formed through the investigator's consistent selection of features that he personally prizes or abhors—and this is manifestly not the case for Weber's nuanced and complex conception of Western rationalism—the concept cannot be said to be inherently value-laden. The value-relevance of Weber's conception of Western rationalism, in short, is perfectly compatible with its value-neutrality—and Weber makes this quite explicit through his distinction between formal and substantive rationality.

18 This theme, implicit in Weber's work, is developed explicitly in the work of his friend and contemporary Georg Simmel, particularly in The Philosophy of Money (1978).

19 The substantive irrationality of what Weber calls formal rationality has been stressed by Löwith (1982) and Marcuse (1971). Perceptive remarks on the tension between formal and substantive rationality can also be found in Parsons (1947, pp. 35-55); Mommsen (1974, pp. 65-71); and Beetham (1974, pp. 273-5).

20 See Mommsen (1974, ch. 3) for a good discussion of Weber's attitude towards socialism.

21 Of course there are also tensions and conflicts among groups interested in the substantive regulation of the social order—conflicts over the particular substantive ends to be furthered and over the appropriate manner of pursuing shared ends.

2

The Nature and Limits of Rational Action

Underlying Weber's conception of the rationality of the modern social order is a conception of the rationality of individual action. And just as there are inherent limits to the rationality of the modern social order, so, according to Weber, there are inherent limits to the rationality of individual action. I explore those limits in this chapter, shifting from the perspective of historical sociology to that of philosophical psychology, from a macroscopic focus on the broad outlines of modern society to a microscopic focus on the anatomy of rational action.

Weber's conception of rational action is not easily pinned down. One reason for its elusiveness is that Weber does not aim to specify once and for all what is rational and what is not, but aims rather to bring out the manysidedness (Vielseitigkeit) of the concept of rational action (GAR, p. 35, n. 1; PE, p. 194, n. 9). Compounding the difficulty of grasping Weber's meaning is the terse, undeveloped, fragmentary character of his remarks on rational action. These remarks, finally, scattered throughout his methodological writings, are not easily reconciled with one another, for Weber develops different conceptions of rational action, draws different distinctions, and uses different terminology in different contexts.

Three distinctions drawn by Weber are examined in this chapter. The first is a very general distinction between non-rational and rational conduct—between spontaneous, instinctive, habitual or otherwise unreflective conduct and deliberate, consciously guided action. The second, corresponding to the structural tension between formal and substantive rationality, is the famous distinction between zwedrkrational action, oriented to calculable expectations, and wertrational action, oriented to
RATIONAL AND NON-RATIONAL ACTION

Weber’s most famous discussion of rational action occurs in the opening pages of Economy and Society. Here he sketches four ways in which action may be ‘determined’ (bestimmt). Traditional action is determined by longstanding habits; affectual action, by strong feelings; wertrational action, by a conscious belief in the intrinsic value of acting in a certain way, regardless of the consequences of so acting; and zweckrational action, by a consciously calculating attempt to achieve desired ends with appropriate means.

Underlying this four-fold typology is a more basic, though implicit, distinction between rational and non-rational action. In so far as the individual is not the self-conscious and deliberate author of his action, in so far as he is carried along by habit (as in purely traditional action) or carried away by feeling (as in purely affectual action)—to this extent, his conduct is non-rational. In so far as the individual acts deliberately and is consciously aware of what he is doing, on the other hand, his action is rational (in the most inclusive sense of this word). In reality, of course, the transition between purely non-rational and purely rational actions is continuous, and the vast majority of all concrete action falls somewhere between the two extremes of unreflective, quasi-automatic reaction to stimuli and deliberate, consciously planned action. Weber underscores the gradual nature of the transition by remarking that both traditional and affectual action may become rationalized, may shade over into one or the other form of rational action. Traditional ways of acting may be more or less consciously upheld; emotional impulses may be sublimated to varying degrees and consciously channeled in a certain direction (E&S, p. 25).

In general, Weber suggests, action is becoming increasingly rational in this most inclusive sense of the word: in a growing range of situations, action tends to be deliberate and self-conscious rather than unquestioningly traditional or blindly emotional. But if social action is increasingly rational, it is not predominantly rational (E&S, p. 7). The subjective rationality of individual action does not typically progress pari passu with the objectified, supra-individual rationality of the social structure (Categ., pp. 178–9). Even in a highly rationalized social order, most action takes place ‘in a state of inarticulate half-consciousness or actual unconsciousness of its subjective meaning . . . [and] is governed by impulse or habit’ (E&S, p. 21).

WERTRATIONAL AND ZWECKRATIONAL ACTION

Weber is less interested in distinguishing different degrees of rationality than he is in specifying different kinds of rationality—different ways in which action may be deliberately and consciously guided. Thus he distinguishes between wertrational and zweckrational action—the former directed towards the realization of some value believed to be inherent in a certain way of acting, the latter towards the achievement of some end or ends that are expected to result from a certain way of acting. Wertrational action is oriented to an act’s intrinsic properties, zweckrational action to its anticipated and intended consequences. Wertrational action presupposes a conscious belief about the intrinsic value or inherent rightness of a certain way of acting, zweckrational action conscious reasoning in terms of means and ends.

Consider the following medical scenario:

a transplant surgeon detects signs of tissue rejection in a patient who has just received a donor kidney. The surgeon is virtually certain that within a week the kidney will have to be surgically removed and the patient transferred to dialysis equipment again. Although in no immediate clinical danger, the patient is suffering from postoperative depression. It is altogether possible that if the patient is told at this time that the transplant appears to be a failure, his depression will become more severe. This, in turn, might lead to a worsening
of the patient's physical condition, perhaps even to a life-threatening extent (Munson, 1979, p. 173).

If the surgeon tells his patient the truth about his condition, acting on the basis of a conscious conviction that truthfulness is an unconditional obligation, his action is *wertrational*. If, on the other hand, he deceives the patient, believing deception to be necessary in order to prevent a dangerous relapse, his action is *zweckrational*. The action is deliberate and consciously guided in both cases—but by fundamentally different sorts of reasons. One reason appeals to the intrinsic rightness of truth-telling as such, regardless of its consequences; the other appeals to the detrimental consequences of telling this particular patient the truth at this particular time, and to the beneficial consequences of temporarily concealing the truth from him. Weber's two types of rational action, then, correspond to two sorts of reasons for acting in a particular way: reasons that invoke value postulates, and reasons that invoke anticipated consequences.

It is of course the *zweckrational* orientation, not the *wertrational* orientation, that Weber conceives as increasingly salient in modern society. *Zweckrational* action appears in its purest form in economic exchange, but conduct in every sphere of life is increasingly (though far from exclusively) *zweckrational*—increasingly oriented to more or less consciously held expectations about the consequences of prospective ways of acting.¹ Underlying this salience of *zweckrational* action are certain structural features of modern society—features that increase the calculability (in Weber's terminology, the formal rationality) of action in the economic, legal and administrative realms. This structurally conditioned calculability, discussed in some detail in Chapter 1, extends the possibilities of *zweckrational* action by enlarging the domain of prospective actions about which reliable expectations can be formed. There are limits, though, to the expanding significance of *Zweckrationalität*. Weber notes that a pattern of social interaction 'based solely on *zweckrational* motives' is in general far less stable than one resting on longstanding custom or on feelings of obligation, particularly those engendered by a belief in the 'legitimacy' of some 'order' (*Ordnung*) (W&G, p. 23; E&S, p. 31).

**SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE RATIONALITY**

Both *Wertrationalität* and *Zweckrationalität* are defined subjectively—i.e. from the point of view of the actor. *Wertrational* action is defined by the actor's subjective belief in the intrinsic value of a particular way of acting, and by his conscious effort to act in accordance with this belief. The objective 'correctness' of the actor's belief—assuming for the moment that this correctness could be established—has nothing to do with the subjective rationality of the action. *Zweckrational* action, too, is defined subjectively, by the actor's expectations about the consequences of alternative ways of acting, and by his conscious effort to bring about one or some of these expected consequences. Again, the objective correctness of his expectations is irrelevant to the subjective rationality of his action.

*Wertrational* and *zweckrational* action, then, are rational only from the subjective point of view of the actor. Such purely subjective rationality needs to be sharply distinguished from what Weber calls 'objectively correct rationality' (*objektive Richigkeitsrationalität*; GAW, p. 408; Categ., p. 154)—from action that 'uses the objectively correct means in accordance with scientific knowledge' (M, p. 34). As an advocate and practitioner of interpretive (verstehende) sociology, committed to explaining social phenomena in terms of the subjective meaning of individual action, Weber is primarily interested in the forms and functions of subjective rationality. In *Economy and Society*, for example, he examines the way in which complex social structures such as markets, bureaucracies and systems of law depend on the subjectively *zweckrational* or *wertrational* (as well as traditional or affectual) orientations of individual actors. But as a philosopher, committed to specifying the relation between scientific knowledge and human action, he is interested in the nature and limits of objective rationality. It is these limits that I discuss in the remainder of this chapter.²

The province of objective rationality is narrower than that of subjective rationality: there is an objectively rational correlate of
subjectively zweckrational but not of subjectively wertrational action. The selection of means to a given end can be assessed in terms of its objective rationality, since it is possible to discriminate objectively—for Weber, scientifically—between adequate and inadequate means. But the notion of objective rationality does not apply to wertrational action—to action conceived as intrinsically rather than as instrumentally valuable, as an end in itself rather than as means to some further end. This is because the value postulates to which wertrational action is oriented, unlike the expectations (about consequences) to which zweckrational action is oriented, cannot be objectively assessed. Such value postulates embody knowledge (Erkenntnis), but it is knowledge of what ought to be (des Seinsollenden), not of what is (des Seienden) (GAW, p. 148; M, p. 51). The former, according to Weber, is essentially subjective; only the latter can be objectively valid.

The distinction between subjective and objective rationality, then, applies only to zweckrational action. This distinction can be clarified by considering the categories ‘means’ and ‘ends’. They are at the same time categories of subjective experience—part of the conceptual scheme of the zweckrational actor—and categories of objective analysis—part of the conceptual scheme of the scientific observer. To the actor, these categories facilitate the prospective planning of action; to the observer, they facilitate its retrospective explanation or evaluation. Subjective rationality pertains to the actor’s use of these categories, objective rationality to the observer’s.³

Whether or not an action is subjectively rational depends on the actor’s self-understanding. To the extent that he conceives of his prospective action in a means–ends framework and chooses means he believes to be adequate to some clearly perceived end, his action is subjectively rational, regardless of whether or not his means are in fact adequate. It is the perceived appropriateness of the means, not their actual appropriateness, that makes action subjectively rational. Much magical conduct, Weber notes, is subjectively rational (M, p. 34); magical practices are often carried out in the belief that they will contribute to the realization of certain consciously pursued ends.

Whether or not an action is objectively rational, in contrast, depends on the judgment of a scientific observer—i.e. one who is able to ascertain empirically the appropriateness of the actor’s conduct as a means to some end. This end may be the one intended by the actor, or it may be one of which the actor is unaware but toward which his conduct in fact tends. Subjectively rational action may be objectively irrational: magical means, for example, may be objectively unrelated to the ends they are intended to further. Conversely, subjectively non-rational action—action that is not conceived by the actor as purposefully directed toward the realization of some end—may be objectively rational from the point of view of some unintended or unacknowledged end. (The search for such latent objective rationality is characteristic of psychoanalysis—witness Freud’s concept of the ‘advantage through illness’ (1953, p. 391; 1963, p. 196)—and of functional analysis in sociology.)

THE LIMITS OF OBJECTIVE RATIONALITY

The notions of subjective and objective rationality differ markedly in their implications: subjective rationality is a purely descriptive, objective rationality an inherently normative concept. Imputations of subjective rationality are value-neutral characterizations, while imputations of objective rationality are evaluative appraisals. No value judgment is involved in characterizing an action as subjectively rational. A subjectively rational action is simply one that has a certain type of subjective meaning—a meaning formulateable in terms of means and ends and more or less explicitly formulated in such terms by the actor. Imputations of objective rationality, in contrast, are inherently evaluative, for an objectively rational action is by definition one that uses the ‘correct’ means of attaining some end. Because judgments of objective rationality have strong normative connotations, it is important to specify more precisely the circumstances in which such judgments can legitimately be made.

All subjectively zweckrational action involves conscious reckoning in terms of means and ends. Such reckoning, however, may have a narrower or a wider scope, depending on whether the actor has in mind a single clearly defined end or a number of possible alternative ends. In the former case, the actor adopts a
The Limits of Rationality

technical point of view, and calculation is limited to the weighing of alternative means to a fixed and given end. In the latter case, he adopts what Weber calls an economic point of view, and calculation extends to the weighing of alternative ends and unintended but foreseeable secondary consequences as well as means. Choosing what means to employ, given a fixed and unambiguous end, is a technical problem; choosing what ends to pursue and what means to employ, given a stock of resources, is an economic problem (E&S, pp. 65–7).

Whenever action is conceived by the actor exclusively as a means to some more or less clearly defined end, this action can be understood as a technique (E&S, p. 65). This is true regardless of the substantive content of the end. There are techniques, as Weber says, of 'every conceivable type of action' (E&S, p. 65): techniques for achieving ideal as well as material ends, trivial as well as significant ends, ends that are widely regarded as reprehensible as well as those universally believed to be valuable.

While every technique is by definition subjectively rational, techniques vary widely in their degree of objective rationality. At what Weber calls the 'highest level of [objective] rationality' (E&S, p. 65), the techniques for achieving given ends are determined in accordance with scientific knowledge. This is an important idea, for it implies that the most rational means for attaining given ends can be determined scientifically, hence objectively. But it is also, as Weber recognizes, a problematic idea.

The capacity of science to serve as an objective arbiter of the rationality of action is in fact narrowly limited. The problem is not simply that there are limits to scientific knowledge, in particular to knowledge of social phenomena, and that, as a result, it may be impossible to predict with confidence and precision whether or not a given end will be achieved by employing certain means. For even perfect knowledge of the consequences of alternative ways of acting would not automatically engender objective judgments of the 'most rational' way of achieving a given end. It is true that perfect knowledge would enable one to characterize certain means (those incapable of bringing about or unlikely to bring about the desired end) as objectively irrational and others (those certain or highly likely to bring about the desired end) as objectively rational—from a purely technical point of view. It would not, however, enable one to choose the 'most rational' of two alternative means, both certain (or equally likely) to bring about the desired end, but differing considerably in their secondary (unintended but foreseeable) consequences, for there is no objective way of assessing the 'value' of the secondary consequences.

Moreover, common sense dictates that an action may be irrational even if its technique is objectively rational—even if the means employed are certain or highly likely to bring about some desired end. Undesirable secondary consequences ('side effects') may outweigh the value of the end, or (even in the absence of negative side effects), the cost of the means may be too high relative to the value of the end. Such an action would be (objectively) rational from the narrow technical point of view, but (subjectively) irrational from the broader economic point of view.

Judgments of objective rationality can be made only from the technical point of view, not from the economic point of view. For when an actor adopts the economic point of view, he does not simply calculate the technical adequacy of alternative means to a single given end. Instead, his calculations are oriented to a variety of possible ends, and to the fact that he controls a limited stock of resources that can be used to realize some of these ends. His problem is to select the combination of means and ends that will maximize his 'utility'. To the extent that he is guided by conscious calculations about ends, means and secondary consequences, his action is subjectively rational. But it cannot be objectively rational, for there is no objective way of assessing the comparative importance of alternative possible ends or of balancing desirable ends against undesirable secondary consequences.

Technical rationality, then, can be measured against an objective standard: scientific knowledge of means-ends relations. Economic rationality, in contrast, is purely subjective: the conscious calculations about the comparative value of ends, means, and secondary consequences that make action economically rational cannot be assessed in terms of their objective correctness. Objective rationality, in short, exists only in the sphere of technique.
This does not diminish the significance of objective rationality. Technical problems can be solved in an objectively rational manner, and technical progress—the progressive subordination of nature to human purposes, guided by an ever-expanding stock of scientific knowledge—has transformed and continues to transform our civilization. Moreover, not only the material world, but the social world as well—including the political, social, educational, and propagandistic manipulation and domination of human beings (M, p. 35)—is subject to technical rationalization.

Most important problems of social life, however, even those that have an important technical dimension, are not purely technical problems—i.e. problems of finding the most rational means to a fixed and precisely specified end. Problems of social policy, in particular, are seldom purely technical. There may seem to be ‘general agreement about the self-evident character of certain goals … [including] the concrete problems of social hygiene, poor relief, factory inspection’ (M, pp. 55–6). This illusion of self-evidence, however, is shattered when one of these seemingly noncontroversial goals becomes the object of social policy, and it is discovered that ‘each individual understood something quite different by the ostensibly unambiguous end’ (M, p. 12). Consider a contemporary example. There is general agreement in the United States that the health of textile manufacturing workers ought to be protected by federal legislation. In addition, there is general agreement about the effects of various types of protective equipment on workers’ health. Yet this problem does not have a technically rational solution, for the goal—protecting workers’ health—is only apparently unambiguous. Should health be protected to the maximum extent technically feasible? Or to the extent economically feasible (up to the point that the cost of protective equipment would threaten the viability of the industry)? Or to the extent that the benefits of better health outweigh the costs of protective equipment? And in this case, how are the benefits of better health to be estimated in monetary terms? What is the money value of a 5 percent decrease in deaths from Brown Lung Disease? Clearly this is not a technical problem at all: agreement on the general goal of protecting workers’ health masks disagreement over the interpretation of this goal—i.e. over what the specific objective of government policy should be.

Scientific knowledge can determine ‘what is to be done’ only when an unambiguous end is given and when there is an unambiguous way of comparing the rationality of alternative means of achieving the given end. In Weber’s view, the most pressing problems of practical social life—problems of economic and social policy—do not meet these criteria: they ‘cannot be resolved merely on the basis of purely technical considerations which assume already settled ends. Normative standards of value can and must be the objects of dispute in a discussion of a problem of social policy because the problem lies in the domain of general cultural values’ (M, p. 56).

This does not mean that science has no role in solving such problems. On the contrary, one of the basic functions of social science, according to Weber, is to establish reliable empirical knowledge that can be taken into account by policy-makers. But science cannot dictate a ‘solution’ to problems of social policy: the decision will inevitably be based on values, not on knowledge.

Even such simple questions as the extent to which an end should sanction unavoidable means, or the extent to which undesired repercussions should be taken into consideration … are entirely matters of choice or compromise. There is no (rational or empirical) scientific procedure of any kind whatsoever which can provide us with a decision here. (M, pp. 18–19)

Weber’s conception of the limits of objective rationality recalls Hume’s strictures on the practical impotence of reason. ‘Reason alone’, Hume writes in A Treatise of Human Nature, ‘can never be a motive to any action of the will’ (p. 413). From the point of view of its relation to action, reason is ‘perfectly inert’, exercising ‘no influence on our passions and actions’ (pp. 457–8). Hume concludes that ‘reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them’ (p. 415). In the Weberian idiom, reason is the slave of human values and of the ends people choose to pursue by virtue of holding certain values—values for which no rational
justification can be given. These values, according to Weber, are in eternal conflict with one another, and this conflict cannot be rationally resolved. It is this conception of value conflict—a conception that underlies Weber’s persistent emphasis on the limits of rationality—that I examine in Chapter 3.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1 ‘On the whole, the course of historical development involves ... a steady advance of the zweckrational ordering of consensual action by means of rational rules, and in particular the progressive transformation of informal associations [Verbände] into institutions organized on an instrumentally rational basis [zweckrational geordnete Anstalten]’ (GAW, pp. 446–7; Categ., p. 177).

2 The expression ‘objective rationality’, as Donald Levine has remarked (1981a, p. 11), is ambiguous, denoting objective correctness or validity on the one hand and supra-individual, institutionalized rationality on the other. My concern in this chapter is with objective rationality in the former sense; pp. 9–23 of Chapter 1 examine objective rationality in the latter sense (what Levine calls ‘objectified rationality’).

3 Actor and observer, it should be noted, may use the categories means and ends in different ways to make sense of the same concrete course of action. In particular, the end imputed to an action by an observer may not coincide with the end consciously intended by the actor.

Weber’s conception of the limits of rationality is rooted in his understanding of value conflict. If, as Weber argues, value conflict cannot be reconciled, then the scope of rational decision-making is narrowly limited. Only in situations shielded from value conflict can choice be rational; between conflicting value commitments, choice must be arbitrary. Furthermore, if value conflict is irreconcilable, then conflicting conceptions of substantive rationality, based on conflicting value commitments, are likewise irreconcilable, and the ideal of a substantively rational society—of a ‘good society’—is meaningless from a scientific point of view, since there is no rational way to reconcile conflicting conceptions of the nature of a substantively rational society. The claim that value conflict cannot be reconciled, in short, is the basis for Weber’s argument that there are inherent limits to the rationality of individual action and to the rationality of the social order.

This chapter explores the philosophical and sociological foundations of Weber’s claim that value conflict is irreconcilable. Its perspective is expository, not critical.1 Exposition, in this case, has its own risks: the highly elliptical character of Weber’s remarks requires us to go beyond straight exegesis in an attempt to reconstruct his theory of value conflict from a handful of tantalizingly sketchy passages.

Weber uses a rich variety of language, much of it uncharacteristically extravagant, to express his conception of value conflict. He speaks, for example, of the ‘struggle that the gods of the various orders and values are engaged in’ (FMW, p. 148); of

*The title is taken from ‘Politics as a Vocation’ (FMW, p. 122).