# Weber and Coyote: polytheism as a practical attitude

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then I contradict myself,
> (I am large, I contain multitudes.)
>
> —Walt Whitman 'Song Of Myself'

Max Weber (1864-1920) is one of the founders of sociology, and is remembered especially as the great theorist of bureaucratic rationalisation.  This, according to Weber, is a deep and ancient tendency in our civilisation.  To take as an example the context I know best, we university academics see bureaucratic rationalisation happening every day in our universities and in education generally.  As the head of an academic department, I have to contribute to it, and sometimes to enforce it.  Weber persuades me that it is inevitable, and daily work persuades me that sometimes it is a good thing—we would not wish our curricula or assessment procedures to be whimsical or arbitrary.  At the same time, it is clear to me, as it was clear to Weber, that rationalisation comes at a cost in spontaneity and flexibility.  That matters in education because learning is unpredictable and unruly.  Flashes of insight can be planned for, but they cannot be programmed.  Therefore, we academics have to think about how to practise an anarchic activity in a rationalised environment.[i]  This tension between anarchic activity and rationalised structure is not unique to education.  It is found in any occupation where learning or creativity coexist with imperatives towards efficiency or reliability.

My understanding of the anarchic end of this dialectical dyad will mostly come from Lewis Hyde's book *Trickster Makes This World: how disruptive imagination creates culture*.[ii]  Hyde explores myths about tricksters such as the Yoruba spirit Eshu, the Greek Hermes, the Norse Loki and the Coyote and Raven stories of some of the native cultures of North America.  He is particularly interested in the importance of trickery in stories about how the world came to be the way it is.  Note that these examples all come from polytheisms.  Hyde makes few references to the Abrahamic faiths, even though they share the story of the fall, brought about by the serpent's trickery, and the god of the Old Testament plays a few tricks of His own.  Early in his book, Hyde asks whether trickster is with us now and considers that the answer may be 'no', because "trickster only comes to life in the complex terrain of polytheism" (pp. 9-10).  If that is true, and if we need trickster to create and re-create the world, and if we in the UK (and similar societies) are a deeply monotheistic culture, then we are in trouble.  However, Weber offers grounds for optimism on this point.  Writing in 1918, he claimed that:

Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another.[iii]

As we will see, there are in Weber's view some new gods vying for control over and sacrifice from humanity as well as the old ones. If Weber is right, and the winter of monotheism is giving way to a new polytheism (albeit of a disenchanted sort) then perhaps the trickster can live among us after all.

The plan of this paper, therefore, is to elaborate some basic notions from Weber (rationalisation, disenchantment, bureaucracy), to explore Hyde's thesis in more detail, and then to take up this question of the plurality of spirits both around and within us, and whether the trickster is one of them. Weber has three roles in this argument. First, he theorises rationalisation, disenchantment and bureaucracy; second, he offers an argument that in a certain sense polytheism is returning (if it ever went away); and third, he presents a way to translate the mytho-poetic register in which Hyde works into terms acceptable to social science of a more materialist bent. We saw this last role in the quotation above; his resurgent old gods are impersonal social forces. This allows us to draw on Hyde without falling into mystery-mongering.

## Rationalisation, disenchantment and bureaucracy

"The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.'"[iv] Rationalisation, in Weber's work, is a steady tendency towards system, order, standardisation, repetition, measurement, intellectualisation, explicit rules and calculated efficiency and effectiveness, in more or less all domains of life. Methods of farming and cooking that were justified by tradition lose out to scientifically tested methods. Even if the first attempt at scientific farming fails, the idea of trying new methods in a systematic fashion to see what works best will displace ancient lore as the standard practice. Businesses that take careful account of their costs and find ways of measuring apparently intangible factors like risk and depreciation will drive out family firms that trade in traditional ways. Legal practice starts with local wise-folk making case-by-case judgments, but will eventually develop an ordered code. There may be an intermediate stage where the law is a mass of disconnected written rules, but eventually the practical demands of maintaining consistency and training new judges will prompt a search for fundamental principles. Questions of fairness will attach to legal processes as well as to legal outcomes. This will lead to standard procedures. At every stage, it is practical need that drives the tendency to rationalisation. In pre-modern history, this was largely the

result of the growth of large states.  The Roman Empire required greater levels of standardisation than the city states of ancient Greece.  Stephen Toulmin recounts Polybius's report that Greek and Roman armies had differing ways of laying out their military camps.  The Greeks would reconfigure their campsites as they travelled to take best advantage of the terrain.  They did not have to do so much digging of artificial defences as the Romans, but suffered the disadvantage that no one could be sure of their relative positions, which made it harder to organise themselves.  The Romans, in contrast, pitched their military camps in the same configuration regardless of the terrain, according to a precise standard plan, even if this required a lot more entrenching.[v]  Toulmin offers reasons to prefer the Greek way, but the Romans won.  Now, the same pressures drive large companies to standardise and unify their products and procedures.  This was evident to Weber, but digital technology has intensified this process beyond even his imagining.

Scholarship since Weber's time has filled in many of the details of this process.  For the European medieval part of the story, see Alfred Crosby's book *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society 1250-1600*.  Cosby explains, for example, the process whereby music came to be written in a standardised notation and consequently became increasingly homogenised.  He relates the rapid introduction of public clocks from the early fourteenth century onwards (chapter four) and the consequent introduction of standardised hours and routines.  To take an example close to scholarly life, Crosby explains how the medieval schoolmen found themselves overwhelmed with texts and had to find some system for ordering and retrieving them.  Their first library catalogues ordered material in descending order of importance, starting with the Bible.  This proved impractical, so they began to put texts in alphabetical order as we still do today (p. 63).  As Crosby shows, it was not long before Europeans quantified more or less everything, for practical reasons, and not because they were in the grip of an ideology that drove them to it.  And in order to quantify space, time, music and so on, these magnitudes have to be divided into standard units.

Part of rationalisation for Weber is 'intellectualisation'.  Here too, Weber did not mean to suggest that there is a pure drive in humans to theorise, but rather, again, that the practical demands of everyday life tend towards the emergence of theoretical understanding.  This does not mean that people in general nowadays understand their surroundings better. People now do not know how their gadgets work, nor why their world is the way it is (the economic crash of 2008 is a mystery to most people even now).  "The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do *not*… indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives."  Rather, Weber says, "It means something else,

namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time.  Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."[vi]

This practical need to theorise applies to matters of religion too.  Where first there might have been ritual combined with storytelling and a diffuse sense of awe and dread, eventually religion differentiates itself from drama and entertainment to produce intellectuals like Thomas Aquinas, writing thick books of closely-argued theology.  We should not suppose that the intellectualised religion of Aquinas was any less deeply felt than that of an illiterate shaman, nor that the rationalisation of religion was not driven by perceived practical need.  For people who believe in hellfire as firmly as we believe in atoms, it is urgently practical that there should be experts who think about salvation with as much scientific rigour as possible.  Moreover, it would be an error to suppose that religious movements that seem to turn away from intellectualisation, such as mysticism and pietism, are counterexamples, because they do so as a conscious reaction to the prevailing rationalisation of culture, and they explain themselves in its terms.  One cannot, now, simply practice an ecstatic religion as some ancient cultures did; one has to have a theology of ecstasy, a rational account of the place of ecstatic experience in religious life.  For another example: those religious movements that reject the theory of evolution feel a need to justify their stance in scientific terms.  Thus, we see 'creation science'.

The consequence of intellectualisation is a process that Weber described with a phrase from Schiller: 'the disenchantment of the world'.  Continuing the last quotation: "This [rationalisation] means that the world is disenchanted.  One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed.  Technical means and calculations perform the service.  This above all is what intellectualization means."  It must be borne in mind that these claims are about the prevailing social order, the means whereby society organises itself and carries out its functions.  The disenchantment thesis, for example, does not entail that nobody ever tries to affect events by magical means, perhaps by imploring mysterious powers.  Rather, it means that there are no public rites of propitiation or divination.  No significant institutions of our society try to achieve their practical ends by casting horoscopes or making sacrifices.  Such public religious ceremonies as we have are restricted to non-magical functions like proclamation, recognition and commemoration.  Efforts at magic are all private affairs.

Weber took care not to suggest that rationalisation is inevitable in some metaphysical sense akin to the progress of Hegel's *Geist.* He aimed to found sociology as an empirical science in contrast to the a priori philosophies of history that flourished in the nineteenth century. He knew that heavily rationalised societies can collapse, perhaps as a result of military defeat by nomadic hordes. He was particularly interested in the role of charismatic leaders, be they military, political or religious, as counter-forces to rationalisation (Weber died in 1920, so he did not live to see how prescient this interest was). Nevertheless, the direction of his writing, and the evidence of history since his day, suggests that aside from occasional retrograde interludes, the path of human civilisation is towards ever more rationalised forms of organisation. This does not prevent individuals from clinging to old ways and suffering from superstitions. But they do so in an increasingly disenchanted and rationalised social order, so their traditions and superstitions appear as nostalgia and individual eccentricity. Individuals might have mystical experiences, but in a disenchanted world, these cannot be effectively expressed or socially grounded.

Note that rationalisation is ancient, deep and pervasive. It is not associated with the spirit of any particular age; rather, it progresses across ages. It is not the result of the religious, ideological or psychological specificity of any ruling power; rather, it arises from the natural and universal human activity of matching ends with means. Any attempt to blame the fact that we live in a standardised, quantified, bar-coded world on something recent or partisan (such as modernity, or capitalism, or digital technology, or loss of deference to authorities, or totalitarian tendencies in high places, *etc*.) is a failure to appreciate the age, depth and scope of the phenomenon.

The last Weberian concept that I wish to introduce is bureaucracy. Weber inherited from his parents a practical interest in German politics, and when he writes about bureaucracy, it is worth keeping the late nineteenth-century German civil service in mind. Bureaucracy, for Weber, is the result of rationalisation in the realm of human organisation. What he calls the pure type of bureaucracy is "superior to any other form in precision, in stability, in the stringency of its discipline, and in its reliability. It thus makes possible a particularly high degree of calculability of results for the heads of the organization and for those acting in relation to it."[vii] He considers it to be the most efficient way of controlling people. This pure type of bureaucracy is characterised as follows:

1) officials are free citizens (as opposed to, say, the scribe-slaves of ancient empires)

2) strict hierarchy

3) specified scope of responsibility for each office

4) everything important is formally recorded in writing

5) officials are appointed in a free selection, based on technical competence demonstrated by examinations

6) officials are paid a fixed salary, regardless of the outcome of the policies they enact

7) officials do not use their own equipment or money

8) officials cannot gain extra money or goods in kind from their offices (unlike, say, tax-farmers, or societies where gifts to officials are normal)

9) officials are under the strict discipline of the organisation.

Weber includes large private corporations in his analysis. The difference between public and private ownership is not decisive of whether an organisation counts as a bureaucracy in Weber's sense. To reiterate: the existence of such bureaucracies is not the result of a 'bureaucratic mentality'—rather, there are bureaucrats with a bureaucratic mentality because the practical needs of our society demand bureaucracies.

Much of this may seem familiar and obvious, but that is because we no longer live in a society where, for example, military commissions, church livings and judgments in lower courts can be bought. On the other hand, for the past four decades or so, there has been a challenge to Weber's claim that this type of organisation is the most efficient. There is now a market-based, 'entrepreneurial' model that (of the characteristics just listed) is opposed to 2, suspicious of 3, 4 and 5, and positively contemptuous of 6. The 'entrepreneurial' spirit wants to flatten hierarchies, does not care about qualifications or processes except as they affect results, and does not understand why an official would work hard if there is no financial incentive. It is this spirit[viii] that, for example, wishes to replace certification of school-teachers with payment by results. The principal argument in favour of this view is that market mechanisms calculate efficiencies more finely than bureaucracies, and motivate people to improve.[ix] For this reason, the emergence of this 'entrepreneurial' model of humanity and society does not threaten Weber's deeper claims about rationalisation. The entrepreneurial model challenges the bureaucratic model on grounds of efficiency. It does not challenge Weber's claim that efficiency is the decisive factor in the evolution of society and that the triumph of instrumental rationality is the almost inevitable outcome.

Now, it is time to meet the anarchic side of the dyad.

## Tricksters

The subtitle of the second edition of Hyde's book is *how disruptive imagination creates culture.* Understanding this, rather than simply cataloguing myths about tricky gods and spirits, is his real aim. His focus is on art, though disruptive imagination has a place in science too.[x] I first learned of Hyde's book from the mathematician Michael Harris. He got interested in tricksters when one of his mathematical innovations was described as 'Harris's tensor trick', and he wondered how to take this epithet.[xi] A trick is not a method. It exploits the specifics of the problem it solves more in the opportunistic manner of the Greek military camp than the Roman approach. 'Method', on the other hand, suggests the uniform procedure of the Roman camp. The trickster seeks to take imaginative advantage of features of the situation that a more methodical approach might miss. The moral ambiguity of the term arises from the cases where the situation includes other people.

Hyde proceeds by exploring myths about tricky spirits from all over the world. He recognises the danger of forming a composite out of figures from many different traditions, but his aim is rather to use these stories to say something about intelligence, imagination and culture. Indeed, I suspect that his confidence that the stories can be usefully juxtaposed arises from a conviction that they express some common human truths. The most obvious things that his tricksters tend to have in common are theft and deceit, a kind of 'Artful Dodger' intelligence and boldness of action that gets them into trouble as often as it brings rewards. They are marginal figures, often found on roads or at crossroads rather than in the settlement where the rule of law prevails. However, they are not just thieves and con-artists. Their schemes are cosmically significant. They steal important things (fire, water, daylight, agriculture and the like) from important people (usually other mythological personages). They are often the mediators between gods and humans. This places them at the margin of divine society. Hermes, the messenger of the Olympian gods, had to steal cattle from Apollo and (effectively) sacrifice them to himself in order to become a real god (and being a self-made god, is as much a parvenu as a self-made man). Loki is never really welcome in Asgard.

Tricksters in cosmic origin stories are often responsible for bringing change, contingency, fate or death into the world. The trickster belongs on the road and especially at crossroads in part because he (it invariably is *he* in these stories, for reasons that Hyde explores[xii]) is marginal, liminal and a go-between for humans and gods. There is another reason for this; it is on journeys that contingency can

flourish.  The Yoruba trickster Eshu is the god of divination.  This does not mean that he (through the seer) tells the future.  Rather, he gives advice about the future by reminding the petitioner of things that are always true.  Hyde recounts the case of a man going on a journey who asks for advice (Hyde 2008 pp. 114-5).  He is told the tale of a man who travels to a town where he is not known, and there, through a series of accidental events that could not have happened in his hometown where he had a fixed social position, he ends up with a family without having to pay a dowry.  At home, there are fixed roles, fixed relationships and predictable outcomes.  On the road, there are accidents and chance meetings that can be opportunities for a bold, imaginative traveller with an eye on the main chance.  The crossroads is especially important because real contingency happens when two independent causal chains intersect.  The cat startled by a barking dog dashes in the road causing a car to swerve, which car would not have been there had the driver not been held up earlier by a phone-call.  The resulting swerve causes a minor accident, as a result of which the drivers of two cars exchange phone numbers...  The progress of one causal chain (dog barks, cat starts) was predictable, as was the other (phone rings, driver delayed), until they cross.

Such radical contingency is essential to the trickster because it allows him to exercise his guile.  This brings up a point that Hyde illustrates with Coyote stories.  Other animals have fixed ways of catching prey or of avoiding capture--speed, disguise, armour, webs or poison.  Coyote has none of these; he has no way of his own, so he tries to imitate the ways of other animals.  The ability to think like a fish, or like a lion, is what makes Coyote tricky—to fool another, a trickster must look at the world through that person's eyes.  It's notable that apart from tricksters, this ability is quite rare among gods and mythological beings.  This makes tricksters dangerous, but it also equips them to be effective mediators.

One of the stories with a direct bearing on this paper is Ragnarok, the doom of the Norse gods.   Baldr, the son of Odin and Frigg, is the god of light and purity.  He has a prophetic dream about his own death.  His mother Frigg travels the world to extract from everything a promise not to harm her son, but she overlooks mistletoe.  Loki makes an arrow out of mistletoe and gives it to a blind god during an archery contest in which the gods celebrate Baldr's invulnerability by using him as a target.  Under Loki's guidance, the blind god shoots Baldr dead.  To punish Loki, and to prevent further mischief, the gods bind Loki.  This, though, causes the world to die and the gods with it.  It is only when Loki is freed that the world and the gods are reborn.  In Hyde's reading of this myth, Loki *has* to react to Frigg's attempt to save her son from contingency, danger and death because he is the god of such uncertainties.  Frigg's effort is an attack on him.  The gods raise the stakes when they bind Loki—they try to drive contingency,

danger and death out of the world altogether, but their effort is fatal because without contingency, danger and death, there can be no life.[xiii]

I mentioned at the outset Hyde's suggestion that "trickster only comes to life in the complex terrain of polytheism" (pp. 9-10).  The first reason for this is that the trickster plays his role in shaping the cosmos by tricking gods.  This is only possible with the sort of limited, specialised gods who are open to trickery.  There is no fooling the all-knowing, all-powerful god of the Abrahamic faiths.  Some tricks bring material benefits to humanity (fire, agriculture) while others change the ethical landscape.  That ought not be possible if the moral law is given by the absolute authority of the unlimited god of monotheism.  Moreover, the trickster is the god of radical contingency, but a universe governed by the eternal, absolute authority of the god of Abraham can have no real contingency in it.  Things may look radically contingent to us finite creatures, but in Abrahamic monotheism the divine mind knows and approves of everything that happens and will happen.  A third reason is that the absolutely powerful god of Abraham needs no mediator to communicate with humanity.  The god of monotheism speaks to Abraham directly.  When this God, rather than speak directly to a prophet, sends an angel with a message, the angel is an entirely reliable mouthpiece for God.[xiv]  The trickster-mediators, in contrast, may spin or invent messages for their own tricky purposes, unbeknownst to the limited gods whose messages they carry.  The trickster-mediator expresses in the mytho-poetic register the unreliability of all communication, whereas the Abrahamic faiths all suggest, one way or another, that it is possible to received the word of God in a reliable form.[xv]

Finally, the trickster needs polytheism because he is a god (or at least some sort of mythic being), and could not possibly be the only one.  No human being can be a trickster spirit any more than an ordinary coyote can be Coyote.  'Trickster coming to life' means that his spirit is one of the social forces shaping our world, along with the bureaucrat, the entrepreneur, the politician, and so on.

## Weber's 'polytheism'

These, then, are our two spirits, the bureaucrat and the trickster.  These are the gods of the two tendencies in modern life that we encountered at the outset—on one side, the rationalising tendency of academic quality assurance and standardised summative assessment, and on the other the exuberant anarchy of fizzing ideas.  Now, we need Weber to argue that we do in fact live in the 'complex terrain of polytheism' (the second of his three functions in this paper).  In 'Science as a Vocation', Weber wrote:

We live as did the ancients when their world was not yet disenchanted of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and above all, everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanted and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity. Fate, and certainly not 'science', holds sway over these gods and their struggles. One can only understand what the godhead is for one order or for the other, or better what godhead is in one or the other order. (p. 148)

What Weber meant by this is that we are subject to distinct and sometimes contradictory demands from separate 'ethical orders'. He elaborated this in 'Politics as a Vocation', where he was especially interested in the ethical demands on political leaders. (He gave these two 'vocation' lectures to German students in 1918.) According to Weber, the state is defined by the monopoly it claims on the legitimate use of violence. A political leader is thus committed to state violence as an acceptable means, even if as a matter of fact he or she never declares war or orders out the national guard. Since Europe in Weber's day was supposed to be governed by Christian values, this raises a problem, because "The genius or demon of politics lives in an inner tension with the god of love…" (p. 126). In general, there is a conflict between the proper ethical order of politics, which demands that the political leader must be prepared to use violence and take responsibility for the consequences of policy, and any 'ethics of absolute ends' (such as the Sermon on the Mount) that insists that consequences are not important next to the imperative to do the right thing. As Weber put it, the saint is commanded "resist not him that is evil with force", but "for the politician the reverse proposition holds, 'thou *shalt* resist evil by force,' or else you are responsible for evil winning out." (pp. 119-120).[xvi]

Even if we do not consider an ethic of ultimate ends, there is a contrast in Weber's writing between the ethical demands on the political leader and those on the civil servant. The political leader is an advocate, for policy, for party advantage, for the interests of some social group or class, and ultimately for the politician's own convictions and claims on power. The civil servant (in the ideal type of bureaucracy described above), on the other hand, must not advocate anything, but must rather be the reliable instrument of decisions made higher up. "The honor of the civil servant is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities, exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction. Without this moral discipline and self-denial, in the highest sense, the whole apparatus would fall to pieces." (p. 95). The good leader and the good civil servant are committed to different ethical orders. If these were personified as gods, the deities would have different characters, expressed

in different myths.  Of course, human politicians and civil servants must be subject to ethical demands other than those of their professions, be it the god of love, or Christian charity, or Kantian rectitude or some other such ethic.  Otherwise, the demand of professional ethics on politicians that they be prepared to use violence when necessary would allow any end to justify any means, and the honour of civil servants would require them to be the willing instruments of any policy, however evil.  This is the 'inner tension' between the demands of different spirits.

Weber generalised this thought.  Considering the suggestion that there could be a single ethical code to govern all human life, he asked (rhetorically, expecting a negative answer), "But is it true that any ethic of the world could establish commandments of identical content for erotic, business, familial, and official relations; for the relations to one's wife, to the greengrocer, the son, the competitor, the friend, the defendant?" (pp. 118-9).  Part of the point of these two 'vocation' lectures is that the political leader and the scientist are committed to different ethical orders.  The leader must offer a moral vision and recommend action; the scientist must not—the scientific ethic forbids it.

This multiplicity of ethical orders is a feature of all societies, but Weber argues that some handle it better than others.  Polytheisms do it best; they simply have different gods associated with different ethical orders.  "We are placed into various life-spheres, each of which is governed by different laws.  Religious ethics have settled with this fact in different ways.  Hellenistic polytheism made sacrifices to Aphrodite and Hera alike, to Dionysus and Apollo, and knew these gods were frequently in conflict with one another." (p. 123).  The ease with which ancient polytheists simultaneously venerated gods of apparently differing ethical orders is what Weber meant by 'inwardly genuine plasticity'.  Such a person can supplicate the goddess of unruly passion while at the same time paying due respect to the goddess of faithful matrimony, simply by not thinking too much about the contradiction.  The multiplicity of ethical orders is more of a problem for us, because our world and our action in it is rationalised, theorised, intellectualised, and therefore such contradictions are harder for us to ignore.  In philosophy, the two modern giants of moral thought, Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, took it for granted that there is a single moral system—they devoted their efforts to working out what it is.[xvii]

Medieval Christendom too had its distinct ethical orders: "There stands the monk who must not shed blood or strive for gain, and beside him stand the pious knight and the burgher, who are allowed to do so, the one to shed blood and the other to pursue gain." (p. 124).  The fiction that monk, knight and burgher were all governed by the same ethical order was sustained for a while by doctrinal footwork,

but this, Weber, maintains, is no longer possible: "our civilization destines us to realize more clearly these struggles again, after our eyes have been blinded for a thousand years—blinded by the allegedly or presumably exclusive orientation towards the exclusive moral fervor of Christian ethics." (p. 149). The reason for this falling of the scales from our eyes is, of course, rationalisation. The disenchantment of the world robs Christianity of its authority, while rising intellectualisation throws the contradictions between ethical orders into sharper relief.[xviii]

## Weber's Sociology of Religion

So far, we have encountered Weber as the theorist of bureaucracy and as the author of the two 'vocation' essays of 1918, in which we find the idea of distinct and incompatible ethical orders most powerfully expressed. One can imagine the material on bureaucracy re-ordered and re-titled 'Administration as a Vocation'. However, there is another side to Weber. He was also an early and prolific sociologist of religion. His most influential book is probably *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which he argued that one (but only one) of the enabling conditions for the emergence of capitalism was a form of this-worldly asceticism that he associated especially with Calvinism. His studies of other world religions were partly motivated by the question whether anything of the sort is found elsewhere, and if not, whether this might help to explain why capitalism arose uniquely in Europe. These studies of religion were extensive, and one might wonder whether there is a connection to be made between Weber the sociologist of religion and Weber the theorist of modern 'polytheism'.

In fact, there is no direct link between the 'polytheism' material (which is mostly found in his two 'vocation' essays) and his sociology of religion, in part because the latter is focussed on the various 'salvation' religions, which are mostly either monotheistic or non-theist (Buddhism). While he mentions ancient polytheism from time to time, he did not write a sociology of it. He did write extensively about one kind of polytheism, namely Hinduism, but his interest was to understand why it seemed to him incompatible with the spirit of capitalism.[xix] While he examined many aspects and varieties of Hinduism, he did not do the experiment of comparing Hinduism as a form of polytheism with the 'polytheism' of competing value spheres that he describes in the 'vocation' essays. Nor did he ask how Hindus cope with the multiplicity of incompatible value spheres—indeed, in his sociology of religion he did not ask this question of any of the world religions, perhaps because his root enquiry about the non-emergence of capitalism outside Europe did not demand it.

In any case, there are two related differences between Hinduism and the 'polytheism' of Weber's vocation essays. First, the teeming multitude of Hindu gods are all related in some way to Brahman, the ontologically ultimate source and sustainer of all things. Characterising their dependency on Brahman is a subtle matter that we need not enter into. The vital point is that the metaphysical status and religious function of the Hindu gods cannot be understood without reference to their relation to Brahman.[xx] There is nothing in Weber's view that corresponds to Brahman. There is, for him, no unifying divinity 'behind' or 'beneath' or 'above' the gods of his particular ethical spheres. The second, related point is that it is part of Hindu faith that the conflicts and contradictions that we finite, unenlightened consciousnesses encounter are merely apparent. Ultimate reality is, for Hindus, self-consistent.[xxi] In Weber, the conflicts between the demands of different ethical orders are real, and are not to be resolved or dissolved by achieving a higher or more enlightened point of view. In this sense, Weber's outlook is tragic rather than religious. For him, the contradictions in our systems of values go all the way down.

Few Weber scholars attempt to relate Weber's 'polytheism' thesis to his sociology of religion, perhaps for the reasons just discussed. One of the few is Roger Friesland, who argues (2013) that Weber's polytheistic theory of multiple spheres of value does not map on to his sociology of religion. In his studies of religion, Weber invokes various binary distinctions, and Friesland claims that the practices that enact commitment to the 'gods' of Weber's distinct value-spheres cut across these oppositions. If we wished to defend Weber on this point, we might remember that his sociology of religion was mostly about salvation religions that in some sense 'reject the world', and so its analytical machinery has no bearing on the disenchanted, worldly 'polytheism' that he discussed in his 'vocations' essays. In any case, the justice of Friesland's criticism need not concern us, because no part of the present argument appeals to or depends upon Weber's sociology of religion.

Weber uses the language of polytheism to make two points. The first is his view that we live among multiple incompatible ethical orders. The second is his contrast between the ease with which ancient polytheistic religious cultures dealt with this ethical multiplicity (aided by their mystical inward plasticity) and the difficulty that we have in our rationalised, intellectualised culture. He does not suppose that these 'gods' are beings who might be summoned or supplicated, or who might intervene in human affairs, or that anyone thinks of them in such terms. For him, the mytho-poetic register is a *façon de parler* rather than a metaphysical commitment.[xxii]

**If Weber is right about polytheism, what about monotheism, unity and integrity?**

Weber announced the return of polytheism in 1918, but in spite of his argument and analysis, monotheistic religions remain popular, and the notion that there should be one ethical order for all occasions retains its grip (in spite of recent vogues for virtue ethics and ethical particularism among professional philosophers). Rationalisation (and in particular, intellectualisation) may be part of the explanation. At the level of theory, we do want to know how it all hangs together—this is one of the deep reasons why philosophy is present in all developed cultures. If there are many ethical orders, how do they relate to each other, and what do we do when they conflict? For orderly philosophical minds, it is tempting to seek some higher-level account that will resolve all ethical conflicts, rather than to recognise that there may be irresolvably tragic dilemmas in life. However, most people are not principally driven by such demands of theoretical reason, so monotheism must have some other appeal.

Its political advantages are obvious. The earthly representative of the One True God need brook no opposition, while the king-priest of one god among many has to pay at least formal respect to the others.[xxiii] Moreover, extinct polytheisms of the sort that Weber had in mind tend to be morally and psychologically unsatisfying. Odin and Zeus may look on humanity benignly, but no member of any pantheon loves you the way Jesus is said to. Nor do such polytheisms guarantee cosmic justice.[xxiv] Souls may be weighed after death, but on the whole restorative justice is not a big part of the polytheist offer. Polytheisms recognise the radical contingency of life—that is one reason why tricksters need polytheism. But anxious, suffering humanity hankers after the certainties of one god, whose one truth has been written down once and for all in one book, and the unconditional love of an infinitely wise, powerful and benevolent heavenly father.

These are (admittedly speculative) reasons why people might wish to resist Weber's argument for the multiplicity of ethical orders. However, there is a philosophical argument against Weber's view that arises from consideration of the unity of the person and the integrity of a life.[xxv] According to this argument, it is both psychologically unhealthy and ethically undesirable for a person to be committed to rival ethical orders and for a life to be compartmentalised between them. These views tend to see good mental health and ethically good living combining into a broad notion of 'human flourishing' or *eudaimonia*. A life in which one lives by one ethic at work and another at home is said to lack integrity. Beset by cognitive dissonance, according to this view, the compartmentalised individual

cannot flourish fully.  There is certainly something to this, especially if someone behaves, speaks and thinks as if the ethic of one life-compartment were the universal morality, only to adopt different, allegedly universal principles in another.  However, the fault here lies in the notion of a single morality (together with the intellectualisation of ethics) rather than the compartmentalisation.  Persons with genuine mystical inner plasticity would not feel the cognitive dissonance (though they would still have to resolve practical dilemmas between ethical orders).

Moreover, it's far from obvious that relentless consistency is necessarily a good thing.  Someone who sticks to one ethical order will make a bad job of other aspects of life.  Great political leaders are often not very good parents; voters who assess every policy solely in terms of its effects on their own children are not the best citizens.  There is a picture of the human psyche due to Nietzsche and Freud in which a human personality is not a simple unit, as Descartes (for example) imagined.  Rather, the 'soul' of a human is a sort of society of personas, ancestral voices, inherited tendencies and ingrained habits.[xxvi]  On this picture, the unity of a personality is an achievement.  With this picture in mind, we can ask what sort of society your psyche might be.  The view of the eudaimonists who insist on absolute integrity and consistency make the society constituting a well-ordered soul sound rather conformist and uniform, with every member sharing the same basic outlook.  Perhaps a healthy soul has rather more variety in it than this, though the nature of its unity then becomes more of an interesting problem, both for the philosopher and the person trying to live a decent life.[xxvii]

Here, then, is another reason why polytheism has not swept all before it.  The existence of multiple ethical orders is existentially strenuous, because ethical orders are not merely social structures or forces external to us.  Rather, they are part of our inner structure.  If I feel the force of several incompatible ethical orders, then the differences between them are divisions in me.  Weber himself addresses this in the final pages of 'Politics as a Vocation'.  Having contrasted the demon of politics with the god of love (or less mytho-poetically, the ethics of responsibility with the ethics of ultimate ends), he notes that a politician who served only the former would be a monster.  "An ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements which only in unison constitute a genuine man." (p. 127).  This 'unison' is not easy to achieve, but rather requires "trained relentlessness in viewing the realities of life, and the ability to face such realities and to measure up to them inwardly" (pp. 126-7).  Even so, there may be insolvable conflicts between them, in which case the best we can do may be to recognise such conflicts clearly, without denial or bad faith, and claim as our own whatever

decision we make.  One of the attractive promises of monotheism is to relieve us of this existential strain by offering to resolve such conflicts.

My conviction, for which I have not argued adequately here, is that Weber is right about the multiple ethical orders.  This means that there will be tragic occasions when ethical demands conflict, and there is no higher system or authority to resolve them.  Monotheism cannot deliver on this promise.  The paradigm for this is Antigone, caught between equally pressing loyalties to family and city.  It also means that we will carry these divisions and conflicts between ethical orders within us, and feel them sometimes as dilemmas, as cognitive dissonance or as ethical paralysis.  Too bad!  Hyde suggests that trickster spirits can help on these occasions—and perhaps they might—but they are unreliable.  It would have taken a very slippery trick to save Antigone.

**The trickster's role in practical polytheism**

We seem to have come a long way from the original questions about anarchy and order in modern life.  What does all this stuff about gods and Antigone mean for that agenda?  The first task in this concluding section is to descend from the mytho-poetic plane.  These various gods and spirits are really social forces.  They show themselves in the cultures and structures of society, or not at all.  They are active forces (rather than dead cultural forms) because they are also part of our psyches.  To call them beliefs would be to over-intellectualise them.   The official who shudders inwardly when a decision is not properly recorded does not merely believe a proposition about bureaucracy, nor does the hustling entrepreneur merely believe some piece of theory about market economics.  Their gods are alive within them; they feel and act on their commitment to their respective ethical orders.  There is no magic here, just a meeting of culture, psychology and ethics.

Hyde himself offers a descending staircase from the mytho-poetic plane to a more practical level:

> …trickster belongs to polytheism or, lacking that, he needs a relationship to other powers, to people and institutions and traditions that can manage the old double attitude of both insisting that their boundaries be respected and recognizing that in the long run their liveliness depends on having those boundaries regularly disturbed.  (p. 13)

That 'old double standard' is close to Weber's 'inward plasticity'.  Both thoughts require respect for multiple centres of authority and energy.  That is why the other gods never kill the trickster, however

annoying he is (even Loki, after murdering Baldr, is not executed, which is not what one might expect in the warrior culture of Asgard). This mutual respect among mythic beings is a two-way street. The trickster stirs things up, but he does not declare war on the established powers—his need for them is as obvious than their need for him. This observation of Hyde's is a staircase to the practical level, because it is open to *human* powers, people, institutions and traditions to maintain that double standard. In particular, it offers a *modus vivendi* to the ill-matched spirits of anarchic learning and orderly administration, of creativity and bureaucracy.

In mytho-poetic terms, polytheism requires recognising and respecting the servants of many gods. Speaking prosaically, to take the university as an example, the stickler for human resources processes, the academic quality assurance pedant, the absentee researcher and the dedicated classroom teacher are all doing their proper offices according to their own ethical orders. None of these gods is an absolute authority—including the god of classroom teaching, whose hierophants can be as tiresomely pious as any other true believers. Moreover, in cases of conflict, there is no recipe for a resolution. As the stories of strife in Asgard or Olympus remind us, such conflicts are decided by a combination of practical wisdom and personal politics—and sometimes, trickery. So here is one practical consequence: that a confrontation between functions is a confrontation between ethical orders that has to be negotiated on the basis of mutual recognition. Furthermore, it is in these circumstances that a trickster might be invoked—provided that all parties to the negotiation recognise trickery as an option. Coyote may help here precisely because he has no way of his own. Unlike the rest of us, the trickster is not subject to *déformation professionnelle*, that is, he has not been bent out of shape by having to conform to the norms of a professional function. This requires Hyde's 'double standard'. In this, then, is a second practical consequence. Trickery might mean something as simple as using a bureaucratic structure or process for something other than its intended purpose. Computer programmers do this all the time with programming functions, but this is easy for them, because programming functions, unlike bureaucratic functions, are not normally part of someone's ethical order.[xxviii] Recognising the ethical seriousness of bureaucratic functions (for example), involves paying some respect to their priests, temples and rites. This is especially important precisely on the occasions when one pulls a trick on them.

One place where the trickster spirit appears in corporate life is in the management brainstorming away-day led by a consultant. When this sort of exercise goes well, it is because some elements of the trickster persona have worked together. First, like the man in the Yoruba story, the participants have

been taken out of their usual location where they have settled roles, responsibilities and relationships. An unfamiliar location permits much higher levels of contingency. Second, the consultant is a liminal figure, partly inside and partly outside the organisation. This allows consultants to say what would be otherwise be unsayable. Like the trickster gods, the consultant does not have a place in the hierarchy or a specific area of competence. A consultant, it is said, is the person who borrows your watch to tell you the time; the consultant, like Coyote, has no way of their own but uses the ways of others. The exercises that the consultant asks the participants to carry out may be tricksy because they break down established forms and habits, because they exploit features of human psychology, because the participants can't immediately see their point or because they cannot be used on the same people twice (and are therefore, in mathematical terms, more like tricks than methods). These occasions are often uneasy, even if the participants understand the need for fresh thinking and that they need some help doing it. Part of this unease arises from the knowledge that they are being worked on and manipulated by a trickster (albeit a benevolent one). Part of it may be the natural resentment of honest burghers in fixed occupations towards itinerant opportunists. The consultant seems to make an easy living out of flim-flam rather than doing a proper job. Even without this resentment, though, there is a deeper source of unease. To adjust Hyde's words only slightly, such brainstorming occasions require the senior bureaucrats of the organisation to achieve a double attitude of both insisting that their functions be respected while recognising that in the long run their livelihoods depend on having those functions disturbed. That is a tricky thing to do. You have to think outside your function, knowing that you were only invited to participate in virtue of that very function.

Next, I want to return to the 'Ragnarok' point. Training may be an orderly activity, in which students acquire skills and knowledge by following a 'learning journey' that has been planned by an instructor. Training in a discipline must include the discipline's methods. Students must learn entrenchment in the Roman style. Education, however, requires that students' minds remain lively even as they submit to the demands of their disciplines. We hope that they have insights of their own as well as a grasp of pre-planned curriculum content, and this requires from them an openness to the fizzing together of two apparently unrelated topics or tasks and the unlooked-for opportunities presented by happy accidents.[xxix] We want students to be able to do tricks with the ideas they gain from their books as well as follow methods. They should have the Greek camp-design option, too. Education requires teachers to allow for unplanned teachable moments in their classrooms, and it requires academic quality and teaching management regimes to recognise the need for contingency and

uncertainty.  Where authorities attempt to drive contingency out of learning and teaching by (for example) insisting on detailed lesson plans and module and programme descriptions, it's Ragnarok all over again.

Lastly, I want to return to professional ethics.  As we saw, Weber claimed that different vocations have ethical orders that are not only different but may well be contradictory.  The vocations of politician, bureaucrat and scientist say contradictory things about the holding and enacting of moral visions.  We should expect this point to extend into other professions such as law and medicine.[xxx]  For example, a GP has to be an advocate of individual patients, but the official charged with deciding which treatments should be publicly funded must not act with individuals in mind.  Moreover, doctors and lawyers have other 'spheres of life' in addition to their vocations, and we should expect these to make ethical demands that are different from and perhaps in conflict with their vocational ethical orders.  Just as with Weber's politicians and civil servants, there should be a place for the god of love, or else we are no more than the sum of our roles and stations.  Polytheism as a practical attitude means recognising that there are diverse and contradictory ethical orders built into the world around us and active with our psyches.  This may not seem like very comforting knowledge, but at least, when suffering from the resulting existential strain, one has the consoling thought that 'it's not just me'.  Moreover, once we recognise that negotiation among ethical authorities, none of whom is absolute, is unavoidable, then we can get on with learning to do it wisely and well.  Or if we can't manage wisdom, we can aim for guile.

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[i] The ideas in this paper developed as a result of a discussion with Dr Beverly Clack, and I'm grateful for the help she gave me to clarify and elaborate the problem.

[ii] I'm grateful to the mathematician Prof Michael Harris for bringing Hyde's book to my attention. He first got interested in tricksters when one of his mathematical innovations was described as 'Harris's tensor trick', and he wondered how to take this epithet (see Harris 2015 and especially chapter eight).

[iii] 'Science as a vocation' p. 149 in Weber 1948.

[iv] Op. cit. p. 155. The phrase belongs to Friedrich Schiller.

[v] Toulmin 2001 pp. 36-7

[vi] 'Science as a vocation' p. 139 in Weber 1948.

[vii] Weber 1947 p. 337.

[viii] This is one of the new gods battling for control of our lives along with Weber's resurgent old gods that I mentioned at the start.

[ix] The entrepreneurial spirit has made some inroads into higher education, but for the most part, recent decades have seen the strengthening of bureaucracy in universities. For example, the movement from collegial governance to management by an all-powerful executive has increased bureaucracy, because the first demand of the executive, on seizing power from the professoriat, is that the university should become a more reliable, calculable instrument of executive policy. See du Gay (2000). I am grateful to Dr Matthew Sinnicks for bringing this book to my attention.

[x] See Bloom et al (2010) for essays on trickster figures in English literature.

[xi] See Harris (2015) and especially chapter eight.

[xii] Essentially, Hyde's argument is that the trickster is a morally unreliable, risk-taking rolling stone, but this is not compatible with raising young. Apparently, in the mytho-poetic register, being female means being a good mother. But see Tannen (2007), Landay (1998) or McNeely (1996) for female versions of the Jungian trickster archetype. Hyde does not seem to depend on Jung for his understanding of the trickster stories and there is no Jungian subtext to the present paper.

[xiii] Hyde may have massaged the original Norse tale at this point—my thanks to Prof Stephen Clark for this and several other helpful notes.

[xiv] Christ has something of the trickster about him; he is a mediator who changes the moral landscape and whose messages are paradoxically tricky (the first shall be last, etc.). That is not surprising, because Christianity, with its trinity, its god-man whose divinity is announced by his miraculous birth, who, like Osiris, is raised in a holy family (the divinity of which is depicted by Egyptian-style solar disks around the heads), who is resurrected from the dead, is a syncretism of paganism and monotheism.

[xv] Here is another reason why an educator might raise a shrine to the trickster. Teaching is, inevitably and always, an exercise in unreliable communication.

[xvi] For analytic completeness, note that Weber had in mind the tension between the occasional political imperative to make war and the standing Christian imperative to make peace, but it could go the other way round. In a society dominated by martial values that saw war as a standing duty, this 'ultimate end' would be in tension with the ethos of politics at those times when politics recommends peace.

xvii See Strawson (1961) for a nuanced discussion of the relation between the various and often incompatible ethical ideals that may grip a person, and the common morality that must govern the pursuit of such ideals. I am not aware of any influence from Weber on Strawson. Strawson's ideals are not quite the same as Weber's departments of life, being as they are visions of how a whole life might be lived. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing this article to my attention. A version of value pluralism is central to the work of Isaiah Berlin, who denied any influence from Weber, and appears in later thinkers most of whom similarly seem to make no reference to Weber. There is no mention of Weber in the Stanford Encyclopedia article on value pluralism. See Lassman (2011) for a systematic treatment that includes the literature stemming from both Weber and Berlin.

xviii Hutton (2013 p. 336) argues that polytheism persisted through the middle ages in Britain, in the form of cults of specialist saints, "which represented the most active means of devotion for many, if not most, medieval people". He firmly repudiates any attempt to identify specific Christian saints with pagan gods—rather, the polytheistic habit of mind and practice survived and found new expression in the saints of the new religion. The cult of the saints was a target of the reformation, so perhaps the 'moral fervour of Christian ethics' that Weber had in mind dates only from then.

xix See Singer, M. (1961) for a critical assessment of Weber on this point.

xx See Kesarcodi-Watson (1976) for a careful discussion of the place of Brahman in Hindu tradition.

xxi See, for example, Daniélou (1964 p. 16) for the reconciliation of love and death in Brahman.

xxii I am grateful to the referee whose questions prompted this insertion of this section. He or she also asked whether Weber ever mentioned the trickster spirit. The answer to the best of my knowledge is 'no'. George P. Hansen (2001) wants to identify the trickster with Weber's notion of charisma, but this is surely a mistake. Charisma, in Weber, is a form of authority. The charismatic leader attracts followers by performing miracles, winning battles or otherwise dazzling with magic. The trickster has no followers, is not an authority figure, and in any case if you can do magic, you don't need to do tricks.

xxiii Hutton (2013), explains the complete eradication of paganism from Britain as a consequence of the fact that pagans had no interest in suppressing Christianity (seeing it as one more religious option in the all-permissive pagan polytheist scene), while Christianity was intent on eliminating all other forms of worship.

xxiv Here too there may be an important difference between Hinduism and the extinct European polytheisms that Weber had in mind.

xxv Versions of it may be found in the works of Søren Kierkegaard and Alasdair MacIntyre.

xxvi Of course, versions of the analogy between society and psyche go back at least as far as Plato.

xxvii See Nietzsche's claim that the mark of a high mind is to be a battleground divided between the two ethical orders that he discerned in European culture. *Genealogy of Spirit*, first essay section 16.

xxviii There is now a literature on hackers as tricksters that refers to Hyde. See, for example, Nikitina (2012).

xxix Scientific folklore recognises this in such myths as the lucky discovery of penicillin.

xxx This paper originated in a meeting on professional ethical training focussed on law and medicine.