

Reconciling Weber and Mises on Understanding Human Action

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Abstract

Max Weber and Ludwig von Mises were two of the twentieth century's foremost theorists of human action. Furthermore, Mises held Weber, his senior by some seventeen years, in great esteem and often discussed his theories, even weaving some, such as Weber's model of ideal types, deeply into the fabric of his own social thought. However, at least at first glance, there seems to be a deep rift between the two men's conceptions about the rationality of action. Weber classified "social actions" into several distinct categories, some of which he saw as exhibiting little, if any, rationality. Mises, in contrast, held that all action is rational by conceptual necessity. Various writers have taken their views to be obviously incompatible, among them, Mises himself. This paper suggests that the appearance of a conflict is produced by the failure to discern that Weber and Mises were addressing different sorts of questions and constructing frameworks to support different modes of analyzing social phenomena. I contend that, if that divergence of aim is properly understood, then the apparent contradiction will be seen as illusory.

I.

Our first task is to examine why the analysis of action provided by Weber so often has been seen as irreconcilable with that offered by Mises. The former's schema divides all social action into four fundamentally distinctive types:

“(1) instrumentally rational (*zweckrational*), that is, determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are

used as "conditions" or "means" for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends; (2) value rational (*wertrational*), that is, determined 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; (3) affectual (especially emotional), that is, determined by the actor's specific affects and feeling states; (4) traditional, that is, determined by ingrained habituation.” (quoted in Peukert, 2004, p. 997)¹

Weber cautioned that he was describing ideal types, and that any concrete action would usually embody of mixture of two or more of the above abstractions. Still, he believed that many actions could be better understood as falling primarily and clearly into a particular one of his categories. Especially relevant to our present exploration is his contention that the third and fourth of the above modes of acting are often less than fully rational, indeed, in some cases, barely exhibiting any rationality at all. Mises, on the other hand, rejected the category “irrational action” as being incoherent, declaring:

“Human action is necessarily always rational. The term ‘rational action’ is therefore pleonastic and must be rejected as such. When applied to the ultimate ends of action, the terms rational and irrational are inappropriate and meaningless. The ultimate end of action is always the satisfaction of some desires of the acting man. Since nobody is in a position to substitute his own value judgments for those of the acting individual, it is vain to pass judgment on other people's aims and volitions. No man is qualified to declare what would make another man happier or less discontented. The critic either tells us what

¹ Quoted from Weber, Max (1968) *Economy and Society*, G. Roth and C. Wittich, eds. New York, pp. 24-25.

he believes he would aim at if he were in the place of his fellow; or, in dictatorial arrogance blithely disposing of his fellow's will and aspirations, declares what condition of this other man would better suit himself, the critic.” (1966, p. 20)

A number of writers have cited the apparent incompatibility of these two conceptions of action. For example, Peukert says:

“It may be interesting to briefly compare Weber's approach and Mises's homo agens and see how Mises tried to solve the problems we identified in Weber.... For Mises, praxeology is a proto-theory beyond the particular social sciences. It is not psychological and does not depend on inner psychic ways of understanding. The social sciences are only based on a method called Verstehen (or what he calls conception). It is absolutely distinct from the natural sciences and the method of explaining; he thus rejects a combination of understanding and explaining. Mises believes that action is always goal-oriented and meaningful (formal subjectivism) and can clearly be distinguished from automatic reactions. For Mises, Weber's four types of action do not make sense, because ‘action’ implies the instrumentally rational Weberian type. We are not sure if Mises really solved Weber's methodological problems.”² (2004, p. 1001)

II.

As noted above, I believe that the appearance of an irreconcilable conflict between Weber’s four types of actions and Mises’s understanding of the tautological rationality of

² For further examples of the “incompatibility thesis,” see, e.g., Crespo (1998) and Eberle (1988).

all human action vanishes if we pay heed to the sort of explanation each sought to erect upon the foundation he devised. I suggest that there are distinct *contrast-classes* implicit in the two explanatory schemes, so that they offer not incompatible answers to the same sort of questions but non-conflicting responses to two different kinds of queries. The notion of distinguishing among types of explanation in terms of the contrast-classes upon which they focus our theoretical attention was developed most notably by Bas van Fraassen. The crux of the idea, as he propounds it, is that any request for an explanation of a specific event or category of events posits, either implicitly or explicitly, a particular, contrasting class of events that did not take place. Scientific explanations can be comprehended “in terms of a why-question, their presuppositions, and their context dependence” (1980, p. 97). And the “correct, general underlying structure of a why-question is... ‘Why (is it the case that) P *in contrast to* (other members of) X?’ where X, the *contrast-class*, is a set of alternatives” (1980, p. 127).

When so conceived, it follows that a crucial criterion for judging the adequacy of any explanation is that it ought to be framed in terms of the same contrast-class as the request for understanding it seeks to satisfy. Let us imagine that a social scientist is asked why consumer x bought television y at time z. What sort of answer is appropriate will depend on what possible, alternative class of happenings the questioner had in mind when posing his query. If he was wondering “Why did x buy *a television*, rather than, say, a microwave oven or a stereo?” then a satisfactory answer might include elements such as x’s great love for sitcoms or televised sports. On the other hand, if the questioner’s curiosity was directed toward why x bought model y, rather than some other available model, then factors such as the prices and features of the various types of televisions

become relevant. Or, if the request was made in the hope of understanding why x purchased y at time z, instead of at some other moment, then the fact that there was a sale going on at time z could be a suitable response.

So how can the theory of contrast-classes resolve the apparent conflict between Mises's theory that all human action is rational and the Weberian scheme of the four types of social action? Consider the case of an Egyptian peasant, circa 1000 B.C. who always sows his crop just after the annual flooding of the Nile has subsided. He is acting in conformity with a custom that most likely pre-dates his birth by several thousand years. If this is not an instance of Weber's "traditional action," then it is hard to imagine what would be. But the suitability of invoking that ideal type depends on what question the social theorist is attempting to answer, or, more precisely, on what contrast-class is implicit in that question. If the questioner (who, of course, may be the social theorist herself) asked "Why is the peasant sowing the crop?" seeking to comprehend why he sows it *after the flood* rather than at a different time of year, then the Weberian answer, "Because he is following an ancient tradition that calls for sowing just after the Nile's flooding," is apropos. It is entirely plausible that the peasant himself could not articulate any reason other than custom to explain his choice of planting time, in contrast to a modern farmer, whose decision as to when to sow a crop probably much more nearly approaches Weber's ideal type of instrumental rationality, being grounded in his consideration of factors such as the period of optimal fertility for the plant species, seasonal variations in soil and air temperature, and the most likely dates of peak consumer demand for the produce in question. But that is far from being the only approach to understanding the peasant's action; for instance, the thrust of the inquiry

might be to determine, “Why is the fellow sowing a crop *at all*, rather than sitting at home drinking beer or making love to his wife?” In response to that query, I suspect that the subject himself could formulate a response like the following: “If I don’t get off my rump and go plant something, then I won’t have food to eat in a few months and my family and I will probably starve to death” – in other words, even while being guided almost entirely by tradition, the peasant's behavior nevertheless is *purposeful*, and, therefore, an instance of tautologically rational action for Mises.

Articulating analogous pairs of contrast classes for Weber’s other types of “less-than-fully-rational” actions should serve to dispel any suspicion that they are incompatible with the Misesian concept of rationality. Take the example of someone who assaults his neighbor in a fit of rage: If asked why he chose violence rather than, say, talking things over, he might explain that his anger overwhelmed him. But if asked what the *goal* of the attack was, he probably would answer that he wanted to punish the target for some wrong he believed that person had done to him.³ This illustrates that there is nothing fundamentally incoherent about understanding the very same event, seen from one perspective, as an example of Weberian affectual (and less-than-entirely-rational) action, while in another perspective conceiving it as an exhibition of purposeful behavior a la

³ Note that the attacker's rage led him to attack his perceived wronger, and not the kitchen cabinets or the garage door! Even in a case where someone, say, “kicked the cat” rather than the real object of his anger, he *still*, unless the behavior was merely reflexive, would be able to explain, e.g., “I kicked the cat because I had to vent my anger somehow, and the guy I really wanted to kick is too dangerous!”

Mises. What separates the Weberian categories and Misesian rationality is not that they posit philosophically incompatible theories of human action, but rather that they explain the same types of phenomena using different contrast-classes.

The two different contrast classes implicit in Weber's and Mises's models of rationality map neatly to the pair of basic and distinctive modes of explaining all human action to which Alfred Schutz called our attention: explaining an action by its "in-order-to" motive and explaining it by its "because" motive. Schutz defined the in-order-to motive as the agent's own, subjective reason for choosing a particular action, constituted by "the future state of affairs to be brought about by the future action, pre-phantasized in its project" (1962, p. 22). Mises's assertion that all human action is intrinsically rational was grounded in his insight that human behavior lacking an in-order-to motive is fundamentally distinct from purposeful activities, with the former best categorized not as an action at all, but as a reflexive response to a physical stimulus or as an automatic physiological process. In contrast, a because motive explains an action not by the actor's own rationale for undertaking it, but by seeking out what aspects of his life history led him to choose as he did, proposing factors as causal that did not consciously guide his chosen course, but were only grasped in retrospect by either the actor himself or the social theorist. Weber's schema represents an attempt (and a fruitful one, as I see it) to abstract a useful, theoretical typology of because motives from the myriad of concrete cases confronting the social scientist. His characterization of broad classes of action as failing to exhibit complete rationality represents no more than an expression of the fact that in most cases falling under those classes the agent has not subjected her because

motive to any significant degree of rational examination, often being entirely unaware of its nature.

At this point a perceptive critic of my attempt at reconciliation may note that I haven't addressed Weber's contention that much of what he terms traditional action "lies... directly on, and often beyond, the boundary marking out the area of what can in general be called 'meaningful' action. For very often such behavior is simply a dull reaction to accustomed stimuli along lines laid down by settled habits" (1978, p. 28).

My answer to this hypothetical critic is that I believe that Weber is mistaken in regarding traditional behavior, in so far as the term's scope of designation incorporates activities that first must be learned in order to be performed subsequently and not merely unconscious habits like twiddling one's hair, as being without meaning. It is true that individuals reared by and continuing to live within some highly conservative culture may never seriously contemplate alternatives to the customs they inherit, nor entertain doubts as to their efficacy, but still those traditions must be taught anew to each generation, and that process of transmission will unavoidably suffuse traditional practices with *some* subjective meaning for those who will follow them. No action can ever be *merely* the enactment of a tradition, as it always must additionally entail the recognition of a unique and unrepeatable constellation of circumstances as presenting a set of conditions to which the performance of a particular traditional is an appropriate response, and that performance cannot help but involve decisions about how to best follow that tradition given the facts at hand. Ultimately, as Oakeshott notes, "Practices... are footprints left behind left behind by agents responding to their emergent situations" (1975, p. 100).

As a result, an agent will perform even the most ingrained practices with *some* end in mind, however nebulously conceived that end might be. Perhaps a member of a society that is dominated by its dedication to the ways of the ancestors', if asked why he constructed his house as he did, will respond, "I built it that way because, in doing so, I honored the sacred spirits of those who came before me." Guiding one's conduct towards such an end may strike someone who is more accustomed to choosing a course of action based on instrumentally rational considerations as being ill-conceived, and if that outsider fancies herself a social reformer it may inspire her to attempt freeing the traditional group from their "irrational" customs. But however dim a view of the conceived purpose of the traditional builder one may take, the fact remains that, as he understood his own situation, that purpose was adequate to motivate his action.

The final, related topic this paper will address, albeit briefly and speculatively, is the riddle of why Mises, despite his admiration for Weber's work, did not recognize that (if I am correct) Weber's four-fold categorization of the basic types of human action is not at odds with his praxeological approach, but, instead, complements it. Here I only wish to suggest a plausible but quite tentative solution to that puzzle: One of the major motifs sounded throughout Mises's intellectual career was his emphatic rejection of polylogism, a term referring to all theories which hold that the members of a particular culture, race, or social class act based on a logic that is uniquely their own and that is incommensurable with the thought processes followed by those of a different culture, race, or class. He believed polylogistic doctrines made possible [????], for instance, the brutality directed by the Nazis towards the Jews and the Soviet Communists towards the Kulaks. After all, if it were true that the persecuted group reasons in a form that is completely alien to that

of the persecutor, then it is futile to attempt resolving the conflict between them by rational discussion; it can only end when one of them simply overpowers the other. Given Mises's laudable opposition to such policies, today regarded by most people as criminal violations of basic human rights, but which, at the time Mises began to argue against polylogism, were often seen as merely the practical consequences of then fashionable theories⁴, it perhaps is understandable if Mises was too quick to reject an approach that seemed to allow polylogism a foothold in the social sciences.

Conclusion

The belief that the models of rationality proposed by Weber and by Mises are fundamentally at odds is, it seems to me, an unnecessary impediment to the social theorist who holds it. If their theories are properly understood to be casting in relief different features of human action, then it opens the way for the theorist to call on whichever of them can best serve him in his effort to answer the question before him at the moment. Devising satisfactory explanations of social phenomena is inherently difficult enough that there is no need to abjure potentially useful tools based on a mistaken notion that one or the other of them must be rejected.

References

⁴ See, for instance, Levy and Peart (2005) on the widespread acceptance of eugenic doctrines by prominent intellectuals during a period running from the latter half of the nineteenth century right up until World War II.

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