

The Nature of Politics and the Ethic of Responsibility According to Max Weber

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Max Weber's "The Profession and Vocation of Politics" examines the nature of politics, emphasizing the ethical dilemmas, responsibilities, and unique challenges political leaders face. At the heart of Weber's argument is the concept of the "called politician," a leader driven by an inner vocation (*Beruf*) to serve the public good through a balance of conviction, responsibility, and pragmatic judgment (Weber 1994, 309). By exploring the relationship between politics, power, and ethics, Weber provides a framework for understanding the complexities of governance and the qualities required for effective leadership in politics. This essay will analyze Weber's definition of politics, the role of violence, the qualities of the Called Politician, and the necessity of the 'ethic of responsibility' in navigating the moral paradoxes inherent in political life.

Weber defines *politics* as the leadership or influence over a political association, particularly the state. The state, a central question in Weber's work, is distinguished by its monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory (Weber 1994, 316). This monopoly is not arbitrary but is legitimized through law, tradition, or most importantly to Weber, the consent of the governed (Weber 1994, 311-12). The 'charisma' associated with this third type of leader is ideal because of the qualities of leadership that manifest most directly through this 'gift of grace' (Weber 1994, 311). Nonetheless this legitimized power gives the state the authority to enforce laws, maintain order, and safeguard societal stability- making power and violence integral to political action.

The role of violence highlights the ethical complexities of politics (Weber 1994, 364). Politics often involves the use of power and violence as 'means' to accomplish a particular goal. Leaders must determine when this use is justified while ensuring it serves the collective good rather than personal or partisan interests. Decisions involving violence – whether in law

enforcement, military action, or civil control – often conflict with absolute moral principles, creating a tension that leaders must navigate with care. Weber underscores that politics demands a pragmatic approach to ethics, where the outcomes of actions take precedence over rigid adherence to ideals. For Weber, this is where the vocation of the Called Politician becomes critical.

The Called Politician: Leadership as Vocation

Weber's concept of the Called Politician is central to his analysis of political leadership. A Called Politician views politics not as a profession for personal gain but as a higher calling to serve the public good. Weber contrasts those who live "for" politics with those who live "from" politics:

While living 'for' politics, individuals dedicate themselves to public service, motivated by passion and responsibility. Their commitment often requires personal sacrifice, as their focus is on advancing societal goals rather than accumulating material wealth. Conversely, living 'from' politics requires individuals to treat politics as a livelihood or a means of economic security. While not inherently unethical, this approach risks reducing political engagement to transactional goals and undermining the vocation's higher purpose.

According to Weber, a Called Politician must possess three key qualities: passion, responsibility, and judgment (Weber 1994, 352). Passion drives their dedication to their cause, ensuring resilience in the face of setbacks. Responsibility ensures they take ownership of their decisions and consequences, maintaining accountability to their constituents. Judgment enables them to temper their passion with rationality, making informed decisions prioritizing the public good over personal ambition.

Weber also emphasizes the importance of balancing passion with cool-headed judgment (Weber 1994, 353). While passion provides the energy to advocate for meaningful change, it must be guided by rational decision-making to avoid impulsive or ideologically rigid actions. Leaders who embody this balance can navigate governance's complexities with moral clarity and practical effectiveness.

The Ethical Dilemmas of Political Leadership

Weber highlights the inherent ethical dilemmas in politics, particularly the tension between the ethic of principled conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) and the ethic of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*). These two frameworks represent competing approaches to ethical decision-making.

The 'Ethic of Principled Conviction' approach prioritizes unwavering adherence to moral ideals, such as justice or truth, regardless of the consequences. While noble, it risks impracticality in the political sphere, where decisions often involve trade-offs and unintended outcomes.

The 'Ethic of Responsibility' approach demands accountability for the foreseeable consequences of one's actions, even if achieving good ends requires morally ambiguous means. Politicians guided by this ethic must anticipate the broader impacts of their decisions and act with pragmatic foresight.

While often contradictory, Weber argues that effective political leadership requires a balance between these two ethics. Leaders must remain committed to their principles while navigating the practical realities of governance. This balance is particularly critical when decisions involve the use of power and violence. For instance, imposing harsh measures to quell

unrest may conflict with ideals of freedom but be necessary to protect public safety and maintain order (Weber 1994, 357).

Power, Vanity, and Responsibility

A recurring theme in Weber's analysis is the corrupting potential of power and the dangers of vanity in political leadership. Vanity, Weber warns, can lead politicians to prioritize personal glory over genuine public service, undermining their objectivity and sense of responsibility (Weber 1994, 353). Politicians consumed by self-interest risk making decisions that serve their ambitions rather than the needs of society, resulting in "empty and absurd actions" (Weber 1994, 354).

Weber emphasizes the importance of grounding political actions in a sense of responsibility to counteract these tendencies. Leaders must focus on future responsibilities rather than dwelling on past guilt or seeking moral superiority (Weber 1994, 355-6). Politicians can navigate the ethical paradoxes of power by prioritizing accountability and practical outcomes while maintaining their integrity and legitimacy.

Resilience and the Challenges of Governance

Weber underscores that politics is a demanding vocation, requiring resilience, steadfastness, and a willingness to confront setbacks. He describes political leadership as "slow, strong drilling through hard boards," emphasizing the long-term commitment and perseverance needed to achieve meaningful change (Weber 1994, 369). Leaders must navigate competing demands, reconcile conflicting values, and accept that progress often comes incrementally.

Often leaders, revolutionary leaders in particular, face unique challenges as they transition from inspiring movements to managing the practical realities of governance. They must reconcile the high ideals that motivate their followers with the compromises required to

maintain order and achieve sustainable progress. For Weber, true political leadership lies in the ability to balance ethical conviction with pragmatic responsibility, embodying the dedication and strength necessary to navigate these challenges.

Conclusion

Weber's three qualities that are pivotal for one to successfully wield power include passion, responsibility and judgement. Although passion would hypothetically be the ideal trait, Weber emphasizes that passion alone is insufficient. A sense of responsibility must accompany this passion to be the guiding force of action. Moreover, adding to passion for Weber is the notion of judgement where a sense of poise in an otherwise chaotic existence is necessary (Weber 1994, 352-3). Via these three traits, ideally a politician distances themselves from their constituents and the ideals they govern whilst not becoming overly passionate about one singular goal and losing sight of what really matters.

Politics, as Weber describes it, is a vocation that demands passion, responsibility, judgment, and the ability to navigate the moral paradoxes inherent in the exercise of power and violence. Within the ironies behind these, often competing, convictions and responsibilities lies the conundrum Weber committed much of his time to exploring and attempting to explain. The Called Politician, guided by the "ethic of responsibility," embodies this vocation while balancing conviction with pragmatism to serve the public good.

By emphasizing accountability, resilience, and a commitment to future responsibilities, Weber challenges political leaders to rise above personal ambition and vanity and focus instead on achieving meaningful and ethical outcomes. The practicality of his insights remains

profoundly relevant, offering a timeless guide for navigating the complexities of political life and inspiring leaders to approach their roles with integrity, dedication, and purpose.¹

¹ Second Writing Center appointment completed on November 14th, with Mia Pepitone

References

Weber, Max. "The Profession and Vocation of Politics." *Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994, pp. 309-369