

VALUE-RATIONALITY AND THE DISTINCTION  
BETWEEN GOAL-ORIENTED AND VALUE-ORIENTED  
BEHAVIOR IN WEBER

1. It is notoriously difficult to assess the exact meaning of Max Weber's distinction between means-end-rational and value-rational behavior. In his paper Johannes Weiß tries to elucidate this distinction and to overcome some of the problems of Weber's account by equating rationality with communicability. This seems to be an interesting approach, though it certainly has some problems of its own, especially since the concept of communicability remains rather unexplained. In my paper, however, I don't want to deal with the question whether Weiß's approach is likely to lead to systematically satisfactory results, but rather concentrate on the question what we can learn from Weber's original texts. For in my opinion this is the first question one has to ask if one wants to understand the meaning of the distinction between means-end-rational and value-rational behavior. And to this question, I think, Weiß has given too little attention.

If one scans what Weber himself wrote on the aforesaid distinction, however, one immediately discovers the surprising fact that this distinction occurs only once in Max Weber's works – in the introductory chapter 'Basic Sociological Terms' of his main work *Economy and Society*.<sup>1</sup> There are no similar formulations elsewhere in his theoretical writings and, what is even more remarkable, Weber made no use of this distinction in his material sociological analyses either.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the only way to understand what Weber was driving at in making the distinction between means-end-rationality and value-rationality seems to be to reconstruct the context in which this distinction is made, that is, to analyse the structure of the first seven paragraphs of the first chapter of *Economy and Society*. This is what I am going to do in this paper. And I think that this analysis will indeed throw some light on the distinction we want to understand by showing what role Weber meant it to play in his *system* of 'basic sociological terms' and especially by clarifying the close connection between this distinction and the distinction between goal-oriented and value-oriented behavior.

2. So let us start with the first paragraph of the chapter 'Basic Sociological Terms'. In this paragraph Weber begins by giving his famous definition: "Sociology [. . .] is a science concerning itself with the interpretative understanding

of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences" (ES 4, WG 3). And then he goes on to explain the meaning of two of the key concepts of this definition – the concept of understanding and the concept of social action. In his explanation of the concept of understanding the normative aspect is strongly emphasized.<sup>3</sup> For according to Weber actions – and therefore *a fortiori* social actions – are understandable because an action is human behavior "insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning" to it (ES 4, WG 3). To understand an action therefore is to grasp this meaning, to see in what way the action made sense, in what way it seemed reasonable to the agent, in what way his action was the *right* thing to do under the circumstances. Weber calls a course of conduct "subjectively adequate" (and thereby understandable) "insofar as, according to our habitual modes of thought and feeling, its component parts taken in their mutual relation are recognized to constitute a 'typical' (it is more common to say 'correct') complex of meaning" (ES 11\*, WG 8; my italics). And having stated that every understanding strives for "*Evidenz*",<sup>4</sup> Weber stresses that rationally purposeful actions possess the highest degree of "*Evidenz*".

But that makes it all the more difficult to see why Weber treats even affectual behavior in this sense as understandable. The problem of this procedure becomes quite clear in the last quoted passage where Weber changes from 'typical' to 'correct' as if there were no difference. And a similar abrupt transition takes place in the following two sentences which succeed one another in a passage where Weber elaborates on his thesis that all understanding strives for "*Evidenz*". "Action is rationally evident chiefly when we attain a completely clear *intellectual* grasp of the action-elements in their intended context of meaning. Action is evident in an *empathic* way when we are able to grasp, through sympathetic participation, the emotional context in which the action took place" (ES 5\*, WG 4; my italics). Here Weber does not give us the slightest clue, either, as to how these two cases can be subsumed under the same common concept of "*Evidenz*". In one place, however, even Weber seems to recognize how artificial this concept becomes when it is extended like this. In that passage Weber first claims that we – affectually – understand e.g., an outburst of anger if we come to know that it has been provoked by jealousy, injured pride, or an insult, since in all these cases we grasp the complex of meaning ("*Sinnzusammenhang*") in which the outburst of anger "thus interpreted belongs". But then Weber adds – rather apologetically:

In all such cases, even where the processes are largely affectual, the subjective meaning of the action, including that also of the relevant meaning complexes, will be called the intended meaning. (This involves a *departure from ordinary usage*, which speaks of intention in this sense only in the case of rationally purposive action.)" (ES 9, WG 7; my italics).

Weber himself thus seems to realize that it is at least problematic to qualify the outburst of anger of a jealous man as a meaningful or even reasonable action or as an action to which the agent attached a subjective meaning.

To be sure, affectual and emotional behavior is not just a reaction to certain stimuli. For even in this kind of behavior processes of perception and interpretation play an important role. But that makes it no less inappropriate to qualify such behavior as rational, "correct", or the right thing to do under the given circumstances. In my opinion, one has to abandon Weber's overly close connection of rationality and understandability if one is looking for a reasonable result. But I don't want to elaborate on this point further here.

3. In part II of the first paragraph of the chapter 'Basic Sociological Terms', after his treatment of understanding, Weber goes on to explain the concept of social action which he previously defined in this way: "Action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course" (ES 4, WG 3). Thus social action is not simply action in the presence of others, but action which "is *meaningfully* related to the behavior of other persons" (ES 1375, WL 441). According to this definition there are at least two types of social action: (i) An action  $x$  will count as a social action if the action(s) of one or more others are the aim of  $x$ , i.e., if the agent intends to bring about by his action  $x$  a certain behavior of others (as in the case of a mother rocking her child to soothe him and stop his crying)' (ii) An action  $x$  will count as a social action if the actions of others are part of the circumstances which the agent considers as relevant for the achievement of the goal his action is aimed at (as in the case of a man who wants to cross a street and therefore has to take into account the behavior of the motorists). But certainly in most cases both of these aspects will play a part. In any case, social action according to Weber is an action which is at least partly determined by the *expectations* the agent has concerning the actions of others.

It is just after these comments on the concept of understanding and the concept of social action that Weber, in a paragraph headed 'Explanatory

Grounds of Social Action' ("Bestimmungsgründe sozialen Handelns"), introduces the distinction between means-end-rational, value-rational, affectual, and traditional behavior. According to Weber, an action is *means-end-rational* if it is

determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations [being] used as 'conditions' or 'means' for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends.

In contrast to this Weber calls an action *value-rational* if it is "determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some [...] form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success" (ES 25, WG 17).

Examples of pure value-rational orientation would be the actions of persons who, regardless of possible cost to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honor, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call, personal loyalty, or the importance of some 'cause' no matter in what it consists [...] value-rational action always involves 'commands' or 'demands' which, in the actor's opinion, are binding on him" (ES 25, WG 18).

Weber calls an action *affectual* if it is "determined by the actor's specific affects and feeling states" and *traditional* if it is "determined by ingrained habituation" (ES 25, WG 17).

This list of the possible explanatory grounds of social actions in the second paragraph of the chapter 'Basic Sociological Terms' is a peculiar interruption of Weber's argument since the next paragraph – paragraph 3 – directly continues the argument of the end of the first paragraph where Weber explained the concept of social action. For in this paragraph Weber introduces the concept of 'social relationship' which obviously is closely connected with the concept of social action. According to Weber, a social relationship is "the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others" (ES 26, WG 19). Thus a social relationship is a complex of actions which are mutually related to each other and which are – at least partly – determined by the reciprocal expectations of the several agents. *A* acts in a certain way because he expects *B* to act in a certain way; and conversely, *B*'s actions are – at least partly – determined by his expectations as to the actions of *A*.

In my opinion this explanation shows that the behavior in a social relationship is genuine *societal* behavior. And perhaps one could even say that society is made up of social relationships. Thus the concept of social relationship is one of the fundamental concepts of sociological analysis. On the other hand, the behavior in a social relationship is in a special sense

problematic. And Weber, who is well aware of this problem, therefore introduces in the next paragraph the concept of 'legitimate order' which is meant to cope with this problem. In the beginning of paragraph 5 he writes rather briefly:

Action, especially social action which involves a social relationship, may be guided by the belief in the existence of a legitimate order. The probability that action will actually be so governed will be called the 'validity' (*Geltung*) of the order in question (ES 31, WG 22).

The problem just mentioned can be stated like this. The behavior in a social relationship is, as has been said before, guided by the reciprocal expectations of how the other people involved will behave. But if this is so, the stability of such behavior depends completely on the reliability of these expectations. If they fail, all actions in a social relationship are in vain. These actions can be successful only if the agents are in one sense or another *justified* in expecting a certain behavior of others in certain circumstances. This justification, however, in turn depends on the "validity" of a legitimate order or, in other words, of a system of social norms. This is made especially clear by Weber in his paper 'Some Categories of Interpretative Sociology'.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper Weber uses the term "*Gemeinschaftshandeln*" instead of "*soziales Handeln*", defining "*Gemeinschaftshandeln*" (also translated by 'social action') as an action which "is *meaningfully* related to the behavior of other persons" (ES 1375, WL 441). Using this concept he claims:

An important [...] component of social action is its meaningful orientation to the *expectation* that others will act in a certain way, and to the presumable chances of success for one's own action resulting therefrom" (*ibid.*).

Thus social action depends on the objectivity of these chances, that is, on the "objective chance (i.e., more or less probability as expressed in a 'judgement of objective possibility') that these expectations are indeed well-founded" (*ibid.*).

The problem is that actions are specifically precarious if they are guided solely by expectations of how other people will behave or — if these are themselves social agents — solely by expectations of what behavior other people will expect (cf. Prewo 378ff.). For such actions must fail — at least in the long run — if there is no guarantee for the justification of the corresponding expectations. And such a guarantee can only be given if the agents engaged in a social relationship in fact do *not* act on their expectations of how the other agents will behave, but on their belief in the 'legitimacy' or 'validity' of a certain set of social norms.

But a behavior exclusively oriented to the 'expectation' of how other persons will behave [...] would be only the extreme borderline case of mere 'social action', and would imply the absolute instability of these expectations themselves. For these latter are the more 'justified', the more [...] one can rely on the fact that the participants orient their actions not only to the expectations of how other people will behave, but the more in a relevant amount these participants hold the subjective opinion that the [...] 'legality' towards the order is 'binding' on them" (WL 446).

I cannot consider further details here. But the main point, I hope, has become clear anyway. According to Weber, the stability of social actions and social relationships depends on the existence of social norms which the majority of the agents involved hold to be obligatory. And therefore the possibility of a society depends on the fact that most of the members of that society act in a norm-oriented, and not solely in an expectation-oriented way.

4. In the last section I wanted (a) to emphasize the importance which social norms and the adherence to social norms have for the possibility of societal behavior, and (b) to show that Max Weber was well aware of this importance – even if he deals with the concepts of 'social relationship' and of 'legitimate order' only in a few pages. But if we accept the thesis that society depends on the adherence to social norms, the next question certainly must be how this adherence itself can be guaranteed. This question in turn leads us back to Weber's distinction between means-end-rational, value-rational, affectual, and traditional behavior. For it is significant that Weber returns to the considerations of the second paragraph of 'Basic Sociological Terms' just in those paragraphs of this chapter which are devoted to the grounds of the 'legitimacy' of a social order. In paragraph 6 Weber writes:

The legitimacy of an order may be guaranteed in two principal ways:

- I. The guarantee may be purely subjective (*innerlich*), being either
  1. affectual: resulting from emotional surrender; or
  2. value-rational: determined by the belief in the absolute validity of the order as the expression of ultimate values [...]; or
  3. religious: determined by the belief that salvation depends upon obedience to the order.
  
- II. The legitimacy of an order may, however, be guaranteed also (or merely) by the expectations of specific *external* effects, that is, by interest situations. (ES 33, WG 24; *my italics*)

And in paragraph 7 he says:

The actors may ascribe legitimacy to a social order by virtue of:

- (a) *tradition*: valid is that which has always been;
- (b) *affectual*, especially emotional, *faith*: valid is that which is newly revealed or exemplary;
- (c) *value-rational* faith: valid is that which has been deduced as an absolute;
- (d) positive enactment which is believed to be *legal*. (ES 36, WG 26)

I cannot fully consider the details of these two passages and the peculiar differences between them. But in my opinion the main point is this. According to Weber the 'legitimacy' of a social order can be guaranteed in two ways: "internally" and "externally". An order is guaranteed "externally" if the agents adhere to the norms of that order because this adherence is in accordance with their own interests, i.e., if they take a means-end-rational stance towards these norms. This is the case when they adhere to the norms because this adherence turns out to their direct advantage (as in the case of an arrangement between two people which is meant to yield a profit for both of them), or because they want to avoid the sanctions which would follow a violation of the norms. In contrast to this, the 'legitimacy' of an order is guaranteed "internally" if the adherence to this order is based on ingrained habituation (traditional) or on "emotional surrender" (affectual) or on "the belief in the absolute validity of the order" (value-rational). Obviously there is a strong resemblance to the four kinds of explanatory grounds of social action of paragraph 2. But this time these four kinds are divided up into two groups – traditional, affectual, and value-rational orientations belonging to one group, and means-end-rational orientations belonging to the other. The reason for this division is that, according to Weber, all social orders which are guaranteed only in an external way (i.e., by means-end-rational orientations) are very unstable and therefore unable to survive in the long run. In the fifth paragraph of 'Basic Sociological Terms' he is very explicit on this:

An order which is adhered to from motives of pure expediency (*eine nur aus zweckrationalen Motiven innegehaltene Ordnung*) is generally much less stable than one upheld on a purely customary basis through the fact that the corresponding behavior has become habitual. The latter is much the most common type of subjective attitude. But even this type of order is in turn much less stable than an order which enjoys the prestige of being considered binding, or, as it may be expressed, of 'legitimacy'. (ES 31, WG 23; cf. WL 470)

So the result of the last section recurs on a new level. Not only does the stability of social relationships depend on the fact that most agents act in a norm-oriented, and not in a merely expectation-oriented way. Moreover the

stability of a 'legitimate order', a system of norms, itself depends on the fact that it is not adhered to on mere means-end-rational motives. If society is not to collapse like a house of cards, therefore, there must be "explanatory grounds" of social action which make it possible (a) to act in a norm-oriented way and (b) to adhere to norms not only on means-end-rational motives. By using the terms "traditional", "affectual", and "value-rational" Weber tries to identify these kinds of explanatory grounds.

5. I have so far tried to show that the much more fundamental distinction between *goal-oriented* and *norm-oriented* behavior lies behind Max Weber's distinction between means-end-rational, value-rational, affectual, and traditional behavior, and that according to Weber only value-rational, affectual, and traditional orientations make reliable norm-oriented behavior possible. This result alone, however, does not give us an answer to the question why Weber of these three kinds of orientation only calls the value-rational orientation *rational*. But at least it is now possible to characterize value-rationality in a more formal way: an action is value-rational if the actor acts rationally with regard to norms in the same way as a means-ends-rational actor acts rationally with regard to his own goals. But what conditions must be fulfilled for this to be the case?

Weber's own answers to this question are not very enlightening. According to Weber, an action is value-rational if it is "determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some [...] form of behavior independently of its prospects of success" (ES 24f., WG 17). Value-rational action "always involves 'commands' or 'demands' which, in the actor's opinion, are binding on him" (ES 25, WG 18). Value-rational action is distinguished

from the affectual type by its clearly self-conscious formulation of the ultimate values governing the action and the consistently planned orientation of its detailed course to these values" (*ibid.*).

The 'legitimacy' of an order is based on value-rational motives if the adherence to the order is based on the "belief in the absolute validity of the order as the expression of ultimate values" (ES 33, WG 24). An order has legitimacy by virtue of "value-rational faith" if it is regarded as something "which has been deduced as an absolute" (ES 36, WG 26). I am not able to weave these different strings together here. But I think the least one can say is that according to Weber the adherence to a social order on value-rational motives is the best basis for stable social relationships.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This work is quoted from the English translation edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich (ES). Where I deviate from this translation this is marked by a \*. The corresponding pages of the German edition are indicated by WG.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Prewo, p. 367, n. 167.

<sup>3</sup> This aspect is, therefore, rightly stressed by J. Weiß in his paper.

<sup>4</sup> In the edition of Roth and Wittich "Evidenz" is translated by "clarity and verifiable accuracy of insight and comprehension".

<sup>5</sup> This paper, originally published in *Logos IV*, is reprinted in WL pp. 427–474. A partial translation is published in Appendix I of Roth's and Wittich's edition of *Economy and Society*.

## REFERENCES

- Prewo, R.: 1979, *Max Webers Wissenschaftsprogramm*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Weber, M.: 1964, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (WG), Köln/Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch. (English transl. edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich, 1978, *Economy and Society* (ES), University of California Press.)
- Weber, M.: 1968, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (WL), 3rd ed., Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr.