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For decades, numerous philosophical studies have attempted to explore modern society characterized by pluralism and conflicts over values. Against this background, no definitive answer has been given to the question of how we can better understand the complexity and diversity of the contemporary world. Under the circumstances, there have been attempts within certain philosophical circles to find a new approach to interpret modern society based on epistemological foundation. The difficulty of understanding the contemporary world mainly stems from our tendency to adopt an explanatory approach driven by a natural scientific model. According to the natural scientific methodology, the world is governed by universal laws which can be discovered empirically. This deductive methodology is likely to consider general trends but ignores the particularity and individuality of specific cases. This obsession with the natural scientific model was criticized by Max Weber in the nineteenth century. Against the naturalistic monism which generalizes all empirical facts into a common law in all empirical facts, Weber argues that “ objectivity” analysis (the reduction of empirical reality of law) is meaningless in the cultural sciences (Weber, 1949, p. 80). In particular, he emphasized the sharp distinction between the natural and cultural sciences and raised the question if the ‘ objectivity’ of the natural sciences could be applied equally to the cultural sciences.

According to Weber (1949), unlike the natural sciences, which study the phenomena of nature, the social sciences aim to find social phenomena: the relation among humans including their behaviors and subjective intentions. The objects of the natural sciences can studied without the investigator’s value-judgment because they are completely separated from the

investigator. In contrast, the objects of the social sciences consist of people with different values. Since the investigator is also a member of society, the involvement of his or her values is unavoidable when researching a certain social phenomena. Simply put, completely “ objective” study can barely be conducted and it is much more difficult in the social sciences. Thus, it is important for social scientists to be aware that their “ subjectivity” can have an impact on their analyses. Max Weber’s greatest concern was in what ways investigators cognize the social phenomenon and how they can overcome the matter of “ objectivity”.

Many remember Max Weber as a sociologist due to his considerable amount of writings about various areas in the social sciences. However, he was also a social philosopher who gave us comprehensive ideas about human nature and the world in which we live. This paper aims to examine Max Weber as a philosopher with regard to his contribution to the philosophical methodology of the social sciences.

2. WEBER’S INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND (POSITIVISM VS HISTORIANISM)

In his journal, “ Objectivity” in Social Science and Social Policy’, Max Weber develops his unique methodology of the social sciences in relation to the debates between naturalism (positivism) and historicism (German historical school) (Tenbruck, 1959; Ringer, 1997). As Weber acknowledges, there is a sharp contrast between naturalism and historicism with regard to how we acquire knowledge: explanatory and interpretive methodology (Hekman, 1983; Ringer, 1997). Recognizing the strong contrast between these two theories, Weber tried to find an alternative methodology which would

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overcome their limits(Eksrom, 1992; Hekman, 1983; Ringer, 1997; Tenbruck, 1959). It is worth taking a quick look at these two philosophical theories for a better understanding of Weber's methodological position in the social sciences.

Naturalism, which is also called positivism, was the most widespread theory in the philosophies of science in the early nineteenth century. Driven by the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment, central to positivism is the notion that only rational evaluation of empirical evidence can distinguish knowledge from unscientific thoughts such as traditional religions and superstitions (Halfpenny, 2003). In other words, only knowledge confirmed by scientific method can be accepted and this knowledge becomes a universal law to explain a particular phenomena. In addition to natural phenomenon, positivists claim that the casual laws discovered by scientists can also be adopted to the study of society. In the early 1990s, this positivism was reexamined by logical positivists, the Vienna Circle. Like previous positivists, logical positivists believed in empiricism and stressed “the demarcation of knowledge that was properly scientific” from others which are not logically and empirically justified such as metaphysics (ibid, p. 372). More specifically, logical positivists put an emphasis on deductive methodology following the natural scientific model. The predominance of the deductive method over the inductive one driven by logical positivists produced distorted image of the scientific methodology (Huff, 1984, p. 2). In fact, since the 1960s, logical positivism has been confronted with many criticisms by post-empiricist philosophers and their criticisms are based on Weber's ideas of the methodology (ibid, p. 8).

As a rule, Weber took the view of German historicism: he rejected positivists' ideas of the naturalistic monism (Tenbruck, 1959). Unlike the positivists advocating deductive methodology (in which we acquire knowledge from casual law confirmed by scientific method), German historians espoused inductive methodology, and called attention to individuality and cultural diversity (Ringer, 1997). German historians refused to study a particular fact or phenomenon with a definite concept. For example, Ranke, one of the German historians, made an explicit statement as to weakness of deductive methodology and put on emphasis on "individualities". He wrote, "From the particular, you may ascend to the general; but from general theory there is no way back to intuitive understanding of the particular." (quoted in Ringer, 1995, p. 11).

Weber's disposition of German historicism can be found most explicitly in his adaptation of Rickert's view on scientific conceptualization. Rickert argued that empirical reality has no definite features and that the understanding of empirical reality depends on the way we see it. In his book, *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*, Rickert said: "Empirical reality becomes nature when we view it with respect to the universal; it becomes history when we view it with respect to the particular and the individual" (quoted in Mises, 1958, p. 129). In accordance with Rickert, Weber (1949) argued as follows. Here and further on this paper I use bold face type for my own emphasis:

The transcendental presupposition of every cultural science lies not in our finding a certain culture or any "culture" in general to be valuable but rather in the fact that we are culture beings, endowed with the capacity and the will

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to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and to lend it significance (ibid, p. 81).

Now, as soon as we attempt to reflect about the way in which life confronts us in immediate concrete situations, it presents an infinite multiplicity of successively and coexistently emerging and disappearing events, both “ within” and “ outside” ourselves. The absolute infinitude of this multiplicity is seen to remain undiminished even when our attention is focused on a single “ object”.... All the analysis of infinite reality which the finite human mind can conduct rests on the tacit assumption that only a finite portion of this reality constitutes the object of scientific investigation, and that only it is “ important” in the sense of being “ worthy of being know” (ibid. p. 72)

Simply put, human perception attributes the meaning and significance to the world. Only a limited part of the universe can be the objects of scientific research. In this sense, Weber disagreed with the positivist belief that we can derive universal truth from the conjunction of events. That is because the concrete reality is not identical with the casual explanation discovered by scientific research. According to Weber:

There is no absolutely “ objective” scientific analysis of culture - or put perhaps more narrowly but certainly not essentially differently for our purposes- of “ social phenomena” independent of special and “ one-sided” viewpoints according to which - expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously- they are selected, analyzed and organized for expository purposes (ibid, p. 72).

For Weber “ objectivity” cannot be scientifically justified even in the natural sciences. For that reason, the deductive methodology (reducing the conjunction of events to causal law) advocated by positivists is meaningless. Accordingly, we can say his point of view is in line with German historicism. However, he did not fully accept the historians’ view on finding rules in the society. Although Weber commends historians for their acknowledgements of ‘ particularity’ or ‘ individuality’ of reality, he differed from their traditional views of historicism (Tenbruck, 1959). From the point of view of historians, clear concepts or knowledge of causal laws obstructs our understanding of reality. In opposition to their standpoint, Weber declared these are indispensable analytical tools to conduct scientific research (ibid, p. 75-76). Weber wrote:

... knowledge of reality with respect to its cultural significance and its causal relationships can be attained through the quest for recurrent sequences...the analysis of reality is concerned with the configuration into which those (hypothetical!) “ factors” are arranged to form a cultural phenomenon which is historically significant to us.... If we wish to “ explain” this individual configuration “ causally” we must invoke other equally individual configurations on the basis of which we will explain it with the aid of those (hypothetical!) “ laws.” (ibid, p. 75)

Consequently, despite his criticism of positivism, Weber recognizes the necessity of finding casual laws because we need these concepts to understand the infinite world. However, unlike positivists, these laws are not the purpose of scientific research but ‘ heuristic’ means of understanding reality. Put it in another way, what he denies is that these laws become a <https://assignbuster.com/max-webers-contribution-philosophical-methodology-of-social-sciences-philosophy-essay/>

principle of nature as the positivists argue. Due to his acknowledgement of causal laws, Weber faced many criticisms for his position (Huff, 1984). It is beside the point, however, to discuss whether he is an historian or a positivist. What we should focus on is the fact that Weber tried to establish an alternative scientific methodology in the social sciences in relation to disputes between naturalism and anti-naturalism. More specifically, his aim was to explore “ an empirical science of concrete reality (Wirklichkeitswissenschaft)”.

3. WEBER’S METHODOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

2-1. EMPIRICAL SCIENCE OF CONCRETE REALITY

Weber declared that “ the type of social science in which we are interested is an empirical science of concrete reality” :

Our aim is the understanding of the characteristic uniqueness of the reality in which we move. We wish to understand on the one hand the relationships and the cultural significance of individual events in their contemporary manifestations and on the other the causes of their being historically so and not otherwise (ibid, p. 72).

An empirical science of concrete reality is a way of understanding the phenomenon in the world in a cultural context. According to Weber, ideas about universal laws must be based on, and related to, values of particular people and society. In other words, there can be no complete objectivity. Rather, valuation of the world is always qualified by ideas and perceptions of the investigator. Weber wrote:

The significance of a configuration of cultural phenomena and the basis of this significance cannot however be derived and rendered intelligible by a system of analytical laws, however perfect it may be, since the significance of cultural events presupposes a value-orientation towards these events. The concept of culture is a value-concept (ibid, 76).

Therefore, the most important criteria to select “worthy of being know” is our value-orientation. In other words, researchers use their “evaluative ideas” to judge what can be studied as the objects of investigation and what significance has to our lives. To be exact, the researcher “weighs and choose from among the values involved according to his own conscience and his personal view of the world” (ibid, p. 53). Weber argues that the cultural or social sciences can only be conducted under researcher’s “cultural values”. Furthermore, the meaningfulness of the research can only be found when the researcher’s value is acknowledged:

To be sure, without the investigator’s evaluative ideas, there would be no principle of selection of subject-matter and no meaningful knowledge of the concrete reality (ibid).

In this respect, Weber disagrees with people who believe that the “objective” and “true” reality exist on the facts discovered by scientists. He asserts this point of view as “the naive self-deception” of researchers whose evaluative ideas are unconsciously involved when selecting “a tiny portion” from “an absolute infinity” as a subject-matter for their study (ibid).

Consequently, Weber denies the possibility of an “objective” point of view with regard to conducting investigation. According to Weber, all evaluative

ideas are “ subjective”. As a result, he rejects the naturalists view that all investigators’ values should be excluded with regard to studying the social sciences. That is because a value-free investigation is impossible in the social sciences due to researchers’ evaluative ideas.

Against this ostensible “ value-freedom”, Weber argues that the validity of empirical knowledge is achievable when the investigator explicates his or her subjective “ evaluative ideas” (value-relevance). However, we should not identify Weber’s conception of value-relevance with value-judgment.

Although the investigator’s values influence on his or her approach to selecting subject-matter, Weber claims that the researcher should be free from value-judgment in his or her analyses (Tenbruck, 1959). More specifically, as mentioned above, the selection of subject-matter and its concept-construction are conducted by researchers’ evaluative ideas. It means that the results of scientific research cannot be universal laws or common cultural values. Accordingly, it is inappropriate to enforce particular ethical standards by using scientific authority. This is the freedom from value-judgment Weber meant. In other words, Weber’s “ objectivity” in the social sciences can be defined in the following way: Historians or social research workers, by acknowledging their value-orientation, can avoid confusion created by a wide range of different values. Then, they seek the logical consistency of what they study in a value-free way. In this sense, Weber’s “ objectivity” in the social sciences is not the objectivity of empirical sciences. Instead, Weber argues for a qualified “ objectivity”, methodology which is aware of its own limits and values, but which makes an effort to be logically consistent.

2-2. CONSTRUCTION OF IDEAL-TYPES

As mentioned before, Weber attempted to overcome the disjunction between naturalism and anti-naturalism by rigorously defining the foundation of epistemology; how do we know the things we know? When it comes to different aspects of the social sciences from the natural sciences (an empirical science of concrete reality), Weber disapproves of the natural science model which seeks to discover universal laws. However, unlike historians, due to limits of interpretive understanding, he argues that we need theoretical concepts as ' heuristic means' for understanding of the ' infinite' reality. In other words, along with historians, Weber's starting point is with specific cases, the particularities of individual situation. Once this was achieved, taking positivists' way, he turns his eyes to methodology in order to conceptualize theory (Hekman, 1983). His attempt to construct theory based on value-relevance can be explained through the concept of the " ideal-type". An ideal-type enables investigators to have both approaches advocated by historians and positivists: individualization and generalization.

His construction of ideal-types comes from his criticism of Menger's abstract-theoretical approach. Menger understands the disparity between concept and reality, but acknowledges the necessity to build abstract theory(Ringer, 1997). Weber agrees with his basic position, but points out Menger's error. According to Weber (1949, p. 87), " In spite of the fundamental methodological distinction between historical knowledge and the knowledge of " laws" which the creator of the theory drew as the first and only one, he now claims empirical validity, in the sense of the deductibility of reality from " laws," for the propositions of abstract theory." That is to say, Menger is

aware that knowledge of laws discovered in all social sciences cannot be identical with reality, but argues that we can deduct reality from the knowledge. Weber rejects his view that reality can be deduced from laws and particular phenomenon can be anticipated from these laws. In other words, Weber disagrees with the statement that the purpose of the sciences is to establish laws. These laws are nothing but ideal-types which were arbitrarily formulated based on subjective perspectives. For example, in Weber's argument, "abstract economic theory" offers an "ideal" picture of commodity-market such as "free competition" and "rational conduct", but the "construct" is a "utopia" because it is achieved by conceptual "accentuation" of a particular element of reality (ibid, p. 90). In this case, ideal-types can be used as analytical tools to explain the "characteristic features" of this relationship clearly. Weber wrote:

This conceptual pattern brings together certain relationships and events of historical life into a complex, which is conceived as an internally consistent system. Substantively, this construct in itself is like a utopia which has been arrived at by the analytical accentuation of certain elements of reality. Its relationship to the empirical data consists solely in the fact that where market-conditioned relationships of the type referred to by the abstract construct are discovered or suspected to exist in reality to some extent, we can make the characteristic features of this relationship pragmatically clear and understandable by reference to an ideal-type. This procedure can be indispensable for heuristic as well as expository purposes. The ideal typical concept will help to develop our skill in imputation in research: it is no "hypothesis" but it offers guidance to the construction of hypotheses. It is not

a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description (ibid).

Ideal-types are used to demonstrate the general quality of a particular human behavior. According to Weber, a certain ideal-type comes into being when characteristic features of particular facts selected by investigators are put together. Weber calls this “ideal-construct” (ibid, p. 91). For example, if we attempt to find a ideal-construct of “handicraft”, the same principle characterizing the ideal-typical “handicraft” appears in any states and any periods(ibid, 90-91). Weber acknowledges that the process of constructing an ideal type looks like a utopia. A utopia here, however, should not be negatively understood. Ideal-types are by no means reproduction of the facts and are not something far away from the facts. Rather, they are concepts to provide guidance for analyzing the causal relationships behind the human behavior. That is to say, ideal-types are not an “end” but cognitive “means” to understand the particularity of cultural phenomenon (ibid, 92). Weber see ideal-types as functional tools, not as universal truth. Therefore, he stresses that we must not identify ideal-types with actual “reality”.

As Weber mentioned above, ideal-types cannot be hypotheses, but they can provide guidance to construct hypotheses. And these hypotheses are means to understand social phenomenon. Of course this raises the question of how we verify ideal-types with empirical facts(Winch, 1958). As Weber argued, ideal-types need to be scientifically verified and historical science is also a “rational science”(Aron, 1968, p. 192). Thus, verification of ideal-types also require “clarity and verifiable accuracy of insight and

comprehension(Evidenz)” by rational understanding such as “logical and
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mathematical" methodology(Weber, 1947, p. 90). For example, Weber argues that human behaviors can be understood in the same way as " $2 \times 2 = 4$ " by " a logical train of reasoning according to our accepted modes of thinking"(ibid). This implies causal laws can be discovered by logical thinking in the social sciences. More specifically, social scientists should be able to interpret and explain why a certain historical event took place (Aron, 1968). Weber shows how we can rationalize our interpretation of certain human behavior or historical events within society through causal analysis. In Weber's argument, historical causation originates from connecting particular facts with the components of previous ones:

Our real problem is, however: by which logical operations do we acquire the insight and how can we demonstratively establish that such a casual relationship exists between those " essential" components of the effects and certain components among the infinity of determining factors ... Rather, does the attribution of effects to causes take place through a process of thought which includes a series of abstractions. The first and decisive one occurs when we conceive of one or a few of the actual causal components as modified in a certain direction and then ask ourselves whether under the conditions which have been thus changed, the same effect or some other effect " would be expected" (Weber, 1949, p. 171)

For example, if we attempt to find the origin of capitalism, we first need to discover the unique features of capitalism. Then we analyze which previous events are related to these features and observe how those causal components are intertwined in a particular direction. From this process, we will be able to find which sources are relevant to the origin of capitalism and <https://assignbuster.com/max-webers-contribution-philosophical-methodology-of-social-sciences-philosophy-essay/>

conclude that these are the historical causes of capitalism. In other words, we produce “ imaginative constructs” in order to gain insight into the causal relations between historical facts (ibid, p. 173). Here, Weber’s causal analysis rests on the “ motivational understanding” of actions (Ringer, p. 93). According to this argument, we are able to explain the origin of the capitalism in the same way as we analyze a temperamental mother’s motive to commit violence to her child (ibid, p. 178). Let us suppose a young mother, who is upset with child’s misconduct, boxed her child’s ear. Afterward, she makes an excuse based on “ empirical knowledge”. This empirical knowledge means that she usually does not use violence toward her child and her irrational behavior would not have happened when she was not irritated by a quarrel with the cook. For that reason, she defends herself by asserting that the violence was an “ accidental” and not an “ adequately” caused one. Simply put, “ she had made judgments of objectivity possibility and had operated with the category of adequate causation”(ibid). Weber wrote:

Reflective knowledge, even of one’s own experience, is nowhere and never a literally “ repeated experience” or a simple “ photograph” of what was experience; the “ experience,” when it is made into an “ object”, acquires perspectives and interrelationship which were not “ known” in the experience itself (ibid)

This implies that causal laws are formulated by investigators not only by the researchers’ subjective views but also by objective possibilities based on empirical knowledge. When investigators attempt to make ideal-types, they extrapolates their evaluative ideas in relation to empirical data (which is <https://assignbuster.com/max-webers-contribution-philosophical-methodology-of-social-sciences-philosophy-essay/>)

viewed as objective) and these ideal-types continue to be modified by empirical analysis. Ideal-types are not complete scientific theory but methodological means. Ideal-types are also changing depending on the dominating value concepts of a particular society and age. Therefore, for each period or society that we study, we have a correspondingly new notion of ideal-types.

3. Conclusion

Max Weber's primary contribution to the social sciences is his suggestion of alternative methodology between naturalism and anti-naturalism. Within the extreme conflicts between the two, he points out the fallacy of both positions and attempts to develop his independent methodology. As for naturalism, he acknowledges that social phenomena can be scientifically investigated like the phenomena of nature. Importantly, however, Weber has a different view on objectivity from positivists. In the natural sciences, "objectivity" can be achieved when investigators exclude their subjective values. In contrast, "objectivity" in the social sciences can be accomplished through "ideal-types" when the investigator's values are aligned with (insofar as possible) the cultural values of the society he or she studies.

When it comes to anti-naturalism, he takes the historians' view that the aim of the social sciences is to study particular individualities based on interpretation. Unlike the historians, however, it is possible to find causal laws about specific social phenomenon and these are "inevitable" means to understand "infinite" reality. These casual laws are discovered not by subjective intuition but "objective possibility" based on empirical laws.

Against the natural monism which understands reality under universal laws, Weber distinguishes “ an empirical science of concrete reality”. With value-orientation, social scientists choose “ worthy of being know” and this enables us to uncover unique characteristics of reality. Weber argues that we need concepts to explain social phenomena. In this regard, through an “ ideal-type”, Weber believes that we can explain meaning and the causal relations of various human behaviors.

Ideal-types are not universal laws, but heuristic means for understanding our culture and society. Since ideal-types reflect our cultural values, they differ in accordance with peculiar people, societies and times. In this sense, the ideal-types still have important meanings to modern society. More specifically and perhaps his most important contribution from Weber’s methodology is able to bridge the gap between individual values and social sciences. This gives us insight into how to solve the problem of pluralism and conflicts over values.

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