

Article

Suffering Between Disenchantment and Re-Enchantment in Max Weber and Beyond

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Abstract

Suffering and theodicy are two interconnected concepts: while the former indicates the embodied personal experience of pain, the latter represents the theological effort to explain the existence of suffering and evil by reconciling them with the idea of a world created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely good God. From a sociological perspective, the first scholar to address the problematic relationship between these two concepts was Max Weber. The problem of suffering in Weber was linked, first of all, to the process of social rationalization, that is, to the growing predominance of formal rationality in Western social life, the ultimate outcome of which he famously described through the metaphor of the “iron cage” as the existential suffering of modern Western humanity. Subsequently, in his *Sociology of Religion*, he adopted the concept of “disenchantment” to refer to the cultural rationalization of worldviews as a process characterizing most Asian religions within a broader universal perspective. According to Weber’s comparative investigation, at the origin of all attempts at religious rationalization lies the same universal problem of theodicy, namely the search for an explanation capable of justifying the unequal distribution of the goods of happiness among human beings and the resulting suffering, perceived as unjust. For Weber, the paradox of theodicy consists in the fact that the rationalization of thought (worldviews) and action (conducts of life), in an attempt to confer meaning on and alleviate suffering on the basis of one of the two conceptions of salvation (rebirth or redemption), instead produces the unintended consequence of making the human condition even more vulnerable to the experience of suffering, since it comes to be regarded as morally more outrageous and intellectually more unacceptable. Later, the founders of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer and Adorno, essentially took up and expanded the Weberian thesis of the paradox of theodicy by showing that the second disenchantment brought about by modernity affected the rationalization of metaphysical-religious worldviews through the return of the irrational mythical-magical forces that had once been subjugated and turned into myth by the Enlightenment. As a consequence, the loss of individual freedom, reduced to a mere functional response within modern political and economic bureaucratic systems, comes to coincide with the loss of meaning of any autonomous cultural framework rationally grounded in value orientations. Habermas further developed Weber’s thesis of the loss of freedom by situating the process of social rationalization within a broader paradox that illustrates the contemporary inability of colonized lifeworlds, now completely bureaucratized and technicized, to confer meaning on the subjective experience of suffering. More recently, in the so-called Anthropocene, a non-linear and non-unidirectional dialectic of disenchantment and re-enchantment has emerged, in which the two coexist as constitutive processes of modernity, allowing the paradox of theodicy and suffering to be reconsidered in terms of a new anthropodicy.



Academic Editor: Antonio Camorrino

Received: 11 November 2025

Revised: 4 April 2026

Accepted: 7 April 2026

Published: 27 July 2026

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Keywords: suffering; theodicy; rationalization; disenchantment; re-enchantment; anthropodicy

1. Introduction

Suffering and theodicy are two interconnected concepts: while the former indicates the embodied personal experience of pain, the latter represents the theological effort to explain the existence of suffering and evil by reconciling them with the idea of a world created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely good God. From a sociological perspective, the first scholar to address the problematic relationship between these two concepts was Max Weber. Once the influence of [Talcott Parsons' \(1968\)](#) interpretation of his work declined ([Burger 1993](#)), the critical recovery and reconstruction of Weberian sociology allowed for “a fuller recognition of the extent to which Weber’s personal concern with the possibility of establishing and sustaining a ‘meaningful’ existence under conditions of modernity” ([Wilkinson 2005](#), p. 56).

Since the seminal work of [Tenbruck \(1989\)](#), there has been a strong revival of Weberian studies on the concept of theodicy as a response to the problem of suffering in relation to the processes of rationalization. This has largely coincided with the demise of the dominant secularization thesis that modernity necessarily leads to a decline in religion, showing instead that modernization more often strengthens religion ([Berger 1999](#)). Following this suggestion, I first reconstruct ([Giarelli 2018](#)) the implications of the two meanings of the concept of rationalization that Weber adopted to address the problem of suffering: that of the social rationalization of modern Western capitalism based on formal rationality, culminating in the well-known metaphor of the “iron cage” as the expression of the existential suffering of Western man; and that of the cultural rationalization of images of the world based on the idea of “disenchantment” as a process characterizing most Asian religions and, in a broader universal perspective, all attempts at the religious rationalization of the same universal problem of theodicy. These attempts, however, resulted in the unintended consequence of making the human condition even more vulnerable to the experience of suffering, since it came to be regarded as morally outrageous and intellectually unacceptable. This is, for Weber, the paradox of theodicy, produced by the rationalization of thought (images of the world) and action (conducts of life) in an attempt to confer meaning on and alleviate suffering on the basis of one of the two conceptions of salvation (rebirth or redemption).

If, as [Bryan Turner \(1981\)](#) suggested, the problem of theodicy “is central to Weber’s sociology of religion” (p. 148), we may ask to what extent it has remained so in sociological debate after the recent processes of de-secularization and the so-called “re-enchantment” of Western societies. This is the aim of the final part of the article, in which I first examine the contribution of the two founders of the Frankfurt School, [Horkheimer and Adorno \(\[1944\] 1997\)](#), to the development of the thesis of the paradox of theodicy through the idea of a second disenchantment brought about by modernity, affecting the rationalization of metaphysical–religious images of the world through the return of the irrational mythical-magical forces once subjugated by, and turned into myth by, the Enlightenment, with the consequent loss of meaning resulting from cultural rationalization and the loss of freedom due to social rationalization. [Habermas \(\[1981\] 1986a, \[1981\] 1986b\)](#) then develops Weber’s thesis of the loss of freedom by situating the process of social rationalization within the process of social evolution, with the progressive disjunction between the lifeworld and the social system, and between social integration and systemic integration, resulting in the mediatization and colonization of the lifeworld, which progressively impoverishes and

empties it of its cultural traditions, ultimately undermining its capacity to confer meaning on the subjective experience of suffering.

Finally, in the recent era of the so-called Anthropocene, the Weberian view of disenchantment as a unidirectional and universalizing tendency of modernity is challenged by Jenkins (2000), who argues that enchantment and re-enchantment are both constitutive of modernity. The dialectic of disenchantment and re-enchantment as two co-present processes of modernity thus goes beyond any positivist or evolutionist conception of re-enchantment. This appears particularly true if, following Repphun (2009), we do not adopt a “thin” conception of re-enchantment, predicated on the idea of disenchantment and re-enchantment as opposing linear movements within history. A “thick” conception of re-enchantment, by contrast, conceptualizes it as a dialectical counterpart to disenchantment: the dialectic of enchantment considers re-enchantment and rationalization as existing in a both/and relationship even in modernity. From this perspective of dialogical re-enchantment, in which re-enchantment represents a dialectical counterpart to the rationalization and disenchantment that it produces, the paradox of theodicy and suffering can also be reconsidered in the light of the idea that humanity, through its techno-scientific power, has driven the planet into the new epoch of the Anthropocene, characterized by a massive and irreversible human impact on the Earth. Following this suggestion, as we shall see, Becker ([1968] 1976) and Hamilton (2017) proposed the term “anthropodicy” to define a philosophically oriented scientific reconstruction of the meaning of evil in a now disenchanted world. In this context, suffering takes the form of extreme events that call into question the traditional distinction between moral and natural evil. However, this “new anthropocentrism” appears insufficient for Untea (2019), who proposes instead a collective re-enchantment of evil based on the acceptance of suffering as universal.

2. The “Iron Cage” of Social Rationalization in Modernity

The fundamental concept through which Max Weber’s comprehensive sociology, conceived as the “science of the reality of life” (Weber [1922] 2001, p. 170), interprets the problem of suffering is rationalization. However, he does not use this concept univocally, but rather “in two distinct meanings, on the one hand to indicate the overall direction of development of human societies, on the other to characterize the specific historical process of the modern West” (Rossi 2007, p. 177). In this second meaning, according to his well-known distinction between “purpose-oriented rationality” (*Zweckrationalität*) and “value-oriented rationality” (*Wertrationalität*) (Weber [1922] 1995), he identifies the former as characterizing the “spirit of capitalism” in modern Western Europe as an ideal type, based on the two elements of “the rational exploitation of capital in the form of enterprise and the rational capitalist organization of labor” as the “dominant forces for the orientation of economic action” (Weber 2002a, p. 45).

Subsequently, according to Weber, this process of rationalization extended from the techno-economic sphere to the ideals of life of modern bourgeois society, especially in those European countries where Calvinist and Puritan Protestantism played a key role in shaping the methodical conduct of life, which represents the type of rational action characteristic of the bourgeois rationalization of life that took hold in the West from the sixteenth century onwards. However, for Weber this broad process of social rationalization transcends the original dichotomy between rationality with respect to purpose and rationality with respect to value, since the methodical conduct of life becomes a value in itself through a heterogenesis of ends that makes it impossible to regard the spirit of capitalism simply as purposive rational action. Through a classic inversion of the means–ends relationship, the pursuit of profit by means of a methodical conduct of life thus becomes a value-rational form of action.

The non-equivalence of the rationalization of modern capitalism and rationality with respect to purpose *tout court* leads Weber to formulate a second distinction relating to rationality in the second chapter of *Economy and Society* (Weber [1922] 1995, pp. 57–206), devoted to the “Fundamental Sociological Categories of Economic Action”. Closely connected with the previous distinction, this second dichotomy—between formal and material rationality—is better able to characterize modern Western capitalism and its process of social rationalization in all their complexity.

While the first type of rationality consists in the application of calculability (and, in its highest form, monetary calculation) as the exclusive criterion of formal economic action, the second “is not satisfied with the fact, verifiable in a (relatively) univocal way, that a rational calculation is made with respect to the purpose, with the most adequate technical means possible; but instead asserts ethical, political, utilitarian, hedonistic, class, equality or any other type of needs, measuring on the basis of them rationally with respect to value, or rationally with respect to a material purpose, the results of economic action (even if this is formally ‘rational’, that is, calculable)” (Weber [1922] 1995, p. 81). The concept of material rationality (which, perhaps, would be better described as substantive rationality) is extremely important and constitutes a notable step forward in Weber’s analysis of rationality, since it includes not only criteria other than calculability in the evaluation of economic action, but also both of the previous types of rationality (with respect to purpose and with respect to value). It is therefore a much broader concept of rationality, which Weber applies in *Economy and Society* to both ancient capitalism and the socialist planned economy, emphasizing the irreducibility and substantial irreconcilability of material and formal rationality.

Modern Western capitalism is instead characterized by Weber as being dominated by formal rationality, based on the calculability of capital, which presupposes a series of preconditions for economic action that he identifies in eight fundamental elements (Weber [1922] 1995, p. 161): a free market, freedom of enterprise, a free labour market, freedom of contract, calculability of the technical conditions of production, formally rational administration and law, the separation of enterprise and domestic economy, and a formally rational monetary system. These characteristics define a form of typically liberal capitalism, based on a market economy and a *laissez-faire* liberal state, which effectively predominated in the West until the crisis of 1929. Formal rationality, entirely grounded in rational calculability, progressively extends from the economic sphere of the capitalist enterprise and the rational organization of labour to other spheres of life, beginning with the administration of the state (organized bureaucratically) and the legal system (based on rational-formal law), and extending to the rationalization of the domestic economy, separated from the capitalist enterprise, and to the sphere of science, with the increasing specialization of scientific work and the emergence of science as a profession (Weber [1919] 1980).

A fundamental implication of the generalized calculability inherent in formal rationality is the growing confidence in the possibility of predicting and, therefore, rationally controlling the phenomena of reality, leading to a “technical domain of living conditions, a growing domain not susceptible to encountering a fixed limit” (Rossi 2007, p. 132).

Formal rationality therefore transcends modern capitalism. It is not confined to the economic sphere but extends to all other spheres of life in the modern Western world. As Rossi (2007, p. 128) notes, “the affirmation of ‘formal rationality’ is a phenomenon that goes far beyond the economic sphere, and which coincides with the process of rationalization of the modern world”. Through the concept of formal rationality, Weber is thus able to characterize the rationalization of life in all its spheres as the defining feature of the modern Western world, thereby delineating an ideal type of social structure.

But what does this identification of the modern Western world with formal rationality entail? For Weber, this historical process carries no positive connotation and no celebration of alleged “progress”, but only the tragic awareness of its inevitability, owing to its “overpowering coercive force” (Weber 2002a, p. 185). It is precisely here that he outlines its consequences in terms of human suffering: “Modern capitalism has built an ‘iron cage’ from which humanity, at least Western humanity, cannot escape” (Rossi 2007, p. 141). The bars of this cage are constituted by an all-pervasive calculating rationality and an increasingly widespread bureaucratization of life, which, by placing Western humanity under their dominion, has significantly reduced its freedom of thought and action, as well as its creative possibilities. The existential suffering of Western humanity, imprisoned within the very cage it has built with its own hands, affects its deepest conscience: “Today his spirit—who knows if forever—has escaped from this cage” (Weber 2002a, p. 185). Weber therefore sees no way out of this desperate condition and believes in no possibility of either political or religious liberation, envisaging instead a future filled with fear and burdened by the danger of “mechanized petrification”.

3. Suffering and Disenchantment in the World Religions

The second meaning of the concept of rationalization in Weber no longer characterizes the specific historical process of the modern West, but rather the overall direction of the development of human societies. It may even offer a glimpse of hope for escaping the cage, or at least for widening its bars, if considered beyond Weber’s own intentions.

In fact, Weber begins his study in the *Sociology of Religion* with a famous question posed in the *Prefatory Remarks* (Weber 2002a, pp. 3–18): “What concatenation of circumstances has meant that precisely in the West, and only here, cultural phenomena have manifested themselves which—at least according to what we like to imagine—were placed in a line of development of universal meaning and validity?” (Weber 2002a, p. 5). With this question, Weber opens a universalistic horizon that the expression “only here” immediately tends to close. On the one hand, he regarded himself as “inevitably and legitimately” a “son of the modern European cultural world”, fully aware of both its merits and its limitations, particularly its ethnocentric perspective. On the other hand, “he has assumed an extremely ambivalent position towards Western rationalism at a pre-scientific level, in the context of everyday experiences” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 271). According to Habermas, Weber thus lays the foundations for relativizing the type of modernization and rationalization developed in the West as one particular historical trajectory. He ultimately did not pursue this path, however, maintaining a consciously ethnocentric attitude towards the claim to the universality of the modern Western understanding of the world represented by that decisive “only here”.

Yet, as Habermas himself (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 229) has rightly pointed out, “among the classics of sociology, Max Weber is the only one who broke with the premises of thought linked to the philosophy of history as well as with the basic assumptions of evolutionism”. Indeed, the intellectual context in which he worked—German scholarship between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—had already largely freed itself from both the Enlightenment philosophy of history (Condorcet) and nineteenth-century biological and social evolutionism (Spencer).

Weber addresses the issue of rationalization through a critique of these two approaches that calls into question their fundamental assumptions. First, his historicist perspective leads him to reject any philosophy of history based on the idea of constant and necessary linear progress, whether in its Hegelian, Marxist, or positivist–organicist form. The particularity of human cultures may allow us to identify historical regularities and connections, but it does not justify the assumption of an inevitable progression towards greater ratio-

nality or any form of evolutionary determinism. Second, drawing on Neo-Kantianism, particularly Windelband and Rickert, and on the distinction between value judgments and value relevance, Weber criticizes the concepts of progress and evolution because they inevitably perform an evaluative function and therefore involve value judgments, which should remain outside the scientific analysis of empirical reality. Third, from the same historicist perspective, Weber rejects any universalistic conception of rationality derived from the modern natural sciences, characteristic of both the philosophy of history and evolutionism. Instead, he recognizes the plurality and relativity of cultures, especially those based on written traditions, while stopping short of extending this epistemological relativism to oral cultures. Finally, unlike both Enlightenment philosophers and positivist evolutionists, Weber does not regard science and technology as paradigmatic models of historical progress. Rather, his pessimistic assessment of the negative consequences of a rationalization based on purposive rationality detached from practical and moral foundations reveals the influence of Nietzsche and the vitalist philosophers of the *fin de siècle* bourgeois culture.

Therefore, Weber does not believe that the processes of rationalization are an exclusive characteristic of the West, but rather asks why they led only in Europe to the emergence of the particular form of rationalism characteristic of the modern West. He nevertheless remains convinced of the validity of this type of formal rationalism based on purposive rational action, provided that it is ethically oriented by values. At the same time, however, his distinction between formal and material rationality provides the basis for developing a more comprehensive concept of rationality that takes into account not only the suffering produced by a process of rationalization based exclusively on formal rationality—the “iron cage”—but also the intrinsic limits of rationalization itself.

Following this line of the Weberian theory of rationalization (Kalberg 1979), it is possible to identify the two main dimensions of the rationalization process, corresponding to the two sets of factors at its origin: on the one hand, social rationalization, relating to economic, social, political, and legal structures; on the other, cultural rationalization, relating to images of the world, namely the philosophical, ethical, and religious symbolic systems that confer “meaning” on human existence and on the reality in which it takes place. Above all, this distinction enables Weber to pose the fundamental question of how these two orders of factors, structural and symbolic, interact, asking whether, and in what direction, these two modes of rationalization interpenetrate one another, since it is precisely on this interaction that the distinctive character of each type of rationalism depends.

Following this approach, Weber analyzes, both in his *Sociology of Religion* and in the chapter of *Economy and Society* devoted to the sociology of religion and the types of religious community (Weber [1922] 1995, vol. II, pp. 105–311), the relationship between religious ideas and the social strata that carry them across the different religions of the world, from magical cults to Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and ancient Judaism. From this extensive comparative analysis, it is clear that the relationship between religious worldviews and the social strata that sustain them is by no means univocal. On the contrary, although a religious “image of the world” may initially express the interests of a particular social stratum, the social groups associated with it may change over time, so that the influence of any single stratum is never exclusive. Conversely, different worldviews are capable of exerting a profound influence on the conduct of life and the everyday behaviour of the social groups that share them. For Weber, therefore, ideas and interests are equally significant and mutually condition one another according to a logic of circular causality that transcends any unilateral explanation, whether idealist or materialist.

On the basis of this conception of causality, Weber is able to address, in his *Sociology of Religion*—according to Tenbrück’s (1989) influential interpretation, which revolutionized

Weberian studies—a much broader question than the relationship between economic ethics and religious ideas. His concern is how the process of rationalization develops historically through the reciprocal interplay of religious ideas and material interests, eventually giving rise to its own paradoxical logic. According to Weber’s comparative investigation, every process of religious rationalization originates from the same universal problem: theodicy, namely the search for an explanation capable of justifying the unequal distribution of the goods of happiness among human beings. From a negative perspective, this is the problem of human suffering perceived as unjust and of its justification through a search for meaning in response to the fundamental irrationality of a world experienced as meaningless. For Tenbruck (1989), this constitutes the universal anthropological problem identified by Weber, one that shapes every cultural perspective on the rationalization of life. Faced with the “brute fact that suffering exists”, religion becomes a rational construction, a universal cultural form that develops in response to the irrationality of the world. The historical development of religions is therefore understood as the result of the different ways in which societies use culture to cope with the lived reality of suffering.

According to Weber, this historical process of rationalization begins when mythical–magical explanations of the world are abandoned. Only then can suffering be perceived as unjust, since the tribal belief that the sufferer is responsible for his own condition through some fault or transgression must first be overcome. In this respect, Weber appears to follow the evolutionary anthropology of Edward Burnett Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*, which regarded the transition from magic to religion as the first stage in the cultural development of humanity. However, as Rossi (2007, p. 178) points out, “he immediately translates this perspective into sociological terms. The decisive turning point for him is represented not so much by the rise of religion, but by the affirmation of a specific form of religiosity, the ‘religions of redemption’, which announce a promise of liberation from the pain of the world. For this purpose, they organize themselves into a community of believers and, at the same time, must give a ‘sense’ to the world. (...) But with this also begins an effort of systematic interpretation and explanation of the world, which aims to justify the existence of evil and suffering, and to formulate a perspective of individual or social salvation. The process of rationalization and the development of religion therefore coincide; and the directions of that process depend, in the final analysis, on the ‘sense’ that the different ‘religions of redemption’ attribute to the world and on the ways of salvation that they indicate.”

4. The Paradox of Theodicy

With the abandonment of the vision of the world as an “enchanted garden”, Weber argues that the process of “disenchantment” begins. Disenchantment constitutes the other side of the process of rationalization and coincides with the progressive fading of the mythical–magical image of the world. Developing Tenbruck’s interpretation of Weber, Habermas ([1981] 1986a, pp. 295–310) analyzes the internal and external factors underlying this development of religious images of the world: the former relate to the rationalization of the contents of worldviews, whereas the latter concern the structural embodiment of the structures of consciousness in the conduct of life.

With regard to the internal factors, according to Habermas, Weber distinguishes the images of the world of the various Eastern and Western universal religions primarily according to their different conceptions of the divine. On the one hand are the Eastern cosmocentric worldviews, based on the representation of an impersonal, uncreated cosmic order; on the other are the Western theocentric worldviews, founded on the idea of an anthropomorphized and transcendent creator God. In the former case, the divinities become the guarantors of the cosmic order, the immutable foundation of the world order, in relation to which the believer conceives of himself as a “recipient of the divine”, as in

Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the latter case, by contrast, the believer encounters an otherworldly conception of the divine, in which the “God of action”, exemplified by the Jewish Yahweh, calls him to become an “instrument of God” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 298).

In addition to the conceptual strategy of the divine, Weber distinguishes the contents of the images of the world of the universal religions according to their evaluation of the world as a whole. From this perspective, religions are differentiated into those oriented towards the rejection and denial of the world, sometimes reduced to mere appearance—such as Hinduism and Buddhism, but also ancient Judaism and Christianity—and those characterized by an affirmation of the reality of the world, such as Confucianism and Taoism.

The external, structural factors concern the influence exerted by religious images of the world on practical conduct in life. This influence is mediated by the type of attitude or disposition towards the world encouraged by such worldviews. Weber considers those images of the world to be more highly rationalized which, in addition to freeing themselves from magical practices and structuring the relationship with the divine in a coherent and systematic manner, conceive of the world as a sphere of ethical testing in relation to one’s own moral principles, considered independently of all other social spheres.

From this perspective, Weber regards the religions of redemption based on a dualism between God and the world (Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism) as more highly rationalized than the non-dualistic traditions (Confucianism and Taoism), since the acute tension between the divine and the devalued and objectified world places the search for salvation within an exclusively ethical dimension. Both the Eastern religions of salvation and the Western prophetic religions maintain a lasting tension with the world, deriving from their prophetic or salvific orientation, in which ethical conduct is directed towards the goods of salvation and progressively sublimated into an increasingly internalized religiosity.

However, according to Weber, the full ethical rationalization of the conduct of life also requires that this negative disposition towards the world be combined with an active ascetic orientation rather than with passive detachment. Only in the former case does the promise of redemption give rise to a propensity for ascetic mastery of the world. This is the form of active asceticism characteristic of the “religions of interiority” and of ethical conviction, namely Judaism and Christianity, in which the believer regards himself as an instrument of the transcendent God engaged in an active search for salvation. In the latter case, by contrast, “the believer sees himself as a receptacle of a divine founding essence immanent in the world” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 304), or, as Weber (2002a) puts it, as “a ‘vessel’ of the divine”, a passive contemplative orientation that culminates in a mystical withdrawal from the world, characteristic of the Asian “religions of thought” centred on mystical contemplation, such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

If, therefore, as Habermas ([1981] 1986a, p. 304) states, “the mystic experiences himself by withdrawing from the world, the ascetic by acting in it”, only the latter can achieve a rationalized conduct of life at the ethical level that also extends to the other spheres of non-religious life, giving rise to a fully intra-worldly asceticism capable of exercising dominion over the world itself. Habermas summarizes these two types of disposition towards the world, characteristic of the religions of redemption, in a scheme of Weberian thought (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 305) in which, somewhat surprisingly, Buddhism is omitted, although it could well be placed alongside Hinduism among the forms of religious disposition oriented towards a mystical withdrawal from the world.

On the other hand, Habermas questions the absence of Confucianism and Taoism from this scheme because of their affirmative attitude towards the world. According to Weber, the absence in these traditions of any dualism between the phenomenal world and the extra-mundane world, between this world and the hereafter, leaves little scope

for the rationalization of their own images of the world, owing to the persistence of a purely magical religiosity. On the basis of the studies of Needham ([1954] 1981–1983) and other sinologists on science and technology in China, Habermas argues that “the Chinese between the first century B.C. and the fifteenth century A.D., in the development of theoretical knowledge and in the use of such knowledge for practical needs, clearly achieved greater successes than the West” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 306).

Moreover, according to Habermas, even classical Greek philosophy, which shares with Confucianism and Taoism a positive appreciation of the world, “has developed the rationalization of the image of the world rather in the direction of a theoretization” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 306). In both cases, however, the lack of ethical rationalization has led to the persistence of an “ethically rooted and non-interventionist attitude towards nature and society” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 307).

What is important to emphasize here is that, according to Habermas, beyond the merely ethical–practical or theoretical–cognitive dimensions of rationalization, “Weber measures the rationalization of images of the world to the degree to which magical thinking is overcome” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 310). The resulting process of “disenchantment” therefore coincides with the disappearance of the vision of the world as an “enchanted garden”, a reality populated by spirits over which specially endowed individuals are believed to exercise control. Weber’s negative assessment of the rationalizing potential of Confucian and Taoist religious ethics derives precisely from “the uninterrupted persistence of a purely magical religiosity” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 306), which underlies the disposition towards unconditional adaptation to the world advocated by these traditions. Only with the emergence of a dualism between the worldly and the extra-mundane realms, and of an irreconcilable tension between them, does the process of disenchantment and rationalization truly begin, reaching its culmination in the intra-worldly asceticism of Western Judaism and Christianity.

However, as Kalberg (2021) has shown, the Chinese case was shaped by a plurality of adverse conditions that limited the development of formally rational conduct, including strong clan ties, traditional economic ethics, the predominance of an agrarian economy, and the political dominance of patrimonial authority.

As Tenbruck (1989) has pointed out, Weber’s approach nevertheless reveals the persistence of certain evolutionary assumptions, despite his explicit skepticism towards universal laws such as evolution or progress. It is evident that his thesis of a common direction of rationalization, extending from tribal magic to intra-worldly asceticism across all universal religions, serves to support his original hypothesis concerning the relationship between Puritan ethics and the spirit of capitalism, understood as a rational economic mentality and conduct of life. It is equally clear, however, that Weber’s monumental comparative studies in the sociology of religion were not intended simply to confirm his thesis on the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism. As we have already seen, the concept of “rationalization” assumes in Weber an essentially ambivalent meaning. Alongside its more restricted use to characterize the specific historical process of the modern West, a broader meaning emerges, oriented towards understanding the overall direction of the development of human societies. Weber developed this broader perspective only partially, yet it already provides us with important elements for further reflection.

According to this second Weberian approach, every process of rationalization originates in the universal human experience of suffering, in the need to explain it—especially when it is perceived as unjustly distributed—and in the consequent search for redemption. Suffering thus involves both a cognitive dimension, arising from the need for a meaningful explanation of the irrationality of the world, and an emotional dimension, expressed primarily in the charismatic search for redemption and liberation from suffering through

some extra-mundane path of salvation. This is the problem of theodicy: the religious justification of the existence of suffering and of its unequal distribution among human beings. All human cultures and universal religions have confronted this problem and sought both theoretical and practical responses to it. Weber begins from the recognition that these responses have followed different historical trajectories, even though he ultimately tends to regard the Western one as the most “rational”. At the same time, however, he also provides the elements for a different assessment by evaluating these responses not so much according to the extent to which they overcome magic, but according to their capacity to offer a systematic and coherent explanation of suffering and of the injustice of its distribution, capable of transcending its destructive force.

Indeed, in the second volume of the *Sociology of Religion*, devoted to Confucianism and Taoism, Weber states: “The metaphysical representation of God and the world, which the irrepressible need for theodicy aroused, could similarly produce only a few—in all, as we shall see, only three—conceptual systems that have given rationally satisfactory answers to the problem of the reason for the incongruence between destiny and merit: the Indian doctrine of karma, the dualism of Zarathustra and the decree of predestination by the *deus absconditus*. These solutions, which are the most rationally coherent, have presented themselves in pure form only quite exceptionally” (Weber 2002b, p. 15).

Although Weber develops these insights only partially, it nevertheless becomes evident from his subsequent discussion that his positive evaluation of these three religions of redemption as the most “rationally satisfactory” and “rationally coherent” derives from their ability to provide meaningful responses to both the “senseless infinity of the real world” and the problem of suffering. It is this “imperative of meaning”—that is, the capacity to provide a coherent and systematic meaning capable of offering adequate explanations at the theoretical level and corresponding ethical guidance for practical conduct—that constitutes the broadest criterion by which Weber evaluates processes of rationalization, although he never fully develops it. That he was nevertheless fully aware of the implications of this criterion is evident from the fact that he subsequently feels obliged to account for the persistence of elements of “irrationality” within these apparently rational constructions: “The modern form of the integral intellectual and instrumental rationalization, at the same time theoretical and practical, of the image of the world and of the conduct of life has had as a general consequence that, the more this particular type of rationalization progressed, the more religion was in turn pushed into the irrational—considered from the point of view of an intellectual elaboration of the image of the world. (. . .) The irrational elements present in the rationalization of reality were also the places where the almost irrepressible need of intellectualism towards the possession of values beyond reality was forced to retreat, and this all the more so as the world appeared to him to be devoid of them” (Weber 2002b, pp. 20–21).

Weber’s reference to these “irrational elements” as expressions of values and value choices shaped by the “situation of external (socially conditioned) and internal (psychologically conditioned) interests—of those strata which were the bearers of such a method of life at the decisive moment of its formation” (Weber 2002b, p. 21) once again reflects his bidirectional approach to the relationship between ideas and interests, as well as his recognition of the different autonomous logics governing images of the world and conducts of life, cultural rationalization and social rationalization, despite their inextricable interconnection.

The paradox of theodicy, therefore, consists, for Weber, in the fact that the rationalization of thought (images of the world) and action (conducts of life), undertaken in an attempt to confer meaning on and alleviate the suffering deriving “from the limits of finitude that are manifested in suffering, necessity and death. . . in view of an eternal bliss in a future existence, earthly or heavenly” (Weber 2002b, p. 20), on the basis of one of the two con-

ceptions of salvation (rebirth or redemption), has the unintended consequence of making the human condition even more vulnerable to the experience of suffering, since suffering comes to be regarded as even more morally outrageous and intellectually unacceptable. Thus, with the advance of rationalization, the problem of suffering is intensified rather than resolved, insofar as what makes suffering unbearably irrational is not suffering itself, but the increasingly absurd and apparently meaningless character that it acquires. Weber thus captures—probably under the influence of Nietzsche ([1887] 1984)—the ultimate insufficiency of every process of rationalization to provide an adequate meaning for existence, as well as the absurdity that characterizes the human condition, reflected in the “conviction that the task of giving an adequate meaning will always exceed our cultural capacities for creating meaning” (Wilkinson 2013, p. 127).

5. New Polytheism of Values and Loss of Meaning and Freedom

Among those who have further developed the thesis of the paradox of theodicy are the scholars of the first and second generations of the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer (1969), in particular, in *The Eclipse of Reason*, shares Weber’s thesis of formal rationality as the generalized foundation of rationalization in industrial society. Unlike Weber, however, who regards this process as an increase in rationality identified with purposive rationality, Horkheimer emphasizes the loss of rationality that results from action being conceived, planned, and evaluated exclusively in cognitive–instrumental terms, thereby identifying rationality with respect to purpose with instrumental rationality: “When it was conceived, the idea of reason was supposed to do more than merely regulate the relationship between means and ends; it was conceived as the instrument for understanding ends, for determining them” (Horkheimer 1969, p. 16, author’s italics).

At the origin of the emergence of instrumental reason as the dominant form of rationality in modern consciousness, Horkheimer identifies the disintegration of those metaphysical–religious images of the world whose claim to represent an objective and unitary reason had been undermined by the process of disenchantment described by Weber: “The philosophical systems of objective reason implied the belief that one can discover an all-encompassing or fundamental structure of being and from it one can derive a conception of human destiny” (Horkheimer 1969, p. 18).

Horkheimer essentially takes up and expands the Weberian thesis of the paradox of theodicy. The capacity of metaphysical–religious images of the world to create meaning is progressively diminished by the very process of rationalization that they themselves helped to initiate, as the disenchantment of mythical–magical images of the world progressively erodes the credibility of their theological and ontological foundations (Horkheimer 1969, p. 27). Whereas Weber identifies the distinctive sign of this loss of meaning in the rationalized modern world with the fragmentation of reason into a plurality of value spheres, thereby losing its universality, and with the emergence of a new polytheism—a “polytheism of values” (Weber [1919] 1980, pp. 31–33)—in which the struggle among the gods assumes the depersonalized form of competition among irreconcilable orders of value and life, ultimately leading to the domination of a world devoid of brotherhood, “Horkheimer defines the idea of self-preservation as the principle that drives subjective reason to madness since the thought of something that goes beyond the subjectivity of self-interest is deprived of all rationality” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 468).

Thus, ironically, the second disenchantment brought about by modernity affects the rationalization of metaphysical–religious images of the world through the return of the irrational mythical–magical forces that had once been subjugated. The Enlightenment itself thus turns into myth, as Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 1997) argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in agreement with Weber’s thesis in the *Intermezzo* of the *Sociology of Religion*

(Weber 2002b). They regard the structures of reified consciousness and the instrumental reason underlying them as the fundamental structures of the mechanism of reification, grounding them in the anthropological condition of humankind, condemned to reproduce its existence through labour. Thought thus becomes the expression of technical adaptation to external nature, and the domination of external nature is transformed into domination over human beings and over their own internal nature. In this way, instrumental reason transforms the “absolute purpose of life into the domination of internal and external nature” (Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 1997, p. 40), detaching the concept of reification not only from the specific historical context of capitalism in which Lukács ([1923] 1967) had located its origins, but also from the sphere of intersubjective relations, generalizing it according to the same logic of domination to the relationship with internal and external nature, and ultimately extending it to the whole of human history.

If the Frankfurt School’s thesis of the loss of meaning resulting from cultural rationalization ultimately leads, in its abstract formulation, to the denial of any possibility for reason, despite the claim that “at this level of complete alienation the idea of truth is still accessible” (Horkheimer 1969, p. 152), Horkheimer’s complementary thesis of the loss of freedom appears to be more firmly grounded in the historical and empirical processes of social rationalization. Here too he refers to Weber (2002a, pp. 184–86), who describes the progressive autonomization of the various social subsystems on the basis of purposive rational action, characterizing the development of modern society from the seventeenth century onwards, beginning with the transfer of Protestant intramundane asceticism to the idea of vocation and culminating in the transition from liberal to organized capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century. Horkheimer reiterates Weber’s thesis concerning the ascetic–religious foundations of the economically rational action of capitalist entrepreneurs, emphasizing how this later found its legitimizing ideology in liberal individualism, so that “the qualities forged by the ascetic discipline of Christianity were reinvigorated by the doctrine of liberalism” (Horkheimer 1969, p. 121).

But with the progressive bureaucratization of social life brought about by the institutionalization of rational action in the economy and the state, the tendency towards the decline of the individual emerges as the paradoxical outcome of the growing complexity of the dominant organizational forms of contemporary capitalist society. This is Weber’s “iron cage”, with the inevitable loss of individual freedom that it entails in a world increasingly administered according to the instrumental rationality of large political and economic bureaucratic organizations, which no longer leave any room for rational judgments and decisions concerning individual values. It is the triumph of the “specialists without spirit” and the “heartless sensualists” of whom Weber (2002a, p. 186) speaks in one of the most lucidly prophetic passages of his *Sociology of Religion*, where he sees the only possible response to such universalized discipline in the emergence of charismatic leaders capable of subjecting rationalized bureaucratic machines to their own will—a remedy worse than the disease, resulting in the autocratic voluntarism of leaders endowed with authoritarian and plebiscitary power.

Beyond the charismatic-authoritarian outcome that Weber foresaw, Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 1997), writing in the light of their direct experience of fascist authoritarianism and Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism, go a step further. They emphasize the deformation and impoverishment of every sphere of life—family, community, and voluntary association—that had once enjoyed relative autonomy. Social rationalization, by imposing its own instrumental rationality upon these spheres, produces an “atrophy of individuality”, which no longer finds any cultural foundation other than one of an irrational or merely pragmatic nature. Thus the circle closes, and the loss of individual freedom, reduced to a merely functional response within modern political and economic bureaucratic

systems, comes to coincide with the loss of meaning of every autonomous cultural reference rationally grounded in value orientations.

It is at this point that the second generation of the Frankfurt School enters the discussion, of which Habermas (1929–2026) is certainly the most significant representative. He begins by observing that, in his analysis of modernity, Weber consistently adheres to the theoretical perspective according to which modernization represents the continuation of the universal historical process of disenchantment. Habermas therefore identifies two central components of Weber’s diagnosis of modernity: the thesis of the loss of meaning and the thesis of the loss of freedom. Whereas the former appears to him to be firmly grounded in the processes of cultural rationalization based on the differentiation of autonomous value spheres associated with the emergence of capitalism, the latter appears considerably more problematic if it is derived solely from the autonomy of the subsystems of purposive rational action that allegedly threaten individual freedom in the development of Western capitalist society since the late eighteenth century. As Habermas ([1981] 1986a, p. 350) observes, the second thesis does not “simply arise from that first thesis. It is unclear how the thesis on the loss of meaning is connected to that of the loss of freedom.”

Weber formulates the thesis of the loss of meaning through the emergence of the “new polytheism”, in which “the struggle between the gods takes on the depersonified, objectified form of an antagonism between irreconcilable orders of value and life” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 349, author’s italics). Implicitly, this means that Weber identifies a dialectic already inherent in the historical process of religious disenchantment, whereby reason itself becomes fragmented into a plurality of value spheres, thereby losing its universality. However, the autonomy of the subsystems of purposive rational action “does not in itself entail the pessimistic prediction of a reification of these sectoral systems in an ‘iron cage’” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 351). For Habermas, Weber “goes too far when he infers from the loss of the substantial unity of reason a polytheism of conflicting forces of faith, whose irreconcilability is rooted in a pluralism of incompatible instances of validity” (Habermas [1981] 1986a, p. 352).

Although Weber develops a complex concept of material rationality as the coordination of purposive and value-rational action, he never fully elaborates this broader concept of rationality that underlies his investigations into cultural tradition, instead analyzing social rationalization primarily in terms of purposive rationality. In addition to recovering and developing this broader conception of material—or practical—rationality, Habermas argues that a distinction between the social system and the lifeworld is essential for understanding the evolution of social rationalization. He therefore seeks to overcome the limits of Weberian-inspired comprehensive sociology, in both its phenomenological and ethnomethodological variants, which identifies the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) with society as a whole. Such approaches remain confined to the actor’s internal interpretative perspective and are therefore unable to account for the external forces shaping socio-cultural lifeworlds, becoming trapped in what Wellmer ([1977] 1983) calls “hermeneutic idealism”. For Habermas, the lifeworld, understood as the network of communicative actions constructed through shared cultural traditions, is not coextensive with society. He therefore proposes, drawing also on Lockwood’s ([1964] 1993) distinction between social and systemic integration, a conceptual differentiation between the lifeworld and the social system, conceiving society as a whole as “systemically stabilized action links of socially integrated groups” (Habermas [1981] 1986b, p. 748, author’s italics). This leads to the “heuristic proposal to consider society as an entity that differentiates itself in the course of evolution both as a system and as a lifeworld”, reconstructing systemic evolution as an “increase in the capacity of control of a society” and the evolution of the lifeworld as a growing “gap between culture, society and personality” (Habermas [1981] 1986b, p. 748).

From this perspective, Habermas conceives social evolution as a process of second-order differentiation, parallel to and accompanying both the growing complexity of the social system and the rationalization of the lifeworld. Accordingly, each socio-evolutionary stage is characterized by systemic mechanisms corresponding to increasing levels of complexity. Thus, whereas in primitive egalitarian societies the lifeworld is still coextensive with the social system, founded on a horizontal mechanism of segmental differentiation based on gender, age, and descent, in primitive hierarchical societies stratification emerges as a differentiation mechanism based on hierarchical relations of prestige. Societies with a state organization then become politically stratified class societies based on hierarchies of authority, whereas modern capitalist societies are class societies economically constituted through the regulatory medium of money.

A clear polarization thus emerges between these two mechanisms of action coordination, resulting in a broad disjunction between systemic integration (based on functional action links) and social integration (based on consensus). This is precisely what Weber had already identified as the paradox of the rationalization of the lifeworld in modern society, namely that “the rationalized vital world allows the emergence and growth of subsystems whose autonomized imperatives have destructive repercussions on it” (Habermas [1981] 1986b, p. 794). Habermas takes up this paradox and defines it as “the unstoppable irony of the historical-world process of the Enlightenment”: “the rationalization of the vital world allows an increase in the complexity of the system which becomes hypertrophic to the point that the unleashing of systemic imperatives undermines the capacity to understand the vital world which is instrumentalized by them” (Habermas [1981] 1986b, p. 752).

Habermas speaks of the “mediatization of the life-world”, referring to those “phenomena of interference, which arise where the system and the life-world have differentiated themselves to such an extent that they can act on each other”. As a consequence, systemic coercions “instrumentalize a life-world structured in a communicative way” without the latter being aware of it (self-deception), or being able to interpret them “starting from traditions and contents of communication, from the intuitive knowledge of the interested parties”; “a structural power derives from this which, without becoming manifest as such, takes possession of the form of the subjectivity of a possible understanding” (Habermas [1981] 1986b, pp. 794–95, author’s italics). The bureaucratization and technicization of lifeworlds deprive social actors of the meaningful connections underlying their actions. Habermas analyzes these processes by reinterpreting Weber’s theses of the loss of meaning and the loss of freedom through the concept of the colonization of the lifeworld, thereby attempting to overcome their inconsistencies. For Habermas, it is analytically necessary to keep distinct the rationalization of communicative action, on the one hand, and the emergence of subsystems based on purposive rational action, such as the political-administrative and economic subsystems, on the other. This two-level model of society makes it possible to highlight the mediatization of the lifeworld “through systemic imperatives”, which “assumes the socio-pathological forms of an internal colonization to the extent that the critical imbalances of material reproduction (hence the crises of control accessible to systemic analysis) can be avoided only at the price of disturbances in the symbolic reproduction of the vital world (i.e., crises or pathologies experienced ‘subjectively’ that threaten identity)” (Habermas [1981] 1986b, p. 956, author’s italics).

The paradox of social rationalization and the resulting loss of individual freedom cannot therefore be explained, as Weber proposes, as the result of the reversal of value-based rationality into an ethically uprooted purposive rationality, but rather as the consequence of the disjunction between the social system and the lifeworld. Similarly, the loss of meaning identified by Weber can be understood as the consequence of the “one-sided styles of life

conduct” in the private sphere and of the “bureaucratic drying up of the public political sphere” (Habermas [1981] 1986b, p. 979).

Both the problems of orientation in the private sphere and those of legitimation in the political public sphere are thus traced by Habermas to the colonization of the lifeworld “through systemic imperatives, which remove the practical-moral elements from the spheres of private conduct of life and the political public sphere” (Habermas [1981] 1986b, p. 982), or to the monetarization and bureaucratization “of everyday practice, in private and public spheres” (Habermas [1981] 1986b, p. 982). These processes give rise, on the one hand, to phenomena such as consumerism and possessive individualism and, on the other, to a political system that redefines practical questions in technical terms, legitimizing them as merely procedural issues.

Beyond this unilateral rationalization—or reification—of everyday practice, however, Habermas identifies the complementary phenomenon of cultural impoverishment and the loss of meaning of an increasingly devalued lifeworld as the defining feature of this process of colonization. To the mediatization and instrumentalization of the lifeworld is added the erosion of a vital and comprehensive cultural tradition, of which the various forms of theodicy once constituted an integral part, and whose capacity to confer meaning on everyday practice has now been profoundly weakened. This completes the picture of a paradox of rationalization that effectively illustrates the contemporary inability of the lifeworld to confer meaning on the subjective experience of suffering in a context that has become thoroughly bureaucratized and technicized.

6. Anthropodicy and the Disenchantment of Evil in the Anthropocene

According to Campbell (2002), the inner logic underlying the development of the world’s religions in Weber’s analysis was the tension between worldview and reality, between the expectations that worldviews create and the experiences of suffering that people actually undergo. This discrepancy, and the tension arising from it, constitutes the problem of theodicy, which remains central even in the era of “New Age theodicy”. However, before assessing the persistence of the problem of theodicy, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by “re-enchantment”. If, according to Gablik (1991, p. 11), “re-enchantment implies a release from the affliction of nihilism” as a reaction to disenchantment, Raymond Lee, from the perspective of the sociology of religion, argues that “re-enchantment refers to the reclamation of the magical. It is a process of refilling the world with credulity towards the supernatural. A re-enchanted worldview ushers in beliefs that are less cynical of realities beyond the boundaries of the natural world” (Lee 2007, p. 231). A less categorical definition is offered by Tacey (2000) and Partridge (2004, 2005), who equate re-enchantment with the rise of “invisible religion” and new religious movements. Similarly, Berman (1981, p. 23) regards re-enchantment as the emergence of a “holistic, or participating consciousness” that is essential to the very survival of humankind in a time of global crisis. Laszlo (2006) argues that re-enchantment consists in the emergence of non-dualistic sciences, both natural and social, capable of conceiving the cosmos according to an integral vision of reality.

These interpretations clearly show that, in the literature on Weber, the question of *Entzauberung* has become more problematic than it was originally conceived, pointing towards what Hans Joas has called “the power of the sacred” (Joas [2017] 2021). This represents an alternative to the narratives of disenchantment and secularization that have long dominated the debate, by proposing an interpretation that takes into account the dynamics of ever-new sacralizations and their normative evaluation in the light of the human experience of self-transcendence.

Jenkins (2000), too, challenges the Weberian view of disenchantment as a unidirectional and universalizing tendency of modernity by distinguishing between secularization and

the “decline of magic”. In his view, both enchantment and re-enchantment are constitutive of modernity. Indeed, while disenchantment has produced (re)enchantment, enchantment can in turn generate disenchantment. The two may therefore be regarded as opposite sides of the same coin: “The imperialism of formal-rational logics and processes has been, and necessarily still is, subverted and undermined by a diverse array of oppositional (re)enchantments. (...) (re)enchantment will be taken to refer to two linked tendencies: one which insists that there are more things in the universe than are dreamed of by the rationalist epistemologies and ontologies of science, the other which rejects the notion that calculative, procedural, formal rationality is always the ‘best way’” (Jenkins 2000, p. 12).

According to this dialectical perspective, modern societies consist of an array of opposing tendencies and forces: “even within the most efficiently rationalized bureaucracies, ‘irrational’ dimensions of social life—symbolism and myth, notions of fate or luck, sexuality, religious or other ideologies, ethnic sentiment, etc.—necessarily influence organizational behaviour” (Jenkins 2000, p. 14).

There are, evidently, significant differences between the more conventional definitions of re-enchantment proposed by Lee and those of Tacey, Partridge, Berman, and Laszlo, who regard re-enchantment as an opportunity of one kind or another and as a natural feature of the modern condition. Above all, however, it is Jenkins who, by considering disenchantment and re-enchantment as two co-present processes of modernity, enables us to move beyond any positivist or evolutionist conception of re-enchantment. According to Repphun (2009, pp. 64–65, author’s italics), “there exist two understandings of re-enchantment (...). I shall call these thin re-enchantment and thick re-enchantment. They do not represent mere nuances on a single concept but are in actuality two radically different conceptions of the history and character of modernity. Thin re-enchantment, without question the dominant form (at least in terms of frequency of usage), is based on the simple acceptance of a commonly understood disenchantment, which, as we have seen, misrepresents the complexity and ultimately indeterminate nature of Weber’s *Entzauberung*. (...) Thin re-enchantment is predicated on the idea of disenchantment and re-enchantment as oppositional linear movements within history (...). In conceptualising re-enchantment as the historical successor to disenchantment as a largely completed historical process, thin re-enchantment misses the true complexity suggested by the idea of re-enchantment while at the same time restating a flawed and ultimately simplistic understanding of modernity. In thin re-enchantment, the complete, or near-complete, disenchantment of the world is simply assumed as the background against which re-enchantment takes place. (...) Extending the logic of the complex, dialectical understanding of modernity and the religious (...), thick re-enchantment conceptualises re-enchantment as a dialectical counterpart to disenchantment. Re-enchantment cannot thus be understood as a matter of the reversal or survival of enchantment but rather as a continuous line of thought and practice accompanying disenchantment, even in the accelerated rationalisation that characterises modernity. Re-enchantment and rationalisation exist in a both/and relationship that I shall call the dialectic of enchantment”.

From the perspective of thick re-enchantment, the dialectic of enchantment invites us to reconsider the concept of rationalization in light of the idea that “a thoroughgoing re-enchantment of the world is all but impossible to imagine. (...) The diversity, complexity and sheer size of the contemporary world render the total absence of rationalisation neither desirable nor possible. (...) The concept of thick re-enchantment allows for both losses and gains in enchantment and assumes the necessary triumph of neither rationalisation nor re-enchantment. In the logic of thick re-enchantment, disenchantment is a tendency rather than a *telos*. Thick re-enchantment asserts that the disenchantment of the world has never been, and can never be, complete” (Repphun 2009, p. 66, author’s italics).

Moreover, Bauman (1993, p. 33), taking up Weber's critique of instrumental rationality, applies this idea of dialogical re-enchantment by comparing, indeed identifying, re-enchantment with postmodernity: "Postmodernity (...) brings 're-enchantment' of the world after the protracted and earnest, though in the end inconclusive, modern struggle to dis-enchant it (or, more exactly, the resistance to dis-enchantment, hardly ever put to sleep, was all along the 'postmodern thorn' in the body of modernity). The mistrust of humans' spontaneity, of drives, impulses and inclinations resistant to prediction and rational justification, has been all but replaced by the mistrust of unemotional, calculating reason. (...) The postmodern world is one in which mystery is no longer a barely tolerated alien awaiting a deportation order."

From this perspective of dialogical re-enchantment, in which re-enchantment represents a dialectical counterpart to the rationalization and disenchantment that it produces, the paradox of theodicy and suffering can also be reconsidered in the light of what has been called the "Anthropocene", namely the idea that humanity, through its techno-scientific capacities, has driven the planet into a new geological epoch characterized by a massive and irreversible human impact on the Earth. The term was first coined by the ecologist Eugene Stoermer in the 1980s and later popularized by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000 (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). Although the proposal to include the Anthropocene as a formal epoch in the Geological Time Scale was rejected by the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) of the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS), the IUGS-ICS statement concluded that: "Despite its rejection as a formal unit of the Geologic Time Scale, Anthropocene will nevertheless continue to be used not only by Earth and environmental scientists, but also by social scientists, politicians and economists, as well as by the public at large. It will remain an invaluable descriptor of human impact on the Earth system" (*The Anthropocene: IUGS-ICS Statement* 2024).

Following this suggestion, we may say, with Hamilton (2017, p. 66), that the Anthropocene reveals how faith in the techno-scientific possibilities created by humanity has failed to "humanize" the planet, which is instead becoming increasingly "capricious and uncontrollable". Thus, the industrial ambition to disenchant the world by bringing "the natural world under human supervision" ultimately failed, because "in practice" the world became "less controllable" (Hamilton 2017, p. 8, author's emphasis). Humanity cannot escape this situation by returning to the form of re-enchantment characteristic of the pre-industrial world. The crucial difference is that the world with which humanity now interacts is no longer animated by "magic", but by "willed activity" (Hamilton 2017, p. 37).

While apparently adopting a quasi-religious language, Hamilton's vision of the re-enchantment of the Earth seeks to identify a philosophical way forward that, instead of invoking invisible forces, whether spirits or deities, focuses on "a more palpable force that stands in the way of any ambition we may have for total control, and that is the Earth itself" (Hamilton 2017, p. 49).

This ambivalent image of a rebellious Earth, manifesting itself through disastrous events that leave humanity subject to what Hamilton describes as "a sublime Earth that presents itself to us as beautiful when becalmed and terrifying when enraged, an intimate planet and an alien one, Mother and Other" (Hamilton 2017, p. 49, author's emphasis), requires a new kind of enchantment that integrates a scientific outlook with philosophy rather than with religious or theological thought.

Hamilton (2017, p. 126) uses the term "anthropodicy" to define this philosophically oriented scientific vision of the intrinsically connected fate of the world and humanity. It is a secular approach that he explicitly acknowledges as indebted to the "theodicy" advanced in the second century by the Church Father Irenaeus, which, in his view, was later overshadowed by the "harsher" version of theodicy developed by Augustine, tending

to impose a predetermined model of moral response to evil (Hamilton 2017, p. 125). By contrast, Hamilton finds in Irenaeus' theodicy the idea of the Fall as an "event still unfolding and with the outcome uncertain", a condition for humanity's evolution towards "full moral autonomy" and towards the capacity to "exercise their world-shaping responsibility with care or neglect" (Hamilton 2017, p. 126). Unlike Irenaeus' theological model, which focuses on the individual struggle to resist temptation and reject evil while assuming a secure human destiny because "God rigged the race" to ensure that "good will ultimately prevail" (Hamilton 2017, p. 127), anthropodicy describes humanity's moral struggle from a collective, global perspective, whose outcomes remain fundamentally uncertain, while conceiving the re-enchanted Earth simultaneously as companion and enemy.

This brings to the fore the central issue of humanity's relationship with evil, which had already permeated the traditional theodicies of both Irenaeus and Augustine. As Untea (2019, p. 878) suggests,

"Hamilton attempts to uproot the problem of evil from his anthropodicy in order to prevent its transformation into a concealed theodicy (. . .), he does this without importing the kind of language of traditional theodicies that hold the deity responsible for the evil of the world. Hamilton's re-enchanted Earth as 'Mother and Other' cannot be held accountable for the evil of the world."

Following Irenaeus' model of theodicy, Hamilton seeks to replace the predominantly negative understanding of evil with a more positive interpretation centred on fallenness and uncertainty as constitutive features of humanity's "fate" and "life" on Earth. Consequently, in the Anthropocene the central issue is no longer that of a good or bad life, but rather that of the "conditions of life", which have been degraded despite our "full knowledge of what we are doing" (Hamilton 2017, p. 37). As Untea (2019, p. 879) further argues, "There is a shift of focus in Hamilton's anthropodicy from the issue of evil, that would keep humanity uninvolved in the destiny of the Earth, given the responsibility for evil being attributed to a divine being, to the issue of life".

In an age of uncertainty, in which life is increasingly shaped by insecurity, only a collective appeal to a theodicy grounded in humanity's capacity to develop shared strategies for preventing the uncertainties and risks facing the world, whether natural or human-made, may become possible. These risks have traditionally been included within the broad category of "evil". Re-enchancement today does not imply a return to the archaic attempt to influence a deified nature through sacrifice, prayer, or ritual. Although Hamilton refers to a re-enchanted Earth, his approach is ultimately oriented towards collective action aimed at preventing irreversible damage to the planet's ecological balance. For Hamilton, however, the lack of effective collective action largely reflects the widespread reluctance to place the consequences of human activity at the top of the public agenda and thereby stimulate the collective awareness necessary to improve the deteriorating conditions of life on the planet.

Becker ([1968] 1976), who had already used the term "anthropodicy" to denote the convergence of science and philosophy in "a unified science of man", argued that, in the nuclear age, medieval theodicy was "long since dead" (Becker [1968] 1976, p. 17). Referring to Weber's concept of disenchantment, he maintained that modern humanity had "completely secularized the stars" and deprived the "external world" of "all inherent meaningfulness" (Becker [1968] 1976, p. 17). In today's disenchanted world, Becker denounces humanity's loss of the capacity for wonder, a phenomenon that has also fostered a disenchantment of evil, since "it was inevitable that good and evil should have become merely an affair of technical calculation" (Becker [1968] 1976, p. 17). He was already aware that, because of this naïve faith in humanity's capacity for technological progress, "our world does become more irrational with the advance of science" (Becker [1968] 1976, p. 356, author's emphasis).

Becker further observes that, as the advance of technoscience fuels the disenchantment of the world, public concern for living conditions declines and sensitivity towards the evil and suffering that increase in the social world diminishes. Hence his warning: “If man fails to introduce critical reason into the realm of human affairs, he must be prepared to suffer evils which he could have prevented” (Becker [1968] 1976, p. 142).

This is what might be called the “paradox of disenchantment”, analogous to the paradox of theodicy. In the context of a global loss of sensitivity towards a disenchanted evil, suffering takes the form of extreme events that call traditional distinctions into question: “every extreme event now has a human fingerprint. Flood, famine, fire, and pestilence can no longer be purely natural, so the theological distinction (also commonplace among the secular) between moral evil and natural evil collapses” (Hamilton 2017, p. 9).

Beyond the limits of traditional morality, Hamilton develops the idea of a re-enchanted Earth capable of inspiring both fear and respect. It therefore becomes necessary to draw upon humanity’s creative capacities in order to anticipate possible collective disasters through a vision that includes the human ability to reverse the damage inflicted on the Earth’s ecology.

By secularizing the Irenaean model of theodicy, Hamilton’s version of anthropodicy interprets evil as “uncertainty”, that is, as the impossibility of predetermining the outcomes of human action. Consequently, “within this framework of re-enchancement organized by the aesthetic perception of a sublime Earth it becomes possible for Hamilton to bring under the scrutiny of anthropodicy the conditions of life as fate (with its uncertainties) without allowing evil to break free” (Untea 2019, p. 883).

7. Conclusions: The Re-Enchantment of Suffering as the Challenge of Anthropodicy

If, according to Ricoeur (1967, p. 51), the main limitation of traditional theodicies grounded in religion and morality was that the argument according to which humanity’s fate is guided by the “grandiose calculations” of God’s providence collapses before the “complaint of the righteous sufferer”, then the solution proposed by Hamilton and Becker for the disenchanted era of the Anthropocene—namely, an aesthetic re-enchancement of the Earth grounded in a critical awareness of uncertainty—appears, according to Untea (2019), at best naïve and at worst unrealistic and dangerous. According to the Chinese philosopher at Southeast University in Nanjing, the “new anthropocentrism” proposed by these two American scholars, in opposition to the traditional “arrogant anthropocentrism” that is driving the destruction of the planet through its uncritical exploitation of nature, is insufficient “for humanity to withdraw from the path of arrogance” (Untea 2019, p. 883). What traditional theodicies described as the “Fall”, and anthropodicy interprets as uncertainty regarding humanity’s destiny in a disenchanted world, cannot simply become the basis for a more respectful project of sustainable civilization, since it cannot by itself guarantee effective critical control over the conditions of life. Moreover, this disenchanted attitude towards evil and human destiny “raises the disappearance of humanity as a serious potential outcome”, because “the question here is how to give positive meaning to an Earth which rather inspires fear and which acts more like a constraining force on humanity’s ideals of self-transcendence rather than as a factor and source of inspiration for human selfish creativity” (Untea 2019, p. 884).

For Untea, the problem lies in the limited meaning attributed to the process of disenchantment. “If the meaning simply stops conceiving the re-enchanted Earth as an agent defiant of humanities’ plans, then the possibility of a further fall of humanity into reciprocal blaming of human communities for their negligent treatment of the Earth and their ultimate fall into nothingness is assured”, since, in his view, “too little weight is place on the role of

suffering in the collective search for meaning” (Untea 2019, p. 884). He argues that suffering should play a more important role in humanity’s struggle to cope with its destiny than its capacity to give meaning to it: “human beings are in nature, and nature is in our bodies. If only humanity is able to make sense of the suffering generated by the nature’s demiurgic embrace that tears bodies apart in order to maintain or generate others, it does not mean that suffering cannot exist independently of the human meaning-making capacities. All of the nature’s bodies suffer, but only human bodies attribute explicit meaning to this suffering” (Untea 2019, p. 886, author’s emphasis).

Therefore, enchantment should not be directed only towards the source of suffering—nature or the Earth—but also towards suffering itself, already naturally enchanted, by attributing possible meanings to it. This, then, is the challenge of an anthropodicy for the Anthropocene. Universal suffering, by virtue of its ubiquitous character, becomes the ground for a collective re-enchantment based on its acceptance “by a humanity that has built its history on the ideal of the avoidance of suffering” (Untea 2019, p. 886), with the full awareness, as Weber taught us, that every personal and collective search for meaning remains immersed in the boundless meaninglessness of the universe, which will always transcend it (Giarelli 2018).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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