

ULTIMATE RATIONALIZATION TO ULTIMATE TRADITIONALIZATION

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Introduction

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber proposes his theory of “rationalization.”¹ Rationalization, in its most elementary form, is the transformation of a traditional society into a rational society. Weber suggests that traditional societies transition to rational societies because of shifts in religious thought. According to Weber, traditional religions portray the physical world as divinely-infused. Questions of meaning within traditional religions, therefore, revolve around isolated, tangible events. In contrast, rationalized religions separate the divine realm from the everyday realm; questions within rationalized religions address the universal condition of the greater human experience. Weber declares that social upheaval stimulates the transition from traditional to rational thought. Social upheaval, due to various factors, prompts societies to ask questions beyond the limits of traditional religion — to ask questions within the realm of rationalized religion. Through this movement towards rational thought, Weber believes societies, historically in the West, to become more modern.

Weber structures his argument in terms of the Protestant Reformation. In short, Weber suggests that the Protestant Reformation rationalized society and, thus, prompted modern capitalism. Protestantism stripped the traditional, predominantly Catholic, society of all magic and interaction with God. The Protestant God, specifically the Puritan God, was absolutely inaccessible; in order to know of one’s salvation, one needed to work. Weber argues that the Protestant “disenchantment” of the world rationalized labor as one could no longer be divinely saved. Through this transformation of labor, society became rational. Traditional Catholic

¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992).

doctrine could no longer answer rationalized Protestant questions. In this religious shift, overall society modernized and developed into a capitalist structure.

Upon the ultimate rationalization of society, Weber warns that the religious foundations of rationalization will completely crumble and society will be left in a world of rote mechanization. Weber calls this stage the “iron cage.” Society will work perfectly rationally, but there will be no philosophy or reason behind work. In the complete manifestation of meaninglessness, Weber predicts humanity's desperate search for worldly enchantment and individual purpose. Weber, nevertheless, concludes his theory without a concrete solution, but, instead, with a dystopian future of hopelessness and despair. Weber’s rationally imprisoned future has no ultimate salvation, no tangible purpose.

Despite the modern reality of hyper-rationalization, however, Weber’s iron cage has not yet materialized. Rational society, contrary to Weber’s prediction, did not erase religion, but, rather, transformed religion. As man drew away from God, he continuously appealed to his own autonomy. Although God, in a Calvinist sense, predestined man’s fate, God no longer played a tangible role in the world; man no longer could interact with God. Weber views this progression as the imprisonment of man in meaningless rationality. The modern reality of this rationalization, yet, appears as the liberation of man from God. Instead of submitting to a divine force, man himself has become the commander of his own actions. In his empowered role, man has assumed his own divinity.

The perfect rationalization of society, therefore, has brought about a *traditionalization* of religion. As opposed to the rationalization of religion, the traditionalization of religion re-enchants the stark, meaningless realm of humanity. Man’s own rationality evolves into his

own divinity and, thus, man's rational creation, technology, becomes the manifestation of his own divinity. Furthermore, the absence of an intervening God leads man to answer his own questions of meaning through his process of rationalization.

Overall, modern humanity exists in a stage that it believes itself to be rational because it still does not understand itself as traditionally religious. Rational religion exists in form and in practice, but, in reality, man himself is traditionally religious; he believes divinity to exist in his world through himself. Humanity, particularly in the West, continues on a track of rationality, but, as it does so, it further affirms its own divinity, its traditional religiosity. Ultimately, Weber's rationalization of religion produced a rational society, however, the perfect rationalization of society produced the traditionalization of religion through the divinity of man.

Weber's Theory of Rationalization

Max Weber was born in 1864 to a wealthy German family. As Weber grew up, he was immersed in a “Golden Era of German learning.”² Steeped in academic society, Weber pursued his own advanced studies in legal and economic history. Although Weber faced many personal challenges, he continued to produce influential literature, particularly surrounding the relationship between economics and society.³ As Weber proceeded to study this interaction, his research led him to the study of religion.⁴ In 1904, after years of deep research and analysis, Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Upon its publication, the book sparked great debate and conversation; “Weber’s thesis”⁵ proved to be both innovative and

² Daniel L. Pals, Nine Theories of Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 145.

³ Pals, 146.

⁴ Pals, 153.

⁵ Pals, 153.

provocative. Weber set the foundation for future theorists, like Clifford Geertz,⁶ and enhanced the overall study of religion. Despite subsequent years of analysis and critique, Weber's 1904 text remains relevant and applicable to the modern day.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber describes the utterly rational state of Protestantism that has brought about modern capitalism. In the beginning of his book, Weber notes the disproportionately high percentage of Protestant "business leaders and owners of capital," specifically in comparison to Catholic occupations.⁷ As Weber frames his overall argument, he attempts to discern the factors that brought about this phenomenon. Weber proposes several possible explanations, including Catholics' "stronger propensity to remain in their craft"⁸ and the "otherworldliness of Catholicism,"⁹ but declares these all of these explanations to be incomplete, if not incorrect. Weber concludes that to truly understand the nature of the occupational statistics, one must "penetrate into the peculiar characteristics of and the differences between those great worlds of religious thought."¹⁰ In other words, Weber believes that isolated aspects of Catholicism and Protestantism cannot explain this occurrence; only a true comprehension of the nuances and variations between the two belief systems can provide an answer.

Weber begins his in-depth examinations of Catholicism and Protestantism with an overview of the capitalist system. Weber outlines capitalism as the combination of "a disciplined

⁶ Clifford Geertz, 'Internal Conversion' in *Contemporary Bali* (Chicago, IL: Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations, The University of Chicago, 1964).

⁷ Weber, 3.

⁸ Weber, 6.

⁹ Weber, 9.

¹⁰ Weber, 12.

labour force, and the regularised investment of capital.”¹¹ The ethic of capitalism, according to Weber, is “the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life.”¹² Weber aligns this concept of strict frugality with Protestantism, and more precisely Puritanism, but does not yet dwell on this connection. Weber contends that individuals are driven to accumulate wealth because they feel an “obligation... towards the content of [their] professional activity.”¹³ Despite the specific nature of one’s profession, in a capitalist structure, one’s calling is one’s work.

Weber presents the capitalist structure as wholly rational and, therefore, fundamentally opposed to traditional understandings of society. Weber describes the attitude of “traditionalism” as the “most important opponent with which the spirit of capitalism has had to struggle.”¹⁴ Traditionalism, in Weber’s view, contradicts the capitalist ideal of wealth accumulation for the purpose of wealth accumulation; traditionalism is the accumulation of wealth for a specific “purpose” alone.¹⁵ Through a traditionalist mindset, an individual would not be incentivized by an increased pay but would, instead, decrease his or her time spent working, as increased pay and fewer hours achieved a specific purpose. Weber defines capitalism as the rational progression from traditionalism.

Weber’s delineation of capitalism provides the foundation for his original investigation: the religious factors that led to rationalization. Weber explains that, during the Reformation, Luther’s Protestantism brought “moral justification [into] worldly activity.”¹⁶ Unlike

¹¹ Weber, xi.

¹² Weber, 18.

¹³ Weber, 19.

¹⁴ Weber, 23.

¹⁵ Weber, 24.

¹⁶ Weber, 41.

Catholicism, which reserved religious behavior for monastic life, Protestantism declared the divinity of worldly duties. Weber suggests that, more specifically, Calvinism unintentionally carried the “old Protestant ethic” into the modern “spirit of capitalism.”¹⁷

The Calvinist structure is centered around the concept of predestination. Predestination is the belief that God has already decided which individuals will be saved and which will be damned. Weber reasons that, through this structure of predestination, Calvinists can only depend on “a life of good works” to indicate their eternal salvation.¹⁸ The Calvinist path, according to Weber, is one of “unprecedented inner loneliness.”¹⁹ Each individual has to reveal his or her own predestined fate through labor. Calvinism, in Weber’s framework, is the epitome of a rational religion. The sphere of the divine is inaccessible to individual humans. This stark separation of divine and human realms sets the precedent for capitalism: labor and wealth as ends unto themselves.

Weber draws Calvinist rationalism in relation to the lingering traditionalism of Catholicism. Weber claims that Catholics retain magic through their interaction with and manipulation of salvation. Weber explains that the “absolution” of the Catholic church “compensates” for an individual’s flaws; an option unavailable to Calvinists.²⁰ Furthermore, Catholic priests can perform “the miracle of transubstantiation” and invoke the magical realm to absolve a human.²¹ With the option of salvation and a relatively open portal to God, Weber claims that Catholics did not exist in the despairingly isolated world of the Calvinists.

¹⁷ Weber, 49.

¹⁸ Weber, 69.

¹⁹ Weber, 60.

²⁰ Weber, 71.

²¹ Weber, 71.

Consequently, Calvinism absolutely rid the world of magic and set the rational path of capitalism. Weber concludes that “the radical elimination of magic from the world allowed no other psychological course than the practice of worldly asceticism.”²²

Through worldly asceticism, the placement of “monastic cells into everyday,” Weber contends that Protestantism inadvertently “dominate[d] worldly morality.”²³ The Protestant philosophy seeped into the societal realization of labor and, consequently, shaped the economic order. Weber, nevertheless, argues that, despite the Protestant roots of capitalism, contemporary society is no longer bound to the perpetuation of capitalism through religion. Capitalism has evolved to become dependent on the “technical and economic conditions of machine production,” rather than Protestant ethic.²⁴ The choice of Protestant belief no longer drives society, but rather the “irresistible force” of mechanization does.²⁵ Weber names this modern tragedy, the “iron cage;”²⁶ individuals are subject to and trapped by the structure that Protestantism has built and that machines have upheld. In his final analysis, Weber laments that “victorious capitalism rests on mechanical foundations” alone.²⁷ Protestantism brought rationalization into society and produced capitalism, but capitalism evolved beyond its Protestant origin — capitalism is now solely driven by the machine.

Weber rests that future society, even so, may be able to escape mechanized mundanity; a society totally stripped of all belief can re-enchant the world. A cautiously optimistic Weber poses that, perhaps, “at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will

²² Weber, 97.

²³ Weber, 123.

²⁴ Weber, 123.

²⁵ Weber, 123.

²⁶ Weber, 123.

²⁷ Weber, 124.

arise.”²⁸ Upon the desecration of all traditionalism, naked rationality may recall the inspiration of divinity, potentially in the form of prophets. To set society free from the iron cage, Weber urges the recollection of greater significance and meaning, of action with inspiration.

Historically, *The Protestant Ethic* both propelled religious theory and drew serious criticism. Many critics indicate that Weber “mistakes the nature of causal relation” between Protestantism and capitalism.²⁹ Critics attribute this misconception to Weber’s own incomplete comprehension of Protestantism, Catholicism, and/or capitalism.³⁰ R.H. Tawney, a well-established critic of Weber, writes that the relationship between “the capitalist spirit” and ‘Protestant ethics’... [was] a good deal more complicated than Weber seems to imply.”³¹ More specifically, Tawney finds fault with the sequence in which Weber places capitalism and Protestantism; Tawney argues that, instead, capitalism both preceded and formed the Protestant ethic.³²

In terms of rationalization specifically, several authors remark on Weber’s lack of a concise definition and, ergo, lack of a concise concept. Steven Lukes blames Weber for “the untold confusion and obscurity” of “the word ‘rational’ and its cognates.”³³ Similarly, Nicholas Gane notes other Weberian theorists’ focus on the “conflicting outcomes of the rationalization process.”³⁴ Collectively, the critical theorists claim that Weber does not present a uniformed

²⁸ Weber, 124.

²⁹ Weber, xxiii.

³⁰ Weber, xxii.

³¹ R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study* (London and Alesbury: Hazel, Watson, & Viney, 1948), 320.

³² Tawney, 226.

³³ Steven Lukes, “Some Problems about Rationality,” *Essays in Social Theory*, 1977, 259, doi:10.1007/978-1-349-15729-7_6.

³⁴ Nicholas Gane, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory: Rationalization versus Re-enchantment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 42.

definition of rationalization and, therefore, his idea of rationalization itself is weakened. Arnold Eisen counters these criticisms, however, and claims that “what is lost in precision through the use of a single term is repaid in added meaning for each application.”³⁵ In other words, Weber’s flexible use of rational and rationalization broadens and strengthens each definition and concept. Ultimately, Weber’s rationalization, despite criticism, retains its strength and relevance in the modern day.

The Traditionalization of Perfect Rationalization

Modern society has arguably followed Weber’s path of rationalization. The contemporary state of labor is thoroughly enhanced by and intertwined with machines; labor, and by extension society, is thoroughly mechanized. This state of complete rationality, of total mechanization, nonetheless, has not caged humanity in an unbearably mundane and unsacred existence. Alternatively, this state away from God has forced man to act autonomously, to be his own steward. A world devoid of godly intervention has empowered man to the extent that he finds divinity within himself. On the most basic level, man declares his own innate and natural rights.

The liberation of man from God and, following, the deification of man, re-enchants the world. More concisely, the rationalization of society produces the traditionalization of religion. In the most contemporary form of this traditionalization, man’s rationalization of the world through technology reiterates man’s own divinity. Man is no longer a victim of oppressive mechanization, but the master of mechanization. The fate of humanity no longer rest upon an intervening God, but within its own hands.

³⁵Arnold Eisen, "The Meanings and Confusions of Weberian 'Rationality,'" *The British Journal of Sociology* 29, no. 1 (1978): 58, doi:10.2307/589219.

Weber's understanding of future mechanization through rationalization remains unquestionably accurate. To reiterate, Weber's rational society emphasizes the value of labor for labor itself and the collection of wealth for wealth itself. Through the perpetuation of labor and wealth for the sake of labor and wealth, society grows more efficient and, consequently, increasingly mechanized. Mechanization, Weber writes, allows for rational advantages such as "precision, speed, [and] unambiguity."³⁶ Production is more efficient through "purely technical superiority."³⁷ Machines, and rigid systems like bureaucracies, can achieve a level of rationality that is well beyond the capabilities of individual, natural humans

In the years since Weber's writing, technological development has proved, if not exceeded, Weber's thesis of the increasing mechanization of rationalization. Harry Braverman, though concluding with a conflicting Marxist perspective, outlines this mechanization of labor. Braverman writes that the mechanization of human labor began with the use of punch cards which "'[read]' and 'interpret[ed]' simple data without human participation."³⁸ From the onset of the punchcard, Braverman traces the increased record and analysis of human data in the workplace. Eventually, Braverman cites his contemporary computer as "the chief, though not only, instrument of mechanization, of the office."³⁹ The computer, in terms of Braverman, not only streamlines the workplace, but it organizes human labor itself.

The twenty-first century has experienced and is experiencing a continuation of this rationalized mechanization. Twenty-first century human labor is almost entirely integrated with

³⁶ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Gerth (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1946), 214.

³⁷ Weber, "From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology," 214.

³⁸ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 226.

³⁹ Braverman, 226.

computers. Computers, the instrument of rationalization, have not only integrated with human labor, but they have shaped and determined human labor.⁴⁰ Within the framework of capitalism, society's movement towards rationalization fiercely continues with the development of new technology, the increased mechanization of labor.⁴¹

The great rational mechanization, however, has not trapped man in Weber's iron cage; it has liberated man. Man's path of liberation begins with the Protestant defamiliarization with God. As Weber explains through *The Protestant Ethic*, the narrative of Protestantism removed God, and hence enchantment, from the human realm: "everything of the flesh is separated from God by an unbridgeable gulf."⁴² Without a tangible God to guide or to punish man in the world, God "ceased to be of any great importance"⁴³ and man began to act on his own accord. Harvey C. Mansfield delineates the emboldening of man through rational control. Mansfield explains that the modern world, the world of "increasing human empire," required the destruction of the "irrational order, the order of custom."⁴⁴ In Weberian terms, rationalization necessitated the destruction of traditionalist values. Although, unlike Weber, Mansfield attributes all "irrational order" to God.⁴⁵ In order to achieve rationalization, Mansfield eliminates God entirely, whereas

⁴⁰Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane, *The New Division of Labor: How Computers Are Creating the Next Job Market* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

⁴¹ Donald L. Evans, *A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use of the Internet*, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.ntia.doc.gov/legacy/ntiahome/dn/html/Chapter6.htm>.

⁴² Weber, 60.

⁴³ Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 235.

⁴⁴ Harvey C. Mansfield, "Rational Control, or Life without Virtue," in *America at Risk : Threats to Liberal Self-government in an Age of Uncertainty* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 241.

⁴⁵ Mansfield, 242.

Weber only removes God from the human realm. Mansfield argues that “modern liberation is liberation from God as the source of irrational custom,”⁴⁶ as the source of traditionalism.

As Mansfield removes God, he asserts man’s newfound divinity. Mansfield continues that men, upon rejecting irrational custom, “still need a guide.”⁴⁷ With God no longer as a source of rational authority, “modernity must show that men can control themselves.”⁴⁸ More specifically, as man pushes God’s reign out of the rational world, he positions himself as his own rational authority. As Steve Bruce describes, man’s “general sense of mastery over fate” established himself as his own leader.⁴⁹ Man does not cower to God’s will, man declares his inherent rights, his innate divinity. The very founding document of the United States echoes this sentiment when it demands that citizens “secure the Blessings of Liberty to [them]selves.”⁵⁰ To give meaning to rationalized society, humans must declare their own reality of divinity; humans must re-enchant their world.

While the modern world grows increasingly rational through an abundance of technology, man affirms his divine right. Technology allows man to both control and to enhance nature — a power once reserved for God alone. Through technology, man can become his own divine “guide.” Contemporary theorists Ciano Aydin and Peter-Paul Verbeek, similarly argue that “transcendence... can be experienced in the process of technologically overcoming (presumed absolute) limits.”⁵¹ In other words, man can transcend his own natural limits through technology

⁴⁶ Mansfield, 242.

⁴⁷ Mansfield, 242.

⁴⁸ Mansfield, 242.

⁴⁹ Bruce, 235.

⁵⁰ U.S. Constitution, § Preamble (1789).

⁵¹ Ciano Aydin and Peter-Paul Verbeek, "Transcendence in Technology in Advance," *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology*, 2015, 20, doi:10.5840/techne2015121742.

— a confirmation of man’s divinity through his own rationality. Aydin and Verbeek further argue that if Weber’s “‘disenchantment of the world’ is on a par with the eradication of transcendence,”⁵² then the transcendent nature of technology re-enchants the world. The re-enchantment of the world is inherently the traditionalization of religion.

As technology becomes increasingly intertwined with biological human beings, the language of human divinity through technology grows stronger. The transhumanist movement, in particular, implements language that specifically addresses human divinity through technological advancement. Transhumanism is the evolution of humans past biological limits by means of technology.⁵³ Subsequently, the transhumanist conversation often questions humanity’s “achiev[ment] [of] a higher and more godlike reason or intellect.”⁵⁴ The rational production of transhumanist technology implies man’s own divine intervention or divinity. The American Academy of Religion itself formed a “Transhumanism and Religion Group” to better understand the fundamental divinity of man through transhumanist technologies.⁵⁵

Overall, man transcends his mundane existence through his rational production of technology. Through man’s production of technology, he becomes divine and, thereby, he turns traditionally religious. Weber depicted traditional religion, in contrast to rational religion, as the fluid integration of the divine and the human.⁵⁶ In fact, divinity is so integrated into everyday life, that traditionally religious societies “scarcely realize” that they have religion.⁵⁷ In

⁵² Aydin and Verbeek, 6.

⁵³ Heidi Campell and Mark Walker, "Religion and Transhumanism: Introducing a Conversation," *Journal of Evolution & Technology* 14, no. 2 (August 2005): vii.

⁵⁴ Campell and Walker, vii.

⁵⁵ Calvin R. Mercer, *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, an Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2015), xi.

⁵⁶ Pals, 273.

⁵⁷ Pals, 273.

comparison to the contemporary state of humanity, the divinity of man is, needless to say, indistinguishable from the realm of man. Given the current structure of being, man's divinity cannot be separated from man himself. Additionally, the divinity of man, though universally recognized, at the very least, in the Western world, is not considered religious. In line with traditional religion, the religion of man is "scarcely," if at all, realized.

In modern society, the relatively individual choice of rational religion coincides with, and actually emphasizes, the shared traditional religion. Bruce holds that the modern religion is "no longer about glorifying God but about personal growth."⁵⁸ Moreover, Wade Roof believes the "religious stance today [to be] more internal than external, more individual than institutional."⁵⁹ Religion, in the current moment, appears as a choice to follow a certain, discernable doctrine, but, in practice, religious belief is actually a more vague and personal exploration. Rational religion is segmented, but the act of religiosity, the individual practice of religion, is relatively homogenous. Bruce explains that God is "no longer seen as an actual person but as some sort of vague power or, in the final reduction, our own consciences."⁶⁰ Rational religion, in this sense, is a facade for the divinity of self. Through the rationalization of society, the reality of religion is traditional; divinity is infused within the human realm.

⁵⁸ Bruce, 208.

⁵⁹ Wade Clark Roof, "God Is in the Details: Reflections on Religions Public Presence in the United States in the Mid-1990s," *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 2 (1996): 153, doi:10.2307/3711947.

⁶⁰ Bruce, 208.

Conclusion

Overall, Weber's projection of the Protestant rationalization of society has held true in the modern day. Through the Protestant exile of God, capitalism grew and flourished. In an effort to prove his own salvation, man became rational; he worked for the purpose for working and he acquired wealth for the wealth itself. The perpetuation of rationalization led to the mechanization of society. Mechanization allowed for greater efficiency and productivity in labor. Nonetheless, Weber claims that the increased rationalization of society led to the ultimate mechanization of man himself. Man's drive towards rationalization was no longer founded in religious devotion, but within the perpetuation of the system. Weber maintains the mechanization of man to be an "iron cage" in which an utterly spiritless man is trapped.

Although Weber's rationalization of society has held true, his conclusion of an iron cage has proven false. The rationalization of society has stripped society of God, but it has not stripped society of divinity. With an absent God, man found divinity within himself. The increase in rationalization led to an increasingly divine man. Man's rational production, technology, only elevated man in his transcendent and divine capabilities. The return of man's transcendence, thus, re-enchanted society. Structures of religion remain, but the practice of religion is, fundamentally, the fostering of the divine self.

As rationalization continues, and technology allows for greater transcendence over the natural human form, perhaps humanity will begin to become more like the pre-Protestant God. With rapidly advancing biotechnology, the human form becomes increasingly malleable. If we can be freed from the bounds of our human shape, if we can achieve a transhuman state, how

will humanity differ from a god? The ultimate state of rationalization, therefore, produces the ultimate traditional reality.

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