THE REDUCTIONISM OF WEBER’S SOCIAL SCIENCE METHODOLOGY AND THEORY OF ACTION

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Max Weber is a sociology classic who left behind the most detailed historical explanations, but only at the expense of theoretical coherence. At least this is how Weber was characterized by Richard Münch (1981, 18) when compared to Marx and Durkheim. Weber’s methodology is usually considered unconstrained, not burdened by great ideals of the scientific method. When criticized then it is so for its incoherence and ambiguity. This text takes a different perspective on Weber, joining a minority stream in Weberian literature represented by Gregor Schöllgen (1982, 1984, 1998). This stream corrects the assumption of “liberal” methodology and reveals reductionist tendencies in Weber’s approach, showing that he did not only study action neutrally but also prescribed it. In contrast to Schöllgen who presumes that Weber was limited to the purposive-rational type of action (1998, 73), we will be more sympathetic of the core of Weber’s method and, following Talcott Parson’s example, pay attention to signs of a general concept of action.

Keywords: Max Weber, reductionism, theory of action, ideal type, understanding sociology, verstehen sociology, purposive action, rationality

Introduction: Max Weber from today’s perspective

Max Weber was an important sociologist, economist, historian, philosopher and legal scientist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At least this is how he appears to us today when these disciplines are fully independent, with more-or-less exclusive fields of interest. The
idea that someone today might be fully devoted to all these disciplines (keeping track of all journals in the field, attending conferences etc.) seems rather hallucinatory. Yet Weber did not split his attention between these disciplines because social science simply was not as highly specialized. Today’s specialization distorts our view of this scholar. His works are only read through the specific lens of various disciplines, not as an integral whole. Reception is also uneven: Weber as a sociologist or perhaps also historian enjoys unparalleled interest, compared to Weber as a philosopher or economist. For philosophers, Weber’s works may have original philosophic contents but they are too attached to his empirical studies. They are perhaps taken as a variant of Neo-Kantianism which does not receive much attention as a whole. Economics with its emphasis on formal-mathematical, thus ahistorical modelling is not at all sympathetic to Weber. On the opposite extreme, sociology takes him as one of its founding fathers, approaching him with respect and little criticism.

The process of disciplinary specialization and division is associated with the idea of accumulation of knowledge. When a discipline is established it focuses on the most fundamental phenomena. After explaining these successfully, it shifts emphasis on more detailed and specific phenomena studied by separate circles of scholars. In order to fully concentrate on their specific areas of interest, these scholars tend to adopt the fundaments of their field uncritically. Knowledge expands but it is not expected to be revised.

By contrast, the following text is based on the idea that knowledge needs to be renewed in its entirety. I believe this applies even more to social science. That is why I would like to bring attention to the basic concepts of Weber’s thought that are too often received as matters-of-course. I am going to deal with fundamental and constitutive concepts, rather than those covering more specific social phenomena (bureaucracy, authority or rationalization).

First I intend to present the concept of ideal type which largely determines Weber’s entire method. The main question will be: Can theory be based exclusively on ideal-typical concepts? Taking a critical
stance to Weber’s nominalism, I intend to demonstrate that a theory of action must be based on a general concept of action – and only then can special types be derived. Subsequently, I will examine Weber’s concepts of understanding sociology and theory of action. I will describe the intentions behind the ideal-typical method and its inseparability from the purposive-rational type of action which, as I will attempt to prove, is rather misleading in the context of sociological inquiry.

**The ideal type**

Every phenomenon, historical factor or event is special – both typical and atypical in its own way. A social scientist or historian may deal with in-depth description of a given event but when attempting to define a more general context, they must follow what is typical, i.e. which characteristics make the given case affiliated with a certain type. Yet tension with the diversity of available evidence always arises in the process of typologizing. Only some types will resist that tension and become part of the scholarly discourse.

Weber allows more to his “ideal types”, explicitly freeing them from accountability to reality. He understands them as instruments scholars can use with unlimited discretion. The contents of a concept do not matter; Weber’s quality criterion does not lie in appositeness, but in a potential for causal interpretation (Weber 2012, 126). This certainly makes it easier to identify causes and effects, but always at the risk of incoherence between our explanation and historical reality. This is why we should always take the next step and verify the extent to which the explanation applies by comparing it with individual cases. Weber has been repeatedly criticized for omitting this step. He did not introduce his ideal types back to reality and only focused on making the explanation itself as detailed as possible. Frank Parkin exemplifies this on the ideal type of bureaucracy:

> “Having set up his ideal type bureaucracy, Weber might have been expected to compare it against empirical cases of bureaucracy.
He could have used it as an evaluative yardstick for examining the administrative practices of, say, the Prussian civil service, or the university bureaucracy, or German trade unions. He could have proposed, as a working hypothesis, that the greater divergence between these or similar bureaucracies and the ideal-type, the greater their loss of „technical superiority“ in administrative affairs. But Weber does none of these things. He presents no evidence to show that a loss of precision, speed and unambiguity, or from an increase in friction and material and personal costs. The technical superiority is simply stated as an axiomatic truth that requires no empirical proof.” (2002, 34)

There is indeed a lack of correspondence between the attribute “ideal” and Weber’s concept of type. The latter rather stands out because of the extreme liberty allowed by its author. This will become clearer when contrasted to Georg Simmel’s approach which is usually referred to as analogous (Kim 2002, 486–519) to Weber’s “social type”. Simmel’s types are also idealized insofar as they are not expected to correspond to specific individuals or average group characteristics. Simmel mentions individual empirical cases rarely, especially compared to Weber. On the other hand, he fully concentrates on appositeness. His types are vivid and their advantage becomes clear as we easily relate them to our own personal experience. While a social scientist striving for the most complex causal explanation would conceptualize types similarly as physical quantities, Simmel aimed at empirical plausibility. He depicted his types in a way that we recognize them in what we already know. Much more than Weber, Simmel dealt with contemporary issues, which allowed him to relate to modern people’s experience. In contrast, Weber worked with the past which is easier to capture. As a historian, he reported about realities we had no direct contact with. Therefore, he was able to treat his types more arbitrarily. His attention to the present and sociological perspectives increased at the end of his career. This brought the application of the ideal type much closer to the average type (Schöllgen 1998, 43 – 44. See also quote below). Thus, Weber had to give up some of his requirements and ground his ideal types in average characteristics. Thorough
application of the ideal-type method to contemporary experience would have brought chaotic results because we would not have known which parts of our experience to relate to the reality-independent ideal types.

Weber also did not make sufficient distinction between a type and a concept. The ideal-type method served him as a general way of formulating concepts. Thus, every concept should be an ideal type. However, a typology distinguishes cases of what is united under a concept. Since Weber does not require appositeness of his types, he relies on comparing them with reality. This implies that reality must exist independently of the type; it must be there before the type is formulated. And this is precisely what does not apply to a concept. A concept conceives and thus makes apparent. It does not make good sense to say that a phenomenon we are able to see through the lens of a concept existed even before because it has only been revealed in this way thanks to the concept. We can imagine an ideal type of city-state in antiquity and subsequently compare it with various historical city-states. We can also imagine ideal types of a city or a state, but we can only do so when we know what a city is and do not confuse this concept with the ideal type. Yet if we do not distinguish the concept from the ideal-type construction then manipulation with the ideal type might also amend our concept. Then it comes as little surprise that the necessity of the next step – to compare the ideal type with empirical observations – will no longer be perceived urgent. On one hand, this risk is less relevant when we discuss details in a field that has already been conceptualized. This condition is fulfilled in the study of historical facts, and we must admit that Weber intended his ideal-type method mostly for his historical inquiries; moreover, he usually relied on complex empirical description in his social-historical works. On the other hand, he also developed a general theory of sociological inquiry based on abstract concepts; these concepts cannot be taken as heuristic instruments but as cornerstones of his theory of social science. For example, Weber’s concept of social action opens a door for future sociological development. It does not make good sense to
confront the concept of action with an empirical instance of action before it is understood as action. Weber also does not do so; he uses a completely standard method to define his basic concepts and makes no effort to confront them with empirical material.

The issue is complicated by the fact that concepts are, of course, considered ideal in the tradition of Greek philosophy.\(^1\) The attribute “ideal” is originally derived from Plato’s ideas. These, just like Aristotle’s categories or Weber’s ideal types, need not apologize for any lack of appositeness with specific cases because this is one of their intended qualities. It is absolutely necessary to abstract from the changing reality in order to see ideas in their eternality. The main difference lies in the fact that ideas-concepts cannot be formulated deliberately, like in Weber’s case. They are not instruments, but guides in the process of learning.

Should we compare the above three types of concepts-types, the distinguishing characteristic will not lie in their ideal character (which applies to all three cases) but in the quality criterion applied to them. The quality criterion lies in causal explanation for Weber’s ideal type, empirical plausibility (clarification of empirical reality) for Simmel’s social type and logical clarity (relation to the Logos, or the universe of ideas) for the abstract philosophical concept.

Also of interest is comparison with Marx’s laws of development of human history. Weber himself writes that “all specifically Marxian ‘laws’ and developmental constructs, insofar as they are theoretically sound, are ideal types” (Weber 2012, 132). Schöllgen (1998, 43) wonders if this statement could also be read reversely, i.e. if Weber’s ideal types could indeed be viewed as similar to Marx’s objective laws. Marx, too, presents historical development as a comprehensive picture and the diverse forms of reality as deviations. The difference will probably exist insofar as Weber keeps his types purely instrumental. According to Schöllgen, Weber succeeded to do so in his early works which consisted almost exclusively of historical inquiry, but his

\(^1\) A return to the Greek understanding of concepts is emphasized in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. See Neubauer (2001).
notion of ideal type changed over time as he dealt with contemporary social problems:

“Ideal types were originally of a purely instrumental nature and thus served to facilitate the sorting and ordering of diverse historical phenomena. Now they apparently developed into a learning purpose in itself. Historical material is used almost exclusively to demonstrate ideal types.” Early on, Weber usually did not differentiate between “sociology” and “history” and referred to them as collectively “empirical” or “interpretative” disciplines. But in his later works, he raised a sharp distinction between them: “sociology creates types and looks for general rules, whereas history is concerned with the causal analysis and attribution of individual, culturally significant actions, structures and personalities” (Weber 1964, 12). Eventually, Weber associated the ideal type with an “average type”. (1998, 43 – 44)

This again demonstrates the difference between sociological and historical applications of the ideal-type method. We will return to this question in a section on purposive-rational action.

In spite of the above-mentioned points of critique, we should bear in mind that Weber did not use his ideal-type method dogmatically. We cannot say that he only cared about the explanatory potential of his concepts and completely ignored their plausibility. His historical types relied on extensive empirical evidence. He also often used the term “ideal type” in a weaker sense, e.g. as variants of authority – patrimonial, charismatic etc. – but here the only ideal quality lay in the fact that empirical observations comprised a mix of these types. However, their formulation tended to be pregnant, not only technical or heuristic. By defining the ideal type in the above-mentioned radical sense, he primarily made room for more ambitious conclusions. This is actually the intention of Weber’s entire methodology (which relies on the foundation of ideal types): to make room which can be inhabited as necessary. As a result, a part of Weberian literature is concerned with translating Weber’s somewhat eclectic conclusions into a coherent form (Alexander 1985).
In the following text, we will pay attention to the status a given concept has or should have.

**Weber's understanding sociology**

The principles of Weber's methodology are summarized in two writings, *Über einige Kategorien der verstehenden Soziologie* from 1913 and *Soziologische Grundbegriffe* from 1921. Identifying himself with methodological individualism, Weber considered action as the fundamental concept. He defined it as “human behavior when and to the extent that the agent or agents see it as subjectively meaningful” (Weber 1978a, 7). Therefore, the purpose of understanding sociology is to reveal this meaning and interpret human behaviour as meaningful or motivated. The ability to understand the meaning of action is associated with personal and cultural proximity between the agent and the observer (see point 2 and point 3, Weber 1978a, 7 – 8). On the other hand, Weber says that “It is not necessary to be Caesar in order to understand Caesar” (Weber 1978a, 7), suggesting that the ability to understand the meaning of others’ actions is simply a part of human nature.

Sociological inquiry attempts to “find evidence of understanding”. According to Weber, this can be done in two ways, rationally and empathically. Both options have their specific limitations. “Rational intelligibility … is to be found in its highest degree in those complexes of meaning which are related to each other in the way in which mathematical or logical propositions are” (Weber 1978a, 8). The observable, external progression of action thus can only be grasped when logically contextualized in the meaning of surrounding happenings. For example, some chess moves are forced and fully dictated by the game’s logic. The player makes them irrespective of his/her tactical or strategic choices. However, rational understanding is associated

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2 See below for discussion of correspondence between meaning motivation of action. At this point, we will focus on one quality these two concepts have in common, namely on approaching the agent's perspective.
too closely with the phenomenological aspects of action (Alexander 1985, 31) and there is nothing to “hold on to” if we do not have this kind of necessary logic of action. We must also bear in mind that this “game logic” may not affect purely internal individual motivations.

By contrast, empathetic understanding looks inside the agent and thus tends to grasp his/her motives, rather than any logical rules behind the resulting actions. For example, affects may “emerge” at different occasions, and it is often more important to understand the given person’s inner life than any specific related meanings. However, empathetic understanding is limited by personal and cultural distance between people. This approach does not always guarantee understanding or correct understanding.

The issue of approaching other people’s motivations is not further elaborated by Weber – the ideal-type method is supposed to play an essential role here. A scientific method should first identify the progression an action would take ideally, based on a heuristically identified motive. Subsequently, this construction serves as a measure of actual action. All things considered irrational affects from this perspective are recorded as deviations and eventually treated as factors of discrepancy between actual and ideal-typical action. This can be illustrated by the following schema:

Figure 1 – Ideal-typical and actual progression of action (According to Ringer, 2000)
We start at B’ – the action whose meaning we intend to explain. We determine A – an ideal-typical motive of action – and derive B from it – a progression the action would take if motivated by A. If B differs from B’ then we can repeat the procedure and try to identify a better ideal type, or focus on interpreting the deviation and gradually cut down the unexplained part. For example, in order to explain why a gothic bridge was built in the 14th century, we might see an ideal-typical motive in the necessity of transport between both river banks. Yet if this was the only motive then the bridge would probably be much poorer in terms of artistic value, lacking elements of style. Thus we could explain the deviation between actual and expected construction by the effects of aesthetic values. As a result, the bridge would represent a specific residue of economic and aesthetic values of that time.

There is a serious drawback to this method. As we mentioned in the preceding section, Weber’s procedure relies on independence between the explained and the explaining. In other words, it must be possible to clearly compare the ideal-typical explanation with reality. However, as Weber himself emphasizes, no fact is understandable in itself, but only when given a meaning – a motive. By ascribing a motive to it, for example ideal-typically, we have completed the action and as such it no longer requires a revision. In the previous example, we might feel that instrumental calculation on transport improvement explains the bridge construction well. If the sovereign was motivated by transport improvement, then it is clear why he had the bridge built. All corresponds with the actual progression of action, but we still may be mistaken. There is abundance of other motives that would have led to the exact same result. The bridge may have been constructed as a matter of prestige, for its symbolic meaning, following tradition, or as a mere extravagant gesture by a rich sovereign. We cannot easily decide between these alternatives based on the extent to which they explain the action, because all of them may explain it. However, inspired by neoclassical economics, Weber still
preferred purposive-rational explanations. Therefore, we are going to pay special attention to this type of action. But let us first complete Weber’s analysis of understanding which distinguishes between “immediate” and “explanatory” understanding (Weber 1978a, 11). The former attribute applies when we understand the meaning of action in its internal logic. For example, we understand the meaning of the statement “2 × 2 = 4” insofar as we know what it means irrespective of who said or wrote it. Immediate understanding is not concerned with the reasons why an agent acted in a certain way, but rather with the way the action’s outcome makes sense. In contrast, explanatory understanding is concerned with motivation, i.e. with the meaning an agent ascribed to the statement “2 × 2 = 4” and the reasons he expressed it just now and just under these circumstances. The following table summarizes this distinction along with the above-mentioned distinction between rational and empathetic understanding.

Table 1: Types of understanding according to Max Weber

| Understanding  | Immediate                                      | Explanatory                                      |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| *Rational*     | I understand what “2 × 2 = 4” means.          | I understand that a hunter fired because he wanted to obtain food. |
| *Empathetic*   | I understand a work of art.                   | I understand that a little boy is crying because he hurt his leg. |

There is a paradox hidden in the distinction between immediate and explanatory understanding. On one hand, these two perspectives are linked. As Weber says, “every artifact, such as for example a machine,
can be understood only in terms of the meaning which its production and use have had or will have for human action. It would remain in-comprehensible without reference to the meaning. Without reference to this meaning such an object remains wholly unintelligible” (Weber 1978b, 7). Immediate understanding does not seem possible without a specific motivation behind the action. In order to grasp what the statement “$2 \times 2 = 4$” means or understand a work of art, we must always first understand the place these residues of human action have in relation to their authors and their motivations. However, there may or may not be correspondence between immediate and explanatory understanding, i.e. between the external and internal sides of action. The internal logic of what we pursue as our action is measured on a different scale than the logic of its motivation. For example, a piece of art could be created in a primitive way or with perfect virtuosity but this distinction does not logically correspond to the author’s satisfaction with himself as an artist, in terms of his motivation. Let us imagine a great artist who finds no joy in painting – in other words, this activity does not intersect with his motivation – and a bad artist who finds art personally fulfilling.

**Purposive-rational action according to Max Weber**

Weber distinguishes between four types of action: (1) *purposive-rational* led by conscious calculation of means to an end, (2) *value-rational* guided by ethical, aesthetic or other values, (3) *affectional* driven by affects, emotions and feelings, and (4) *traditional* following established customs and traditions. These alternatives can be viewed as model ideal types serving to explain action. Apparently, though, Weber prefers the purposive-rational type in his method. He does so for pragmatic reasons, considering instrumental calculation to be best accountable scientifically (Weber 1978a, 22). At the same time, he believes this preference is independent of the actual meaning of action. We have already suggested above that this belief is problematic. Let us now attempt to elaborate the line of argument Weber may have followed to reach that conclusion.
The very definition of action presented by Weber might suggest that every action is purposive-rational by principle. If action is associated with a subjective meaning then this meaning could be conceived as a purpose to which the action serves, such as abiding by a value, following a tradition or satisfying an emotion. Thus, we could conceive of every type of action as purposive-rational without changing its meaning in any way. Here, “-rational” characterizes the scholar attempting to grasp action rationally. Therefore, this purposiveness would not be related to the ways the action was experienced (as an act of reason, experience of affect or abidance by tradition). Furthermore, it would not be related to any motives, including those of the economic type. Nevertheless, this notion relies on an initial transposition between meaning and purpose which may easily cause misunderstanding. Of course, in Weber’s terminology purpose is associated with instrumental rationality as one of the types of action (in contrast to the traditional, affectional and value-rational types). Here, it is assumed that agents consciously calculate their actions with regard to a purpose, acting economically and, as a rule, in view of economic ends. Unfortunately, Weber does not distinguish between these two notions of purposeful action, namely a scholar’s concept that grasps other agents’ action (for example, in terms of Parson’s “unit act”) and an agent’s purposive-rational action as one of several types. This results in artificial preference of economic motives of action and search for latent economic/pragmatic motives even in actions that appear to be motivated by values or customs. The actual meaning is thus reinterpreted in economic terms, while affects or traditions are taken merely as deviations from the intended meaning. As Gregor Schöllgen argues, this reductionism has even graver consequences because optimal means to an end can be identified objectively for purposive-rational action, and therefore, agents cannot choose freely without being viewed by the sociologist as mere suboptimal deviations. Arguably, they should have no motivation for other than optimal actions because, in any case, the ends to which they relate their actions are their own personal ends. However, as we
tried to demonstrate, Weber’s method tends to be affixed to heuristic “business” motives of action only, which makes the requirement of optimality of action necessarily oppressive. According to Schöllgen, this means Weber’s methodology is centred on the way Weber saw his contemporary time, namely as devoid of magic and meaning. We might wonder why Weber did not take the same perspectives on the other historic eras or cultures he studied. Here we can return to the difference between sociological and historical inquiry mentioned above with reference to the ideal-type method. It is in the way Weber accounted for his contemporary time that the oppressive tendencies of the ideal-type method become the most apparent. In contrast, historiography tends to restrain itself and it is not by accident that Paul Veyne relates this fact to competition between sociology and history:

“Limited by the perspective of events from day to day, contemporary history abandons to sociology the non-eventworthy description of contemporary civilization. Limited by the old tradition of narrative and national history, the history of the past is too exclusively bound to the account followed by spatiotemporal continuum („France in the seventeenth century“); it rarely dares to repudiate the unities of time and place and also to be comparative history, or what is called that („the city through the ages“). Now one can see that, if history decides to be “complete“ to become completely what it is, it makes sociology useless.” (Veyne 1984, 264)

Yet precisely these restraints for which Veyne blames his discipline have a positive meaning as well: they delimit otherwise ungrounded ideal-type concepts. Relation to a clearly defined place and time allows us to keep distance from the general concept and avoid distorting it through manipulation with ideal-type concepts.

Another possible answer refers to the diversity of Weber’s methodology which integrated, among others, Heinrich Rickert’s concept of value-relevance (Wertbeziehung). The affectional and traditional types of action are clearly marginalized, while the status of value-rational
action is more complicated. Let us therefore specify the definitions of both “-rational” types:

Value-rational action is guided by a “conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success…” (Weber 1978b, 24 – 25)

“Action is instrumentally rational (zweckrational) 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 the end, of the relations of the end to the secondary consequences, and finally of the relative importance of different possible ends. Determination of action either in affectual or in traditional terms is thus incompatible with this type. Choice between alternative and conflicting ends and results may well be determined in a value-rational manner. In that case, action is instrumentally rational only in respect to the choice of means.” (Weber 1978b, 26)

The value-rational type implies a close relationship between value and action; course of action is determined by the given value. In the purposive-rational type, agents first have to calculate which means may help fulfil the given purpose; the purpose is thus merely a criterion and the best way of action does not become apparent immediately. Agents also choose between different purposes. If these choices are also purposive-rational, they must also be made with regard to a purpose, namely a higher-order purpose to which lower-order purposes serve as means. It is not by accident that Weber suddenly turns to value rationality at this point. As he writes, action which would be fully purposive-rational (not only in its means) would be subject to infinite regress. Every purpose would have to be calculated in comparison to another purpose, the latter would also have to be calculated, ad infinitum. Even if agents broke this chain after some time, they would still be impeded by inability to calculate their actions simultaneously at several levels. A certain purpose has to be taken as final, which
suggests the existence of links to other types of action, including value rationality.

Can we, after all, take purpose as a kind of value or take value as a kind of purpose? Neoclassical economics relies on purposive-rational action but also on value, namely subjective utility. Every utility perceived by agents as relevant becomes a criterion against which action is measured, i.e. a purpose. Indeed, agents are able to calculate action rationally (by choosing means) in order to best satisfy their values.

If we conceived of action as exclusively rational and omitted the two remaining types it would become apparent that we cannot take value rationality and instrumental rationality as logically separate. A conjunction between them is one of the main motives of Talcott Parson’s early works which peaked with The Structure of Social Action. The unclear relationship between them also complicates the translation of Weber’s concept of “Zweckrationalität” into some languages. Jeffrey Alexander even refused to use an English term for it. It is translated in two different ways: “instrumental action” and “purposeful rationality” (1985, 155), i.e. purely instrumental action which regards all purposes as means, or action that is rational in its means only and assumes culturally determined purposes.

This problem is apparent in Weber’s work as well. His most famous writing, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, gives us a completely different message than we would expect after reading Weber’s methodological texts. It does not work with purposive-rational economic motives, but rather with those related to religion and values. On one hand, Weber praised instrumental rationality for its scientific clarity, but on the other hand, his interpretation of the inception of capitalism relies much more on general ideas and values that can provide a common denominator for a country’s disparate economic interests. Eventually, Weber’s work came to be valued precisely for the important counterbalance it posed against Marx’s economizing theory. From this we can derive what has been stated above, namely the fact that Weber applies his methodology rather liberally,
but also the existence of contradictions in his theory of action. What it lacks the most is distinction between analysis of the concept of action and discussion of the individual types of action.

**Weber’s concept of rationality**

Weber argues that a transition to modern society is accompanied by the process of rationalization. It is, however, clear that this process cannot be adequately grasped in terms of Weber’s typology of action, namely as growing importance of the purposive-rational type. Thus, some authors attempted to further differentiate both rational types of action (Kalberg, in Sprondel, Seyfarth, 1981 or Döbert, in Weiß 1989), especially in line with Weber’s distinction between formal and substantive rationality. Substantive\(^5\) rationality accentuates purpose, that is the content it seeks to fulfil, while formal rationality relates to the ways action is directed, namely rational calculation of the possible consequences of action. This addition to Weber’s typology has one disadvantage: it further disintegrates Weberian methodology. A different approach is taken by Randall Collins (1986, 62 – 63) who draws lines between types of rationality by the different topics Weber writes about. The first type covers his methodological works which associate rationality with fulfilment of personal purposes through adequate choice of means. The second type covers Weber’s historical writings which differentiate rational capitalism from other types of capitalism on the basis of its active, result-oriented and world-transforming approach. Finally, the third type is apparent in Weber’s studies of bureaucracy which describe it as a rational form of administrative organization and juxtapose it to the tradition-burdened aristocratic administration. In contrast to the preceding category, emphasis is placed on predictability and regularity. Bureaucracy is also marked by

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\(^5\) Even if the German attribute “material-” immediately implies the English “material”, such a translation would be somewhat misleading. Therefore, the usual translation as “substantive” is perhaps more comprehensible. This type relates to the meaning, the substance of action with regard to a purpose, not a material.
orientation on purpose, but one externally given, rather than subjectively meaningful. Weber’s positive assessment of bureaucracy differentiates him from the same liberal economic approaches he referred to when developing his ideal-type method. Finally, a special position is occupied by Weber’s work on the rational character of Western music which extends the concept of rationality to the subtle and reason-defying realm of art.

This text deals primarily with Weber’s methodological studies, but even these do not clarify the term of rationality. The starting point is clear – relation of rationality to individual motives – but Weber gradually departed from it as he further elaborated his understanding sociology. An important role was given to “right rationality” (Richtigkeitsrationalität) which is not related to fulfilment of individual purpose but to objective rightness of action as it appears to the sociologist from his perspective. Although Weber failed to delimit this concept methodologically, he resorted to it whenever a purely subjectivist approach did not provide solid ground. For example: “This first and most general instance of the direct harnessing of religion to extra-religious purposes also reveals the idiosyncratic autonomy of the religious domain, in the somewhat incredible irrationality of its painfully onerous norms, which applied even to the beneficiaries of the taboos“ (Weber 1978b, 433). Apparently, norms are not irrational from the perspectives of those abiding by them but from that of Weber who finds them absurd.

The ideal type of instrumental rationality is built on a different foundation. It is again measured against the success of fulfilling purposes, but highly specific ones – business-like purposes to which any action’s meaning can be easily reduced. Analogously to “right rationality”, action is measured by fulfilment of imputed criteria, but these relate directly to the agent.

The following section will elaborate on one more important ambiguity in the concept of rationality.
**Weber’s concepts of meaning and purpose**

Max Weber conceives of action as behaviours endowed by agents with subjective meaning. But how can we better imagine this *meaning*? We can replace it with purpose, motive or value, which clarifies it at the expense of generalization. All action has a subjective meaning, no matter which of the four types it belongs to. Thus, meaning cannot be merely synonymous of a (rationally determined) purpose, value or custom. It should rather represent a more general quality covering all of these options. Meaning is precisely what represents the agent, irrespective of form. There is yet another way of grasping this concept: not in relation to an agent’s motives, values, purposes, traditions or affects but as a sum of all particularities in the world, a sum arising from the fact that this is an agent’s world. To state two examples, an anthropologist studying a foreign culture might attempt to present it as an integral whole; or Weber studied logical coherence within the protestant ethic. In terms of Weber’s theory, the former case represents *explanatory understanding* and the latter *immediate understanding*. We would say that each individual action “is meaningful” (with regard to the whole) in the former case, or “makes sense” (to the agent) in the latter case. While Weber distinguishes these two concepts in his typology of understanding, he does not state which one should be in the focus of his method or how to avoid potential contradictions between them. This gave rise to diverse interpretations by Weber’s followers. Parsons tends to identify with the *explanatory* meaning (1937, 642). In contrast, Herva’s work on this topic (1988, 143 – 156) argues that Weber drew a line between his approach to action and the depth-psychological, motivational approach of Simmel and Dilthey. The psychological accents in Dilthey’s approach differentiate him from Weber. Weber always seeks subjective meaning, and does not consider the possibility that meaning would be extrinsic to the agent, for instance when influenced by false consciousness. However, since this overlap with Marx and Freud was “up for grabs”, it was adopted by Frankfurt School authors including Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer and Fromm. I perceive this direction of Weberian interpretation as a response to
the fact that subjective meaning tends to become reified in social analysis, and especially in modelling. Meaning does not comprise of unambiguous facts, something every ideology would like, or of things or goals; but it is easily substituted by them. Recently, the issue of priority of goals over meaning has been studied by Czech philosopher Václav Bělohradský (2007) who distinguishes between instrumental and hermeneutical rationality.

**Purpose as a cause of action**

At several instances throughout this text we have been confronted with the collision between subjective meaning and instrumental rationality as one type of action in Weber’s methodology. However, we also indicated that purpose can be viewed as a general cause of action. Aristotle was the first philosopher to identify an end (the final cause) as one of four kinds of causes (along with matter, form and source) and this had nothing in common with instrumental rationality. For Aristotle, the final cause was attached not only to action, but also many other natural processes. Perhaps somewhat narrower, Weber’s definition of purpose is linked to the notion of effect:

> “From our viewpoint, “purpose” is the conception of an effect which becomes a cause of an action. Since we take into account every cause which produces or can produce a significant effect, we also consider this one. Its specific significance consists only in the fact that we not only observe human conduct but can and desire to understand it.” (Weber 1946, 83)

Aristotle and Weber are of course divided by two thousand years of philosophical development which largely transformed the understanding of causality. After the middle ages, attention shifted to just one of Aristotle’s causes, namely source (or the moving clause). The new model of the universe consisted of atoms which collided with one another but did not differ in matter, form or end. Moreover, this single cause turned into a sufficient one – the modern era became deterministic. Causality is understood as a necessary relationship
between cause and effect. This is ideally exemplified on the way one domino knocks over another domino and so on, until the entire line is down. We can observe apparent causality, seeing the cause as well as the effect. However, in human behaviour, the end/final clause is never observable in this way. While we may find other agents’ actions intelligible, we are often only able to grasp their superficial motivations. If we wanted to dive and grasp a deeper motivation that would explain a social phenomenon of higher relevance – such as the inception of capitalism in Weber’s case – we would have to do more than just shifting attention a few causes down the line, like in the domino example. When we proceed from the most superficial intention to a deeper motivation, we necessarily enter a less clear and perhaps even ambiguous domain. The deeper and more significant motivation we search for, the worse apparent it will be on the outside and the more difficult it will be to identify. If our ambition is as high as to find the causal explanation of the modern era, we run the risk of staying on the surface. For example, the cause of people’s relation to work can be easily identified in the money they earn at work, from which we conclude: People work because of earnings. This causal relationship is unambiguous and even allows us to model human behaviour. Yet the fact that an explanation by this cause is clear does not testify its quality or plausibility. Then again, a more complex explanation might be developed at the expense of clarity, which would make it less prone for scientific explanation in line with the motto, clare et distincte. For example, Thorstein Veblen used the term instinct of workmanship which, as a matter of internal motivation, constitutes a trivial or unidentifiable cause at the same time, it seems to represent internal motivation appositely. Causal explanations look for chains, getting down to significant causes that affect the largest possible areas of social phenomena, but they seem to be presented without the necessary evidence of correspondence between these causes and human motivation.

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6 It is sometimes difficult to determine how exactly this instinct manifests itself in specific human actions.
It is one thing whether a cause might explain a given action, and another thing whether it truly explains and represents the action.

The same defect is somewhat apparent in Weber’s *Protestant Ethic*, arguably the best achievement of his understanding sociology. The book’s main argument is that the doctrine of predestination had highly specific effects on protestant mentality. Since salvation and damnation were prearranged by God, no one was able to improve their destiny through their actions. Absolute uncertainty about the afterlife led to anxiety which could only be alleviated through hard work in the job one was assigned to. Success was seen as evidence of God’s grace and a sign that one was predestined for salvation. This exposition suggests a high level of appositeness with the cause of human action which ignited modern capitalism; however, as Parkin (2002, 43) remarks, it is basically not evidenced in Weber’s work. Weber provides ample information about a “capitalist spirit” in protestant thought but does not at all mention the anxiety it was supposedly driven by or the belief that professional success would best relieve that anxiety. In other words, Weber presented an attractive causal explanation that corresponds to the course of history but paid little attention to *authenticity* of the motive behind it.

Another problem with causality arises from the fact that action is only intelligible as motivated action. An agent’s choice of purpose also affects what it is supposed to explain. Thus, the two parts of the causal connection are not independent, which refutes the basic condition we would naturally require of any meaningful causal explanation.

**Conclusion**

“An ‘understanding’ of human behaviour that has been obtained by means of interpretation first of all possesses a specific qualitative

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7 If Protestants believed that their destiny was decided irreversibly then it is not quite clear why professional success would provide them with any certainty. As long as everything was already decided, nothing would seem to be worth trying anymore.
“evidentness” whose strength may vary very considerably. The fact that an interpretation possesses this evidentness to a particularly high degree still does not in itself constitute any sort of proof of its empirical validity: Behaviour whose eternal course and effects are identical may stem from the most varied constellations of motives; and the most intelligibly evident motive is not always the one that was actually involved” (Weber 2012, 273).

By stating this on the first page of his work on social science methodology, Max Weber anticipated the fundamental flaw of his approach to sociology. Weber knew that the causal explanations covered by the purposive-rational type of action are highly plausible, but not necessarily valid. Yet he did not realize the ideal type’s potential to obscure. He was a rather radical nominalist and, as Wittgenstein notes, nominalists “make the mistake of interpreting all words as names, and so of not really describing their use (Verwendung), but only, so to speak, giving a paper draft on such a description.” (§383 from Philosophical Investigations cited according to Binkley 1973, 80). Since Weber considered his concepts as mere instruments, he ignored their strength and the fact that by using them he referenced an established element of the language or everyday language games, thus impressing the studied phenomenon (action) with strongly controversial characteristics. The process of interpreting human action depends on the path (concepts) we choose. An initial choice may change our entire perspective, preventing us from tracking down the error committed through this choice. As a result, a means may translate into an end. Explanation may result in over-explanation, in prescription rather than description. Within this seems to lie the most serious problem of Weber’s methodology.

The ideal-type method with its instrumental character uncovered some unclear and weak spots of Weber’s very theory of action. The latter paid rather scant attention to the general concept of action and developed its typology prematurely. The former is not sufficiently distinguished from the latter. The general concept of action is vague insofar as almost the only thing we know about is its attachment to
meaning; this seems to motivate constant confusion of the general concept with the particular type of purposive-rational action. It is also reflected in the fact that Weber’s work was later referenced by fields ranging from qualitative, understanding sociology to formalist economic theory. The former found comfort in the undeveloped theoretical foundation, the latter staged Weber to justify its reductionism, and both merely highlighted and isolated what was already apparent in Weber’s studies. The general concept of action was followed up by Talcott Parsons but his effort remained an exception. Seeking a more intimate connection to practice, sociology left theory to philosophers. The concept of meaningful action was further developed mostly by Hans Georg Gadamer in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. In spite of some particular influences (Habermas, Giddens) the time for its comeback in theoretical sociology has not yet come.

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