Max Weber on Value Rationality and Value Spheres

Critical Remarks

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ABSTRACT This essay considers a question that Weber scholarship seems to have left untouched: is Weber's concept of value rationality coherent? In making the case that it is not, I begin with the premise that value rationality is a product of processes of value rationalization that operate in value spheres. Because of self-destructive defects that undermine Weber's analysis of these processes, his account of value rationality is invalidated as well. I conclude with some skeptical observations on his distinction between value rationality and instrumental rationality.

KEYWORDS instrumental rationality, methodology, value rationality, value spheres, value theory

Value Rationality as a Problem

Value rationality has proven to be a perennial topic for speculation, reconstruction and debate among Weber scholars. After Max Weber, the most influential 'German' sociologist of the 20th century was an American with the improbable name Talcott Parsons. In The Structure of Social Action (Parsons, 1937) and Toward a General Theory of Action (Parsons and Shils, 1962), Parsons pushed Weber's fragmentary remarks on value rationality to heights of abstraction never envisioned by the author of the first chapter of Economy and Society. Parsons' innovation was to introduce the conception of a general Weberian theory of action in which value rationality is a basic category. Since Weber never developed such a theory, the Parsonian vision opened up vast but obscure horizons left to be explored and mapped by generations of Weber cartographers. This project captivated the imagination of Weber cognoscenti, above all in Germany, where the differentiation of sociology from philosophy has remained uncertain, and even at
the end of the 20th century it was possible to qualify for a professorship in sociology on the basis of a philosophical monograph.¹

More recently, the idea of value rationality as the cornerstone of a Weberian normative ethics has gained currency (Schluchter, 1996). The conception of Max Weber as a moral philosopher resurrects the old gods of the Weber literature: Dieter Henrich, whose celebrated doctoral dissertation held that Weber achieved a grand synthesis of theoretical and practical reason (Henrich, 1952), and the more personal iconography of Karl Jaspers, who insisted that even if Weber did not write as a philosopher, there is a more fundamental sense in which his life and work expressed a distinctive philosophy (Jaspers, 1988).

This essay has more modest aims. I consider a question that Weber scholarship seems to have left untouched: is Weber’s concept of value rationality coherent? In making the case that it is not, I begin with the premise that value rationality is an artifact, a product of processes of value rationalization that operate in value spheres. Because of self-destructive defects that undermine Weber’s analysis of these processes, his account of value rationality is invalidated as well. The ensuing discussion falls into three parts. First, I examine Weber’s complementary analyses of value rationalization and value spheres. Then I argue that his concept of value rationality collapses due to irredeemable weaknesses in his account of the rationalization of value spheres. I conclude with some skeptical observations on his distinction between value rationality und instrumental rationality.

**Value Rationalization and Value Spheres**

Value rationalization is a key explanatory variable in Weber’s panoramic investigation of the genesis, development and distinctiveness of western modernity – the currently fashionable English cliché is ‘trajectories’, as if modernity were a projectile launched by a piece of ancient machinery. The locus of value rationalization is one or another value sphere. Weber seems certain that there are precisely six such spheres, and no less confident as to what they are: religion, the economy, politics, aesthetics, the erotic (die Erotik) and intellectualism.

Value spheres are the domain of the Weberian ‘cultural being’ (Kultur-mensch), endowed ‘with the capacity and the will to deliberately take a position on the world and ascribe a meaning to it’ (Weber, 1949a: 81, translation amended). Although it would be quixotic to attempt a definition of Weberian value spheres, it is clear that several elements are essential to their constitution.

**Ultimate Values**

‘Ethics’, Weber claims, ‘is not the only thing in the world that is “valid” ’ (1949b: 15). All value positions are grounded in ‘ultimate values’, ‘ultimate valuations’, ‘ultimate axioms’ or ‘value axioms’ – principles that claim the unconditional
validity of categorical imperatives. Because a position can be taken only from a standpoint, cultural beings must occupy a space from which they can understand the world and their place in it. Ultimate values define this space. Thus the main desideratum in understanding a value sphere is to identify its distinctive ultimate values. In light of this consideration, Weber’s most explicit analysis of the definitive axioms of the six value spheres – ‘Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions’ (1915), the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ or digression that he included in the first volume of his collected essays on the sociology of religion (1920) – is surprisingly casual. The ultimate value of the economy is unproblematic, but only because Weber reduces this sphere to ‘the cosmos of the modern, rational, capitalist economy’ (1958a: 331, translation amended), in which actors attempt to maximize financial gains in competitive markets by calculating monetary prices. Weber arrives at the ultimate value of politics by a parallel tactic, reducing politics to ‘the impersonal pragmatics of reasons of state’, the distribution of power in the domestic and foreign relations of states (Weber, 1958a: 334, translation amended). Given this simplification, the fundamental political value is domination achieved by coercion that is based on force – in Weber’s view the distinctive property of the state. Intellectualism is reduced to ‘rational intellectualism’ or discursive knowledge (das denkende Erkennen). Its imperative is to produce a cosmos of truths grounded in factual evidence or logical inference (1958a: 350–1). Religion is reduced to religions of salvation. Notwithstanding Weber’s cautionary observation that religions produce diverse conceptions of the psychological motives and theological possibilities of salvation, all religions are said to be committed to caritas: a selfless and ‘acosmic’ love for suffering humanity (1958a: 330). Weber’s comments on aesthetic values are difficult to decipher. Although he claims that ‘the development of intellectualism and the rationalization of life’ form art into a cosmos of values that are increasingly conceived as both autonomous and intrinsic (1958a: 342), he does not resolve the question of what these values are. Weber’s account of the erotic, or sexual love, is a pastiche of ethnographic and metaphysical speculation linked by observations drawn from his extensive reading in philosophy, religion and belles lettres. Following Goethe’s The Elective Affinities and Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde, Weber seems to see the erotic life as committed to a mutual sexual possession that lovers experience as an inescapable destiny. The world exists to make the consummation of this experience possible (1958a: 334–9).

Antinomy

Weber’s conception of value spheres does not admit the possibility of a fundamental value from which all value positions can be derived or a single value sphere to which all others can be subordinated. The impossibility of a hierarchy of value spheres is a consequence of his thesis that a value position is invariably a partisan position (eine Parteinahme): a decision within a field of mutually exclusive values.
in which a stand is taken for one value and against all others. Any value position presupposes a plurality of conflicting values and value axioms. If this plurality were reduced to unity, value positions would no longer be possible. The conception of value positions as partisan decisions also holds for value axioms, the content and status of which can be determined only antithetically. Value positions are grounded in value conflict at the most fundamental level – in inconsistencies among ultimate values: ‘the highest ideals, which move us most forcefully, are always formed only in the struggle with other ideals which are just as sacred to others as ours are to us’ (1949a: 57).

The antinomy of values – the doctrine that value positions, value axioms and value spheres can be constituted only in opposition to alternatives – is the source of some of Weber’s more memorable images: the idea of an irresolvable axiological struggle and the metaphor of value spheres as kingdoms ruled by gods and demons locked in perpetual warfare. It is also the basis of his belief that an ultimate decision between competing value axioms is inescapable,

... that 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 irreconcilability and thus the irresolvability of the struggle of the ultimately possible standpoints on life, and therefore the necessity of deciding among them.

(Weber, 1958b: 152, translation amended)  

‘And so it goes’, Weber claims, ‘throughout all the orders of life’ (1958b: 148). Weber’s discussion of the place of Kampf – struggle or conflict – in culture suggests that Kampf is a basic fact of cultural life (1949b: 26–7). The antinomy of values entails that Kampf is a condition for the possibility of culture. Because the act of taking a value position, the practice that constitutes culture, is not possible independent of irreconcilable value conflicts, Kampf is, in the philosophical parlance of Weber’s time and place, a transcendental presupposition of culture.

Eigengesetzlichkeit

The inescapability of radical conflicts between value spheres is a consequence of ‘Eigengesetzlichkeit’: a tendency of value spheres to become increasingly autonomous domains of thought, action and passion. Each value sphere follows its own ‘laws’, an immanent logic that distinguishes it from other spheres and sharpens the conflicts between them. Although Eigengesetzlichkeit is a property of value spheres and an artifact of culture, it is driven by two premises of Weber’s philosophical anthropology – his conception of what it means to be human – that transcend all contingencies of culture and history: a metaphysical and a logical principle.

Weber sees a basic human disposition of ‘intellectualism’ expressed in ‘the metaphysical needs of the human mind’, which is ‘driven’ by an ‘inner compulsion
to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and to take up a position toward it’ (1978: 499). The source of metaphysics lies in ‘a stand toward something in the actual world which is experienced as specifically “senseless” ’. Metaphysics is an attempt to eliminate this sense of meaninglessness. The project of metaphysics rests on the assumption that ‘the world order in its totality is, could, and should somehow be a meaningful “cosmos” ’ (1958d: 281). It follows that there is an ‘ultimate question’ of metaphysics that can be understood in the following terms: ‘if the world as whole and life in particular were to have a “meaning”, what might it be, and how would the world have to look in order to correspond to it?’ (1978: 451, translation amended). On this view, existence is a text or text-analogue; not necessarily the ‘Book of Nature’, as the philosophers of the 17th century conceived it, but a cosmos of meaning that can be interpreted. Metaphysics is that interpretation – in the language of a later philosophical discourse, a meta-narrative that integrates all things into a single story.4

The timeless human need to understand the world as a meaningful totality is both animated and constrained by a logical principle that demands consistency. ‘Rationality’, Weber claims,

... in the sense of the logical or teleological ‘consistency’ of an intellectual-theoretical or practical-ethical position, has (and always has had) power over human beings, however limited and unstable it is and always has been in the face of other forces of historical life.

(1958a: 324, translation amended)

These two premises produce several consequences that are essential to Weber’s conception of the autonomy of value spheres.

**Sublimation**

The pre-cultural sense of value as a vague and diffuse sensibility is transformed. Unwitting and unintended feelings – events that occur in the life of actors, not actions that they perform – are replaced by conscious positions that cultural beings take on the world. Cultural beings ascribe values to phenomena that are otherwise axiologically indifferent; they make value judgments and adopt ideals that become objects of conviction. The transition from sensibility to commitment clarifies values and forms the intentions of the actor as bearer of values. Weber’s term for this process is ‘sublimation’ – not the Freudian idea but a metaphor drawn from the language of chemistry: value rationalization as the refinement of value positions.5

**Systematization**

Sublimation translates the contingent and hypothetical norms of a value sphere into ultimate values: imperatives that are unconditionally binding on the cultural
beings who have found their god or demon in that sphere. Extrinsic norms are either discarded as irrelevant, nullified as invalid, or reconceptualized as intrinsic. The result is a Copernican-like revolution that subordinates all the values of a sphere to the one thing that is necessary, the final truth of that sphere. Because value spheres are also existential orders (Lebensordnungen), the creation of a new axiological cosmos represents a revolution in the conduct of life. Life as a discontinuous regime of conduct regulated by conventions and externally imposed sanctions is recast from within, by conviction and the force of self-imposed obligations. The systematization of values by ‘inner’ axiological conviction creates a continuous regime of conduct, a permanent habitus formed by the actor’s self-conscious commitments.

Systematization can be understood as a product of sublimation. The object of sublimation is a specific value; the object of systematization is the value sphere. Once sublimation is under way and values are progressively clarified, the sphere is systematized as the logical relations of its values become increasingly transparent. There is a sense in which the two processes are dialectically linked. Although sublimation is a necessary condition for systematization when the latter process begins, it produces more refined forms of sublimation, which in turn generate higher levels of systematization.

**Tensions**

Sublimation and systematization generate conflicts or ‘tensions’ (Spannungen) between value spheres. This facet of the logic of Eigengesetzlichkeit can be elucidated most simply by considering Weber’s analysis of religion, the only value sphere that he explores in detail. For this purpose, the principal text is the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ (1958a), where Weber explores sources of conflict between an other-worldly or ‘acosmic’ caritas and the goods produced by mundane value spheres. Tensions between value spheres are a consequence of the self-knowledge of cultural beings. The increasing transparency of value spheres achieved by sublimation and systematization is a process of self-enlightenment, a decidedly Hegelian idea on the part of a thinker who strenuously insisted on his anti-Hegelian credentials. Self-enlightenment illuminates the premises of value positions and their conflicts with opposing value axioms. ‘The fruit of the tree of knowledge, which is distasteful to the complacent but which is, nonetheless, inescapable’, teaches cultural beings that they are ‘compelled to apprehend, and therefore to see, these conflicts’ (1949b: 18, translation amended). When the taste of this fruit opens the eyes of cultural beings, they see that the axioms in which their values are anchored cannot be derived, deduced or proven in any sense but only chosen. In the end, life is not a chain of inferences but a chain of decisions. Weber characterizes the tensions between religion and the world created by Eigengesetzlichkeit in the following terms:
The rationalization and the deliberate sublimation of the relations of human beings to the various spheres of the external and internal, religious and mundane possession of goods led to the following result: The inner logical dynamics (innere Eigengesetzzichkeiten) of the individual spheres and thus the tensions between them – which remained latent in the primal naïve relationship to the external world – became clear.

(1958a: 328, translation amended)

Weber postulates an original state of cultural innocence in which cultural beings are oblivious of potential conflicts between value spheres. This illusory harmony is destroyed by self-consciousness concerning the possession of goods that value spheres make possible. As knowledge of the tensions between value spheres becomes inescapable and cultural beings see themselves as partisans in the endless warfare of axiological gods, conflicts between values are radicalized until they finally reach the level of a ‘fatal hostility’.

The more impersonally ruthless capitalist economic actors become and the more systematically their conduct is determined by purely commercial assessments of costs and benefits, the more intransigent the conflict between commerce and a religious ethic of universal caritas.

The more dispassionately and remorselessly – sine ira et studio – political actors pursue the calculated exercise of power, the more problematic the commandments of religious ethics.

As the distance between the aesthetic sensibility and an interest in the meaning of the object of art increases, the commitment of art to the creation of aesthetic form for its own sake becomes more uncompromising. When art is constituted as a world of autonomous and intrinsic values, it becomes a mode of inner-worldly salvation, in blatant opposition to religions of salvation.

The refinement of sexuality as the erotic ends in ‘the deadly seriousness of sexual love’ and a ‘portal to the most irrational and thus most authentic essence of life, in opposition to the mechanisms of rationalization’ (1958a: 345, translation amended). When sexual passion is sublimated as a profane sacrament and a celebration of the triumph of the flesh over the spirit, it also becomes a possible mode of inner-worldly salvation, irreconcilable with the religious promise of salvation.

The most radical conflict with religion is produced by the sphere of discursive knowledge or rational intellectualism. The sciences are Weber’s ideal type of intellectualism. In a 1908 letter to Ferdinand Tönnies, he offers some instruction on the relationship between thought and science and how the scope of the sciences should be understood.

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 (Begriffsethik).

(Baumgarten, 1964: 399)

If ‘the analysis of facts’ includes the production of verifiable generalizations, explanations and interpretations, then ‘science’ comprises the empirical sciences with the addition of ‘Begriffsethik’. The latter concept is peculiar and misleading in this context. It is not limited to analytical moral philosophy or meta-ethics, as the term might suggest, but seems to cover the investigation that Weber calls ‘value philosophy’: the conceptual or logical analysis of values – their content, presuppositions and implications.

In the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’, the tension between religion and intellectualism is traced to conflicting cosmologies. Intellectualism, following its own intrinsic norms, fashions the world as a ‘cosmos of truths’ conceived as a ‘cosmos of natural causality’ (1958a: 355). Science achieves a systematic ‘disenchantment of the world’ by means of ‘rational empirical knowledge’ and its ‘transformation into a causal mechanism’ (1958a: 350). Religion, on the other hand, forms the world as a cosmos of meaning, based on the principle that all things must exhibit an ethically comprehensible and just order. Intellectualism, Weber claims, is inconsistent with all positions that ascribe a meaning to the world, and the assumptions of religion entail that any purely immanent explanation of the world is meaningless. The result: the cosmos of natural causality and the cosmos of causality grounded in an ethical requirement of equity are in ‘irreconcilable opposition’ (1958a, 355).

Critique

Weber’s analysis of value rationalization as Eigengesetlichkeits – each value sphere governed by its own distinctive logic – is open to damaging objections. Although the ensuing remarks sketch only some of the more evident weaknesses of his account, they mark a beginning for further investigation.

Eigengesetlichkeits entails a rule of immanence. The axioms of one value sphere cannot be derived from those of another, nor does the logic of one sphere conform to that of another. A general theory of value spheres is also impossible, a set of meta-axioms or a master logic of axiological development from which the dynamics of all value spheres can be deduced. Each value sphere develops only from within, on the basis of its own values and logic.

Eigengesetlichkeits and Occidental Rationalism

Perhaps the most immediately troubling feature of Eigengesetlichkeits is its incompatibility with Weber’s panoramic vision of occidental modernity. Between 1911 and his death in 1920, Weber considered the entire spectrum of ideas and
institutions that he regarded as distinctive to the modern West – from urban citizenship, state formation, the capitalist economy, the legacy of Roman jurisprudence, and the concept and status of officialdom to experimental and mathematical science, harmonic music, the principles of architecture and engineering, the metaphysics of Christian theology, and the introduction of perspective in painting. In one respect, he found himself master of all he surveyed: wherever he looked, Weber saw the same dynamic at work – the reduction of all spheres of life to a small number of principles. As a result, both individual and collective action become increasingly calculable, predictable and systematically organized. The economy, the state, art, religion and sexual intimacy do not develop as independent spheres. They are all subsumed under a single architectonic: ‘the distinctiveness of western science’ (1958c: 24, translation amended). To employ one of Weber’s railroad metaphors, rationalization as intellectualization is the engine that drives the West, and it operates on tracks that all lead in the same direction. This synthesis, which Weber scholars seem to regard as his most important discovery, clearly rules out autonomous value spheres, each following its own logic.

The Dilemma of Immanence

The conflict between Eigengesetzlichkeit and Weber’s conception of western history is a result of more fundamental paradoxes. The rule of immanence is inconsistent with Weber’s analysis of value spheres, and on several grounds.

Weber claims that art and the erotic are essentially ‘non-rational’ or ‘anti-rational’ (1958a: 341). Therefore, no immanent logic can be ascribed to either of these spheres.

In Weber’s philosophical anthropology, sexual love is the most powerful irrational force of life. Even its most highly sublimated forms remain solipsistic, inexpressible and quasi-mystical experiences in which one self dissolves into another. It follows that the opposition between the erotic and any value position that is impersonal, rational or general is ‘as radical as possible’ (1958a: 341). Because a logic of the erotic is impossible in principle, this value sphere can be sublimated and systematized only by other forces: ‘the universal rationalization and intellectualization of culture’ (1958a: 344).

Parallel considerations hold for aesthetics. The rule of immanence requires an aesthetic logic and a demonstration that the development of art conforms to it. Weber’s analysis of art does not take this path. He does not attempt to establish that art follows an immanent logic, nor does he consider how such a logic might be characterized or even whether a distinctive logic can be ascribed to art. Instead he argues that the immanent values of art are artifacts of the logic of intellectualization: above all, the refinement of the distinction between aesthetic form and content, the generalization of the principle that the sole province of art is the creation or representation of aesthetic form, and the systematization of the theory and practice of art on this principle (1958a: 341–2).
Consider also Weber’s analysis of religious rejections of the world. Tensions between religion and other value spheres end in antinomies, which are expressed as the religious repudiation of all mundane values. Weber explains this process – and the formation and development of religions of salvation generally – as a consequence of intellectualism. As religious practice is transformed by doctrine and beliefs are refined and systematized as binding theological truths and ethical commandments, the self-enlightenment of the religious *Kulturmensch* reveals conflicts between religious and worldly values that cannot be resolved. If Weber’s analysis is taken seriously, the religious rejection of the world does not seem possible. The repudiation of worldly values is motivated by the ‘imperative of consistency’, the conviction on the part of the religious *Kulturmensch* that because the world is existentially empty and ethically contemptible, all mundane striving is meaningless. This conviction is an inference, an exercise in discursive reasoning that is grounded in intellectualism, the mundane value that Weber regards as the prime mover of inner-worldly rationalization. In rejecting the world, therefore, religion embraces it. Because of this relationship between intellectualism and the religious rejection of the world, Weber’s account of the latter process is self-defeating: worldly values can be rejected only on the basis of these values. Although Weber’s objective is to explain how the religious rejection of the world occurs, his analysis entails that this process is impossible.

Perhaps it is worth noting that the function of intellectualism in Weber’s explanation of the religious rejection of the world is not comparable to the ladder in Wittgenstein’s famous image in the *Tractatus*: after climbing the ladder, one casts it aside (1961: 74). Religion does not employ mundane reasoning in order to renounce worldly values and then dispose of it when the process of world rejection is declared to be complete. On the contrary, sublimation and systematization produce an increasingly intellectualized religion. Finally, note that the conclusion that religion is completely detached from the world – that world rejection has in some sense been consummated – is also an inference made with the tools of intellectualism.

Every value sphere follows the same logic: sublimation as the development of increasingly clear and precise value positions; systematization as the generalization of axiological axioms and the reorientation of the conduct of life on the basis of these axioms. With a single exception, all Weber’s analyses of value spheres violate the rule of immanence. The exception is intellectualism, the only sphere defined by an immanent logic.

If the foregoing arguments are sound, Weber confronts an unattractive choice: either there is a one-to-one correspondence between types of intellectualization process and value spheres, a plurality of conflicting logics of cultural development that vary from one value sphere to another – in which case, intellectualism is not an independent value sphere – or intellectualism is the value sphere that rationalizes all others – in which case, Weber’s conception of *Eigengesetzlichkeit* collapses. Both alternatives are fatal to his value theory: the first
because it eliminates intellectualism as a value sphere; the second because it is inconsistent with *Eigengesetzlichkeit*.

**The Possibility of Value Spheres**

Weber’s conception of culture is based on the assumption that action is a value position: a stance taken from some perspective and situated in a value sphere. Value spheres are defined by axiological axioms or ultimate values, which are also value positions. A stance must stand on something. A perspective without a vantage point is comparable to a lever without a fulcrum. Just as there is no leverage in empty space, there is no view from nowhere.

What are the possible grounds of value positions or value perspectives? This is a way of posing the question: What are the conditions for the possibility of value spheres? In the interest of simplifying a difficult question, consider an unimaginative but otherwise unobjectionable answer. There are two possibilities: another position and something that is not a position.

The first possibility generates an infinite regress. Suppose that the vantage point of position $A$ is another position, $B$. In that case, $B$ must also have a vantage point, position $C$. And so on ad infinitum.

The second possibility requires an account of something that is not a perspective. Weber, who built the framework of a value theory by using philosophical tools and materials that he found in the workshop of southwest German neo-Kantianism – the writings of Windelband, Rickert and Lask – has no means of providing such an account. In Weber’s value theory, every human action and artifact is either a standpoint or an unintelligible element in the ‘stream of immeasurable events’ (1949a: 84); either the object of a perspective or an unknown variable that has not been differentiated from the ‘meaningless infinity of the world process’ (1949a: 81); either an ideal type or ‘reality’, the infinitely complex continuum of experience.

Thus the problem of the constitution of value spheres seems to end in a dilemma. The only solutions available to Weber either produce an infinite regress or contradict his value theory.

Weber’s concept of *Wertaxiome* or axiological axioms provides no escape from this dilemma. On the contrary, this idea also entails paradoxical consequences. Axiological axioms are differentiated by their respective value spheres, the domains in which they have the status of ultimate values. If the question of the constitution of value spheres ends in a dilemma, it is not clear how the final values of any value sphere could be identified. Consider how criteria for axiological axioms could be established. Again, Weber’s value theory offers two possibilities: criteria independent of value spheres and criteria immanent to value spheres. The first possibility contradicts Weber’s position that there are no axiologically neutral principles – no meta-values from the standpoint of which all other values are defined. In his view, this possibility rests on metaphysics of value, an archaic
philosophical illusion. The second possibility is ruled out by Weber’s thesis that the ultimate principles of a value sphere cannot be demonstrated within that sphere. Any putative demonstration would be circular. Within a given value sphere, all positions are based on its axioms. Thus any criterion for axiological axioms framed in that sphere presupposes these same axioms.

If Weber’s value theory excludes the possibility of non-tautological axiological criteria, destructive consequences follow. Because *Eigengesetzlichkeit* presupposes a method for distinguishing the spheres in which different ‘laws’ operate, it is impossible to determine whether an immanent logic can be ascribed to any value sphere. If one logic cannot be distinguished from another, it is impossible to identify a referent for the term ‘*Eigengesetzlichkeit*’. Thus there is a strong sense in which this concept is useless. Finally, there is no conceivable evidence for ‘tension’, ‘irreconcilable conflict’ or ‘eternal struggle’ between ultimate values, because it is impossible to determine what these values are. In sum: the intractability of the problem of distinguishing value spheres and identifying axiological axioms destroys the conceptual apparatus Weber uses to analyze value rationalization.  

**Value Rationality and Instrumental Rationality**

Value rationality is a logically fragile component of Weber’s conceptual apparatus in *Economy and Society*. In three paragraphs, he analyzes value rationality as a type of rational action by distinguishing it from instrumentally rational action. This dichotomy is the foundation of his typology of social action and the subject of innumerable commentaries and exercises in the higher *explication du texte*. I do not propose to reprise or revise the commentaries but only to expose the logical core of the dichotomy.

Weber’s criterion for distinguishing value rational and instrumentally rational action is derived from his analysis of action as behavior that falls under an intentional description: action is defined by the meaning the actor ascribes to it. Value rational and instrumentally rational actions are distinguished by orientations or intentions that Weber regards as mutually exclusive: commitment to a binding conviction in the former case, commitment to calculability in the latter.

Instrumentally rational action is based on the actor’s assessment of relative costs and benefits. In the ideal-typical case, the assessment is elaborate, covering the means of performing the action in comparison with other available means as well as the consequences of the action performed by the means selected, again in comparison with alternatives. The consequences to be weighed include not only direct effects but also ‘secondary’ results – the ancillary, tangential and more remote consequences of pursuing a given end by employing specific means. Finally, instrumental rationality requires a consideration of relative advantages and disadvantages of objectives achieved in comparison with alternative objectives. Instrumentally rational actors are utilitarians. In the ideal-typical case, they are
ruthlessly systematic, acting only on the calculation of all variables germane to their objectives.

Value rational action is defined by the conviction of actors that a binding or exigent value can be ascribed to the act: a ‘conscious belief in the unconditional intrinsic value – interpreted in ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other terms – of a specific act purely as such and independent of the outcome’ (1978: 24–5, translation amended). The hallmark of value rationality is the authenticity of the actor’s commitments, expressed in Kierkegaard’s dictum that purity of heart is to will one thing – the one thing required by actors’ convictions concerning their ultimate obligations. Weighing alternative means, comparing and assessing consequences, judging the impact of conduct on any range of objectives or values, even considering immediate prospects for success, are all irrelevant to value rationality. The imperatives of value rationality are categorical, not hypothetical; they are independent of all contingencies that might have any bearing on results.

Weber’s dichotomy breaks down for the most elementary of reasons: although it is intended to establish a mutually exclusive distinction, it fails to do so. Contrary to his assumptions, there are cases in which instrumental rationality qualifies as value rationality. Suppose that actors are committed to the instrumental assessment of conduct as an intrinsic value, independent of the results achieved. On this supposition, acting on a cost–benefit analysis is an unconditional imperative. In Weber’s language, instrumental rationality is ‘elevated to the status of an absolute value’ (1978: 26). This supposition would seem to define the paradigm case of instrumentally rational action, since the value of calculating consequences is not compromised by any competing principle. In such a case, it would be mistaken to claim that the more unconditionally actors devote themselves to the value of calculability for its own sake, the less they are influenced by considerations of consequences. However, this is the implication of the position that Weber takes.

From the standpoint of instrumental rationality, however, value rationality is always irrational, and increasingly so as the value to which the action is oriented is elevated to the status of the absolute value. For as the intrinsic value of the action (pure conviction, beauty, absolute goodness, absolute devotion to duty) comes to the fore more unconditionally and exclusively, reflection on the consequences of the action diminishes.

(1978: 26, translation amended)

On the contrary, the more rigorously actors follow the regime of instrumental rationality, the more systematically their conduct is determined by utilitarian reasoning.

This argument seems to dispose of Weber’s dichotomy, which collapses because it is based on the mistaken assumption that instrumental rationality
cannot be an object of the unconditional commitments that define value rationality.

In a letter to Heinrich Rickert, written when Weber was engaged in the controversy over value judgments in the Verein für Sozialpolitik, we find the following observation:

For my part, the ‘axiophobia’ of sociologists simply means this: I can not mix up the ultimate problems of value with the question of why pork costs x pennies today in Berlin, and cloak whatever ultimate issues can move the human heart in similar concepts and conflate these issues with empirical questions.

(Hennis, 1996: 125)7

Thus spake Max Weber from the pinnacle of the bourgeoisie of property and high culture, in his opulent family villa overlooking the Neckar valley and the Heidelberg castle: the rentier academic, married to an heiress with a lavish private income, comfortably retired from gainful employment before the age of 40, and traveling in ease from one European watering place and winter resort to another. Weber did not seem to see that the ultimate problems of value that can move the human heart might end in the question of the price of pork – or bread or rice. If the ultimate convictions of actors entail that the value of an action must be determined by assessing its cost and benefits, then the intrinsic value of that action is tied to a consideration of its consequences. Under circumstances of total war, state terror, mass unemployment or chronic impoverishment – some of these conditions should not have been entirely invisible to an economist of the Kaiserreich – the highest values may be seen as utilitarian. If actors believe that their final commitment is to survive, then the final questions of life become problems of instrumental rationality: empirically, what are the most effective means of producing the goods necessary for existence?

An examination of the reflexive exercise of instrumental rationality also demonstrates the limits of Weber’s dichotomy. Consider instrumentally rational action as the practice of performing cost–benefit analyses. Is this practice instrumentally rational? This question is not a frivolous exercise in the logic of self-referentiality. In testing the validity of Weber’s dichotomy, it has its place, which is to identify a point at which the dichotomy fails. The question of whether the exercise of instrumental rationality is itself instrumentally rational depends on its relation to intentions. Weber’s analysis of rational action offers two possibilities: the practice may be based on a belief in its inherent value, in which case instrumental rationality falls in the domain of value rationality; or it may be pursued on instrumental grounds. What could these grounds be? What would it mean to perform cost–benefit analyses because one had performed another cost–benefit analysis? What would the latter cost–benefit analysis show?
Cost–benefit analysis is a rationale for conduct. If the conduct in question is the practice of cost–benefit analysis, and if – following the principle of instrumental rationality – a cost–benefit analysis is performed to provide a rationale for this practice, what is the result? An instance of a practice is not a rationale for that practice. This method of grounding a practice calls to mind another Wittgensteinian metaphor: verifying what is reported in a newspaper by purchasing a second copy of the same paper. Producing a rationale for cost–benefit analysis by means of a cost–benefit analysis – the method dictated by instrumental rationality – is circular. It assumes what it is undertaken to prove, because it presupposes the rationality of the practice of which it is a case. Thus utilitarian actors who are systematic confront a dilemma. Either their conduct is value rational, in which case they obviously cannot act in an instrumentally rational fashion; or a rationale for their conduct cannot be produced by a cost–benefit analysis, in which case the same consequence follows. On either premise, systematic instrumental rationality is impossible.

In order to escape this dilemma, it is necessary to find a basis for instrumental rationality that is independent of cost–benefit reasoning. In Weber’s analysis of rational action, there is only one possible basis: value rationality. In the dilemma of systematic instrumental rationality, therefore, Weber reaches a logical dead end.8

Notes

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1. Any survey of the substantial German literature on value rationality and the theory of action would be pointlessly superficial. Major contributions include Bubner (1982, 1984); Münch (1982); Schluchter (1988); and Schöllgen (1985).

2. For readers disposed to take seriously Weber’s avowals of nominalism, the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ (1958a) is a problematic text. Here his essentialism – the assumption that all things referred to by the same name share definitive properties – is transparent. Weber assumes that there is a single value or a small internally consistent set of values that underpins each of the six value spheres. All the arts follow the same path, in virtue of which they can be reduced to ‘art’. Based on the same reasoning, all varieties of religious experience are reducible to ‘religion’, all variations of sublimated sexuality to ‘the erotic’, and so on, for all value spheres. Weber does not explore the possibility that different artistic endeavors – composing a song, directing a drama, designing a city – may not follow the same laws or rest on the same values. This consideration applies to different genres within the same field of art – poetry, the novel and the essay; or the Bildungsroman, the gothic novel, the science fiction novel and the historical novel. It also holds for different modes of artwork performed on the same artifact – composing a song, orchestrating the song, performing the song. These and comparable possibilities in other value spheres are excluded by Weber’s conception of occidental rationalism – a metaphysics of history that sociologists represent as his comparative historical sociology.

3. Weber’s conception of the life of the Kulturmensch as a chain of ‘ultimate decisions’ (1949b: 18) cannot be explained by a principle of clarity and unsparing self-knowledge that dissolves illusion
and self-deception (Jacobsen, 1998: 206 n. 2). Clarity and a hyper-selfconsciousness are essential to culture only because of the necessity of ultimate decisions entailed by the antinomy of values.


5. Karl Jaspers, perhaps the most eminent and unrestrained of Weber’s hagiographers, maintained that Weber, ‘always dedicated to substance and oblivious to language’, was indifferent to the literary quality of his work (1931: 71). Perhaps Jaspers had no ear for Weber’s many resonant metaphors. The Weberian penchant for figurative expression is not confined to his disposition to express the pathos of human affairs in a language with richer resources than the austere discourse of science. Weber often betrays a preference for allusion over analysis when problems become conceptually difficult, a habit that is especially evident when he moves from historical and sociological issues to philosophical problems. His discussions of the theory of value rest overwhelmingly on metaphors such as the polytheism of values and the struggle between the gods of value spheres. Since Weber rules out the possibility of laws of historical development or social dynamics, Eigengesetzlichkeit is also a metaphor. This is a surprising practice on the part of a thinker who consistently represented himself as a hardened apostle of objectivity. Instead of following a puritanical rule of plain-speaking and rigor, Weber seems to have embraced an anti-puritanical principle classically formulated by Mae West: ‘I generally avoid temptation unless I can’t resist it.’

6. Some of the best work on Weber’s concept of value spheres has been done by Hartmann Tyrell (1993, 1997, 1999, 2001). If the above critique is sound, it poses an obstacle to Tyrell’s attempt to distinguish Weber’s concepts of value spheres and existential orders: the former but not the latter, Tyrell argues, are grounded in ultimate values. If my position is correct, Weber’s concept of ultimate values is incoherent and thus cannot provide the basis for any distinction. Wolfgang Schluchter maintains that Weber himself makes the above distinction in the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ (2000: 111). I find no evidence for this position in Weber’s text. Thomas Schwinn (1998) has attempted to elucidate the distinction Schluchter claims to find in the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ by means of a minimalist criterion for value spheres: a value sphere is formed when a value is detached from heteronomous or extrinsic ends, is pursued for its own sake, and becomes intrinsic. Perhaps a case can be made that this criterion is a necessary condition for the constitution of a Weberian value sphere; however, it is not sufficient. The range of intrinsic values obviously exceeds the six spheres of the ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’. For example, Schwinn claims that law is not a value sphere but a ‘coordination mechanism’ (1998: 310). If it is possible to obey the law for its own sake and frame a jurisprudence and structure legal institutions on the basis of the intrinsic value of legality, it is not clear why law fails to qualify as a value sphere. It is also not clear how the distinction between a value sphere and a coordination mechanism can be made. Schwinn assumes that the only intrinsic values are the six that define Weber’s value spheres. How many different values are there? How can it be shown that, with the exception of these six, they are all essentially extrinsic? Schwinn’s analysis presupposes solutions to these unresolved and daunting problems.
Wilhelm Hennis places this letter in the summer of 1911 (1996: 125).

If the foregoing refutation of Weber's dichotomy is valid, it undermines every piece of theoretical apparatus that he erects on its basis. See, for example, his typology of legitimate orders, which is based on the distinction between value rational and instrumentally rational grounds of legitimacy (1978: 33–6). See also his analyses of legality and legal authority, the basic concepts of his sociology of law (1978: 217). It seems that the refutation can be countered only by showing that instrumental rationality cannot qualify as an ultimate value. As this essay demonstrates, Weber has no criterion for determining what an ultimate value is. Thus it is not clear how he can escape the refutation and its consequences.

References


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