

WEAKNESS AS A VALUE IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN CULTURE ¹

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Abstract. *This paper examines the paradoxical elevation of weakness as a core cultural and political value in contemporary Western liberal democracies, particularly in the European Union. Drawing on philosophical, sociological, and political sources—from Nietzsche, Hegel, and Tocqueville to recent Eurobarometer data and policy analysis—it argues that many cherished democratic values such as tolerance, equality, peace, comfort, and compromise are increasingly interpreted and institutionalized in ways that valorize fragility, aversion to risk, and avoidance of conflict. While these values have moral and historical legitimacy, their contemporary deployment often masks an aversion to strength, ambition, or principled confrontation. The paper introduces the concept of a “bureaucratized cult of weakness” to describe this ideological trend, tracing its Christian, post-historical, and technocratic roots. Through a critical, polemical lens, the paper seeks to provoke reflection on the moral and political consequences of institutionalized vulnerability in a world that remains deeply shaped by power and conflict.*

Key words: *weakness, liberal democracy, European values, institutional fragility, power*

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Introduction

Judging and discussing values of all kinds is a pastime that nearly everyone is eager to indulge in—frequently and with conviction. Values are debated not only in the lecture halls and corridors of universities but also in public spaces, offices, and, when the topics are particularly sensitive, in the heated arenas of mass discourse. Merely mention morality, sexual life, or various forms of cohabitation, and opposing factions immediately begin sharpening their rhetorical daggers for battle in the comment sections of online forums.

Be that as it may, these debates often bring to the fore certain values that are widely regarded as progressive, supportive, and modern. They are values thought to characterize European culture in all its celebrated diversity and contradiction. Appealing to the ideal of universal fraternity, contemporary discourse searches for what unites and reconciles. Moreover, philosophy is frequently assigned the role of affirming and legitimating these values. This is, without doubt, both a difficult and commendable task. Yet the values that are most visible and praised also carry another dimension—one that lies not in the foreground but in the background, in the shadows, yet never far away. It is precisely this peripheral aspect that has drawn my attention.

What, then, are the values deemed most important by contemporary Westerners—Europeans included? In public, political, and intellectual discourse, one regularly encounters the prominence of values such as democracy, equality, human rights, tolerance, harmony, fairness, and peace. One needs only look at the highest-level political documents in Europe. For example, the European Union's *Berlin Declaration* (2007) speaks of "peace and prosperity," "the rule of law," and the historically questionable claim of "the unnatural division of Europe," alongside references to "mutual respect and shared responsibility, for prosperity and security, for tolerance and participation, for justice and solidarity" (*European Union 2007a*: 1). Of course, these are not the only values Europeans recognize as their own and consider important—but they are certainly among the most pronounced.

Two years later, the *Treaty of Lisbon* clarified the European Union's foundational values in more explicit terms:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail. (*European Union 2007b*)

Moreover, the EU has been tireless in employing a range of administrative and financial mechanisms to institutionalize and promote these principles across all levels of public life. These values—enshrined in legal documents, policy initiatives, and public discourse—are widely regarded as noble, humane, and civilizing.

Yet what unites many of these values, at a deeper level, is a shared orientation toward *weakness*—or more precisely, toward its protection, elevation, and

institutionalization. One might even allow oneself a certain impoliteness and suggest that “*being weak*” has become a moral leitmotif of contemporary Europe. If such a claim provokes indignation—if it is dismissed as crude, reactionary, or insensitive—it is precisely because modern sensibilities have been trained to recoil from the association of weakness with vice, and to see it instead as something to be cherished, defended, and even celebrated. In this context, to question the sanctity of weakness is to commit something akin to a philosophical heresy.

This paradox lies at the heart of the present inquiry. In contemporary Western European liberal democracies, weakness has seemingly been elevated into a high normative value. Public discourse and institutional policy increasingly valorize vulnerability, victimhood, and emotional safety, while displaying suspicion—if not outright hostility—toward strength, confidence, or risk-taking. This inversion of value hierarchies, in which strength is redefined as dangerous and weakness as virtuous, has deep philosophical roots.

This essay explores how and why weakness has come to occupy such a privileged position in Western culture, particularly in Europe, and considers the philosophical, historical, and anthropological consequences of this shift. By examining both conceptual developments and contemporary examples, I argue that weakness has not only become a moral priority but that it increasingly serves as a mechanism of legitimation, a way of commanding respect, authority, and even power. On the surface, of course, the discourse is still about *strength*. Europe speaks of *empowerment*, of *resilience*, of *values worth defending*. But my aim is to reveal the shadow side of this narrative. What is presented as strength often conceals an aversion to conflict, to risk, to hardship. The rhetoric of dignity and solidarity masks a deeper tendency: the systematic elevation of weakness into a moral ideal. Contemporary Europe may speak the language of strength—but what it celebrates, what it rewards, is weakness. To grasp this paradox, one must first understand the *inversion of meaning* at work. These are not just semantic shifts—they are signs of a deeper transformation in the value system.

1. Doublethink and the Inversion of Language

Often it is writers and artists—not social scientists with their data—who best perceive the subtle shifts in meaning that reshape entire moral worlds. George Orwell, although not a philosopher in the strict sense, had an exceptional ability to capture ideology at work. Orwell’s concept of *doublethink*—the capacity to hold contradictory beliefs and accept both—is especially useful here.

To illustrate the contemporary inversion of moral categories, one may consider the case of former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt. He is remembered not only as a successful statesman but also as the embodiment of certain personality traits and ideals associated with physical vigor, self-discipline, and masculine assertiveness. Having been a frail and asthmatic child, Roosevelt deliberately forged his character and physique through intense effort and willpower, engaging in activities such as gymnastics, boxing, horseback riding, hunting, and winter swimming. His public persona has since become a

recurring reference point in American debates concerning gender roles, masculinity, and what is now frequently termed “toxic masculinity.”

In recent cultural and academic interpretations, Roosevelt’s masculinity is often recast through a psychological lens: not as a manifestation of strength, but as a symptom of unresolved trauma or repression. According to this line of reasoning, Roosevelt’s persona is viewed not as authentic but as compensatory—a nostalgic and neurotic attachment to a bygone era. His celebration of the cowboy archetype, for instance, is interpreted as a longing for lost heroic narratives. Within this framework, Roosevelt is seen not as a strong or “manly” figure in any genuine sense, but rather as a man masking his fragility beneath exaggerated performances of strength.

This represents a striking reversal: what is publicly visible is treated as false, while what is hidden or inferred—emotional vulnerability, psychological injury—is elevated as the real. The performative display of strength is taken as proof of inner weakness. Thus, Roosevelt’s very effort to appear strong is interpreted as evidence that he was, in fact, weak. Appearances deceive, and the true moral worth supposedly is located in what is opposite—namely, in the language of trauma, insecurity, and fragility. Apparently, the visible is the invisible and the invisible is the visible, or the visible is the false and the invisible is the true.

To be sure, there may be elements of legitimacy in the critiques offered by Roosevelt’s biographers and cultural interpreters, such as Sarah Watts. It is indeed reasonable to speak of a broader crisis of masculine ideals and patriarchal life forms in late 19th-century America, as well as the socio-cultural impact of urbanization on rural identities such as the cowboy archetype. However, the interpretive move whereby strength is redefined as weakness and weakness as authenticity evokes deeper questions—questions that go beyond the particularities of Roosevelt’s case and point toward a more pervasive epistemological and moral inversion. Hence, these interpretive strategies bring to mind Orwell’s observations, in which political power operates not simply through coercion, but through the reengineering of language itself. The motto of Orwell’s fictional ruling party, Ingsoc—“*War is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength*”—encapsulates the logic of such inversions.

While some may object that invoking Orwell in the context of contemporary liberal democracies or European Union discourse is excessive, the comparison is not as far-fetched as it may seem. Orwell’s concern was not only with overt totalitarianism, but with the politicization of language in any form—where semantics become instruments of ideological control. What, then, constitutes the Orwellian? In 1984, besides *doublethink*, Orwell introduces the concepts of *Newspeak* and *Oldspeak*. *Newspeak*—the artificial language devised by the regime—is constructed precisely to limit thought, to make dissent not only impermissible but unthinkable. *Doublethink*, the capacity to hold two contradictory beliefs simultaneously, is a condition not of mere confusion, but of systematized moral ambiguity, where conceptual opposites are collapsed into one another and reality itself becomes malleable. In this sense, *Newspeak* is more than a linguistic novelty; it is a political technology that manufactures consent through the manipulation of meaning.

For instance, the concept of “*safety*” has undergone semantic expansion to include not only protection from physical harm, but also emotional comfort. Simultaneously, the term “*violence*” is often applied to speech or ideas that merely offend or challenge sensibilities. In this discursive climate, a vigorous debate or a disquieting truth can be recast as an act of aggression, while the refusal to engage—withdrawal from disagreement—is framed as an act of courage and self-care. This Orwellian transformation of language norms reverses traditional moral intuitions: forthright speech is deemed dangerous, while silence or passive assent is elevated as a refined form of sensitivity.

Public institutions have played a key role in reinforcing these semantic inversions. Universities, which have long upheld the ideal of free inquiry and intellectual engagement, are now increasingly adopting speech guidelines and inclusive language policies aimed at enforcing supportive environments. Yet, in Orwellian terms, what has taken root is not the ideal of robust and open debate, but rather the ideal of inoffensiveness—a *Newspeak* condition in which “challenging ideas are harmful” and “avoidance of conflict is a virtue.” The consequences are far-reaching: language becomes a tool for obscuring, not articulating. As Orwell famously wrote, “political language [...] is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable” (Orwell 1946); in today’s cultural context, it can make weakness appear noble and strength morally suspect. By reshaping the meanings of words, contemporary discourse facilitates a reevaluation of values, wherein weakness not only claims the moral high ground but does so *without contradiction*.

This does not, of course, suggest that contemporary European discourse is totalitarian in any conventional sense. However, it raises a more subtle and disquieting question: could Orwellian mechanisms operate *not only* within totalitarian regimes, but also within democratic societies—precisely when language becomes a vehicle for moral coercion rather than open deliberation?

2. European Values with Weakness Within

2.1. Peace as a Value and the Paradox of Strength

Peace is one of the most cherished values in contemporary European discourse, juxtaposed against the horrors of war. Without diminishing the catastrophic consequences of armed conflict, it is essential to recognize that the capacity and willingness to engage in warfare have historically been associated with expressions of strength, tension, and power. War, in this context, is not merely an act of destruction but also a manifestation of a state’s or society’s resolve and vitality. War is power, and power is strength. Peace, conversely, is often maintained through a balance of power, where the potential for conflict serves as a deterrent against aggression.

This perspective aligns with the doctrine of deterrence, a cornerstone of NATO’s strategic framework. Deterrence operates on the premise that the credible threat of retaliation can prevent adversaries from initiating hostilities. As such, the maintenance

of robust military capabilities is not antithetical to peace but is, paradoxically, a prerequisite for its preservation.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel offers a provocative—by contemporary standards—understanding of war’s role in societal development. In his *Philosophy of Right*, he posits that war is not an absolute evil; rather, it can serve as a catalyst for ethical life and the evolution of the state. He writes:

War has the higher significance that by its agency [...] the ethical health of peoples is preserved in their indifference to the stabilization of finite institutions. (Hegel 1991: §324)

Hegel’s assertion is not an endorsement of war *per se* but an acknowledgment of its role in preventing societal stagnation and promoting dynamism within political structures.

2.2. Europe’s Evolving Defense Posture

Currently, Germany’s contemporary stance on defense vividly illustrates the tension inherent in modern Europe’s conception of strength and weakness. Despite public proclamations about the necessity of robust defense spending—symbolized by Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s landmark declaration of a *Zeitenwende* (“turning point”) following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—Germany and other European states continue to struggle with translating rhetorical commitments into concrete actions.

On paper, Germany has indeed pledged a significant increase in defense spending, announcing a €100 billion special fund intended to modernize its armed forces and committing to meet NATO’s benchmark of dedicating 2% of its GDP to defense. Yet in practice, these ambitions often remain mired in bureaucratic inertia, political hesitancy, and logistical shortcomings. Media reports persistently highlight critical deficiencies within the Bundeswehr: inadequate equipment, chronic underfunding of maintenance and even the notorious use of broomsticks as placeholders during military exercises due to shortages of real equipment. Moreover, despite pledging robust support for Ukraine, Germany and several other European countries have faced criticism for their slow and cautious delivery of military assistance. Europe’s declared solidarity and moral resolve frequently collide with an evident reluctance to make decisive engagements or escalate commitments beyond symbolic gestures.

Thus, while European leaders verbally embrace the language of strength, deterrence, and resilience, their actions (or lack thereof) reveal a deeper cultural ambivalence. What is publicly presented as strength often masks a profound discomfort with power itself. European armies, symbolically and practically weakened by decades of neglect and bureaucratic inefficiencies, have come to embody a political and philosophical paradox: Europe praises strength in principle but consistently defaults to weakness in practice.

2.3. Compromise as a Virtue and Its Paradoxical Perception

Compromise is widely heralded as a cornerstone of democratic societies, symbolizing the ability to reconcile divergent views through mutual concessions. It is often portrayed as a pragmatic approach to conflict resolution, fostering social cohesion and political stability.

At its core, compromise entails a recognition of limitations—be they moral, strategic, or resource-based. It suggests that no party possesses absolute authority or the unilateral capacity to impose its will, necessitating a middle ground. It is therefore neither a victory for one side nor a loss for the other, but mediocrity. While this can be seen as a strength in promoting dialogue and preventing conflict, it also implicitly acknowledges a form of weakness: the inability to achieve one's objectives without concession. Philosopher Avishai Margalit (2009) distinguishes between “rotten compromises,” which involve agreements with morally reprehensible parties or terms, and “decent compromises,” which, despite involving concessions, uphold fundamental ethical standards.

Empirical data complicate the perception of compromise. A 2019 Pew Research Center study revealed that while 56% of Americans preferred political leaders willing to compromise, a significant portion still desired leaders who would steadfastly adhere to their principles. This dichotomy reflects a broader societal ambivalence: the idealization of compromise coexists with a desire for unwavering commitment to one's values.

Moreover, the practical application of compromise often leads to suboptimal outcomes. Negotiation theory suggests that parties may settle for agreements that are less than ideal due to misaligned incentives or miscommunication. This phenomenon raises questions about whether compromise always leads to the best possible solutions or merely the most expedient ones. As both historical and recent events—such as the Munich Agreement, the Israel–Palestine conflict, and negotiations over Ukraine—have shown, the ethics of compromise become especially pronounced in the realm of international relations.

Furthermore, the concept of “weakness of will,” or *akrasia*, in philosophical discourse, parallels the challenges of compromise. It denotes situations where individuals act against their better judgment, often due to conflicting desires or external pressures. This internal conflict mirrors the external negotiations in political compromise, where parties may concede not out of genuine agreement but due to strategic necessity or coercion. Compromise is only necessary when strength is lacking. In compromise, the disputants accept their weakness or lack of strength. (And claims that the wisest will concede or that “the key is to participate” are excuses for weakness.)

2.4. Tolerance as Endurance

Tolerance is frequently lauded as a foundational virtue in liberal democracies, emblematic of open-mindedness, pluralism, and respect for diversity. However, upon closer examination, tolerance functions less as an active embrace of difference and more as a passive endurance of the disagreeable. In this light, tolerance may signify not strength, but a concession to weakness—a reluctant acceptance born out of necessity rather than conviction.

Philosopher Preston King delineates tolerance as comprising two components: an objection to certain beliefs or practices, and a voluntary acceptance of them despite this objection. This framework suggests that tolerance is not indifference but a conscious decision to endure what one finds objectionable. Such endurance, while sometimes

commendable, can also indicate an inability or unwillingness to confront or change the objectionable.

The concept of tolerance raises significant questions concerning the self-defending capacities of democracies. A “self-defending democracy,” a term originally coined in German political theory as *wehrhafte Demokratie*, refers to a democratic system equipped with institutional safeguards to protect itself from anti-democratic forces—an idea that emerged prominently in post-war Germany and was later articulated by philosophers such as Karl Loewenstein and Karl Popper. Popper (2013), in particular, underscored the necessity of setting boundaries to tolerance, warning that a society overly permissive of intolerance risks undermining its own foundations. He posits that unlimited tolerance may lead to the disappearance of tolerance itself, as it allows intolerant ideologies to flourish unchecked, ultimately undermining the tolerant society. The inherent paradox is that a democracy committed to tolerance must, paradoxically, demonstrate intolerance towards threats against its democratic order. Thus, tolerance is revealed as a double-edged sword: essential for a vibrant pluralistic society, yet dangerous if not paired with mechanisms to identify and counteract genuine threats.

Contemporary critiques, such as those by political theorist Wendy Brown (2008), argue that tolerance can serve as a mechanism of power, wherein dominant groups “tolerate” minorities, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies and masking systemic inequalities. Brown writes:

Like patience, tolerance is necessitated by something one would prefer did not exist. It involves managing the presence of the undesirable, the tasteless, the faulty—even the revolting, repugnant, or vile. In this activity of management, tolerance does not offer resolution or transcendence, but only a strategy for coping. There is no *Aufhebung* in the operation of tolerance, no purity and no redemption. (Brown 2006: 25)

At its core, tolerance implies not acceptance but endurance—a conditional allowance of what is regarded as undesirable or deviant. It is not an act of affirmation, but a restraint of disapproval.

In democratic societies, the practice of tolerance often manifests as a mutual forbearance among the populace—a “tolerance of the masses.” While this mutual endurance prevents overt conflict, it may also foster apathy and inhibit meaningful dialogue. The emphasis on tolerance, in this sense, becomes a societal mechanism for avoiding confrontation, rather than a pathway to understanding and resolution.

3. Comfort or Challenges

Comfort is widely embraced as one of the defining aspirations of contemporary Western societies. Technological advancements, consumer culture, and institutional policies consistently promote ease, convenience, and the reduction of effort as unequivocally beneficial. Modernity itself could be characterized as a sustained quest to minimize hardship, streamline effort, and maximize personal convenience. Yet beneath this widely

celebrated value of comfort lies a darker philosophical reality: a steady drift into institutionalized weakness.

The concept of comfort is closely related to the classical Greek notion of *hedonism*, which emphasizes the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain as life's ultimate goals. Aristotle warned against excessive comfort, advocating instead for a life of moderation and virtue—a balance that necessarily included struggle, effort, and ethical striving. Similarly, Friedrich Nietzsche, first in “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” (Nietzsche 1966), sharply criticized modernity's obsession with comfort as symptomatic of a deeper cultural malaise. He envisioned modernity as producing the “last man,” an individual obsessed with safety, comfort, and self-preservation, but devoid of any grander aspirations or ideals. For Nietzsche, comfort ultimately leads to decadence, mediocrity, and cultural stagnation (Nietzsche 2007).

In contemporary society, comfort is institutionalized through countless everyday practices and technologies that promise ease. Smart technologies automate routine tasks; algorithms curate personal preferences, minimizing decision-making efforts; online platforms facilitate immediate gratification without personal interaction or physical effort. These technological and cultural innovations, while undoubtedly enhancing convenience, also subtly erode individuals' resilience and capacity to confront discomfort. As sociologist Frank Furedi (2018) argues, modern Western societies have become “risk-averse,” systematically shielding individuals from hardship and conflict in ways that significantly diminish personal and collective fortitude.

Empirical studies increasingly reveal the costs associated with this institutionalized culture of comfort. Psychological research has demonstrated that continuous avoidance of discomfort significantly reduces individuals' resilience, adaptive capacities, and psychological robustness. According to psychological research (e.g., Kashdan & Rottenberg 2010; Doorley et al. 2020), individuals who consistently avoid challenging or uncomfortable situations exhibit lower stress tolerance, increased anxiety, and diminished emotional flexibility. This state of vulnerability, paradoxically fostered by the very comfort society promotes, can lead to what psychologist Jonathan Haidt identifies as the increasing psychological fragility of younger generations, manifested in rising anxiety disorders and depression rates.

The cultural obsession with comfort also impacts public and political life. Democratic societies, driven by constituents' desire for stability and comfort, may become hesitant to confront challenging issues or adopt difficult but necessary policies. In his reflections on the future of democratic societies, Alexis de Tocqueville (2000) warned not of violent tyranny, but of a more insidious threat: a democratic despotism that would “be more extensive and milder; it would degrade men without tormenting them.” Unlike traditional forms of oppression, Tocqueville envisioned a system in which freedom is not destroyed by force but slowly eroded by comfort and administrative overreach.

It [soft despotism] covers its surface with a network of small, complicated, painstaking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot clear a way to surpass the crowd; it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and directs them. (Tocqueville 2000: II, 4, 6)

What emerges is not open tyranny, but a paternalistic order that pacifies rather than inspires—a society of passive individuals lulled into surrendering initiative and autonomy for the sake of tranquil and regulated existence.

Thus, the dark side of comfort is precisely the weakening of human faculties—physical, intellectual, emotional, and moral. By systematically reducing exposure to difficulty and challenge, comfort gradually atrophies the very capacities required for meaningful human flourishing. In the pursuit of comfort, societies inadvertently foster conditions of profound weakness, undermining the virtues of resilience, courage, and genuine autonomy.

3.1. The Institutionalization of Minority Advocacy

Another value is the centralization of the marginal, or the swapping of the places of majority and minority, also known in policy texts as “minority advocacy.” This value is, of course, very laudable for many different reasons. But it is also a weakness. That is to say, if the majority is power, then in this case, it is a question of limiting power in favor of the weaker. In contemporary democratic societies, the advocacy for minority rights has become a central tenet of public policy and institutional practice. This emphasis on minority advocacy seeks to rectify historical injustices and promote inclusivity by ensuring that marginalized groups have equitable access to resources, representation, and opportunities. Such efforts are evident in legislative frameworks that enshrine anti-discrimination laws, affirmative action policies, and cultural recognition initiatives.

Philosophers such as Will Kymlicka (1995) have argued that minority rights are essential for a just society, distinguishing between polyethnic groups and national minorities, each of which requires different forms of recognition and accommodation. Similarly, Iris Marion Young (1990) emphasizes the importance of acknowledging group-based differences to address structural inequalities, advocating for a “politics of difference” that moves beyond mere tolerance to active engagement with diversity. However, some scholars (e.g., Park 2022) argue that the bureaucratization of minority rights can lead to a form of symbolic politics, where the proliferation of policies and programs serves more to signal virtue than to effect substantive change. The prioritization of minority advocacy disrupts the balance between majority rule and minority rights.

3.2. Equality and the Bureaucratized Cult of Weakness

Equality is widely recognized as one of the foundational values of modern democratic societies. It embodies ideals of justice, fairness, and moral inclusion, advocating that all individuals should have equal rights, opportunities, and access to resources. Yet beneath its commendable surface, the contemporary institutional interpretation of equality often harbors a subtle inversion of hierarchies, which can be aptly described as a bureaucratized cult of weakness.

To understand this provocative claim, one must first consider equality in its philosophical complexity. In classical liberal thought, equality was primarily understood as equality before the law—a framework ensuring that all citizens possess the same legal rights and liberties, without guaranteeing identical outcomes. However, modern

conceptions of equality increasingly emphasize equality of outcome, whereby disparities between groups or individuals are interpreted as injustices that institutions must actively correct.

This shift has significant philosophical implications. As Nietzsche (2007) cautioned in his critique of egalitarianism, equality tends to negate individual excellence and distinction, fostering a culture of mediocrity where strength and superiority become morally suspect. Contemporary political philosopher Alain de Benoist (2011) similarly argues that modern societies, driven by the ideal of absolute equality, often embrace policies that systematically suppress or diminish differences perceived as superior. These policies frequently result in a form of bureaucratic interventionism, where institutions strive obsessively to eliminate every trace of inequality, thus enshrining weakness and vulnerability as protected and privileged categories. This phenomenon, what could be termed a “bureaucratized cult of weakness,” actively institutionalizes and normalizes the condition of being disadvantaged, vulnerable, or marginalized, while implicitly stigmatizing manifestations of strength or success as forms of oppression or privilege. In other words, equality is a normalization in which strength is suppressed in order to be attributed to weakness. Here is the most obvious expression of weakness. It could even be called a bureaucratized cult of weakness.

Empirical evidence for this dynamic can be found in contemporary debates on educational policies and affirmative action programs. While intended to promote fairness, such policies have sparked intense debate. Critics argue that they inadvertently foster a narrative of dependency, reinforcing perceptions of minorities or disadvantaged groups as perpetually fragile, incapable of succeeding without systemic assistance. According to a spring 2023 Pew Research survey, affirmative action remains a fiercely debated issue in American public opinion, with clear partisan and demographic divisions: 50% of U.S. adults disapproved of selective colleges considering race or ethnicity in admissions to increase diversity, compared with 33% who approved and 16% who were unsure.

Moreover, this institutionalized emphasis on equality frequently translates into bureaucratic measures that micromanage human relations, language, and interactions, such as workplace sensitivity training, mandated diversity quotas, and speech regulations. Such measures, while ostensibly promoting fairness, foster an environment in which individuals are encouraged or even compelled to portray themselves as disadvantaged or vulnerable in order to gain institutional recognition and support.

Thus, equality carries a paradoxical implication: strength, excellence, or distinction must be diminished or hidden, while weakness, vulnerability, or disadvantage become sources of legitimacy and even power. This profound moral inversion reveals not just a cultural shift but a deeper philosophical transformation: a society increasingly uncomfortable with the visible expression of individual strength and competence, opting instead to elevate vulnerability as its new moral ideal.

4. Institutionalizing Weakness: Safe Spaces and Victimhood Culture

Contemporary Western institutions provide concrete examples of weakness being treated as virtue. One prominent case is the rise of safe spaces and trigger warnings in academia. Universities often encourage students to avoid exposure to ideas or images that might upset them, establishing zones (physical or intellectual) where one should not have to encounter conflict or opposing viewpoints. The original intent was to protect genuinely vulnerable individuals (for instance, survivors of trauma) from re-traumatization. However, the practice has evolved into a broader ethos that prioritizes emotional comfort for all. This reflects an underlying assumption that students (and by extension, people in society) are fragile and must be shielded from adversity. A “culture of fragility” has taken root, marked by an aversion to confrontation and a redefinition of collegiality as never offending anyone. While couched in terms of kindness and respect, this institutional stance effectively valorizes psychological weakness: the more sensitive you are, the more the system will bend to accommodate you.

These academic trends, however well-intentioned, infantilize students and leave them unprepared for reality (reference). A university experience devoid of challenge is like a gym in which no one lifts anything heavy for fear of strain; the result is not strength but further weakness. Yet in the moral narrative on campuses, the “snowflake” (a pejorative term for an overly fragile student) sees themselves as virtuous for seeking safety, and the institution reinforces this by treating emotional security as a right. The very concept of resilience—once a prized character trait—has faded from the conversation, replaced by calls for *ever more protection*. The virtue of weakness becomes self-reinforcing.

Beyond the campus, a broader victimhood culture has emerged in social politics. In identity-based movements, being part of an oppressed or marginalized group often confers a special moral standing. Society is taught to “honor” those who have suffered historical injustices, sometimes to the point of exempting them from scrutiny or elevating their voices simply because of their victim status (reference). Under the identitarian outlook, victimhood is a positive political resource – it signals moral innocence and claims automatic empathy. Conversely, individuals from groups seen as powerful are treated as inherently suspect or guilty (they must “atone” for privilege). This creates an inversion: weakness or marginality itself becomes a credential of virtue, while strength or dominance is something to apologize for. Hence, public debates sometimes hinge not on what is objectively right, but on who has the stronger claim to being a victim.

This valorization of victimhood encourages what has been called ‘competitive grievance.’ Social rewards—attention, validation, influence—accrue to those who can portray themselves as more aggrieved or vulnerable. If weakness commands respect, there is less incentive to overcome it. We see this in how disagreements play out: rather than argue the merits of an issue, contending parties each emphasize how hurt or threatened they feel. The discourse thus revolves around displays of weakness. It is a kind of race to the bottom of vulnerability, which can paradoxically breed new forms of power—the power to *cancel*, to elicit concessions, to win sympathy.

Even the justice system reflects this paradigm shift. Restorative justice and therapeutic approaches to wrongdoing have gained favor as more “humane” alternatives to punitive measures. In many Western communities, there is a strong preference for rehabilitating offenders through understanding and counselling rather than imposing penalties. Here again, we find a tension between strength and weakness as guiding values: is it more virtuous to show leniency (display moral “weakness” in the form of mercy) or to show resolve and enforce justice strictly?

4.1. European “Soft Power” and the Preference for Safety

The European Union and its member states present a striking macro-level portrait of weakness as an avowed value. The EU’s official self-description centers on ideals like *peace*, *human rights*, *solidarity*, and *dialogue*. According to recent surveys, Europeans rank “peace” as the number one value representing the EU (mentioned by 39% of citizens), with human rights and democracy following closely (European Commission 2024). This is telling: “peace”—the avoidance of conflict—is held up as Europe’s defining ethos. Strength, in the sense of military power or even assertive patriotism, is largely absent from the list of virtues. Postwar Europe has prided itself on being a “civilian power” that wields influence through economic and moral example, not force. The lexicon of European diplomacy is rich in words such as “de-escalation,” “restraint,” and “consensus-building.” In effect, Europe has turned *non-confrontation* into a virtue.

Some analysts applaud this as a triumph of enlightenment over brute politics. Others see it as a rationalization of decline. This attitude can breed complacency. Walter Laqueur (2012) identified a “lack of self-confidence, a weak ego” underlying the persistent invocation of “European values,” interpreting it as symptomatic of a continent drifting in self-doubt beneath its elevated moral rhetoric. Commenting on Laqueur’s *After the Fall*, Christopher Caldwell wryly noted that the European Union, through constant appeals to its humane ideals, “has sought to dress up Europe’s weakness as virtue” (Caldwell 2012). Lacking either the capacity or the political will to project power abroad—or even to defend itself with conviction—Europe increasingly reframes its hesitancy not as failure, but as moral superiority. Europe reframes its lack of will as a principled choice.

The European case illustrates the semantic inversion at a grand scale: strength and aggression are seen as evils to be expunged from politics, whereas admitting one’s weakness or limits is seen as enlightened. The EU often acts as if any show of hardness would betray its core identity. While this has kept internal European peace for decades, it has also led to accusations that Europe is impotent in the face of external threats—too dependent on others to guarantee its security or uphold international order. Europe’s proud stance of “Never again war” unavoidably carries the undertone of “Never again daring”, as the will to fight (even for a just cause) is cautiously suppressed. The anthropologist in Nietzsche might say that Europe’s highest ideal became the comfort of its populace—a tranquil prosperity protected by bureaucratic rules and transnational norms—and that this required systematically demoting the values of heroism, sacrifice, and strength. In describing people shaped by such a cultural situation, Nietzsche writes that they are “they are not human beings, but only physical compendia and, as it were, concrete abstractions” (Nietzsche 1997: 9). He continues:

... they are something other, not human beings, not gods, not animals, but historically educated pictures, completely and utterly education, picture, form, without demonstrable content, unfortunately only bad form and, in addition, uniform. (Nietzsche 1997: 10)

4.2. Nietzsche's Slave Morality and the Valorization of Weakness

If we think consistently, we could certainly go on with these examples. However, little has been said on the subject. Perhaps this is because the concept of “weak” is perceived as dangerous, as it can offend and irritate a more fragile being. The obscene philosopher and madman Friedrich Nietzsche has already spoken on the subject—the foul-mouthed preacher to whom decent citizens should not listen. Nietzsche analyses in “On the Genealogy of Morality”: there are two moralities that compete. One is the morality of the great, the heroic, and the powerful, and the other is the morality of the slave. The slave morality, as Nietzsche writes, arises from the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is slave-like through and through. He is not tired of pointing out that Christianity is the slave revolution that has made morality what we know it to be today. It praises the weak and fights the strong. It seeks to equalize the great so that it does not oppress the weak.

Nietzsche's statement is, of course, heretical. But it is also modern. Of course, the European values that resonate in Europe and, more generally, in the entire Western intellectual sphere are commendable. What is too often overlooked, however, is the fact that they have a dimension of weakness—weakness as a by-product, weakness as an integral part, as the underwater part of an iceberg. Not to win, but to reconcile. Not to strive for oneself and one's strength, but to abolish it in favor of the other—and any other. Of course, living with the other is praiseworthy if it is enriching. But it can no longer be praiseworthy if it robs. If one ignores the presence of weakness as a value in the content of other values, one can easily fall into a loss, which will result in the disappearance of the values that were originally honored.

Nietzsche observed that Judeo-Christian ethics inverted earlier value systems, turning the attributes of the powerless into moral ideals. In this slave morality, qualities such as meekness, humility, and sympathy—essentially forms of weakness—are labelled virtues, while strength, pride, and domination are condemned. Nietzsche argued that the *morality of the weak* arose from the resentment of enslaved or oppressed people, who found psychological victory in declaring their persecutors' power to be evil and their own weakness to be good. Christian morality, with its emphasis on pity and “the meek shall inherit the earth,” (Matthew 5:5), was for Nietzsche the prime example of this value inversion.

Nietzsche feared that modern egalitarian societies would continue to exalt “weak” virtues even as religious faith declined. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 1966), he prophesied the rise of the “last man”—a symbol of humanity resigned to mediocrity, who avoids struggle, shuns ambition, and prioritizes comfort and security above all else. For Nietzsche, this figure embodied the ultimate degeneration of vitality: a society that no longer aspires to greatness but instead clings to safety and sameness. The last man is the anthropological outcome of a culture that prioritizes avoiding pain and conflict above all

else. He is risk-averse, easily satisfied, and lacks aspiration for anything great or transcendent. In Nietzsche's view, such a society of comfortable weaklings would be devoid of the creative tension and striving that produce cultural vitality. Nietzsche's polemical challenge forces us to ask: has the West's very idealism and morality made it "too human", too sympathetic, at the expense of courage and excellence?

The elevation of weakness in Western morality is probably deeply connected to the legacy of Christian ethics, albeit in a secular form. The West's humanitarian values did not appear from nowhere; they are the heirs of a religious worldview that has long dignified the downtrodden. Historian Tom Holland (2019) argues that many secular ideals—such as the equal dignity of all and care for the weak—are in fact "instinctually Christian". The Christian revolution taught Europe to value humility, charity, and the suffering victim. Even as explicit faith declined, this moral framework endured, making modern liberalism resemble *Christianity without Christ*: protective of the weak, but stripped of its spiritual grounding.

Thinkers like Charles Taylor (2007) have noted that the secular West continues to prize values of empathy, tolerance, and equality because of this Christian imprint. However, once these values are detached from their religious narrative, they can become absolutized in peculiar ways (Kūlis 2022). The duty to help the weak can lose its balance with other virtues. One can see a kind of moral sentimentalism take hold—a priority on caring and comfort above all, reflecting what Taylor calls the "affirmation of ordinary life" (the idea that relieving suffering is the highest good). In practice, this means that anything causing distress or inequality is viewed as evil, and alleviating it is the paramount aim. The Christian injunction to love the neighbor has subtly morphed into a secular imperative to never judge, never offend, and always accommodate.

5. Anthropological Consequences: Comfort and Its Discontents

A culture that prizes comfort, safety, and validated weakness above all else will shape a certain type of human character. The collective ideal today sometimes seems to be the emotionally secure yet physically and intellectually passive person—one who "stays safe" and gets rewarded for it. Over time, this will erode qualities of resilience and fortitude in the population. When minor adversity is treated as a catastrophe, people lose the adaptive "antifragility" that comes from facing challenges. In Nietzschean terms, the widespread adoption of slave-moral values could culminate in a society of Last Men: individuals who are content but not truly happy, protected but not truly free. They live in a blinkered, comfortable illusion that evil and hardship have been tamed.

The French philosopher Alexandre Kojève (1980), interpreting Hegel's master–slave dialectic, predicted that the end of history would culminate in a universal and homogeneous state: a classless, post-conflict society grounded in equality. In such a post-historical condition, the struggle for recognition would be resolved, and humanity would cease to strive for greatness. Yet this vision, Kojève warned, would not yield fulfillment, but alienation. The "last man" (*l'homme dernier*) would live in comfort and conformity,

devoid of ambition or philosophical depth, reduced to a technocratic being that works, consumes, and entertains itself—but no longer aspires.

From the standpoint of cohesion policies, this raises a sharp question: does enforced equality truly produce social unity, or does it lead to alienation? In Kojève's view, the post-historical subject becomes indistinguishable from an animal—not because of suffering, but because of indifference. Without conflict, risk, or struggle, the space for political, artistic, or philosophical life dissolves.

In contemporary Europe—and notably within the European Union's bureaucratic ideal of "unity in diversity"—we observe this tension between official sameness and lived difference. While equal rights and opportunities are theoretically designed to foster inclusion, they can also suppress difference and reduce social identity to impersonal categories. A society that erases meaningful distinctions in the name of cohesion may end up producing apathy rather than solidarity.

There are profound costs to this mindset. Culturally, it may mean fewer innovations and bold ventures—for these require tolerance of failure, controversy, even danger. Politically, a citizenry averse to conflict may avoid hard choices or confronting injustices that demand struggle. Morally, equating weakness with virtue can lead to moral confusion: people might begin to believe that being virtuous is simply about being injured or aggrieved, rather than actively doing good. The classic virtues, such as courage, honesty, and justice, involve confronting risk, speaking hard truths, and sometimes using strength to defend what is right. If a society shrinks from those demands, it might preserve a pleasant order for a time, but at the risk of hollowing out its spirit.

None of this is to say that compassion and safety are misguided values—only that a mature society must balance them with honor and resilience. When weakness becomes the gold standard of morality, strength disappears. The anthropological challenge (Kūlis 2019) for the contemporary West is to integrate its hard-won empathy for the vulnerable with a renewed appreciation for courage and excellence. In practical terms, it means remembering that comfort is not the highest human end—flourishing is, and flourishing often requires venture and contest.

The modern West's elevation of weakness as a virtue is a double-edged phenomenon. It embodies a humane progress that rightly rejects the brutalities of the past and seeks a gentler society. Yet it also carries the seed of decline if taken too far, tilting into mediocrity and passivity. A culture overly obsessed with not hurting or being hurt can lose its vitality, much as a muscle that is never exercised grows weak. The task ahead is to transcend the simplistic binary of weakness-good/strength-bad and to remember that true human dignity involves a spectrum of virtues. Compassion can coexist with strength of character; a society can be both caring and courageous. To achieve this balance, however, the West may need to shed some of its comforting illusions and rediscover the merit of discomfort—the productive struggle that forges not only personal growth but also the collective will to defend what is good and true.

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