The Antinomy of Values

Weber, Tolstoy and the Limits of Scientific Rationality

GUY OAKES Monmouth University

ABSTRACT In this article, I revisit Max Weber’s lecture ‘Science as a Vocation’ by considering his position that choices between values are, in the end, irrational. In examining an argument, which he attributes to Tolstoy, on the relationship between modern culture, science and the meaningless of death, I attempt to prove that Weber’s position nullifies the premises on which it is based. As a result, his case for the irrationality of values is self-destructive and incoherent.

KEYWORDS rationality of science, science and values, ‘Science as a Vocation’, sociology of science, Tolstoy, Weber

Value Spheres and Axiological Deities

Max Weber stimulated the imagination of generations of readers with a host of arresting metaphors: the ‘polar night of icy darkness and hardness’ that would envelop Germany in the aftermath of the First World War (1958a: 128); the suggestion that anyone seriously engaged in politics ‘contracts with diabolical powers’ (1958a: 123); the ‘disenchantment of the world’ that is an inescapable concomitant of modernity (1958c: 155); and the ominous final pages of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, with its vision of a ‘mechanized petrification’ of life, an ‘iron cage’ inhabited by ‘specialists without spirit’ and ‘sensualists without heart’ (1958d: 182). Perhaps Weber’s most compelling metaphor is his image of modern culture as a war of gods. Politics, economics, religion, science, art and erotics – the ‘existential orders’ (Lebensordnungen) and ‘value spheres’ (Wertsphären) of culture – struggle with one another as if they were warring deities. The rationalization and intellectualization of life that marks ‘the fate of our times’ does not portend a twilight of the gods (1958c: 155). Although a thousand years of the ‘grandiose moral fervor of Christian ethics’
imposed a long *pax dei*, this proved to be only a semblance of peace (1958c: 149). After the death of the one God, many of the old deities arose from their graves. Resurrected as impersonal social forces, they resumed their struggle for cultural supremacy and possession of the soul of the *Kulturmensch*, the human being who lives for cultural values and lives off them as well. The result:

We live as the ancients did when their world was not yet disenchanted of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and, above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanted and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity. Fate, and certainly not ‘science’, holds sway over these gods and their struggles. One can only understand what the godhead is for the one order or the other, or better, what godhead is in the one or the other order. (1958c: 148)

With this understanding of value spheres, reason reaches its limits. A resolution of conflicts between final values cannot be derived from a theory or deduced from an argument. In Weber’s metaphor, which makes a surprising turn from a polytheistic to a monotheistic theocracy of values, it is necessary to choose a god by finding the divinity that holds the ‘fibers’ of one’s being (1958c: 156). The value sphere of this deity is the kingdom of God. All other possibilities are demonized as the kingdom of the devil. ‘We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world.’ In Weber’s view, this Pauline message holds not only for the antagonism between Christian spirituality and the exigencies of a mundane existence. The conflict of value spheres and the necessity of making rationally underdetermined choices among final values is a ‘fundamental fact’ of human existence:

So long as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. Or speaking directly, the ultimate possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion. Thus it is necessary to make a decisive choice. (1958c: 152)

Weber’s conception of value spheres seems to be defined by three features:

1. ‘*Letzte, höchste Werte*’: Every value sphere is grounded in a ‘final’ or ‘highest’ value that claims unconditional validity: ‘the one thing that is necessary’. Final values are categorical imperatives, creating a Manichean world of dichotomies based on the principle: either/or, everything or nothing. In religion, the believer is either saved or damned. In commerce, the merchant either conforms to the market or is eliminated by the pitiless forces of competition. In science, one
should either measure up to the demand that ‘the fate of his soul depends upon whether or not he makes the correct conjecture at this passage of this manuscript’ or stay out of science altogether (1958c: 135).

(2) ‘Eigengesetzlichkeit’: As value spheres become more systematically differentiated and their conceptual articulation more precise and refined, they assume the form of autonomous domains of thought, action and passion. Weber calls this property of value spheres ‘Eigengesetzlichkeit’. Each value sphere is governed by its own laws, an immanent logic that distinguishes it from alternatives and sharpens the conflict between them. The more impersonal and instrumentally rational the capitalist economy becomes, the more intransigent the conflict between commerce and a religious ethic of universal love. The more ruthlessly politics is pursued as the calculated exercise of power, the more problematic the commandment ‘Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.’

(3) ‘Ewiger Kampf’: The immanent dynamic of each value sphere produces increasingly rigorous and uncompromising internal consistency at the same time that it intensifies conflicts with alternatives. The result is an eternal struggle among the deities of the axiological world. Salvation religions, Weber claims, are committed to caritas: an ‘acosmic’ love for suffering humanity. Economics is committed to the maximization of monetary gains by competing in markets. The telos of politics is mastery by means of a coercion that is ultimately based on force, the basis of Weber’s famous definition of the state as the organization that claims a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence. Science is devoted to the pursuit of truth as established by the methods of empirical, conceptual and logical investigation. Weber regards the conflicts between these value spheres as inescapable. Because the antinomy of value spheres is a consequence of conflicts between final values, reconciliation, relativization or compromise is impossible in principle.

Weber calls the ‘unceasing struggle’ of the axiological deities a ‘fundamental fact’ (1958c: 152). In his view, it is a basic feature of our conception of the world, and in his studies on the economic ethics of the world religions, he spills much ink documenting this position. ‘Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions’ (1958b) – the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ or digression that he inserted between his monographs on Confucianism and Taoism (The Religion of China) and Hinduism and Buddhism (The Religion of India) – is in large measure an effort to elucidate the conflicts between a religious ethic of universal ‘brotherhood’ and the premises of other values spheres. However, it seems mistaken to claim that the antinomy of values is nothing more than a fact, albeit one of immense significance, that Weber discovers by investigating the history and sociology of salvation religions. Value antinomies are contradictions between ultimate values. Contradictions cannot be established by empirical investigations, to which Weber limits the cultural sciences. They are demonstrated by logical and conceptual analysis, which he places in the domain of philosophy. No Weberian
sociological investigation can determine that two positions are in eternal and irreconcilable conflict. Sociology can establish contingent facts, interpret their meanings and trace their causal connections. Efforts to demonstrate what is inevitably the case lie in a different province of science. The territory of axiological antinomy is metaphysics: not the speculative metaphysics of the 19th century and his own day, which Weber repudiated, but what has been called ‘descriptive metaphysics’: an account of the basic structure of our concepts (Strawson, 1959).

It is also a mistake to construe the antinomy of values as the incommensurability of ultimate value standards (Scaff, 2000: 109). Ultimate values are incommensurable only if there is no criterion on which they can be understood or evaluated. Under this condition, neither consistency nor inconsistency between values can be determined. It is possible to show that values conflict only by comparing them. Comparison requires common standards on which values can be interpreted or assessed. Incommensurability rules out common standards and thus the possibility of evidence for conflicts between value spheres. As a result, such conflicts are impossible in principle. The antinomy of values is not the result of an argument that ultimate standards are incommensurable. On the contrary, it presupposes common standards.

Because of the irreconcilable struggle between the gods and demons who rule value spheres, choices between fundamental values that determine the conduct of life are, as Weber puts it, ‘irrational’: there are no grounds for value decisions that are neutral between value spheres. Axiologically neutral principles of value choice or principles that transcend all value spheres are excluded by the doctrine of Eigengesetzlichkeit: Every value sphere is governed by its own immanent Nomos or laws. Choices within a given value sphere are determined by the ultimate values of that sphere. Choices across value spheres are logically indeterminate, which is the point of Weber’s metaphor that the problem posed by these choices can be resolved only by deciding which value is God and which the devil. Or, as he states the matter in different terms at the conclusion of ‘Science as a Vocation’ (1958c), we must find the demon who holds the fibers of our lives. Because Weber recognizes no principles, independent of all value spheres, on the basis of which decisions between ultimate values can be adjudicated, a Weberian science of value choices is impossible.

The concepts of value spheres and existential orders became prominent in Weber’s thinking during the First World War as he began to publish the monographs that would form his studies in the economic ethics of the world religions. In the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ of 1915, he surveyed the various ‘orders and values of this world’, documenting how economics, politics, art, erotic love and intellectual conflict with the otherworldly ethics of religions of salvation (1958b: 330). The conception of conflicting value spheres outlined in the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ was sharpened in his 1917 argument for the value neutrality of science, initially set out in the manuscript that he circulated to the members of
the Verein für Sozialpolitik in 1913 and defended in the special closed session of the Verein in January 1914 on value judgments (Baumgarten, 1964: 102–39). In the 1917 essay on value neutrality, the abyss between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ and the logical impossibility of deriving value judgments from scientific propositions are transposed by means of the metaphor employed in ‘Science as a Vocation’ into a metaphysics of ‘absolute polytheism’, a world of ultimate values locked in ‘an irreconcilable death-struggle, like that between “God” and “the devil”’ (1949: 17). Neither an empirical investigation of values, which Weber undertook in his studies on the sociology of religion, nor a logical or conceptual analysis of the premises and consequences of such an investigation, which he developed in the essay on value neutrality, can strike a balance between warring gods and demons. The ‘inevitable fruit of the tree of knowledge’ forces us to confront the result that conflicts between value spheres are inescapable and irresolvable. This means that the self-conscious life of the Kulturmensch has no ontological anchor. It is ‘a chain of ultimate decisions in which the soul, as in Plato, chooses its own fate – the meaning of its conduct and its existence’ (1949: 18).

In ‘Science as a Vocation’, delivered at Munich University in November 1917 (Schluchter, 1996: 46–7), Weber derived the consequences entailed by the antimony of values for the value sphere of science. The principal issues of the lecture: ‘What is the calling of science within the total life of humanity? And what is the value of science?’ (Weber, 1958c: 140, translation amended).

Weber’s response to these issues is found in his conception of science as the most powerful force in the intellectualization of life, a process that began by addressing questions about the meaning of life and, after some two thousand years, dismissed these questions as both unanswerable and absurd. Magic, a technique for the manipulation of nature, was undermined by the religions of salvation and their theologies, which offered interpretations of the meaning of the world that magic did not possess. Theologies were undermined by secular metaphysics, which provided immanent interpretations of the meaning of the world, rendering the assumption of transcendent entities and supernatural powers both suspicious and unnecessary. Metaphysics was undermined by modern science, which in Weber’s view demonstrated that questions about the meaning of life and the universe have no rationally justifiable answers. Science undermined the absolute and universal pretensions of all value spheres by demonstrating that choices between values are precisely that: not facts confirmed by evidence or inferences derived from arguments, but decisions. In the end, therefore, science reflexively undermined itself. Science and its ultimate value – truth conceived as a product of empirical and logical analysis – have no privileged status over other value spheres and their fundamental values. This position is not an assumption of Weber’s analysis of science but its conclusion, which he bases on the sociological arguments of the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ and the logical and conceptual arguments of the essay on value neutrality and ‘Science as a Vocation’. The Platonic view of science as the way to true being; the Renaissance ideal of science as the path to art
as the truth of nature; the 17th-century conception of science as the discovery of God in his works; and the Enlightenment and utilitarian conception of science as the basis of all human welfare, science as the way to true happiness – once these illusions about its meaning have been dissolved, what, ultimately, can be claimed for the value of science? No more, it seems, than can be said for any other value sphere. The antinomy of values entails that the question of what value, if any, can be ascribed to science and its artifacts can be answered only by making a value judgment. In Weber’s metaphor, this is a decision about whether science is a divine or a diabolical power. Because the decision depends on a commitment that is ultimately irrational, it poses a problem that cannot be resolved on scientific grounds.

**Tolstoy’s Question**

As a result of these considerations, Weber finds Tolstoy’s critique of science unassailable. On Weber’s reading, the basic theme of Tolstoy’s work is the question of whether any meaning can be ascribed to death: Is death a comprehensible event within the narrative of a person’s life? According to Weber, Tolstoy maintained that in a civilized culture, death is meaningless. Tolstoy’s case for this position, as Weber understood it, is tied to the increasing complexity of culture in civilized life. As each sphere of culture becomes progressively differentiated, the possibilities of life become inexhaustible. The result is an endless array of new challenges to confront, puzzles to solve, ideas to stimulate the imagination and experiences to pursue. In a culture that produces unlimited possibilities, we can become tired of life but never sated with life. Because civilized culture is essentially progressive and never reaches an end, there is no answer to the question ‘Why should I die today and not tomorrow?’ or ‘Why should I die at all?’ In such a culture, it is never possible to get enough of life. This is not the case in a simpler and less dynamic culture, in which all potentialities can be realized in the life of a single individual. At the end of life one can say: ‘It is sufficient’ or ‘I’ve had enough.’ Under these conditions, death makes sense because no unrealized possibilities remain, only the monotony of repetition.

Death becomes meaningless when it is no longer possible to understand why life should end at a specific point in the personal exploration and mastery of culture, or why it should end at any point. If the end of life is meaningless, the culture that produces this arbitrary and incomprehensible end is also meaningless. Given the multiplicity of pursuits that a civilized culture presents, the question ‘Why should I do one thing rather than another?’ or ‘Why should I do anything at all?’ has no answer. Assume an infinite set of choices. If one can act only on a finite subset of these choices, no single choice can be justified. As Weber presents Tolstoy’s position, this is because it is impossible to give an account of why one choice is preferable to another. Science has no solution to this problem. Thus
Tolstoy’s judgment on science, in Weber’s reading, is unsurprising and simple, the simplest of all answers to the question of the meaning of science in a disenchanted age.

Science is meaningless because it gives us no answer to our question, the only question important for us: ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’ (Weber, 1958c: 143)

Within limits, Weber accepts Tolstoy’s judgment, as indeed he must. It is a consequence of his own position on the antinomy of values. If your values entail that the meaning of death is the only problem of fundamental significance, then these values entail that science, which sheds no light on this problem, is also meaningless. If, from the standpoint of science, questions about the intelligibility of death are meaningless, then, from the perspective of these questions, science itself is meaningless.

**Tolstoy on Science and the Meaning of Death**

Before considering the logic of Weber’s case for the antinomy of values, it may be useful to examine the Tolstoyan turn taken in ‘Science as a Vocation’. What confidence can we place in Weber as a reader of Tolstoy? Weber claims that the argument he ascribes to Tolstoy on the relationship between science, culture and the meaning of death is the predominant theme ‘throughout his late novels’ (1958c: 140). What are Tolstoy’s ‘late novels’? Tolstoy died in 1910. His final novel, Resurrection, was published in 1899. The novel before Resurrection was Anna Karenina; it appeared nearly a quarter of a century earlier in 1877, before Tolstoy’s spiritual crisis, which began in the late 1870s and reached its peak in 1880–81, when he experienced the inner moral revolution documented in Confession (1882) and What I Believe (1883). If Tolstoy’s late works are understood as the post-crisis writings, they comprise primarily novellas, short stories and the ethical and political tracts that established his reputation as a critic of modernity. If his later fiction has a central theme, it is not the problem of the meaning of death, but the conflict between sensuality and spirituality: the tension he experienced in his own life between amoral sexual passion, which recognizes no limits beyond the erotic imagination and its exhaustion, and the uncompromising ethic of the Gospels. This is the theme of Father Sergius (1898, published posthumously), the story of a monk who is tortured by sensual desire and the struggle between the enticements of lust and the demands of Christian asceticism. Resurrection is the story of a young aristocrat who seduces the daughter of a tenant farmer. Driven to prostitution and accused of theft, she dies of typhus in prison. The Devil (1889, published posthumously) and The Kreutzer
Sonata (1889, published posthumously) share the same theme: the conflict between sexual appetite and moral constraints. Both begin with the same epigraph from the Sermon on the Mount: ‘But I say unto you, that every one that looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.’ The debauchery of the spirit is a consequence of ‘freeing oneself from moral relations with a woman with whom you have physical intimacy’ (Tolstoy, 1966: 125). For Tolstoy, the erotic is the most dangerous threat to moral order and the supreme force of irrationality in life because of its power to effect a demonic possession of the soul. This idea, which recurs throughout his fiction, is already prominent in War and Peace (1869).

The problem of the meaning of death that Weber poses in ‘Science as a Vocation’ is not the main theme of Tolstoy’s novels, early or late. Tolstoy’s most thorough discussion of the meaning of death is in his Confession. However, this book does not consider the problem that Weber raises in ‘Science as a Vocation’: given the increasing complexity of modern culture and the impossibility of exhausting its potentialities, science is meaningless because it cannot answer the only question of importance to us – what shall we do, and how shall we live? This question calls to mind Tolstoy’s ethical-political tract What Then Must We Do? (1886). But this piece is not concerned with the meaning of death; it is a critique of the state based on his communitarian communism and his understanding of Christian ethics. In short, it is not clear that the position Weber claims to find in Tolstoy’s ‘late novels’ is considered in his work. In order to find the Tolstoy of ‘Science as a Vocation’, we should do as Weber did and turn to Georg Lukács’s unfinished book on Dostoevsky, where the question that Weber ascribes to Tolstoy is an important theme. In this manuscript, written in Heidelberg in 1914–15, Lukács transposes the conception of culture that he had learned in Berlin from Simmel onto the writings of Tolstoy: culture as a proliferation of abstract and impersonal forms, remote from human experience, depleted of subjective or personal meaning, and the principal cause of the spiritual impoverishment of modern life (Lukács, 1985). Lukács’s rationale for this transposition, in which Tolstoy becomes a precursor of Simmel, is the early novella The Three Deaths (1858), written 11 years before War and Peace when Tolstoy was only 30 (Lukács, 1965: 150). It is a commonplace of the Weberian literature that Lukács was one of Weber’s most important interlocutors during 1912–15 and a regular participant in the Sunday salons at the Weber villa in Heidelberg. These were the years when Weber had begun to write his studies on the sociology of religion, the period in which the concept of cultural spheres became an important piece of his theoretical apparatus.3

In the Confession, however, there are no traces of the Simmelian premises that appear in ‘Science as a Vocation’. Tolstoy’s discussion of his spiritual crisis and his preoccupation with death during this period rests solely on metaphysical considerations. At the point in his life described in the Confession he was in his late
forties, enjoying the comforts of a happy family, a large estate, prosperity, robust health and intellectual powers, and literary fame. Yet his life seemed to come to a halt when he began to consider the problem ‘without which life is impossible’ (1983: 34): In light of the inevitability and incomprehensibility of death, of what significance is life? Tolstoy considered his growing literary reputation and the possibility that his works might bring him even more renown. ‘Very well, you will be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Molière, more famous than all the writers in the world – so what?’ (1983: 27). If nothing lies ahead but ‘the reality of suffering and death, of complete annihilation’ and if ‘nothing will remain except the stench and the worms’, what is the point of becoming the most famous of all writers (1983: 28, 30)? ‘Is there any meaning in my life that will not be destroyed by my inevitably approaching death?’ (1983: 35).

As the Confession shows, Weber misstates Tolstoy’s question. It is not the problem of the meaning of death that confounded him, but the problem of the meaning of life in the face of the inevitability of death. Tolstoy’s problem begins with the assumption that his life has no inherent significance. Both his literary work and family life appear empty and pointless. If we regard his life as a narrative, he seems to take the view that its individual episodes and passages as well as the story as a whole have no meaning of their own. Death creates meaninglessness only because Tolstoy is unable to identify a significance in life that death cannot destroy. Thus if life has a meaning, it must transcend both life and and death. Otherwise, Tolstoy, like Macbeth, is compelled to see his life as a tale told by an idiot, perhaps not full of sound and fury, but in the end signifying nothing. He can escape this paralyzing conclusion only by finding an answer to the question: Does life have a meaning beyond death?

Turning to the sciences with his question, Tolstoy finds that they give him no satisfaction. Although the experimental sciences and mathematics achieve clarity and precision, they are limited to questions about the proximate causes of empirical phenomena. Tolstoy’s question concerns ultimate causes: the purpose and significance that can be ascribed to human life. Confronted with such an issue, the exact sciences are silent. Philosophy, and above all metaphysics, is the province of his question; but when he surveys the ‘darkness of the speculative sciences’, he finds no answers, only recondite ways of restating the same problem (1983: 41). Thus Tolstoy concludes that the sciences cannot answer ‘the most vital and profound questions in life’ (1983: 27).

I searched all areas of knowledge, and not only did I fail to find anything, but I was convinced that all those who had explored knowledge as I did had also come up with nothing. Not only had they found nothing, but they had clearly acknowledged the same thing that had brought me to despair: the only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless. (1983: 33–4)
‘The Vocation of Science within the Total Life of Humanity’?

In the main, Weber’s observations on Tolstoy in ‘Science as a Vocation’ are based on misreadings. His essential point, the thesis most important to his own argument, is also mistaken: Tolstoy does not claim that science is meaningless. He argues that science cannot answer his question about the meaning of life and concludes that life is meaningless – not merely his own life, but any individual life. Does it follow that science is also meaningless? Suppose we put aside Weber’s misinterpretations of Tolstoy. In light of the argument employed in the Confession, can Tolstoy consistently accept this inference?

How does Tolstoy arrive at ‘the only absolute knowledge attainable by man’, namely ‘that life is meaningless’ (1983: 34)? By interrogating the sciences, which teach him this answer to his question, in the face of which all other replies have ‘crumbled to dust’ (1983: 38). Tolstoy constructs his argument by sketching a taxonomy of the sciences based on the kinds of issues they are competent to investigate. In surveying the experimental sciences, he finds that they cannot answer his question because it is not an empirical issue. On examining the results of the speculative sciences, he draws the following conclusion:

In the realm of speculative science I saw that in spite of – or rather precisely because of – the fact that this knowledge was designed to answer my question, there could be no answer other than the one I had given myself: What is the meaning of my life? It has none. (1983: 41)

In the Confession, Tolstoy is engaged in speculative science. Weber does not seem to have considered that, without science, Tolstoy would have neither an answer to his question nor even the question, which is generated by a metaphysical inquiry into the finitude of life. An inquiry is incoherent if it negates conditions for its own possibility. Because Tolstoy’s question, his investigation and his conclusion are all exercises in scientific reasoning, the inquiry that he undertakes in the Confession is not possible on the premise that science is meaningless. On this assumption, every move in his inquiry would be self-negating. Unless the significance of science and its results remain intact and uncontested, the underpinning of all scientific inquiry, including Tolstoy’s investigation in speculative science, collapses. Thus the conclusion that Weber mistakenly ascribes to Tolstoy entails that the position Tolstoy in fact takes in the Confession and the reasoning on which it rests are paradoxical. To borrow a metaphor from Wittgenstein, if Tolstoy’s inquiry is a door, the significance of science and its results are the hinges on which it turns. ‘If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put’ (Wittgenstein, 1972: 44).

This line of reasoning is also fatal to Weber’s argument for the antinomy of value spheres. Because of the irrationality of choices among value spheres, science
and the values in which it is anchored are also irrational. They can be justified only by rationales that are immanent to science. Any such rationale would be circular, a pseudo-justification that assumes what it is devised to prove. Weber’s argument presupposes a theory of ‘Wissenschaft’ – literally ‘the production of knowledge’ – that is more comprehensive than the English concept ‘science’ and at the same time more narrow than ‘thinking’ or ‘thought’. Weberian science is the Aristotelian idea of theoretical wisdom reconceptualized by Kant as theoretical reason and reformulated in Heinrich Rickert’s philosophy of science (Rickert, 1902). In Weber’s essays on methodology, science comprises three types of investigation: the confirmation of facts; the formation of concepts to analyze and explain facts – which, following Rickert, he sometimes calls ‘abstraction’; and the analysis of all claims by elucidating their premises and implications – an inquiry that he calls ‘logic’ or ‘immanent critique’ (‘innere Kritik’). He places the following modes of axiological analysis in the domain of logic: ‘Wertinterpretation’ (value interpretation), the analysis of the meaning of values; ‘Wertanalyse’ (value analysis), the analysis of the premises and implications of values; and ‘Begriffsethik’ (roughly, analytical ethics), the analysis of the meaning, presuppositions and implications of value judgments.

In a 1908 letter to Ferdinand Tönnies, Weber comments on his conception of science:

Thought is not restricted to the limits of science. However, it should not represent itself as science unless it is either 1. the analysis of facts (including abstraction and all empirically verifiable syntheses and hypotheses) or 2. analytical ethics. (Baumgarten, 1964: 399)

The theory of value spheres that Weber uses to make his case for the irrationality of science falls within the value sphere of science. The analysis of the concept of value, the identification and differentiation of the various value spheres, and the investigation of how they constitute existential orders that regulate the conduct of life are all scientific inquiries, contributions to ‘the typology and sociology of rationalism’ (Weber, 1958b: 324). The thesis of value antinomy is an inference that Weber derives from premises, a conclusion that he bases on the investigations undertaken in the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’. Weber’s case for this thesis depends on criteria for defining the conditions under which values conflict, indices for determining whether conflicts obtain, and a method for establishing that they are irreconcilable. The logical and conceptual apparatus that Weber constructs to support the view that science is irrational is an essential component of his sociology and methodology, both of which presuppose the rationality of science. Put another way, the premises that Weber employs to defend the thesis of value antinomy cannot be generated unless that thesis is false. This means that his case for the thesis is self-defeating and logically self-destructive. It refutes itself by nullifying a fundamental premise on which it is based: the
rationality of science and its values. This does not mean that the thesis is self-contradictory in the strict sense or even false. However, it exhibits several logical peculiarities. It entails the incoherence of the arguments Weber uses to support it and the premises and arguments of Weberian methodology and social science as well; and it cannot be intelligibly asserted on the basis of any inquiry that falls within the value sphere that Weber calls ‘science’.

These same considerations subvert Weber’s decisionistic response to the antinomy of values. If there are no principles for resolving conflicts between value spheres because the mutually unsatisfiable demands of ultimate value imperatives are irreconcilable, we must choose our own values and decide which of the axiological gods or demons we will serve. This decision, Weber claims, is ‘plain and simple, if each finds and obeys the demon who holds the fibers of his very life’ (1958c: 156). Weber’s policy in the war of the gods is spirited and aggressive engagement. Engagement means entering the war of the gods and making a choice. In this way, we find the value that teaches us how to follow one of Weber’s favorite Goethean dicta: \textit{werde der, wer du bist}, become who you are. Finding depends on discovery, which presupposes an inquiry that arrives at a successful conclusion. Inquiry depends on a method for inquiring: criteria for determining where and how to look, principles for distinguishing possible objects of the search, and standards for confirming whether we have found the right value, the axiological demon who holds the fibers of our lives. This compendium of criteria, principles and standards constitutes a logic of investigation that distinguishes valid from invalid inquiries. All of which is to say: it is a case of Weberian science. Weber’s response to the irrationality of values and the impossibility of choosing among them on the grounds of science refutes itself by employing the methods of science to make the choice. His picture of an Adamic \textit{Kulturmensch} – axiologically innocent, uncommitted and confronted by a world of conflicting values – is an illusion. The Weberian value choice is possible only within the value sphere of science. As a result, his response to the antinomy of values undercuts its own assumptions and defeats the argument from which it is derived.

**Concluding Remarks on Value Spheres: The Olympians Reconsidered**

Weber’s conception of the antinomy of values is unpromising from the outset. Even in his choice of metaphors, he seems to have gone awry. In ‘Science as a Vocation’, the Olympian gods reproduce his vision of the \textit{Kaiserreich} and its adversaries to the East: locked by fate in an inexorable struggle for hegemony in which reconciliation is neither feasible nor even conceivable. The Olympians, however, seem to approximate more closely one of Tolstoy’s unhappy families: neither perpetually at war nor enjoying unceasing bliss but, in the parlance of our time, ‘dysfunctional’.
In the *Iliad*, the gods form an extended ethnic family, comparable to a Sicilian clan or a New York Mafia family: a tribe of irascible personalities, sometimes quarrelsome but generally stable and united under the undisputed power and patronage of a single godfather. It is difficult to see how the gods could be perpetually at war given the supremacy of Zeus, the Homeric father of gods and men and the ruler of all the immortals. Aristophanes, Herodotus and Thucydides all observe that the Greek gods were worshipped as a collectivity by the Athenians of the classical period. Single altars to all the gods were established for worship and sanctuary, the most notable located in the Athenian agora (Guthrie, 1962: 110). In the *Phaedrus*, Plato describes not a divine civil war but a hierarchy of gods and demons who are assigned various ranks determined by their relationship to Zeus (Guthrie, 1962: 111–12).5

Weber could be ruthless in exposing what he regarded as fundamental weaknesses in the writings of his adversaries. He did not always subject his own thinking to the exacting requirements he demanded of others. Conceptually, his theory of value spheres is a disappointment. He does not seem to have considered questions that are quite elementary and makes no attempt to elucidate basic concepts with any care. How, for example, does he know what value spheres there are? How does he know that there are only six and that economics, politics, religion, science, esthetics and erotics exhaust the universe of values? Why, for example, are there no value spheres of law, play, intimacy or technique? Why no value sphere of ethics? In the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’, he writes as if ethics could not constitute an independent value sphere because each sphere is governed by its own ethic. However, the same claim could be made for politics. There is a politics of the economy, of religion, science, art, and even of the erotic life. In the essay on value neutrality, he juxtaposes ethical values to both erotic values and ‘cultural’ values, which suggests that there is an autonomous domain of moral values. But what is the sphere of culture? Is it a seventh value sphere – or an eighth if we include ethics? Or is it a meta-sphere that subsumes all extra-moral values? And how could ethics constitute an independent value sphere given Weber’s distinction between two juxtaposed types of morality grounded in antithetical values: an ethic of responsibility and an ethic of morally pure intentions? All these questions revolve around the same central difficulty: What are the criteria for the constitution of value spheres? Because Weber does not address this issue, any answer to the question ‘What are the “ultimate” and “highest” values?’ is tautological or circular.6

For Weberian studies, this is a consequence of no mean significance. The antinomy of values is not ancillary to Weber’s thought, nor can it be discarded without dismantling the framework on which Weberian social science is built. Consider his methodological strategy of idealypical analysis, which is underpinned by the dichotomy of value relevancies and value judgments. Weber regards the former as inter-subjectively valid and objective connections between facts and values. The latter are subjective and personal because they rest on choices between

---

OAKES THE ANTINOMY OF VALUES 207
values. Value judgments cannot be derived from value relevancies, nor can value relevancies be theoretically grounded in value judgments. The irrationality of value choices is the basis of this dichotomy. If a science of value choices were possible, it would destroy the basis of Weber’s theoretical pluralism, which is a consequence of the plurality of value relevancies and the interests that generate them. His polytheistic sociology, which is founded on the possibility of a plurality of equally legitimate ideal-typical constructions of the same phenomenon, would be superseded by a monotheistic sociology based on a one-to-one correspondence between ideal types and their objects: Both the ideal type and its object would be defined by reference to the same objective values. The methodological and axiological structure of Weberian social science – the theory of ideal types, the value neutrality of science and the objectivity of the social sciences – would lie in ruins.

If the arguments of this paper are sound, Weber’s defense of the antinomy of values ends in a paradox that cannot be resolved. His case for this position contradicts its own presuppositions and nullifies the grounds on which it is based. The result: the thesis of value antinomy falls under the weight of its own logical ballast.

Notes
Work on this essay was supported by the Jack T. Kvernland Chair, Monmouth University. Thanks are due to Gerhard Wagner for suggestions on an earlier draft.

1. Weber spells out the limits in ‘Science as a Vocation’. The fact that science does not answer Tolstoy’s question leaves three issues open: In what sense does science give ‘no answer’ to Tolstoy’s question? What does it mean to pose this question correctly? And once Tolstoy’s position is correctly understood, can science still achieve something of value (1958c: 147, 152)? In the remaining pages of the lecture, Weber does not address the first two questions. As regards the third, he argues that science serves moral ends in at least two respects: it forces us to confront facts that cannot easily be accommodated to our beliefs; and it exposes the assumptions and consequences of our beliefs, producing ‘self-clarification’, a ‘sense of responsibility’ and ‘an account of the ultimate meaning’ of our conduct (1958c: 147, 152). This response seems weak. Even if science discovers facts that are inconsistent with our beliefs, it does not follow that we will come to terms with them or even acknowledge their existence. Although science may elucidate the premises and implications of our beliefs, this guarantees neither self-clarification nor a ‘sense of responsibility’, both of which depend on our willingness to be taught by science and to act on what we learn. Finally, Weber’s moral apologia for science begs the question against the position he ascribes to Tolstoy. If the only ethical issue of significance is a question that science cannot answer, any other moral ends it may serve are insignificant. If the meaninglessness of death entails the meaninglessness of life, what is the point of confronting inconvenient facts and acquiring self-knowledge?

2. Weber read Tolstoy’s ethical and political writings for his monograph on the Russian revolution of 1905, citing one of them in the original Russian (Weber, 1989: 248, n. 79). By 1910–12, when he was beginning his studies on the economic ethics of the world religions, he was also apparently ready to publish an essay on Tolstoy. In 1911, the first issue of the Russian edition of the journal Logos, the international voice of southwest German neo-Kantianism, printed a notice of a forthcoming essay by Weber titled ‘Tolstoy’s Ethics’, scheduled to appear in October of that year.
This piece was never published. In her memoir on Weber, his wife Marianne mentions a book on Tolstoy that Weber had planned and intended to dedicate to her and his mother Helene (1988: 466). In an autumn 1912 letter to his mother, he told her he was writing: ‘not “Tolstoy” just yet, but I’ll begin soon’ (Hanke, 1993: 172). This book was also not written. On Weber’s conception of Tolstoy, whose personality and writings he regarded as ideal types of an anti-utilitarian ethic of morally pure intentions, see Hanke (1993: 168–208).


4. Tolstoy describes the process of questioning that led him to this result as if it reproduced the course of a fatal disease. In the beginning, the patient notices seemingly innocuous symptoms and ignores them. However, they return with increasing frequency, becoming ‘one continuous duration of suffering’ that teaches the sufferer what he already knows but refuses to admit: ‘the thing he had taken for a mere indisposition is in fact the most important thing on earth to him, is in fact death’ (1983: 26). The theme of The Death of Ivan Ilych, the novella that Tolstoy began after finishing the Confession and his first major piece of fiction since his spiritual crisis, is the meaning of death. The novella is the story of the death of a judge who suffers horrifically from a wasting, cancer-like disease. His spiritual agony is even more terrible than his physical pain. Ivan Ilych is tormented by two questions: why he has to suffer and die and whether his life – which, in the end, he sees as corrupted by sensuality, hypocrisy and the shallowness of bureaucratic routine – has been morally fraudulent. His quandary is not the question of the Confession: How can life have any significance if it must end in death? Nor is it the question of ‘Science as a Vocation’: In a culture of unlimited possibilities, how can death be understood? On the contrary, he wants to know why he must suffer and die. He does not interrogate science in order to answer this question, nor does he find science wanting or meaningless because he can find no answer.

5. Guthrie finds no grounds for Weber’s conception of the Greek gods as ideological rivals engaged in Mannheimian Weltanschauungspolitik and total war, as if they were leaders of early 20th-century revolutionary parties and their armies. He describes the gods as more exalted versions of Homeric kings: morally flawed, on occasion moved by passion, disposed to nepotism and questionable measures when the interests of their favorites were at stake, but committed to a chivalric ethic and a moral psychology of noblesse oblige. On the relatively pacific relations among the Olympian deities and their tactics for avoiding and reconciling conflicts, see Guthrie (1962: 126, 186–7, 201–2).

6. Here I part company with Hartmann Tyrell (1993), who attempts to repair Weber’s value theory by distinguishing value spheres from existential orders. His strategy is to make this distinction by using the concept of an ultimate value that has the status of a categorical norm. Value spheres are grounded in such norms; existential orders are not. Notwithstanding ingenuity and careful scholarship on his part, Tyrell’s strategy leads to a dead end. The reason: given the premises of Weber’s value theory, there is no non-circular method for identifying values that qualify as ultimate and categorical norms. Two methods seem possible: one employs criteria independent of value spheres; the other, criteria immanent to value spheres. As regards the first possibility, the doctrine of Eigengesetzlichkeit entails that there are no axiological criteria independent of all value spheres – no meta-values from the standpoint of which all other values can be defined. In Weber’s view, this possibility would presuppose a metaphysics of value, which he rejects as an archaic philosophical illusion. As regards the second possibility, Weber argues in ‘Science as a Vocation’ that the premises of a value sphere cannot be demonstrated within that sphere. Any such demonstration would be empty on grounds of circularity. The result: Weber’s value theory does not admit the possibility of non-tautological criteria for defining the ‘ultimate’ and ‘highest’ values. Since value spheres are identified by reference to such values, the former concept falls with the latter. Weber’s value theory poses the same kinds of problems that Plato confronted in his late dialogues – the Parmenides, the Sophist and the Theaetetus – when he began a skeptical
reconsideration of his theory of forms. However, the differences between the two thinkers in this regard are striking. Plato produced a devastating critique of his own position. Weber, a consumer rather than a producer of philosophical ideas, seems to have been oblivious of the difficulties created by his theory. The trouble, as is often the case in the philosophical underpinnings of Weber’s work, begins with Rickert, the source of his idea of value spheres (Rickert, 1911, 1913). See Gerhard Wagner’s seminal critique of Rickert (1987) as well as Oakes (1988, 1997).

References


Guy Oakes is the Jack T. Kvernland Professor at Monmouth University, USA. He has done research in classical German sociology, the philosophy of the social sciences and the sociology of ethics. His recent books include The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture (Oxford University Press, 1994) and (with Arthur J. Vidich) Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life: Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (University of Illinois Press, 1999).

Address: Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ 07764, USA. [email: goakes@monmouth.edu]