

Value-Spheres or 'Validity-Spheres': Weber, Habermas and Modernity

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Abstract

Jürgen Habermas argues that Weber's discussion of processes of rationalization across value-spheres bears out the Neo-Kantian conception of three emergent domains of reason in the modern world: theoretical reason, embodied in science and technology; practical reason, embodied in law and morality; and aesthetic-expressive reason, embodied in art and self-presentation. This paper assesses Habermas's attempt to derive from Weber's empirical sociology his own conception of certain universal structures of communication based on a theory of social evolution. The paper concludes that while Habermas's thesis is not without important strengths that correct the more 'decisionist' tendencies of Weber's writing, Weber's own reflections still suggest the need for a more culturally differentiated understanding of modernity than that provided by Habermas.

Keywords Habermas, modernity, Neo-Kantianism, rationalization, value-spheres, Weber

Jürgen Habermas argues that Weber's discussion of the internal rationalization and differentiation of spheres in the 'Intermediate Reflections' of the *Sociology of Religion* bears out the Neo-Kantian conception of three emergent domains of reason in the modern world: theoretical reason, embodied in science and technology; practical reason, embodied in universalist morality and legal forms; and aesthetic-expressive reason, embodied in art, erotic life and cultural self-presentation (Habermas 1984: 143-271; Weber 1948a). Habermas holds that these three domains correspond to the three emergent 'validity-spheres' of social communication in its modern, fully differentiated form: the spheres of propositional truth, embodied in factual statements; normative rightness, embodied in commands and precepts; and subjective sincerity, embodied in expressive avowals:

The cultural rationalisation from which the structures of consciousness typical of modern societies emerge embraces cognitive, aesthetic expressive and moral-evaluative elements of the religious tradition. With science and technology, with autonomous art and the values of expres-

sive self-presentation, with universal legal and moral representations, there emerges a differentiation of *three value spheres, each of which follow its own logic.*

As soon as science, morality and art have been differentiated into autonomous spheres of values, each under *one* universal validity claim—truth, normative rightness, authenticity or beauty—objective advances, improvements, enhancements become possible in a sense specific to each (Habermas 1984: 164-65, 176-77).

Habermas maintains that Weber's account of these processes provides the resources for a general theory of social evolution, the significance of which is not limited to Western developments but extends in principle to all societal change (Habermas 1984: 157-85). With Schluchter (1981), he sees a clear logic of social development in Weber in which increasing rationalization across spheres gives rise to ever more differentiated structures of cognition and moral consciousness (Habermas 1984: 225-42). With Tenbruck (1980), he identifies rationalization in world-pictures and symbolic systems as the explanatory key to Weber's theory of modernity as a whole (Habermas 1984: 195), and, following Parsons, he distinguishes between three functional levels of rationalization for all social contexts: 'cultural' rationalization in world-pictures; 'societal' rationalization, in the economy and state; and rationalization of personality structures *qua* principle-guided conduct of life (Habermas 1984: 167).

My concern in this article is to probe some of the implications of Habermas's thesis and to evaluate its warrant. What are the differences between Weber's empirical 'value-spheres' and Habermas' transcendental 'validity-spheres'? Although Habermas is careful to show how the normative structures he invokes can only be understood pragmatically in the context of empirical social development and never speaks of the 'transcendental' in any unqualified sense, there are clearly some important presuppositions of his argument we need to pick out here.¹ Is he right to read in to Weber's largely his-

1. In some early writings, Habermas spoke of three basic validity dimensions of rational speech as 'quasi-transcendental' properties of communicative competence. By this he meant that while they constituted necessary presuppositions of all meaningful communication between subjects, these presuppositions were in no way to be seen as innate ideas or *a priori* principles in the classical Idealist sense. Rather, they were to be seen as emerging historically through processes of concrete social interaction, along the lines of C.S. Peirce's pragmatic-evolutionary interpretation of the Kantian transcendental deduction (Habermas 1973). Since the late 1970s, Habermas has preferred to describe his position as resting on a sociologically embedded theory of 'universal pragmatics', in contrast to the more formally

toricist adaptation of turn-of-the-century German Neo-Kantianism his own contemporary, 'discourse-theoretic' Neo-Kantianism? Do Weber's analyses imply a truly universal model of rationalization in the way Habermas affirms, or should we insist on a more contextualist understanding?

Addressing these questions requires first acknowledging the sources of Habermas's interpretation. At least three sources should be mentioned.

A central claim of *The Theory of Communicative Action* and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas's two most widely read works, is that the Enlightenment project of universal critique in pursuit of free and just social conditions can be upheld and developed, despite its various Romantic and post-Nietzschean detractors, provided it is no longer couched in the ethnocentric and anthropocentric language of classical European philosophy but is reconstructed in terms of the pragmatic orientations to rationality of social actors in daily intersubjective communication (Habermas 1987a: 312-42). In place of the old European metaphysics of transcendental subjectivity, we must now look to the inherent capacity of social agents to discursively 'redeem' the various validity-claims they implicitly attach to their utterances and actions through reasoned argument and intercultural dialogue (Habermas 1992). Weber's sociology of modernity allows Habermas to locate these capacities in the context of a general historical process of secularization. Habermas also enlists Durkheim in support of what he calls the 'linguistification of the sacred' in which traditional sacred images are gradually transformed by abstract discursive systems, such as natural rights theories and international law (Habermas 1987b: 43-111). Piaget's and Chomsky's analyses of cognitive development and linguistic competence and Kohlberg's theory of the stages of moral consciousness provide Habermas (and Schluchter) with the criteria of a general social learning process at both the ontogenetic and phylogenetic levels (Habermas 1979, 1990, 1993).

A second source is Habermas's concern to develop a less pessimistic account of the future of capitalism than that outlined by Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) in their reading of Weber in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Although Habermas accepts that Horkheimer and Adorno well reflected Weber's own mood of resignation at a world dominated by the iron cage of bureaucratic regimentation and meaninglessness, Habermas maintains that they neglected the import of Weber's other

Kantian theory of 'transcendental pragmatics' developed by his close colleague, K.-O. Apel (Habermas 1979).

insights into processes of formal liberation and democratization (Habermas 1987b: 303-31). Indeed Habermas suggests that Weber himself overvalued the significance of his analyses of instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) at the expense of his notion of value-rationality and other, more substantive elements of rationality implied in his work:

On the one hand, Marx, Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno identify societal rationalisation with expansion of the instrumental and strategic rationality of action contexts; on the other hand, they all have a vague notion of a [more] encompassing societal rationality—whether in the concept of an association of free producers, in the historical model of an ethically rational conduct of life, or in the idea of fraternal relations with a resurrected nature—and it is against this that they measure the relative position of empirically described processes of rationalisation (Habermas 1984: 144).

Rejecting Weber's doom-laden vision of fragmentation and conflict between spheres in which 'what is rational from one point of view may well be irrational from another' (Weber 1930: 26), Habermas affirms that Weber's analyses of modernity demonstrate not the wholesale disintegration of social reason but, on the contrary, its *differentiation* into at once *distinctive yet interdependent* spheres:

It is, of course, true that with the appearance of modern structures of consciousness the immediate unity of the true, the good, and the perfect, which is suggested by religious and metaphysical basic concepts, falls apart. ... But Weber goes too far when he infers from the loss of substantial unity of reason a polytheism of gods and demons struggling with one another, with their irreconcilability rooted in a pluralism of incompatible validity claims. The unity of rationality in the multiplicity of value spheres rationalised according to their inner logics is secured precisely at the formal level of the argumentative redemption of validity claims (Habermas 1984: 249).

This is related to a third motive in Habermas's critique: his concern to resolve Weber's notorious *decisionism*. Several critics such as Runciman (1972) and Turner and Factor (1984) have contested Weber's claim that in the age of value pluralism we can only deliberate rationally over appropriate means to ends, or the consequences of ends, or the consistency of one end with another, but never over our ultimate choices of ends: that we must simply assert our allegiances and choose as between God and the Devil (Weber 1948b: 148). Habermas is not alone in rejecting this diagnosis of the times in which only those of tough moral character rise above the quagmire of ethical confusions and prove themselves in the authenticity with which they devote themselves to their chosen value-axioms. Yet Habermas also goes

further than these critics in proposing that Weber's discussion of value-rationality still permits a way of reconstructing his theses on rationalization in cultural and ethical life without the decisionist aspect. This is Habermas's suggestion that in *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber's discussion of methodical conduct of life guided by principles supports the idea of increasingly post-conventional forms of morality governed by abstract precepts that promote discursively negotiable normative structures:

In normative questions Weber is a sceptic; he is convinced that the decision between different value systems (however clarified analytically) cannot be grounded, cannot be rationally justified.... Nevertheless, the *way* in which the actor grounds his preferences, in which he is oriented to values, is for Weber an aspect under which an action can be viewed as rationalisable... The rationality of the values underlying action preferences is not measured by their material content but by formal properties, that is, by whether they are so fundamental that they can ground *a mode of life based on principles*. Only values that can be abstracted and *generalised* into principles, internalised largely as *formal* principles, and applied *procedurally*, have so intensive a power to orient action that they can cut across various particular situations and, in the extreme case, systematically penetrate all spheres of life and bring an entire biography, or even the history of social groups, under a unifying idea (Habermas 1984: 243).

Clearly there is much in these proposals that goes beyond the explicit text of Weber's writing, and much that it leaves out. It should be emphasized that one need not take objection to this *per se*, since Habermas's aims are avowedly constructive rather than exegetical—to develop his own theoretical constructs with Weber's aid, rather than a purely historical study. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile noting some important discrepancies and omissions in his reading before proceeding any further.

Firstly, Weber does not actually mention three clear value-spheres consonant with the Neo-Kantian schema. The 'Intermediate Reflections' enumerate five spheres: the economic, the political, the aesthetic, the erotic and the intellectual, not Habermas's three pairings of two into six. Weber's method of elucidating these spheres also follows no obvious deductive schema; it is empirical throughout and steadfastly renounces any overarching normative programme or teleology. Although Weber's Neo-Kantianism does allow for normative 'taking of positions' in relation to values (*die Stellungnahme*), such position-taking occurs outside the sphere of social science for Weber and is an aspect of our orientation to lived cultural values in national politics and social policy (cf. Weber 1948b; 1949a). As is well known, Weber

frequently counsels against normative judgment in sociology; and it is this that underlies his view that to describe something as 'rational' or 'rationalized' is emphatically *not* (or ought not to be) to express approval or disapproval. He states in the clearest terms:

When the normatively valid is the object of empirical investigation, its normative validity is disregarded. Its 'existence' and not its 'validity' is what concerns the investigator (Weber 1949a: 39).

Thus Weber held that if, in our increasingly secularized Western world, our calling is for science and 'intellectual' understanding, then one of our ultimate choices must be for 'intellectual integrity.' When our vocation is for science, we become partisan, as it were, *not* to be partisan: we take a stand *not* to take a stand. This does not require us to suspend our value-orientations altogether but rather to make use of the deductive methods of logical analysis and inductive methods of empirical observation and hypothesis-contruction in as formally consistent and impartial a manner as possible. Thus Weber comments that empirical science can therefore tell no one 'what he [*sic*] *should* do—but only what he *can* do—and under certain circumstances—what he wishes to do' (1949c: 54). Science can furnish 'methods of thinking, the tools and the training for thought' (1948b: 150) and, above all, 'clarity': assistance in forming 'an account of the ultimate meaning of one's own conduct' (1948b: 152), but it cannot itself create this meaning or make our decisions for us. In no way, then, can Weber's concept of the normative be compared to Habermas's very different, 'discourse-theoretic' conception of the 'internal connection' between sociological description and normative critique.²

2. Habermas maintains that an 'internal connection' exists between 'questions of meaning' (descriptive-expository questions) and 'questions of validity' (normative questions), to the extent that just as, for Donald Davidson and the theorists of formal semantics, we cannot understand the *meaning* of a sentence without knowing the conditions under it would be true to utter the sentence—its *truth-conditions*—so we cannot interpret the meaning of a cultural object without simultaneously asking ourselves whether we consider it a true or right or rational piece of communicative action. In Habermas's words: 'If, in order to understand an expression, the interpreter must *bring to mind the reasons* with which a speaker would if necessary and under suitable conditions defend its validity, he is *himself* drawn into the process of assessing validity claims. For reasons are of such a nature that they cannot be described in the attitude of a third person, that is, without reactions of affirmation or negation or abstention. The interpreter would not have understood what a "reason" is if he did not reconstruct it with its claim to provide grounds; that is, if he did not give it a *rational interpretation* in Max Weber's sense. The *description* of reasons demands *eo ipso* an *evaluation*' (Habermas 1984: 115). For

Secondly, although the concept of value-rationality is an important and perhaps relatively neglected element of Weber's work, it remains the case that purposive rationality or instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) is Weber's primary model of rationality. It is the cardinal lense through he surveys the discontents of modernity; and Habermas cannot escape that fact. Furthermore, the sheer virulence with which Weber denies any possibility of negotiation over 'ultimate values' in the age of science also makes it very hard to see how his position could be reconciled with Habermas' thesis of interdependent competences for argumentation in the moral and aesthetic spheres. Although the *Protestant Ethic* does indeed speak of the rise of methodical conduct of life 'guided by principles', it does not speak of universalising ethical principles in the specific sense Habermas associates with the rise of human rights and legal formalization. In *The Protestant Ethic* Weber seems to have been more concerned to trace the rise and fall of a particularly exemplary kind of ethical habitus, rather than to outline any general theory of rationalization or moral development, as Hennis (1988, 1996) has notably argued.³ Other scholars such as Albrow (1987), Ouattara (1996) and Osborne (1998: 137-47) have illuminated Weber's view of the ways in which purposive rationality and value-rationality can remain in a complex interlocking relationship even in the context of widespread technological domination.⁴ This therefore

a critique of Habermas on this score, see Harrington (1999, 2001).

3. See also the four 'Anti-Critical Replies' to reviews of *The Protestant Ethic* by Karl Fischer and Felix Rachfahl, 1907–1910, which generally tend to support Hennis's view (Weber 2001).

4. Albrow (1987) suggests that *Zweckrationalität* ought not necessarily to be equated with instrumental rationality in the sense of material technological mastery. For Weber allows us to think of purposively rational conduct of life in the sense of an ethical technique of life that combines hypothetical imperatives within the framework of unconditional categorical imperatives, which is the not the same as technological domination over nature, nor administrative technocracy. Weber allows us to see how technological advances can proceed alongside simultaneous purposive rationalization in the ethical procedures that regulate industrial applications. Albrow cites the case of *in vitro* fertilization as an example of a social phenomenon issuing in two parallel dimensions of purposive rationalization, occurring in both (1) the technical instruments that make artificial insemination possible and (2) the various moves toward procedural clarification of the principles governing acceptable and non-acceptable applications of technology in medical ethics commissions (in this case the *Warnock Committee on Human Fertilisation and Embryology in the UK*, 1984). On the idea of ethical 'techniques of life' and 'ethical expertise' in the sense of neo-Stoic virtue-ethics, see also Osborne (1998: 71-99), and Harrington (2000).

suggests that despite decisionist overtones, Weber still gives enough of a sense of possible value-oriented guidance to purposive rationalization in modernity not to need the kind of wholesale corrective systematization Habermas tries to confer on his views.

Thirdly, Weber is far from unequivocal about the cultural universality of the developments he describes. Although the declared aim of the *Sociology of Religion* as stated in its famous Preface is to elicit events of 'universal-historical significance', Weber characteristically hedges the universality of occidental rationalism as something 'we at least like to think':

A product of modern European civilisation studying the problem of universal history is bound to ask himself, and rightly so, to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilisation, and in Western civilisation only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (at least as we like to think) lie on a line of development having *universal* significance and validity (Weber 1930: 13).

Alongside this interest in universalism, then, Weber is extremely keen to avoid those evolutionary narratives of irreversible unilinear development so popular with the nineteenth century and instead to stress the radical discontinuity and diversity of different social courses of rationalization—from the great civilizations of the East to the earliest days of Western antiquity (cf. Ruano 1996: 42-59). Nonetheless, while acknowledging Weber's caveats over the universal-historical significance of Western rationalism, Habermas maintains that Weber cannot consistently develop these reservations without undermining his own argument (Habermas 1984: 178). Weber cannot without relativistic implications at once affirm the universality of the events he describes and simultaneously withdraw this statement as something merely 'perceived by us': the reservation can hold at most as a methodological caveat, not as a substantive proviso. Habermas therefore argues that in respect of fundamental societal structures Weber's position remains universalist and that his concerns about the possible historical relativity of Western developments only apply to the level of what Habermas calls the contingent '*cultural contents*' of Western traditions:

The universalist position does not have to deny the pluralism and the incompatibility of historical versions of 'civilised humanity'; but it regards this multiplicity of forms of life as limited to *cultural contents*, and it asserts that every culture must share certain *formal properties* of the modern understanding of the world, if it is at all to attain a certain degree of 'conscious awareness' or 'sublimation.' Thus the universalist assumption refers to a few necessary structural properties of the mod-

ern life forms as such. If, however, we regard this universalist view as itself cogent only *for us*, the relativism that was rejected at the theoretical level returns at the metatheoretical level. I do not think that relativism, whether of the first or second order, is compatible with the conceptual framework in which Weber accounts for the rationality problematic. Certainly he had his relativistic reservations. They derived from a source that would have disappeared had he traced the peculiarity of Occidental rationalism not to a cultural singularity, but to the selective pattern that rationalisation processes assumed under the conditions of modern capitalism (Habermas 1984: 180).

What Habermas means by 'cultural contents' in this context turns on his sense of the difference between, on the one hand, the immanent normative presuppositions of rational speech and behaviour that hold in principle across all contexts of social interaction, and, on the other hand, the different ways in which cultures can *signify* these norms in particular symbolic frameworks (Habermas 1987b: 43-111). In the transition from traditionalism to modernity, social lifeworlds are rationalized at manifold levels: not only in the political and economic spheres but also in the moral and aesthetic spheres according to emergent discursive competences expressed in legal systems, constitutions and critical publics. In the cultural process of disenchantment, local customs, traditions and myths do not entirely disappear; they remain as a symbolic resource on which social agents can draw to express and make motivationally meaningful the dilemmas that confront them in daily life, but they are no longer themselves the binding source of validity through which agents can resolve these dilemmas. Actors find themselves required instead to discursively redeem their everyday validity claims through universalizing argumentative practices. In the face of societal imperatives of cohesion across nations and cultures, it is these basic discursive structures of cognition and moral consciousness that define the course of social evolution, not the particularistic cultural contents of specific lifeworlds. Thus 'cultural contents' for Habermas are only the contingent historical variations on the these more deep-seated cognitive and normative structures.

This allows Habermas to argue that the specific *cultural* aspects of rationalization in the West are not the only possible forms of rationalization at the *societal* level and further that the specific *cultural* outcomes of occidental rationalism described by Weber in terms of fragmentation, moral nihilism, the iron cage and so on, are, or were, by no means inevitable (Habermas 1984: 181-85). Habermas argues that Weber's nightmare scenario of irreconcilable value-systems caused by the evacuation of all unifying social meaning and the predominance of purely technical elements of rationality both arbitrarily generalizes

from a largely contingent tendency of Western capitalism and conflates the difference between particularistic cultural 'value-contents' of historical traditions and the universal 'value-standards' of modern consciousness *tout court*. As an example, Habermas cites the way in which Weber refers in *Science as a Vocation* in one and the same breath to conflict between the values of truth, morality, the beautiful and the sacred *and* to conflict between the values of French and German national culture.⁵

The value systems of French and German culture are in fact good examples of historical configurations of value contents that cannot be reduced to one another. But the pluralism of value *contents* has nothing to do with the differences among the *aspects of validity* under which questions of truth, justice and taste can be differentiated out and rationally dealt with as such (Habermas 1984: 250).

One problem with this argument, unfortunately, is that it begs us to accept Habermas's highly loaded distinction between 'societal' and 'cultural' levels of rationalization.⁶ What permits Habermas to distinguish in this rather legislative fashion between certain supposedly deep-seated structures and other merely superficial features? This seems at odds with his commitment to hermeneutic arguments that stress the dependence of all sociological and anthropological generalizations on cultural and historical variation (Habermas 1988: 148-68). What Habermas takes to be the purely 'cultural' correlates of an underlying 'societal' system may, for the participants of these different domains, institutions and traditions, constitute categorial differences of world-view that demand far greater hermeneutic understanding in their own right. The roots of this difficulty probably go back to Habermas's attempt to find a macro-sociological outlet for the researches of Chomsky, Kohlberg and Piaget on linguistic competence and cognitive and moral development in children. Here is not the place to go into the issues raised by this appropriation, but it should at least be noted that little of this research (particularly Piaget's and

5. The full passage is: 'It is commonplace to observe that something may be true although it is not beautiful and not holy and not good. Indeed it may be true in precisely those aspects. But all these are only the most elementary cases of struggle that the gods of the various orders and values are engaged in. I do not know how one might wish to decide 'scientifically' the value of French and German culture; for here, too, different gods struggle with one another, now and for all times to come' (Weber 1948b: 148).

6. It is perhaps not surprising that the distinction originates from Parsons. As one writer has remarked (Turner 1992), Parsons's conception of culture as a discrete 'sphere' is a distinct reification.

Kohlberg's) has gone unchallenged on grounds of culturally restricted perspective and gender differences.⁷ It also seems suspect to assume that such findings can be unproblematically transferred from the ontogenetic to the phyllogenetic level of *collective social* learning processes (cf. McCarthy 1985).

In the remainder of this article, I want to argue that while Habermas may be correct to censure Weber's tendency to conflation of different logical levels of argumentation, he has insufficient grounds to correct and revamp Weber's account in the particular way he does. For all Weber's images of irreconcilable conflict, we may still have much to learn from his tentative historical analyses of divergent value-spheres and world-pictures and from his largely *unsystematic*, borrowings from Neo-Kantianism. As Gerard Delanty has recently argued, the difficulty with Habermas's theory of communicative action is that while Habermas is himself only too concerned to overcome ethnocentrism, he 'fails to grasp that universal morality can be articulated in more than one cultural form and in more than one logic of development':

By conceiving of universal morality in terms of an evolutionary theory culminating in the discourse of Occidental rationalism, Habermas has failed to see how universal morality may be embodied in *different forms* in other cultures, both historically speaking as well as in the contemporary perspective. ... Habermas needs to rethink radically his notion of social learning: the historical process of social learning through which universalistic principles emerge can occur in all societies and does not need to follow the particular logic of Western modernity (Delanty 1998: 30, 42).

Seen this way, Weber's fears for the re-appearance of purely Western historical features in the universal portrait of rationalization he describes gain more urgency.

One way of focusing this issue is to establish precisely what Habermas needs to presuppose in order to secure his argument for the unity of the three spheres. Habermas proposes that we cannot think of rea-

7. Carol Gilligan (1982) famously argued that Kohlberg's seven-staged schema of moral development in which children gradually learn to replace consequentialist maxims by universalizing categorical ones ignores a particular kind of ethical consciousness based on feeling and empathy that is specific to girls and women but is not universalizing in form. Although many feminists have criticized this view (see Benhabib and Dallmayr 1990), Gilligan's challenge at least raises some important issues. Similarly, other writers have remarked on the ethnic bias in Piaget's reliance on middle-class Swiss children in his studies (see McCarthy 1982).

son other than as something unitary: we can think of it as *differentiating* into various constituents but we cannot think of it as *dividing* (Habermas 1984: 247). We cannot think of communicative actors as speaking and acting reasonably without thinking of them capable of relating each one sphere in which they make a rational claim to each *other* sphere, hence of *mediating* between each sphere. Therefore Weber's notion of wholly autonomous spheres of rationality must be logically confused in some way. To support this argument, Habermas refers once again to Weber's thesis of the mutual irreducibility of truth, goodness, beauty and the sacred in *Science as a Vocation* where Weber speaks of a new 'polytheism of values' in which 'something can be sacred...because and insofar as it is not beautiful' or beautiful 'in the aspect in which it is not good' or 'true although...not beautiful...not holy and not good... The one is the devil and the other the God, and the individual has to decide which is God for him and which is the devil' (Weber 1948b: 148). Habermas understands this as the thesis that after the disenchantment of the world it has become impossible to criticise scientific propositions with ethical arguments, and vice versa, or ethical positions with aesthetic claims, and vice versa, or scientific statements with aesthetic claims, and vice versa (Habermas 1984: 181-85).

Put this way, Weber's thesis does indeed seem hard to sustain. For one *can* counter a truth-claim with a moral claim. One *can* criticize a proposition *p* on the grounds that, while true in itself, it is thickly embedded in a context of other, immoral propositions and hence is only trivially or insignificantly true: for example, some one-sidedly biological piece of research on human 'intelligence' that has been motivated or influenced by racial prejudice. Likewise, one *can* negotiate a moral argument with an aesthetic argument: for example, Nietzschean aesthetic arguments against 'inauthentic' moral values, reinterpreted as a more subtle kind of ethical argument. Or again one can criticise an aesthetic argument with a moral argument: for example, exposing the aesthetic seductions of fascism as both morally *and aesthetically* unsound. To this extent, then, it *is* possible to challenge one sphere from the standpoint of another sphere in a way that is not a priori refuted by the terms of the first sphere. Each sphere's domain of validity is meaningless without the claims of the other spheres that *delimit* that domain.

However, there are two ways in which one might counter the relevance of this argument. The first concerns its fairness to the subtlety of Weber's position, and the second some wider, more problematic implications of Habermas' claim.

Firstly, it should be stressed that while strictly separating each sphere's domain of validity, Weber does not in fact deny the relevance of any one sphere to another. In the relationship between science and morality, his view appears to have been that while the scientific validity of a piece of research on, say, the cognitive achievements of white compared with black children would, provided it is true, remain unaffected by the social context of its formulation, the social *value* of this research would certainly be open to dispute. Nor can we equate Weber's view with the commonplace position that posits a universal cognitive validity of science on the one hand and a relativism of moral values on the other. Weber's idea was that in the course of each sphere's process of internal rationalization, each sphere develops a degree of analytical distinctness, internal consistency and systematicity that becomes *exemplary* for the other spheres: exemplary in the sense of something to which the other spheres cannot help but form a response and forge a relationship. And in formulating this response, our duty is always to achieve clarity and transparency and not to confuse one set of arguments and axiological values with another. This, Weber emphatically insists, is far removed from any ethical relativism. 'In almost every important attitude of real human beings', he writes, 'the value-spheres cross and interpenetrate.' Indeed 'the shallowness of our routinised daily existence in the most significant sense of the word consists...in the fact that the persons who are caught up in it do not become aware, and above all do not wish to become aware, of this partly psychologically, part pragmatically conditioned motley of irreconcilably antagonistic values' (Weber 1949a: 18). However, we must endeavour to overcome these obscurities:

The fruit of the tree of knowledge, which is distasteful to the complacent but which is, nonetheless, inescapable, consists in the insight that every single important activity and ultimately life as a whole, if it is not to be permitted to run on as an event in nature but is instead to be consciously guided, is a series of ultimate decisions through which the soul—as in Plato—chooses its own fate, ie. the meaning of its activity and existence. Probably the crudest misunderstanding which the representatives of this point of view constantly encounter is to be found in the claim that this standpoint is 'relativistic'—that it is a philosophy of life which is based on a view of the interrelations of the value-spheres which is diametrically opposite to the one it actually holds (Weber 1949a: 18).

In choosing certain values, we have to be prepared to stand up for our choices and defend their validity and in this sense be willing to engage in dialogue with other disputants. No independently existing criteria may be available by which to adjudicate such dialogue, but

this does not mean that all criteria at stake are wholly relative to each disputant's discourse. As is well known, in adopting Rickert's idea of the 'subjective positing' of values through time and history, Weber abandoned Rickert's further, crypto-Platonic postulate of certain self-subsistent 'objective values' by which to adjudicate values and appropriated Rickert's philosophy solely for the purposes of the empirical historical analysis of cultural forms, while quietly dropping the latter's residual metaphysical baggage. However, he did not thereby renounce the idea of objective arbitration between values *tout court*. Rather, his feeling was that it would be the task of some future philosopher or philosophy to work out such a possibility in the light of the kind of understanding of historical immanence and cultural difference that he had himself shown to be so important.

Secondly, there are some wider implications of Habermas's critique that seem far harder to sustain. Does Habermas's critique justify the claim that there are three distinct spheres of validity to rational speech and action in its fully evolved modern form to which *all* communicative actors in *all* cultures implicitly or explicitly appeal—or would appeal as soon as they pass through a certain stage of collective learning and societal evolution? To prove that the value-spheres Weber analyses in the era of modern European civilization are interconnected and not fragmentary is not necessarily to prove they are *universal* in their claim over cultures. Might it not be that in order to secure his argument for the unity of reason here, Habermas is forced to make some rather arbitrary assumptions about the form such unity is to take? I suggest the main problem with the argument lies in its implicit vision of the particular kind of rational human subject that is to perform this reasonable act he postulates of mediating between each validity-sphere and weighing them up in ongoing practice. For to discursively redeem one's validity-claims in daily communication with others by, for example, checking another's truth-claim with one's own moral rightness-claim, or another's moral rightness-claim with one's truth-claim, or expressive sincerity-claim, and so on, involves the possession of a particular evaluative capacity, a practical faculty of judgment or *Urteilkraft*, as Kant would have called it.⁸ To bear such a capacity is pre-eminently to be a *subject*. However, if this capacity is to be only of one kind, if it is to designate *the* procedural-discursive structure of all rational conduct, uniform in character, Habermas is surely invoking some particular vision of human *subjectivity* here.

8. This point is particularly stressed by Seel (1991) and Bernstein (1995, 1996).

Why should we not suspect this vision of being culturally and historically specific in certain ways?

Habermas is at pains to show that his account of the normative presuppositions of modern consciousness is not 'metaphysically' transcendentalist in the manner of the classical Kantian system (Habermas 1992). This is the reason he turns to figures such as Weber and Durkheim and the empirical sociological tradition, as well as to the American pragmatist thinkers from Peirce (Habermas 1991, 1996) and Mead (Habermas 1987b: 5-42) up to the present who can be seen as having sought to reformulate German Idealist metaphysics in the discourses of cognitive science and social psychology. Yet our own discussion has suggested that the logic of Habermas's argument still forces him in the direction of certain legislative prescriptions that he cannot redeem in unequivocally empirical, or 'post-metaphysical', or culturally neutral, terms. Indeed although the original intention of the theory of communicative action was to break the spell of the old European metaphysical tradition and its conception of a legislative transcendental subject behind all appearances (Habermas 1987a), notable critics of Habermas such as Charles Taylor and Dieter Henrich now argue persuasively that he has not 'overcome' this framework.⁹

Herbert Schnädelbach (1992) also suggests that Habermas has not in fact escaped what Michel Foucault once referred to as the 'transcendental-empirical doublet' of the philosophy of man. In the concluding chapter of *The Order of Things* Foucault writes of the peculiar tendency of post-Kantian philosophy to allow empirical historical explications of human practices to double up covertly as discrete transcendentalist conceptions of a priori faculties (Foucault 1974: 318-25). As Schnädelbach points out, Foucault's judgement on the philosophies he names is somewhat indiscriminate, but it is certainly true that any attempt such as Habermas's to re-elaborate the normative content of the classical Idealist tradition in the language of contemporary social science has to grapple with this problem, and the fact that he operates with the categories of 'communication' rather than 'consciousness' makes no fundamental difference to the issue (cf. Dews 1996).

9. Taylor (1989: 86-90) and Henrich (1987) argue that the Kantian rationalisms of Habermas and Rawls still presuppose some particular vision of the good and some historically situated self forming an integral personality with distinct kinds of ethical commitments. Such historically particular visions of subjectivity need not necessarily be gravely ethnocentric, but they should be acknowledged for what they are and not concealed in the guise of some allegedly purely procedural and culturally neutral theory of the right.

I suggest that the importance of Weber in these connections lies in precisely his reservations about the universal import of Kantian critique. Although these reservations sometimes seem inconsistent with the ideal-typifying thrust of his vast *oeuvre*, they seldom seem sufficiently flexible to justify Habermas's various reconstructions. This is not to say that Habermas does not make highly effective use of Weberian insights to demonstrate the complexity and variety of the rationalisation processes of modernity. In its direct engagement with the classics of the Enlightenment tradition, his theory of communicative action offers some powerful alternatives to the defeatist aspects of much postmodernist discourse on this issue. But it *is* to say that if we are to escape such problems as the transcendental-empirical doublet, we will need to recognize a greater range of possible pathways to the universal than Habermas allows. We will need to develop a more 'cosmopolitan', and in this sense more 'Weberian', understanding of the embeddedness of the rationalizing processes of modernity within different spheres and cultures.

The variety of pathways that Weber suggests arise out of his highly distinctive conception of the universally 'exemplary', rather than universally *binding*, character of rationalization in the West. Thus the universality of Western scientific civilization for Weber consists in something that is exemplary for other cultures without necessarily being something to be *prescribed* for all cultures. It may seem a *prima facie* contradiction to assert that something can be at once 'universally valid' and, nevertheless, a specific creation of a specific culture in history. But Weber's position here implies neither some necessary evolutionary scheme for all cultures nor, on the other hand, some out-and-out historical contextualism. Rather he invites us to think of something beyond these two extremes. Wolfgang Schluchter has captured Weber's position here in a way that is particularly revealing and worth citing at length:

The rationalism of mastering the world is *our* perspective; we use it like a search-light to illuminate a segment of world history; and it has for *us* a claim to correctness insofar as *we* are concerned with continuity. It belongs to *our* hermeneutic initial situation, which not only arose contingently but remains particular. However, modern Occidental culture is at the same time of such a kind that *all* civilised people [*Kulturmenschen*] could take an interest in it. For it brought a new, historically previously unknown, interpretation of civilised humanity [*Kulturmenschentum*]. This not only makes it a special phenomenon but gives it a special status. And because this is the case, it poses a universal-historical problem and is of universal significance and validity. Even the civilised people who do not choose this alternative for themselves are

forced to recognise in it a possible interpretation of civilised humanity, an interpretation against which they need not relativise their own choice, but to which they must relate it, insofar as they want to live consciously (Schluchter 1979: 36-37).

In summary, it is interesting to note that Weber's and Habermas's positions display a remarkable sort of polar symmetry to each other. In general, Weber adopts an empirical position where Habermas opts for the 'transcendental.' However, Habermas disowns transcendentalism on the grounds that his is a historically situated, pragmatic 'reconstruction' of Kantian critique. Conversely, though, Weber disowns relativism and aspires to a kind of situated universalism. Thus where Habermas claims what could be called a sort of contextualized universalism, Weber claims a universalized contextualism. Furthermore, where Habermas has been accused of betraying purely Western preconceptions and a merely 'abstract' universalism, Weber has been accused of concealing an all too subjectivist decisionism. But both thinkers also offer a way of absolving themselves of these charges. In Habermas's case, this consists in the idea of a universal communication-community or 'ideal speech situation' in which any one culture's value-orientations can be sympathetically argued out with another's under conditions free from violence and exclusion. The idea seems naïve or overly counter-factual but it can be viewed fruitfully as a useful thought-experiment that any collection of individuals ought at least to consider before asserting the authenticity of their own beliefs and values. In Weber's case, the safeguards against subjectivism consist in the obligation of 'intellectual integrity' to stand up for one's beliefs and values self-critically, as well as resolutely in an attitude of open dialogue with others. In many ways, then, Habermas and Weber each offer complementary perspectives in which the strengths and weaknesses of the one can be productively played out against the other.

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