

Ethics and Society: A Theory of Comparative Worldviews

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Abstract

This article outlines a theist social science paradigm. The central thesis, derived from the assumption of an omnibenevolent and powerful God, is the Law of Divine Selection. It states that the motives of people, or the worldviews they adopt, fundamentally determine their society's organization and evolution. In particular, the more hedonic or Nietzscheist a society is, the less progressed it will be, and the more ascetic a society is, the more progressed it will be. This provides a consistent and parsimonious explanation of many puzzles in macro-historical studies, among them the Great Divergence between the West and China, the sudden eruption of the two World Wars, and the religious distribution of Nobel Laureates.

Keywords: methodological atheism, theodicy, social evolution, worldview, Max Weber, Arnold J. Toynbee

1. Revisiting Methodological Atheism in Social Science

One of the core dogmas in modern social science is methodological atheism, which maintains that “all scientific explanation must be this-worldly, never referencing supernatural or transcendental realities” (Porpora 2006:57). Until the second half of the nineteenth century, social scientists were free to use expressions such as “it is not necessary that God himself should speak in order that we may discover the unquestionable signs of his will” (de Tocqueville 1840:8). However, since the beginning of the twentieth century, any social scientist who dares to speak in favor of God in their research will be quickly declared the enemy of science and ostracized from the scientific community, as evidenced by the tragic fate of Arnold J. Toynbee (McIntire and Perry 1989), the famous British historian who claimed that “human affairs are recalcitrant to laws of Nature” (Toynbee 1961:609), and that history is “a vision of God’s creation on the move” (Toynbee 1987b:350).

The most common reason for excluding theism from social science is the positivist attack that the concept of God is transcendental and non-falsifiable, and consequently, fails to qualify as an object for scientific studies. However, such an argument is based on a deeply flawed understanding of the nature of science (and human knowledge in general). No scientific theory can permit falsifiability for each of its elements because a scientific theory is “a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edge” (Quine 1951:39). Even the most commonly-known scientific concepts, such as force, magnetism, and genes, are non-falsifiable “cultural posits” to work “a manageable structure into the flux of experience” and, epistemologically, differ from God “only in degree and not in kind” (Quine 1951:41).

Secularists’ only epistemologically valid argument for excluding God from social science is that, as a cultural posit, it is less efficacious than other social science concepts, such as sub-consciousness, institutions, and economic fundamentals, for rationalizing human nature and social evolution. This article shows that this viewpoint is also untenable and that a monotheist God can serve as the core concept of a promising social science paradigm, which can answer many historical and sociological grand questions in a particularly parsimonious manner.

God is commonly portrayed as the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnibenevolent creator, enjoyer (bearer of meaning), and controller of the universe, or a being that possesses a subset of these attributes. Such a being, if it exists, will undoubtedly affect the course of human affairs. In particular, it must in a certain way reward virtue and punish evil in the material world (Plantinga 1974; Swinburne 1998). Like the physical concept of force, which can only deliver testable implications when combined with other definitions such as velocity, acceleration, and mass, theories such as Newton’s laws and other auxiliary statements about the properties of the physical objects, the concept of God cannot deliver testable implications by itself. To (re)introduce the concept of God into social science to build a theist research paradigm, we need to specify the necessary auxiliary concepts and statements about humans and human society.

This article is divided into two parts. The first part consists of Section 2, which concerns metaphysical constructions. Propositions 1 and 2 discuss the definition of God, auxiliary definitions such as good and evil, and auxiliary theories about the will and power of God. The logical implication of Propositions 1 and 2 is Proposition 3, which is a law of social evolution named the Law of Divine Selection. In contrast to materialistic laws of social evolution such as historical materialism and social Darwinism, it states that the fundamental determinant of social evolution is the motive, or worldview, of people rather than any material conditions. Proposition 3 is a formalization of Toynbee’s conjecture that “man does not live under one law only; he lives under two laws: a ‘Law of Nature’ and a ‘Law of God’” (Toynbee 1987b:ch.38).

The second part consists of Sections 3, 4, 5, and 6, which discuss the properties of various human actions and societies to generate empirical statements from Proposition 3. Section 3 discusses what human actions can be derived from the will of humans and what can be derived

from the will of God. Section 4 constructs ideal types of worldview. Section 5 discusses the nature of social progress, technology, and institutions, and the social consequences of worldviews. Section 6 applies Proposition 3 to resolve several puzzles in macro-historical studies, including the Great Divergence between the West and China (Weber 1915; Needham 1969; Pomeranz 2000), the religious distribution of Nobel Laureates in science (Berry 1981), and the sudden eruption of the two World Wars after the “greatest age of peace in Europe’s history” (Palmer, Colton, and Lloyd 2002:611).

2. Morals and the Law of Divine Selection

Throughout this article, God is considered narrowly as an omnibenevolent ruler who has the will and power to reward those who serve it and punish those who do not. This is not to say that the other attributes traditionally assumed of God are wrong, but that they are unnecessary for the ensuing discussion. This idea is formalized by two Propositions. The first proposition states that for humans, motives can only come from three sources, the body, the genes, and God.¹

2.1. *Morality and the Will and Power of God*

Proposition 1 (The Nature of Morals)

Any human action is teleological, and is driven by one or more of the three fundamental motives: the hedonic motive, the survival motive, and the sacrificial motive, where the hedonic motive comes from the body, the survival motive comes from the genes, and the sacrificial motive comes from God.

- The hedonic motive drives humans to pursue pleasure.
- The survival motive drives humans to pursue power, which is defined as the ability to acquire life-sustaining resources.
- The sacrificial motive drives humans to sacrifice the pursuit of pleasure and power.²

Proposition 1 posits that humans differ from animals in nature in the sense that the human’s meaning of life is more than their body and genes. It rejects the secularist claim that

¹ What names these three sources of meaning are called is a purely semantic issue and inconsequential for the following arguments. The point is that pleasure-seeking is of individual origins, power-seeking is of genetic/evolutionary origins, and there is a being that drives humans to renounce both pleasure-seeking and power-seeking.

² Tolstoy (2010:808) offers a literary depiction of the sacrificial motive: “he now experienced a glad consciousness that everything constitutes men’s happiness – the comforts of life, wealth, and life itself – is rubbish it is pleasant to throw away, compared with something... With what? Pierre could not say, and he did not try to determine for whom and for what he felt such particular delight in sacrificing everything. He was not occupied with the question of what to sacrifice for, the fact of sacrificing in itself afforded him a new and joyous sensation.”

humans differ from animals only in acquired characteristics, such as intelligence, technology, and institutions, but not in nature.³ Proposition 1 implies that right and wrong, good and evil, and virtue and vice can only be defined with respect to the motive. The desire to satisfy other earthly entities beside the body and the genes, such as a nation state, a religious leader, the natural environment, liberty, or justice, can always be traced back to the three basic motives. Worldview can be defined as an answer to the ultimate teleological questions: “What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of our existence?” (Kalberg 2004:140). Since human actions are always teleological, every human holds a worldview, regardless of whether they consciously contemplate it.

The second proposition posits that God is an omnibenevolent ruler who has the power to reward virtue and punish evil. Here virtue and evil are defined with respect to the sacrificial motive, that is, an individual or society that follows the sacrificial motive is virtuous, and an individual or society that follows the hedonic or survival motive is evil.

Proposition 2 (The Will and Power of God)

- God wants humans to be virtuous, that is, to serve God rather than pursue pleasure and power.
- God wants and has the ability to reward the virtuous with more pleasure and power and punish the evil with less pleasure and power.

If God has both the will and power to reward virtue and punish evil in the material world, God’s will must manifest materially in human history. Assuming God possesses the attributes specified in Propositions 1 and 2, the question is whether we can derive a law-like rule for the manifestation of God’s will in human affairs. To prepare for this discussion, we call an individual or society that follows the hedonic motive hedonic, one that follows the survival motive Nietzscheist, and one that follows the sacrificial motive ascetic. What then is the reward and punishment law that can be deduced from Propositions 1 and 2?

2.2. *The Law of Divine Selection*

The first possibility is to individually reward the virtuous with more pleasure and power, and punish the evil with less pleasure and power, which is the idea behind the common saying: “Good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil.” However, such a rule is self-defeating. If virtue is always rewarded with pleasure and power, it is not virtue anymore, because virtue is defined as the voluntary renouncement of individual pleasure and power. The same goes for evil. To make sure that virtue and evil are genuine, an individual must receive less pleasure and

³ “The present development of human beings requires, as it seems to me, no different explanation from that of animals” (Freud 1920:35).

power should they choose virtue over evil.⁴ This must also hold in any alternative worlds where an individual's existence is hypothesized to continue in certain forms after death.⁵

Since an individual always receives less pleasure and power by being virtuous and more pleasure and power by being evil, God's reward for virtue and the punishment for evil must be delivered to other individuals. Consequently, for a society of individuals, the more virtuous it is, the more likely it will receive more pleasure and power, and the more evil it is, the more likely it will receive less pleasure and power. This statement is probabilistic because one society's choice between good and evil will have consequences for another society. The reward for virtue and punishment for evil only hold strictly for the entirety of humankind throughout history.

Humans can know that their virtue and evil will lead to reward and punishment for other people at uncertain times in the future, but they will never know what the rewards and punishments will be, to whom they will be delivered, and at what time. God prohibits humans from understanding the precise consequences of their morality, so they must never be satisfied with "partial" virtues and must always fear the punishment from God.

The above analysis is key to this article: in our world, although the virtuous are collectively rewarded, they are individually punished; although the evil are collectively punished, they are individually rewarded. Therefore, the world is an altar where the individual sacrifices of the virtuous are collectively rewarded and the individual sacrileges of the evil are collectively punished. Said alternatively, for humankind to prosper, the virtuous must sacrifice themselves to redeem the sacrileges of the evil. God's reward and punishment law can be summarized as the following proposition, which consists of three statements:

Proposition 3 (The Law of Divine Selection)

1. For an individual, the more hedonic they are, the more pleasure they can expect; the more Nietzscheist they are, the more power they can expect; the more ascetic they are, the less pleasure and power they can expect.
2. For a society of individuals, Statement 1 is partially reversed: the more hedonic it is, the less pleasure it is likely to acquire; the more Nietzscheist it is, the less power it is likely to acquire; the more ascetic it is, the more pleasure and power it is likely to acquire. This uncertainty gradually disappears with increased size of the society and time span.

⁴ The classical (Epicurus) formulation of the Problem of Evil is based on flawed semantics. It conflates evil from the hedonic and survival perspectives, which is the lack of pleasure and power (pain and suffering), with that from the sacrificial perspective, which is the desire for pleasure and power. Alternatively speaking, it conflates the will of humans and the will of God. According to God's will, the virtuous must face more pain and suffering than the evil because that is the definition of virtue. The existence of suffering by no means contradicts the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God.

⁵ "Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hopes of reward after death" (Einstein 2010:39).

3. For the entirety of humankind, Statement 1 is completely reversed: the more hedonic we are, the less pleasure we will acquire; the more Nietzscheist we are, the less power we will acquire; the more ascetic we are, the more pleasure and power we will acquire.⁶

Significantly, Proposition 3 challenges two core dogmas of modern social science: a) materialism or functionalism, because it claims that the motives, meanings of life, or worldviews of the people of a society fundamentally determine its evolution; b) Darwinism, because it claims that human society progresses by individuals sacrificing their pleasure and power rather than by individuals fighting each other for survival (power). It can be viewed as an extension of Weber's interpretive sociology which puts the study of humans' perceived meaning of life at the center of social studies (Weber 1905; 1920). It also formalizes Toynbee's hypothesis that "history was a theodicy in which progress was measured by an awareness of God" (Perry 1989:101), and that the study of material factors should be subordinate to the study of religious factors.⁷

Within the proposition, Statement 1 can be seen as a more generalized form of the Law of Natural Selection or the survival of the fittest, Statement 2 concerns humankind as a totality and its empirical test is more suitable for anthropological studies, and Statement 3 is a comparative historical statement that can be applied to the comparative development of different societies with a sufficiently large scale and a stable combination of the motives of the people. This means the comparative development of civilizations (Toynbee 1987a; 1987b; Huntington 1996), which are large-scale societies holding a relatively uniform worldview, provides the most straightforward test of Proposition 3. However, before moving on to empirical studies, more auxiliary statements about the morality that can be derived from the three basic motives must be specified, and a theoretical scheme to classify the worldviews of civilizations proposed.

3. Pleasure, Power, and Sacrifice

Proposition 1 says that humans must choose to serve one or more of their body, their genes, and God, without which their life will be meaningless. To establish its validity, we show that the three basic motives can rationalize most of, if not all, human actions. We first examine what human actions can be derived from each of the three basic motives, and then what actions can be derived from their combinations.

⁶ Statement 3 can be viewed as a sociological reinterpretation of the biblical story "the binding of Isaac," with Abraham symbolizing the entire humankind and Isaac symbolizing evolutionary advantage. When every human being is willing to renounce their evolutionary advantage, no one needs to make the sacrifice, and humankind as a collective receives the greatest evolutionary advantage.

⁷ "In general, I minimize the effect of material factors of all kinds, economic and technical as well as military, and I magnify the effects of spiritual factors" (Toynbee 1961:609).

3.1. *Pleasure*

Humans have the natural tendency to seek pleasure, a broad class of enjoyable mental states, and avoid pain. Pleasure and pain can take numerous distinct forms. For this analysis, it suffices to look at two characteristics of pleasure without providing a complete characterization.

The first characteristic is that the body does not distinguish between reality and mental illusion. Since it takes less pain to gather material resources to achieve illusions, the body instructs the person to indulge in intoxicating substances and avoid repetitive tasks⁸ beyond those to satisfy basic biological needs. Consequently, a hedonist cannot be productive. The second characteristic is compassion (Hume 1751:43-44). Other peoples' sufferings can cause pain to oneself, so the body will in general not drive one to hurt others. However, as the body is the ultimate enjoyer of pleasure, it will neither drive one to sacrifice oneself for other people.

A hedonist's actions can be mostly summarized as debauchery, to actively pursue pleasure, and idleness and cowardice, to passively avoid pain. This means that a hedonist is useless and mostly harmless: they will neither perform great good nor commit great evil. They will neither facilitate nor directly impede social progress, and will be quickly eliminated and forgotten in any society.

3.2. *Power*

Humans have the natural tendency to seek power, or the ability to acquire more material resources. This is because the genes need as many host bodies as possible to multiply themselves, and the host bodies need resources to survive (Dawkins 1976). Since life-supporting resources are limited, but genes multiply exponentially, the genes instruct their hosts to fight and dominate the hosts of other genes to achieve the maximal chance of survival. Therefore, the survival motive can also be called the conquering motive, the instinct to dominate, or the will to power (Nietzsche 1887). We call a person who follows the survival motive a Nietzscheist, because Nietzsche's works provide the most accurate characterization of the will to power, and played a pivotal role in the conversion of the West to secularism.

Animals acquire resources primarily by exploiting nature and other animals. Means of exploitation include seduction, so as to breed many offspring, adaptation, so as to avoid harm, and conquest, so as to appropriate resources from others. These animal behaviors can be summarized into three categories: (conspicuous) waste, deception, and violence, examples being coloration, parasitism, and predation. Due to the efficiency of exploitation, an individual animal's power-seeking is always detrimental to the animal kingdom as a whole. For example,

⁸ "Enough is left unexplained to justify the hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides" (Freud 1920:17).

peacocks gain individually with their beautiful tails, but will collectively have a better survival chance without wasting energy to sustain them.

In human society, the same conflict between individual and collective survival can be observed. Similar to the animal kingdom, waste, dishonesty, and violence are more evolutionarily advantageous actions than honest work. As pointed out by Nietzsche, the will to power implies that

to refrain mutually from injury, from violence, from exploitation, and put one's will on par with that of other ... is a Will to the denial of life, a principle of dissolution and decay ... life is essentially appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation. (Nietzsche 1886:88-89)

In Section 5.1 below, it is shown that material factors unique to human society, such as technologies and institutions, cannot alleviate the conflict between individual power-seeking and social progress.

Waste includes individual actions that gain the performer an evolutionary advantage at the expense of social efficiency without directly hurting other people, examples being wearing cosmetics, fine-dressing, and learning social skills. Dishonesty includes individual actions to appropriate other people's resources without explicit physical coercion, such as cheating, fraud, deception, counterfeiting, adultery, and stealing. Violence includes individual actions to appropriate other people's resources with explicit physical coercion, such as murder, robbery, imprisonment, and torture.⁹

3.3. *Sacrifice*

The body wants to seek pleasure and the genes want to seek power. God wants individuals to sacrifice bodily pleasure and evolutionary advantage, to abstain from hedonic actions, including debauchery, idleness, cowardice, and Nietzscheist activities, including waste, dishonesty, and violence. Equivalently, God wants individuals to pursue abstinence, diligence, courage, thrift, honesty, and non-violence. A person who follows the sacrificial motive is an ascetic.

The task now is to determine in more detail the actions demanded by God, if God is an omnibenevolent ruler as described in Proposition 2. The method used here is elimination. Consider the entire set of human actions. If an action can only serve the purpose of individual

⁹ Veblen also noticed the relationship between the survival motive and dishonesty and violence: "the traits which characterize the predatory and subsequent stages of culture, and which indicate the types of man best fitted to survive under the regime of status, are ferocity, self-seeking, clannishness, and disingenuousness—a free resort to force and fraud" (Veblen 1899:138).

sensual gratification or power-seeking, it is not ascetic and is thus eliminated. This elimination procedure leaves three broad categories of actions: learning, working, and protecting.

The first category is learning, or the pursuit of truth, as the existence and will of God can only be understood from the philosophical abstraction of natural phenomena, human nature, and social evolution. Ascetics face two problems if they lack scientific and philosophical knowledge. First, their determination will be tempted by earthly pleasure and power and shattered by earthly pain and vicissitude. Second, they will misinterpret the will of God, which can lead to severe destruction, or equivalently, divine punishment, because ascetics are collectively rewarded with great power.

The second category is honest work, which is evolutionarily disadvantageous compared with waste, dishonesty, and violence. Working efficiency requires the study of practical knowledge and techniques distinct from the knowledge coveted by Nietzscheists, which is about how to effectively impress, socialize, manipulate, cheat, intimidate, and kill.

The third category is protection. Humans are born evil, so the evil in humankind can never be completely eradicated. There will always be some people who are ready to hurt others for self-interests. An ascetic needs to protect others from the harm of Nietzscheists. Protection can take two forms: persuasion and coercion. The former can be used at any time, while the latter is used only against unambiguous evil.

3.4. Actions Driven by Mixed Motives

Humans are often motivated by a combination of the three basic motives, and they may conduct different actions depending on the strength of each motive. For example, a person driven by a combination of the sacrificial motive and the survival motive may choose to convert other people by coercion. A person driven by a combination of the sacrificial motive and the hedonic motive may fast to please God. A person driven by a combination of the survival motive and the hedonic motive may gamble, sexually harass the opposite sex, or murder, depending on the relative strength of the survival motive.

4. The Ideal Types of Worldviews

A human's choice between power, pleasure, and sacrifice cannot be altered by material conditions; evil and virtue simply have different manifestations under different material conditions. Only a change in worldview or perceived meaning of life can change someone's choice between the three basic motives. Knowledge about worldviews is primarily found in traditional religions and quasi-religious secular philosophies. Since human motives can only be hedonic, survival, and sacrificial, a worldview is always a combination of three ideal types: hedonism, Nietzscheism, and asceticism, each of which encourages the pursuit of one of the three basic motives. This section characterizes the ideal types of worldviews and classifies some

major historical and contemporary worldviews. From a sociological perspective, it completes Weber's interpretive sociology with an exhaustive classification of worldviews. From a theological perspective, it implies that religions are not "all on the same level of value or validity" and provides a theoretical scheme to "grade" religions (Hick 1981:451).

4.1. *Hedonism*

Hedonism encourages the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, typically describing the world as a playground for sensual gratification. It can be classified into weak, intermediate, or strong, depending on how strongly it emphasizes the pursuit of pleasure. Weak hedonism typically justifies sensual gratification with non-hedonic motives, such as claiming that it is the source of creativity, productivity, or individual success. Intermediate hedonism encourages abstention from productive and profitable activities to avoid the pain and vicissitudes of earthly life. This type of worldview is typically seen in some "otherworldly" or mystic religions, such as Buddhism, Taoism, and certain erotic religions. Strong hedonism encourages the pursuit of sensual pleasure at the expense of individual health and survival, and is often held by abusers of intoxicating substances.

4.2. *Nietzscheism*

Nietzscheism encourages the pursuit of power. It typically describes the world as a battlefield where conflicting parties fight each other for survival. According to Proposition 3, the pursuit of power is always detrimental to other people's pleasure, power, and productivity. We can classify a worldview into weak, intermediate, and strong depending on how much it allows for hurting other people and society for self-interests.

Weak Nietzscheism encourages power-seeking but condemns obvious social efficiency losses. It typically disguises the pursuit of power as the pursuit of productivity or pleasure. Its identifying feature is the encouragement of conspicuous waste. Intermediate Nietzscheism permits the pursuit of individual power at visible damage to other people and society, but condemns major destructive actions, especially violence. Its identifying feature is the legitimization of dishonesty and cheating, in addition to waste. Strong Nietzscheism permits the pursuit of individual power at any cost to other people and society. Its identifying feature is the legitimization of violence, in addition to cheating and waste.

4.3. *Asceticism*

Asceticism encourages the sacrificial motive. It typically describes the world as an altar where each individual must sacrifice themselves for an omnibenevolent transcendental entity, and its extent can be determined by how much it encourages sacrificing individual pleasure and power without asking for returns.

Weak asceticism usually advocates abstinence from pleasure and power-seeking, but maintains that these actions must be fully rewarded in the present life or a believed afterlife. Since strict adherence to the sacrificial motive requires unconditional sacrifice, weak ascetics are rather susceptible to hedonic and Nietzscheist motives. Moreover, weak asceticism does not advocate active sacrifice, including honest work, learning, and preservation, of which the action and reward are hard to connect even with a believed afterlife. Many traditional religions, such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Catholicism, are weakly ascetic.

Intermediate asceticism encourages active sacrifice but maintains that some individual return should be expected. This means intermediate ascetics focus more on productive earthly activities and are less susceptible to hedonic and Nietzscheist motives. One example of intermediate asceticism is Confucianism, which advocates “Preserve heavenly law, extinguish humanly desires” (存天理，滅人欲) (朱熹 1270: 二二四), but at the same time maintains that a “cultivated self” and “harmonious family” are of equal importance as a “prosperous country” and “peaceful world” (修身、齊家、治國、平天下) (朱熹 1190: 四). Another example is the current worldview in the formerly Protestant West. By erroneously claiming that there is no conflict between individual realization and social progress, humanist liberalism weakened the ascetic tradition in Protestantism to create a de facto intermediate ascetic worldview (Smith and Denton 2009).

Strong asceticism also advocates honest work, learning, and preservation, but requires unconditional sacrifice without promising any rewards. An example is ascetic Protestantism, especially Calvinism, which stipulates honest work as calling from God, the fulfillment of which will not change one’s predestined fate (Calvin 1536; Weber 1905). Judaism, which had permitted slaying one’s children¹⁰ to “hallow the Holy Name” (Malamat et al. 1976:416), was also a strongly ascetic worldview in many of its sects.

4.4. *Classification of Worldviews*

When classifying worldviews into ideal types, the first difficulty is that most of them use different semantics than that of Section 2. To extract their ideal types interpretively, what is important is not the name of their identified bearer of meaning, but how similar its properties are to those of the body, the genes, and God as described here. For example, a worldview may claim that the meaning of life is to serve God, but if its God is erotic (Rati) or ecstatic (Dionysus), it is hedonic. Similarly, a worldview may claim the meaning of life is a certain group identity, such as the Nordic race or the proletariat class, but if the survival of this group is mutually

¹⁰ This is a metaphorical way of saying that virtue is evolutionarily disadvantageous. For example, to maintain social justice, a powerful politician should refrain from sending his incompetent children to a good university, which will reduce the survival chance of his children. Sometimes this can be literal. For example, choosing to be an upright policeman in a violence-ridden country can mean certain death to one’s children and oneself.

incompatible with the survival of other groups and the conflict must be resolved by violence, it is Nietzscheist.

Table 1 provides a classification of some pertinent worldviews. There are a few caveats. First, a religious denomination should not be viewed as an unchanging unity. For example, modern Protestantism puts more emphasis on self-realization and redemption than ascetic Protestantism before the twentieth century (Meador 2003). Second, an individual or society can hold multiple worldviews. For example, the dominant worldview of modern mainland China is a syncretism of Communism and Confucianism. Lastly, since the three sources of meaning are mutually exclusive, a worldview cannot be strong in two ideal types at the same time.

Table 1: Classification of Some Major Worldviews

Worldview	Hedonism	Nietzscheism	Asceticism
Catholicism (Pre-20th c.)	intermediate	weak	weak
Protestantism (Pre-20th c.)	-	-	strong
Confucianism (Lixue)	-	weak	intermediate
Judaism (Pre-20th c.)	-	-	strong
Taoism/Buddhism	intermediate	-	weak
Communism	-	strong	-
Nazism	-	strong	-
Neoliberalism	weak	weak	weak
Protestantism (Post-WWII)	weak	weak	intermediate
Machiavellism	-	intermediate	-

5. Social Consequences of Worldviews

How worldviews determine a society's evolution and progress is a further question. This is what Weber (1949) calls the value-neutral analysis of the social consequences of worldviews. Like virtue and evil, social progress can only be defined with respect to the motive, here that of an ascetic.

Definition 1 (Social Progress)

Let productivity be defined as an individual or society's ability to acquire more power for all humankind.

- A society is more progressed if it possesses greater productivity.
- Humankind is more progressed if it possesses greater power or productivity.

Two points are worth emphasizing. First, the progress of a society has nothing to do with its ability to acquire resources other than through production; a society can be powerful without being progressed. For example, a society can acquire many resources by exploiting its rich natural resources or by extorting those of its neighbors with a strong army, but it is not

considered more progressed. Second, the progress of a society is defined by its ability to produce, not the actual production. Production can be wasteful (such as luxury, fine food, and tourism) or outright destructive (such as atomic bombs), so it does not necessarily reflect productivity.

The increase in the productivity of a society can only come from two sources: increase in the efficiency of interpersonal cooperation or increase in individual productivity. Besides the worldviews of a society that directly modify individual actions, the former can be achieved through progress in institutions, and the latter can be achieved by discovery of superior technologies.

5.1. *Ethics, Institutions, and Technology*

The following argues that institutions and technology are not the autonomous fundamental drivers of social evolution, but rather are determined by worldviews. However, ethics and institutions must first be distinguished:

Definition 2 (Ethics and Institutions)

- Ethics are rules for human action and interaction that can be derived directly from some worldview.
- Institutions are human-designed rules for human action and interaction that cannot be derived directly from any worldview.

Not all social norms are institutions. For example, though a social norm of working hard belongs to ethics because it can be derived directly from asceticism, a concrete working schedule cannot be derived from any worldview, so it belongs to institutions. Similarly, efficiency belongs to ethics but market structures belong to institutions, equality belongs to ethics but political regimes belong to institutions, justice belongs to ethics but law enforcement procedures belong to institutions.

Definition 3 (Institutional Progress and Technological Progress)

- A technology is superior or more progressed if it increases the individual productivity of an ascetic society.
- An institution is superior or more progressed if it increases the productivity of an ascetic society, given its individual productivity.

Superior technology and institutions are defined by whether they increase the productivity of an ascetic individual or society, because they can always be used by Nietzscheists for more efficient power-seeking and thereby reduce social productivity. For example, property rights prevent disagreements on property ownership but facilitate (unproductive) wealth accumulation, nation states enable both more effective defense as well as more effective conquest, chemistry and physics can provide both productive energy as well as weapons. Consequently, the conflict between individual power-seeking and social contribution persists in human-made institutions and technology.

Next, it is evident that institutional and technological progress can only be made by ascetics, which again is consistent with Proposition 3. Technological progress cannot come from hedonists due to the repetitive and painstaking nature of research activities. Neither can it come from Nietzscheists due to the uncertainty and non-exclusivity of its outcome. This is particularly true for the scientific progress which is foundational to technological progress as it goes through breakthroughs that lead to new paradigms (Kuhn 1962). Since scientific breakthroughs are rare and unpredictable, attempts at scientific breakthroughs are evolutionarily disadvantageous for individual scientists. Therefore, scientific progress requires sufficiently many ascetic scientists who willingly give up power-seeking (Zhang 2022a).

Institutional progress can only come from ascetics. In the natural state, resources are always allocated based on power rather than productivity. Given the technological level of a society, productivity increase can only happen when resources are reallocated from the powerful to the productive. Institutional progress, therefore, must come from either the voluntary renouncement of power by the powerful or the revolution of the weak, where the former relies on the powerful being ascetic and the latter relies on the weak being ascetic.

So far, it has been argued that social progress is only possible when there are (sufficiently many) ascetics in a society. A more detailed characterization of how worldviews determine social evolution is now necessary.

5.2. *Social Consequences of Asceticism*

In a purely ascetic society, a) the people live to fulfill their callings, so they are individually the most productive given the existing technology and institutions, b) the intelligent members will voluntarily choose science as their vocation, so technology progresses rapidly, and scientific breakthroughs may occur, and c) the institutions that can best protect everyone's right to fulfill their callings will naturally rise. An ascetic society is the most progressed among all human societies.

The most important characteristic of an ascetic society is equality, which delivers liberty, security, and justice. The ascetic equality is about equality in duty, which everyone fulfills at the cost of their own power and pleasure, and equality in value, which means that everyone is equally valuable as long as they diligently fulfill their duty, regardless of the differences in actual achievement. This notion of equality is compatible with inequality in individual rights or power, such as opportunity, wealth, or political power, which is efficient given that people are born with differential talents in managing resources.

The second important characteristic of an ascetic society is trust, because the causes of mistrust, such as dishonesty, aggression, and irresponsibility, are of Nietzscheist and hedonic origins. Trust is the key to exchange, delegation, and specialization, all of which increase cooperative efficiency while creating asymmetries in information, knowledge, and power. The larger the scale of cooperation and the higher the degree of specialization, the more

asymmetries they create, and the more trust is needed to sustain them. Due to its high level of trust, an ascetic society can sustain large-scale and intricate social cooperation and specialization.

Since Protestantism and Judaism are the only two strongly ascetic worldviews, the Protestant-Judaic West before the Secular Revolution of 1870-1950 is close to the ascetic ideal. For example, Tocqueville observed that in his time, “an American cannot converse, but he can discuss, and his talk falls into a dissertation.” “In the United States professions ... are never either high or low: every honest calling is honorable.” “Men sacrifice for a religious opinion their friends, their family, and their country” (de Tocqueville 1840:96, 248, 20). Oscar Wilde described how America’s “national mythology” of truth-telling shaped its business culture. “[T]he crude commercialism of America, its materializing spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination ... are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man who, according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie” (Lears 1995:271). Palmer, Colton, and Lloyd document that in the seventeenth century, William of Orange, the ruler of the Netherlands, “had a strong dislike for everything magnificent or pompous; he lived plainly, hated flattery, and took no pleasure in social conversation” (2002:152).

5.3. *Social Consequences of Hedonism*

Without asceticism, there would have been no human civilization, so the analysis of the social consequences of hedonism and Nietzscheism alone is no different from that of animal societies. Therefore, the interesting discussion is how hedonism and Nietzscheism, from weak to strong, impede social progress in an otherwise ascetic society.

Since the hedonic motive is non-invasive, hedonism diverts resources from production to entertainment, but has no qualitative impact on the progress of a society. When a society becomes more hedonic, it becomes increasingly dysfunctional in every social domain. A pure hedonic society can produce nothing except intoxicating substances, but its people will be in such a blissful mental state that they will amuse themselves to death (Postman 1984).

5.4. *Social Consequences of Nietzscheism*

Nietzscheism reduces the productivity of an ascetic society through three channels: a) reducing people’s individual productivity given the existing institutions and technology, b) slowing down or even reversing technological progress, and c) institutional regress.

5.4.1. *Social Consequences of Weak Nietzscheism*

In a weakly Nietzscheist society, a) people spend time and resources on conspicuous waste, so their individual productivity is lower, b) by emphasizing individual success and achievement, some of the intelligent members are discouraged from science, and those who do choose a scientific career focus on conspicuous research, so scientific progress slows down, and c) people

covet resources mildly even when they are not the most efficient at managing them, so the social institutions have to allocate resources based partly on power rather than exclusively on productivity.

In general, the dominant worldview in the Protestant-Judaic West post WWII is a weakly Nietzscheist syncretism consisting of neoliberalism and the remnant of ascetic Protestantism and Judaism. This worldview can also be called secular humanism (Smith 2003) or Hellenism (Toynbee 1959). The proliferation of conspicuous waste can be observed in every social domain. The economy is replete with wasteful production such as luxury, tourism, and cosmetics (Zhang 2022b), politics is dominated by conspicuously shallow communications rather than rational discourses, and scientists are preoccupied with pedant, specialized, and technically exclusive conspicuous research, while reluctant to move away from the existing dogmatic paradigms (Zhang 2022a).

A weakly Nietzscheist society shows the first signs of inequality, but trust is still largely unaffected. The nascent inequality in the West has been well-documented (Piketty 2014; Putnam 2015). Since weak Nietzscheists' sacrificial motive still exists, they feel morally obliged to legitimize such inequality with productivity. Their ideal institution is thus a meritocracy (Young 1958), in which power distribution is determined by some conspicuous indicators of merit, such as an academic degree or test score. However, as productivity is unmeasurable, a meritocracy always favors weak Nietzscheists, who are the most efficient in producing conspicuous but wasteful achievements, rather than truly productive people.

5.4.2. Social Consequences of Intermediate Nietzscheism

When a weakly Nietzscheist society converts to intermediate Nietzscheism, a) people spend more time and resources on conspicuous waste as well as on cheating, so their individual productivity is further reduced, b) a larger number of intelligent people are discouraged from science, and those who do choose a scientific career conduct conspicuous research as well as cheating, so scientific progress slows down to the point of stagnation or even regress, and c) the stronger emphasis on power-seeking leads to repressive social institutions that further favors power over productivity.

Since their "reform and opening-up" in 1978, Mainland China has been dominated by an intermediately Nietzscheist syncretic worldview consisting of Communism and the remnant of Confucianism. Here a more pathological obsession with conspicuity is seen. In the economy, China consumes 33% of the global luxury (Kim, Luan, and Zipser 2019) with 18% of the world's GDP (World Population Review 2019). In politics, government officials are obsessed with state champions, economic indicators, and political performance indicators. In science, the obsession with publications and citations (Liu 2005) leads to the strange phenomenon of the proliferation of scientific outputs (Tollefson 2018) coupled with de facto scientific stagnation (Wikipedia 2021).

The new phenomenon in an intermediately Nietzscheist society is cheating. In the economy, cheating takes the forms of fraud, scam, adulteration, counterfeits (Yang 2015). In politics, graft, rent-seeking, embezzlement, and nepotism are common in all aspects of administration (He 2000). In science, academic misconduct and corruption is rampant (Liu 2005), including plagiarism, appropriation, fabrication, and relationship publication. Although efficient for individual power-seeking, cheating demands more time and energy than waste, and significantly reduces individual productivity in China.

Cheating also leads to the deterioration of trust toward strangers and the strengthening of kinship, thereby reducing the level and efficiency of social cooperation. In social cooperation involving asymmetric information, such as insurance, credit intermediation, and child and old-age care, people rely more on kinship than those in a weakly Nietzscheist society. In social cooperation involving asymmetric knowledge or power, such as medical treatment and law enforcement, where a kinship solution is less likely, bribery is often the necessary substitute for missing trust.

The social inequality is further deepened by intermediate Nietzscheism, as evidenced by the deplorable conditions of China's labor class, whose income can no longer sustain a healthy and productive life (Weil 2006). The deepening inequality leads to a stricter social hierarchy that legitimizes the interest of the powerful and compromises the security and freedom of the weak. Since the government holds the "monopoly of legitimate physical violence" (Weber 1919:33), the politicians have both the power and willingness to extract resources from the rest of the society, thereby leading to a repressive political regime.

To summarize, in an intermediately Nietzscheist society, political expediency overrides other needs of the society. Specialization and the division of labor start to break down. The boundaries between politics, economy, and science start to disappear. Plus the boundary between knowledge and power starts to disappear. Intermediately Nietzscheist societies are less progressed than weakly Nietzscheist societies, which they can imitate but never catch up.

5.4.3. Social Consequences of Strong Nietzscheism

Strong Nietzscheism permits killing in addition to waste and cheating, so a) because people spend time and effort on killing each other, the individual productivity is even lower, b) because they cannot accept a life that only yields uncertain benefits to other people in the future, systemic scientific research vanishes, and c) because social institutions reward power rather than productivity, they create enormous misallocation. In a strongly Nietzscheist society, the trust level is extremely low, and kinship is the only reliable social relationship. The society exhibits extreme inequality, prevalence of violence, limited social cooperation, and a highly repressive political regime. Strong Nietzscheism can only cause full-scale regress in every social domain.

Many countries in contemporary Africa are good examples of strongly Nietzscheist societies (Collier 2009). Section 4.4 argued that both Nazism and Communism are strongly

Nietzscheist worldviews, but Nazi and Communist countries did achieve some economic and scientific progress during their peak, which goes against this theory. However, those achievements were just transitional phenomena as societies transitioned from asceticism to Nietzscheism. Those Nazi and Communist countries that were not entirely stagnating, such as Germany and China, had a long ascetic tradition, so signs of social degeneration were not immediately apparent. For example, in China, signs of social disintegration became rather evident during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), seventeen years after the establishment of Communist China in 1949.

6. Some Puzzles in History

Proposition 3 provides a consistent answer to several historical puzzles that counter historical materialism. For example, why did the Scientific Revolution and the Industrial Revolution not happen in China, which possessed many favorable factors (Weber 1915; Needham 1969; Pomeranz 2000)? What historical discontinuity caused the two World Wars after the “greatest age of peace in Europe’s history” (Palmer, Colton, and Lloyd 2002:611)? Why are Nobel laureates in physics, chemistry, and medicine highly concentrated among the Protestant-Judaic population in a world with nearly perfect international mobility for scientists (Berry 1981)?

Needham provides the most accurate phrasing of the question “why, between the first century BC and the fifteenth century AD, Chinese civilization was much more efficient than occidental in applying human natural knowledge to practical human needs” (Needham 1969:190). From Table 1, Confucianism was the closest to the ascetic ideal before ascetic Protestantism, so Proposition 3 implies Confucian civilization should have been the most progressed. Moreover, Confucianism was fully adopted in China during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), and the Protestant Reformation happened in 1517 CE, coinciding with the time period identified by Needham.

The answer to the second question is the rise of Nietzscheism that commenced with Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and consummated in a series of works by Friedrich Nietzsche (Nietzsche 1886; 1887). Nietzscheism was indeed a very influential, if not the dominant, worldview in continental Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. “The end of the nineteenth century, the great age of peace in Europe’s history, abounded in philosophies glorifying struggle. People who have never heard a shot fired in anger solemnly announced that world history moved forward by violence and antagonism” (Palmer, Colton, and Lloyd 2002:611). “Normal competition between merchants, bankers, and journalists was depicted with ‘scientific’ generalization as a struggle for survival and a battle for power between ‘the Jews’ and ‘the basic population’” (Malamat et al. 1976:856). In the beginning, Nietzscheism took less violent forms such as imperialism, neo-mercantilism, and nationalism, but quickly

escalated to militarism, Communism, and Fascism. Suddenly, the previously trivial political and economic disputes became impossible to solve by diplomacy, because everyone started to believe that diplomatic compromises would weaken their national/racial/class power and cause them to be eliminated in the eternal struggle for survival. Nietzscheism is why, after the great age of enlightenment, peace, and progress, Europe suddenly descended into chaos and the two deadly World Wars.

The third question is essentially about what causes scientific progress, since the non-linear structure of scientific progress means that the number of Nobel Prizes per capita is a better representation of scientific progress than other measures of normal scientific output. Table 1 indicates that Protestantism and Judaism are the only two strongly ascetic worldviews, the influence of which has been waning but was still present in the twentieth century, so it is not surprising that Nobel laureates are concentrated among the Protestant-Judaic population. The caveat is that the Nobel Prize, a meritocratic institution legitimized by humanist liberalism, is only a situationally accurate indicator of scientific progress.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that the concept of a monotheist God is a fruitful social scientific concept. Its induced theoretical scheme can be viewed as an extension of Weber's interpretive sociology, which claims that humans' perception of the meaning of life is at the highest level of the hierarchy of control in human societies, and fundamentally determines human actions, social relationships, and the entire process of social evolution. Proposition 3 resonates with Toynbee's previously cited statement that "man does not live under one law only; he lives under two laws: a 'Law of Nature' and a 'Law of God'" (Toynbee 1987b:ch.38). History cannot be explained by the interaction between humans, and between humans and nature, because it is also "the interaction of God and Man" (Lampert 1945:45). This theory is not only useful for social science studies, but provides new directions for tackling many imminent challenges facing humankind today, such as climate change, rising inequality, and antagonism between civilizations. Many other important topics could also be explored, including a discussion of other major worldviews, such as Islam, Orthodoxy, and Hinduism.

In the end, the theory articulated here should not be judged by how consistent it is with existing, secularist social theories. It is useful to recall Feyerabend's warning on the unreasonableness of the consistency condition: "it eliminates a theory not because it is in disagreement with facts; it eliminates it because it is in disagreement with another theory" (Feyerabend 1963:90). The whole point is to propose an alternative to modern social science by challenging its core dogmas of methodological atheism and the idolization of humankind. Humans always want to be told that they are the masters of their own fate and that they are free to pursue their own will. That is why we immediately rushed to secularize society and

dismiss the admonitions of prophets throughout human history upon hearing the gospels of Nietzsche. However, what if Moses was correct and Nietzsche was wrong? There is no ambition here to settle the thousands-year-old debate of Athens versus Jerusalem with a single article, but simply to raise the reasonable doubt that theism is not the enemy of science, and that by stubbornly adhering to methodological atheism, social scientists might have crippled social science from the very beginning.

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