

WEBER AND LEVINAS ON MODERNITY AND THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING: RECONSTRUCTING SOCIAL THEORY AS ETHICALLY FRAMED RATHER THAN EPISTEMOLOGICALLY FRAMED

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This paper argues that the quest for meaning and the problem of suffering are in an irresolvable state of tension and that this tension remains of central importance in modernity and a prominent issue in the reconstruction of contemporary social theory and social science.

Methodology/approach – The approach focuses on an examination of the work of Max Weber and Emmanuel Levinas on issues of rationality and suffering bringing them into a productive dialogue and juxtaposition.

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Findings – *The work of Max Weber shows how practices of rationality in modernity are still haunted by the ethical call to responsibility that suffering incurs. The work of Emmanuel Levinas complements and reconfigures Weber’s framing of the issues involved and deepens the general point that a reconstructed social theory would incorporate the implications of suffering more deeply into its practices.*

Implications – *A social science and social theory oriented by an epistemological framework is inadequate to the ethical responsibility the presence of suffering invokes. A reconstructed social theory in an ethical framework calls for the best knowledge capable of being produced. As such, a nihilistic or disengaged pluralism, as well as a social science framed primarily by methodological concerns, is inadequate. What will be required is both critical examination of explicit and implicit assumptions of theory and research as well as active, engaged dialogical practices with alternative perspectives.*

Originality/value – *An engagement between Weber and Levinas is almost unprecedented, especially on issues rationality and suffering despite their shared perspectives. What Levinas offers the reconstruction of social theory today is explored.*

Keywords: Meaning; rationality; suffering; Max Weber; Emmanuel Levinas; social theory

Contemporary social science, in both theory and practice, is dominated by an explanatory logic. It seeks not merely to describe or prescribe, but to explain. This commitment is most often explicitly grounded in a quest for more certain knowledge and implicitly accepted through a privileging of methodological over theoretical/critical concerns. As Charles Taylor observes, the modernist attempts to “think out the question of what something *is* in terms of the question of how it is *known*” (1995, p. 34). Social science has allowed itself to be driven by an “inner logic,” as Weber might say, that imagines resolution of epistemological concerns as primary and foundational. Nevertheless, this quest for knowledge also includes, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, an ethical dimension, a hope and assurance that such modernist knowledge will also provide

practical returns, returns against the problem of suffering in human life. The epistemological/ethical relation is profound and complicated involving dimensions that go far beyond the limits of one paper. Nevertheless, a focused examination of the work of Max Weber and Emmanuel Levinas reveals several themes pertinent to the reconstruction of social theory.¹

In what follows, I show that for both Weber and Levinas, suffering is both at the heart of human life and at the heart of modernity. Coming from traditions informed by German thought, we perhaps should not be surprised to find that they both tend to understand the relation between suffering and rationality in similar ways. However, where Weber acknowledges but then tends to deflect the problem of suffering, Levinas insists upon allowing it to have its full say. For Levinas, Weberian social theory doesn't go far enough in its analysis of modernity in that it fails to take seriously enough our relation to the suffering of the Other, an ethical relationality that displaces the primacy of the epistemological common to modernist approaches. Nevertheless, Weber, clearly the more modernist in orientation of the two, never denies the salience of the ethical challenge the presence of suffering imposes. Even when Weber places rational coherence and self-responsibility in the face of suffering as the primary foundation in modernity, he also recognizes in a somewhat Levinasian fashion that the presence of suffering will continue in modernity and it will also continue to call into question the formulations for life that modernity may provide.

Following Levinas, I argue for a reconstruction of social theory and a reformulation of social science in which the quest for knowledge is to be in the service of a more primary responsiveness to the presence of suffering in life. In my view, a more ethically grounded practice of social theory is more capable of dealing with the epistemological dilemmas, enigmas, and failures that postmodern critiques have shown to be common to modernist and Weberian frameworks. This is the case because suffering calls upon us to act in the best way possible and for the good of the one and the many. Knowledge is desired and necessary and nihilism is not an option in the face of suffering. Nor is a disengaged pluralism. Neither is a social science framed in largely positivistic terms that orients itself primarily around methodological concerns. Instead, a proper placement of the problem of suffering helps to both reaffirm the importance of a reconstructed practice of social theory and social science and the need for a dynamic and ongoing dialogue among competing points of view about just how to understand life and its sufferings.

THE QUEST FOR MEANING

For Weber, any adequate account of human life will necessarily include the meaning that actions have for actors (Chowers, 1995; Reckling, 2001). This emphasis in Weber is so pronounced that many have concluded that Weber takes for granted that there is an almost universal human need for meaning (Symonds, 2015, p. 7). Throughout Weber's work there is an acknowledgment that human actors can and do act in terms of materialistic concerns, or in, for lack of a better term, rather hedonistic ways. Nevertheless, meaning is distinguished by Weber in terms of "ideal interests" rather than "material interests" in order to insure that readers do not reduce realm of human meaning to materialistic or hedonistic concerns such as food, shelter, pleasure, and avoiding suffering (Weber, 2004, pp. 55–80). Working within a German tradition that would include both neo-Kantian and Nietzschean perspectives, Weber assumes that human beings are rational actors, not in the rational choice sense that to act rationally is to act in one's self-interest, but in the sense that human beings are capable of nonhedonistic action grounded in sources of meaning (Weber, 2004, pp. 380–381).

Weber seeks to develop a cultural science that can examine just how "human beings confer meaning and significance" upon the "meaningless infinity of world process" around them (Weber, 1949, p. 81). Indeed, for Weber, human beings must "confer" such meaning because the world itself lacks any intrinsic or inherent meaning itself. This is, of course, a hugely important modernist move capable of being contested (Behnegar, 2003) and will, in fact, be a key point to examine more closely when we move to a more Levinasian framework. Nevertheless, for Weber, the search for meaning is an outgrowth of a quest for order in a world that is fundamentally capable of an infinity of possible meanings. In Weber's (2004, p. 374) depiction, "as soon as we seek to reflect upon life as it presents itself we encounter a simply endless variety of events, which are both 'internal' and 'external' to us, and appear and fade away both successively and concurrently. The sheer infinity of this variety is entirely undiminished if we isolate an individual 'object' for examination." Working within a neo-Kantian context, Weber accepts that we only always know life "as it presents itself" or from within a perspective that we bring to bear on a world that otherwise can only simply be characterized as an "infinite reality" (2004, p. 398). Weber seems to also fully accept the Nietzschean view that full implications of this account are that the lived reality of any people at any given point in human history is always only a partial, limited, perspectival stance in the world.

Confronted with an infinite reality, human beings seek to do more than act practically to produce pleasure and avoid pain, they seek to create and confer some sort of meaning to it. They seek to “rationalize” this infinite reality or to subsume it under more general constructs, concepts, and rules by which they can provide some sort of order to the potential chaos.² In ways both similar to Weber and yet also going beyond Weber, Levinas also frames the quest for rational representations of one’s world as the attempt to assimilate an exterior (what is other) to an interior or order of the same. As Levinas (1969, p. 38) explains, “the possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the *way* of the same.” While Weber will talk of constructing ideal types and forms of rational action, Levinas will highlight more specifically how “in representation the I precisely loses its opposition to its objects; the opposition fades, bringing out the identity of the I despite the multiplicity of its objects. ... To remain the same is to represent to oneself” (1969, p. 126). Through representational knowledge objects are re-presented to the self or knower. Thus, the activity of meaning-making involves transforming what was originally an otherness into something assimilated to the same. This assimilation enables what was previously an infinite reality to be represented to and integrated with the self (as with Weber, Levinas can conceive of this aspect of the self in highly historical and cultural terms) and to do so in such a way that the knower remains essentially unchanged. In this practice of developing rational knowledge, the otherness of the object does not alienate the I from itself or facilitate more fundamental change for the knower.

Hence, for both Weber and Levinas, we can take practices of rationality to be some sort of rendering of an infinite reality (the other) in terms that accord with something that is already taken as given (the same), whether that be some sort of rule or some sort of set of meanings that have been culturally established. To consider some aspect of the world in “rational” terms or to engage in some sort of “rational” action, is to render the world as something to which we could make it assumable. Nevertheless, we assimilate the world not simply to produce some sort of coherent thematization but because we think our assimilation provides real and valuable meaning. Weber devotes a large portion of his work to showing religion to be clear example of a practice that takes up the problem of meaning and provides an answer for “the demand for the fabric of the world in its totality be in some wise a meaningful ‘cosmos’, or rather, that it could or should be” (Weber, 2004, p. 69). Whether simple or complex, in Weber’s account magic could neither provide for the hedonistic or materialist interests of human beings nor, more especially, for “an inner compulsion to understand

the world as a meaningful cosmos and to take up a position toward it” (Weber, 1978, p. 499). Given a “metaphysical need for a meaningful cosmos” (Weber, 1946, p. 281), human cultures will reflect the ongoing “metaphysical needs of the human mind as it is driven to reflect on ethical and religious questions” (Weber, 1978, p. 499).

Just what enables certain ways of understanding to be taken as “rational” is historically and contextually relative. Rationality is always a historical and social concept. What is rational from one point of view may be quite irrational from another (Weber, 2011, p. 292). How, then, does our thematization have the value that it does? Weber assumes that how human beings come to take one cultural matrix of meaning to be of value, to have some sort of compelling worth, is itself ultimately not capable of being fully rationalized. If relating to the world in rational terms depends upon assuming something into an order that is taken as given, then just what the given is cannot itself be determined “rationally.” Hence, for Weber, the ultimate ends or ultimate values which provide the meaning and direction to human lives and social institutions are themselves not capable of being determined in fully rational terms. They are ultimately nonrational, not in the sense of being “irrational” or crazy or emotionally based, but in the sense of having for the source of their value and compelling nature something that is beyond the “rational.” The multiplicity of human thematizations of life that Weber observes as characteristic of lived reality are themselves not capable of being rationally justified (Weber, 2004, pp. 362, 378–379, 402–403).

Given this philosophical anthropology, Weber argues that the human quest for meaning will be essentially problematic and inherently unending. At this point, we might see Weber as providing some rather “postmodern” insights and critique of any modernist quest to master the epistemological shortcomings of a pursuit for knowledge (Gane, 2002). Given the instabilities of all practices that attempt to rationalize human reality, the prospects of creating unchanging forms of knowledge are dim and the desire for such is problematic. Nevertheless, as with Levinas, Weber sees the quest for meaning as not merely an intellectual or epistemologically driven activity but one that is perpetually challenged by the problem of suffering.

SUFFERING: A CHALLENGE TO MEANING

Although one must read Weber carefully to see it, suffering takes a central and prominent place in Weber’s theory of meaning, of modernity, and of

rationalization and social change. Weber assumes that the presence of suffering is intimately involved in the quest for meaning, is central to the historical process of rationalization and development of social change, and is an ever-present challenge to modernity and its rationalization into value spheres (Kalberg, 2001; Weber, 2004, p. 241; Wilkinson, 2013). Weber recognizes the hedonistic and utilitarian currents of modern times where suffering might be seen as a terrible problem but viewed in rather simple terms: there is nothing more to be done or thought than simply getting rid of it! Although a main feature of modernity and its response to the problem of suffering is its increasing reliance upon openly hedonistic accounts, Weber focuses his own work on those aspects of modernity that run counter to this and enable the development of nonhedonistic responses to suffering. Throughout his work, Weber either explicitly, or often implicitly, seeks to oppose the reduction of life to the pursuit of pleasure or happiness and the elimination of suffering. He explicitly rejects any utilitarian approach to social science oriented to a “balance of pleasure,” a position he criticizes political economists as accommodating when they focus exclusively on “the technical economic problem of the production of goods and the problem of their distribution (‘social justice’).” Such an approach imagines that “the only comprehensible purpose” social science could have would be to “devise recipes for universal happiness.” Instead, Weber argues that “a science (*Wissenschaft*) concerned with *human beings* ... is concerned above all else with the *quality of the human beings*” and how to facilitate in human beings “those characteristics which we think of as constituting the human greatness and nobility of our nature” (Weber, 1994, pp. 15, emphasis in original). This concern with how to enable human greatness and further the nobility of human nature under the conditions of modernity is pervasive throughout Weber’s work and relates directly to the problem of suffering.

For Weber, utilitarian accounts fail to see how inescapably the problem of suffering and the problem of meaning are intricately linked. For Weber, like Nietzsche, what is worse than suffering itself (if such an experience is even possible) is to live without being capable of conferring any meaning upon one’s suffering. With suffering, one is provoked to ask, “why?” and “what for?,” and if one can answer that question and provide one’s suffering with meaning, then one can often live with it (As Nietzsche [2005, p. 157] indicates: “If you have your ‘why?’ in life, you can get along with almost any ‘how?’”). For Weber and Nietzsche, the threat of not being able to answer the problem of the meaning of suffering in human history, something the disenchantment of the world and the “death of God” makes extremely viable, is the possibility of producing what Nietzsche terms the

“last man” or the form of human life which consists in the reduction of human life to a hedonistic calculus in which suffering is seen as something simply to be abolished (Nietzsche, 2002, p. 41; Owen, 2004). The hedonistic response to the problem of suffering may seem attractive but is ultimately untenable because suffering is decisively unavoidable and historically unending, so much so that any hedonistic calculus will be unable to overcome the sense that life is unbearable and eventually without substantive worth. If the meaning of life is reducible to the absence of suffering, then the presence of suffering will ensure that the problem of meaning becomes insufferable! In many ways, Weber’s work may be seen as a continuation of both Kantian and Nietzschean attempts to overcome the problems of modernity even as they reject hedonistic, egoistic, or individualistic alternatives that they regard as decisively problematic.

Despite the centrality of the problem of suffering in Weber’s work, he never develops a phenomenology of suffering: what is it to *suffer*? Yet, in ways similar to Emmanuel Levinas, Weber seems to assume that to experience pain and to suffer are not the same thing. Like many forms of pain, to suffer is to undergo something, to experience something that was not sought after, something that one did not expect or wish upon themselves. Suffering is an experience with exteriority that is experienced as something inflicted upon us by something or someone outside of ourselves. Yet, while one can live with pain and merely seek for its amelioration and perhaps even redeem pain, one cannot live with suffering in the same way. As Levinas (1986, p. 180) puts it, “The break with the normal and the normative, with order, with synthesis, with the world, already constitutes its qualitative essence.” For both Weber and Levinas, an experience lived as “suffering” interrupts us. It shakes us out of our way and out of the means we have for making sense of it. It calls our attention and demands a response. As such, suffering disrupts and can “unmake our world” or the rational orders and thematizations we have developed to provide our lives with meaning (Scarry, 1985; Wilkinson, 2005).

And yet, as Weber’s work in particular will emphasize, we try to assume it nevertheless. We try to render suffering comprehensible. Suffering seems to be something that we need to “make sense” of. We want to understand it and not just in general terms: we ask “why me?” We seek to name our suffering and give an account for the suffering that has come upon us (Wilkinson, 2005). For Weber and Levinas, rationality and suffering will always be in tension with one another. Rationality seeks to place suffering within a coherent system of meaning, thereby rendering it assumable. But suffering comes along and interrupts and disrupts any meaning system

which rationality may have succeeded in establishing (Morgan, 2002; Wilkinson, 2013).

MODERNITY: RATIONALITY AND THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

Weber's account argues that all forms of meaning-making in a culture will end up being challenged by the persistence of suffering in the society and the lives of its members. In this way, suffering and its persistence is involved in the formation and continuation of the inner logic of the various spheres of modernity; even, for example, an economic sphere oriented most closely to materialist interests. As Weber (2004, p. 368) relates:

Our physical existence, just like the satisfaction of our most ideal needs, constantly encounters the actual quantitative limit and qualitative inadequacy of the appropriate external means. Their satisfaction requires careful forethought, effort, a struggle with nature, and the need to work in association with people. Expressed most imprecisely, these are the fundamental factors to which all those phenomena that we call "social-economic" in the broadest sense are related.

Both our physical needs and demands, constituted as they are through cultural meanings, expectations, and valuations, and our more explicitly culturally formed desires, ideals, and expectations will inevitably encounter limits. No matter how well we attempt to match needs with the "external means" of their satisfaction, suffering will still ensue as the fulfillment of our "ideal needs" will face "quantitative limit and qualitative inadequacy." For Weber, to be human is to suffer, for the "external means" will never be adequate to cultural ideals, interests, and desires.

Weber argues that any reduction of the quest for meaning and problem of suffering to theoretical explanation and practical amelioration grounded and practiced *solely in terms of that explanation*, particularly in terms of an increasingly "rational" or a more unified and comprehensive explanation, will inevitably fail. As insightful as this is, this is in many ways a version of a postmodernist epistemologically informed critique. But what Weber emphasizes is something more than the production of forms of epistemological crisis but rather seeing that the quest for order and a rational response to suffering may end up having the paradoxical consequence of making suffering even more problematic. As Wilkinson (2013, p. 128) explains:

The rationalizing of thought and action that comprises people's struggles to make sense of and alleviate suffering has the unintended consequence of making them still *more*

vulnerable to experience suffering as a morally outrageous and intellectually unacceptable problem in their lives. Whilst exposing a range of avenues for further inquiry and leaving many matters for debate, Weber appears to be arguing that the potential for the problem of suffering to shatter and shock people's lives *grows* with the advance and force of modern rationalization.

Indeed, modernity's combination of hedonistic accounts of suffering and formal and instrumental rationalization of modern life lead to a similar stance toward suffering: the suffering should not be, resentment towards one's suffering is justified, and without eradication of the suffering, then the explanatory context that provides meaning is useless. Hence, certain forms of rationalization, namely, hedonistic and modernist, will likely exacerbate the problem: suffering becomes more undesirable, more prominent, more present, *and* the rational accounts lose their powers of enchantment in the light of recalcitrant suffering. Consequently, Weber's account suggests that the dynamic and paradoxical relation between the problem of suffering and rationalization leaves the rational order more susceptible to the development of nihilism. The problem of meaning and the problem of suffering are intricately linked and the way modernity attempts to resolve these problems is inherently problematic.

The threat suffering poses to the loss of meaning is perhaps most clearly seen in Weber's account of secularization. Religious intellectual development produced and successfully deployed ever more comprehensive accounts of life, but as it did so the persistence of suffering combined with an "imperative of consistency" would increasingly show forth the inadequacy of such accounts. For Weber, the most highly developed forms of rationalized religion were also those that produced successful theodicies or ways of placing suffering within some sort of supra-human context that would justify both voluntary and nonvoluntary forms of suffering (Shaw, 2014). In its most successful moments in history, religious solutions would provide what Weber terms "rationally closed" accounts (Weber, 1946, p. 275) or accounts which would enable the meaningful understanding of the suffering as justified, even as the presence of the suffering would still promote qualified exploration and questioning. In the end, the theodicy account succeeded at bringing "the demand for rational justifications to a halt at some acceptable point" (Shaw, 2014, p. 360). Nevertheless, like all meaningful accounts of the world, religious systems that succeed at producing "rationally closed accounts" still relied upon some sort of nonrational faith, trust, or assurance of its acceptability. Yet, whatever their success may have been at some point in time, history shows that even relatively successful theodicies encountered sustained problems in the face of

inevitable suffering that would generate a new quest for meaning. For Weber, the modernist rejection of religious theodicies ends up being due less to challenges from scientific critique than it is to their difficulty in answering the problem of suffering. People simply found it harder to reconcile the idea of a theistic order with an all-powerful God who acted providentially with the perceived presence of injustice and suffering in a world supposedly created by God (Weber, 1978, p. 519).

Ironically, despite the “death of God” in the face of unjust suffering, for Weber, modernity built upon and still reflects a Protestant, particularly Calvinist, account that postulates a basically just cosmic order with a benevolent God (Carroll, 2007). The Calvinist solution to the tension between meaning and suffering involves assuming that ultimately all suffering is meaningful but then to acknowledge that the cosmic order that might provide that meaning is itself something hidden from view. In this account, the problem of suffering is taken to be an enigma that can be accommodated but never fully answered, assumable but never with any form of complete understanding. In this way, the challenge of suffering to the quest for meaning was basically removed as a problem by insisting that there was no way to fully ascertain the will of God in relation to human suffering and that one must give up trying. For Weber, this stance was historically very productive and enabled the development of nonhedonistic modernist responses to the problem of suffering and meaning. As Weber (1978, pp. 547–548) explains, “The ascetic, when he wishes to act within the world, that is, to practice inner-worldly asceticism, must become afflicted with a sort of happy closure of the mind regarding any question about the meaning of the world, for he must not worry about such questions. Hence, it is no accident that inner-worldly asceticism reached its most consistent development on the foundation of the Calvinist god’s absolute inexplicability, utter remoteness from every human criterion, and unsearchableness as to his motives.”³ In essence, the Protestant Ethic offers a “non-transparent but presumed rational theodicy” (Shaw, 2014, p. 361) and it is this framework that enables the development of various separate value spheres each pursuing their own “inner logic” all while presuming that their “ultimate” values are (somehow taken to be) genuinely meaningful and of worth.

Oddly, modernity attempts to deal with the tension between suffering and rational accounts of meaning by ultimately side-stepping questions concerning its eventual resolvability. This tactic has proven immensely successful in advancing certain forms of knowledge about the world, enhancing the rationalization of the world, and increasing human ability to deal practically with many problems of pain and suffering. Nevertheless, it also

shows a willingness to deflect the reality of the ethical challenge to meaning brought by the presence of suffering and it ultimately relies upon a willingness to hide from oneself the decisive lack of justification for the meaning modernity provides, especially and most precisely in the face of human suffering (Morgan, 2002). Weber shows this most clearly in his accounts of the vocations of science and politics and their inability to provide any ultimate grounding for their substantive value commitments (Behnegar, 2003; Gane, 2002, pp. 55–63).

MODERNITY: HAUNTED BY SUFFERING AND THE CALL TO BROTHERLY LOVE

As the recent work of Symonds (2015) shows, Weber allows that the various value spheres of the scientific/intellectual, political, economic, aesthetic, and erotic can all provide some way of answering the problem of meaning in human life. Although none of them can justify themselves either intrinsically or in terms of some wider cosmic worldview, they each can become sites where meaning is conferred upon infinite reality with such consistency that it provides direction and meaning for one's life conduct. Weber presents the quest for meaning in modernity as resolvable through formation of a "personality" which is achieved through devoting one's life to a fully secular "calling" or the pursuit of the realization of a certain set of values (Farris, 2013). For example, the scientist commits themselves to the values associated with the "scientific" even though there is no adequate justification of the worth of the scientific enterprise or a way to secure its place in some sort of more holistic cosmic meaning. The same is true of the politician or the artist and presumably other modern forms of vocations. The vocational life answers the problem of meaning and is not reducible to some sort of self-interested, hedonistic calculus: one's devotion is real and meaningful beyond any merely subjective wants or interests.

We see in Weber resonances of a Kantian answer to the inevitable problem of suffering. Kant recognizes that suffering will be ever present because of the persistent gap between our knowledge and the world. For Kant, we can imagine and determine what is our rational, ethical duty, but we cannot know what the full consequences of such dutiful actions will be. Knowledge to remake the world in our image and hence to make it in terms productive to our own happiness will forever escape us. (For Kant, this is a

positive condition because it enables duty rather than just a pursuit of happiness.) Hence, we are forever going to be in a position of suffering. But the proper response is not to engage in a quest for its elimination, not to act in terms of consequences, but to continue to live in terms of a rational duty despite not knowing if it will eliminate suffering or respond to it adequately. For Kant, reason can neither provide the meaning of suffering nor knowledge of how to respond in order to eliminate it, but it can provide a knowledge of how to continue to live in the context of a life with suffering (Neiman, 2002).

Like Kant, Weber thinks that human beings can best resolve the conditions for life that modernity has provided through achieving a state of inner self-knowledge and open awareness of one's responsibility for their own convictions (Farris, 2013). For Weber (1949, p. 18), "the fruit of the tree of knowledge, which is distasteful to the complacent but which is, nonetheless, inescapable, consists in the insight that every single important activity and ultimately life as a whole, if it is not to be permitted to run on as an event in nature but is instead to be consciously guided, is a series of ultimate decisions through which the soul — as in Plato — chooses its own fate, i.e., the meaning of its activity and existence." Becoming self-responsible will facilitate the actor's sincerity, a sincerity demonstrated through a dramatic commitment to a way of life and its associated values and meanings. Within the context of responsibility for ultimate commitments, life becomes a matter of living with integrity, accepting the "god" or "demon" that provides one's life with meaning and direction (Symonds, 2015, pp. 161–171).

Even if we grant Weber a Kantian context for his grasp of the intersection of rationality and suffering in modernity, we must also acknowledge that Weber's account likewise involves the rather Nietzschean recognition that whatever dramatic commitment we make (or are "fated" to make) life will remain fundamentally tragic in nature. Life and the world that one confronts will always resist the meaning and valuations that we bring to it. Recalcitrance to our desires and ultimate values will not be suppressed. Indeed, the very fact that there are other competing valuations for life, each held as intensely as our own, ensures that there will be resistance, even actively sought after and developed resistance, to our attempts to live out our lives and remake our worlds according to our ultimate value commitments. Whether those value commitments be understood in terms of Weberian value spheres of the family, economy, science, the political, the aesthetic, or the erotic or in some other terms, the modern world is fraught with a number of competing value positions,

none of which can justify themselves relative to others. As Gane (2002, p. 96) explains:

Weber remains sensitive to the tragic nature of modern culture, for he argues that the pursuit of an ultimate value necessarily offends the claims of opposing values from both within and without the same value-sphere. The attempt to construct a universalist claim on the basis of a particular value or value-sphere rests on intense human commitment, for it demands one to hold a particular conviction while at the same time recognizing the existence of other values, values which are "held as firmly by others as ours are by us" and which may block the actualization of our beliefs.

Weber's proposed solution to the tension of rationality and suffering invites one to form a personality grounded in an intense commitment to a set of ultimate values. Preferably this commitment would dovetail well with a "value sphere" where one could unite with others to form a life oriented to a vocational practice. Nevertheless, the challenge of living with integrity to one's personality will require that one suffer, perhaps even more than otherwise, and that one will bring suffering upon others, others who seek something different and for whom the consequences of one's commitments may bring negative effects. Despite the fact of continued suffering, and perhaps even contributing to suffering in the world, the tragic nature of life is buttressed by the possibility of an ethical life of commitment and integrity as a vocation. One suffers and others suffer but not in a world of complete nihilism and meaninglessness. Suffering challenges meaning but this challenge is deflected because one nevertheless has something to live for inasmuch as one is capable of forming a personality. With such a personality one now has a way of making one's way for now they have an identity centered on ultimate values and an ultimate cause or vision for remaking the world. In striking ways, Weber shows the quest for meaning and the problem of suffering within modernity to share many features common to premodern religious formulations.

Nevertheless, whatever rational foundation Kant and Weber hope modernity can provide for life, suffering haunts any resolution modernity might proffer. Despite any kind of rational coherence a vocation might provide for answering the need for meaning in life, the structure of each value source is left open to the very same challenge that undermined the Calvinist position as well: the presence of suffering calls it into question in such a way that it undermines its capacity to provide the resolution to the quest for meaning. Remember that for Weber it was less the intellectual critique or the highlighting of the contradictions, incoherencies, and irrationalities of redemptive religion that brought on the "death of God" than it was the inability to adequately address the problem of suffering. In like manner,

each sphere may be called into question by the presence of human suffering in its midst.

Weber explicitly acknowledges the inability of modernity to erase the concern for suffering, evident in the continued power and ethical efficacy of what he terms, “the ethic of brotherly love,” and the inability of each value sphere to take up adequately a proper ethical response to the problem of suffering (Symonds, 2015; Weber, 2004, pp. 215–244). Weber shows that none of the value spheres will respond to suffering, take up an “ethic of brotherly love” in relation to suffering, or even acknowledge the need to consider suffering within its own dynamics. As Weber delineates, this is largely due to the fact that each sphere achieves its “inner logic” and consistency through some sort of impersonalization. Indeed, *the very dynamics that enable devotion to the vocation in each value sphere also contribute to the susceptibility of being haunted by the ethical guilt produced in the face of human suffering*. In the end, whatever meaning can be found in the vocations of modernity, it is always precarious, especially in light of the challenge human suffering can bring, a challenge that is all the more threatening precisely because each of the value spheres are so dismissive of it and ill-equipped to address it.⁴

Perhaps I can restate this conclusion by pointing to the temporality inherent in the modernist response. The focus on value commitment as a response to quest for meaning and its tension with suffering assumes that the way to respond to suffering is to preserve and persevere. It involves an asceticism. One preserves by maintaining with “integrity” a prior commitment, an already established determination of ultimate value. Suffering disrupts the flow of time; it calls attention to itself and problematizes whatever resolution of past, present, and future the established framework of meaning may have provided. Yet, the suffering is deflected through the perseverance that commitment to one’s calling and one’s duty enables. One is thereby able to endure the suffering through attachment to an ideal that one can strive for. One continues on one’s “fated” path because the value and the honor associated with continued attachment to one’s personality, one’s ultimate values, enables deflection of the challenge suffering brings.

LEVINAS: AVOIDING WEBER’S FATE

For Levinas, suffering is more than an excess that disturbs our ordering of the world, for such a description highlights how suffering registers within

the framework of rationality, of making sense of the world, and thinking it. Suffering is also a way of experiencing the world that reflects “disturbance itself”: “suffering qua suffering is but a concrete and quasi-sensible manifestation of the non-integratable, the non-justifiable” (Levinas, 1986, p. 180). As such, suffering is the bearing of the unbearable; of being in the world but experiencing revulsion in that very being. Suffering comes upon us unwelcome and its unwelcomeness calls for a refusal of meaning. Suffering overwhelms us and our capacities for assimilation, not through its limitation on our freedom and rational powers, but through its evil. Suffering exposes our humanity, our way of being in the world that is constituted through a goodness and its other. To suffer is to experience the woe of life and not merely its incoherence.

Levinas deepens our understanding of just how suffering is a challenge to meaning: “In suffering there is an absence, of all refuge. It is the fact of being directly exposed to being. It is made up of the impossibility of fleeing or retreating. The whole acuity of suffering lies in this impossibility of retreat. It is the fact of being backed up against life and being. In this sense suffering is the impossibility of nothingness” (1987, p. 69). In suffering, we are exposed, bound to the present, seemingly unable to go beyond it. Suffering imposes on us the “impossibility of nothingness” or the impossibility of escape from the present even as it moves us to want to overcome it. Yet, suffering involves more than the possibility of being bound to a present that is at the same time being unmade, called into question, and rendered other than our own. Levinas (1987, p. 78) insists that “the pathos of suffering does not consist solely in the impossibility of fleeing existing, of being backed up against it, but also in the terror of leaving this relationship of light whose transcendence death announces. Like Hamlet we prefer this known existence to unknown existence.” It is that suffering which unmakes our world is also a suffering that portends a relationship with death, the ultimate unknown future that exceeds our grasp and challenges our capacity for self-determination of any kind.

In contrast with Weber’s account of rationalization and modernity, suffering is not framed primarily as a challenge to the self and its attempts toward self-determination and thematizing the world. Suffering clearly disrupts meaning and is ultimately meaningless, even useless. Nevertheless, suffering exposes my vulnerability, and by so doing expresses my subjectivity to myself and to others.⁵ Perhaps somewhat misleadingly, we might say, “Through suffering, *I am*.” In my suffering, my subjectivity is revealed to be an extreme solitude, set apart from others and the world. In addition, suffering reveals a subjectivity being subjected to an evil, as

suffering expresses what ought not to be. Yet, while suffering challenges assumability, Levinas does not turn to the rational coherence of an “inner logic” and a responsibility to one’s chosen ultimate commitments to overcome despair in the face of suffering. Instead, Levinas shows that it is the very unassumability of suffering that enables responsibility for the Other.⁶ It is the suffering of the Other, a suffering that fully expresses their subjectivity, that also comes to ground my own being in a responsibility that exceeds even my own suffering.⁷ Again, put simplistically, we might say, “Through the suffering of the Other, *I am for the Other.*” Suffering calls me to a moral order outside of myself, it calls me outside of my thematizing, my ordering of the world, that has enabled my habitation in the world (Knapp, 2000). If modernity involves the impersonalization of the world, then suffering shows how such an impersonalization will always be incomplete. It is in my relation to suffering that I find myself to be a subjectivity capable of being responsible even in the face of an increasingly rationalized, disenchanted, and meaningless world. For Levinas, suffering, particularly the suffering of the other person, opens the world to us in a new way.

Severson (2013, p. 258) explains that the experience of the suffering of the Other changes who I am by changing who I am in relation to: “The other is my *priority* because he or she is preoriginal to my very being. This priority is a debt; I am too late, arriving on the scene as his or her suffering is already, from time-before-time, under-way. And because that suffering arises from a time that I can never recover, from a ‘past more ancient than every representable origin’ (Levinas, 1998b, p. 9), the other’s suffering never becomes understandable to me. I can never recover my balance; I never assimilate the other’s suffering with other forms of suffering familiar to my memories and other representations of suffering.” In light of this experience and in rather stark contrast to a Weberian “personality,” I am unable to define for myself who I am and what my rationality might entail apart from my responsibility in the face of suffering. The suffering Other changes fundamentally the quest for meaning. My responsibility in the face of the Other shows my being as something I “receive” more than I make. Now any quest for meaning is not something I merely confer, nor is its primary orientation one of achieving some sort of rational coherence ordered to forms of evaluation that provide significance in some way and to which I could become committed. Instead, in light of the suffering Other the quest for meaning is intrinsically and inherently imbued with an ethical urgency and significance that neither I, of myself, nor any sort of “rationality” could dispose upon it.

Despite this stark contrast with Weber, it is important to recognize again that Weber himself seems to recognize something similar to the Levinasian approach developed here. Weber acknowledges within modernity itself the ethical force of the call for an ethic of brotherly love even after it has lost any connection to its religious origins. Modernity is not able to fully contain the ethical responsibility the presence of suffering invokes. Weber explicitly acknowledges this when he concludes his discussion of the vocation of science: “We will set to work and meet the ‘demands of the day’ in human relations as well as in our vocation” (Weber, 1946, p. 156). Although often overlooked, Weber acknowledges that beyond becoming a personality formed through devotion to ultimate value commitments, human beings remain embedded in personal, human relations that (somehow) incur obligations, “demands,” that one can set themselves to work and “meet.” Just how this arises, Weber never fully develops, but one can see how complementary Levinas and Weber are at this level of analysis. Where Levinas (1998a, p. 103) draws out how the suffering of the Other calls for us to take “upon oneself the fate of the other,” Weber speaks of taking upon ourselves the “demands of the day in human relations.”

Finally, I conclude this section with an indication of how Levinas renders the deployment of rationality in relation to suffering and how it differs from a modernist and even Weberian account. Although the various forms of rationality, such as formal, instrumental, and substantive, value rationality, maybe helpful in responding to the suffering of the Other, they all frame the temporality of the encounter in problematic ways. Instead of exploring these difficulties, difficulties which deserve much more consideration than I am able to give them here, perhaps we can see some promise in the Levinasian account of the tension between rationality and suffering through examining his description of the caress. The caress “does not announce any compensation, and in its very contact, is not concerned with what is to come afterwards in economic time” (Levinas, 1988, p. 93). The caress does not announce the end of suffering but is rather a kind of response that opens up a movement into an unknown future that is nevertheless a movement that joins with the Other in that movement. Instead of trying to “grasp” or “hold” and control movement across time, the caress signals a care for suffering that entails an openness and relationality to the suffering that exceeds what one could say, think, know, or do in the moment. This response is more than what the modernist rationality is capable of providing, for it involves a being for the Other that is more than the acknowledgment of

the suffering and its woefulness and then perhaps an orientation to its elimination. The caress involves the nobility of being for the Other even as we face the unknown future and its attendant sufferings.

Fully attending to our responsibility that arises in the face of suffering goes beyond any given moment or any given commitment that could be made. For Levinas, “there is a vulgarity and a baseness in an action that is conceived only for the immediate, that is, in the last analysis, for our life. And there is a very great nobility in the energy liberated from the hold of the present. To act for remote things ... is, no doubt, the summit of nobility” (1996, p. 51). Levinas explains that the nobility of which he speaks, a nobility common to the temporality of the caress, involves engaging in a “work [that] is only possible in patience, which, pushed to the limit, means for the Agent to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome, to act without entering into the Promised Land” (1996, p. 50). For Levinas, our response to suffering cannot be reducible to some sort of outcome we seek to produce. Neither can it be reducible to some sort of substantive commitment that orders time, that orders the future to a particular ultimate value such as what we see in the Weberian personality and its vocation. Instead, our response will require that we be moved in such a way that we respond but without reducing our being to that particular response. We act without knowing if our response will be good enough, without knowing if we will actually reach the “promised land.”

The potential nobility of suffering with and for the Other runs counter to the conceptions of strength and competence promoted by Weber and much of modernity. The Weberian account calls for human beings who are strong enough, capable enough, and mature enough to impose their will upon time and to order, master, and conquer those features of time or life that would divert and interrupt the achievement of some self-chosen (if nevertheless fated in some way) but then designed and determined order (Owen, 1994). In contrast, what Levinas offers as a response to the problem of suffering resides not in the strength to impose one’s will but in the humility and faithfulness of receiving life with and for another (Levinas, 1996, p. 56). Life involves a willingness to yield and receive the sufferings of others in ways that will unite with those others to be generative of ever new life. The strength of a Levinasian response to suffering is what is determined to be a weakness in modernist accounts: a willingness to receive the suffering of another in one’s life to such an extent that one becomes problematized whatever bound to them as together you move into an unknown and unmasterable future.

RECONSTRUCTING SOCIAL THEORY OR THE PRACTICE OF REASON AS A RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

In conclusion, I return to the question of the reconstruction of social theory under conditions of modernity but with a fuller recognition of how suffering is implicated in our practices. Weber offers a vision of social theory nicely calibrated to a pluralistic world without any way of delivering a cosmic ordering that would provide both meaning and a way to assume suffering within its scope. For Weber, the best one can do in such a context is to conduct a rational life where one's commitments have been self-reflectively chosen with as much clarity as possible. The project of social theory, as Weber's own work exemplifies, would be to assist in providing for the ways and means of creating meaning and more fully understanding its ramifications and implications. As [Gane \(2002\)](#) shows, Weber has much to offer a world still trying to find its way in the wake of a variety of postmodern critiques. Weber enables a way to be critical of modernity and yet to also work from within it to challenge it and improve it. The noble life, the life with integrity, is possible, something to strive for, and something that will answer the quest for meaning even after postmodern critiques.

Nevertheless, Weber shows us his uncanny capacity to discern critical issues when he recognizes that the very means by which modernity aims to resolve the quest for meaning, and even his own proffered solution to the dilemmas of modernity, will themselves remain implicated by the challenge of human suffering. All of the value spheres of modernity show their resistance to the ethic of brotherly love and, by extension, their incapacity to respond adequately to the problem of suffering. Weber's acknowledgment of this fact is telling, as is his failure to provide either historical or descriptive analysis of just why the ethic of brotherly love remains operative in modernity. Given his reliance upon historical-critical methods for the delineation of modern processes, one would think that the concern for brotherliness in the face of the suffering of others would have clear historical and substantive foundations. Why would we not just expect the ethic of brotherly love to disappear along with the religious appeals to cosmic meaning? Why can't the scientist just devote their lives to science and the artist to art and each live with indifference to the suffering around them? Why would one still care about brotherliness in modernity?

Levinas complements Weber by providing a more secure footing for seeing just why Weber was right to examine modernity in terms of how

well it integrated with brotherliness. Levinas deepens Weber's framework through a phenomenological analysis of just how the suffering of the Other implicates us in ways that rupture all our ways of forming meaning. Levinas offers the grounds for Weber's conclusion that the concern for suffering is not likely to disappear from the horizon of modernity. Levinas expands beyond Weber to see more clearly why, for all the efficacy of post-modern critiques, such critiques will fail to undermine the need for a social theory that responds to suffering.

The agonism at the heart of the Weberian approach is understandable but troubling. The Weberian call to increase clarity and self-responsibility for one's chosen values and taking a stand in the world, particularly in the aftermath of postmodern social theory, is portrayed as the reasonable and "mature" response. Sincerely held convictions that function as a vocation can provide an honest constellation for meaning in a world of pluralistic values and ways of life. And yet, for all the respectfulness to be extended the Weberian actor, the presence of suffering shows its unseemliness and questions its sincerity and honesty. Not in the sense of an accusation of depravity but simply as insufficient to "what the day demands." Weber asserts that it is the knower, scientist, politician, artist, and so forth that determines what is significant based on their own ultimate values, which are themselves indeterminate, unreasonable, subjective, irrational, and ultimately incommensurable. The capacity for human beings to create meaning is thereby conceived in terms of a project of self-expansion and self-determination in relation to a perhaps recalcitrant world. Yet, when brought to face up to suffering, this kind of project can face the guilt and shame of not measuring up. What success in science or business, either individually or collectively, can compensate for a seeming indifference to suffering? The indifference, and its ethical culpability, shows the vulnerability of modernist ways of providing meaning.

A caution is in order. Weberian frameworks end up positioning ultimate value commitments and ethics of brotherliness at odds with one another. Weber frames this as a tragic battle with one side triumphant and the other dismissed. Science is "science" that requires that one meet its own "demands of the day" and the suffering and brotherliness of human relations is a different, contrasting set of "demands of the day." Yet, a Levinasian account announces the end of theodicy (or explanations of events and suffering) not through its refutation, as if this were a battle between irreconcilable values, but through its refusal (Davies, 2002). Refusal involves a social theory for people that will require the best knowledge one can produce. As such, refusal entails seeing that we can no longer

suppose that providing an explanatory account is sufficient for what the practice of social science or social theory requires. Instead, we must come to see that explanatory accounts are themselves only tools that can be more or less useful for our attempt to respond to the call that suffering brings. What the postmodern critique misses is that the problem with modernist forms of social theory is not their epistemological hubris as much as their failure to directly face the ethical stance required of social theory. Weber takes us part way to this conclusion through his recognition of the ethic of brotherly love. Perhaps we can rephrase Charles Taylor's formulation of the primacy of the epistemological in modernity to something that places suffering central: a reconstructed social theory will "think out the question of what something *is* in terms of the question of how it [*relates to the problem of suffering*]."

One reviewer notes that this conclusion is too narrow. Surely social theory is more than this. Indeed, Levinas and the ethical dimension of Weber does not require that all social theory be reducible to practical measures taken to respond in concrete ways to the problem of suffering. That would be to oversimplify the challenge that suffering brings. But what it does signify is that at its core social theory is called to the practice of critique, of taking up the questions that our ethical responsibility to suffering brings. The presence of suffering shows that it matters what we think, the ideas that ground our practice, and the practices that ground our thinking. One might dismiss this claim as a truism but to do so is to fail to see just how recognition of our ethical relationality in human relations intensifies the significance of social theory and shows that neither the mere playfulness of ideas nor a pluralism of mutual indifference are acceptable practices of social theory. Indeed, what proper attention to suffering shows is that self-ownership and mutual respect in the context of inevitable pluralism is not enough: the suffering of the other calls out to us and grounds us as ethical beings called upon to act in "brotherly love."

The kind of reconstructed practice of social theory that our responsibility requires is one that enables a fully dialogical practice that allows us to be fully sincere in our quest to know (Knapp, 2009). Responding to the problem of suffering will require the best of knowledge, not merely a variety of perspectives and a diversity of views where people take a stand. Neither will a social science framed primarily by methodological concerns be adequate to the task. What will be required is both critical examination of explicit and implicit assumptions of theory and research as well as active, engaged dialogical practices with alternative perspectives. What suffering shows us is that we need one another, we need the prospect of new ideas,

we need the reality of differing conceptions and articulations of the good and the real, we need a plurality of views, but we need them because *through their engagement* we can more fully proffer a more adequate response to suffering. If we practice social theory focused on the primacy of explanatory accounts or in monological indifference to other perspectives, then we will respond in ways limited to and reflective of that rationality and we will be assuming that the suffering is reducible to what that rational, and yet, nonetheless, monological view would allow. Pluralism is of value because the (ethical) stakes are so high. We need our best because the suffering calls upon us to give it. And our best will always require critical theorizing at the deepest and broadest levels on just how we are thinking about and examining phenomena, something that is most fully enhanced through critical, dialogical engagement (Knapp, 2009).

As Weber correctly observes, modernist rationality can be destructive of the possibilities of dealing with suffering in human life. Levinas accentuates this concern but also shows more clearly that it is not through the resolute formation of a personality that chooses one's own ultimate values (Weber) nor through the ever more radical deconstruction of forms of authority and knowledge (postmodern) that social theory can best respond to the problems of suffering and modernity. Instead, it is receiving the bonded human relation to the Other and the ethical grounding such a bond provides that one can begin the process of analysis of life and its social dimensions. Within such a relational context, social theory can develop practices of both critique and renewal that nevertheless remain faithful to that more primary ethical relationality (Knapp, 2015).

NOTES

1. A comparison of the work of Weber and Levinas is unusual despite the fact that there are many rich avenues to explore in their work. What follows is only one way of bringing their insights into dialogue with one another and even here I proceed with the aim of elucidating the significance and place of suffering in the reconstruction of social theory. A more complete and in-depth theoretical comparison of Weber and Levinas, particularly one focused on the temporality of the relation of suffering and rationality, is something I am involved in preparing for future readers.

2. Although Weber does not develop it, the implied phenomenology is that the "world" is never experienced completely as chaotic and infinite, but rather is always already known in terms that have been handed down from the past. The world is always, already encountered in some sort of terms that seems "rational" and

“meaningful.” Nevertheless, the reality of a “meaningless infinity” also shows any such meaningful account to be insufficient.

3. Weber’s (1946, pp. 358–359) depiction of the Calvinist “resolution” of the problem of theodicy is worth quoting in full: “This less consistent form of dualism is the popular, world-wide conception of heaven and hell, which restores God’s sovereignty over the evil spirit who is His creature, and thereby believes that divine omnipotence is saved. But, willy-nilly, it must then, overtly or covertly, sacrifice some of the divine love. For if the omniscience is maintained, the creation of a power of radical evil and the admission of sin, especially in communion with the eternity of hell’s punishments for one of God’s own and finite creatures and for finite sins, simply does not correspond to divine love. In that case, only a renunciation of benevolence is consistent.

The belief in predestination realizes this renunciation, in fact and with full consistency. Man’s acknowledged incapacity to scrutinize the ways of God means that he renounces in a loveless clarity man’s accessibility to any meaning of the world. This renunciation brought all problems of this sort to an end.”

4. I present Weber here and later in the paper as having a sympathetic appraisal of the “ethic of brotherly love.” See Symonds (2015) for a full development of this interpretation. However, note that others interpret Weber as largely dismissive of the ethic of brotherly love (Beiner, 2014, pp. xlii–lv).

5. As Lingis (1996, pp. 85–86) points out: “Quite early Levinas studied the immanence of pain. To be pained is to feel one’s own substance, as a passive affliction, in the torment of wanting to escape oneself. For to escape pain would be to be able to transcend it towards the world, or to be able to retreat behind it and objectify it. The inability to flee or retreat, the being-mired in oneself, is the suffering of pain.”

6. The “Other” refers to the other person, not in generalizable terms, but as the concrete, particular personal person. As Levinas says to illustrate, “You are you.”

7. As Sarah Allen shows: “[For Levinas] it is the constant threat of physical suffering and death that opens up otherwise separated and independent human beings to each other, casting them together in relations of love and fecundity that go beyond their own needs and projects.”

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