CHAPTER FIVE

ETHICS FOR AN IMPERSONAL AGE

By the end of the 18th century the Founding Fathers of the American Revolution, that succeeded, and the philosophes who prepared the stage for the French Revolution, that ultimately failed, were increasingly thinking of society in general as reflecting the clockwork mechanisms of Newtonian mechanics, and which would be made more efficient as long as the parts of that machine, people, were kept rational in the service of their own interests and that of society at large. As to what these interests were and how to fulfill them, such writers ultimately believed in a great chain of being extending from strong personal relationships based on personal intimacy but not on overall social coordination being kept in check by levels of authority each reporting to the layer above and ultimately to God. Thus by the end of the 18th century a kind of clockwork universe was taken for granted in Western Europe and in America which, even if as the Deists claimed was no longer under the direct intervention of God, which also undercut the divine right of kings as God’s mouthpiece, was still governed by His laws so that in ethics as well as in technology 18th century Americans would have felt at home in Augustan Rome or the Athens of Aristotle, and the humanistic literature of those ancient times was by no means considered out of date.

As the 19th century progressed social thought that had taken for granted an intimate base for society in the local community and even in the family began to notice that things were changing. This was very much noticed at the beginning of the 20th century by Max Weber, the German lawyer/economist who sought to correct the simplifications of Marx and Nietzsche, among other things, and in the process helped found Sociology as a quasi-scientific endeavor.

One way to summarize the changes in perspective on the human experience in the last two centuries in the West is to say the 18th century scholarship of Western Europe placed great emphasis on government and economics, the scholarship at the end of the 19th century emphasized to a great extent government and personal life (as exemplified in the work of Marx and Freud), and the scholarship of the
The beginning of the 21st century is much more oriented toward discussing personal life treated in an impersonal way as a commodity, in other words personal life in an impersonal environment. The cultural clashes between the proponents of objective reason (whose heyday was the 18th century in Europe and America) and the proponents of “meaning,” those romantics whose heyday was the early 19th century that soon followed and who still persist with similar interests today, eventually resulted in the work of such people as Max Weber who tried to reconcile these two approaches.

That is why he noticed that we increasingly have relativistic ethics in our private lives but absolutist ethics for our leaders, as our social goals are increasingly set, not from the bottom up, but from the top down, in fact is demanded so by the mass of people who increasingly take for granted what Weber called “The Iron Cage of Bureaucracy” (Mitzman 1970). Rather puritanical traditional groups who resist this trend range from local groups in the Islamic world who expect values to be enforced by local custom as interpreted by local influentials interacting with the community, all of this often tribal in origin, and traditional groups in America who also expect values to be enforced by local custom as interpreted by local influentials interacting with the community, in this case middle-class people whose class position makes them particularly interested in issues of self-control and deferring gratification. In the puritanical tradition groups tend to enforce values locally because they do not particularly admire their distant rulers for their aristocratic attainments and do not feel these attainments make them worthy to rule automatically. Obviously there is a certain amount of anti-intellectualism at play here, or at least intellectual rivalries. There are groups within the Catholic and Orthodox Christian worlds who are more used to values being enforced by aristocratic elites, but even they often criticize these elites nowadays as having become vulgar and coarse, perhaps because having become influenced by popular mass culture and because of their own reasons for self-indulgence they are now often figureheads who are no longer worthy of their positions of power. There are also mixed cases nowadays, so that American-style evangelicals are disrupting the cultural unity of Brazil, while in America bureaucratization of society is quite evident and there are mutterings, traditional in our context, against the unworthiness, no matter how educated they are, of those who consider themselves our cultural elite.

So how is Max Weber’s social science different from the social science as it exists today? Basically, he looked with equanimity at the