Preface

This essay explores the rich and ambiguous interplay between Max Weber's empirical work and his moral vision, between his historical and sociological analysis of the 'specific and peculiar rationalism' of modern Western civilization and his deeply ambivalent moral response to that rationalism. My premise is that Weber's empirical and moral diagnosis of modern society remains a compelling one; my aim is to reconstruct this diagnosis in a coherent and systematic fashion from the tantalizingly sketchy remarks on rationality and rationalization that are scattered throughout his work.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the text to refer to Weber's writings. In a number of instances, I have modified existing translations. In such cases, I have given the German reference first, followed by the corresponding English reference. All otherwise unidentified references in Chapter 1, pp. 16–22, are to Economy and Society.

German Works

GAW Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre (Tübingen: Mohr, 1922).

English Translations

Introduction

The idea of rationality is a great unifying theme in Max Weber's work. Weber's seemingly disparate empirical studies converge on one underlying aim: to characterize and to explain the development of the 'specific and peculiar rationalism' that distinguishes modern Western civilization from every other. His methodological investigations emphasize the universal capacity of men to act rationally and the consequent power of social science to understand as well as to explain action. His political writings are punctuated by passionate warnings about the threat posed by unchecked bureaucratic rationalization to human freedom. And his moral reflections build on an understanding of the truly human life as one guided by reason.

Rationality, then, is an idée-maîtresse in Weber's work, one that links his empirical and methodological investigations with his political and moral reflections. The notion of rationality, however, is far from unequivocal; Weber himself repeatedly calls attention to its multiplicity of meanings. 'If this essay makes any contribution at all', he writes in a footnote to The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, 'may it be to bring out the complexity of the only superficially simple concept of the rational' (PE, p. 194, n. 9). And in the text of the same essay, he notes that 'rationalism is an historical concept which covers a whole world of different things' (p. 78). Consequently, as Donald Levine has remarked, 'broad statements about "rationality" tout court . . . are simply unsupportable' (1982, p. 1).

Yet while Weber acknowledges, even emphasizes the many-sidedness of the idea of rationality, he frequently uses the term 'rational' without qualification or explanation. This practice places great demands on the reader, who may well become confused by Weber's apparently casual and unsystematic usage. Again and again, for example, Weber characterizes various—and apparently quite heterogeneous—aspects of both ascetic Protestantism and modern capitalism as 'rational'. Thus modern
capitalism is defined by the rational (deliberate and systematic) pursuit of profit through the rational (systematic and calculable) organization of formally free labor and through rational (impersonal, purely instrumental) exchange on the market, guided by rational (exact, purely quantitative) accounting procedures and guaranteed by rational (rule-governed, predictable) legal and political systems. Ascetic Protestantism is characterized by rational (methodical) self-control and by the rational (purposeful) devotion to rational (sober, scrupulous) economic action as a rational (psychologically efficacious and logically intelligible) means of relieving the intolerable pressure imposed on individuals by the rational (consistent) doctrine of predestination.

No fewer than sixteen apparent meanings of ‘rational’ can be culled from this highly schematic summary of Weber’s characterization of modern capitalism and ascetic Protestantism: deliberate, systematic, calculable, impersonal, instrumental, exact, quantitative, rule-governed, predictable, methodical, purposeful, sober, scrupulous, efficacious, intelligible and consistent. Even allowing for some overlap among these various meanings, the reader may well be perplexed by what appears to be a baffling multiplicity of denotations and connotations.¹

Underlying Weber’s seemingly casual use of ‘rational’, however, is a coherent theoretical perspective, grounded in systematic comparative research. Central to this perspective is the notion of the ‘specific and peculiar rationalism of Western culture’ (AI, p. 26). Chapter 1 elucidates this quintessential Weberian notion by analyzing patterns of rationality and processes of rationalization in the spheres of economic life, law, administration, and religious ethics. In each of these institutional spheres, rationalization has involved the depersonalization of social relationships, the refinement of techniques of calculation, the enhancement of the social importance of specialized knowledge, and the extension of technically rational control over both natural and social processes. It is this common pattern that defines what is ‘specific and peculiar’ about Western rationalism.

Weber was not, of course, the first to stress the unique rationality of the modern Western social order. The progressive embodiment of reason in social institutions and practices had been a central theme of Voltaire, Montesquieu and Diderot, of Kant and Hegel, of Comte, Tönnies and Simmel.² Today, however, we are inclined to regard pre-Weberian discussions of the rationality of modern society as empirically oversimplified or morally overoptimistic—as implausible descriptions or naive celebrations of a ‘progress’ in which we no longer believe. Weber’s conceptions of rationality and rationalization, on the other hand, speak directly to our experience—and our anxieties—in ‘a world increasingly shaped by scientists, industrialists, and bureaucrats’ (Levine, 1981a, p. 5).

If we find Weber’s discussion of rationality challenging and evocative today, more than sixty years after his death, this is above all because of the marked ambivalence of his attitude toward Western rationalism. Weber breaks decisively with the ‘optimistic faith [of the Enlightenment] in the theoretical and practical rationalizability of reality’ (M, p. 85). In no sphere of life, according to Weber, has rationalization unambiguously advanced human well-being. The rationalization of economic production, for example, has created the ‘iron cage’ of capitalism, a ‘tremendous cosmos’ that constrains individuals from without, determining their lives ‘with irresistible force’ (PE, p. 181). The rational, impersonal, calculating conduct that the capitalist economic order requires of individuals, furthermore, is ‘an abomination to every system of fraternal ethics’ (E&S, p. 637). In the domain of administration, rationalization entails dehumanization: it requires the complete elimination ‘from official business [of] love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation’ (E&S, p. 975). And the more rational bureaucratic administration becomes, the more the individual bureaucrat is reduced to a ‘small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march’ (E&S, p. 988). In the domain of thought, finally, the rise of modern science leads to the ‘disenchantment of the world’ and creates a deep tension between the basic demand that life and the world have a coherent overall meaning and the increasingly evident impossibility of determining this meaning scientifically. The extension of scientific knowledge, to be sure, enhances man’s rational control over social and natural processes. But while this control has
made possible dramatic improvements in material well-being, it has also made possible the development of increasingly sophisticated techniques for the ‘political, social, educational, and propagandistic manipulation and domination of human beings’ (M, p. 35).

Rationalization, then, far from automatically promoting human welfare, is a morally and politically problematic development. This theme is introduced in the final two sections of Chapter 1, which explore the idea that there is an irreconcilable tension between formal and substantive rationality. This notion is fundamental to Weber’s social thought, linking his empirical analysis of modern society with his ambivalent moral response to it. From the point of view of the purely formal objective of maximizing the calculability of action—purely formal because maximally calculable action can be oriented to any of an infinite variety of possible substantive ends—capitalism, science, technology, and the modern legal and administrative system are highly rational. Such purely formal rationality, however, is in perpetual tension with substantive rationality, meaning rationality from the point of view of some particular substantive end, value or belief. The antagonism between the formal rationality of the modern socio-economic order and its substantive irrationality from the point of view of the values of equality, fraternity and caritas is ‘one of the most important sources of all “social” problems, and above all, of the problems of socialism’ (E&S, p. 111).

The distinction between formal and substantive rationality implies that what is rational from one point of view may be non-rational or irrational from another, and vice versa. The implications of this relational, ‘perspectivist’ (Kalberg, 1980, p. 1155) conception of rationality are clear—and sobering. To the extent that people share ends and beliefs, they can agree in their judgments of rationality and irrationality; but to the extent ends and beliefs diverge, so too will judgments of rationality and irrationality. According to Weber, social life is marked by perennial, indeed intensifying conflict over ends (especially ultimate ends) and beliefs (especially life-orienting metaphysical beliefs)—conflict that cannot be resolved through any neutral procedure. Consequently, Weber believes in the irreconcilability of conflicting judgments of rationality and irrationality and—a corollary of this—in the limits of rationality as an organizing principle of social life.

This notion of the limits of rationality is explored in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. In Chapter 2, I shift from the perspective of historical sociology to that of philosophical psychology, from a macroscopic focus on the broad outlines of the modern Western social order to a microscopic focus on the anatomy of rational action. For it is in the analysis of rational action—and particularly in the distinction between the subjective and the objective rationality of action—that Weber’s notion of the limits of rationality appears most clearly. Subjective rationality depends on the clarity and self-consciousness of the actor’s inner orientation, objective rationality on the extent to which action measures up to an objective standard. 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 various forms and functions of subjective rationality. 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. Judgments of objective rationality, Weber argues, are possible only from a purely technical point of view—only when the problem is to determine the most rational means to a precisely specified end. While he acknowledges the fundamental significance of objective technical rationalization in modern society, Weber stresses the idea that only a narrowly defined class of problems—those involving no conflict over ends or values—have objectively or technically rational solutions. The most pressing problems of social life do involve the clash of ends and values and thus, according to Weber, cannot be solved in an objectively rational manner.

Underlying Weber’s emphasis on the limits of rationality is the idea that irreconcilable value conflict is endemic in the modern social world. This idea is analyzed in Chapter 3. Value conflict, according to Weber, occurs on two levels: on the level of individual value-orientations, and on the level of supra-individual value spheres. His discussion of value-orientations belongs to a well-defined tradition of ethical relativism and
subjectivism: value-orientations are essentially subjective, and therefore conflict among them cannot be rationally resolved. His argument about value spheres, in contrast, defies easy characterization. It rests on a quasi-sociological, quasi-philosophical notion that the social world is composed of a number of distinct provinces of activity, each having its own inherent dignity and its own immanent norms. It is these autonomous realms of activity that Weber calls value spheres. On this plane, value conflict arises not from differences in the subjective value-orientations of individuals, but from objective differences in the inner structure of different forms of social action. The process of rationalization, according to Weber, intensifies this conflict by bringing ever more clearly to consciousness the autonomy and incommensurability of the various value spheres (in particular the religious, political, economic, aesthetic, erotic and intellectual spheres of value).

The final chapter explores Weber’s moral vision. Weber of course sees himself as an empirical scientist, not as a moral philosopher. Yet moral concerns underlie and animate all his sociological work, and in particular his investigation of the nature and limits of rationality. As Günter Abramowski (1966, p. 14) has noted,

The driving motive behind the scientific question of the rationality of European culture is the existential question: what do rational capitalism, rational science and rational bureaucracy mean for our humanity? How are human freedom, responsible action and a meaningful way of life possible in the face of the inexorably progressing bureaucratization of life and the scientific disenchantment of the world?

In some respects, rationalization is morally disabling, hindering individuals from leading meaningful and autonomous lives. The ever-widening reach of capitalism and bureaucracy, for example, threatens to curtail individual freedom from without, while the steady diffusion of a purely instrumental (zweck-rational) orientation erodes ultimate value commitments and thereby threatens to subvert individual autonomy from within. Yet in other respects, rationalization is morally enabling. The extension of scientific knowledge about man and nature, in particular, affords man the opportunity to achieve the special kind of moral dignity that Weber associates with the ethic of responsibility. At the heart of Weber's moral reflections, in short, is a deeply ambivalent attitude toward the processes of rationalization that have shaped and that continue to shape the modern social world.

Weber’s ideas about rationality are central to his sociological work, and they are central to his moral perspective. But these ideas are neither easily accessible nor easily understandable, in part because Weber never systematized them, in part because his work is usually encountered piecemeal and seldom studied in its entirety. It is my aim to reconstruct Weber’s rich but fragmented discussion of rationality, rationalism and rationalization in a systematic fashion, so as to clarify the intimate and ambiguous interplay between his sociological work and his moral outlook.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1 Interesting attempts to sort out and systematize the various meanings of ‘rationality’ in Weber's work have been made by Eisen (1978), Kalberg (1980) and Levine (1981a, 1982).
2 In his excellent article ‘Rationality and freedom: Weber and beyond’ (1981a), Donald Levine includes a short discussion of the conceptions of rationality held by Kant, Hegel, Tönnies and Simmel.