche's Zarathustra at the beginning of 'The Honey Offering': 'For long I have not aspired after happiness, I aspire after my work', *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, translated R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 251.

the devotion of his adherents, be they disciples or liegemen (*Gefolgschaft*) or his quite personal, partisan supporters, is focused on his person and his qualities. Leadership has emerged throughout the world and in all historical periods, the most important embodiments of it in the past being the magician and prophet on the one hand, and the chosen war-lord, gang-leader or *condottiere* on the other. In the Western world, however, we find something quite specific which concerns us more directly, namely *political* leadership, firstly in the figure of the free 'demagogue', who grew from the soil of the city-state, a unique creation of the West and of Mediterranean culture in particular, and then in the figure of the parliamentary 'party leader' who also sprang from the soil of the constitutional state, another institution indigenous only to the West.

Of course, nowhere is it the case that these politicians by virtue of a 'vocation', in the truest sense of the word, are the only figures who carry weight in the machinery of the political power struggle. Of quite decisive importance is the kind of resources they have at their disposal. How do the powers who rule politically set about the task of asserting themselves as rulers? The question applies to every kind of rule, and thus also to all forms of political rule, to the traditional type as much as to the legal and charismatic types.

All organised rule which demands continuous administration requires on the one hand that human action should rest on a disposition to obey those rulers (*Herren*) who claim to be the bearers of legitimate force, and on the other that, thanks to this obedience, the latter should have at their command the material resources necessary to exercise physical force if circumstances should demand it. In other words, it requires an administrative staff and the material means of administration.

What kinds of inner joy does politics have to offer, and what kinds of personal qualifications does it presuppose in anyone turning to this career?

Well, first of all, it confers a feeling of power. The professional politician can have a sense of rising above everyday existence, even in what is formally a modest position, through knowing that he exercises influence on people, shares power over them, but above all from the knowledge that he holds in his hands some vital strand of historically important events. But the question facing such a person is which qualities will enable him to do justice to this power (however narrowly circumscribed it may actually be in any particular case), and thus to the responsibility it imposes on him. This takes us into the area of ethical questions, for to ask what kind of a human being one must be in order to have the right to seize the spokes of the wheel of history is to pose an ethical question.

One can say that three qualities are pre-eminently decisive for a politician: passion, a sense of responsibility, judgement. Passion in

the sense of *concern for the thing itself* (*Sachlichkeit*), the passionate commitment to a 'cause' (*Sache*), to the god or demon⁴³ who commands that cause. Not in the sense of that inner attitude which my late friend Georg Simmel was wont to describe as 'sterile excitement'.⁴⁴ This is characteristic of a particular type of intellectual (especially Russian intellectuals, but of course not all of them!), and also plays such a large part amongst our own intellectuals at this carnival which is being graced with the proud name of a 'revolution'; it is the 'romanticism of the intellectually interesting', directed into the void and lacking all objective (*sachlich*) sense of responsibility. Simply to feel passion, however genuinely, is not sufficient to make a politician unless, in the form of service to a 'cause', *responsibility* for that cause becomes the decisive lode-star of all action. This requires (and this is the decisive psychological quality of the politician) *judgement*, the ability to maintain one's inner composure and calm while being receptive to realities, in other words *distance* from things and people. A 'lack of distance', in and of itself, is one of the deadly sins for any politician and it is one of those qualities which will condemn our future intellectuals to political incompetence if they cultivate it. For the problem is precisely this: how are hot passion and cool judgement to be forced together in a single soul? Politics is an activity conducted with the head, not with other parts of the body or soul. Yet if politics is to be genuinely human action, rather than some frivolous intellectual game, dedication to it can only be generated and sustained by passion. Only if one accustoms oneself to distance, in every sense of the word, can one achieve that powerful control over the soul which distinguishes the passionate politician from the mere 'sterile excitement' of the political amateur. The 'strength' of a political 'personality' means, first and foremost, the possession of these qualities.

Every day and every hour, therefore, the politician has to overcome a quite trivial, all-too-human enemy which threatens him from within: common *vanity*, the mortal enemy of all dedication to a cause and of all distance – in this case, of distance to oneself.

⁴³ In this instance Weber is using *Dämon* in the same sense as the English 'demon'; elsewhere he uses it without the sense of moral evil.

⁴⁴ This use of *Aufgeregtheit* as a derogatory term for revolutionary fervour was prefigured in Goethe's fragmentary satire on the consequences of the French Revolution, *Die Aufgeregten*.

Vanity is a very widespread quality, and perhaps no one is completely free of it. In academic and scholarly circles it is a kind of occupational disease. In the case of the scholar, however, unattractive though this quality may be, it is relatively harmless in the sense that it does not, as a rule, interfere with the pursuit of knowledge. Things are quite different in the case of the politician. The ambition for power is an inevitable means (*Mittel*) with which he works. 'The instinct for power', as it is commonly called, is thus indeed one of his normal qualities. The sin against the holy spirit of his profession begins where this striving for power becomes detached from the task in hand (*unsachlich*) and becomes a matter of purely personal self-intoxication instead of being placed entirely at the service of the 'cause'. For there are ultimately just two deadly sins in the area of politics: a lack of objectivity and – often, although not always, identical with it – a lack of responsibility. Vanity, the need to thrust one's person as far as possible into the foreground, is what leads the politician most strongly into the temptation of committing one or other (or both) of these sins, particularly as the demagogue is forced to count on making an 'impact', and for this reason is always in danger both of becoming a play-actor and of taking the responsibility for his actions too lightly and being concerned only with the 'impression' he is making. His lack of objectivity tempts him to strive for the glittering appearance of power rather than its reality, while his irresponsibility tempts him to enjoy power for its own sake, without any substantive purpose. For although, or rather precisely *because*, power is the inevitable means of all politics, and the ambition for power therefore one of its driving forces, there is no more pernicious distortion of political energy than when the parvenu boasts of his power and vainly mirrors himself in the feeling of power – or indeed any and every worship of power for its own sake. The mere 'power politician', a type whom an energetically promoted cult is seeking to glorify here in Germany as elsewhere, may give the impression of strength, but in fact his actions merely lead into emptiness and absurdity. On this point the critics of 'power politics' are quite correct. The sudden inner collapse of typical representatives of this outlook (*Gesinnung*) has shown us just how much inner weakness and ineffectuality are concealed behind this grandiose but empty pose. It stems from a most wretched and superficial lack of concern for the *meaning* of human action, a blasé attitude that knows nothing of the tragedy in

which all action, but quite particularly political action, is in truth enmeshed.

It is certainly true, and it is a fundamental fact of history (for which no more detailed explanation can be offered here), that the eventual outcome of political action frequently, indeed regularly, stands in a quite inadequate, even paradoxical relation to its original, intended meaning and purpose (*Sinn*). That does not mean, however, that this meaning and purpose, service to a *cause*, can be dispensed with if action is to have any firm inner support. The *nature* of the cause the politician seeks to serve by striving for and using power is a question of faith. He can serve a national goal or the whole of humanity, or social and ethical goals, or goals which are cultural, inner-worldly or religious; he may be sustained by a strong faith in 'progress' (however this is understood), or he may coolly reject this kind of faith; he can claim to be the servant of an 'idea' or, rejecting on principle any such aspirations, he may claim to serve external goals of everyday life – but some kind of belief must always be *present*. Otherwise (and there can be no denying this) even political achievements which, outwardly, are supremely successful will be cursed with the nullity of all mortal undertakings.

Having said this, we have already broached the last problem which concerns us this evening, the problem of the ethos of politics as a 'cause' (*Sache*). What vocation can politics *per se*, quite independently of its goals, fulfil within the overall moral economy of our conduct of life? Where is what one might call the ethical home of politics? At this point, admittedly, ultimate *Weltanschauungen* collide, and one has eventually to *choose* between them. The problem has recently been re-opened for discussion (in a quite wrong-headed fashion in my view), so let us approach it resolutely.

Let us begin by freeing the problem from a quite trivial falsification. In the first place, ethics can appear in a morally quite calamitous role. Let us look at some examples. You will rarely find a man whose love has turned from one woman to another who does not feel the need to legitimate this fact to himself by saying, 'She did not deserve my love', or, 'She disappointed me', or by offering some other such 'reasons'. This is a profoundly unchivalrous attitude, for, in addition to the simple fate of his ceasing to love her, which the woman must endure, it invents for itself a 'legitimacy' that allows the man to lay claim to a 'right'

while attempting to burden her not only with misfortune but also with being in the wrong. The successful rival in love behaves in exactly the same way: the other man must be of lesser worth, otherwise he would not have been defeated. The same thing happens after any victorious war, when the victor will of course assert, with ignoble self-righteousness, 'I won because I was in the right.' Or when the horrors of war cause a man to suffer a psychological breakdown, instead of simply saying, 'It was all just too much for me', he now feels the need to justify his war-weariness by substituting the feeling, 'I couldn't bear the experience because I was obliged to fight for a morally bad cause.' The same applies to those defeated in war. Instead of searching, like an old woman, for the 'guilty party' after the war (when it was in fact the structure of society that produced the war), anyone with a manly, unsentimental bearing would say to the enemy, 'We lost the war – you won it. The matter is now settled. Now let us discuss what conclusions are to be drawn in the light of the substantive (*sachlichen*) interests involved and – this is the main thing – in the light of the responsibility for the future which the victor in particular must bear.' Anything else lacks dignity and will have dire consequences. A nation will forgive damage to its interests, but not injury to its honour, and certainly not when this is done in a spirit of priggish self-righteousness. Every new document which may emerge decades afterwards will stir up the undignified squabble, all the hatred and anger, once again, whereas the war ought at least to be buried *morally* when it comes to an end. That is only possible through a sober, matter-of-fact approach (*Sachlichkeit*) and chivalry, and, above all, it is only possible where there is *dignity*. But it can never be made possible by an 'ethic' which in fact entails indignity for both sides. Instead of dealing with what concerns the politician (the future and our responsibility for it), such an 'ethical' approach concerns itself with politically sterile (because unresolvable) questions of past guilt. *This*, if anything, is what constitutes political guilt. What is more, in this process people lose sight of the inevitable falsification of the whole problem by very material interests – the interests of the victor in maximising the gain (whether moral or material), and the hopes of the defeated that they will negotiate advantages by confessing

their guilt. If anything is 'common' (*gemein*)⁴⁵ it is this, and it is the consequence of using 'ethics' as a means of 'being in the right'.

What, then, is the real relationship between *ethics* and *politics*? Have they nothing at all to do with one another, as has sometimes been said? Or is the opposite true, namely that political action is subject to 'the same' ethic as every other form of activity? At times people have believed that these two possibilities were mutually exclusive alternatives, and that either the one or the other was correct. But is it in fact true that any ethic in the world could establish substantially *identical* commandments applicable to all relationships, whether erotic, business, family or official, to one's relations with one's wife, greengrocer, son, competitor, with a friend or an accused man? Can the fact that politics operates with a quite specific means, namely power, backed up by the use of *violence*, really be a matter of such indifference as far as the ethical demands placed on politics are concerned? Have we not seen that the Bolshevik and Spartacist⁴⁶ ideologues, precisely because they use this political instrument, bring about exactly the *same* results as any militarist dictator? What, apart from the identity of the holders of power (and their amateurism) distinguishes the rule of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils from the rule of any wielder of power under the old regime? What distinguishes the polemics directed by most exponents of the supposedly new ethics at the opponents they criticise from the polemics of any other demagogues? Their noble intentions, some will say. Very well. But the question under discussion here is the means, and their enemies lay just as much claim to noble ultimate aims, and do so with complete subjective sincerity. 'All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword',⁴⁷ and fighting is fighting everywhere. What about the ethics of the *Sermon on the Mount* then? The Sermon on the Mount, by which we mean the absolute ethics of the Gospel, is something

⁴⁵ For Nietzsche, as for Weber, *gemein* ('common', 'base', 'contemptible') was the antithesis of *vornehm* ('distinguished', 'noble'). Weber's objection to the (mis-)use of 'ethics' to prove one is 'in the right' echoes Nietzschean scepticism about the 'moral interpretation of phenomena'.

⁴⁶ The Spartakus League, led by Karl Liebknecht, was formed in 1916–17. A left socialist group opposed to war, it adopted the name of the Communist Party of Germany in December 1918.

⁴⁷ Matthew 26, 52.

far more serious than those who are so fond of citing its commandments today believe. It is not to be taken frivolously. What has been said about causality in science also applies to this ethic, namely that it is not a hired cab which one may stop at will and climb into or out of as one sees fit. Rather, the meaning of the sermon (if it is not to be reduced to banality) is precisely this: we must accept it in its entirety or leave it entirely alone. Hence the case of the rich young man: 'he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.'⁴⁸ The commandment of the Gospel is unconditional and unambiguous – 'give all that thou hast' – *everything*, absolutely. The politician will say that this is an excessive and socially meaningless demand if it is not made to apply to *everybody*, which means taxation, expropriation by taxation, confiscation, in other words, coercion and order applied to *all*. The ethical commandment disregards such questions *completely* – that is its essence. The same applies to the injunction to 'turn the other cheek!' – unconditionally, without asking by what right the other person has struck you. An ethic of indignity, except for a saint. This is the heart of the matter: it is necessary to be a saint in *all* things, or at least one must want to be one, one must live like Jesus, the Apostles, Saint Francis and men of that kind; *then* this type of ethic becomes meaningful and expresses a kind of dignity. *But not otherwise*. For while it is a consequence of the unworldly ethic of love to say, 'resist not evil with force',⁴⁹ the politician is governed by the contrary maxim, namely, 'You shall resist evil with force, for if you do not, you are *responsible* for the spread of evil.' Anyone seeking to act in accordance with the ethic of the Gospel should not go on strike, since strikes are a form of coercion; instead he should join an unaffiliated trade union. Above all, he should not talk of 'revolution', for that ethic surely does not teach that civil war of all things is the only legitimate form of war. The pacifist whose actions are guided by the Gospel will refuse weapons or throw them away, as we Germans were recommended to do, so that we might fulfil our ethical duty to end the war, and thus to end all war. The politician will say that the only sure means of discrediting war for the *foreseeable* future would have been peace on the basis of the *status quo*. Then the people of all nations would have asked what the point of the war

⁴⁸ Matthew 19, 22.

⁴⁹ Matthew 5, 39: 'That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.'

was. It would have been reduced to absurdity, which is not now possible. For the war will have proved to be politically profitable for the victors, or at least for some of them. The responsibility for this outcome lies with the behaviour which made it quite impossible for us to resist. What will now happen – once the phase of exhaustion has passed – is, that *peace, not war, will have been discredited* – and this will be the result of absolute ethics.

Finally, there is the duty to be truthful. For the ethic of absolute principles this is an unconditional duty.⁵⁰ Hence it was concluded that all documents should be published, especially those which placed a burden of guilt on our country, and that a confession of guilt should be made on the basis of these documents – unilaterally, unconditionally, regardless of the consequences. The politician will take the view that the upshot of this will not serve the cause of truth, but rather that truth will certainly be obscured by the misuse of the documents and by the passions they unleash. He will take the view that the only productive approach would be a systematic, comprehensive investigation, conducted by disinterested parties; any other way of proceeding could have consequences for the nation which could not be repaired in decades. 'Consequences', however, are no *concern* of absolutist ethics.

That is the crucial point. We have to understand that ethically oriented activity can follow two fundamentally different, irreconcilably opposed maxims. It can follow the 'ethic of principled conviction' (*Gesinnung*) or the 'ethic of responsibility'. It is not that the ethic of conviction is identical with irresponsibility, nor that the ethic of responsibility means the absence of principled conviction – there is of course no question of that. But there is a profound opposition between acting by the maxim of the ethic of conviction (putting it in religious terms: 'The Christian does what is right and places the outcome in God's hands'),⁵¹ and acting by the maxim of the ethic of

⁵⁰ Kant's attempt to found ethics on the 'categorical imperative' led him to argue that there was an absolute obligation to tell the truth, even where to do so might lead to the loss of human life. See, for example, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. M. Gregor (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 225–7. Kant's was one of the most influential voices arguing for 'anti-consequentialism' in ethics in Germany.

⁵¹ Although an exact source for these words (used on several occasions by Weber) has not been traced, the editors of the new *Gesamtausgabe* believe they allude to a passage in Luther's lectures on *Genesis*, 'Fac tuum officium, et eventum Deo permitte', *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. XLIV (Weimar, 1915), p. 78.

responsibility, which means that one must answer for the (foreseeable) *consequences* of one's actions. A syndicalist who is committed to the ethics of conviction might be fully aware that the likely consequences of his actions will be, say, increased chances for the forces of reaction, increased oppression of his own class, a brake on the rise of his class. But none of this will make the slightest impression on him. If evil consequences flow from an action done out of pure conviction, this type of person holds the world, not the doer, responsible, or the stupidity of others, or the will of God who made them thus. A man who subscribes to the ethic of responsibility, by contrast, will make allowances for precisely these everyday shortcomings in people. He has no right, as Fichte correctly observed,⁵² to presuppose goodness and perfection in human beings. He does not feel that he can shuffle off the consequences of his own actions, as far as he could foresee them, and place the burden on the shoulders of others. He will say, 'These consequences are to be attributed to my actions.' The person who subscribes to the ethic of conviction feels 'responsible' only for ensuring that the flame of pure conviction (for example, the flame of protest against the injustice of the social order) is never extinguished. To kindle that flame again and again is the purpose of his actions, actions which, judged from the point of view of their possible success, are utterly irrational, and which can and are only intended to have exemplary value.

Yet we have still not reached the end of the problem. No ethics in the world can get round the fact that the achievement of 'good' ends is in many cases tied to the necessity of employing morally suspect or at least morally dangerous means, and that one must reckon with the possibility or even likelihood of evil side-effects. Nor can any ethic in the world determine when and to what extent the ethically good end 'sanctifies' the ethically dangerous means and side-effects.

The decisive means of politics is the use of violence. Just how great are the ramifications of the ethical tension between ends and means in politics can be seen in the case of the revolutionary socialists

⁵² Fichte quotes such sentiments from Machiavelli's *Discourses* in 'Über Macchiavelli (sic!) als Schriftsteller', *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes nachgelassene Werke*, vol. III (Bonn, 1856), p. 420.

(the Zimmerwald faction).⁵³ Even during the war, as is generally known, they espoused a principle which one might characterise thus: 'If the choice lies between a few more years of war, followed by a revolution, and peace now but no revolution, we choose a few more years of war.' If then asked what this revolution might achieve, any scientifically trained socialist would have replied that there could be no question of a transition to an economy deserving the name 'socialist' as *he* understood the term. Rather, a bourgeois economy would arise again which would have shed only its feudal elements and the remnants of dynasticism. For this modest result they would accept 'a few more years of war'! In this instance it could well be said that even a person of very firm socialist convictions might reject the end if these are the means it demands. But this is precisely how things stand with Bolshevism and Spartacism and indeed every type of revolutionary socialism. Hence it is of course utterly ridiculous for such people to condemn *morally* the 'politicians of violence' of the old regime for using precisely the same means as they are prepared to use (no matter how justified they may be in rejecting the *aims* of the other side).

It seems that the ethics of conviction is bound to founder hopelessly on this problem of how the end is to sanctify the means. Indeed the only position it can logically take is to *reject any* action which employs morally dangerous means. Logically. In the real world, admittedly, we repeatedly see the proponent of the 'ethics of conviction' suddenly turning into a chiliastic prophet. Those who have been preaching 'love against force' one minute, for example, issue a call to force the next; they call for one *last* act of force to create the situation in which *all* violence will have been destroyed for ever – just like our military leaders who said to the soldiers before every attack that this would be the last, that it would bring victory and then peace. The man who espouses an ethic of conviction cannot bear the ethical irrationality of the world. He is a cosmic-ethical 'rationalist'. Those of you who know their Dostoyevsky will recall the scene with the Grand Inquisitor, where the problem is dissected very acutely.⁵⁴

⁵³ In September 1915 a group of radical socialists held a conference in Zimmerwald (near Berne) with the aim of founding a new (Third) International. Despite further conferences in 1916 and 1917, they could not achieve unity.

⁵⁴ F. Dostoyevsky *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book 5, ch. 5.

It is not possible to unite the ethic of conviction with the ethic of responsibility, nor can one issue an ethical decree determining which end shall sanctify *which* means, if indeed any concession at all is to be made to this principle.

My colleague, F. W. Foerster,⁵⁵ a man I hold in the highest personal esteem because of the undoubted integrity of his convictions (although I reject him unreservedly as a politician), thinks that he can get round the difficulty in his book with the simple thesis that only good can flow from good, only evil from evil. Were this so, the whole, complex problem would admittedly not exist. Yet it is astonishing that such a thesis could still see the light of day 2,500 years after the Upanishads were composed. Not just the entire course of world history, but any unbiased examination of daily experience, proclaims the opposite. The development of all the religions in the world rests, after all, on the fact that the opposite is true. The age-old problem of theodicy is, after all, the question of how a power which is said to be both all-powerful and benevolent can possibly have created such an irrational world of undeserved suffering, unpunished injustice and incorrigible stupidity. Either that power is not all-powerful or it is not benevolent – or quite other principles of compensation and retribution govern life, principles which we may be able to interpret metaphysically or which will for ever elude our interpretation. This problem, the experience of the irrationality of the world, was, after all, the driving force behind all religious development. The Indian doctrine of *karma*, Persian dualism, original sin, predestination and the concept of the *deus absconditus*, all these notions have grown out of precisely this experience. The early Christians too knew very well that the world was governed by demons, that anyone who gets involved with politics, which is to say with the means of power and violence, is making a pact with diabolical powers, and that it does *not* hold true of his actions that only good can come of good and only evil from evil, but rather that the opposite is often the case. Anyone who fails to see this is indeed a child in political matters.

Religious ethics have adopted various strategies to come to terms with the fact that we are placed in various orders of life, each of

⁵⁵ F. W. Foerster (1869–1966) was a leading spokesman of the Society for Ethical Culture. His *Staatsbürgerliche Erziehung* (1910) ('Education for Citizenship', reprinted under the title *Politische Ethik und politische Pädagogik*) was a popular expression of the ideas of this movement for social reform.

which is subject to different laws. Hellenic polytheism sacrificed to Aphrodite and also to Hera, to Dionysos as well as to Apollo, knowing that these gods were often in conflict with one another. The Hindu order of life made each of the various occupations subject to a particular ethical law, a *dharma*, and forever divided them one from another into castes, setting them in a rigid hierarchy of rank from which there was no escape for the individual born into a particular caste, except through reincarnation in the next life; the different occupations were thereby placed at varying distances from the highest religious goods of salvation. Hinduism was therefore able to elaborate the *dharma* for each caste, from the ascetics and Brahmins down to the rogues and whores, according to the immanent and particular laws governing each occupation, including war and politics. How war is fitted into the totality of the orders of life can be found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, in the discussion between Krishna and Arjuna. 'Do what is necessary', which means whatever 'work' is imposed as a duty by the *dharma* of the warrior caste and its rules, whatever is objectively necessary in relation to the purpose of war. According to this belief, acting thus is not injurious to religious salvation; indeed it serves this end. Admission to Indra's heaven had always been assured to the Indian warrior who died a hero's death just as certainly as Valhalla was to the Germanic warrior. But the former would have scorned Nirvana just as surely as the latter would have scorned the paradise of Christianity with its choirs of angels. This specialisation of ethics made it possible for Indian ethics to treat the regal art of politics quite without reservation or scruple, following the peculiar laws of politics alone, indeed intensifying them radically. Truly radical 'Machiavellianism', in the popular sense of the word, finds its classic expression in Indian literature in the *Kautaliya Artha-Sastra* (composed long before Christianity, allegedly in the time of Chandragupta), in comparison with which Machiavelli's *Principe* is harmless. In Catholic ethics, to which Professor Foerster is otherwise sympathetic, the *consilia evangelica* are, as is generally known, a special ethic for those gifted with the charisma of holy life. Here, alongside the monk, who may spill no blood nor seek material gain, there stand the pious knight and the burgher, the first of whom may do the former, while the second may do the latter. The gradations in this ethic and its integration within an organic doctrine of salvation are less consistent than in India, as was bound to be the case, given the

assumptions of the Christian faith. Because the world was corrupted by original sin, it was possible to build violence relatively easily into ethics as a means of chastising sin and heretics who endangered the soul. But the unworldly demands of the Sermon on the Mount, which represent a pure ethics of conviction, and the absolute demand for religious natural justice founded on the Sermon, have retained their revolutionary force and come to the fore with elemental power in almost every period of social upheaval. In particular they created the radical pacifist sects, one of which experimented in Pennsylvania with a state that abjured force in its relations with other states. The outcome of the experiment was tragic, however, inasmuch as the Quakers could not take up arms on behalf of their own ideals at the outbreak of the War of Independence, although this was fought on behalf of those very ideals. Normal Protestantism, by contrast, legitimated the state absolutely (and thus its means, violence) as a divine institution, and gave its blessing to the legitimate authoritarian state in particular. Luther relieved the individual of ethical responsibility for war and placed it on the shoulders of authority, asserting that no guilt could ever be involved in obeying authority in matters other than faith. Calvinism in its turn recognised as a matter of principle the use of force as a means to defend the faith, in other words religious war, which, in Islam, was a vital element in religion from the very beginning. Plainly, the problem of political ethics is *not* just one that has been thrown up by the modern lack of faith engendered by the cult of the hero during the Renaissance. All religions have grappled with it, and with very varying degrees of success; in view of what has been said above, things could not have been otherwise. 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.

Anyone who makes a pact with the means of violence, for whatever purpose – and every politician does this – is at the mercy of its specific consequences. This applies particularly to the man fighting for a belief, whether religious or revolutionary. Let us simply take the present as an example. Anyone wishing to establish absolute justice on earth by *force* needs a following in order to do so, 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 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. He can only keep control of his following as long as a sincere belief in his person and his cause inspires at least some of the group, probably never in this life even the majority of them. Not only is this faith, even when held with subjective sincerity, in many cases merely the ethical ‘legitimation’ of the craving for revenge, power, booty and prebends (and let no-one try to persuade us differently, for the materialist interpretation of history is not a cab which may be boarded at will, and it makes no exceptions for the bearers of revolutions!), but the emotionalism of revolution is then followed by a return to traditional, *everyday existence*, the hero of the faith disappears, and so, above all, does the faith itself, or it becomes (even more effectively) a part of the conventional rhetoric used by political philistines and technicians. This development comes about particularly quickly in a war of faith, because these are usually conducted or inspired by genuine *leaders*, prophets of revolution. For it is one of the conditions of success in this, as in any apparatus subordinate to a leader, that things must be emptied and made into matters-of-fact (*Versachlichung*), and the following must undergo spiritual proletarianisation, in order to achieve ‘discipline’. This is why the following of a man fighting for a faith, when it begins to rule, tends to decline particularly easily into a quite ordinary stratum of prebendaries.

Anyone wishing to practise politics of any kind, and especially anyone who wishes to make a profession of politics, has to be conscious of these ethical paradoxes and of his responsibility for what may become of *himself* under pressure from them. He is becoming involved, I repeat, with the diabolical powers that lurk in all violence.

The great virtuosi of unworldly goodness and love for mankind, whether they came from Nazareth or Assisi or from the palaces of Indian kings, did not employ the means of politics, force. Their kingdom was 'not of this world' and yet they worked, and work still, in this world, and the figures of Platon Karatayev⁵⁶ and Dostoyevsky's saints are still the closest imitations of their lives. Anyone seeking to save his own soul and the souls of others does not take the path of politics in order to reach his goal, for politics has quite different tasks, namely those which can only be achieved by force. The genius – or demon – of politics lives in a state of inner tension with the god of love, and even with the Christian God as manifested in the institution of the church, a tension that may erupt at any moment into irresolvable conflict. Even in the days of church rule people were aware of this. Again and again the interdict was imposed on Florence (something which represented at the time a far greater power over men and the salvation of their souls than what Fichte has called the 'cold approbation' of Kant's ethical judgement),⁵⁷ and yet the citizens of Florence fought against the Holy See. Machiavelli had such situations in mind when, in a beautiful passage in his Florentine histories (if my memory does not deceive me),⁵⁸ he has one of his heroes praise those citizens who placed the greatness of their native city above the salvation of their souls.

To see the problem in its current guise, replace the terms 'native city' or 'Fatherland' (which may not strike everyone as an unambiguous value at present) with 'the future of socialism' or even 'the achievement of international peace'. The 'salvation of the soul' is endangered by each of these, whenever men strive to attain them by *political* activity, employing the means of violence and acting on the basis of an ethic of responsibility. Yet if the soul's salvation is pursued in a war of faith fought purely out of an ethic of conviction, it may be damaged and discredited for generations to come, because responsibility for the *consequences* is lacking. In such circumstances those engaged in action remain unaware of the diabolical powers at

⁵⁶ Platon Karatayev is a character in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

⁵⁷ 'Das System der Sittenlehre nach den Principien der Wissenschaftslehre', *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämtliche Werke*, vol. IV (Berlin, 1845), p. 167.

⁵⁸ The reference is to Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, Book 3, ch. 7, p. 114: 'so much more did those citizens esteem their fatherland than their souls' (in the translation by L. F. Banfield and H. C. Mansfield, Princeton, 1988).

work. They are inexorable, bringing about the consequences of their actions, including consequences for their inner being, to which they will fall helpless victims if they remain blind to them. 'The devil is old, so become old if you want to understand him'⁵⁹ – the saying does not refer to one's age measured in years. I too have never allowed myself to be outdone in debate simply because of a date on a birth certificate; equally, the mere fact that someone is twenty whereas I am over fifty does not persuade me that this in itself is an achievement before which I must expire in awe. What matters is not age but the trained ability to look at the realities of life with an unsparing gaze, to bear these realities and be a match for them inwardly.

For truly, although politics is something done with the head, it is certainly not something done with the head *alone*. On this point the conviction-moralists are entirely correct. But whether one *ought* to act on the basis of an ethics of conviction or one of responsibility, and *when* one should do the one or the other, these are not things about which one can give instructions to anybody. There is just one thing one can say in these times of excitement – *not*, you believe, a 'sterile' form of excitement (although excitement is not always the same as true passion) – if, *suddenly*, conviction-politicians spring up all around, proclaiming, 'The world is stupid and base (*gemein*), not I. Responsibility for the consequences does not fall on me but on the others, in whose service I work and whose stupidity or baseness I shall eradicate', then I say plainly that I want to know how much *inner weight* is carried by this ethic of conviction. For it is my impression that, in nine cases out of ten, I am dealing with windbags, people who are intoxicated with romantic sensations but who do not truly feel what they are taking upon themselves. Such conduct holds little human interest for me and it most certainly does not shake me to the core. On the other hand it is immensely moving when a mature person (whether old or young) who feels with his whole soul the responsibility he bears for the real consequences of his actions, and who acts on the basis of an ethics of responsibility, says at some point, 'Here I stand, I can do no other.'⁶⁰ That is something genuinely human and profoundly moving. For it must be *possible* for *each* of us

⁵⁹ Goethe, *Faust*, Part II, lines 6817–18.

⁶⁰ Luther is reported to have said this at the Diet of Worms in 1521.

to find ourselves in such a situation at some point if we are not inwardly dead. In this respect, the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility are not absolute opposites. They are complementary to one another, and only in combination do they produce the true human being who is *capable* of having a 'vocation for politics'.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, let us return to these questions *ten years* from now. If by that time, as I am bound to fear will be the case, an age of reaction has set in for a whole series of reasons, and little has been realised of all those things which many of you and (as I freely admit) I too have wished and hoped for – perhaps not exactly none of them but apparently only very little (this is very likely, but it will not break my spirit, although I confess that it is an inward burden) – then I would very much like to see what has become of those of you – what has 'become' of you in the innermost sense of the word – who at present feel themselves genuinely to be 'politicians of conviction' and who share in the intoxication (*Rausch*)⁶¹ which this revolution signifies. It would be fine indeed if Shakespeare's Sonnet 102 fitted the situation:

Our love was new, and then but in the spring,
When I was wont to greet it with my lays;
As Philomel in summer's front doth sing,
And stops her pipe in growth of riper days.

But that is not how things are. What lies immediately ahead of us is not the flowering of summer but a polar night of icy darkness and hardness, no matter which group wins the outward victory now. For, where there is nothing, not only has the Kaiser lost his rights but so too has the proletarian. When this night slowly begins to recede, which of those people will still be alive whose early summer seems now to have flowered so profusely? And what will have become of you all inwardly? Embitterment or philistinism, sheer, dull acceptance of the world and of your job (*Beruf*) – or the third, and not the least common possibility, a mystical flight from the world on the part of those with the gift for it or – a frequent and pernicious variant – on the part of those who force themselves into such an attitude because

⁶¹ In criticising the *Rausch* ('intoxication') of revolutionary enthusiasm, Weber is striking at the ready welcome given to the 'Dionysian' aspects of Nietzsche's thought by many German intellectuals at the time.

it is fashionable. In every such case I will draw the conclusion that they were *not* inwardly a match for their own actions, *nor* were they a match for the world as it really is, nor for their daily existence. Objectively and actually, they did not have the vocation they thought they had for politics in the innermost sense of the word. They would have done better to cultivate plain and simple brotherliness with other individuals, and, for the rest, to have worked soberly (*sachlich*) at their daily tasks.

Politics means slow, strong drilling through hard boards, with a combination of passion and a sense of judgement. It is of course entirely correct, and a fact confirmed by all historical experience, that what is possible would never have been achieved if, in this world, people had not repeatedly reached for the impossible. But the person who can do this must be a leader; not only that, he must, in a very simple sense of the word, be a hero. And even those who are neither of these things must, even now, put on the armour of that steadfastness of heart which can withstand even the defeat of all hopes, for otherwise they will not even be capable of achieving what is possible today. Only someone who is certain that he will not be broken when the world, seen from his point of view, is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer it, and who is certain that he will be able to say 'Nevertheless' in spite of everything – only someone like this has a 'vocation' for politics.