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*Weber's Alternative Theory of Action  
Relationalism and Object-Oriented Action in Max  
Weber's Work*

**Abstract**

The present paper aims to unearth the rudiments of an alternative theory of action in Weber. Centring on salient descriptions of scientific practice found in Weber, I argue that one finds so-called “relational” impulses in these instances, which are at odds with the Kantian, subject-centred and dualist perspectives pervading much of Weber’s thought.

The paper consists of two parts. In the first—critical—part, after a short sketch of my relational approach, I cite some well-known “Kantian” passages in Weber’s work and demonstrate their undesirable theoretical and empirical consequences. I investigate Weber’s “official” theory of action and understanding, his concepts of rationality and psychology, and his understanding of technological mediation. In the second—positive—part, I delve into Weber’s understanding of *creativity*, investigating relational traits in Weber’s descriptions of scientific practice and experience. I then demonstrate how Weber’s late concept of *personality* is based on relational and object-oriented attitudes. Further, I investigate how the two dimensions of creativity and personality merge in his concept of *Sachlichkeit*. Finally, I provide certain biographical observations and discuss the conflict between existentialist and relational interpretations of Weber. At the very end of the paper, I discuss some general implications of the relational perspective.

*Keywords:* Dualism; Creativity; Kantianism; Relationalism; Object-oriented sociology; Personality; Theory of Action; Weber.

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*Introduction*

THIS PAPER seeks to unearth impulses in Max Weber's work that are decisively at odds with Weber's "official" theory of action, i.e., the theory of action related to his famous brand of "interpretative"—*verstehende*—sociology [(1922) 1978: 3-62; (1913) 2012: 273-272]. It investigates a number of remarkable passages, found primarily in Weber's methodological and epistemological writings, and demonstrates how these passages conflict with the Kantian tenor permeating much of Weber's thought. On this basis, the paper seeks to establish an implicit yet clearly discernible *relational* perspective at work in Weber's writings, a perspective on agency that runs counter to the normative privileging of the self-conscious subject as the centre of agency in his official theory of action, as well as to his more "structural" descriptions of the determining role of cultural values in (scientific) thought and action. The discussion carries wide-ranging theoretical implications that transcend the narrow context of Weber exegesis and have general sociological relevance.

In the first part of Weber's methodological work, stretching from 1903 to 1909, these impulses emerge only in brief glimpses connected with Weber's description of *creativity* in science. However, from 1909 onward, new conceptions of *personality* and new ideas about scientific practice emerge, which advocate relational attitudes and decisively conflict with his subject-centred account of agency, the dualist and formalist impulses in his thought and vocabulary, his early concept of personality and his existentialism. Not coincidentally, this is also the period in which the German concepts of *Sache* and of *Sachlichkeit* gain importance in his work, with *Sache* simply meaning "thing" or "object" in German and *Sachlichkeit* referring to a specific conceptually or cognitively sensitive and object-oriented scholarly attitude.<sup>1</sup> Strangely enough, while further developing his well-known theory of action and understanding—i.e., in the article on the "categories" of *Verstehen* [(1913) 2012: 273-272] from 1913 and then later in the posthumously published first chapter of *Economy and Society* [1978 (1922): 3-62], written in 1919—Weber develops a complementary conception of action, one centred on creativity, sensitivity, attachment, intensity, investment and the relational description of multiple agencies. This conception of action finds its most elaborate expression in

<sup>1</sup> Due to the importance of these German concepts in this paper, I have refrained from translating them. I predict the Anglo-American reader will be surprised when remarking upon

the unmistakable centrality of these terms in Weber's late work. I have used the edition of Weber's *Gesammelte Aufsätze* from J.C.B Mohr (Paul Siebeck) as folio.

his well-known lecture on the “vocation” or “calling” of science, given in 1917 [(1919) 2012: 335-353]. The present paper seeks to develop this implicit and alternative “theory” of action on the basis of a critique of the official one. Admittedly, the notions of “creativity”, “personality” and *Sachlichkeit* I engage with are never thoroughly defined by Weber himself. There is no doubt that the “theory” of object-oriented practice I attempt to contour in this paper remains implicit and subterranean in Weber.

This paper consists of two parts. In the first part, after a short sketch of my relational approach, I cite some well-known “Kantian” passages in Weber’s work and demonstrate the negative theoretical and empirical consequences they entail. I critically investigate Weber’s “official” theory of action and understanding, his concepts of rationality and psychology and his understanding of technological mediation. In the second part, I delve into Weber’s understanding of *creativity*, investigating relational traits in his descriptions of actual scientific practice. I then demonstrate how Weber’s late concept of *personality* is based on relational and object-oriented attitudes. I also investigate the way in which the two dimensions of creativity and personality merge in his concept of *Sachlichkeit*. Finally, I provide some biographical observations and discuss the conflict between existentialist and relational interpretations of Weber. At the very end of the paper, I discuss some general implications of the relational perspective.

### *Relationalism and object-orientation*

For reasons of space, I cannot delve into the many variants of relationalism or the sometimes-violent criticism levelled against these controversial approaches. Nevertheless, to avoid misunderstanding and furnish the reader with some signposts, the following can be noted.

The ideas of agency underlying this paper are closely tied to so-called Actor-Network theory (ANT) and the *relational understanding of action* it promotes [Latour 2005: 43-86]. In this context, relationalism is understood as an alternative conception of action and explanation of action that enables ones to escape subject-centred or individualist approaches as well as structural or determinist ones. Relationalism means to transcend the distinction between actor and structure. The terms “subject-centred” and “individualist” thus refer to sociological theories of action that (ideal-typical or not) place all genuine agency in the self-transparent and conscious human subject, while “structural” and “determinist” denote

sociological templates that place agency and thus the focus of explanation “behind the back” of the individual. In contrast to both of these approaches, the relational approach *places agency in our actual relations with other actors venturing forth to help us act*. We never act alone: we share our actions with a multitude of mostly unnoticed things, technologies and artefacts that “mediate” our practices in the sense that they help us to “relate” to some salient “object” which takes centre stage in experience. This salient object, then, is to be understood as an entity or being, material or immaterial, co-constitutive for a certain practice. The reader should think about an artwork taking shape, a melody wanting to be sung, or a religious being, a fictional character, a crystallising idea or a scientific object—all “objects” wanting something from the subject who engages with them. Inside our practices such objects are endowed with all kinds of emphatic agency with which they act upon us, hold us and help us, gain importance or attraction, place demands and requirements upon us, seize us, comfort or interest us—and thus helps us act. Relations are always relations *with*, they are always two-way relations, they entail interdependencies and interaction and they often relate us to existentially and emotionally important and powerful “objective” beings. These are indeed the true “Daemons” who hold us, to use Weber’s famous expression [(1919) 2012: 353].

Relational thought insists that we can avoid individualism, as well as structural perspectives, by focusing on the actual unfolding of these relational entanglements and reciprocities. Thus, for instance, when praying to God, I seek to enact God’s presence and enhance God’s actions upon me. I use various paraphernalia, such as soft music, candle lights and incense. I make use of certain psychological techniques and bodily poses or regimes, such as praying, closing my eyes and making myself ready. Or—thinking with Weber—I may even make use of methodological and ascetic practices ordering my life as a whole, centring it around this meeting. I thus attempt to make myself susceptible and hope that God will make his presence felt, that God will help me—or that we will help each other—to become “concentrated” or focused together and important to one another. To avoid traditional individualist or structural templates, description must remain focused on the agencies emerging inside our practices, as well as our mutual contributions.

Relationalism is *not* a new metaphysics insisting upon the autonomous agency of detached things or objects but a phenomenological insistence upon the relational, mutual and self-reinforcing character of our experiences and practices—thematised, as it were, from the subject side.

Nothing else is meant by relationalism and object-orientation in this paper. However, the reader may nevertheless be surprised by the broad or “phenomenological” interpretation of the relational template. Rather than merely engaging the role of technology or “mediation” in Weber, I engage Weber through “traditional” topics such as the emotions, the body, psychology and the concepts of habit and creativity, which are normally associated with philosophical lineages such as pragmatism, philosophical anthropology, practice theory or post-Husserlian phenomenology. Yet, the ANT template is open for interpretation and development; in my view, it can be so fashioned as to encompass or even radicalise the object-oriented impulses found in these other traditions. Rather than a certain type of material content, the reader should focus on the formal traits of the ANT template. It simply insists that action is entangled in a multiplicity of agencies that are co-constitutive of our practices. Most importantly, however, as developed here, the ANT template insists on treating the relation to the “intentional” object (standing at the centre of the practice in question) as co-constitutive, mutual and dynamic. Thus, as seen in the above example, instead of merely focusing on the body as the locus of a form of anonymous and symmetrical intentionality between subject and world [Merleau-Ponty (1945) 2012], full-blown relationalism insists on a further energizing of this symmetrical link through a potential diversity of mediating objects and bodily and psychological techniques and technologies.

### *Weber the Kantian*

In this section, I seek to describe various aspects of Weber’s Kantianism and show how it precludes the various forms of object-oriented absorption outlined out above. I shall start with Weber’s “methodology” and then move on to other areas of his work. The reader must allow for some rather large sweeps.

#### *Weber’s epistemology*

Even though the research into Weber’s methodological and epistemological thoughts is comprehensive and diverse, the interpreters almost unanimously consider Weber’s relationship to the Neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert and Neo-Kantianism as essential to any appreciation

of these thoughts. Cleavages in the field are centred on the degree to which Weber was attached to Rickert [cf. notably Henrich 1952; Burger (1976) 1987; Oakes 1988], whether his primary inspirations came from Neo-Kantian philosophy of law [Turner 1990] or whether emphasis should be placed on more diffuse (Neo-Kantian) inspirations [Wagner and Zipprian 1990; Bruun 2007; Whimster 2007].<sup>2</sup> While there is no doubt that an understanding of Weber's methodological writings presupposes a rudimentary understanding of Rickert and the Neo-Kantian wave haunting the German universities around the turn of the 20th century, it is nevertheless my claim that these discussions ignore prominent *Non-Kantian* elements surfacing in Weber's work. In fact, it seems that the Kantian mindset has become so implicit and determining even among the less Neo-Kantian interpreters [Turner and Factor 1984; Turner 1990; Tenbruck 1959; Bruun 2007; Whimster 2007] that they—even while investigating other inspirations or proper methodological contributions—have become insensitive to the passages in Weber that escape the basic dichotomies of Kantianism altogether. I am thinking notably about passages that surpass the very dichotomy between an active subject and a passive object.<sup>3</sup>

That being said, there is no doubt that Kantian impulses stand at the centre of Weber's ideas about scientific object construction. The following clearly expresses this tendency.

Again and again, the notion crops up that such [objective] perspectives can be “derived from the material itself”; but this is owing to a naïve self-deception on the part of academic specialists who do not realize that they have unconsciously, from the very beginning, approached their material with value ideas on the basis of which they have selected a tiny part of an absolute infinity, as being *all* that they are *concerned with* observing. This selection of *particular*, specific “aspects” of the occurrences of life goes on all the time and everywhere, consciously or unconsciously [...]. [(1904) 2012: 119-120]

Reading Weber carefully here, it may seem that he actually insists on a certain symmetry, i.e. that he merely claims that it is “not enough”

<sup>2</sup> The noteworthy exception to this Neo-Kantian consensus remains Friedrich TENBRUCK [1959], who rejects the attempt to trace back Weber's methodological writings to the Neo-Kantian camp. Also, Turner and Factor [1984] seek to downplay the significance of Rickert's work to Weber. However, in contrast to Tenbruck, they do not question Weber's basic Neo-Kantian attitudes.

<sup>3</sup> Sam Whimster may be the exception here. WHIMSTER [2007] critically addresses

the Kantian and dualist templates in Weber's methodological work and regrets the way in which “Weber, in his explicit epistemological [*erkenntnistheoretische*] writings, remained locked into the dualism problematic” [WHIMSTER 2007: 89]. However, whereas Whimster looks for a more “hermeneutical” Weber in the protestant *Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, I find the most radical and fundamental break with the Neo-Kantian dichotomies in Weber's methodology.

solely to focus on the object in understanding these processes.<sup>4</sup> This is not the case, however. Weber is *exclusively* focused on the constitutive activity of the subject. “Consciously or unconsciously”, “all the time and everywhere”, a selection and demarcation of empirical elements takes place on the basis of certain “value-relevancies”; it is this selection taking place in the subject that is important to him.

Now, following Weber, the conceptual “formation” of the object is “conscious” when it takes place in the methodologically and cognitively controlled setting of the “cultural sciences”, i.e., based on intersubjectively established forms of “selection” carried out on rational grounds on the basis of purely theoretical relations to certain concepts, interests or “values”. The following well-known passage is exemplary.

“Culture” is a finite section of the meaningless infinity of events in the world, endowed with meaning and significance from a *human* perspective [...]. The transcendental precondition of every *cultural science* is *not* that we find a particular, or indeed any, “culture” *valuable*, but that we *are* cultural *beings*, endowed with the capacity and the will to adopt a deliberate *position* with respect to the world, and to bestow *meaning* upon it. [(1904) 2012: 119]

And a little later,

The basic idea of modern epistemology, which goes back to Kant, is [...] that concepts are, and can only be, theoretical means for the purpose of intellectual mastery of the empirically given [...]. [(1904) 2012: 134-135]

The reader should note that Weber actually describes the “meaningless infinity” as something we actually *experience* and that it is on the *basis of this experience* that the subject imposes a perspective on the world and thus actively bestows “meaning and significance” on its surroundings. Weber often conceptualizes “meaning” in terms of a conscious, intentional and voluntary meaning-making act by a subject on a quest for “intellectual mastery” of an empirical world experienced as “meaningless”. In a number of instances, he thus speaks of experiential reality, the “empirically given”, as “chaotic” [(1904) 2012: 117-119, 134, 137], and it is this fact that explains our need to “master” it “intellectually”. Obviously, when the “empirically given” possesses no structure, does not meet us half way and engenders no passions or interest, the powers of the subject must be correspondingly inflated.

<sup>4</sup> Another well-known paragraph: “[T]he things in themselves possess no inherent criterion according to which some of them can be selected as the only part to be taken into account” [2012 (1904): 117]. This is also

the thrust of Weber’s critique of German political economist Friedrich Gottl, who suffered from the false idea “that the ‘stuff of experience’ in and of itself begets the historical constructs” [(1903-1906) 2012: 71].

Once the subject, instead of being situated inside its actual practices is detached and isolated from them, its powers to relate must be boosted.

Such passages present a fundamental “empirization” of the original Kantian template in as much as the historical Kant never placed the “transcendental synthesis” on the shoulders of the *empirical* individual. There is no empirical “chaos” of sensations in Kant. In contrast, in Kant, experience is meaningful because the sensations are synthesized *a priori*. This displacement is important in our context. Then, by transferring the “constitutive” transcendental activity to the empirical realm, Weber cannot help but blend out our relations to the objects or agencies we engage with. If empirical experience is really “meaningless” or “chaotic”, evidently, it has no hold on us; if the actor “deliberately” *chooses* how to “position” him- or herself in relation to the world and singlehandedly “bestows” “meaning” upon a reality that does not contribute to this “meaning” at all, then, evidently, any moment of non-purposive, absorbed, object-orientation is *a priori* excluded. If all agency is placed in the subject, explanation must tear this self-satisfied subject from its relations. It does not need them.

However, the subject-centred template is not exclusive in Weber’s methodological work. In the first citation above, he emphasised that processes of construction and selection also occur “unconsciously”—especially outside the epistemologically conscious environments of the cultural sciences. This brings us back to what I described in the introduction as a “structural” view, i.e., a decentralizing perspective in which agency is placed “behind the back” of the individual.

We all harbour some form of belief in the supra empirical validity of those fundamental and sublime value ideas in which we anchor the meaning of our existence; but this does not exclude—on the contrary, it includes—the constant change in the concrete points of view from which the empirical world derives its significance; the irrational reality of life, and its store of possible meanings, are inexhaustible. [...] The light shed by those sublime value ideas falls on a constantly changing finite part of the immense, chaotic stream of occurrences churning its way through the ages. [(1904) 2012: 137]

Instead of decentralizing action by moving forward into the actual relations holding the subject, Weber moves backwards. Again, the “empirical world” is numbed and pacified; again, it “derives” *all* its “significance” from somewhere else—only this time not from the “meaning-bestowing capacities of the subject”, who takes an active “position” in relation to the object, but from certain ineffable “values”, which transcend the subject from behind. No one has ever seen these values and their ontology has never really been clarified.



Let us take a preliminary step back. We now see that “consciously or unconsciously”—actively instrumentalised by the individuals or placed in the cultural epoch behind their backs—Weber only needs “values” to guide the subject because he has torn it from “its” relations in the first place. The isolated subject cannot carry the constitutive weight placed upon its shoulders after all and other powers must be drawn in. Contrastingly, once we move in the opposite direction, once the subject is reinserted within these relations, i.e., once we accept that we need to distribute and decentralize agency and allow the “empirical material” to help us relate, we simply do not need the “supra-empirical validity” of “sublime values” anymore. Once the objective dimension we engage with is allowed to play a part in holding us, helping us to relate, even placing demands upon us—demands we may carefully listen to—it will also become less “chaotic” and threatening, less in need of mastery and control.

At the base of Weber’s Kantian epistemology, we find a subject-centred concept of intentionality remarkably similar to the one we find in the early phenomenological tradition. Weber only sees the subject as directed “towards” the objects but never *by* the objects (as they emerge in our practices) [see Weber (1913) 2012: 274; cf. Albert 2014: 49]. And the shift to a decentralizing and structural perspective does nothing to change this unilateralism. In short, Weber understands intentionality in terms of the flashlight metaphor, and it is immaterial whether this light is in the hands of a subject in full control of the beam or is understood as “a light shed by those sublime values” behind the subject’s back. None of the accounts allot an active role to the intentional object in helping us to place ourselves in relation to it and achieve a “point of view”. They either insist on an all-powerful subject capable of doing everything by itself or call in determining structures, values, value relations, laws of value spheres and transcendental processes of “constitution” to help [Oakes 1988: 30ff.; but see also Bruun 2007: 14ff.; Burger (1976) 1987]. They do not expect anything from the intentional object. However, such one-way intentionality is left behind by most Post-Husserlian phenomenologists [cf. paradigmatically Merleau-Ponty (1945) 2012: Lxxxii]. What we relate to—a sculpture, a shop window or an apple tree—helps us to direct “our” investigation, helps us to guide our attention, helps us move around, to turn our heads, to direct our eyes and thus to allot “value”, importance and “significance” to what we see. Phenomenological intentionality—*con*-centration and focusing—is truly a two-way relationship and an active one at that. This emerging mutuality cannot find expression in a dualist perspective.

*The early concept of personality*

The dualism structuring Weber's epistemology is equally pronounced in Weber's concept of "personality". The following citation is from around 1905.

The more "freely" [...] [the person] "acts"—that is to say: the *less* [her action] has the character of a "natural occurrence", the greater the effect will be, in the last resort, of a concept of "personality", whose "essence" is to be found in a constant inner relationship to certain ultimate "values" and "meanings" of life—"values" and "meanings" that in the actions [of the "personality"] are translated into goals, and are thereby converted into teleological-rational action. [(1903-1906) 2012: 85]

Weber can only understand "exterior" attachments in contrasting terms, i.e., as forms of restriction of an "inner" freedom. The attempt to gather all action, freedom and meaning inside the subject goes hand in hand with a complementary placement of all irrationality, determinism and meaninglessness outside, where "nature" merely "occurs". On this basis, the subject has only two alternatives: it either imposes structure upon its own conduct or gives itself over to mere nature and thus loses its freedom and autonomy. There is no room for positive attachments, let alone for the thought that such attachments could be a precondition for, not a colonization of, "autonomous" agency. This is a way of thinking Weber remained attached to for the rest of his life.

[L]ife as a whole, if it is to be lived in full awareness and is not just to unfold like a natural event—involves a series of fundamental decisions through which the soul, as Plato [describes it], *chooses* its own fate. [Weber (1917) 2012: 315]

Instead of anchoring "personality" in actual interests and passions, in investments and relations already holding the subject, Weber wants the subject to decide on these relations beforehand and impose a consistency upon them that is rooted in the *formal constancy* of the personality. This constancy, in turn, is to be obtained through "a constant inner relationship to certain ultimate values", which are to be directly "translated" into "empirical goals" by the individual. Admittedly, Weber does not celebrate the isolated autonomous subject here. He insists on engagement and investment. Yet the precondition for this engagement is only to be found in the interior of a detached self. The ties to the surroundings are to be rooted in "values" or "ultimate meanings", and these are to be actively chosen by the existentialist subject. Still, there is no room for any specific interests or fascinations co-determining her or helping her from the object side.

I will return to Weber and his interpreters' detached and subject-centered existentialism at the end of this paper [cf. notably Henrich 1952; Schluchter 1988 and Oakes 2001]. What is important here is to notice the violence entailed in this ideal of personality. "Personal" consistency is apparently to be maintained exclusively through self-discipline and subjective choice. The fact that we cannot *choose* to become interested in or fascinated by something and that such basic processes contain obvious moments of relational "concentration" does not cross the existentialist Weber's mind. Rather, in this instance, he is inspired by his investigation into the methodological and ascetic aspects of Protestant "life-conduct" [*Lebensführung*]. None of Weber's best interpreters criticize the totalitarian traits of this template [cf. Schluchter 1988; Scaff 2011: 250f.; Hennis 1983; Henrich 1952].

### *The official theory of action*

As is well-known, Weber's "interpretative sociology" is centred on the "subjective meaning" attributed to the action by the actor [(1922) 1978: 3-12]. Fundamentally, as we saw above, Weber's actor is, at least to a minimal extent, self-transparent; she "knows" at some level "what she is doing". If she does not, we are simply not dealing with genuine "action" anymore but with a "natural occurrence", i.e. with "externally determined behaviour". Talcott Parson's [(1937) 1968] and Alfred Schütz's [(1932) 1993] interpretations of Weber's concepts of action and understanding remain loyal to this dualism between action and behaviour, culture and nature, the rational and the irrational, mind and matter, freedom and determinism. The same goes for prominent American interpreters of Weber's more material or historical work [Sica 1988: 113-114; Antonio & Sica 2011: xxxi; Scaff 1989] and also for the broad current of "interpretative sociology" inspired by Weber's thoughts [cf. Blumer 1966; Matthew 2010].

It is this distinction between action and behaviour that explains why Weber only reluctantly qualifies "affective" and "traditional" "action" as action at all [(1922) 1978: 21]. What is "external"—not least the bodily and emotional—must be deterministic or irrational. The consequence of this view is that our actual absorption in our own actions and the embedded forms of object-oriented action they entail disappear from view or become subsumed under the heading of "habit", the "automatic", the "external", the "emotional", the "irrational" or the "deterministic". Weber's dualist account of agency

obliterates the layers of agency bridging the cleavage between inside and outside, spontaneity and determinism. To be sure, Weber admits that most action is carried out “in a state of in-articulate half-consciousness or actual non-consciousness” [(1922) 1978: 21], yet this is not because he sees that we forget ourselves in intensive, absorbed and creative practices, but because he thinks we follow rules and habits on “auto-pilot” or are merely controlled by “impulses” or instincts. Weber cannot combine acuity and presence with absorption and investment. Due to his dualism, he simply cannot conceive of the moments of intensity and resonance found in *all* action save under severe conditions of depression, boredom or psychological exhaustion.

### *Psychology I*

Weber often synthesises the negative side to these dichotomies—the “external”, the “emotional”, the “natural”, the “deterministic” and the “irrational”—under the heading of *psychology*.

Following Weber, the object of psychology is behaviour that cannot be understood from within, because of its lack of “subjective meaning relatedness” [(1913) 2012: 275]. Such psychological “occurrences” are essentially nature. They are “subjectively irrational” in the sense that the acting subject either is unaware of them or reacts automatically or instinctively in relation to them.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, some psychological or physiological states, moods or triggers of action are less unconscious or automatic and can be empathetically re-experienced; these then provoke actions that are “psychologically intelligible” even though they are “purposively irrational”, as Weber terms it [(1913) 2012: 276]. Weber mentions ecstatic comportment and mystical experiences. In this latter case, psychology does in fact gain access to Weber’s interpretative sociology. We are—to a certain extent—capable of understanding the irrational; we are also often understanding in an “irrational”—emotionally based—way.

This may seem as though Weber makes room for a Diltheyan hermeneutics of empathy or *Einfühling* in his doctrine. This is only

<sup>5</sup> Weber’s concept of the psychological is notoriously difficult and changing. Seen in contrast to rational understanding and action, it covers a number of phenomena: 1) dynamics that are unconscious (as when we do not know we are tired, stressed or hungry but it nevertheless effects our thoughts and actions); 2) character traits we are not aware of (temperament, mood); 3) crude “behaviour-

ist” dynamics of impulse or physiological or psychological regularities (investigated in experimental psychology: regularities of our mental life, the way memory works etc.); 4) strongly affective states (panic or rage); and finally; 5) Nietzschean or Freudian unconscious desires or mechanisms (resulting from resentment, trauma or the subconscious).

partly the case. Forms of “psychological understanding”—i.e., forms of understanding based on “empathy”—do exist according to Weber, but they are not at the root of the process of understanding the other [see also (1922) 1978: 19] and they cannot serve as a base for a scientific theory of understanding. Weber remains critical toward what he sees as the remnants of the German Romantics’ celebration of an irrational and pre-conceptual “intuition”. Thus, he insists that empathetic psychology lacks “that qualitatively specific evidentness” that is the hallmark of “rational understanding” [(1913) 2012: 274]. This then explains why Weber replaces “empathetic psychology” with a self-transparent concept of purposive or goal-oriented rationality essentially understood in terms of idealized and formalized calculative processes. Not only are such calculations of ends and means at the base of the most “understandable” forms of action, but it is also possible, in such cases, to shape clearly definable and rational hypotheses about causal motives through the “usual means of causal imputation” and thus to create an ideal course of action against which the actual course can be compared [(1906) 2012: 169ff.; (1913) 2012: 274; (1922) 1978: 21].

The consequence of this line of thought is, however, that the “psychological” is effectively turned into a question of deviance from the absolutely purposive [cf. Joas 1992]; a course of action is then simply “psychological” or “irrational” to the extent it diverges from the hypothetical “correctness type” of absolute rational purposiveness [(1913) 2012: 274ff.]. The unidirectional, instrumental and goal-centred conception of action thus goes hand in hand with a mathematical and calculative concept of reason. Both gain paradigmatic status. For all his “ideal typical” nominalism, for Weber, subject-centred attitudes and economical calculation remain at the heart of rational action. As Richard Swedberg remarks [Swedberg 2003: 292], the concept of interest occurs on roughly every third page of *Economy and Society* [(1922) 1978].<sup>6</sup> This underlines Weber’s indebtedness to a theoretical basis that is irredeemably subject-oriented.

<sup>6</sup> Swedberg also highlights the fact that Weber’s concept of interest is broader than the economic one, which is usually focused on self-interest [2003: 292]. To this point, see also BOUDON [2003]. However, this does not soften the fact that Weber nowhere reflects on the possibility of a symmetrical conception of interest, criticises the subject-centeredness of economic theory in more general terms or criticises its calculative and transparent un-

derstanding of rationality (ideal typical or not). To this point, see also JOAS [1992: 56ff.]. The basic cleavage between transparent planning and actual execution (also found in Schutz) makes it impossible to encompass the sense of embeddedness and intensity in action and its open, dynamic and surprising aspects. Economic models simply cannot capture the excitement and lived-through nature of agency.

Anyone who has some familiarity with the developments in embodied cognitive science and artificial intelligence over the last 30 years must admit to the anachronist nature of Weber's calculative and disembodied view of rationality [Shapiro 2011; Dreyfus 1999]. Calculative and formal rationality can be used as a rough guide when predicting simple behavioural patterns in situations with limited complexity—as in consumer behaviour and everyday economic decisions. However, using it as an empirical or phenomenological description of how rational practice actually unfolds and can be understood is unpromising.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, Weber's methodological use of "ideal types" has crucial theoretical end empirical consequences. It implies a concept of rationality that is essentially rule-bound and quasi-nomothetic. Using our ideal type, we may calculate in advance of any eventual execution what the absolutely rational actor will decide to do; rational action is indeed "predictable"—it is only that the empirical individuals make

<sup>7</sup> The enduring popularity of Rational Choice and Game Theory shows how these idealised and formalised "psychologies" of reason may still be analytically purposive under certain strongly empirically limiting conditions. However, it seems that even RCT, at least in some of its more recent versions, has lessened its formalism. In contrast to Weber, who clearly see that the actual use of calculative reason is limited but nevertheless insists that calculative reason is the *paradigma* of rationality, Jon Elster, in recent work, criticises Weber for his mathematical concept of reason and his lack of "embodiment" [2000: 26]. It must be said, however, that in Elster's vocabulary, this merely indicates a radicalization of Weber's analysis of the (distorting) significance of emotions and a critique of Weber's belief in the possibility of an analytical separation between (calculating) rationality and the emotional. According to Elster, Weber underestimated the "pervasive operation of bias and distortion in human reasoning" [2000: 26], and he overestimated the rationality of the processes of individual belief formation underlying choices, goals and preferences. As a consequence, according to Elster, Weber exaggerated the self-transparency of the calculative process, as well as its ability to achieve unambiguous results.

What is even worse for Weber is that these problems are aggravated in social settings. Weber provides a methodological example: the battle between the German and Austrian

armies (1866), led by the Generals Moltke and Benedek respectively [WEBER (1922) 1978: 21; see also (1906) 2012: 169ff.]. His idea is then that the analyst should construct an ideal "rational" course of events and generate casual explanations for each of the two generals' behaviour. However, as Elster points out, since the potential response of the other to the first's assault must be part of the first's planning (his belief formation) and vice versa, it is simply not possible to separate the actions of the two generals. It is simply too collective. Unsurprisingly, Elster then moves on to suggest a game theoretical approach.

Elster's analysis of these limitations is of great interest to us. Then, in a sense, what relationalists do is extend the "social situation" Elster describes and insist on reciprocity and double contingency outside of the "human" realm as well. Within the relational perspective, there is no *a priori qualitative distinction* regarding degrees of complexity and anticipatory interdependence between human-human interaction and other relations. This is merely humanist prejudice. A sole individual may have an equally interlaced and anticipatory complex relation with a religious being, an artwork, or Weber's concepts and ideas, as with another person. Most often, of course, we carry out already complex practices and multiply complexities and instabilities in both the objective *and* collective dimensions at the same time [cf. SCHIERMER 1916].

“errors” in their instrumental choices or are influenced by irrational “emotions” and thus “deviate” from the rational course [cf. Eliaeson 2002: 35-36]. Again, such scenarios—even while possessing some intuitive plausibility—blend out important dimensions of action and are ultimately self-defeating. To be sure, we make predictions as to the behaviour of others and often use practical “rules” in understanding their behaviour. What we do not do, however, is to judge “deviance” from these expectations negatively or view them as “errors” or expressions of “irrationality”. When we witness a soccer player suddenly making an ingenious and completely unexpected move, this may indeed be the only right solution—yet we only see this afterwards. Freedom and determinism bleed into one another. At any rate, we are often surprised by “our” actions; in fact, we never, when in the midst of things, know exactly “what we are doing”, and we often do things we did not know we would do and did not plan. This absorption or embeddedness does not make our actions irrational—to the contrary, it is a necessary condition for any form of action to unfold in the first place. The reason for this, as we shall see below, is that “our” actions are never entirely our own. Only by giving up mastery and by delegating agency does the miracle of action occur.

### *Weber and technology*

The dualism and human exceptionalism that are so tangible in Weber’s theory of action and methodological writings go hand in hand with a denial of the active role of technology. Since, in Weber’s perspective, the material realm is as distant from the only truly allowed source of rational agency—human consciousness—as is possible, it must be duly pacified.

[E]very artifact, such as for example a machine, can be understood only in terms of the meaning which its production and use have had or were intended to have; a meaning which may derive from a relation to exceedingly various purposes. Without reference to this meaning such an object remains wholly unintelligible. That which is intelligible or understandable about it is thus its relation to human action in the role either of means or of end; a relation of which the actor or actors can be said to have been aware and to which their actions have been oriented. [(1922) 1978: 7]

In such descriptions, humans seem to enter the world with all their purposive plans, “ends” or “goals” already made, whereas technologies only emerge subsequently to be used as “means” of obtaining these goals; technology cannot be allowed to help us in co-constituting the intended purposes of our actions or the means we use. One only

needs to reflect on what the mobile phone has done to our world (and to our goals and purposes) to understand that technology contributes essentially to meaning-making processes; it plays a constant part in the construction of new universes of action and new practices. However, if technology helps to define and construct our purposes, we simply cannot maintain any meaningful idea of “human action” or collectivity that is not already entangled in technology. Moreover, Weber’s narrow and subject-centered understanding of the concept of means likewise tends to blend out the far more general function of technology as tacit mediation, pre-reflexively inscribed in or prolonging our bodies and our actions and thus, just as pre-reflexively, animating, cultivating and enriching the objects it helps us relate to.

### *Rationalisation and disenchantment*

Weber’s dualism also has tangible consequences for his famous analysis of modern Western rationalisation. This analysis is most often connected with the process of bureaucratisation [cf. Sica 2000; Scaff 1989]. There can be no doubt that in terms of an analysis of “new public management”—understood as an attempt initialised from above to rationalise and make calculable professional behaviour or processes in various societal institutions—Weber’s thoughts remain important. However, when Weber or his interpreters insist that broader dynamics of rationalization make our relations and practices *existentially* meaningless, their analyses lose empirical bearing. As we shall investigate in depth further below, Weber’s investigation into science in action is interesting in its ambivalence. On the one hand, Weber cannot play down his actual relations. Obviously, his scholarly work is highly meaningful and existentially important to him. It is, as he terms it himself, indeed full of “passion”. On the other hand, he is in the grips of a romantic critique of science, forcing him to conceptualize it in terms of meaningless rationalisation and empty dominance.

[I]ncreased intellectualization and rationalization [...] bring with them [...] the knowledge or the belief, that if we wished to, we could at any time learn about the conditions of our life; in other words: that, in principle, no mysterious and unpredictable forces play a role in that respect, but that on the contrary, we can—in principle—dominate everything by means of calculation. And that in turn means that the world has lost its magic. [Weber (1919) 2012: 342]

In such instances, Weber eschews all insight into actual scientific practice and the fascinating and highly energetic objects the scientist helps to cultivate, construct and refine in such practices. At such



instances, like a rationalist Baudelaire, he pictures himself in terms of his uncompromising will to live at the heart of rational alienation. In celebrating his heroism, he must silence his deeply meaningful engagement in actual scientific practice [Also Kaesler sees an element of inauthenticity here, it seems; cf. Kaesler 2014: 706]. Obviously, Weber's insistence upon living inside the "cold" rational "skeleton" of modern science, the organic life of which fled long ago [cf. (1919) 2009: 349], remains captured by the romantic irrationalism it attempts to escape.

In the rationalisation scenario, a self-centred and world-less individual is placed before a "meaningless" or "disenchanted" "modern" world, which is incapable of interesting it and towards which the only attitude possible is one of "domination". Tellingly, the first Weber text to be translated into English—*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [(1903-1904) 2003], translated in 1930 by Talcott Parsons—is among the most canonised and the most pessimistic of Weber's texts. It places a strong negative emphasis on rationalisation [to this, see also Swedberg 2003: 297]. Here, we find not only the well-known passage on the "iron cage" of modern capitalism but also the insistence that modern professional life merely amounts to a "joyless lack of meaning", "deprived" of all "this-worldly attractiveness" [Weber [(1903-1904) 2003: 287]. However, if it is really true that modern "action and existence are regimented" by a "vocational activity" that is "stripped of [...] meaning", that our "horizons" are limited to the "rationalized, inwardly meaningless certainties of vocational humanity", that "we are left with the demand of calling forth our own ideals from within ourselves" and that "modernity is characterized [...] by a kind of petrification and homogenization of life"—this is the way a prominent American Weber scholar interprets this work [Scaff 1987: 741]—then, evidently, there are not many interesting objects or agencies out there capable of helping us in our practices. One may wonder whether such viewpoints are not, ultimately, performatively self-contradictory.

### *Psychology II*

To end this first and critical part of the paper, I will return to the concept of the psychological. This is indeed a complex term in Weber. In fact, he uses it in a third sense which we have not yet discussed; a third sense which departs from understanding it in terms of naturally determined behaviour or emotional interference.

This third sense of the term is about creativity in science. This implies a straight-forward sense of creativity as having good ideas and making up new hypothesis and research designs. It also entails having an intuitive feel for complex and still unarticulated empirical “wholes”, i.e., for pre-conscious processes of taste and tact in “feeling”, for instance, what is central and peripheral. Weber describes these phases of scientific life in terms of the “psychological process of acquiring knowledge” [(1903-1906) 2012: 63].

Now, despite the positive significance and scientific importance of these processes, there is no doubt that Weber uses the term “psychology” to imply that such processes are “irrational”. Following Weber, in contrast to the rational, methodological and conceptual phase of scientific practice in which concepts are worked out and hypotheses are rationally tested, these creative processes, if they are not totally “arbitrary”, are at least irredeemably “subjective” [Oakes 1977: 21; Bruun 2007: 137, 147; Eliaeson 2002: 34-54]. Nevertheless, as we shall see in the second part of this paper, the “psychological” phase of scientific activity gains gravity, content and contour in the course of Weber’s oeuvre—at the expense of the “rational” and methodological phase. Apparently, once Weber moves closer, the alleged “irrationality” of the “psychology” of knowledge acquisition seems to become less opaque, black-boxed and irrational. Thus, as I will attempt to show, when Weber engages prospective scholars in his famous talk on the “vocation” of science, he depicts the rudiments of an entirely different understanding of action and agency than that underlying his official position. We find a complex notion of creativity, new ideas of rationality, admissions of non-purposive attitudes and sensitivities, claims to intensity and immersion in engaged relations with powerful “objective” agencies, and we find, finally, a new and highly meaningful attitude toward scientific practice and the concept of “personality”. All these come together in the object-oriented ideal of respect for the *Sache*.

Ultimately, as we will see, I find a template for object-oriented and relational practice that can be generalized beyond the scientific context in Weber’s work and biography.

### *Object-oriented impulses in Weber*

In this part of the paper, I will investigate object-oriented and relational impulses or elements in Weber. I will start with his concept of creativity.

*Creativity*

There are good reasons why Weber's interpreters have been tempted to neglect the importance of creativity in Weber. The first is Weber's complete negligence of creativity in his official theory of action [Joas 1992: 69-72]. The second, described above, is his critique of "intuition" in science and his understanding of rationality as self-transparent and calculative.

Nevertheless, Weber's interpreters seem to ignore the fact that Weber, despite all critiques of intuitionism, repeatedly stresses the necessity of intuitive sensibility and creativity.

There is no doubt that a "feel [for something]" is extremely significant—indeed, almost indispensable—for the psychological genesis of a hypothesis in the mind of the historian (provided, it should be noted, that what has given the historian this "feeling" is his constant *intellectual* preoccupation with the "material"—that is to say: practice and therefore "empirical experience"). [(1903-1906) 2012: 77]

It is under no circumstance true that Weber dismisses the importance of creativity as such. Without creativity, he insists, even the greatest historian would remain "[...] a sort of junior clerk of history" [(1906) 2012: 176]. Conversely, as he tells us elsewhere, "[e]ven the most comprehensive knowledge of methodology does not make anyone into a historian [...]" [*ibid.*: 140]. Knowing this, what is creativity in Weber?

First, we should remark that Weber does not place creativity, as it were, in the mind of the great scientific genius creating *ex nihilo* but in the actual *relation* to the empirical "material" in which she is "intellectually" absorbed. Creativity, in other words, is object-oriented and relational. It includes the creative action of thoughts or ideas *upon us* as well as the practices, techniques and artefacts with which we enliven these ideas or practices. This explains why there is something "unpredictable" or incalculable about the very phenomenon of creativity—a fact metaphorically circumscribed by Weber's repeated use of the words "deviation" and "artistry" [(1903-1906, 1904, 1909) 2012: 63, 138, 158, 176, 252].<sup>8</sup> However, to be sure, the moment of "incalculability" is not to be understood as mere subjective guessing, it is not mere arbitrariness.

<sup>8</sup> Thus, the concept of aesthetics or "artistry" in Weber is not to be reduced to the capacity for mere embellishment or vividness of (historical) description. It connotes trained

practical or intellectual skills. Nevertheless, he also at times uses the concept of artistry in the former "ornamental" or superficial sense [cf. (1903-1906, 1906) 2012: 68, 176-177].

If we dig into Weber's actual description in the quotation above, we see how he sketches a middle way between the absolute predictability of calculative rationality and "irrational" arbitrariness. He does so by prescribing a certain methodological ethos meant to be instrumental in cultivating our relations with the scientific object. Through years of "very hard work" [(1919) 2012: 339], "constant intellectual preoccupation" with the "material" and "condensed empirical experience" [(1903-1906) 2012: 77], we learn to energise the object, to be sensitive to the desires of the empirical material and to let its sudden suggestions and crystallizations, the hypotheses it wants us to try out, guide us toward new and exciting objective constructions.

This brings us to the second point. In certain instances, Weber even seems aware that creative action is as bodily as it is intellectual.

[T]he "feeling" of the cultural scientist] is in essence completely the same as the "feeling"—which is in no way consciously articulated—that guides, say, the captain of a ship in imminent danger of collision, where everything depends on a split second decision. In both cases, condensed "empirical experience" is of decisive importance. [(1903-1906) 2012: 77]

The myriad of conceptual impulses, anticipations and hunches, conscious or unconscious, clear or vague, digested by the scholar through years of hard work with the material is to be stored and "condensed" below the level of conscious "working memory" in the scientist's "body". This is indeed a process no different from the one feeding the practical knowledge of an experienced ship captain. The distinction between mind and body is replaced by a slowly acquired ability to relate sensitively—through mediating technologies and acquired skills—so as to cultivate the empirical or objective in salient ways. This process is about developing a "feeling", a number of skills, bodily or conceptual, that permit the virtuoso, the performer, the athlete or intellectual to simultaneously enrich the objective and sensitise the subjective.

This means, thirdly, that *habit* changes the character. The difference between the conception of "habit" as "ingrained habituation [*eingelebte Gewohnheit*]" [(1922) 1978: 25] related to "traditional" action in Weber's official theory of action, on the one hand, and the concept of habit as "condensed 'empirical experience'" [*kondensierte Erfahrung*]" [(1903-1904) 2012: 77] found in his description of the scholar or the ship captain, on the other hand, is fundamental. We are dealing with the difference between *habits* and *skills*—the latter concept being totally absent from Weber's official theory of action. Contrastingly, here, bodily or intellectually engrained practices do not emerge as something

“automatic”, “external”, “irrational” or “deterministic” but rather as the very foundation of creativity. Whereas habitual action, in Weber’s official theory of action, emerges as a *deviation* from rational action, in this case (as skills), it emerges as the very *foundation* for an extended concept of rationality and rational practice.

This means, fourth, that we must lessen the distinction between the “sphere of discovery” and the “sphere of justification” in Weber’s methodology. Once we understand that scientific or scholarly creativity is anything but “irrational”<sup>9</sup>, the distinction between the two phases can be attenuated. In empirical scientific practice they complement each other in entangled ways. Weber simply does not depict creative practice in the sciences as an extra-scientific “psychological” black box to which we have no methodological access, just as he does not restrict “the scientific” to a mere “testing” of the outcome of these enigmatic processes. Weber was no Karl Popper (or Hans Reichenbach) *avant la lettre*. His depictions of creative behaviour are object-oriented; they directly describe hard-won and immersed processes of cultivation and con-centration—the fruit of a “constant *intellectual* preoccupation with the ‘material’”—in which objective agencies are enacted and made responsive. This mutual responsiveness is what engenders both creativity and objectivity. It is what creates focus and interest. On the other hand, the separation of the two spheres “subjectifies” and “psychologises” creativity, while it objectifies and formalises methodology. In the most remarkable of his descriptions of actual scientific practice, Weber bridges the gap between the two sides of this dichotomy, even as he celebrates it on a theoretical level. In such instances, the “psychological” or “creative” phase of discovery is furnished with its own forms of “justification”, its own methodology. Admittedly, he only contours this methodology in very general terms—Weber wants us to engage with the material through hard work in lengthy processes—yet it is a methodology nevertheless. It only needs to be enriched, detailed and developed.

This brings us to the fifth point. Weber’s descriptions of creative action are marked by moments of non-purposiveness or, more accurately, by complex and paradox negotiations between purposiveness and non-purposiveness. Here, non-human agencies—in this case, “flashes of inspiration”—emerge neither as “ends” nor as “means” but

<sup>9</sup> This conventional prejudice, found among prominent Weber interpreters [SICA 1988: 114; SCHUTZ (1932) 1993: 339], remains in the

shadow of Weber’s economistic and calculable concept of rationality.

rather as all-important collaborators, the relation to which must be cultivated.

A flash of inspiration is no substitute for work. And on the other hand, work does not eliminate the need for inspiration, nor can it force it to appear—any more than passion can. Both of them—and especially both *together*—can entice it. But it comes when it chooses, not when we choose. It is certainly true that the best ideas do not come while one is sitting at one's desk, brooding and pondering. They come, as Jhering has described it, while one is sitting on a sofa and smoking a cigar; or, as Helmholtz observes [...], during a walk on a gently rising road; or in similar circumstances—at any rate: when they are not expected. But on the other hand, they would not have presented themselves to someone who had not sat brooding at his desk, and who had not passionately pursued these problems. [(1919) 2012: 339-340]

This is relational methodology. Weber describes how to relate. We are dealing with active forms of immersion, “passion”, “training”, “hard work” and “brooding”, together with certain possible “tricks” or “sensitizing” practices, certain bodily poses, techniques or regimes that help to make us susceptible. There are also, of course, a number of mediating technologies and artefacts present. This category includes a myriad of humble technological artefacts. Weber mentions “desks”, “sofas”, “cigars” and “gently rising roads”. We could add digital word-processing programs, post-its, markers, the copy-paste function (of extreme importance when responding to the actual object in the process of writing) and notes. All these components, human and nonhuman, constitute mediating agencies. However, as intimated further above, they are never simply “means”; they participate, they frame and they help the scholar to co-construct certain energetic objective beings of scientific importance—which will then invite the scholar to commit herself even more strongly and draw in even more mediators. These objective beings are then the very agencies we actively relate to and which relate to us in turn; they are never mere fixed “goals” or “ends”. When I relate, tune-in, enlive and “entice” these objects, paradoxically, they *gain* objectivity, agency and autonomy. Indeed, the ideas themselves, Weber emphasises, decide when and whether they will arrive or not. Attempts at mastery or forms of one-way intentionality will only have counterproductive results. Yet, as we see, this does not mean that there are no methods to enact or “entice” them.

It is scarcely possible to find a more vigorous dismissal of the very *ethos* of Weber's official theory of action. Rational action—here meaning creative action and thought—is not calculative. Nor is it based on “motives” placed in a detached subject. Nor does it discipline an empirical chaos with concepts in an attempt to breathe

meaning into a meaningless reality. Rather, it is characterised by an *absence* of control or mastery.<sup>10</sup> It is based on a primordial and pre-reflexive absorption in the object world of our thoughts and actions.

This brings us back, again, to the concept of the “psychological”. In reality, there is no room for an independent or immaterial *psyche* in creative action.

[A]ll these kinds of ideas—including artistic intuition—have in common that to objectivate themselves, to prove their reality, they must signify a grasp on demands of the “work” or, if you prefer, a being seized by [these demands]; they are not merely a subjective feeling or experience. [(1922) 1978: 1116]

The citation explains why Weber insists that there is no reason to distinguish between different forms of creativity in terms of their “psychological” characteristics; what they have in common *is*, paradoxically, their *lack* of a detached “psychological” ontology, i.e., their absorbed object-oriented nature. In such instances, Weber leaves his dualism behind. We must start with our relations. Again and again, Weber emphasises this object-oriented and relational element inherent in all creative behaviour: immersion in the “work at hand”, in the “inherent laws” of the concrete professional “task” [(1917) 2012: 307], in the “intellectual preoccupation with the “material” [(1903-1906) 2012: 77], in the artwork [(1922) 1978: 1116], in the political “cause” [(1919) 2009: 79, 115] or in the “demands of the day” [(1919) 2012: 353]. Without this primordial ability to transcend oneself in the distribution and decentralisation of action, there would be no action at all. Creative practice bridges the dualistic divide between the subjective and the objective, between the mental and the material and between traditional conceptions of what possesses agency and what does not. It puts an end to the pacification of the objective pole resulting from the inflation of the subjective one. Instead, it focuses on our common relations and invites the objective to participate on equal footing in our shared practices.

We have come full-circle. The “psychological” has imploded. Once we looked into the black box of creativity, we discovered that it does not even exist as a separate sphere; at its bottom, we find only objective-oriented relations and empathetic investments. One can only marvel at the fact that Weber, while making such observations, still

<sup>10</sup> This idea of absorption and absence of “control”—the idea that if one wants to be “good” at something, one has to enter into the “flow” of what one is doing—is also salient when Weber, criticising the methodological

merits, or lack thereof, of his younger brother Alfred, nevertheless insists that “one can have keen eyesight while lacking knowledge of the eye” [(1909, 1906) 2012: 270, cf. 140].

insists, at a theoretical level, on the process of intuition or creativity as something “subjective”.

In sum, what Weber unfolds in these paragraphs amounts to an investigation into the entangled layers of all action. Here, we find no concentration of agency in the subject but rather an original or primordial decentering, an ability to relate to and become related with the objective, which bridges the dichotomies which otherwise control Weber’s thought. As we will see in the following paragraph, this object-oriented perspective plays an important part in Weber’s late ideal of personality and scientific *Sachlichkeit*.

### *Personality and Sachlichkeit*

In contrast to his material writings, in Weber’s methodological writings, the notion of *Sachlichkeit* has primarily positive connotations. Nevertheless, the prominence of the concept of the *Sache* in late Weber is, it seems to me, largely ignored by his interpreters. The German “*Sache*” simply means “thing”. It is, however, omnipresent in the German academic tradition in which Weber stands, and it carries a number of metaphoric connotations. To demonstrate “*Sachlichkeit*” means taking an objective or objectifying attitude towards something. As we will see, however, Weber’s main point is that we are not dealing simply with impartial and neutral judgement through distance and reflection but rather with an achievement of objectivity through self-investment and absorption.

In this light, it is no surprise that Weber’s greatest interpreters ignore the concept of *Sachlichkeit*—let alone the object-oriented approach to it. On the one hand, the literature focusing on Weber’s notion of “value neutrality” in his text on “value freedom” [(1917) 2012: 304-334] tends to focus on his violent critique of masked value-judgements in science, his separation of the ethical and the cognitive and his pathos of distance and self-disciplining. They thus completely ignore the object-oriented passages in the text. On the other hand, the literature occupied with rationalization and modernity tends to focus on another, alienating sense of *Sachlichkeit* we find, for instance, in Weber’s writings on bureaucracy in *Economy and Society* [(1922) 1978: 959-1005].

Instead, in my view, a true appreciation of the concept of *Sachlichkeit* in Weber requires an understanding of a *constellation* of two tightly interlocking dimensions: an appreciation of the relational,



absorbed and creative dimension of action and of his late ideal of personality.

A good place to begin is by addressing some potential misunderstandings of the above account of creative action. As the critic will remark, energising and listening for the “impulses” and “ideas” coming “from without” and meeting these impulses halfway does not do the trick alone—they must be systemised and somewhat controlled in actual speech and writing. In a letter to his late love Else Jaffé, Weber makes the following remark.

[W]hen I “receive” ideas or contemplatively allow them to form *inside* me, everything flows—no matter whether it is a lot or a little, valuable or valueless—it flows in abundance—and then the struggle begins to capture it for the *paper* [...] and for me that is the true, almost unbearable torture. [Weber in Radkau 2009: 98]

Again, Weber takes his departure in the relation to agencies, enticing them to meet him. And, of course, he is no more “inside” himself than he is capable of accommodating or “receiving” ideas emerging at their own discretion [see also Radkau 2009: 99]. What he means is that he is absorbed in the process. Unsurprisingly, he can only speak or write inspiringly because he is himself inspired by, attached to, interested and seduced by the *Sache*, the subject matter about which he speaks or writes. The instant he begins to reflect or become self-conscious, he will lose his ability to relate. The same thing will happen if he becomes too purposive. Nevertheless, as he indicates, he must, at a certain stage discipline his speech or writing—a task at which Weber readily admitted he was only moderately successful [Bruun 2007: 2ff.]. In other words, Weber seems to imply that one must somehow “master”, “formalize” or “systematize” incipient ideas and thus rise above the creative “flow”.

One may wish to see a dialectics between self-abandonment and self-disciplining here. However, in my view, that is exactly the wrong way to understand this process. In any event, the “systematizing” phase cannot consist of a complete detachment from the actual *Sache* under scrutiny; then, evidently, without object-orientation, the very notion of systematisation and precision would lose all sense. The systematisation of *Sachlichkeit* is never synonymous with formalisation. This even goes, Weber emphasises in *Economy and Society*, for the bureaucrat.

It is perfectly true that “matter-of-factness” [*Sachlichkeit*] and “expertness” [*Fachmäßigkeit*] are not necessarily identical with the rule of general and

abstract norms. Indeed this does not even hold in the case of the modern administration of justice. [(1922) 1978: 978-979]

Looking closely enough, we see that formal or *a priori* “rules” or “general and abstract norms” explain next to nothing of the actual behaviour. The author has no need of a structural hold; he must instead feel his way through mutual dynamics of con-centration and immersion. We should conceptualise the “torture” Weber speaks about above as a form of active “redemption” of objective demands; it is because it requires such degrees of sensitivity toward the emerging contours or structures crystallising “in the material” that the process is so demanding. Even so, despite Weber’s talk about “torture”, this very same process is also rewarding and exciting. Even if Weber places himself at the desk in an act of sheer duty, he *will become* interested. Sooner or later, the material will meet him halfway. Only malign mental conditions, severe stress or depression will hinder from happening—as it did, probably, in certain periods in Weber’s life. Yet even in these periods, Weber did of course manage to become absorbed. To be sure, if the material did not venture forth to focus him and draw him in, there would be no systematisation and nothing to be “captured” on paper in the first place. Again, passivity and activity coalesce; the mimetic and the creative, determinism and freedom bleed into one another.

The following description of Weber’s own expert performance as a speaker, stemming from feminist politician Gertrud Bäumer, who was close to the Weber family, is indeed illustrative of this entanglement of primordial object-sensitivity and “logical” systematization.

[L]ogical sharpness and representational qualities together reflected the intellectual process: the inflow of ideas from all four corners of the earth, and the way in which they were then tightly grasped and skilfully brought into logical relationship with one another. His hands repeatedly stretch out as he labours to draw all the new material together. [Bäumer *in* Radkau 2009: 107]

As is clear, *Sachlichkeit* is anything but “detached” or “disinterested”. Again, we should remark how non-purposive bodily postures, gestures and mimics are instrumental in cultivating and co-enacting the *Sache* in question. Just as one can enforce the agency of music or rhythm by dancing and by contouring and reinforcing the beats with one’s body, one can use one’s body to shape the contours, constructs and structures of conceptual “material”, and one can prepare for the coming of ideas and anticipate the directions taken in improvisations. In such instances, the body uses its knowledge of space to structure

and animate the object. Indeed, *Sachlichkeit* entails a somatic form of reasoning that “forge[s] together” “warm passion” and a “cool sense of proportion” in “the same soul” [(1919) 2009: 115]; Weber biographer Joachim Radkau emphasises that “understanding was for Weber not only an intellectual but also an emotional act” [*ibid.*: 110]. There is a form of cognitive *attachment* here that clearly contains emotional aspects, not least because it is “moral”. We need to *care* about what we are doing if we are to be good at it; we need to do *justice* to it; we need to invest ourselves, we need to be “passionate”. Matters of fact are always also “matters of concern” [Latour 2005: 87–120]. Without such pre-reflexive merging of the emotional, the bodily and the cognitive, hardly anything would remain of scientific activity.

This is also the point where *another concept of personality* emerges in Weber’s work. The first manifestation of this alternative ideal of personality in Weber’s texts can be found in his celebration of the Baltic chemist Wilhelm Ostwald’s “style” in a paper dating from 1909 [(1909) 2012: 252], which includes the following lines.

[...] Professor W[ilhelm] Ostwald in Leipzig is highly distinguished by the rare artistry [that characterizes] his exposition. This is not meant in the sense of an aesthetics of style, which is all too common nowadays. As far as questions of “style” are concerned, his artistry rather manifests itself in precisely the opposite way: in [his] ability (which is all too rare nowadays) to let the “substance” speak for itself [*der “Sache” das Wort zu lassen*] and to take second place behind it [...]. [(1909) 2012: 252]

Using “artistry” to stand out in the eyes of others, to superimpose a “personal style” upon one’s writing for mere reasons of personal vanity does not, obviously, constitute a true and responsible relation to the *Sache*. To the contrary, true intellectual “artistry” requires that no external motives intrude between the scholar and the *Sache*; it requires an ability to mimic it or empathise with it and avoid imposing anything on it that does not belong to it. Only thus can it, paradoxically, “speak for itself”. Again, the reader should remark how attachment, not detachment, is a condition for autonomy and objectivity.

The most elaborated account of this relational concept of personality is found in Weber’s text on value freedom [(1917) 2012: 304–334].

In any *profession*, the *task* [*Sache*] as such has its claims and must be performed in accordance with its own inherent laws. Any person who has to carry out a professional task must confine himself [to it] and eliminate everything that is not *material* [to it] [*was nicht streng zur Sache gehört*—and especially his own loves and hates. And it is *not true* that a strong personality reveals itself by first looking, on every occasion, for its own unique, completely “personal touch”.

[...] “[B]eing a personality” is not something that one can set as a deliberate goal, and [...] there is only one way in which one can (perhaps!) become [a personality]: by committing oneself unreservedly to a “cause [*Sache*]”, whatever [that cause] and the “claims of the day” entailed by it may look like in the individual case. And the “vocation” loses the only really significant meaning that it still retains today if one does not fully exercise the specific form of self-restraint it requires. [(1917) 2012: 307]

Another prominent example is found in Weber’s lecture on the vocation of science.

Ladies and Gentlemen! In the realm of science, the only persons who have “personality” are those who are *wholly devoted to the task [before them]* [*rein der Sache dienen*]. And this does not only apply to the domain of science. We know of no great artist who has ever done anything other than to serve his art and that alone. [(1919) 2012: 340]

This is *Sachlichkeit*. Subjective emotions should be eliminated to the extent that they are not rooted in the *Sache*. Idiosyncrasies can be as violent as collective hysteria, if it inserts itself between the scholar and the *Sache*. In any event, objectivity, or neutrality, is not to be obtained by distance or self-censure but by *moving so close* to the *Sache* that nothing “external” may threaten this relation, least of all the vain “self” of the scientist. As Weber explains, “self-restraint” is rather a restraint “away from” the self than *on* the self. In other words, only by doing justice to the *Sache* is it possible to do justice to one’s personality. Genuine “personal expression” is the least “personal” type of expression in the world; it is unthinkable apart from the concrete articulation and unfolding of “the task at hand”. It is entangled in the objective from the outset. In this sense, Weber’s concept of *Sachlichkeit* also entails a sense of *authenticity*—yet it is a form of authenticity that is not placed in the subject; rather, as Weber states, all “matter-of-fact devotion to a cause [*sachliche Hingabe*]” involves “a *distance* to one’s self” [(1919) 2009: 116, my emphasis]. In a nutshell, true personality is object-oriented and not subject-oriented.

We now see that the stance of *Sachlichkeit* has little to do with distance or personal indifference, simple neutrality or impartiality. “Passionate” attachment is obligatory. However, it must emerge from a “devotedness” to the *Sache* and not out of vanity or a wish to stand out in the eyes of others. As a matter of fact, the passions called forth must be co-produced by the *Sache*, and this is, of course, the reality we see if we phenomenologically examine our actual scientific relations.

The earlier, puritan ideal of a personality that imposes an abstract “methodological”, “ascetic” or “systematic” form on its “life-conduct” has vanished. Gone is the existentialist idea of choosing “ultimate values”. Gone is the idea of a top-down “translation” of these values “into empirical goals”, which can then be projected onto an object world without interest or shape on its own. It has been replaced by a new ideal, a personality that does not even control or create its “own” attachments but cultivates, enacts and constructs the autonomy of the agencies emerging inside its practices, their saliency, their importance and their emotional hold upon itself.<sup>11</sup> The *Sache*, Weber tells us, has its own “claims” which must be attended to; it has “its own inherent laws [*ihre eigene Gesetze*]”; its *relational autonomy*. It is these “laws” and “claims” that must be listened for, emulated or co-accomplished, and this is what the genuine “personality” seeks to achieve. There is no other way to describe it: the scientific object attaches to us. It interests us. It draws us closer. It provokes our curiosity. It helps us, once again, to con-centrate. At this point, all traces of Kantianism and dualism have evaporated.

### *Weber's alternative theory of action*

*Sachlichkeit*, we now know, is a result of a complex process. It takes “passion”, object-oriented attitudes, bodily practices and gestures, tricks and skills, a technological infrastructure of artefacts and methods, and work with concepts and ideas to lure empirical agencies

<sup>11</sup> Weber's assessment of Rilke's poetry in a letter to his sister from 1910 is interesting in this regard.

[Rilke] is not altogether a formed personality *from* which poetry might break forth as its product. “He” does not write poetry, but “it is written” in him. Therein lies his limitation, but also his special quality. It seems to me that for this reason he regards the rhythmic completeness of the lines of fully formed poetry (Stefan George's for example) as too great a loss in atmospheric substance, although any artistic forming is based on relinquishment of this kind. [WEBER *in* Marianne WEBER 1988: 456]

Here one feels Weber's ambivalence between the two concepts of personality and the two different “ecologies” they incarnate: the im-

mersed one (Rilke) and the controlled one (George). Weber insists that a strong personality is synonymous with strong form and that a lack of form in Rilke's poems is predicated on his lack of personality. Yet Weber nowhere states that he sees the alleged lack of form in Rilke as an aesthetic weakness. In fact, he merely observes that placing too much agency in the poetic subject makes it impossible for it to accommodate “atmospheric substances” in its poems. The reader should note, moreover that the question Weber here poses to Rilke is the same that a number of (frustrated) scholars pose to Weber [c.f. Radkau 2009: 101]: why this lack of form? The answer is that Weber's lack of form, just like Rilke's, originates in an attempt to avoid losing the object. As to the critique of Weber's prose see also Bruun [2007: 2-11].

into action. These then gain autonomy and saliency and further impassion the scientist. *Sachlichkeit* is a form of mutual tuning-in “between” the scholar and his phenomenon of interest.

This relational dynamic can be generalised. In fact, Weber’s sociology of art—his account of the rationalisation of music—provides an important step towards such generalisation. Importantly, it also provides a corrective to his neglect of the meaning-creating capacities and active agency of technology and artefacts. In a passage in the essay on value freedom, Weber remarks that “[I]n an empirical-*causal* perspective, changes in technique (in the widest sense of the term) are precisely the most important determinable factors in the development of art” [(1917) 2012: 324]. At such instances, Weber has no difficulties in seeing technology as a form of co-constructive and energising mediation that helps to cultivate what it mediates. Western music, with its richness, its power, its ability to seize us and draw us into complex forms of enjoyment, is inseparable from the technological invention of instruments and systematic notation. Technological innovation and rationalisation lead to new objective agencies, new forms of music, new forms of appreciation, new sensibilities and new emotions—i.e. new hybrid bodies that are as rational as they are emotional, as cultural as they are natural and as technological as they are human [cf. Radkau 2009: 367-373; and even more pronounced in Kaesler 2014: 702-706].

Fundamentally, we enter into such dynamics of mutual entrainment in all our creative practices.<sup>12</sup> Radkau’s depiction of Weber’s erotic virtuoso is interesting in this regard.

Beneath the surface, nature is at work throughout the rationalization and intellectualization of human existence—above all, man’s sexual nature. But, this [nature] in turn undergoes a kind of rationalization of human existence and systematic intensification, especially among people who make eroticism the meaning of their life [...]. Weber’s thinking is marked by conceptions of a sometimes paradoxical dynamic of this kind, rather than by clearly delineated sketches of a system. Simple souls believe in a clear-cut separation between Eros and Intellect; Weber discovered that eroticism and spirituality intensify each other. [Radkau 2009: 389]

Rationalisation is not only alienation and disenchantment but also cultivation and enrichment. The object enacted, whether in the sense of a scientific object, a piece of music or, as here, bodily erotic experience, is shot through with culture and technology. However, in as much as a distinction between rationality and emotion underlies

<sup>12</sup> Science and art may be the pinnacles of creative behavior, yet Weber insists that creativity is also completely necessary in “tackl[ing]” different “problems of practical life” or in religious or even economic matters [(1919) 2012: 339-340].

Weber's official theory of action [to this see Elster 2000], Radkau is probably not correct in his assessment that it is only simple souls who believe in a "clear cut separation between eros and intellect". To say the least, Weber remained ambivalent on these issues.

Throughout the so-called *Zwischenbetrachtung* [(1919) 2009: 323-359], Weber emphasises the *opposition* between the "irrational" spheres of sexuality and art and the "rational" spheres of economics and science. The erotic virtuoso experiences, Weber writes,

[a] communion which is felt as a complete unification, as a fading of the thou. It is so overpowering that it is interpreted "symbolically": as a sacrament. The lover realizes himself [sic] to be rooted in the kernel of the truly living, which is inaccessible to any rational endeavour. He knows himself to be freed from the cold skeleton hands of rational orders. [Weber (1919) 2009: 347]

However, the opposition between rational and irrational value-spheres remains stylised and ideal-typical. It is clear that it is not absolute. On the one hand, a cultivation of the erotic exists which originates in a "knowing" or "mature love", a form of "eroticism of intellectualism" [*ibid.*]. This form of cultivation is indeed rational in the sense of being a sophisticated, rational and technologically mediated enactment of passions, emotions and orgiastic experiences. On the other hand, as we have seen, the object-oriented attitude—the "fading of the thou" allegedly so characteristic of the erotic—is no less important in scientific *Sachlichkeit* than in erotic experience. "Scientific action", the paradigmatic rational value sphere, is, we have seen, as embedded and absorbed as any other practice.

Unsurprisingly, we find the same rational structure of "systematic intensification" in mystical experience as in science and the erotic.

[Religion] claims to unlock the meaning of the world not by means of the intellect but by the virtue of a charisma of illumination. This charisma is said to be imparted only to those who make use the respective technique and free themselves from the misleading and deceptive surrogates [...]. By freeing himself from them, a religious man is said to make himself ready for the reception of the all-important grasp of the meaning of the world and of his own existence. [Weber (1919) 2009: 352-353]

Again, below the dichotomy between intellect and emotion or feeling, a rational and relational structure of "systematic intensification", that is, of mutual tuning-in and entanglement between the subjective and the objective become salient. Again, we need techniques and technologies to "make" ourselves "ready for the reception" of the agencies emerging inside our practices, only this time we are dealing with a cultivation and animation of religious beings and sentiments.

While Weber was less receptive to such religious agencies, he had his share of erotic experience in the last ten years of his life, as we now know. The erotic part of the *Zwischenbetrachtung* and the conflict between brotherly and sexual love have their origins in these events [Radkau 2009: 352]. However, what is often lost in the literature emphasising the modern value conflicts [cf. Oakes 2001; Turner and Factor 1984; Bruun 2007] is the fact that Weber also experienced the possibility of *positive synergy* among different spheres. It is in this context that Radkau's remark on the reciprocity of eros and intellect in Weber's later years belongs. In fact, all Weber's biographers, even his wife Marianne, note how Weber's enduring affairs with Else Jaffé and Mina Tobler led to creative eruptions and to his final regaining of intellectual strength [cf. Marianne Weber 1988: 517; Radkau 2009: 350, 368; Kaesler 2014: 701]. Possibly, the cultivation of object-oriented experiences in one realm may help to promote and further object-oriented attitudes in other realms.

But why did Weber not write about this parallel himself? Why did he only see the conflicts? Why did he remain dualistic? One explanation may be that while he could somewhat indirectly and abstractly describe the enjoyment of the erotic, his romantic fascination with the ability to "endure" disenchantment, existential meaninglessness and "the skeleton embrace of cold rationality" hindered him in emphatically articulating and theorising about his experience of *pleasure* in relation to science or intellectual practice. However, there can be no doubt that Weber must have been aware of the *general* importance of relational and non-purposive experiences for our psychic health and general well-being<sup>13</sup>. Again, this also means that he must have seen that the "rationalization" of the "irrational"—the emotional, bodily

<sup>13</sup> The mature Weber's experiences at Monte Verità in the Swiss Alps mirror these ambivalences. The mountain housed an "alternative" community promoting, among other things, "sexual freedom", and Weber holidayed there without Marianne for several months in 1913 and 1914. The very fact that Weber *wanted to go there* testifies to an increasing sympathy, during this epoch of his life, with ideas of "free love", no doubt sparked by experiencing the remedying effects of sound sexual relations. Verità "rejuvenates" him and enables him, finally, to kick his use of sleeping aids (bromide) [RADKAU 2009: 380]. At this point, he knows not merely how *strong* sexual desires can be but also how *important* it may be to enact and

cultivate them (for his general mental condition but also for his academic work), even *despite* the ethical consequences. In short, Weber became more tolerant toward the erotic in its various guises [cf. KAESLER 2014: 699-700].

On the other hand, the Ascona colony and notably his encounter with the "Countess", Franziska zu Reventlow, also seem to have demonstrated for him that the erotic cannot be inflated into a quasi-religious worldview without ensuing disappointment and that a one-sided and exclusive cultivation of the mere technical or purely sexual aspects of the erotic results in existential emptiness. See also HANKE [1999] and GREEN [1974].



and “natural”—is anything but “disenchanting”. The moments of self-abandonment—“flow” as it is called—in our practices are the very moments we enjoy and live most intensely [Csikszentmihalyi 2000]; it is the very moments, long or short, when we become enthused by what we are doing. These non-purposive and object-oriented moments exist in all our practices. Once more, they likely constitute a condition for agency as such.

And yet, Weber, while actively experiencing all this on his own body, cultivated a doctrine of action that tears us from our relations by placing all agency in the subject.

### *Weber's existentialism*

There is a certain passage in Weber that existentially inclined Weber scholars, such as Schuchter [1988: 280-281, 356] and Oakes [2001] but also Henrich [1952: 121-123], celebrate. Here, we find Weber's formulation of a normative ideal for the individual, encouraging him or her to assume a “conscious life-conduct” [*bewusste Lebensführung*].

People's humdrum “everyday lives”, in the truest sense of that position, make them shallow precisely in that they do not become aware [of the fact] that irreconcilably antagonistic values are thus [in practice] mixed up with each other [...]. Above all, they do not want to become aware of [that fact]. On the contrary, they evade the choice between “God” and the “Devil”, and the fundamental personal decision as to which of the conflicting values belongs to the realm of the one, and which to the other. [...] [L]ife as a whole, if it is to be lived in full awareness and is not just to unfold like a natural event—involves a series of fundamental decisions through which the soul, as Plato [describes it], *chooses* its own fate. [Weber (1917) 2012: 315]

We have already been here before. I do not wish to criticise the idea that we should live “consciously”. It becomes problematic, however, when this attitude goes hand-in-hand with a denigration of attachments and the idea that authentic “human” life, lived in “full awareness”, tears the subject from its objective and collective relations and places it in a vacuum situated above “everyday life” and its “shallowness”. This view is motivated, as we have seen, by a one-sided understanding of habit, seeing it as “automaticity” or as a “natural occurrence” and not as sensitising skills for relating. It is characterised by a disregard for the intensity, presence and demanding and creative nature of everyday practices—not to speak of the realities of contemporary Western skilled post-Fordist working life. The passage is from

1917. Ten years later such impulses would resurface in Martin Heidegger's concept of "authenticity" [*Eigentlichkeit*] and his critique of the everydayness of "*Dasein*". However, contrary to their existentialist interpreters, Weber and Heidegger knew that this could only be half of the truth. They were both so sensitive to the empirical that their work remained ambivalent. To be sure, the subject separated from its "being in the world" (Heidegger) or from the "task at hand" (Weber) is not less "shallow" than the everyday or invested individual. In fact, the opposite is the case.

From a relational perspective, just as "meaning" is not "bestowed" upon mute and blind objects by the human subject, it is not "conveyed" by modern man "upon his life" [Schluchter 1988: 348]. Virtually all the well-known Weber interpreters remain tied to this dichotomous pose—and the idea of an inflated or "free" individual with its alleged "subjective" choice [cf. Turner and Factor 1984: 41; Bruun 2007: 14; Oakes 1988: 146; 2001]<sup>14</sup>. From a relational perspective, there is no such thing as a "conscious" existential "choice" in the detached, unidirectional and purposive sense in which these authors celebrate it. Just as in Weber's account of the coming of scientific ideas, "decisions" surface, crystalize or assert *themselves*, and complex existential ones do so to an even greater degree. Just as in Weber's account of science in action, existential decisions emerge through embedded "work with the material". Of course, we, as individuals, contribute to these processes, yet we do not control them. There is no subject that "makes its own decisions" in an emphatic sense. Like all other action, making decisions involves a renunciation of self-consciousness and self-transparency. However, this does not mean that ultimate decisions are "irrational" or "arbitrary" [cf. Oakes 1988: 145ff.; 2001; Turner and Factor 1984: 41; Bruun 2007: 14; Oakes 1988: 146; 2001]. In fact, it means that they are not.

Again, it is dualist thinking that leads Weber and his interpreters astray: *either* there is mere "natural occurrence", *or* there is subjective responsibility; *either* there is (natural) determinism, *or* there is (human) freedom; *either* the flashlight is held by the subject itself *or* by somebody else behind its back. In all cases, the objective side remains dark and mute. Due to a lack of relationalism, the Kantians obscure what actually occurs. They simply cannot describe how we, at

<sup>14</sup> Though Bruun remains interestingly ambivalent: "If a person finds a certain element of life theoretically 'interesting', 'worth knowing about', he more or less explicitly

thereby makes a choice in favour of the value of truth" [2007: 29]. In such formulations, the "free" choice is undercut by relations [See also BRUUN 2007: 27].

one and the same time, invest ourselves and become invested; how we—sometimes through very complex methods of mediation and enhancement—become interested in objects that are always more than we put into them, objects that let us “find” and “discover”, excite and “hold” us and take the lead and direct us in our common endeavours. This is the way in which all our practices are structured, including the practice of decision-making. There is no such thing as an “irrational” leap made by the subject alone. There is no such thing as a “subjective” choice. The place outside the world where existentialists meet to make such decisions or take such leaps simply does not exist.

Weber feels this. Toward the end of his anything-but-subject-centred lecture on the “calling” of scientific practice, he delivers the following relational encouragement to the prospective scholars in the audience.

[We should] attend to our work and face up to the “demands of the day”, both personally and professionally. And those demands are plain and simple, as long as each of us finds and obeys the daemon who holds the threads of *his* [sic] life”.  
[(1919) 2012: 353]

Such complex and relational “psychology” finds no access to the existential mind. Weber tells us, however, that we are already “held”. The problem of the antagonist “value sphere”, the problem of “decision”, is one of *too many* relations. If there were no conflicting relations, there would be no decisions to make. In this view, there is no choice without engagement; there are no decisions made by subjects who are not already related and relating. Just as importantly, the reason why there is no leap, no decision made by a “subject”, is because the Daemons we relate to meet us halfway, because reality comes alive inside our practices and because the either/or that existentialists believe in is a mirage.

For the same dualistic reasons, these authors do not see the crucial difference between Weber’s relational ideas of *Sachlichkeit*, on the one hand, and the transcendental or structural frames of the *value sphere*, on the other. They overlook the relational aspects of Weber’s *Sachlichkeit* and can only see Weber’s idea of value spheres in structural terms. They focus on how the “conceptual articulation” of these “value spheres” becomes ever more precise and refined in modern history, how each sphere is thus becoming increasingly autonomous, i.e., characterised by “immanent logics” and specific “laws” [*Eigensetzlichkeit*] [see paradigmatically Oakes 2001: 196-197; but also Henrich 1952: 127; Bruun 2007: 35; Turner and Factor

1984: 53]. From a relational perspective, however, this is merely philosophical hypostatization. In reality, these “conceptual articulations” are motivated by concrete work with actual objects, actual material, and they *result* from this work. They do not *explain* it. As we have seen, all the “hard work”, all the labour with tedious or even “tortuous” conceptual articulations, all the “passion” that drives the scientist, is called forth by a concrete scientific object, but it could as well have been a God, a sexually desired object, or the artwork in process that *wants* to be so articulated; that *provokes* the passionate behaviour; that *wants* the scientist to enrich her methods or invent new concepts, tools or practices in order to satisfy its needs. There is good reason for repeating Weber’s cautious paragraph presented above.

It is perfectly true that “matter-of-factness” [*Sachlichkeit*] and “expertness” [*fachmäßigkeit*] are not necessarily identical with the rule of general and abstract norms. Indeed this does not even hold in the case of the modern administration of justice. [(1922) 1978: 978-979]

Detaching the value spheres from their objects amounts to a reification of structures or norms beyond the practices in which they belong. Moreover, this detachment makes an even graver mistake possible: the belief in the objective existence of these value spheres and their ability to “explain” or “determine” action from without. Polemically, from a relational and antireductionist perspective, this amounts to reducing, say, the unfolding, dynamical and rich reality of a football game to its constitutive “rules” and attempting to explain it by resorting to these rules.

### *Conclusion*

This paper has attempted to cultivate a relational streak in Max Weber’s thought overlooked by his interpreters. We first found this object-oriented impulse in Weber’s depictions of creative action. While in the early texts in his methodology, this dimension is held in strong chains, restricted to a “psychological” register held separate from the “methodological” and “rational” work with concepts and causal attributions, it is nonetheless a crucial part of scientific practice. However, it is just as evident that this “psychological” dimension gains importance over the course of Weber’s methodological oeuvre. Whereas the early methodological texts are centred on epistemological issues, on the very “constitution” of the scientific object within

a Neo-Kantian Perspective, the later texts entail long object-oriented passages on the coming of ideas, creativity and *Sachlichkeit*.

At the same time, the early concept of “personality”, understood as an ideal of a rationalised and self-imposed systematisation of “life-conduct” in the service of a chosen “ultimate value”, is replaced (or at least complemented) by an object-oriented and relational ideal of “personality” that rejects the separation between the “personal” and the “objective” that is so characteristic of the early conception. Indeed, once we allow for attachments, reciprocities and relations with the objective beings we engage inside our practices, we have no logical or metaphysical need for either transcendental values or autonomous individuals.

However, not only does Weber nowhere theorise or reflect on these Non-Kantian developments in his proper thought, but around the very same time as he makes his twin lectures on politics and science—the two most object-oriented texts in his *oeuvre*—in 1919, he completes an outline of a theory of action that remains subject-centred, dualistic and detached. Weber’s work is indeed an interesting and ambivalent case. Nowhere else in the history of sociology do we find dualist and non-dualist attitudes confronting one another in such an unmediated and tense relationship. Nowhere else do we find a theory so apt at overcoming the usual dichotomies haunting European intellectual history, and nowhere do we find texts so haunted by these very same dichotomies.

In this paper, I have warned that a subject-centred, structural and dualist vocabulary should be used with utmost care. It tears apart what originally belongs together and silences the objects we relate with inside our practices. Weber’s *early* concept of personality bears witness to this impairment and the violence it entails. In contrast, in Weber’s late advice to the young scientist, in his concept of creativity, in his late ideal of personality and in his “methodological” reflections on *Sachlichkeit*, it becomes absolutely clear that in reality, mind and matter, subject and object, freedom and determinism and action and behaviour are essentially interwoven. None of these pairs can be torn apart without destroying the complex reciprocities and entanglements we constantly enact.

### *Discussion*

To conclude this long paper, I will permit myself some remarks on the general importance of the relational perspective and its criticism of

conventional theories of action. These remarks are centered on the relationalist claim to move beyond the actor-structure template [for a recent attempt to construct a Weberian actor-structure model, see Stachura 2009].

Let us start with yet another example of how the actor-structure dynamic plays itself out in Weber. The following quotation is famous.

Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the "world images" that have been created by "ideas" have like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest. [Weber (1922-1923) 2009: 280]

Here Weber moves from actor to structure, from freedom to determinism. Yet had he refrained from rooting "interest" inside the individual in the first place and positioned it where it really emerges—that is *between* the individual and the "material" or "ideal" object that interests him or her—he would not feel the need for external "determination" so acutely. It is obvious that this is the traditional Weber speaking here, and not the relational one we found in the descriptions of scientific creativity analysed above. Indeed, had Weber permitted himself to make the scholar's scientific "interests" equally a product of the wishes and imperatives coming from the object side—as he does in his last lecture—he would not have had to call in epochal "world images" or "values" holding this relation from without. Had he trusted the scientific subject's actual engagement in the *Sache*, he would not feel the same need for the external and limiting "laws" of "value spheres".

Let us now move on to some more general observations. A usual starting point for the movement towards structural perspectives in sociological theorizing is the critique of the transparent and "free" individual. The typical critique of individualism understands that the freedom of the subject is not absolute and that the subject is not transparent to itself, but it does not see that this lack of transparency is also the place where freedom resides, i.e. that the subject is limited through its own investment, empowered by its own renouncement of control, and that determination and freedom coalesce in the moments of improvisation present in all action. The structural account seeks to decentre the individual; it seeks, as it were, to distribute action. But since it cannot move into the individuals' actual practices, it needs to find its hold elsewhere and must hypostatize independent determining forces: values, norms, culture, discourse, genes.

On the other hand, the structural account has notorious problems with accounting for change. This is were the opposite movement

begins. Once the subject is circumvented by a determining structure, there is no way to retrieve a sense of dynamism, the “individualists” correctly see. To be sure, interesting and ingenious analyses have emerged in the structural tradition—consider Bourdieu’s famous analysis of the gendering of the “Cabylian House” or the best of Barthes’s or Foucault’s early structuralism—yet the results remain nevertheless static. These analyses simply seem to venture too far from the dynamic and creative character of actual practice and experience. Some readers begin to miss “real people”. However, the tragedy is that these claims are always made in the name of the purposive and autonomous subject because, so the critics seem to think, there is nowhere else to ground them. As long as the dichotomy between actor and structure is in command, we can only diminish structure by augmenting the actor. This is what happens, negatively, when Garfinkel insists that Parsons “over-socialized” individual is a “cultural dope” or, positively, when Foucault is commended for “inviting the subject back in” in his late work. The “subject” must be allowed to “play a part” and this does not mean as already engaged and absorbed in its relations, but in terms of a strange and empty sort of freedom that has to be limited from without or through an “internalization” of these external forces. Ultimately, and despite all kinds of attempts at mediation or reconciliation, what determines and limits the subject can only be seen in contrastive terms, as hindrances and obstacles to the otherwise “free” individual, i.e. as “external” forces “imposing” themselves upon the subjects or limiting them in other ways without their being aware of it.

Ultimately, as long as the concept of intentionality remains unidirectional, as long as the point of departure lies either in the subject or behind its back, there is no way to describe an individual that leans on mediating objects or artefacts, invests itself and forgets itself, improvises and even surprises itself through its practices. None of the two accounts can really push forward to such a relational scenario. As long as freedom and determinism remain opposed, as long as freedom is placed in the subject and determinism somewhere behind its back, it is impossible to reach a perspective where freedom and creativity becomes indistinguishable from determination and responsiveness.

Relationalism has finally moved beyond these dichotomies. The basic assumption is that a relational interdependency exists between us and the objective agencies we engage in our practices. This and nothing else is what is meant by the controversial term “non-human agency”. It simply means that we must allow for Daemons of all sizes and shapes to

help us con-centrate, that intentionality is reciprocal. We help these agencies to gain autonomy and agency and thus to make claims upon us—claims that we can only redeem if we invest ourselves even further. This is what happens when we make music or love; when we become absorbed in hobbies, sports or discussions or when we engage divine beings or scientific objects. We determine and become determined; we are active and passive at the same time. Eruptions of creativity occur when this dynamic intensifies. They occur at the height of absorption: when we make a pass in a football game that we had no idea that we would make seconds before, when the person draw suddenly captures the intended expression, or when the right words, the precise formulation, the words that do justice to a complex object, come to us while engaged in writing or discussion. To describe creative action, and to pay due justice to the intense, dynamic and open-ended reality of practice, we need to analyse it as object-oriented and enmeshed in non-human agency. We need to understand that object orientation is a form of absorption—a form of “passion” Weber says—which comprises purposiveness *and* non-purposiveness, acuteness *and* habit and transparency *and* self-abandonment. This is what Weber’s descriptions of scientific practice and scholarly *Sachlichkeit* demonstrate so vividly.

At his best, Weber, imaginatively and creatively describing proper empirical experiences, finds a multitude of various agencies and multiple interdependencies inside these practices. He remains *metaphysically open*. He simply investigates *what* acts and *how* it acts as empirical questions—and avoids the *a priori* ontological distinctions or dichotomies which otherwise haunt his thinking and all too often decide these questions dogmatically for him in advance. This is an example to be followed. Taking Weber’s rudimentary descriptions in his lecture on the calling of science as *paradigma*, we should learn to discern as many agencies in our practices as possible and to multiply causal directions, mediations and con-centrations. We should learn to describe the mediating role of technologies and artefacts and the collective and individual uses of bodily and intellectual techniques intended to refine and enliven the objects taking centre stage in these absorbed practices. We should learn to focus on what the Daemons do to “hold” us, how they draw us closer, help us focus, interest us, attract our attention, surprise us and place demands on us. Finally, we should learn to describe how these Daemons help to bring about, shape and construct *collective* collaboration and sentiment with other humans, forms of *effervescence*, which then, in turn, further animate and agitate our relation to the object [cf. Schiermer 2016]. Weber had less regard for



this additional collective and energizing factor, yet he clearly sees that creativity and creative practice are not exclusive human prerogatives, but something we share with the Daemons that hold us. Ultimately, creative practice takes place where the individual, the objective and the collective dimensions of practice bleed into one another. This is where we live.

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## Résumé

Cet article propose de mettre au jour une théorie alternative de l'action chez Max Weber. En me basant sur les descriptions qu'il donne de la pratique scientifique, j'affirme que l'on observe chez Weber des impulsions « relationnistes », qui entrent en contradiction avec les perspectives kantienne, dualistes et centrées sur le sujet, qui imprègnent par ailleurs en grande partie sa pensée. Le papier est structuré en deux parties principales. Dans la première partie, essentiellement critique, après une brève esquisse de mon approche relationnelle, je reviens sur quelques passages kantien bien connus de Weber afin d'en montrer les conséquences théoriques et empiriques indésirables. J'étudie la théorie wébérienne « officielle » de l'action et de la compréhension, les concepts de rationalité et de psychologie, ainsi que son approche de la médiation technologique. Dans la seconde partie, plus positive, j'étudie l'approche wébérienne de la créativité, en m'intéressant en particulier aux traits relationnels présents dans les descriptions de la pratique et de l'expérience scientifique. Je montre comment le concept tardif de « personnalité » repose sur des attitudes à la fois relationnelles et « orientées-objet ». J'étudie comment les deux dimensions de la créativité et de la personnalité fusionnent chez Weber dans son concept de « Sachlichkeit ». Enfin, j'apporte certaines observations biographiques et j'analyse le conflit entre les interprétations existentialistes et relationnelles de Weber. Pour clore cet article, je discute les implications générales de la perspective relationnelle.

*Mots-clés* : Dualisme ; Créativité ; Kantisme ; Relationnisme ; Sociologie Centrée-Objet ; Personnalité ; Théorie de l'action ; Weber.

## Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel setzt sich zum Ziel, eine alternative Handlungstheorie bei Max Weber aufzuzeigen. Ausgehend von seinen Beschreibungen wissenschaftlichen Handelns, behaupte ich, dass bei Weber „Beziehungs“-Impulse beobachtet werden können, die im Widerspruch zu seinen kantianischen, dualistischen und thematisch-zentrierten Perspektiven stehen, die größtenteils seine Gedanken bestimmen. Dieser Beitrag ist in zwei Abschnitte gegliedert. Im ersten, hauptsächlich kritischen Teil, nach einer kurzen Darstellung meines Beziehungsansatzes, werde ich einige, sehr bekannte kantianische Abschnitte bei Weber erläutern, um unerwünschte theoretische und empirische Konsequenzen darzustellen. Ich untersuche die „offizielle“ Theorie Webers in puncto Handlung und Verständnis, Rationalitäts- und Psychologiekonzepte sowie sein Verständnis von technologischer Vermittlung. Im zweiten, positiven Teil, geht es um den weberianischen Ansatz der Kreativität, wobei ich mich besonders für die in Praxis und wissenschaftlichen Erfahrungen präsenten Beziehungen interessiere. Ich beschreibe des Weiteren, wie das späte Konzept der „Persönlichkeit“ sowohl auf relationalen und objektbezogenen Verhaltensweisen basiert. Ich untersuche, wie die beiden Dimensionen der Kreativität und der Persönlichkeit bei Weber in sein Konzept der „Sachlichkeit“ einfließen. Nach einigen biografischen Beobachtungen analysiere ich den Konflikt zwischen den existentialistischen und relationalen Interpretationen Webers. Abschließend diskutiere ich die allgemeinen Auswirkungen auf die Beziehungsperspektive.

*Schlüsselwörter* : Dualität; Kreativität; Kantianismus; Relational; Objektorientierte Soziologie; Persönlichkeit; Handlungstheorie; Weber.