

Kant and weber's concept of freedom

Sociology



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6 SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY Kant also distinguishes three kinds of freedom: freedom of choice, or free will; freedom as self-regulation, or autonomy; and freedom as civil liberty. Freedom of choice is a natural property of all human beings, and refers to the fact that human conduct is not wholly determined by animal impulses. Autonomy is the capacity of a subject to legislate and abide by ethical imperatives of his own making. Civil liberty refers to a condition in which men are protected by the rule of law against constraints on their actions emanating from the arbitrary wills of other actors. To the first kind of freedom reason relates only indirectly, only in the sense that by virtue of being an animal with the potential for reason, man possesses an innate capacity to determine for himself what he shall do. This capacity itself is not rational, however; free choice stems from the elective will, Willkiir, which is a faculty of desire, not of cognition. Freedom of choice simply represents a factor of organismic indeterminacy in the constitution of man; as such, Kant considers it neither morally valuable nor dependent on the actual exercise of rational powers. The two other kinds of freedom, by contrast, do constitute ideal conditions for Kant, and both are closely tied to the use of reason. First and foremost, reason gives man freedom by enabling him to legislate ethical imperatives for himself, to experience autonomy through the exercise of a purely rational will (Wille, as contrasted with Willkiir). Moreover, practical reason dictates the propriety of joining with others in a civil society and, through that collaboration of rational wills, establishing a juridical condition that guarantees to each independence from the constraint of another's will insofar as is compatible with the freedom of everyone else in accord with a universal law. Kant's summary position, then, would be that rationality in the form of practical reason (a kind of <https://assignbuster.com/kant-and-webers-concept-of-freedom/>

subjective rationality) promotes both human autonomy (a kind of subjective free- dom) and civil liberty (a kind of external or objective freedom).

Although these and other formulations of Kant were absorbed in various ways into the complex of intellectual resources from which Weber was to draw heavily, there is one particularly impor- tant respect in which Kant anticipates and orients the thinking of 19th-century writers whom Weber confronted. This is his turn from treating reason and freedom exclusively in the framework of a static metaphysic of morals and its related view of human nature to their examination in a histori- cal perspective as well. In his later reflections, Kant maintained that a purpose could be dis- cerned in the natural unfolding of the history of humanity-and this purpose was in fact to perfect the use of human reason and to establish societies which guarantee freedom under external laws (Kant, [1784] 1963; Galston, 1975). It is this historicizing afterthought of Kant which Hegel seized to make the entire ground of his conception. Although freedom and reason (Vernunft, which following Kant is contrasted with Verstand, mere scientific understanding) con- tinue to signify preeminent ideals for Hegel, he sees them not as states attainable by every person simply by virtue of being human, but as species objectives to be attained through a long and arduous evolutionary struggle. It is this very struggle which constitutes history as Hegel prefers to define it. Hegel defines history, however, in two distinct senses: in a subjective sense, as the human nar- ration of events, and an objective sense, as the events themselves. The development of ration- ality and freedom, accordingly, follows two dis- tinct paths. On the one hand, history is the actual sequence of struggles by which political com- munities successively emerge to negate and tran- scend the cultural values of their predecessors; objective reason is

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the progressive embodiment of that struggle in the form of increasingly perfected systems of morality represented by the state and its laws; and objective freedom is maximally obtained when the constituent units of society all submit their wills to the laws and regulations of the state. On the other hand, history is the reconstruction of that progressive record of events by human subjects; subjective reason is the active self-consciousness of the subjectivity of oneself and others and the growth of Mind in articulating that self-consciousness through the creative work of art, religion, and philosophy; and subjective freedom is the transcendence of passions and impulses by the achievement of ultimate self-knowledge through philosophical speculation. Subjective reason and freedom are possible only because what history comprises are the manifestations of universal ideas of reason and freedom in concrete communities; objective rationality and freedom are possible only because the subjects it considers are rational subjects in pursuit of freedom. Both types of freedom entail the subordination of impulse to the constraints of reason, and both represent freedom in the sense of self-perfection. Hegel's conception of rationality and freedom thus differs radically from that of Kant. Not a guaranteed sphere within which actors can do what they wish without interference from others, but a regime of duties stipulated by and enforced by political institutions, constitutes the domain of objective freedom; not moral laws of the autonomous individual's own making, but recognition of the rationality of the state's demands, is the locus of subjective freedom. For Hegel " it is not the particular members of the society that constitute an individual, free, self-integrated, and self-conscious entity; it is the society as the

The two dimensions are closely related. Sociological Inquiry 51 (1): 5-25 Rationality and Freedom : Weber <https://assignbuster.com/kant-and-webers-concept-of-freedom/>

and Beyond * Donald N. LEVIN-E The University of Chicago and Center for Advanced Study, Stanford In the tradition of German social thought from Kant and Hegel through Toennies and Simmel. the development of rationality in modern Europe is associated with an increase of human freedom. Weber's work departs from that tradition by providing an incomparably differentiated framework for the analysis of rationality and by associating modern European rationalization with a curtailment of freedom. More careful examination of Weber's oeuvre, however, indicates that he, too, connected rationalization with the growth of freedom in many respects. His amended argument remains valuable today, although ways in which it stands to be improved by incorporating subsequent analyses are suggested. Max Weber did not utter the first words on the problem of rationality and freedom in modern life, nor has he had the last word, but he did recast the entire discussion of the subject in terms which have by no means lost pertinence for analyzing a world increasingly shaped by scientists, industrialists, and bureaucrats. Prior to reaching the mind of Weber, this problem was presented grandly by a number of 18th-century writers who subscribed to a general formulation which subsequently underwent a series of critical transformations. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, writes Ernst Cassirer, were suffused by the sense that a new force was at work in their time, a formative power that manifested itself in a great variety of energies and shapes. The name given to this essentially homogeneous formative power was 'reason.' " 'Reason,' " he observes, " becomes the unifying and central point of this century, expressing all that it longs and strives for, and all that it achieves" (1951: 5). Not the least appreciated attribute of this force of reason was its assumed capacity to promote human freedom. For <https://assignbuster.com/kant-and-webers-concept-of-freedom/>

Voltaire, reason served to liberate men from superstition, bigotry, and intolerance. For Montesquieu, reason applied to the study of political forms could enable men to

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devise a constitution which realizes the greatest possible freedom. For Diderot, to follow the laws of reason was to shake off the yoke of authority and tradition. This conjoint celebration of reason and freedom by 18th-century thinkers had some well-known repercussions in modern history. It animated the framers of the American Declaration of Independence. It was used and abused by the makers of the French Revolution. It initiated a great tradition of German social thought; as Hegel wrote to Schelling in 1793, despite the excesses of the French Revolution “reason and freedom remain our principles” (Marcuse, 1941 : 11).

PRE-WEBERIAN FORMULATIONS: KANT AND HEGEL It was Immanuel Kant who first transformed the philosophes’ rather diffuse laudation of reason and freedom into a differentiated schema of precise philosophical argument. If rationality and freedom remain preeminent linked ideals for Kant, it is not the case that all forms of rationality promote freedom nor that all kinds of freedom represent ideal

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states. Rather, Kant takes pains to distinguish and assess different forms both of rationality and freedom. For Kant, rationality is a property of human subjects that appears when their mental powers are developed to the point of achieving cognition according to principles. Kant identifies three such higher faculties of cognition: understanding (Verstand), judgment (Urteil), and reason (Vernunft). Understanding serves to ascertain the deterministic laws of natural phenomena, and judgment serves to produce aesthetic and teleological assessments; neither of these cognitive activities, however, is directly constitutive of human freedom. Only Vernunft, the faculty responsible for producing morality, is related to the attainment of freedom.

RATIONALITY AND FREEDOM: WEBER AND BEYOND 7 resolution of the partial freedom and self-consciousness of the members" (O'Brien 1975: 161). PRE-WEBERIAN FORMULATIONS TOENNIES AND SIMMEL This shift toward the representation of increased rationality and freedom at the level of large-scale societal processes was perhaps the aspect of Hegel's treatment of the problem which had the most lasting repercussions in German social thought.' In the next major reformulation of the problem, Ferdinand Toennies would hail Hegel's achievement in demonstrating the historical necessity of the rational modern social structures--civil society and the state--thereby deflating the movement by romantic writers, legal historians, and reactionary thinkers to reject them as theoretical errors. At the same time Toennies faulted Hegel for presenting a vague and obfuscating view of social life and for propounding the idea of a unilineal development toward perfection. In seeking to correct these shortcomings, Toennies attempted to bring persons back into the picture, to uncover "the real relationship between individual will and social groups" which Hegel had "blotted out" ([1912] 1971: 27), and <https://assignbuster.com/kant-and-webers-concept-of-freedom/>

to replace the notion of Vernunft as a transcendent teleological ideal with a variety of relatively neutral analytic concepts. In so doing, he laid the groundwork for the modern sociological treatment of rationality and freedom.' ' This is true well beyond the period reviewed in the present paper. See Mannheim's call for a return to Hegel as point of departure in developing a modern sociology of mental life: " What makes Hegel's original point of view still worth remembering is his collectivistic, and potentially sociological, understanding of ideas" (1956: 59). It should be noted, in passing, that contemporary with Hegel a comparable shift toward conceptualizing the growth of rationality and freedom as evolutionary societal processes was taking place in France in the work of Condorcet, Saint-Simon, and Comte, albeit on the basis of radically different philosophical principles. 'Some mention should be made of the man who has justly been referred to, if unjustly neglected, as the first German sociologist-Lorenz von Stein. Toennies acknowledges von Stein as a key transitional figure between Hegel and himself. Stein attempted to bring Hegel's conception of reason and freedom into closer contact with contemporary realities. Denying that freedom could be secured solely through a constitution that embodies the pure idea of the state, on grounds that what the state does must reflect the differential distribution of resources in society, Stein sees the true history of freedom as the history of the growth and distribution of societal products among the disadvantaged classes. Insofar as people lack possessions they live in a state of social " dependence. " They are unfree as individuals, and their state, which is supposed to serve the whole It was a constant feature of Toennies's sociological vision, in his own later words, to " see in the entire historical development since the Middle Ages the gradual setting free of

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rationalism and its increasing dominance as inherently necessary processes, and especially as processes of human mind as will" ([1932] 1971: 6). To conceptualize this vision he constructed a pair of ideal types to represent fundamentally contrasting kinds of human volition, Wesenswille and Kiirwille. s Both Wesenswille and Kurville involve rational activity, and both manifest freedom since, as Toennies defines it, freedom denotes the psychic energy that comprises both kinds of human volition ([1887] 1977: 136). Moreover, the dis- tinctive types of social formations which they generate, Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft respec- tively, both manifest freedom. This is so, fist, because both kinds of formation involve volitional affirmation, and second, because both have some kinds of laws which guarantee certain kinds of freedom ([1926] 1974: 174). Accordingly, the transition from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft is not a movement from nonrationality and unfree- dom to rationality and freedom; but from one mode of volition and social organization in which rationality and freedom are defined and circum- scribed by the immersion of selves in an organic community bound by shared sentiments and mu- tual understandings, to another in which ration- ality and freedom are exhibited in the deliberative processes by which persons associate on the basis of instrumental considerations and contractual arrangements. Why, then, does Toennies repeatedly maintain that the development of Gesellschaft entails the development of rationalism? The point is this: community but is constrained to serve the interests of the privileged, is similarly unfree. The movement for freedom begins with the appropriation of intel- lectual goods, with education. " The spread of edu- cation necessarily constitutes a beginning of the spread of human freedom" ([1850] 1964: 71). The cultivation of human reason through education pro- <https://assignbuster.com/kant-and-webers-concept-of-freedom/>

motes freedom by making people conscious of their needs and interests and by equipping them to strive more adequately for material possessions. terms are scarcely translatable, but Loomis's translation of *Kiirwille* as "rational will" is especially unsatisfactory, for two reasons. "Rational will" is often identified with Kant's *Wille*, which for Kant was identical with pure practical reason. The term Toennies used in the first two editions of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* was *Willkiir*, precisely Kant's term for the elective will as opposed to rational will. Toennies's *Willkiir* or *Kiirwille*, then, is more accurately rendered as elective will, or arbitrary will, as Kahnman and Heberle have done. (*Wesenswille* might best be translated as primordial will.) A second reason for objecting to *Kiirwille* as rational will is the implication that *Wesenswille* is devoid of rationality, which as the text indicates was not the way Toennies conceived it. 8 SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY in *Wesenswille*, thought is subordinated to volition. That is, rational activity occurs in order to realize desires derived from genetic inheritance, habit, group sentiments, custom, and religion. In *Kurwille*, by contrast, volition is subordinate to thought. In *Kurwille*, rational activity attains a kind of independence such that it can conceive novel ends, project alternative futures, and calculate a variety of means. It is this autonomous status of rational activity that Toennies has in mind when ascribing an expanded role to rationality in *Gesellschaft*. Viewed as a critical extension of Hegel, this formulation of Toennies not only purports to be a secular empirical analysis, but further modifies Hegel's treatment of reason in history by stressing the distinction between two levels of historical phenomena: an objective, social level and a subjective, individual level. Hegel had, as Toennies put it, defined the objective mind as the system of social life, and for Hegel "the state was to

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emerge as social rationality in all its purity" ([1894] 1974: 66). Toennies insisted on supplementing this level of analysis with one focused on variations in the quality of individual intentionality, on different modes of rational volition. Thus, for Toennies to treat the development of rationalism as a social phenomenon means to identify "a development in both individual and social reason (Entwicklung der individuellen und der sozialen Vernunft)" (1926: 98; 1974: 174; emphasis mine); in his own analytic terms, a development both of the capacity for *Kiirwille* and of the enactments of *Gesellschaft*. Enhanced freedom is a major consequence of this development in individual and social reason. Gradually, Toennies states, the activity of persons oriented by *Kiirwille* and the institutions of *Gesellschaft* dissolve the unifying social bonds based on time-honored custom and belief, bonds which restrict the individual's freedom of movement and conception. They produce persons who are free, self-determining agents, free to subjugate one another or free to conclude agreements, free to establish contracts, and free to adapt their attitudes to the findings of science ([1887] 1957: 224, 234). Kindred themes are broached in the work with which, as Toennies put it, 19th-century sociology "reached an impressive finale" ([1926] 1974: 182), Simmel's *Philosophie des Geldes*. In his first sociological monograph (1890), Simmel had outlined a number of developmental patterns that together portrayed modern society as a highly differentiated social world wherein individuals are liberated from a variety of jural and customary constraints in ways that enormously expand their freedom of action. In his long treatise on money published years later, Simmel developed a more original and profound set of interpretations. In the latter work, Simmel depicted a new mode of rational activity manifest in the pervasive utili-

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zation of money as a generalized medium of exchange. Money, Simmel writes, favors the ascendance of intellectuality over emotional responses. Being a quantitative measure, the repeated use of money required the development of calculative skills and habits. Being a strictly instrumental possession-money is the absolute tool, the means flexible enough to serve any end whatsoever-its habitual use requires that considerable energy be devoted to the rational analysis of costs and benefits, means and ends. In pursuing this analysis, Simmel does not consistently adhere to the kind of distinction urged by Toennies, between subjective and objective rationality. Although Simmel does make, and use to very good effect indeed, a distinction between what he calls subjective and objective culture, when treating the rationalism of modern social relations based on the circulation of money he tends to confuse the objective significance of money as a social phenomenon and the subjective orientations of those who use it (a confusion for which he would later be criticized by Weber'). On the other hand, he goes well beyond Toennies and other writers of the time in making and using clear distinctions among different kinds of freedom. Of the many kinds of freedom which Simmel mentions at different points in his work, three are of recurring and central importance. We may gloss these in terms of the already mentioned distinction between subjective and objective freedom. Simmel distinguishes two kinds of objective freedom, kinds of freedom that refer to an actor's position in a nexus of relations with objects: a "negative" freedom of liberation from external constraints and obligations, and a "positive" freedom to obtain satisfactions through the control of resources. In addition, Simmel develops a notion of subjective freedom in the sense of individuality, freedom as the development of one's personality according to

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the dispositions of one's own nature. What Simmel goes on to argue in *Philosophie des Geldes* is that all three kinds of freedom are promoted by the use of money and its related rational mental habits. Money promotes freedom in the sense of liberation from external constraints: by enabling values to be assigned precisely and impersonally, money makes it possible for individuals to be connected to other persons only insofar as they need or wish to be so connected, and to be freed from the ancillary constraints and obligations which encumber relations to patrons, suppliers, clients, and customers ~ ~ 4“(Subjectively) intended and objectively valid ‘ meanings’ are two different things which Simmel not only fails to distinguish but often mixes up with one another” ([1921 (1976)] 1968: 4 [I]; translation altered).

RATIONALITY AND FREEDOM: WEBER AND BEYOND 9 in societies which lack monetized media of exchange. Money promotes freedom in the sense of ability to realize one's goals in a number of respects. Of all objects, money offers the least resistance to an agent. It is the most possessable of all things, hence completely submissive to the will of an ego. It can be acquired in countless ways. There are no limits to the amount of it that one can possess. As the absolutely general instrumentality, money maximizes the options available to anyone having a finite amount of resources. Finally, money promotes freedom in the sense of individualized self-development, by providing an effective means of differentiating between the subjective center and the objective achievements of a person. Individuals' performances may be paid for with money while their persons remain outside the transaction. Conversely, individual persons can be supported as such by monetary contributions from anonymous others, while their specific performances remain free from financial considerations. Further in this vein Simmel argues <https://assignbuster.com/kant-and-webers-concept-of-freedom/>

that the separation of workers from their means of production (for which “ a money econ- omy paved the way”), while viewed by some as the focal point of social misery, may rather be viewed “ as a salvation” insofar as it provides conditions for the liberation of the worker as a human subject from the objectified technical ap- paratus of productivity ([1907] 1978: 337).’ ENTER

WEBER The formulations of Kant, Hegel, Toennies, and Simmel provided some of the ideas from which Weber drew selectively in developing his own sociology of rationalism. Although Weber’s work was arguably stimulated by their formula- tions in certain ways, 6 what is perhaps more ‘ Simmel’s complex argument on this subject also includes lines of thought which treat the negative consequences both of excessive freedom and of ra- tionalization as a source of alienation. For a more extended exposition, see Levine (1981). 8For example, Kant’s formulation of the categor- ical imperative was for Weber an archetypical ex- ample of what he came to call value-rationality; Hegel’s treatment of the course of rationalization in world history set up the project which Weber strove to recast (on Weber’s silent homage to and acute consciousness of Hegel as his major intellectual an- tagonist, see Bruun, 1972: 39); Toennies’s treatment of *Gerneinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as social forms based on differing degrees of rational volition became the paradigm for Weber’s first sketch of a Ver- stehende sociology in his 1913 *Logos* essay; and Simmel’s last chapter of *Philosophie des Geldes* was cited as a “ brilliant portrayal” (“ glanzenden Bilder”) of the spirit of capitalism in the *Protestant Ethic* essay ([1920] 1930: 193 [33]). notable is that Weber’s treatment of the topic of rationality differs dramatically from all of his predecessors in three respects. First, the conceptual apparatus Weber devel- oped to represent the forms and processes of rationalization is much

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more differentiated than that employed in any of the earlier analyses. Second, through his comparative studies of efforts to rationalize culture in classical antiquity, the Near East, China, and India, Weber decisively transcended the Europocentric notion that the development of rationalism is a uniquely Western phenomenon. Indeed, he can be viewed as crediting the Orient for having developed heights of rationality in some respects superior to those reached in the Occident.' Regarding developments in Western Europe, finally, Weber's position concerning the effects of rationality on freedom challenges the formula with which all the previously mentioned thinkers, in spite of their numerous substantive differences, were in agreement. Far from viewing the advance of rationality as a prime source of freedom in the modern West, Weber frequently decried it as a serious threat to freedom. Prevailing interpretations of Weber typically focus on this aspect of his position: thus, "when it came to [analyzing] the trends toward rationalization... of modern society, Weber tended... to assert that the chances were very great indeed that mankind would in the future be imprisoned in an iron cage of its own making" (Coser, 1977: 233); for Weber after 1903, "the Leitmotiv of Western history has changed from progress through self-liberation to enslavement through rationalization" (Mitzman, 1970: 168); "Weber's sympathy, or rather his grim anxiety, is on the side of personality against rationality" (Cahnman, 1978: 191; emphasis mine). To advance beyond Weber in the understanding of these issues, I argue in the remainder of this paper, requires two efforts. The first is to recover what Weber actually said concerning the forms and processes of rationalization. Weber's penetration of these issues was not only unprecedented, it remains unsurpassed. No subsequent discussion of rationalization with <https://assignbuster.com/kant-and-webers-concept-of-freedom/>

which I am familiar- ' See, for example, Weber's assertion that "in the area of thought concerning the ' significance' of the world and of life there is nothing whatsoever which was not already been conceived in Asia in some form" ([1923] 1958b: 331 [365]; emphasis in original: translation altered). ' This is not, of course, to say that Weber was the first to sound the alarms about certain negative tendencies in modern society. Apart from the varied anti-modernist currents in 19th-century culture, notable critical diagnoses were made by Marx, Nietzsche, and Simmel, all of whom had serious impact on Weber. Still, it was Weber who first thematized the intimate association between historical processes of rationalization and the curtailment of freedom. 10 SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY iar has mastered the levels of complexity and insight that Weber reached. To do this we must bring more order to Weber's formulations than he himself had time to produce. Second, we must subject the formula that modern rationalization produces unfreedom to a searching critique. I shall argue that any global assertion that rationalization curtails freedom must be fundamentally flawed, in good part because of its failure to take into account the full scope of Weber's argument on the problem and beyond that its failure to apply the gamut of Weber's rich array of distinctions regarding rationality to the question of freedom in the modern world. THE WEBERIAN CONCEPTION OF RATIONALITY Few sources indeed are informed by a sustained appreciation of the fact that for Weber the concept of rationality was multiply ambiguous. g This is no less than astonishing in view of Weber's own declaration, in a footnote to his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: " If this essay makes any contribution at all, may it be to bring out the complexity (Vielseitigkeit) of the only superficially simple concept of the ' rational'"

([1920] 1930: 194 [35]). Within the text itself, moreover, Weber makes the point that "one may rationalize life from fundamentally different points of view and in very different directions. 'Rationalism' is a historical concept that contains a world of contradictions in itself"--a point given added emphasis in the revised edition of 1920, where Weber observed, "This simple proposition, which is often forgotten, should be placed at the beginning of every study which essays to deal with rationalism" ([1920] 1930: 77-78 [62]). The problem of securing an adequate grasp of the *Vielseitigkeit* of Weber's conceptualization of rationality is complicated by the fact that Weber himself did not use the relevant distinctions in a 1930: 77-78 [62]). The few significant exceptions include Bendix (1965), Schluchter ([1976] 1979b), and Kalberg (1980). "Rationality" and "rationalism" are used interchangeably by Weber to denote a property of action or symbolic products. "Rationalization" refers to a historical process of making action or symbolic products more rational. The attempt by Swidler (1973) to make these terms bear the semantic freight of distinguishing the several substantive meanings used by Weber seems to me misguided. Although one must agree with her point that "confusion over terminology blunts the real theoretical impact of Weber's study of rationality," an effort to remedy the situation by attaching major substantive meanings to those three terms can scarcely be justified either by reference to the Weberian texts or by claims that it clarifies Weber's argument. clearcut and consistent manner, nor did he ever produce the conceptual exposition of the "many possible meanings of the concept of 'rationalization'" which he promised in introducing the later part of *Economy and Society* ([1921] 1976) 1968: 30 [15]). Even for those who are aware of the serious need for such conceptual clarification, then, the matter

remains vexed. As a contribution toward sorting out some of this complexity, I propose as a preliminary step to make use of the distinction between subjective and objective manifestations of rationality which surfaced in our review of the earlier authors. This is a commonplace distinction and each term refers to a wide variety of phenomena. The locus of subjective rationality is the mental processes of actors. Such notions as Kant's practical reason, Hegel's self-consciousness, Toennies' s rational volition, and Simmel's calculating habits of mind refer to various aspects of kinds of subjective rationality. Other contemporary notions include Pareto's concept of subjective logicity and, more generally, the economists' notion of utility-maximizing orientations. The locus of objective rationality is courses of action and symbolic products assessed in terms of institutionalized norms. Hegel's notion of reason embodied in laws and political institutions, Toennies's notion of the constitution and judicial agencies of Gesellschaft as embodying " naked social reason, " Simmel's conception of social relations based on precise, impersonal calculation, and Pareto's concept of objective logicity are illustrative. Although Weber did not consistently make use of the distinction when analyzing the phenomena of rationality and rationalization, I believe that without clearly distinguishing subjective and objective rationality it is impossible to do justice to his complex of observations on this subject. There are several warrants for this claim. For one thing, there are passages in his methodological writing where Weber does articulate a distinction between subjective and objective rationality. Both " On Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology" (1913) and " The Meaning of ' Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics" (1917) include discussions of the importance of distinguishing these two dimensions of social action.

Subjective rationality is taken to refer to action that is conscious and deliberate (contrasted with action undertaken for motives that are unconscious or disavowed) and/or action that is oriented to means that are regarded as correct for a given end. Objectively rational action, by contrast, is taken to refer to action that uses technically correct means in accord with scientific knowledge and/or has been subjected to some process of external systematization (1922: 408-11 ; [1922] 1949: 34 [488]). Weber goes on to insist that a progressive subjective rationalization ("fort- schreitende subjektive Rationalisierung") of conduct is not necessarily the same as an advance in the direction of objectively rational conduct; and that what appear as objectively rational human adaptations have been brought into being in numerous historical instances through completely irrational motives. Beyond this, there are other passages where this distinction is clearly implicit in Weber's discussion. Most notable, perhaps, is the contrast, in sections 6 and 7 of Chapter 1 of *Economy and Society*, between the various ways in which actors can be oriented to uphold the norms of a social order, and the grounds on which legitimacy can be ascribed to a social order. Viewed together with Weber's other discussions of legitimacy, the latter must be viewed as a typology of institutionalized forms, involving beliefs and related sanctions to which the representatives of an order have recourse in the exercise of their legitimate authority. The former typology is one of the subjective intentions of actors as they comply with or deviate from that order. Thus, an order which rests on objectively rational grounds (e. g., on the basis of a consensually validated legal constitution) may be adhered to because of the nonrational dispositions of the subjects (e. g., their emotional

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need to comply with authority figures). Finally, I would argue that although Weber signaled his intention, in the prefatory note to *Economy and Society*, to distinguish subjectively intended meanings from objectively valid meanings as sharply as possible ("tunlichste Scheidung der gemeinten von dem objektiv gultigen 'Sinn'"), his general failure to articulate the distinction between subjective and objective rationality more forcefully and consistently appears plausible if two considerations are kept in mind: Weber's tendency to avoid using the category of "objective validity" because of its connection with normative approaches in social studies, such as jurisprudence, from which he was aggressively trying to dissociate his empirical sociology; and his lack of a viable theory of institutionalization, such that he did not have at his disposal a ready and precise way of distinguishing the term 'objective' in the sense of valid from 'objective' in the Durkheimian sense of supra-individual or institutionalized. To avoid this ambiguity and remain mindful of Weber's sensitivity on this point, I propose hereafter to use in the latter sense the term 'objectified' in place of 'objective.' Since it appears, then, that there are ample justifications for doing so, let us proceed to organize Weber's manifold references to rationality in the terms just suggested.

SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIFIED FORMS OF RATIONALITY Weber discusses rationality as a quality of subjective mental processes in two contexts. These correspond, very broadly, to Kant's distinction between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, the capacity for rational understanding of phenomena, and the capacity to use reason as a source of directives for willed action. Weber has little to say about the operation of mind in its understanding of natural phenomena, but focuses his attention on mental operations involved in understanding human conduct. He presents, with little elaboration, a

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straightforward dichotomy, between (1) rational understanding, itself further divisible into mathematical and logical understanding, and (2) empathic understanding. Rational understanding entails an intellectual grasp of the coherence of the elements of action in the actor's situation. In empathic understanding, the observer draws on his personal fund of emotional self-knowledge to experience imaginatively the emotional context of that situation (1968: 5). It is empathic understanding if, attending to a student's rapid breathing and staccato talk, I intuit that he has come early to an appointment because he is anxious; it is rational understanding if I have knowledge of his schedule and calculate that he has an important class soon after for which he does not want to be late. Weber's other discussion of subjective rationality appears in his classification of the types of social action (1968: 24-26). Social action can be conceptualized in terms of four ideal types, two of which are rational, two nonrational. A person's action is rationally oriented, for example, if he greets another person because of a consciously held belief that it is a moral duty to show respect for all human beings (value-rational [wertrational] action); or because he has reasoned that the costs of appearing rude or indifferent outweigh the advantages of remaining self-absorbed (means/end-rational [zweckrational] action). A person is nonrationally oriented when greeting someone because of long-established custom (traditional action) or a momentary burst of good feelings about that person (affectual action). This typology is well known and requires no elucidation at this point beyond some comment on the category of Zweckrationalitat. Many writers have understood this to refer to action in which consideration is given only to questions of technical expediency. Admittedly there are passages in Weber's writings which permit a narrow

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construction of this sort. However, in his chief discursive exposition of the category, Weber presents a broader definition: action is zweck- rational, he writes, “ when the end, the means, and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighed. This involves rational consideration of alternative means to an end, of the relations of the end to the secondary consequences, and finally of the relative importance of different possible ends” (1968: 26). I shall adhere to Weber’s explicit statement on the matter 12 SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY and regard meansend-rational action in this more inclusive sense. “. ” Weber’s explicit discussion of these forms of subjective rationality is succinct and late. It appears only in the introductory chapter of his last major writing, Part I of *Economy and Society*. By contrast, in the greatest part of his substantive work from 1904 on he was preoccupied with the different kinds of objectified rationality in world history. There are two principal places in his oeuvre where Weber sets forth considerations that enable us to discriminate the variety of manifestations of objectified rationality. When discussing the point that “ there have been rationalizations of the most varied sort within various spheres of life in all civilizations” (1930: 26; translation altered “), Weber asserts that to characterize these different rationalizations one must determine (1) what spheres of life are being rationalized, and (2) with respect to what ultimate points of view and in what directions (“ letzten Gesichtspunkten und Zielrichtungen”) they are rationalized. Furthermore, in another passage (to be discussed below), Weber sets forth still another set of distinctions concerning (3) the different forms which rationalization may take. By “ spheres of life” Weber meant what sociologists today often refer to as institutional orders. Weber himself treated, at varying length, the <https://assignbuster.com/kant-and-webers-concept-of-freedom/>

phenomena of rationalization in at least a dozen distinct institutional spheres: economic organization; political order; military organization; legal systems; social stratification; education; religion; ethics; science; music; art; and erotic life. By "ultimate points of view" Weber was referring to the particular ends on behalf of which the rationalization of some sphere of life has been carried out. Thus, the law could be rationalized in order to solidify caste or class distinctions, or in order to ensure equality of treatment for all members of the community. Science could be 'Failure to do so has produced some puzzling formulations, such as that of Kaplan's effort (1976), in the guise of refuting Weber's position, to argue against the narrower conception of instrumental rationality on behalf of a position which is precisely that which Weber represents in the passage here cited. ' I am adopting Matthews' translation of Zweck-rationalitiit as means/end-rationality (Runciman, 1978), partly in order to save "instrumental rationality" to designate one of the forms of objectified rationality discussed below, and partly to emphasize that this type of rational orientation involves not only the assessment of the costs and consequences of alternative means to a given end, but also the "rational consideration. . . of the relative importance of different possible ends. " ' "' Rarionalisierungen hat es daher auf den ver-schiedenen Lebensgebieten in hochst verschiedener Art in allen Kultirrkreisen gegeben" (1920: 12). rationalized in order to understand better the working of divine providence and to glorify the Creator, or to provide knowledge that may be used to improve living conditions. Religious beliefs and practices could be rationalized in accord with ascetic or mystical ideals. In other Webe-rian language, modes of rationalization differ according to the "irrational presuppositions" which ground and direct the various ways of

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leading a rationalized style of life. What I am glossing as the diverse “ forms” of rationalization represents the dimension of varia- tion which Weber delineated briefly in his intro- duction to *The Economic Ethics of the World Religions*, when he enumerated some of the “ very different things” that “ rationalism” may mean. (The full text is provided in the Appendix.) Although Weber does not intend here to present an exhaustive or systematically developed typology, he does clearly differentiate four emphatically distinct conceptions of what it might mean to describe a cultural phenomenon as rational. One meaning of rationality, in Weber’s words, is “ the methodical attainment of a particular given practical end through the increasingly precise cal- culation of adequate means. ” Although exhibited in its most developed form by such strata as peas- ants, merchants, and artisans, this type of rational action is to some extent universal. It is informed by a general human tendency to attain worldly goals by adapting to the exigencies of everyday life. Weber notes that the most elementary forms of magical and religious behavior exhibit a degree of rationality of this sort (1968: 400), a point akin to Malinowski’s (otherwise somewhat different) observations from Trobriand culture in refuting the notion that the thought of primitive peoples is fundamentally prelogical. I shall refer to this as “ instrumental rationality. ” A second meaning of rationality, Weber writes, is “ increasing theoretical mastery of reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract con- cepts.” Rationalization of this kind is designed to produce a coherent, meaningful picture of the world, and is preeminently the achievement of religious or secular intellectuals. It involves the basic cognitive processes of generalization and logical systematization. It may be referred to as “ conceptual rationality. ” The next <https://assignbuster.com/kant-and-webers-concept-of-freedom/>

meaning of rational mentioned by Weber is one that relates to evaluative standards. This kind of rationalization is conceived as a process of establishing valid canons against which that which is empirically given can be assessed, canons not derived from traditional or mystical sources. Weber's example of this type of rationality in the passage is the aesthetic canons of Renaissance humanism. Primarily, however, in the comparative studies he treats this form of rationality in the context of considering ethical ideals which have a transformative effect on everyday life, ideals such as justice, equality, piety, RATIONALITY AND FREEDOM: WEBER AND BEYOND 13 or nirvana. Religious and secular prophetic figures are viewed as the typical sources of such ideals. More generally, this form of rationality can be identified with what Weber refers to in the economic and legal spheres as "substantive (materielle) rationality," a rationality which accords predominance to ethical imperatives, utilitarian rules, or political maxims (1968: 85, 657). Finally, rationality may take the form of what Weber calls *Planmäßigkeit*, a methodical ordering of activities through the establishment of fixed rules and routines. This kind of rationalization is designed to maximize the predictability of activities and norms in a particular sphere of action and to minimize the influence of universal ties and social sentiments. Weber tended to refer to this as "methodical rationality" in the sphere of religion (1930: 197), and as "formal rationality" in spheres of law and economic action (1968: 85, 657). I shall use the latter term here.*

Some effort is required to keep these distinctions clearly in mind, especially since Weber's own usage is at times confusing. Conceptual rationality is a predicate of symbolic systems, not of social action; its relation to action is significant, but indirect, as Kalberg has pointed out. Conceptual rationality is

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manifest to the extent that symbolic representations are governed by norms of precision, inclusiveness, and coherence; conceptual rationalization is a response to the human desire for meaning and understanding of the world.

The three other forms of objectified rationality have reference to socially sanctioned courses of action. Instrumental rationality is manifest to the extent that the operative norms are those of technical efficiency; it reflects the wish to use maximally adequate means in attaining given ends.

Substantive rationality is manifest to the extent that the operative norms are subordinated to some overarching value; it reflects the desire to achieve motivational integrity. Formal rationality is manifest to the extent that the operative norms channel action according to clearly stipulated procedures; it reflects the wish to act within a calculable order of activities and

relationships. For three of the institutional spheres which Weber treated most extensively, these forms of objectified rationality may be illustrated as follows:

Form of Institutional Spheres	Objectified Rationality
Religion	Conceptual
Economy	Instrumental
Law	Substantive
	Formal

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preferable. I have used "instrumental" rather than "practical," inasmuch as the latter term generally has reference to praxis or action, and "substantive" and "formal" types of rationalization refer to practical rationality in this commonplace sense no less than does instrumental. I have used "conceptual" rather than "theoretical," inasmuch as this mode of rationalization applies to spheres like law and music where the interest is other than what is commonly considered theoretical. "Methodical" is perhaps a more descriptive term than "formal," but I have decided to follow Kalberg's usage in this case in order to minimize the appearance of differences between what are essentially identical interpretations of Weber's schema. Although many other observations made by Kalberg in this paper seem persuasive, I do take issue with some features of his application of the schema. It seems to me (a) a contradiction in terms to say that formal rationality cannot be associated with a methodical way of life (1169); (b) confusing to say that bureaucracy calculates "the most precise and efficient means for the resolution of problems by ordering them under universal and abstract regulations" (1170), since this blurs the distinction between the principles of instrumental and formal rationality; (c) important to stress the independent variability of subjective and objectified forms of rationality; (d) puzzling to read that for Weber the origin of substantive ethical rationalities was "largely a result of economic factors" (1171); and (e) misleading to suggest that only value-rational action possesses the potential to rupture traditional ways of life (1171), for Weber argues that "ratio" can also be a revolutionary force by working from "without" in ways that transform men's living conditions and "finally," in consequence, men's attitudes ([1921 (1976/1968): 245 [142]) -as the introduction of

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technological change into so many “ traditional societies” in the last half-century dramatically indicates. 14 SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY Speculating for a moment beyond Weber, I wish to make two further comments on this typology. One is to suggest that there are probably significantly different affinities between the several institutional spheres and the various forms of rationality. Thus science, as the sphere primarily concerned with understanding the world, would have a special affinity for conceptual rationality, and law, as the sphere most concerned with regulating relations among actors, would have a special affinity for formal rationality. The other is to suggest that the four forms of objectified rationality have approximate counterparts in the forms of subjective rationality. For three of these, the previously mentioned Weberian terms are indicative: rational understanding is the subjective counterpart to conceptual rationality; the means/ends-rational orientation corresponds to instrumental rationality; the value-rational orientation to substantive rationality. Although Weber did not provide a term to designate the subjective orientation which parallels formal rationality, he frequently described a psychic tendency for actors to secure order by enacting regulative norms, a tendency he glosses as “ one of the factors motivating social action” (1968: 333). It should be remembered, however, that the empirical connection between subjectively rational orientation and objectively rational action is variable: actors may observe the norms of objectified rationality of a given sort for a variety of rational or nonrational reasons. The full set of distinctions outlined above is presented schematically in Table 1. Only with a schema of this order of complexity can we begin to appropriate all that Weber has to say on the subject of rationality. The schema alerts us to one of the hallmarks of Weber’s

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interpretive genius: his revelation that there are historically consequential affinities and conflicts among independently varying manifestations of rationalization. A few references may remind us of some of the complex relationships among different forms of rationality which Weber illuminated. Between forms of subjective rationality, there is an inherent tension between value-rational and means/end-rational orientations: the latter regards the former as irrational and always increase at the expense of the former (1968: 26, 30). In the relationship between subjective and objectified rationality, there are moments of affinity between value-rational orientations and substantive rationality, since the prophets or lawgivers who establish substantively rational codes would have to be oriented in a value-rational way; however, that subjective and

TABLE 1 OUTLINE OF THE VARIOUS MEANINGS OF RATIONALITY IN WEBER'S WORK

I. FORMS OF SUBJECTIVE RATIONALITY AND NONRATIONALITY

MENTAL QUALITY ORIENTATIONAL SPHERES

Cognitive Processes

Conative Processes (rationales Verstehen)

(Zweckrationalität)

1. mathematical

2. Value-rational orientation

2. logical (Wertrationalität)

Rational understanding

1. Means-end-rational orientation

Nonrational: Empathic understanding

3. Affectual orientation

emotional (einführend nachvollzogenes Verstehen)

habitual

4. Traditional orientation

II. FORMS OF OBJECTIFIED RATIONALITY

INSTITUTIONAL SPHERES

Economy

Polity

Law

Military

Religion

Ethics

Science

Art etc.

FORMS OF RATIONALIZATION

Conceptual

Instrumental

Substantive

Formal

Within each of the institutional spheres-but to different degrees according to presumptive differentials in elective affinity between type of sphere and form of rationality-the different forms of rationality have been pursued in different directions on the basis of orientations to diverse ends or "

nonrational presuppositions. " 111. CORRESPONDENCES BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIFIED FORMS OF RATIONALITY Objective Forms Subjective Counterpart Conceptual rationality Rational understanding Instrumental rationality Means/end-rational orientation Substantive rationality Value-rational orientation Formal rationality Disposition toward calculable regulation RATIONALITY AND FREEDOM: WEBER AND BEYOND 15 objectified forms of rationality often vary in- versely has been shown in the passages referred to above (p. 10). The relations among different forms of objectified rationality within the same institutional sphere admit of many possibilities: the formal rationalization of religious practice has favored the conceptual rationalization of religious beliefs (1968: 41 7); conceptual rationalization of religious knowledge as in Brahmanic contempla- tion stands in contrast with the formal type of rationalization of religious technique as in classical yoga ([1923/1958b; 165); and the formal rati- onalization of law exists in chronic tension with substantive rationality in the legal sphere (1968: 81 1-1 3). Regarding the relations among different courses of rationalization within different institu- tional spheres, Weber writes, for example, that the conceptual rationalization of religious doctrine has occurred at the expense of instrumental ra- tionality in the economic sphere (1968: 424) and has inhibited the formal rationalization of law (1968: 577), but also that substantive rationality in a this-worldly ascetic direction was a key factor in promoting the formal rationalization of economic action in early modern capitalism. Fi- nally, it should be noted that even when Weber was concerned to show affinities among different types of rationalization in different institutional spheres in Western history, he stressed repeatedly that those different rationalization processes took place <https://assignbuster.com/kant-and-webers-concept-of-freedom/>

at different times and in different places (1930: 77; 1968: 1400). To my mind, the foregoing considerations establish beyond doubt that it is untenable to attribute to Weber the belief that rationalization refers to a univocal unilinear historical process. RATIONALIZATION AND SITUATIONAL FREEDOM Enough has been said, now, to equip us