The Ontological Assumptions of Max Weber's Methodology

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Introduction

All interpretation involves some form of induction. Passages and fragments of an author's writings are taken by an investigator, organized, and reassembled into a coherent and meaningful picture of the author's reality with the intent of illustrating some hitherto undiscovered motivation and/or intent. These inductive inferences may make a contribution to the store of human intellectual history, or they may serve as part of an investigator's original contribution to the realm of positive discourse or critique.

This inductive enterprise has produced volumes of work on the German sociologist, Max Weber. Surveys of Weber's work include books by Carl Jaspers (Jaspers 1932), Reinhard Bendix (Bendix 1962), and Anthony Giddens (Giddens 1972). Weber's political thought has been interpreted by J.P. Mayer (Mayer 1956), Ilse Dronberger (Dronberger 1971), Mark Warren (Warren 1988), and Wilhelm Hennis (Hennis 1988). Weber's appraisal of history and culture has been explored by Wolfgang Mommsen (Mommsen 1965), Lawrence Scaff (Scaff 1988), and Robert Eden (Eden 1984). Finally, Weber's methodology has been discussed by J. E. T. Eldridge (Eldridge 1970), Pietro Rossi (Rossi 1965), Steven Kalberg (Kalberg 1980), Donald Levine (Levine 1981), and Jurgen Habermas (Habermas 1984). As any serious Weber scholar knows, this list only begins to scratch the surface of the mountain of Weber literature.

However, noticeably absent from the literature on Weber is any discussion which confronts the question of "being." Specifically, what does Weber mean when he refers to "human beings"? In sociological terms, Weber saw the person as a complex of motivations to action. This aspect of Weber's sociological perspective is explored by Thomas Burger (Burger 1977) and Ed Portis (Portis 1978). While important, the question of motives is only one aspect of Weber's general perspective regarding human nature. Weber must have had a broader conception of the "human being" in order to make the assertions he made about social inquiry and the character of modern life. Weber's critique of modern institutions is well documented. However, the literature lacks a coherent linkage between the nature of individual experience and the alienating character of contemporary society.

An understanding of Weber's ontology (more specifically, human ontology) will bring a unifying element to Weber's diverse writings. In examining the boundaries of human nature, the reasoning

behind Weber's "interpretive sociology" will also be clarified. Elaborating Weber's ontology will also uncover another facet of Weber's pessimism. A great deal has been written about Weber's concern for man's fate in an increasingly rationalized world. What is lacking in the discussion is a characterization of mankind's "natural condition" against which to compare his fate in the contemporary world. Finally, an explanation of what Weber considered the "character of life" to be, will lead to an understanding of Weber's "motivation" in choosing to examine the specific social phenomena that he did.

   The assumptions of my method are simple. Access to Weber's ontological positions will come primarily from an examination of the necessary assumptions which underlie his methodology. Human action takes place within a set of uniquely human parameters. Limits to action are the result of the limits of perception, knowledge, and understanding. Through an understanding of the existential boundaries in Weber's "Weltanschauung" it is possible to infer his understanding of the character of life. Therefore, the limits and boundaries that Weber accepts in his methodological position will also convey his view of the ontological limitations of life itself.

   Selective elements of this position will then be applied to the discussion of modern culture. I will demonstrate that the picture of the human being that Weber defines is in a state of tension with the content and direction of modern culture. The attempt to define this conflict, its origins and nature, is the motivation behind Weber's general inquiry.

I. The Search for Rational Orientation

   All human beings seek a subjectively meaningful orientation to the world. This is the common origin of both religion and science. Religious orientations has its origins in an inner psychological desire for unity and meaning. "[T]he human mind ... is driven to reflect on ethical and religious questions, not by material need but by an inner compulsion to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and to take a position towards it." (Weber 1978, p. 499) Scientific orientation assists in the adjustment to an empirical reality. In Science as a Vocation Weber makes it very clear that while science cannot offer the absolute meaning defined by metaphysics, it assists in gaining control over both an external world of objects and providing the individual with a subjectively meaningful account of his own activity. (Weber "Science as a Vocation," in Gerth and Mills 1946, pp. 150-152) The individual has a psychological need for ethical orientation and a practical need for orientation to the world of objects.

   Orientation is necessary because a person must act in the world. But action is not random. The individual acts as a result of motives. A motive provides the "meaning" or "significance" for our actions. As Weber suggested, we can describe the actions of a person writing a numerical equation on a piece of paper, but to have an explanatory understanding of such behavior we need to imply, or know, what motivated that particular action. (Weber 1978, p. 8) Weber suggested that material and ideal interests provide the motivation to action. (Weber "The Social Psychology of the World Religions" in Gerth and Mill 1946, p. 280) An "ideal interest" is the ethical orientation we have toward the world. Pursuit of material interests takes place through a manipulation of the external environment.

If all human need and seek a rational orientation to the world under what ontological conditions does that orientation occur? To pose this question in a slightly different manner: what conditions of human existence serve to limit the range of knowledge available in the conduct of action? At this point the Kantian epistemology found in Weber's analysis becomes extremely important.

II. The Limits of Perception: The Kantian Legacy

The mind confronts and external reality, regardless of whether that reality is strictly physical or social, as an object foreign and separate from itself. The dualism inherent in this position has its origins in the epistemology of Kant. This is not to say that Kant was the only influence on Weber's general world view, clearly there are major differences. However, Weber accepted basic tenets of the Kantian system as the foundation of his own methodology. As Weber put it, "...the fundamental ideas of modern epistemology ... ultimately derive from Kant..." (Weber 1949, p. 106) The implications of this position are numerous.

The Kantian system is built on the notion of a distinction between the empirical world and the realm of intelligibility. (Kant 1958, p. 26) Man comes to know the empirical world through the action of the senses and the activity of the mind. However, the mind is restricted in its capacity to grasp empirical reality due to the limited nature of the mechanisms employed. The five senses coupled with the categories of experience found in the mind can never convey the complexity of any object's true nature. We, therefore, never know an objective reality, only the appearance of reality. (Kant 1958, p. 54)

If this is true of the sense impressions left from contact with a concrete physical reality, the problem is compounded when Weber applies these ideas to social reality. Every event in the social world also has a complex nature which the human mind is incapable of grasping in its entirety. "... a description of even the smallest slice of reality can never be exhaustive..." (Weber 1949, p. 78) With the parameters of social knowledge thus restricted the problem become one of defining a method which will make any aspect of the social world intelligible.

Weber's acceptance of the Kantian dualism shaped the methodological strategy employed in the study of social reality. The mind may have material premises, but the activities of the mind are unique to it realm. As an object separate from empirical reality, the reasoning mind confront that reality as a object alien to itself. In the study of society, as in the study of physical objects, events are never understood in their entirety. The mind is not capable of grasping the totality of history. Therefore, the social world requires interpretation.

III. Interpreting Social Reality

Weber summed up the Kantian approach to epistemology as follows: "[Kant took for his point of departure the presupposition: 'Scientific proof exists and it is valid,' and then asked, 'Under which presuppositions of thought is truth possible and meaningful?'" (Weber "Science as a Vocation, in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 154) Of Weber, a similar statement regarding social scientific knowledge can be offered. Weber asked, 'Given the essential separation of intellect and matter, and given the

inherent limitations of the mind to grasp the material and social events of external experience in their entirety, what type of knowledge is possible.'

To Kant knowledge of the physical world was limited by the necessary interaction of subject and object. To Weber, knowledge of the social environment is of a limited nature as well. The problem of perception is further exacerbated in social science by the necessity of interpretation in the social realm. The actual occurence of an event in history can be objectively stated. The complex of causes leading to the event, however, requires that the events in the infinitely rich web of social reality be placed in relation to one another. Finite assertions about a structure of infinite causality require some means of sorting out the most "significant" causes of the event. The idea of significance, however, brings some "subjectivity" into all interpretive understandings of social reality.

What Weber, and the other neo-Kantians, suggested is that the mind, with its limited capacities, must confront the social environment as an object in the process of seeking to make it intelligible. The conceptual tools to be used in this task are called "ideal types." The ideal type is "an abstraction...a utopia...mental construct...that cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality." Borrowing the notion from Johann Gottfried Herder (Stammer 1971, p. 217) Weber's ideal type is an intellectually pure concept created by an investigator to which empirical reality can be compared. (Weber 1949, p. 91) With conceptual purity any deviation from the logically expected condition can be explained with reference to the ideal image. (Weber 1949. p. 90) It is particularly useful in the explanation of behavior carried out by groups of individuals. To Weber, concept such as "capitalism" and "bureaucracy" are ideal types because these terms represent specific sets of substantive conditions and patterns of behavior.

This construct is neither true reality nor any sort of historic condition. The ideal type is simply an analytic tool to explain some small aspect of an infinity complex social world. When empirical reality does not correspond to the ideal, causal explanations for lack of congruity can then be offered by the investigator. Weber suggested that these causal hypotheses must conform with a common sense notion of causal sufficiency. (Weber 1949, p. 173-174)

At this point two rather implicit ideas regarding the logical implications for a Weberian view of human ontology should be made explicit. The first suggests how the notion of an ideal type relates to the ontological separation of the mind from the world. The very notion of an ideal type is made necessary to Weber as a result of his acceptance of this Kantian position. The methodological strategy outline by Weber is precisely designed to deal with the lack of ontological unity presented by the Kantian epistemology. Secondly, the notion of an ideal type as an intellectually pure residue of rational thought would seem to suggest that Weber has adopted more of the Kantian transcendentalism than is often asserted. I do not want to suggest that there are not Nietzsche-esque elements in Weber's thought, but I do want to suggest that they will not be found here.

If ideal types are simply concept to be used as a means in the creation of causal hypotheses, what type of process is taking place in the human mind in the construction of hypotheses. For the description of this process Weber uses two terms synonymously: intuition and inspiration. The application of this concept of inspiration appears in numerous contexts throughout Weber's writing. The clearest assertion of a general process appears in "The Logic of the Cultural Sciences."

Ranke [the historian] "devines" the past, and even the advancement of knowledge by historians of lesser rank, is poorly served if he does not possess this "intuitive" gift....it is absolutely no different with the really great advances in knowledge in mathematics and the natural sciences. They all arise intuitively in the intuitive flashes of imagination as hypotheses which are then tested... [Weber 1949, p.176]

  In "Science as a Vocation" Weber again touches on the theme in reference to the widespread misunderstanding about how science is conducted in the factory and the laboratory. "In both some idea has to occur in someone's mind..." (Weber "Science as a Vocation, in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 135) There is also the element of creative intuition in business. "A merchant without 'business imagination'...will for all his life remain a man who would better have remained a clerk." (Weber "Science as a Vocation" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 136)

  In all of these instances "intuition" is treated as a creative spark in the individual which serves the process of adaptation. Intuition orients the individual to ethical or material surroundings. Weber clearly had in mind a concept that described creativity in general. This is apparent in his comparison of the creative imagination of the mathematician and the artist. They differ, said Weber, in how the imagination is oriented. "But the psychological processes do not differ." (Weber "Science as a Vocation" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 136)

  Inspiration and intuition serve the organism as it tries to adapt to the complexities of the environment. In science, this is adaptation through the creation of hypotheses governing the natural world. In art, this process is the creative interpretation of culture. In social science, the creative energy is used in the formation of concepts (ideal types) and causal theories of development and change.

  One further comment regarding the notion of creativity is in order. Weber never argued that all human being possessed these creative powers equally. In fact, his position was quite the opposite. Weber insisted that whether or not we had these intuitions depended on the "gifts" that we possess. (Weber "Science as a Vocation" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 136) Human beings cannot force intuitions to occur. They occur when and where they please. (Weber "Science as a Vocation" in Gerth and Mills, p. 136) And, it is those with the intuitive "gift" that make the great advances in science, art, and culture.

IV. Religious Revelation and Charisma

  Approached on the level of human ontology, the characteristics of creativity discussed by Weber will unite some rather disparate areas of Weber's work and show their common origin. The position that all creative enterprises share a basic operation in the mind clarifies some further assertions that Weber made about how human beings orient themselves in the world. In this regard, Weber's ideas about intuitions are linked to the concepts of religious revelation and charisma.

  To Weber all religion has the same source. "...the experience of the irrationality of the world; has been the driving force of all religious evolution." (Weber "Politics as a Vocation" in Gerth and

Mills 1946, p. 123) Religion is part of an irresistible drive. (Weber 1978, p. 499) Religious metaphysics arose from an awareness of "existing and unbridgeable tensions." (Weber "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 358) It is the way in which we try and understand our fate in the world, caused by the experience of good and bad fortune. (Weber "The Social Psychology of the World Religions" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 271)

  By what mechanism is the psychological need for a metaphysical orientation translated into a religious doctrine? The answer is simple. The religious revelations of one or more people produce a doctrine which then attracts adherents. It then becomes a religion. But what is religious revelation? Religious revelation has the same source as other spontaneous creative acts: creative intuition. (Weber 1978, p. 1111) This creative act orients the desire for the metaphysical perspective of an entire community. This is accomplished using a common set of identifiable objects, goals, and conditions. "...the prophecy or commandment means, at least relatively, to systematize and rationalize the way of life, either in particular points or totally." (Weber "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions" in Gerth and Mill 1946, p. 327)   Prophecy, therefore, has the effect of creating a new social community. (Weber "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions" in Gerth and Mill 1946, p. 329)

  Religious revelation provides one of the best examples of the way in which idea of intuition is link to the phenomenon of charisma. Prophecy is the ordering of the elements of metaphysical reality into a new conceptual scheme, with new symbols and priorities. The power of the resulting revelation originates in the force the images have over the followers. A conclusion with regard to "charisma" is therefore obvious. Charisma is the term given to explain the adherence by a group of followers to a leader who has provided a creative revelation. Charisma is a "special gift of body and mind" that is attributed to an individual by his followers. (Weber 1978, p. 1112) "...this recognition derives from the surrender of the faithful to...what is alien to all regulation and tradition and is therefore viewed as devine surrender." (Weber 1978, p. 1111) In religion, charisma is a power that followers recognize in one who has offered a new creative ordering of metaphysical principles or social reality in a time of crisis.

  The need for a new intuitive ordering is not limited to religion, however. Weber makes it clear that the search for charismatic revelation take place in time of distress. (Weber 1978 p. 1111) But distress may occur in ethical, economic, political, or any other area of life. The disorientation always results in the search for a new order. Thus a relationship between charismatic leader and followers may occur anywhere life can cause individuals discomfort and estrangement.

  The link between intuition, creativity, and charisma is essential in understanding Weber's notion of historic change. Not only is charisma a force for change in history, it is "the" force for creative change and development. ..."charisma is indeed the specifically creative revolutionary force in history." (Weber 1978, p. 1117) It is the creative force in history because only human beings can have ideas of historic significance. Only human beings have creative, intuitive revelations that can change human culture. Charisma is the creative force in history because it is the result of a creative vision for a new order.

V. Rational Inquiry and the Objectification of the Self

Social Science is the interpretive study of individuals in a social context. Social actions are defined as those actions which are affected by the existence and behavior of others. (Weber 1978, p. 4) But as with the creative process of intuition, only individuals have experiences and motives. Only individuals perform actions. Social science finds it useful to employ collective concept in explaining action, but "collectivities must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action." (Weber 1978, p. 14)

Weber's goal in social scientific research is, therefore, to understand the subjectively meaningful motives and goals of individuals acting in a social context. "Laws" of historic and social change can never convey the uniqueness of subjective meaning, nor the richness of historic events. "Laws" are not the goals of Weber's sociology, as they "must necessarily be as abstract as possible and hence devoid of content." (Weber 1949, p. 80) The complexity of an historical event is never conveyed by the search for regularity, but only in the explanation of its unique character.

There is another aspect to this rejection of "laws" as the goals of Weber's analysis. The search for laws in the explanation of human behavior implies that there exists an objective level at which analysis can occur outside of a subjective orientation on the part of the investigator and the subject. Weber rejected this idea.

The search for some objective totality is outside the parameters of human understanding. The individual is not able to grasp the infinite complexity of social and historic reality. Subjective interpretation is therefore necessary. The subjectivity of the human experience is clearly portrayed in Weber's description of culture. "Culture" is a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning. (Weber 1949, p. 81) There is no objective meaning in history. History is only significant to the extent that people consider it so.

What process occurs in order for the individual to have any objective knowledge of culture from the subjective participation in experience? It should already be clear that the idea of "objective knowledge" has a very qualified meaning in Weber's work. Objective knowledge is not to be equated with "total" or "perfect" knowledge in any way.

If the mind constructs images of reality out of the infinite complexity of experience in order to orient the individual to the empirical world, then that process is objective in the sense that subjective sensation has been processed, sorted, and categorized as meaningful experience by the mind. Objective experience is experience that has been objectified, turned into an object of knowledge, to be distinguished from raw sensation. Experience must be objectified before it can be turned into knowledge. Knowledge of things and events is knowledge that has gone through the process of reflection.

Conceptual knowledge [gedankliche Erkenntnis], even of one's own experience, is nowhere and never literally "repeated experience: of a simple "photograph" of what was experienced: the "experience" when it is made into an "object" acquires perspective and interrelationships which were not "known" in the experience itself. [Weber 1949, p. 178]

All experience must be objectified before it can be treated as an object of knowledge. This applies whether we are talking about our own experience of that of someone else. The process of turning subjective experience into objective reflection characterizes the acquisition of all knowledge, both in the natural and the social environment.

The ideas formed in later reflection, of one's own past action is no different in this respect from the idea so formed of a past concrete natural event in the external world, which had been experienced by one's self or which was repeated by someone else. [Weber 1949, p. 178]

The process of objectification occurs wherever experience is ordered for understanding. The ontological implications of this position are profound. Reflection on the physical, social, and personal realms of experience all produce the same outcome. If thought is identified with reflection, the very process of thought itself is an objectifying experience. With the first conscious thought mankind is estranged from immediate experience. There is an irreconcilable process of self-objectification inherent in rational human thought. This separation of thought and experience is part of the ontological condition of mankind.

VI. Meaning and the Subjectification of Values

To this point the terms "meaning" and "significance" have been discussed in relation to the motivation of individual action and the requirements of social research. What has yet to be done is the integration of the term "value" to the discussion. The idea of "value" is important for both the role it plays in social research and in the personality of the individual. The discussion of "value" will help to link Weber's methodology to his conception of the individual.

Weber's analysis of the role of values is based on a clear distinction between "facts" and "value" in all forms of communication. Weber asserted that there is a logical distinction between statements which describe what "is" and those statements which judge the "appropriateness" of a given state of affairs. (Weber 1949, p. 19) Value judgments are to be understood as the "...practical evaluations of the unsatisfactory or satisfactory character of phenomena subject to our influence." (Weber 1949, p. 1)

Values have a pivotal role in orienting the individual to the environment. Creative intuition is the mind's mechanism to confront and make sense out of the experience of the environment. But, what is it that causes the organism to seek orientation in some areas and not in others. We seek orientation in areas of life which we consider important. Values assist in sorting through the complexity of experience itself because "[l]ife with its irrational reality and its store of possible meanings is inexhaustible." Therefore, value commitments are an essential part of the personality. They assist in orienting the individual to the environment. "The light which emanates from those highest evaluative ideas always falls on an ever changing finite segment of the vast chaotic stream of events, which flows away through time." (Weber 1949, p. 111) Values provide a form of continuity in a world of inexhaustible sensation.

Just as the individual finds personal meaning through the adherence to values, so the social sciences are made "significant" in relation to the values which give a study its meaning. Weber

was never to claim that values could be removed from social research. Quite the contrary is actually the case.

In the empirical social sciences,...the possibility of meaningful knowledge...is bound up with the unremitting application of viewpoints...[which] are oriented on the basis of evaluative ideas...but their validity cannot be deduced from empirical data as such. [Weber 1949, p. 111]

The validity of the social sciences rests not on its value neutrality, but on the fact that its meaning is derived from the adherence to some evaluative position. Our desire to confront certain aspects of our experience through social science is explained by what we consider valuable. It needs to be added here, that Weber is not suggesting that social science is strictly an arena for competing value positions. Social science is not the assertion of mere opinion. The task of social science is the assertion of demonstratable hypotheses based on the analysis of events which the investigator considers "important."

"Importance," "significance," and meaning result from value commitments. Weber's methodological discussions were not designed to remove values from social research, but to show the ways in which values enter the process of social scientific investigation. Given Weber's acceptance of an infinitely complex external reality, the influence of values in social research is a necessary condition for discourse.

The individual is the repository of values. Although values may be shared by individuals in a collective setting, only the individual subject can possess and orient behavior according to them. For this reason Weber claimed that social action must always be explained as the action of individuals.

...[T]he subjective interpretation of action...must be treated as 'solely' the resultant...of particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action....[T]here is no such thing as a collective personality which "acts." [Weber 1978, pp. 13-14]

This claim was not a matter of convenience for social explanation. It is, rather, an ontological assertion about the character of the individual and the nature of meaningful action. Only organic life has the prerequisites for experience and the ability to reflect upon it. Only human beings can acquire and act according to values.

If values are the results of a need for ethical orientation, out of what process does the content of value commitments emerge? Weber gave a very clear answer. "...the highest ideals, which move us most forcefully, are always formed only in the struggle with other ideals which are just as sacred to others as ours are to us." (Weber 1949, p. 57) The reason for the struggle of value position is also clearly enunciated by Weber. There is no objective way to verify and validate value positions. It can certainly not be achieve through the social sciences. The validity of any value position is undemonstrable by social science. "It can never be the task of an empirical science to provide binding norms and ideals..." Weber 1949, p. 52) "...[T]o judge the validity of such values is a matter of faith." (Weber 1949, p. 55) Weber suggested that we all have some "meta-empirical" faith in the validity of our ultimate and final values. (Weber 1949, p. 111)

But, to Weber our ultimate values cannot be objectively verified. With no objective criteria for assessing the appropriateness of any value position the individual is left to formulate his own attitude toward the world. In asserting the subjective verification of value positions Weber is essentially saying that individuals must ultimately be estranged from one another. Conflict is, therefore, inevitable.

This attitude is clearly indicated in the discussion of the struggle of ultimate value positions. "Every meaningful value judgment about someone else's aspirations must be...a struggle against another's ideals from the standpoint of one's own." (Weber 1949, p. 60) Life is an unceasing struggle of value positions.

... so long as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. Or speaking directly, the ultimate possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion. [Weber "Science as a Vocation" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 152]

The idea that values are subjectively verified, and therefore in constant struggle, drew Weber to another conclusion. "[I]t is necessary to make a decisive choice" among these competing value positions. (Weber "Science as a Vocation" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 152) Choosing among competing value alternatives defines the personality. The validity of values themselves come from the fact that the personality can chose to organize its life around them. (Weber 1949, p. 55) "... the dignity of the "personality" lies in the fact that for it there exists values about which it organizes its life." (Weber 1949, p. 55)

If choice reflects the dignity of mankind, then something else is also implied. Real "choice" implies some conception of freedom. Freedom involves making choices among real alternatives. Here the personality has the power to define itself. "The freer...the action is...the more the power of the personality is applied." (Weber 1922, p. 132

However, it must be stated that an absolute assertion by Weber about human freedom does seem to be lacking. Weber may be suggesting, as is found in Kant, that freedom must be assumed in order for the human experience to have any digity at all. (Kant 1977, p. 188) This assertion appears to be supported by Weber's use of quotation marks in the Methodology of the Social Sciences around the reference to the "feeling of freedom" that results from the absence of physical and psychic coercion. (Weber 1949, p. 124-125) If freedom is to be understood as a psychological "feeling" then it can be a part of sociological inquiry while avoiding the ultimate questions of "free will." In parallel to Kant's assertion about the necessity of freedom for moral accountability, Weber seems to be suggesting the necessity of free choice for human dignity.

But for this dignity, assuming it is the case, mankind must pay a price. Human beings will remain forever isolated and alienated in their individuality. Weber states the human condition very bluntly.

Conflict cannot be excluded from social life. One can change its means, its objects, even its fundamental direction and its bearers, but it cannot be eliminated. There can be, instead of an external struggle of antagonistic persons fro external objects, an inner struggle of mutually loving

persons for subjective values and therewith, instead of external compulsion, an inner control. Or it can take the form of a subjective conflict in the individual's own mind. It is always present. [Weber 1949, pp. 26-27]

Weber's ontology contains the irreconcilable "death struggle among gods" due to the inherent limits of mankind in the search for ethical and material orientation. Due to ontological limitations, mankind is forced to confront the environment through interpretation. This leads to conflicts as the infinite number of possible combinations of values and experiences come to shape the psyches of individuals. Subjective verification of values becomes, at the same time, a prescription for alienation and conflict.

However, when Weber confronted the character of modern society the struggle of individuals was already accepted as a "given." Weber claimed that the particular form of social organization found in society had no effect on "struggle." Struggle will exist with or without bureaucracy, in capitalism or socialism. (Weber "Socialism", Runciman 1978) Struggle is part of the ontological make-up of human existence. If this is the case, why was Weber critical of modern institutions, particularly bureaucracy and capitalism? To answer this question requires some understanding of how Weber defined "organic being" in its confrontation with modern rational culture.

VII. Modernity and the Organic Cycle of Life: Defining Weber's Ontological Task

According to Weber, modern rational culture has a disruptive influence on the organic character of human life. He claimed that in modern society mankind was losing touch with that creative, intuitive side of existence and, consequently, was in danger of creating a future for "specialists without spirit and sensualists without heart." The origin of such an idea cannot be understood without some conception of Weber's ontological position.

To Weber, the ontology which stands at the center of his "Weltanschauung" is under attack in modern society. In a society in which formal and instrumental form of rational conduct are reinforced at the expense of spontaneity and creativity, the dignity and character of individual existence are lost. It is in his discussion of what modern institutions do to the individual that the romanticism attributed to Max Weber by his brother Alfred can be most clearly seen.

Weber's comments about the dehumanization of mankind, as a slave to the the rational procedures of an ever expanding bureaucratic monolith, are well known and often discussed. Bureaucracy is treated as a social machine in which the bureaucrat becomes a faceless cog in an "ever-moving mechanism." (Weber "Bureaucracy" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 228) Less clearly enunciated in the secondary literature is Weber's problem with industrial capitalism.   The instrumental calculation of the means to profits will result in using people as "means" rather than "ends". The result is that the "psycho-physical apparatus of man is completely adjusted to the demands of the outer world, the tools, the machines,...in line with the demands of the work procedure,...through the creation of an optimal economy of physical effort." (Weber 1978, p. 1156) In this process the individual is "shorn of his natural rhythm as determined by his organism." (Weber 1978, p. 1156) This notion of bureaucracy and industrial capitalism "shoring" man from a natural rhythm indicates

the tension that Weber felt between his ontological views and the requirements of modern mass society.

  Several aspects of this conflict need to be discussed. As should be obvious, the culture of formal and instrumental rational calculation acts to diminish spontaneity and creativity. Charisma is "the" creative force in history, yet "[i]t is the fate of charisma, however, to recede with the development of permanent institutional structures." (Weber "The Nature of Charismatic Domination" in Runciman 1978, p. 248) This situation will inhibit social progress. However, this is clearly not all Weber had to say on the subject.

  Modern rational culture also serves to negate the worth of the individual by reducing the relevance of individual value commitments. This can be seen in a statement Weber makes about the individual's fate in the modern industrial economy.

For every purely personal relationship of man to man, ... even including complete enslavement, may be subjected to ethical requirements and ethically regulated. This is true because the structures of these relationships depends upon the individual wills of the participants...But this is not the situation in the realm of economically rationalized relationships, where personal control is exercised in inverse ratio to the degree of rational differentiation of the economic structure. [Weber 1978, p. 585]

  Value commitments are the very core of the personality, yet their worth is being diminished in modern routinized, rational, culture. In the political realm, the negation of values can bring rational authoritarianism, as the significance of the value "freedom" declines. In the personal realm, the individual is left with his essence negated. There can be little doubt that adherence to the formal rules in a bureaucracy has the same effect.

  Industrial capitalism ties man to the rhythm of the mechanized production process. (Weber 1978, p. 1156) Bureaucracy turns man into a cog in the social machine. (Weber "Bureaucracy" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 228) But capitalism and bureaucracy are but two manifestations of a rationalized culture. Weber's problems with modern culture are more complex than the analysis of bureaucracy and industrial capitalism alone would indicate. In order to understand Weber's ambivalence towards modernity some conception of what Weber considered a "natural life" must be posited. To suggest, as is indicated above, that modern society "shores" man from his natural "rhythm" is to indicate that Weber had some notion of a "natural rhythm" to life.

  The problems confronting "organic man" in modern society are conveyed in the a few comments Weber makes regarding death. Death is a fate which comes to everyone. (Weber "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions," in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 335)   But how does modern man confront this inevitability? Rational culture knows no death, only infinite "progress."

...[F]or civilized man death has no meaning. It has none because the individual life of civilized man, placed against an infinite "progress," according to its own immanent meaning should never come to an end; for there is always a further step ahead of one who stands in the march of progress. [Weber "Science as a Vocation" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 140]

Although Weber was less certain civilization always meant "progress," he indicated that the "idea" of civilization means growth, change, and development. The finite segment of human existence loses its meaning when placed against the infinite scope of history. This notion of "civilized" life is in opposition to the naturalness of an earlier time.

Abraham, of some peasant of the past, died old and satiated with life because he stood in the organic cycle of life; because his life, in terms of its meaning and on the eve of his days, had given him what life had to offer... Whereas civilized man, placed in the midst of the continuous enrichment of culture by ideas, knowledge, and problems, may become "tired of life: but not "satiated with life." [Weber "Science as a Vocation" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 140: an almost identical reference to Abraham can be found in "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 356]

As the values contained in civilization have expanded, the significance of finite organic existence has diminished. "...[O]rdinary death marks an end where only a beginning seems to make sense." (Weber "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 335) Because of this characteristic, "...[i]t becomes less and less likely that 'culture' and the striving for culture can have any inner-worldly meaning for the individual." (Weber "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Direction" in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 356) Culture in all its forms, whether as rational science or institutions, voids life of its organic meaning.

Viewed in this way, all "culture" appears as man's emancipation from the organically prescribed cycle of natural life. For this very reason culture's every step forward seems condemned to lead to an ever more devastating senselessness. [Weber "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions" in Gerth and Mills 1946, pp. 356-7]

In a culture which is built around formal and instrumental norms, culture reflects only part of the self. The individual confronts the world as a meaningless infinity. Using reason, finite segments of that infinity are imputed with meaning and significance. But modern culture has externalized personal meaning, transferring the significance of an individual organic life to the impersonal march of civilization. The experience of finite organic existence is left meaningless. Subjective meaning has been lost to an "objective' notion of progress in civilization. However, personal meaning can only found through subjective experience. The individual confronts "mankind" in the struggle to regain and retain lost dignity. This is the character of the modern age.

VIII, Conclusion

Scholars disagree over the underlying objective of Weber's work. Talcott Parson suggested that Weber always retained his early focus in the area of law. (Parsons 1965) Stanislav Andreski argued that Weber was interested in the conditions which gave rise to modern capitalism. (Andreski 1964) Reinhard Bendix claimed that Weber was concerned with explaining the rise of rational culture in the Western world. (Bendix 1962) This view is supported by Wolfgang Schluchter. (Schluchter 1981) F. H. Tenbruch suggested that this rise of rationalism can be understood as the development of religious disenchantment. (Tenbruch 1980)

With the exception of Parsons, the specific claims about Weber's themes can be understood as different manifestations of an ontological concern for the human individual. One must remember Weber's own words, explanatory understanding requires some understanding of "motive." (Weber 1978, p. 8) What was the origin of the curiosity regarding rationality, religion, bureaucracy, and capitalism? This can only be explained as a reaction to the perception that modern culture reflects a set of parameters which are unnatural to organic life. In this way, an understanding of what Weber meant by a "human" existence helps to unify his diverse writings.

Investigators use their values to determine what is of interest to them and their age. Weber's interest was to define the ontological tension found in modern culture. This tension had produced a 'loss of meaning' for the individual as civilization progressed. The loss of meaning was found in the institutions which had come to characterize this age; bureaucracy and capitalism. However, bureaucracy and capitalism are but two manifestations of rational civilization. They are reinforcing "consequences" of the growth of rationality, not its causes. Therefore, bureaucracy and capitalism reflect a more comprehensive historical process that is occurring.

The "rational" character of modern culture has more than just an impact on external social organizations. It has results for the subjective meaning we impart to our own "being." The meaning of finite existence is dwarfed beside the infinite scope of history. The individual becomes a "cog" in the service of culture. Subjective meaning is lost as the value of individual existence gives way to the march of infinite progress.

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