

Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation” (1917)

Abstract

Modern Germany’s most renowned sociologist, Max Weber (1864–1920), made important and lasting contributions to several areas of analysis. This excerpt from his famous 1917 lecture at the University of Munich lays out his vision of the academic or scientific professional: a totally committed, socially detached individual, who is fully absorbed in the minute details of highly specialized research, someone whose painstaking and uncompromising labor may have truly transformative implications. This heroic image of arid academic rationality, however impossible to realize in practice, played a formative role in shaping the learning personalities of modern Germany’s premier knowledge workers: university professors.

Source

[...]

I believe, however, that you really want to hear about something else: about the inner call to science. In today’s times, the inner state, in contrast to the organization of science as a vocation, is conditioned primarily by the fact that science has entered a phase of specialization unknown previously, and that this will forever remain the case. Not only externally, no, but also internally, the situation is such that the individual can be consciously certain of achieving something truly perfect in science only in cases of the strictest specialization. Any work that extends into neighboring disciplines, such as we occasionally undertake, and which, for example, sociologists in particular must necessarily undertake time and again, is burdened with the resigned realization that, at best, one is providing the expert with useful questions that might not have readily occurred to him from his own specialized vantage point, but that one’s own work inevitably remains highly imperfect. Only with strict specialization can the scientific worker really attain the full feeling, once and perhaps never again in his life: I have accomplished something here that will endure. Nowadays, a truly definitive and sound accomplishment is always a specialized accomplishment. And anyone who is incapable, so to speak, of putting on blinders and immersing himself in the belief that the fate of his soul depends on whether he makes this, and precisely this, conjecture correctly at this point in this manuscript, may as well stay far away from science. Never will he internally go through what may be called the “experience” of science. Without this strange exhilaration, which outsiders ridicule, this passion, this “millennia must pass before you come to life, and other millennia wait silently.” – If whether you succeed with this conjecture matters to you, then you have not been called to science and you should do something else. For nothing has value for man as man unless he can do it with passion.

[...]

Source: Max Weber, “Wissenschaft als Beruf,” in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922, pp. 530–31.

Translation: Kathleen Dell’Orto

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