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Protestant Ethics and the Secularization of Vocation

Rarița MIHAIL^{1*}

Abstract

Starting from the way Martin Luther relates to vocation and its wider implications for society, Max Weber will later develop an understanding of the relationship between the teachings of Protestant morality and vocation. Starting from the ethics of a specialized and ascetic profession, the carrier of a normative and responsible commitment in the world, Weber builds a personality model capable of responding to the political and intellectual challenges of his time. In this paper, I argue that the secularization of vocation, as the epiphenomenon of the disenchantment of the world, and its departure from an ethic of specific religious behavior allowed Weber to shape a portrait of the professional man as an ideal type of ethical personality, inspired by the archetypal example of the ascetic Protestant. It will be necessary to understand how vocation, as a way of articulation between ethics and conduct, generates a distinct type of man engaged in the social struggle. We have developed this thesis through an approach to the Weberian vocation concept, especially in terms of ethical and normative foundations, which implies a unique philosophical position, and I have come to the conclusion that this conceptual framework supports the modernity of the Protestant vocation.

Keywords:

Max Weber, Protestant morality, vocation, conduct of life, type of man.

1. Introduction

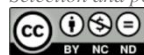
The tension between the ethic component of conduct and its integration in the diversity of everyday life is a matter of crucial reflection for

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modernity. Approaching the issue of conduct from an ethical perspective, Michel Foucault investigates a certain aspect of the subject, but not from the point of view of institutions and relations of power, but of how it is embodied in actual practice [1]. His objective, starting with the second volume of *Histoire de la sexualité*, is no longer to observe the relations between power and knowledge, but to specify the active dimension of subjectivity in relation to self. “To act” equates to “the way in which the self must be constituted as a moral subject, acting in relation to the normative elements that constitute the code” [2]. This point of view places the individual action in a relationship with the self, as a source for the realization of freedom, and in relation to the code, as the constitutive delimitation of this horizon. In this way, Foucault initiates a new research object, the conduct that materializes the ethical tension between the individual project of the aesthetic personality and the historical and institutional conditions of the current life. Conduct allows consideration of the meaning of moral action for its modeling, both practical and dynamic. “There is no special moral action that does not relate to the unity of moral conduct; but no moral conduct that does not resort to the constitution of the self as a moral subject, nor the constitution of the moral subject in the absence of “modes of subjectivity” and of “ascetics” or “practices of the self” on which they are founded” [2]. Dialectics between ethics, understood as an inner search for self, and its everyday materialization is embodied in the issue of unity of life conduct. For Foucault, asceticism as a way of mastering this behavior has always been a privileged practice of ethical existence, oriented towards an authentic subjectivity

This tension between the ethical coherence of behavior and its enrollment in the plurality of the ordinary was, in fact, at the center of modern thinking. Friedrich Nietzsche gave it an unusual existential accent: how can man make sense of his life and existence in the scientific age, which seems to undermine the sources of meaning? What discipline can lift man above the structures that govern him? The ascetics and probity of free spirits [3], to which Nietzsche refers, give us a way of emancipation: the liberation from the comfort of “the last men” seems indispensable for the fulfillment of a superior and genuinely idiosyncratic destiny. The tension between the determinations of modern society and the exigencies of human development is therefore an extremely important anchor for reflection on the challenges of modernity.

The history of this *topos* of political philosophy has been deeply marked by the works and thoughts of an author who has made studying lifestyle his passion and asceticism. At the beginning of the last century, Max Weber took a fascinating journey to the United States, which allowed him to

understand how the economic activism of the Ascetic Protestants of the Reformation could form the capitalist spirit, starting with the realization of a methodical life conduct, regulated in all respects by an ethical doctrine. Weber uses the term “vocation” (*Beruf*) to describe this ethical existence in the world as a systematic conduct, governed by the obedience of an inner duty [4]. In *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, it is the behaviour proclaimed by the Ascetic Protestants of the Reformation, derived from the doctrine of predestination, which generates a transformation of the ideal and material cosmos of the West. The personality model that Weber defends, reconciling moral integrity and responsibility to the world, has proven to be essential to a reflection on the modern ethics of action.

2. Theoretical Background

The subject of vocation is an extremely fertile one from the perspective of the history of philosophical ideas and at the same time extremely current, present in public debates, being a point of intersection of philosophy with anthropology, psychology, sociology and not only. Unlike Charles Taylor who claims in *The Ethics of Authenticity* that the concept of *vocation* points to an ideal of *authenticity* [5] that seems to be a discovery of modernity, Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, believes that this concept attests, rather, ancient sources, primarily Aristotelian ones [6]. According to this tradition of thinking, man is not a social atom endowed with rights and duties, but the being whom, in order to achieve his essential purpose, has to fulfill a series of social roles in *polis* [6]. It is true, however, that this ideal of authenticity knows a series of significant mutations in modernity. On the one hand, the theological foundation of the social order, characteristic of the Middle Ages, is undermined, which makes the social position to which you can access and, implicitly, the recognition from others depend less and less on a predetermined hierarchy and social categories taken for granted [5]. On the other hand, modernity has an *individualistic* emphasis on the *uniqueness*, singularity of each vocation: “There is a certain way of being human, which is my own. I am called to lead my life this way, and not to imitate anyone else” [5].

The idea *vocation* as such and even *professional* vocation is already found in antiquity. For example, in *Politics*, Aristotle mentions a myth referred to in the *Republic of Plato* [7], according to which God has mixed from the beginning some souls with gold, others with silver, “and the souls who were to become craftsmen and farmers He mixed with brass and iron” [7].

It is clear that, placed in this horizon of significance, the concept of *vocation* implies rather the idea of community, assuming an organicist view of society. On the other hand, there is a common understanding that Martin Luther's Reformation is a real turn-key to modernity and that in this significant historical change the concept of *man* ceases to be thought of as a *functional* concept [6], ending up to designate before anything else, the *individual*. However, if it is indeed true that the Protestant Reform has engaged the modern individualism, it can be explained, above all, starting from the Calvinist dogma of choosing through unconditional election/grace, according to which God has decided from the beginning who are elected for eternal salvation and life. The stake of earthly life moves thus from obtaining salvation to obtaining, or rather, maintaining the certainty of salvation, the certainty that you have been "chosen". Although, in Calvinism, the predestination dogma is not only a prerequisite, but a consequence [8], Max Weber considers that this change of perspective has decisively contributed to a breaking in the traditional mentality and to the birth of modern capitalism.

For Weber, the key element in Protestant ethics, the one that has largely generated the so-called "spirit of capitalism", exemplarily illustrated by Benjamin Franklin, is the idea of vocational work or professional vocation: *Beruf* or *calling*, as the English speaking theologians would express it. To give the work done of vocation an unprecedented spiritual importance in traditional Christianity becomes possible with the interpretation of Luther's Bible, who translates *Beruf* (in the current sense, secular profession) "two completely different concepts" [4]: First of all, *ergon* of the Septuagint, the *Book of Jesus, son of Sirah*, with a meaning close to the present current „profession" (*bleibe in deinem Beruf*) and then, the Pauline *kelesis*, from the *Epistle*, with the meaning of calling (*Berufung*) by God to eternal salvation, a transcendent calling which presupposes, precisely, disinterest in material things. In addition, Weber adds, "in traditional Latin, *vocatio* was equal to the divine calling to *holy life*" [4], and this sense is somehow "diverted" by Luther to the idea of "secular «vocational» work" [4].

It is precisely in this context that the unprecedented importance given in Protestant Ethics to vocational work is explained, being seen as the best antidote to eventual discouragement and spiritual inertia of the believer, the success of the work for which you have a calling is essential to ensuring you are on the side of the "chosen". As Weber remarked, such a doctrine has the psychological effect of "the feeling of an unbelievable inner loneliness of the individual" [4]. Nevertheless, we remember that Protestant ethics didn't only offer psychological support for the interpretation of profit chances as a sign of divine grace, but, firstly, it helped form a mass of

disciplined and orderly workers, convinced that work in the profession for which they had a “calling” is their purpose on earth, even if it doesn’t allow them enrichment [4]. Also, as in Protestantism, the idea of *vocation* engages the imperatives of a *rationalist* ethic, which opposes the “constant motives” of changing affections [4].

This interpretation of the appearance of the protestant doctrine and its practical consequences on the individuals’ behaviour is inseparable from the establishment of a secularized concept of vocation.

3. Argument of the paper

In this paper, I argue that the secularization of vocation, as the epiphenomenon of the disenchantment of the world, and its departure from an ethic of specific religious behaviour, allowed Weber to render a portrait of the professional man as an ideal type of ethical personality inspired by the archetypal example of the Ascetic Protestant. It will be necessary to understand how vocation, as a way of articulation between ethics and behaviour, generates a distinct type of man engaged in the social struggle. However, our intention is to overcome the purely sociological reading of the vocation concept in Weber’s writings to demonstrate its central role in building an individual ethic. To this end, we approach the Weberian concept of vocation especially in terms of its ethical and normative fundamentals, as an attitude towards the world, significant, responsible and virtuous at the same time.

4. Arguments to support the thesis

Vocation is an omnipresent concept in Max Weber’s thinking. In his emblematic book, *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber exposes the idea of vocation as the pivot of the psychological portrait of the Ascetic Protestants. His doctrinal opening within Lutheranism implies a dual movement of secularization and intensification of behaviour/conduct in order to achieve salvation.

In a dialectical relationship with the “world image” that determines and shapes it, vocation as a model of ideal type of relationship between ethics and conduct always returns in the Weberian work. Vocation appears in all its cultural contingency as a way of behavior specific to religious communities, which is then disseminated and rationalized to become compatible with the requirements of a rational economy. For Ascetic Protestants, this behavior was characterized by active ascetics, and was

mainly driven by the inner sense of duty to transform the world into soteriological anxiety, and the need for oneself and others to confirm its state of grace.

4.1. *Vocation as a virtuous lifestyle*

We can identify three practical aspects that will guide us in examining the vocation, starting from how Weber relates to Luther's interpretation of the concept. Indeed, the latter initiates a new conception of the secular profession, placing it in connection with the obligations of religious doctrine. The ascetism is required from the very beginning as the pillar of vocation, in the sense that it embraces a complex set of practices characteristic of this virtuous way of life. Utility, as a material criterion for the possession of faith and salvation, and exemplarity, as the ethical dynamic of social life anchoring, constitute the other two pillars.

4.1.1. *The ascetic foundation of behaviour*

In Protestant Ethics, Weber often returns to the ascetic and the varied ways of its manifestation. To argue, Weber constantly appeals to the comparison with Western Catholic monastic life. The Puritan ascetic secularises and makes profane (in the sense that it is imposed to the laity as well) the strict regime, which was previously a characteristic necessary to overcome *intramundane* morality. It becomes a daily exercise of self-control: "The Christian asceticism (...) was systematically elaborated, was a rational life, aimed at overcoming its *status naturae*, removing man from the power of irrational instincts and from the dependence on the world and nature, his submission to the supremacy of deliberate will, the subordination of his actions to a constant self-control and to the *appreciation* of their ethical consequences, and thus - objectively - the education of the monk as a servant in the service of the kingdom of God and - subjectively - ensuring of the salvation of the soul" [4].

The parallel between the two ethics is therefore incontestable. Asceticism is a mode of conduct that regulates the practical conflict between the *subjective* ethical ideal of salvation confirmation and the *objective* requirements of the world and economic activity. By substituting its entire existence to the divine will (which gives human nature its individual vocation), ascetism proves to be in fact an individual submission to discipline as a sign of confirmation, an obedience to a duty self-imposed for oneself. In this sense, "the *instinctual* pleasure of life, which equally distracts from professional work and from religious preoccupations, was in contradiction with rational asceticism" [4]. The certainty of salvation should

consist “in a systematic *self-control* that is *permanently* confronted with the alternative: chosen or rejected?”[4]. The main feature which emerges from this is the fact that this ascetic is ordinary/everyday and *intramundane*, it isn’t an extra-ordinary (or extraordinary) act made up of the desire to escape the world and its vicissitudes to enjoy the afterlife. The Calvinist ascetic opposes the medieval one by “giving up the *Evangelical counsel* and implicitly by transforming asceticism into a pure secular ascetic” [4]. The decisive element here is the valorization of the secular sphere through the implementation of a positive idea: “the need to *confirm faith* in secular professional life. In this way, it (Calvinism) gave a wider range of people with religious inclinations a *positive incentive* towards asceticism” [4]. The way in which Ascetic Protestantism has been able to extend the field of asceticism - distinguishing itself from the rest of Christians – at the same time with the increase of the need for self-transformation in a truly unique tool that serves religious purposes. From this moment: “The Christian ascetic (...) was alive, shutting the monastery door behind it and starting to penetrate the *everyday* life of the world with its methodology, transforming this life into a rational one in the world, and yet *not* from this world or *for* this world” [4]. Any modern conception of vocation, which was originally a deliberate refusal and a deliberate escape from the world, therefore derives from a genealogical point of view from its expulsion from the monastery to gradually become a way of life imposed by the superiority of its internal economic rationality.

4.1.2. Utility as an ethical measurement standard

The sign of salvation confirmation lies, above all, in the fierce regularity of the way of life, put into practice by an ethical (and not material) intent. However, we must not believe that the Ascetic Protestants were pleased with the radiography of the motivations of action as hermeneutical support for the confirmation of salvation. The visible results of faith mattered as much, and this because of two reasons that reinforce each other: transforming the world by practicing the profession contributed to the greater glory of God on the one hand, and only those faith-driven achievements could serve as the basis for an objective examination of the status of the believer by the community of believers, on the other. Thus, the *fides efficax* principle serves both an internal dynamics to confirm the soteriological status due to the visible effects of economic success and a relational dynamics for exemplarity and legitimacy in the community or in the religious sect. Thus, the usefulness of this belief becomes, in a way, a supreme asset of salvation. It provides an objective criterion for hierarchy and comparison between those who are likely to be chosen (and therefore

those who can be given credit) and those whose piety leaves much to be desired.

There is no doubt for Weber that in the consciousness of Ascetic Protestants there is an obvious transitivity between inner ethics, way of life, and economic success. For Wolfgang Schluchter, the transition that he identifies between an ethic of norms and an ethics of principles, that characterizes Protestant ethics, reveals above all an increase in autonomous control and inner discipline over rules and norms issued from the outside [10]. The ethic of principles requires, in comparison with the ethics of norms, a greater degree of action oriented inward. In the same way, it marks a transition from a type of heteronomic consciousness to a type of autonomous consciousness, from a personality oriented towards others to a personality oriented towards oneself. “But this type of autonomous consciousness always remains fixed in concrete forms of morality, which Weber demonstrates in the conduct of ascetic Protestantism. Here, inner compulsion towards vigilant self-control, a methodical and rational discipline of personal behaviour, was connected to a growing external control through various forms of ecclesiastical organizations” [10].

This interconnection makes it possible to judge the ethical quality of an individual from his economic activity, which is more than the devotion displayed or the participation in the cult, the main support of the individual's moral credit in relation to the other. As Weber sums it up: “The Calvinists are enthusiastic about the idea that in the composition of the world, as in the social order, God should seek *positive utility* as a means of increasing his glory (...) The incentive to for deeds of the saints, unlocked by the doctrine of predestination, is confused with the tendency of rationalizing the world” [10]. This positive utility applies primarily to interpersonal relationships: no feeling that is unreasonable or guided by God's celebration should be displayed or encouraged. The individualization of the social relationships generated by this utility is, for Weber, an important factor in the emergence of capitalism, in the sense that to each social action is attached an ethical justification, which is ultimately purely individual. This individual assumption is the corollary of a way of life, whose logical coherence encompasses all aspects of life, even the most ordinary or intimate. Finally, besides the fact that utility is a positive assessment criterion - which today seems to be obvious - it is also a dynamic specific to the profession as a vocation: the ideal valorisation process of utility is central to the economic ethics of the Protestants involved in economic activities. It is not a *means* targeted towards social success or economic prosperity, but is a positive *aim* pursued itself as both *subjective* proof (towards oneself) and *objective* (towards others) of the ethical qualification of the individual.

4.1.3. Moral exemplarity and legitimacy of the believer

Although this utility is the result of a psychological impulse primarily of a religious nature, the ethical integrity that Ascetic Protestants assume reflects more complex psychological ramifications. Indeed, moral probity becomes a virtue pursued for itself, in the service of the constant search for salvation, and not just for non-ethical or pragmatic purposes. In this regard, the article on Protestant Sects [11] explores the determinant role of control without any bias in Puritan Protestantism. Weber insists on several occasions that the participation of everyone in communion is accepted only if the individual demonstrates ethical purity that can be tangibly observed in his way of life. The exemplarity of this behaviour provides an ethical credit to the individual, whose integrity is a priori judged by his acceptance in the religious sect: “integrity is unrelated to seeking economic capital but, is more deeply related to seeking, for oneself, a specific form of capital recognized by those who judge integrity “[12]. The fact that this way of life is constantly placed under rigorous ethical control makes it a reliable and rational judgment and legitimacy criterion. By exerting a “panoptic” influence on each person’s behavior, members practice an effective check of the visible ethical provisions of each person and a valorization of the “moral” qualities, thereby confirming the membership of the sect.

From this point of view, moral exemplarity becomes the main source of accreditation and legitimizing the individual inside his sect, but also externally: “belonging to a sect (...) was considered as a certificate of ethical qualification for a personality and it especially guaranteed his commercial ethics” [11]. The individual presents this guarantee both to the other members of his own sect, but also to the society as a whole, thus proving that he knows the virtuous ethical path that each believer has to fulfill and respect. Once again, this exemplarity is, for Weber, the perfect example of “moral” transitivity between the personal way of life, aimed at salvation, and the secular activity, such as the profession. The formula agreed by Puritans: “honesty is the best policy” admirably sums up this process. The guarantee of moral and economic credit provided by these sects made possible the access to the latter. This guarantee was “a ticket for social success and, in particular, allowed individuals to affirm themselves in their eyes: it was a means of “confirming themselves” [11]. In addition, Weber adds that maintaining these ethical provisions visible in secular conduct, which responds to the pressure to maintain the purity of the community - in other terms, to preserve this virtuous state as the only one able to provide grace - allows the preservation of the charismatic dimension of faith, both for the pastor and the members [11]. The convergence of affirmation for oneself,

but also for others, of the state of grace is undoubtedly the instrument of control and discipline of the way of life of individuals, inaugurated or used with the greatest power by the Ascetic Protestants.

From the very beginning, vocation has both an individual/soteriological and social/legitimate basis. The psychological rewards offered to the believer are only available at the cost of unifying all spheres of social life under one principle: “the rewards were associated with a confirmation before God, which had to guarantee salvation, and with a confirmation in front of men, which will allow the individual to affirm himself in the Puritan sects” [11]. It is essential to underline the fundamental importance of this article about sects, because it combines, as in other cases, the link between the rational and methodical way of living with the legitimacy in the community. The article also establishes an inextricable link between the rational interest in “knowing” the choice and the social interest of being “recognized” by the community. From this perspective, the article focuses not only on the ethical and practical consequences of a religious doctrine, but also on “the power of influence exerted on the way of life by different forms of religious communities - churches or sects” [13]. Weber thus avoids any substantialist interpretation; for him, the entities and institutions “are nothing but coagulations of certain types of practices” [14].

4.2. The outline of an ideal type of ethical personality

Asceticism, utility and exemplarity are, therefore, the three essential characteristics of the Ascetic Protestants’ lifestyle. The fact that they become the ethical principles of *intramundane* activity is the result of secularization of vocation, where the economic profession, even the most trivial one, is associated with an ethical and religious content that no other religion has exploited with such force. But, beyond the elective affinity he identifies between the doctrinal contents and the birth of a methodical and rational economic spirit, like that of capitalism, Weber wants to portray a new type of man.

4.2.1. Lifestyle and personality

Indeed, this rationalization of the way of life leads to the selection of features and the development of a singular and specific way of conception of existence, a way that anticipates certain parameters of modern individualism. Thus appears the need to articulate this phenomenon around the concept of “personality”: “the Puritan ascetic, like any other «rational», asceticism, made man capable of maintaining and affirming the «constant motives», especially the ones it has inoculated itself as opposed to «affects», has shaped him in

terms of «personality» in *this* «formal-psychological» sense of the word. In opposition to some popular representations, the purpose was a lucid, conscious, bright life, and the most urgent goal was to annihilate the naivety that the joy of instinctual life gives. The introduction of *order* into the life of all followers was the main *means* of asceticism” [4].

Thus, methodical and rational way of life is not only an indispensable tool for achieving salvation, but it causes a natural inclination to be set in accordance with the principles of *duty* and *order*, which governs permanently and coherently the whole life of individuals: “all passions remove us from the rational and reserved relationship that we must maintain with the world” [4]. On this primordial ascetic aspect one builds personality, since the secularization of this asceticism into an ethics of the profession that can transform the world most efficiently, while at the same time providing the individual with sufficient recognition within his community, indispensable for obtaining the critical volume required for belonging to a social category. This “setting” of secular conduct is what interests Weber in *Protestant Ethics*, and not exclusively the emergence of capitalism [13].

As such, the personality is mainly based on the subjugation of secular affections and contingencies of a methodical way of life, rationalized according to the ultimate values, subjectively felt. To put it differently, it is about subjecting the “person” to a process of personality building. The full meaning of vocation is achieved in the omniscient architecture of such a project. The potential of being an ethical personality, at the same time individual and total, is what fascinates Weber in his study of the Ascetic Protestants. The Puritans granted an exceptional reward to the personality, because the visible transformation of the individual (which the churches glorified as the “second birth” of the believers - *born again*, embodied in an almost caricature way) was achieved through the rational arrangement of all his actions under the unique principle of *ethos* and religious *habitus*.

The rational transformation of the self and the world, oriented towards the improvement of motivation and conduct, is connected here with the conquest of a supposed state of grace, which is about, first of all, devoting oneself to the glory of God by fulfilling the tasks he assigns to each individual. The irresistible force of the divine decree has given the necessary and indispensable momentum for putting into practice an equally advanced ascetic device, both for establishing a relationship that is remote from itself and for conquering legitimacy and prestige in the community [15]. This feeling of “duty” and “order”, notified from within and reinforced by community pressure, forms the nucleus of the Ascetic Protestant personality. Only the intensity of this “distinction” pulsation, both religious and social, makes it possible to understand the radical nature of the

Protestants' economic commitment and, consequently, their contribution to the development of capitalism. There is an indissoluble link between religious qualification and social prestige. The rigorous and systematic fulfillment of this duty has the highest ethical content; the personality is carved out by "raising and unifying the self by systematically overcoming the sentiment and desire in order to serve higher goals" [15]. The moral authority on secular affections sets the foundations for the folding of the "natural" self (*status naturae*) into a personality. It is both an educational process and a constraining process: the transformation of the self is orchestrated with method, and conduct with discipline.

This anthropological creation from the *Protestant Ethics* will become a paradigmatic for subsequent personality models (from science and politics, for example). It is "the basis of Weber's later research on a viable, attractive and efficient ideal of the public and private person" [15]. By such a rigorous examination in *Protestant Ethics* on the creation of a charismatic and transforming personality, such as the Puritan, Weber draws the path he will himself move in the conferences on the scientist and the political man.

4.2.2. An aristocratism of faith

By creating the subjective faith as the main, autonomous and immanent source of practical ethics, Weber initiates a first approach of a moral virtuosity that crosses all of his writings. This virtuosity no longer corresponds to the perfect adaptation to a set of norms issued in a heteronomic manner by institutions or charismatic leaders, but is built by daily confrontation with the multiple irrationality of the world, according to an ethics, both individual and total, which has the purpose of transforming the world, not adapting to it. Thus, Protestant asceticism creates the conditions for the systematization of the way of life and the ethics of vocation. But this possibility of personality training is reserved only for an elite, an elite that has exceptional abilities of overcoming and discipline which has been (self) designated as an instrument of divine plans. Indeed, sects and communities of believers aim at achieving a certain exemplarity and virtuosity in the exercise of their faith, not only because of the perpetual fear of damnation, but also because of its convergence, as a result of a particular elective affinity, a way of legitimacy and of prestige that allows them to distinguish themselves from other confessions. Thus, the simultaneity of the factors - ideal and material, ethics and pragmatic - which make the profession a vocation, allows a new ethics of virtuosity to emerge. The latter causes the emergence of a new moral aristocracy, "whose merits derive from the new acquired capacities and from a superior mission" and

which “differs greatly as a meaning from its «being» and its ancient value, a more traditional representation of the aristocracy” [15].

In this case, it becomes almost a certainty that the extension of vocation as the ethical epicenter of secular life, which accompanies the secularization and individualization of the search for salvation, challenges almost all the traditional forms of authority and legitimacy. The source of dignity of the traditional aristocracy was the importance of its “being” and its rank, an inherent quality that had to be justified and valorized within an appropriate doctrine. The dignity of privileged classes thus fit into a self-referential theodicy that built a legendary status around the qualities presumed to be intrinsically held. On the contrary, the new “aristocracy” of the Ascetic Protestants find themselves in an inappropriate and sinful state: only the transformation of their being (by asceticism) and the world (by utility) can bring hope of salvation. Only the fulfillment of the task (and not the rank) structure a rational religious ethic around the notions of function, mission, and ultimately of vocation. Religious virtuous are the soldiers of their faith, in direct confrontation with the world’s irrationality. This new source of power is innovative, creative, and shapes the world in accordance to an ethical volunteering that foreshadows the portraits of the scientist and the political man; it is understood rather as a mastery of its becoming and its unpredictability than as a preservation or contemplation of being.

5. Conclusions

To justify the interest that his research may have for the era in which he lives, Weber tries to find the origin of contemporary moral content in history: “Of course, the different dogmatic roots of ascetic ethics have disappeared over time after terrible struggles. But the original anchoring in those dogmas did not leave only deep traces in later “non-dogmatic” ethics, but only the knowledge of the original idea content teaches us to understand how this ethic was related to the idea of a life *beyond* that absolutely dominated the man of those times” [4]. Thus, Weber invites us to consider the gradual secularization of certain spiritual concepts that have emerged throughout history. The elimination of the dogmatic content of *intramundane* morality is the phenomenon to be observed; and the concept of “vocation” is appropriate to this phenomenon. In this context, the disenchantment of the world is nothing but the elimination of the dogmatic and religious justifications of certain behaviors.

Weber’s main insight is, of course, that the spirit of capitalism, previously supported and justified by a coherent and constraining religious

ethic, has become empowered from this metaphysical content. From a previous subjective constraint, we reach an objective constraint that is shown by this famous formula: “The Puritan *wished* to be a man of profession, we are *obligated* to be” [4]. What Weber regrets is the fact that the empowerment of capitalism has led to the diminishing of the strong significance that the “vocation” of the professional man had: it was sense donor and “personality” trainer. He also presents the continuity between the ethics of virtuosity pursued by Protestants - in which professional work was an assistant to the certainty of salvation - and the ethics of the profession of modern capitalism. Nevertheless, in some aspects, this behaviour, justified by the permanent anguish of choice or rejection, has been reified in a rational economic behaviour that can no longer rely on an ethical justification. In other words, it no longer obeys an ethic of virtuosity, but only an economic rationality essential to the social survival of the individual. This instrumental rationalization has radical consequences on the type of man that Western civilization promotes. Weber attempts to counteract the renouncing of the ethical justification of behaviour, as well as the reductionist influence of material assets on the spectrum of potential personalities (the “iron cage”), by perpetuating a strong idea of vocation.

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