ENCHANTMENT, WEAK ONTOLOGIES, 
AND ADMINISTRATIVE ETHICS

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The article contributes to an enlivening of ethical discourse by employing the notion of weak ontology. Weak ontologies insist that fundamental sources of inspiration, or “onto-stories,” are indispensable to a vital ethics, even as it admits that every onto-story is contestable. The article considers powerful perspectives that militate against implementing weak ontology: liberalism’s conception of the neutral framework and Max Weber’s characterization of the modern world as disenchanted. The article argues that these two perspectives contribute to a nay-saying ethic and a negative form of governance because the disenchanted world they describe is too hard to love. The article ends with an examination of an ethical perspective that seeks to overturn the disenchantment story by cultivating a nontheistic experience of enchantment.

Keywords: weak ontology; administrative ethics; disenchantment; enchantment

According to Max Weber (1930/1993, 1946a, 1946b; Wolin, 1981/1984), public administration emerged to fill the gap left when the modern world became disenchanted. Because modern science and governmental rationalities drain the world of intrinsic meaning, we are uncertain how to proceed, and we make do by proceeding bureaucratically and commercially. Liberal political philosophy has complemented this view by insisting that democratic political institutions must provide a neutral framework within which people with different interests might coexist and cooperate, while making as little reference as possible to the varying sources of metaphysical inspiration or visions of the good life that different constituencies honor. Recently, a number of theorists have brought new arguments and considerations to bear on the wisdom of such a course (Bennett, 2001; Connolly, 1995, 1999; Taylor, 1989; White, 2000). Following Stephen White (2000), we can call these thinkers weak ontologists.
I will accept White’s (2000) characterization of what he terms the recent ontological turn in social science. What is meant is not the arcane philosophical study of being but rather an awareness that our seeing and doing things in the world presupposes some prior set of conceptualizations, commitments, and understandings about the human relationship to things such as self, world, and others. “Ontological commitments . . . [are] entangled with questions of identity and history, with how we articulate the meaning of our lives, both individually and collectively” (p. 4). My argument is that administrative ethics needs to pay explicit attention to this ontological dimension.

Though critics might be hesitant to push administrative ethics in this direction, weak ontology offers two enticements for those who do: wonder and modesty. In a world increasingly experienced as uncertain, insecure, and contingent, some constituencies—including (some) secular, religious, and managerial ones—are tempted to shore up flagging confidence in their familiar ethical faiths with ever-increasing doses of authority. Authority that scrupulously separates the right from the good might succumb to this temptation by implementing ever more comprehensive frameworks of rules, punishments, incentives, reporting, and reviews. Authority that does not separate the right from the good might respond with dogmas, constitutional amendments, or public campaigns to discredit those who honor (or do not) alternative sources of inspiration. Both are busy telling people no. Against the first, an ontological dimension allows one to cultivate a more positive, life-affirming ethical sensibility. Against the second, a weak ontological dimension, because it acknowledges the element of contestability in every fundamental stance, invites a less authoritarian, and more modest, response to the experience of contingency. There will be more on these claims below, but first a caution.

Weak ontology does not offer itself as a criterion for judging between vigorously contested or polarizing ethical claims. What it offers instead is an ethic of forbearance and agonistic respect toward the ethical inspirations of others precisely because one acknowledges the contestability of one’s own inspirations, even as one offers them as worthy of endorsement. One can make this acknowledgement because one further acknowledges that the possibilities of ethical enactment far exceed one’s ability to know, understand, or imagine them. If widely accepted, such an ethic would inject a moment of modesty into the (sometimes) immodest ethical claims of both strong ontology and secularism. It is not just that public administration will increasingly be required to do its work in the company of believers but that as Alan Keenan (2003) puts it, the negative and
defensive political moralisms of the present might best be overcome by honoring the positive and unique potential of each person to help “bring into being a more democratic and just future” (p. 22; see also Rogers, 1990, pp. 97, 134).

Of course, mine is not the first attempt to suggest using ontological sources to inspire a positive administrative ethics. Louis Gawthrop (1998), relying on theistic sources, Dennis Thompson (1987, 1998, 1999), relying on Kantian and Rawlsean philosophy, and John Rohr (1978, 1998), relying on Aristotle, have all articulated positive ethical visions. I do not wish to diminish the accomplishments of these thinkers; our discipline owes them a lot. However, I would characterize them, as ontologists, as having minimalist versions of strong, as opposed to weak, ontologies. Rather than stressing the contestable nature of their “onto-stories,” all would regard them as minimal stories that all Americans, despite their being “marked by disagreement about fundamental values” (Thompson, 1987, p. 8), could in principle endorse. The weak ontology I endorse would not tread so softly past our differences but would rather foster an agonistic appreciation of multiple moral sources as being crucial to a viable administrative ethical education. Cultivating an appreciation for the plurivocity of ethical sources is itself claimed here as an ethical source of abundant life.

In what follows I will try to show why I find ontological insight in general, and weak ontology in particular, to be politically and ethically important. I will also discuss some powerful modern impediments to a more robust engagement with ontology: liberalism’s commitment to a neutral framework of rules and Weber’s description of the modern world as disenchanted. I will end on a hopeful note by discussing Jane Bennett’s (2001) nontheistic attempt to re-enchant the modern world. But before doing all that, I need to say some preliminary things first about ontology and then about contingency.

**ONTOLOGY AND CONTINGENCY**

Although it is not my intention to champion theistic ontologies, as a weak ontologist I find it ethical to cultivate an “agonistic indebtedness” (Connolly, 1995, p. 26) to certain possibilities and energies flowing through some versions of theism. One fascinating aspect of Christianity, one that shows the importance of ontology generally, is the idea of abundant life. The notion can be used either to impose stability, as Thomas Hobbes used it in his interpretation of the book of Job, or to introduce
contestation in overly settled ethical regimes, as I would argue it did in narratives of American chattel slavery. In its contesting mood, abundant life comes close to Hannah Arendt’s notion of natality. It can generate hope precisely because the possibilities of ethical life exceed the capacities of available ethical institutionalizations. One of the greatest exemplars of this practice was the Christian philosopher St. Augustine (1962). When Augustine chided, “Let us not then faint, my Brethren: an end there will be to all earthly kingdoms” (p. 49), he was reminding people who could not imagine civilized or ethical life without the Roman empire that Rome did not exhaust the possibilities of either civilization or ethics. Augustine’s technique was to first chasten immodest Roman claims about virtue by recasting the Roman pursuit of glory as lust. With this shift he could then reveal the multiple ways in which the pursuit of glory, by fostering a long catalog of unacknowledged cruelties, victimizations, subjections, and rivalries, had undermined Roman civilization from within. However, Augustine’s negative critique also generated a new positive ethical project. Augustine’s solution of giving the glory to God and loving one’s neighbor not only drained the murderous rivalry out of human relations but opened up the ethical space for new experiments in human community.

The notion of abundant life, at its best, can chasten the imperative to declare current instantiations of good and evil as exhaustive, transparently true, or complete, and it can also generate positive practices of affirmation. Both moments are present in the following quote from the womanist theologian Katie Cannon (1995).

[The] New Testament helps Black women be aware of the bad housing, overworked mothers, underworked fathers, functional illiteracy, and malnutrition. . . . However, as God-fearing women they maintain that Black life is more than defensive reactions to oppressive circumstances of anguish and desperation. Black life is the rich, colorful creativity that emerged and reemerges in the Black quest for human dignity. (p. 56)

If I understand Cannon, her transition from “defensive reactions to oppressive circumstances” to the more affirmative “Black quest for human dignity” comes from the belief in the sovereignty of God. Believing in His pronouncements of justice, and finding that present arrangements do not live up to that standard, one realizes that neither nature nor God is to blame for one’s plight. People are. The script that those people have handed one, and the ethical truths those scripts seek to uphold at one’s expense, fall far short of the vision Cannon finds in the Bible. With a larger positive vision in mind, a person might start experimenting with
ways to put it into practice. For instance, in slave narratives people tended to start meeting clandestinely to study the Bible or to transmit news or to plan escapes. The point is that these new activities—perhaps nothing more than a weekend barbeque—are positive responses to the theistic ontological source rather than negative reactions to the oppressive situation (see also Stewart, 1999).

To come back now to Cannon’s God-fearing church women, how might public administration respond ethically to their positive but precarious ethical experiments? Black church women increasingly show up in our organizations as students, employees, supervisors, clients, or pastors. Some of their sons are inmates or guards in correctional facilities. Some of their daughters support their children with help from Women, Infants, and Children or with food stamps or work as nurses for county health departments or nursing homes. Others teach in public administration programs. My hope, now that you know they sometimes risk positive experiments in the affirmation of life, is that you will respond less dismissively to their expressions of faith or that you will be less ready to impose normalizing interpretations on behavior you do not at first understand. Perhaps, now that you know, agonistic forbearance toward them is more possible for you.

However, not every constituency is in a position to welcome ethical abundance. Contingency is the unsettling experience that your life could be otherwise or that your most deeply held ethical sensibilities are not universally honored. This experience has become pervasive for many reasons. For instance, global economic interdependence has generated an increasingly rapid whirl of crossings, changes, and exchanges among currencies, cultures, diseases, technologies, businesses, laborers, wars, refugees, and terrorists. The accelerated pace of these changes outdistances people’s ability to fold them in to their settled habits and mores. As their ethical settlements erode, some constituencies are tempted to respond by filling the hollowed out space with strong ontologies, that is, with ontologies that claim to be incontestably true.

Alternatively, academic liberals and secularists respond to both contingency and strong ontology by advocating a neutral framework within which a deontological notion of public reason can flourish. To oversimplify, public reason is conceived as a form of “metaphysical abstinence” (Connolly, 1999) that understands society to be made up of prudential individuals essentially unconnected to one another by any relationship except rational consent (Coles, 2001; Elshtain, 1981, pp. 100-146; Sandel, 1982). In practice, appeals to things such as traditions, communities, or religious commitments are ruled to be nonrational or private. Difference
is depoliticized in the hope of replacing “the conflict between opposed ideals with a tolerance of difference” that might “grow into an appreciation of diversity and an enriched cultural life” (Moon, 1993, p. 217). The neutrality of this conception of public reason can certainly be contested, but it seems to me that a greater drawback is that it is insufficient to deal with the world we must actually administer, and it needs to be revised. As Connolly (1999) points out, religious fervor, to the chagrin of many rationalists, has not abated, and increasingly public administrators do their work in the company of believers. Metaphysical abstinence makes it difficult to participate in many current public questions except in defensive reactive postures, although what is needed is positive visions that appeal to people’s sense of integrity and hope. But what if we supposed that ontology is one of those presuppositions of discourse that cannot be easily gotten around, much the same way that discourse theorists insist that linguistic truth claims cannot be gotten around? In that case, it would be at least possible for academic liberals and secularists to entertain the notion that the world is too abundant to be contained in a public discourse bounded by metaphysical abstinence.

When one overconfidently imposes a fundament on a world that was not designed to accept it, a world more abundant than the fundament can admit, there is a temptation to respond to resulting resistances as though they deserved punishment in the name of the fundament. Such, I believe, is the source of many of the rules and resentments that appear in many organizational settings today.

**WEAK ONTOLOGIES IN CONTEXT**

In this section, I will further explicate the notion of weak ontology. Although weak ontologists find much to contest in one another’s work, as ontologists they all share a commitment to a political and ethical practice that cultivates fundamental sources from which affirmative gestures of ethical life and liveliness might gain their strength. As weak ontologists, they all affirm the contestable nature of their onto-stories about these sources. Although all insist that fundamental conceptualizations of self, other, and the world are necessary to any adequately compelling ethical practice, they all also acknowledge that all such conceptualizations offered today are tinged with contingency and indeterminacy rather than certainty and that none can be simply demonstrated to be true or even universally compelling (White, 2000, pp. 6-10). In most renderings, this fundamental contingency can itself become a source of ethical care and forbearance.
Weak ontology would differentiate itself from both those who want to make strong ontological claims and those who believe ontology should make no claims at all. White (2000) characterizes strong ontological claims as those that purport “to show ‘the way the world is,’ or how God’s being stands to human being, or what human nature is” (p. 6). We might think of Plato’s philosophy of Ideas or of most versions of theistic Christianity but also of the political theories of Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss. These accounts, White notes, carry an assumption of certainty, or truth, that allows them to confidently articulate both a fundamental essence of the world and how that essence ought to be reflected in moral and political life. Against such certainties, weak ontologists insist on the fundamental experience of contingency and indeterminacy in modern life (p. 7). No story of strong ontology could capture, without remainder or violence, the multiplicity of today’s moral–political experiences and possibilities. This has led William Connolly (1995) to replace the term ontology itself with the term ontopolitical interpretation (p. 1).

By the same token, classical liberals might warn that ontology should be allowed to make no claims at all. Isaiah Berlin (1970), for instance, worried that fundamental conceptualizations of the good would lead to political practices of repression—practices that justified constraining some activities, desires, or beliefs in the name of heralding better, purportedly freer, ones. Berlin instead championed negative liberty, a form that leaves each person alone to choose his or her own path to the good. Berlin’s essay oozes with the confidence that he was simply articulating what had become the considered consensus of the civilized right-thinking world and also with the confidence that uninterfered-with people would naturally create a civilized and free political order. In general, weak ontologists would find that the drive to describe modern individuals as unencumbered choosers leads liberals to understate the existential realities that make such a life possible. No weak ontologist I know of would reject Berlin’s argument outright, but few would share his confidence in its animating vision. There is little guarantee today that a commitment to, say, rights-based liberalism will translate into a public ethos characterized by administrative generosity. To the dimension of formal rights, it is necessary to add an aesthetic–affective activity of cultivation of the sources of ethical sensibility. This cultivation will have to confront certain entangling existential realities.

White (2000) defines existential realities as entanglements in things such as language, mortality, the capacity for radical novelty, and an articulation of deep sources of the self (p. 9). Although the way we live each of these realities is subject to historical change, and thus a strong
ontological account of them is unavailable, they do establish frames that enable and disable various possibilities of ethical enactments. For instance, many liberals would treat language as something humans “have,” a tool that can aid, given proper definitions, the project of rendering the world available for self-mastery and free choice. Many late modern thinkers, however, are alert to ways that language also “has us” (Foucault, 1981; Taylor, 1985). Individuals speak from within linguistic conventions that both enable and constrain what can be said and thought (McSwite, 1997, pp. 54-55). To live in this relation to language is part of what it means to be human. Weak ontologists tend to be alert to the linguistic precariousness of their own ethical sensibilities. Weak ontologists do not believe they can articulate a “demonstrable essence of language” (White, 2000, p. 9). Instead, White says, weak ontologists offer “prefigurations.”

In this view an ontology is not like a treasure chest we discover after deep diving that contains a cache of “first things” inscribed with incontestable political directions. A weak ontology only prefigures ethical-political perception and judgment; that is, it focuses our attention cognitively and orients us affectively. (White, 2000, p. 69)

It may be helpful to give a few examples of prefiguration. George Kateb (1992) uses his explorations of Walt Whitman’s poetry to insist on the primacy of individual human rights because this commitment can lead to a profound and empathetic connection to everyone else. Following Whitman, Kateb insists that respect for individual persons prepares the way for such a political–ethical sensibility by first acknowledging that each individual is “a world, an infinity, a being who is irreplaceable” (p. 5). Individualism, lived with a certain Whitmanesque ethical–aesthetic sensibility, first gives one an experience of nonconformist expression that, by loosening the hold of conventional ways of seeing and feeling, connects one sympathetically to others—to resist on behalf of the oppressed or respond hospitably to others (p. 241; White, 2000, p. 21). Notice, however, that it is Kateb’s aesthetic sensibility that keeps his celebration of liberal human rights from becoming a standard defense of the atomistic acquisitive individualism. In passing, too, I should note the way weak ontology typically employs notions of what White (2000) called radical novelty. Kateb here has opened up new ethical possibilities within liberalism that neither liberalism’s critics nor its defenders would normally stress. One endorses it, if one does, because Kateb’s vision of our being together has touched an aesthetic chord.

Similarly, Bennett (2001) discusses what she calls a series of “crossings” to prefigure her ethical sensibility. Crossings involve encounters
taken from various domains—science, animal studies, chess, literature, philosophy—between humans and nonhuman entities, for instance, a chess master playing against a computer, a parrot solving conceptual problems for complex social reasons, Kafka’s story of an ape’s self-willed metamorphosis into a man-ape who delivers an academic lecture, or Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) Body without Organs. Bennett’s point is not to run amok with one’s identity but that controlled and careful experiments in crossing inter- and intraspecies boundaries, in becoming partially other, can foster and prefigure a richer ethical life.

I explore and seek to strengthen whatever affinities might exist between crossings, the spirit of generosity and enchantment. . . . My wager is that if you engage certain crossings under propitious conditions, you might find that their dynamism revivifies your wonder at life, their morphings inform your reflections upon freedom, their charm energizes your social conscience, and their flexibility stretches your moral sense of the possible. (Bennett, 2001, p. 32)

Prefigurations may also sometimes be used as a critical tool. Because weak ontologists do thematize their prefigurations, it becomes possible to see that many theorists claiming stronger ontological groundings also use aesthetic notions to prefigure their moral–political enactments. Connolly (1995) discusses the way Alex de Tocqueville used a language of cultural regret to ward off any cross-cultural disturbances to his vision of the American civilization (pp. 167-173). The American civilization supported a robust and lively democratic politics on its surface but rested on an underlying and unquestioned common identity indelibly inscribed onto public mores through Protestant religion, family farming, and Anglo-Saxon township culture, written over a Rousseauian moral geography of the American continent. For Tocqueville, the celebrant of the unruliness of democracy, these deeper commitments must never themselves come into democratic contestation; rather, it is these institutions that predetermine, outside politics, the American political imagination. How, then, does one deal with native forms of life which, prior to the advent of the American civilization, had in the same places practiced animism, had wandered on but not possessed territory, and had used but not plowed the limitless fields? With regret. Natives are described by Tocqueville as ill-fated, unfortunate, and unlucky (p. 171). This language allowed Tocqueville to acknowledge the undeserved suffering of native victims of the American civilization but also justified that civilization’s doing nothing to curtail the suffering.

Tocqueville’s dilemma, according to Connolly (1995), was that he could not acknowledge that the sources of moral virtue might themselves
harbor, or even require, immoralities (p. 171). Tocqueville’s language of regret thus prefigures a hardening of moral boundaries and obscuring or forgetting of the violence those boundaries require.

Why should these considerations interest students of public administration? One might notice that all my examples of prefiguration involve opening oneself to calls from beyond conventional moral and cultural claims—radical novelty, nonhuman others, and unfortunate natives. If the heart of a new interactive public administration ethos is (customer) service (Breton & Temple, 1999; Sørensen, 2000), it still is important to contest which visions are worthy of being served and to question how such a public service ethos serves or disserves the many new others whose claims it might code as either threat or abundance. In contrast to weak ontology’s experimental prefigurations, in the next section I will turn to some treatments of administrative ethics that do not discuss ontological sources.

RESPONDING TO LIBERALISM

In the next two sections, I will consider two powerful objections to including an ontological dimension in administrative ethics. In this section, I will consider classical liberalism’s insistence on a neutral framework of procedures, and in the next section, I will discuss Weber’s claim that in a disenchanted world ontology is unavailable.

Thinkers representing the classical liberal tradition often frame our ethical predicament in terms of negative and positive liberty, where negative liberty refuses to subordinate free individuals to any overarching societal conception of the good (Moon, 1993, pp. 215-219; Rawls, 1971; Sandel, 1982; Spicer, 2003). Classical liberals are willing to control behavior but not motivation. They are willing to promulgate minimal rules to ensure civil peace for individuals, but they fear any suggestion that individuals exist for some purpose higher or more important than themselves (Kateb, 1992). However, in this section, I wish to stress two related points. First, classical liberals tend to understate the degree to which market societies have become neoliberal and that neoliberal practices already constitute a regime of positive governance aimed at orchestrating individual conduct (Foucault, 1991). Second, in this new neoliberal setting, liberal agnosticism about ethical sources exacerbates the problem of workplace ethics. Neoliberal workplaces depend on ethics as never before, yet neoliberal assumptions about the springs of ethical behavior contribute to making workplaces hotbeds of fear, distrust, suspicion, anger, and defensiveness.
Neoliberalism is a contested term, but as I am using it here, it refers to a form of governance that systematically ensures and regulates the stream of ongoing individual expectations (Engelmann, 2003), or, in Eva Sørensen’s (2002) terms, it is the regulation of self-regulation (p. 699). Perhaps the crucial difference between liberalism and neoliberalism is that although the former was characterized by a sovereign juridical state against which it was important to guard a vulnerable sphere of private rights, private property, and commercial markets, under neoliberalism, the purpose of the state is to ensure the continued thriving of the economy; that is, the economy is itself conceived here as a form of government. Where the classical liberal citizen was a bearer of rights, the neoliberal citizen is a subject of choices, and she or he normally chooses from menus she or he did not write. The logic of neoliberal government is not to leave people alone but to structure and secure, in a positive—even shepherdlike—way, the field of expectations within which choice takes place. Think of something as straightforward as zoning a parcel of land or as complicated as glamour and fashion advertising, or think about the need to provide a college education for your children or the need to constantly revisit the issue of your phone and Internet service as new gadgets displace services that were once adequate and stable. In all these cases, the field of choice is pre-structured to elicit particular styles and types of choice from individuals imagining alternative future satisfactions (Rose, 1998, 1999). Paradoxically, if the avenues, probabilities, and possibilities of satisfaction are pre-structured by the economic regime, then individual imaginations that work within the terms of those options also become constructed by that same regime. Choosers are made, not born.

What I would like to suggest is that our reticence to speak of moral sources is rooted in a complex interweaving of classical liberal with neoliberal commitments. In a gesture of agonistic cultivation, I hope to loosen somewhat the tie that binds them while encouraging whatever democratic energies may be harbored in each. I applaud classical liberalism’s commitments to individual autonomy, formal political rights, and democratic processes because people who have grown used to living according to these ideals are more likely to view impositions of power critically. However, when used in combination with neoliberal government, these high principles can provide a pretext for deploying managerial, disciplinary, and self-help regimes that far exceed what classical liberalism ought to mean by minimal rules. Because these rules are usually not promulgated by official state actors, liberals can plausibly deny that autonomy is in any way jeopardized.

To see how this affects the workplace, consider the case of an in-service school teacher working in an inner-city school and simultaneously
completing a master’s of public administration course in personnel management. Her assignment was to discuss the management style at her school in terms of Douglas McGregor’s (1960) classification of managers as either controlling (theory X) or participative (theory Y). Her response was that at her school, teacher–student relationships were expected to be modeled on theory Y, whereas administration–faculty relationships were modeled on theory X. Anecdotal discussion reveals that one would get similar employee responses in many service-providing organizations today: theory Y for customers, theory X for employees. The school teacher, unfortunately, took this to mean that students get away with murder while teachers are forbidden to do anything about it—and therefore liberals are to blame. However, I would like to call attention to what happens when we have to rely on amoral motivations to get ethical behavior. Because deeper discussions about the sources of ethical behavior are taboo, the only way to get kind, caring, and conscientious treatment for clients is to require it. However, under liberal presuppositions, one can only require the behavior, not the conviction that drives it. Furthermore, as Lewis Mainzer (1962) argued long ago, supervisors who do not themselves share the conviction, who are merely furthering their own careers, can demand that employees display the behavior (see also McSwite, 2002, p. 38). Even when employees believe in the standards to which they are being held, there is something highly dispiriting about having your highest values used for amoral ends.

Both public and private managers have developed a host of ways, both cooperative and commanding, to elicit the behavior they require. Take for instance a popular ethics text, *The Ethics Edge* (Berman, West, & Bonczek, 1998), published by the International City/County Management Association. From the perspective of city managers, ethics never involves having employees participate in the ethical direction of the organization. Rather ethics tends to be about employees’ “buy in” to managerial visions. It involves such things as clarifying the rules for disclosing criminal convictions or financial entanglements, enumerating the punishments for non-compliance, exhorting ethical enthusiasm (this ranges from bringing in motivational speakers to offering monetary incentives or junk food for high marks on customer satisfaction questionnaires), including ethics in annual performance reviews, and performing so-called ethics audits. All of these strategies are presented in a sort of self-help format as a way to positively make known management’s expectations so that employees can then structure their own choices and nurture realistic expectations.

Neoliberalism exacerbates these tendencies. Under neoliberal conditions, the individual whose ideals are left alone, or whose professional
expertise and discretion are honored, is also a choosing self and as such is presumed to bear a high degree of personal responsibility that in turn authorizes regimes of rules, regulations, incentives, and punishments to structure and secure not just her or his choices but also the menu of choices available to her or his supervisors, themselves responding to menus of choice presented by policy makers.

Under neoliberal conditions, what has made the host of managerial interventions so necessary, so possible, and so thinkable is that classical liberalism’s commitment to individual autonomy has morphed into dogmatic assignments of personal responsibility. Individuals are dogmatically conceived of as the products of their own choices. They are choosing selves rather than autonomous selves, and their choices have become intensely interesting to managers and public policy makers. But although it is easy in principle to fall back on doctrines of personal responsibility, in practice these doctrines defeat themselves because they all make morals depend on willpower while obscuring any need for ethos. It is easy to get everyone to buy in at a motivational seminar, but it is difficult to sustain the excitement in day-to-day administration when there is no ethos to sustain it. Why, in the absence of genuine care and concern, should a street-level administrator treat clients or coworkers respectfully? Or why should a supervisor treat street-level administrators respectfully? The only two answers that individualism can offer are to either remind one that one really does want to be a good person—hence motivational seminars—or, second, offer and spell out rewards and penalties for behavior—hence ethics codes, compliance officers, and performance reviews. There are many days, perhaps most days, when willpower without further reason is simply not enough. When exhortation is not enough, it gets replaced with a host of managerial techniques (Berman et al., 1998, pp. 61-156) all made necessary, the story goes, by the suboptimum choices of individuals. That is, assigning personal responsibility is the antidote for the inadequacy of using personal responsibility as the sole foundation for ethics.

Thus, the intertwining of neoliberal and classical liberal commitments, although it amounts to a sort of default ontology of moral inspiration, makes it extremely difficult to thematize those inspirations or to introduce any alternative discussion of ethos. Rohr (1978) has long complained that in many professional training manuals, ethical behavior “is reduced to staying out of trouble” (p. 54). Liberalism’s conception of the neutral framework of minimal rules, at least in alliance with neoliberalism, contributes to this nay-saying managerial ethic by its overemphasis on the doctrine of personal responsibility.
According to Jeffrey Pfeffer (2003), the loss during the past 10 years of security in employment, as both business and government downsize, merge, use temporary employees, subcontract, and outsource their services and production overseas, has left behind workplaces characterized by fear, pressure, and impermanence, with employees who are less loyal, less committed, angrier, and more disaffected (p. 29). Managers and business leaders, trying to improve service, productivity, honesty, and civility, have responded with expensive, if unsuccessful, motivational and ethical campaigns and have lately even turned to workplace spirituality (García-Zamor, 2003, p. 316; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). Employees are often very skeptical of these campaigns. Many compensate by becoming self-protective at work and demanding high pay to indulge immediate and plentiful material satisfactions in the world of consumer choice. Surprisingly, however, another powerful response has been a greater demand that work itself be more intrinsically rewarding, that it encourage creativity, personal growth, and even spirituality. What weak ontology might contribute to this situation is its insistence that care needs to be taken to acknowledge and honor what attaches people to life and that these attachments often differ. We cannot expect neoliberal governance to go away, but neither do people need to be merely artifacts of neoliberal power. This might be the opening for which some theorists in public administration have recently been looking to reassert a liberal zone of privacy (Fox, 2003; Miller, 2002; Spicer, 2003). Weak ontology may be able to help further just such a zone by, paradoxically, enlivening the ways in which, again to use Sørensen’s (2000) term, we regulate self-regulation.

WEBER AND DISENCHANTMENT

For commentators on administrative ethics such as Thompson (1987, p. 8), appealing to ontological sources is problematic because we live in a pluralist society. Usually these thinkers propose some minimal set of individualistic values, procedures, or legal frameworks on which, it is maintained, everyone—at least everyone committed to living under pluralism—can agree. Everyone should be willing to accept these minimal commitments because it is the only way to get a consensus on solutions to our common problems. The idea is that we can agree about conclusions and solutions to problems, but we might never agree about principles or what I have been calling ontological sources. This characterization helps support the emphasis in administrative ethics on rules, sanctions,
punishments, and incentives because disciplinary techniques are presumed not to interfere with the plural and subjective nature of belief while at the same time responding to the need for collective action and administrative accountability.

Interestingly, Weber (1946b) made a similar argument in “Science as a Vocation,” but he reversed its terms. Instead of arguing that because we are plural, ontology is unavailable, Weber argued that because ontology is unavailable, we are plural. For Weber, our culture’s increasing commitment to intellectualization and rationalization, especially as embodied in experimental science, in practice means that we believe and behave as though “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather ... one can, in principle, master all things by calculation,” and therefore, “the world is disenchanted” (p. 139).

Why is a world that is “in principle” calculable therefore disenchanted? Disenchantment, for Weber, is the view that the world has been drained of any obviously intrinsic meaning or transcendent purpose. Magical means are no longer used to master or implore the spirits because technology and calculation now perform that service. However, according to Weber, modern science does not merely replace an exclusively Christian worldview with an exclusively scientific one. Rather, because science still requires inspiration but cannot account for it, disenchantment creates a certain polytheism. “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” (Weber, 1946b, p. 149).

Weber’s characterization of our society as pluralistic, then, presupposes a world already disenchanted. This characterization undermines somewhat the classical liberal story because it reverses its logic and underscores the crucial role that rationalization and disenchantment play in creating the pluralism liberalism celebrates and usually takes as simply given. What will concern us is the difference this makes for theories of governance. If one focuses on pluralism, one tends to talk in terms that prefigure a consenting individual, terms such as reason, choice, rights, and interests. If one focuses instead on disenchantment, one is more likely to speak in terms of insecurities, routines, methods, and discipline. If liberalism is more caught up in the disenchantment story than it usually acknowledges, then it is also implicated in governmental regimes that do not square well with its emphasis on rational consent. I will try to undermine the disenchantment thesis a little by exposing its disciplinary role in bureaucratic governance, but I also want to claim that Weber’s characterization of plural gods is on to something important for
weak ontology. First, I must say a little more about Weber’s understanding of the modern predicament.

In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber (1930/1993) argued that Calvinism developed the notion of the mundane profession as a vocation. Calvinists did not seek salvation in monasteries but in the ordinary occupations of life (p. 154). Calvinism had inherited from medieval nominalism an emphasis on God’s inscrutable omnipotence. To say that God is omnipotent means that any human claim to know God’s will puts limitations on God because it assumes that God must conform to human conceptions of what is good or holy. Because an omnipotent God can have no limits, consistent nominalists conclude we have no way of knowing whether or not our conceptions are adequate to God. Although the doctrine can be modified by one’s view of revelation, in its most unlimited form, this doctrine leaves the believer in a state of radical uncertainty.

According to Weber, the doctrine of omnipotence served two purposes for Calvin. First, it rendered priests (and sacraments) superfluous because they could possess no privileged knowledge of salvation. Second, it intensified faith. Because Calvinism also stressed the role of damnation, Calvinists were left intensely aware of their precarious position. Because the doctrine closed off the way to sacramental relief—which Weber calls magical relief—Calvinists were left to work out their salvation in their ordinary pursuits, working in unrelieved uncertainty against a powerful notion of damnation, never knowing whether their efforts made any ultimate difference.

Sheldon Wolin (1981/1984) has argued that this anxious Calvinist is the model for Weber’s later articulations of both the heroic politician and the scientific researcher. For Weber, Puritanism was rational in the sense that it drained magic from the world and turned ordinary life into a method, “a life of good works combined into a unified system” (Weber, 1930/1993, p. 117). For Weber, in prehistory rationalization was part of magic (Weber, 1978, pp. 422-432). Both magic and ethics started out as ways to set up a system of obligations between humans and the cosmic order, for instance, to ensure rain for crops. Interestingly, what disenchants this instrumental–ethical relation is not science or intellectual activity itself. Weber notes that for millennia belief was compatible with great scientific and philosophical systems (Weber, 1946b). What disenchants the world is experimental science. Experimental science does its work only to be superseded by more experimental science. “Scientific work is chained to the course of progress . . . and this progress goes on *ad infinitum*” (Weber quoted in Wolin, 1981/1984, p. 76; Weber, 1946b, p. 138). Thus, science, the foster child of nominalism, knows it is not
uncovering ultimate truth in Plato’s sense. Science cannot even know the ultimate meaning of science or whether any given project within science is or is not significant.

Because science cannot give itself a meaning, how does it know what to study? The answer, according to Weber, is that culture gives scientific projects a sort of relative significance. The job of interpreting culture and articulating its significances belongs to the social scientist. Wolin (1981/1984) insists that Weber’s social scientist fills the role of the classical political theorist, except that for a modern theorist, the ultimate truth of classical theory gives way to the provisional truths of modernity. Furthermore, these provisional truths are in incessant competition.

[As] long as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. Or speaking directly, the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion. Thus it is necessary to make a decisive choice. (Weber, 1946b, p. 152)

Why do Puritans, scientists, and politicians participate in these systematically methodical enterprises that have no ultimate meaning or at least none that one who labors this way could ever know? Weber was adamant that self-interest played no real part. For the Puritan, he says, it was fear of eternal damnation, but then we learn that later the logic of money making—a logic of ad infinitum not so different from the logic Weber attributed to experimental science—simply crowded out any spiritualist motivation. Why, then, do capitalists continue to expand their holdings?

What seems to intensify everyone and keep them plugging away and looking for new inspirations about how to rationalize ever more areas of life in ever more methodical ways is the radical uncertainty caused by disenchantment itself. When Weber considers the question of why we do science, his answer is, over and over, that the world is disenchanted. When we say science makes no presuppositions, this is not literally true: Science assumes method and logic are valid. Science, it turns out, is presuppositionless only in the sense of refusing to articulate ontological presuppositions.

For governance, we can notice that because no one knows what is cosmically correct, disenchantment gives rise to both the proliferation of irreconcilable “ultimately possible attitudes towards life” (Weber, 1946b, p. 152) and the need to decide which of them to choose. This, in turn, gives rise to the social scientific function of clarifying what the various options entail and aiding people in achieving self-clarity (pp. 151-152). Individuals participate because they are in a Puritan-like bind of trying to create by methodical action some value that is cosmically obscure.
Because of progress, what we seize is always something provisional, but values still remain operative. Like the scientist, each still tries to perform significant work and consume significant products in a world where one can never be sure. Perhaps, speaking as a weak ontologist, it would help to give a name to what Weber refers to variously as inspiration, gods, polytheism, values, and forces. Let us call them attachments to life and affirm with Weber that they are indeed plural. We might then sum up Weber’s discussion by saying that he has shown how, in late-modern society, the attachment to life, the search for vitality, takes place in such a way that it never experiences completion or even knows if it is on the right track. One searches for an elusive “more” but always suspects that one is being shortchanged.

In current practices of governance, it is not hard to discern, as Weber predicted, a proliferation of discourses offering clarification. The literature of governmentality catalogues in detail how practices of individuality become invested by relations of power such that individuals come to enact socially prescribed duties as their own concern (Berry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996; Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991; Rose, 1998, 1999; Smandych, 1999). In late-modern governmental regimes, citizens become self-administrators who constantly seek to enhance their chances of living well by bringing the details of their lives in line with expertly promulgated norms of health, wealth, beauty, happiness, risk, danger, security, and so on. One quote from Nikolas Rose (1998) might help clarify what is meant:

The guidance of selves is no longer dependent on the authority of religion or traditional morality; it has been allocated to “experts of subjectivity” who transfigure existential questions about the purpose of life and the meaning of suffering into technical questions of the most effective ways of managing malfunction and improving “quality of life.” (p. 151)

In the past several years, Western democracies have proliferated a number of strategies and techniques aimed at the creation, preservation, and enhancement of an ideal norm that we might oversimplify as enterprising responsible individuality. Individuals, according to this norm, are primarily self-actualizing beings who choose, think, judge, spend, save, and invest in terms of knowledge and information gleaned from an array of expert discourses and statistical studies. What is remarkable is the extent to which such people form their self-knowledge in reference to their approximation to or deviation from publicly promulgated norms of, say, happiness, health, wealth, beauty, knowledge, risk, or dangerousness and in the same gesture enact public policy. “The apparently ‘public’ issue of rationalities of government is fundamentally linked to the apparently
‘private’ question of how we should behave, how we should regulate our own conduct, how we should judge our behavior and that of others” (Rose, 1998, p. 77).

The danger presented by the disenchantment of the world is not so much the hedonistic “anything goes” feared by fundamentalist theists, nor is it the war of all against all feared by secularist Liberals. The most serious danger is the dismal regularity of a busy, methodical, and aggressive docility. It is hard to imagine such a regime of governance without the disenchantment of the world, the proliferation of pluralism, the necessity of choosing between them, and experts who help us clarify our situation.

ETHICS AND ENCHANTMENT (TRASH COLLECTION)

Bennett (2001) has a weak ontological strategy for undermining Weber’s disenchantment diagnosis. “One way to call into question the diagnosis of disenchantment is to recall alternative stories about the nature of things” (p. 84). Bennett’s strategy is to foreground cultural sites that ought not to exist in a disenchanted world. Bennett’s book explicates multiple sites of wonder, joy, and enchantment even as, like Cannon, she acknowledges things such as environmental degradation, injustice, and inequity. Unlike Cannon, however, Bennett does not locate the ontological sources of her positive ethos in theism. Rather, she refers to what she espouses by such terms as quasi-pagan or enchanted materialism or, simply, enchantment.

“To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday” (Bennett, 2001, p. 4). One is both pleasantly charmed by something novel and shaken by an uncanny “feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one’s default sensory-psycho-intellectual disposition” (p. 5).

The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one’s nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged—a shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life . . . in early modern Europe, the terms for wonder and wonders—admiratio, mirabiolia, miracula—“seem to have their roots in an Indo-European word for ‘smile.’” (Bennett, 2001, p. 5)

Enchantment also contains the idea of a certain kind of musical experience, the chant. Chants, unlike Weber’s progressive sense of ad infinitum, cast a spell with sounds that repeat. Repetition can eventually render
a meaningful phrase nonsensical but can also “provoke new ideas, perspectives, and identities” (Bennett, 2001, p. 6). This can give one a new sense of things. One might become a sort of garbage picker, reusing and recycling experiences that the usual story of disenchantment encourages us to ignore. Kafka’s *The Trial*, for instance, is a story of a man being wronged by a civilization that believes it has been done a cosmic disservice because it has been, through no fault of its own, disenchanted (p. 6). (It is, of course, regrettable that this causes so much grief to Josef K, but the officials did not ask to be disenchanted. It is not their fault.) But meanwhile, Kafka notices that from time to time, and with no significance to his story, there are neighbors across the way looking out their window. It is possible to understand Kafka to be iterating how disenchanted modern life has become. These neighbors, after all, do not even care what happens to Josef K. But Kafka might just as well be taken to be saying that our myopic focus on Josef K’s misfortunes has led us to edit out and lose sight of all the teeming life and love that do not build our preferred disenchanted case. The old woman across the way is one day seen with her arm around the waist an even older man.

Bennett’s (2001) formulation highlights several unexamined assumptions in the disenchantment thesis. What we are “dissed” from, says Bennett, is a transcendent objective source on the model of Plato’s sun or the monotheistic Christian God. Both theists and secularists agree about this. But who said that a world without a transcendental design or teleology could not contain sources of enchantment?

Disenchantment tales too often feed into the reduction of ethics to a will to obedience. Consider the too familiar pattern in most texts on ethics. We might think here of a typical work on environmental degradation or a conservative theist decrying the liberal secularist slide into immorality or an ethics professor alarmed at the state of administrative ethics. The author usually claims that things are bad and getting worse and that some particular set of people is to blame. This sets a trap. The ethicist has become invested in enumerating ongoing examples of deterioration and finding ever-new instances of infraction by the offending group. Increasingly, the ethicist will overlook anything good because if the world turned out to have any enchantment left in it, there would be no reason to resent the culprits and to make rules and sanctions with them in mind. Indeed, bureaucrats are often scapegoats in such stories.

For Bennett (2001), the problem with disenchantment tales is that they contribute to the problem they identify by insistently reiterating the dead, dispirited state of society or culture or nature while actively discouraging
any discernment of the marvelous vitality that runs through people and the world. If the world were as meaningless or degraded or disenchanted as ethicists say it is, it is hard to know why anyone would bother doing good things in it.

I tell my alter-tale because it seems to me that presumptive generosity, as well as the will to social justice, are sustained by periodic bouts of being enamored with existence, and that it is too hard to love a disenchanted world. (p. 12)

The idea is that ethics is more likely to come from joy than from resentment. Bennett (2001) points out that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra denigrated pity for sufferers, not because he despised sufferers but because he found that he did them more good when he learned to feel better joys (p. 12). “And learning better to feel joy, we best unlearn how to do harm to others and to contrive harm” (Nietzsche, quoted in Bennett, 2001, p. 13). In a world that does not make itself perfectly amenable to your moral expectations and in which your most deeply held ethical sensibilities are not universally honored, the disenchantment story contained in a typical ethics text redirects your existential resentment into a will to punish. On the other hand, joy can help to “unlearn how to do harm” because it is less interested in retribution and more interested in living.

This brings up the problem of contingency, mentioned earlier. We saw that this problem shows up in Weber’s work as the fact of plural gods and in the work of public administration ethicists in such phrases as “in a polity marked by disagreement about fundamental values” (Thomson, 1987, p. 8). And we discovered through an exploration of Weber that this notion is tightly tied to the tale of disenchantment. Bennett (2001) challenges this story in many ways, but one interesting move is to challenge its insistence that the gap between different ontological sources is unbridgeable. She does this by exploring an alternative story of materialism, that of the Epicureans.

Unlike in the modern disenchantment tale, for Epicurus matter was not dead lifeless stuff. Epicureans told a fundamental tale of a world without divine purpose, meaning, or command that was still full of liveliness and surprises. In the Epicurean onto-story, there is no design, but sometimes atoms, which normally fall together in parallel lines, take a quirky swerve (Bennett, 2001, p. 81). This starts it. The atoms, running into one another and “trying unions and experiments of every kind” (p. 81), eventually “fall into such dispositions” as create our world. Before you scoff, you should know that a tale much like this lies at the heart of recent research into nanotechnologies (p. 84), is not terribly far from
some complexity theories, and is very close to the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987; Massumi, 1992, pp. 61-69). For Bennett (2001) the point of these examples is to offer a different account of contingency. Because everything is ultimately made of the same stuff and everything is also a hybrid, that is, “created of well-mingled seed” (p. 82), Epicurean materialism does not require a strict wall of separation between living humans and dead matter, nor does it require a strict gulf between self and other. As an imaginative way to picture the relations between self, others, and the world, it breaks down the incommensurability implied in our usual gesture at pluralism. This alter-tale shows that our choice need not be confined between an enchanted world created by design and a dry lifeless world jumbled together by chance. Here is the ethical implication:

The negotiation of significant differences between human beings is more likely when all the parties involved have overcome, in one way or another, their resentment against the contingency of being. And so, more than confronting the bitter end that is death and the unbridgeable chasm that is the Other, the ethical task is to en-joy life with discipline, to receive it with wonder and to add, by one’s actions, to its stock of joy. (Bennett, 2001, p. 88)

To conclude, I have suggested that a generous ethos of public service is more likely to thrive in a world of onto-pluralism than in one of either metaphysical abstinence or theistic assertion. Both of the latter, relying on the disenchantment story, respond to the contingency of being by first deepening and making unbridgeable the gaps between people and the world and then becoming more disillusioned with a world that refuses to tolerate difference, or that refuses to turn to God, or that refuses to curb its drive to technologically master the planet, or that refuses to assign or take personal responsibility for its own misfortunes. But an ethos of weak ontological pluralism, in which onto-stories are both honored and contestable, is one that can better acknowledge contingency without overcoding it with prohibitions, disciplines, and rules.

REFERENCES


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