

On October 1, 2016 the magazine *The Economist* published [an article](#) entitled “A tale of two ethics”, which applied the famous distinction proposed by Max Weber between the “ethic of responsibility” and the “ethic of conviction” to the leadership of Angela Merkel. In a nutshell, the article suggested that Merkel has betrayed her usual ethic of responsibility in dealing with the refugee crisis. But is it really so? Would Max Weber criticize her for her stance on the matter?

Responsibility and conviction: an unbridgeable gulf?

Max Weber’s *Politics as Vocation* is rightly considered a classic of political theory and political science. In this essay, written for a speech delivered to the “Free Students Union” in 1919, Weber puts forward some of his key ideas, such as: the definition of the state as an entity which has a monopoly over the use of legitimate coercive power in a given territory; the descriptive conception of legitimacy; the well-known discussion about charisma and leaders. Crucially important for anyone interested in politics and in the evaluation of politicians and statesmen is the final section of the essay, in which Weber discusses the kind of reasons that should motivate and guide political actors in their public lives. There, Weber distinguishes between the ethic of conviction, which is deontological in nature and requires political agents to follow their core values and not compromising them, and the ethic of responsibility, which is consequentialist in nature and requires political agents to calculate causes and effects in order to achieve their desired goals. According to the ethic of conviction, certain actions and means are off the table, despite the good outcomes they may bring about. On the contrary, according to the ethic of responsibility, it is necessary to choose the correct means to achieve the good outcomes the agent wants to bring about.

Weber deems the ethics of conviction risky, for it can degenerate in a form of chauvinism of the ends. Indeed, if the ends a political agent wants to attain cannot be compromised, then any means may be allowed in order to secure such ends.

It is no secret that Weber assigns priority to the ethics of responsibility: a good politician is

the one who is responsible and, thus, attempts to acquire an objective understanding of the empirical world in order to understand the best course of action available, given the circumstances. Moreover, Weber deems the ethics of conviction risky, for it can degenerate in a form of chauvinism of the ends. Indeed, if the ends a political agent wants to attain are extremely important and cannot be compromised, then it might be the case that any means may be allowed in order to secure such ends. This is clear when Weber talks about the case of the revolutionary socialist, who would choose more years of war in order to have the revolution, instead of peace now and no revolution.

The ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction go hand in hand because the latter represents an indispensable corrective to the former. The good politician is, for Weber, the one able to produce a good combination of the two ethics with a sheer force of will.

It is often said that the gulf between the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction is unbridgeable for Weber. And *The Economist* seems to agree with this reading. In “A tale of two ethics”, it is said not only that the distinction between the two ethics is vivid and vibrant among German politicians—who can indeed be grouped with respect to such distinction—but also that Angela Merkel, who is usually ranked within the “responsibility group”, has instead chosen the ethic of conviction in tackling the refugee crisis. This move, the article continues, may be problematic in terms of the coherence of her political action. But is it true that the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility are such worlds apart? And is it correct to think that Merkel went against Weber’s advice in fostering a “welcome culture” and in offering help to any human being in need and forced to migrate?

An indispensable corrective

Pace *The Economist*, Angela Merkel can be seen as a true Weberian actor with respect to the migration crisis. Indeed, according to Weber, it is impossible to deny the deep and great tension between consequentialism and deontology, between the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction. However, such tension should not lead one to think that the two can

be useful in isolation. Although the ethic of responsibility should have primacy over that of conviction, they should be forcefully brought together. The ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction go hand in hand because the latter represents an indispensable corrective to the former. The good politician is, for Weber, the one able to produce a good combination of the two ethics with a sheer force of will. This is, in the last analysis, the politician who has the vocation (*Berufspolitiker*).

Taken by itself, the ethic of responsibility too is risky, for it may be too adaptive in terms of the empirical realm of real possibilities. The ethic of conviction provides the ethic of responsibility with several fundamental filters. First, it sets a limit on the kind of means that can be used to achieve an end. Second, it provides politicians with the ideals and ideas to go beyond the status quo. As Weber himself writes, “man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible”. Finally, the crucial trait Weber wants to preserve from the ethic of conviction is the idea that certain moral principles should not be compromised, that it is important for a politician to be resolute and determinate in defending some of his or her values. Sometimes, it is necessary for a politician with vocation, who is guided by the ethic of responsibility, to say “Here I stand; I can do no other”.

In this sense, if the complex relation between the two ethics is acknowledged, Angela Merkel’s attitude towards the refugee crisis can be evaluated as perfectly Weberian in claiming equal dignity and care for any human being running away from a terrible and bloody war.

Photo Credits CC [Ralf Roletschek](#)