

Max Weber:

An ethic of responsibility as a response to the decline of values

“You should resist evil with force, otherwise you are responsible for its getting out of hand.”

(Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf* (1918/19) in *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, 3rd ed., Tübingen 1971, p. 550)

“One of the first thinkers to seek an explicit ethical way to deal with the monumental ideological conflicts and the pluralistic situation of modern times was Max Weber, one of the fathers of modern sociology. He was born in Erfurt in 1864 and died in Munich in 1920. He taught, among other places, in Freiburg and in Vienna. In 1918, he helped found the Liberal German Democratic Party. [...] Weber not only exercised a lasting influence on the ethical debate of the 20th Century; he helped to give it its shape. Reacting to the deep social and political crises at the beginning of the 20th Century, he was the first to introduce the notion of responsibility into political ethical discourse. In the wake of the war of ideologies escalating since the 19th Century, the doctrine of ethics prevailing in politics at this time held that what counts are the right convictions and the good intentions, ignoring the real consequences of ones actions and showing no readiness to take responsibility for the undesirable results of actions taken with the right intentions.”¹

“The politician cannot be satisfied with merely intending to do the right thing. He must also do it, and, when he lacks the possibility to do it, he should at least try to do the next best thing. [...] Naturally – so Weber – the proponent of an ethic of responsibility cannot dispense with moral principles. Otherwise he would indeed be threatened by a lack of moral footing. Weber does not intend to abolish morals: what he, like the pragmatists, challenges is the notion of a ‘pure’ morality, which itself falls into immorality and prepares the way for the social decline of values. The moralist or upholder of an ethic of convictions has already achieved his goal when he intends to do the good thing and only the good thing. When he has developed the right intention, when he has purified his will of all evil intentions and all immoral thoughts, then he is a moral person.

¹ Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann, *Weltethos in philosophischer Perspektive*, Munich 2008, p. 74f.

Counter to this position, Max Weber proposes to concretize and delimit the ethical horizon by calling attention to the responsibility for foreseeable consequences. The central focus of ethics is no longer merely the good intention but also the overall result of an action, insofar as it can be foreseen, evaluated, and accounted for. This means keeping the realities of the day-to-day world in sight: one must carefully analyze the world as it is. Taking responsibility means that one cannot presuppose the world or a human being to be the way one wants them or imagines them to be.

The person practicing an ethic of responsibility reckons with the average failings of human beings. He has [...] no right to presuppose their goodness and perfection. He will not be tempted to shift onto others the responsibility for the consequences of his actions, at least insofar as he can foresee them. Instead he will say that such consequences belong to his own deed.”²

² Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf* (1918/19), in *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, 3 ed., Tübingen 1971, p. 552.