

Weber On Rickert: From Value Relation to Ideal Type

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Abstract

The role of values is a central feature in Weber's methodology, and the strong influence of Heinrich Rickert on Weber in this respect, is usually taken for granted. Basing itself on comments by Weber on Rickert in a number of, mostly unpublished, manuscript sources this paper re-assesses Weber's dependence on Rickert's concept of 'value-relation'. The paper demonstrates that Weber distances himself from Rickert's terminology and from its philosophical implications, stressing instead the active aspect of commitment in the concept of 'value'. The paper further argues that Weber sees his concept of the ideal type as a methodological tool more useful in practice, and more liable to safeguard the 'value freedom' of social science, than the concept of 'value relation'.

Keywords Weber, Rickert, methodology, values, value relation, value freedom, ideal type.

1. Introduction

The focus of interest: value and value relation

The role of values is a central feature in Max Weber's methodology: indeed, his view of science is firmly grounded in the two basic concepts of value freedom ('Wertfreiheit') and value relation ('Wertbeziehung'), and derives much of its interest from his discussion of the inherent tension between them.

Ever since the magisterial early study of Weber's methodology by von Schelting (1934), it has been a commonplace to refer to the influence of the neo-Kantian German philosopher Heinrich Rickert on Weber, particularly with regard to the concept of 'value relation' and the logic on which it rests.¹

1. Among the numerous testimonies to this state of affairs, two examples from recent exhaustive studies, one in English, one in German, should suffice: 'It is generally recognized that Weber's main philosophical mentor was ...Rickert' (Eliaeson forthcoming); 'Even a cursory survey of the literature since 1922 on Weber's view of the nature of science shows that the relationship with Rickert is fundamentally accepted' (Merz 1990: 35).

The literature on the Rickert-Weber relationship is by now abundant, nourished, no doubt, by the contrast between Rickert's elaborate and circumstantial, not to say finicking, exposition over against Weber's densely formulated and richly suggestive, but frustratingly unsystematical, early methodological essays. The 'outer points', so to speak, of the discussion are fixed: on the one hand it is manifest that Weber takes over from Rickert the concept of 'value relation'; on the other it is equally plain that Rickert's ambition to try to construct a 'scientific' 'system of values' held little attraction for Weber, who took as his basic methodological premiss the fundamental irreconcilability of different value spheres.

Within these fixed outer points, however, conclusions have differed quite widely. While some commentators (e.g. Bruun 1972; Ringer 1997; Jacobsen 1999; Eliaeson forthcoming) have concentrated on bringing out and emphasizing nuances between the two scholars, others have tried to 'systematize' Weber along Rickertian lines. Within the latter group Burger (1987) seems to me to have gone farthest in the direction of concluding that there is a near identity between the views of Weber and Rickert.² Other 'systematizers' (Wagner 1987; Oakes 1988), while pointing to differences between the two thinkers, have nevertheless placed their conclusions in a Rickertian context by insisting that since Weber based himself on Rickert's neo-Kantian logic of history, his methodology is by necessity vitiated by the same deadly flaws which they diagnose in Rickert's thought.

The 'systematizing' approach, however cleverly and carefully argued, is in my view problematic already in that it straps Weber to the Procrustean bed of his intellectual sources, and in so doing makes it more difficult to appreciate the nature and extent of his own contributions to methodology, especially those which – like the concept of the ideal type – clearly go beyond Rickert.³

The source problem

The temptation for scholars to 'systematize' Weber in the direction of congruence with Rickert may have been more difficult to resist because of the nature of the Weber texts on which the argument is made to rest. Most commentators, particularly in the English-speaking

2. Agevall (1999) certainly also goes far in this direction but, surprisingly, manages to discuss the Weber-Rickert relationship without any major reference to the value aspect.

3. Rickert (1929: 758) may have thought otherwise, but, as we shall see (pp. 152-53 below), on insufficient grounds.

world, base themselves only on Weber's printed methodological essays in the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (GAW) (Weber 1968), which they read alongside Rickert's *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (*Grenzen*) (Rickert 1902), sometimes supplemented by other (usually earlier) works by Rickert. Since Weber's early methodological essays, while peppered with *formal* references to Rickert, contain only a few *substantive* comments on Rickert's work, and since there are no comments by Rickert on Weber's work until the 3rd and 4th editions of *Grenzen* in 1921 (that is, after Weber's death), the discussion has on the whole been correspondingly 'secondary' in the sense that it draws its conclusions from the comparison of texts by Rickert and Weber, respectively, which with minor exceptions do not *directly* relate to each other.

There are, however, many more 'primary' sources—in the sense of direct comments by Weber on Rickert's work—apart from the scattered printed ones.⁴ In particular some early, substantial notes by Weber on Rickert have survived. We also have a large body of Weber's letters, including many addressed to Rickert himself and partly dealing with methodological topics, and others exchanged with other scholars and containing comments on and interpretations of Rickert.⁵ For many years political-bureaucratic obstacles, coupled

4. I am conscious that, in employing the terms 'primary' and 'secondary' in the sense used above, I am borrowing well-known historiographical terminology for my own, somewhat different purposes. The quotation marks put around them are meant, in true Weberian fashion, to alert the reader to this fact. I also realize that I am to a certain extent begging the question of whether Weber's unpublished notes or letters can be made to carry an evidential weight equal to that of his published texts. In principle, of course, the printed text must take precedence. However, when interpretations of the text differ, as they certainly do here, the 'primary' sources acquire an obvious importance as possible indications of the intentions of the author. (The parallel to the method of interpretation employed in jurisprudence is obvious). This is particularly clear when, as in this case, these 'primary' sources are not widely known and have therefore not hitherto formed part of the argument.

5. In my book on Weber's methodology (Bruun 1972) I was able to draw on the whole range of manuscript sources mentioned above (then deposited in the German Central Archives in Merseburg, GDR; now in the Prussian Archive, Berlin), and to include a large number of quotations from them in the original German. Among the 'systematizing' commentators, Burger, in spite of the self-assurance with which he claims completeness (1987: xix, 'Technical Remarks') does not quote or use any of the letters or notes. This is a pity, since they might have led him to modify some of his conclusions (e.g. 1987: 81 n. 34, 120). Agevall (1999) has a few references to Weber's letters. As for Oakes (1988: 166 n. 38), he does refer to the full correspondence between Weber and Rickert, but not to the notes. However,

with the major challenge of reading Weber's fiendishly difficult handwriting, made it difficult to consult and use these 'primary' sources. This situation has now improved somewhat. The Complete Edition of Weber's work (Max Weber Gesamtausgabe—MWG) will eventually include all his letters and, it is to be hoped, manuscript notes. But publication of the letters has so far been slow, encompassing only the period 1906–12; the rest, including the letters from the period from 1902 to 1906, which are especially interesting in this connexion, and all the handwritten notes, is still difficult to access.

When trying to find an answer to the question of how far Weber followed Rickert in his discussion of the nature of values on which a value relation must be based, and of the practicalities of that value relation, the 'primary' sources turn out to be extremely fruitful. Not only do we find that Weber actually tried his hand at a structured discussion of precisely this point, but many other manuscript notes and letters also contain direct comments on the problem. In the present article I shall try, basing myself on the totality of the primary Weber sources as they are known to me, to present Weber's arguments as they appear there, to discuss their implications, and to formulate the coherent position which they seem to indicate, and which at the same time underlines certain basic, but sometimes neglected, elements in Weber's methodological thought.

2. The 'Nervi fragment'

The context

The first recorded comment by Weber on Rickert's work is also the best known. It comes in a letter to his wife, Marianne, written March/April 1902⁶, in which he says:

I have finished Rickert [Rickert 1902]. He is *very* good. To a great extent, I find my own ideas in [the book] (although I had not worked them up from a logical point of view). I have doubts concerning [his] terminology.⁷

he does not quote any letters directly and, unfortunately, some of his paraphrases of them are misleading, and in one case simply wrong. Other commentators (Eliaeson forthcoming; Hennis 1996; Tenbruck 1999; draw much more fully on the 'primary' sources, in particular on the letters, from which they quote extensively. So does Jacobsen (1999) who also quotes a number of the manuscript notes, basing himself on my transcripts.

6. Marianne Weber 1926: 273. The letter is undated; the approximate date given is based on external evidence.

7. 'Rickert habe ich aus. Er ist *sehr* gut, zum grossen Teil finde ich darin das,

Most commentators have concentrated on the first two sentences,⁸ perhaps because there seems to be little trace in GAW of Weber's terminological doubts. In fact, of the many references to Rickert, only two seem to indicate any such doubts. In one of these (Weber 1968: 126 n. 1), he concedes that Rickert's term 'natural science' may give rise to misconceptions. In the other, which is more substantial, and more directly relevant to the present study, he quotes with approval Simmel's comment that the description of the sources of historical interest as 'values' 'solves the problem simply by reference to a generic concept' (Weber 1968: 92 n. 1).⁹ As Weber points out, this leaves both the question of the *psychological* origins of historical interest and that of the *content* of the values unanswered. But although he goes on to argue that these questions need not be answered in a purely methodological study, we are left with a feeling that Weber might well have more to say on his agreement (or not) with Rickert in both instances.

This is indeed the case. In early January 1903, almost a year after first reading Rickert's *Grenzen* in Florence, Weber went to Nervi on the Ligurian coast of Italy to try to calm his troubled nerves and regain his strength after a trying winter in Heidelberg. He took with him a number of works on the methodology and philosophy of history in order to get on with the methodological article which he

was ich selbst, wenn auch in logisch nicht bearbeiteter Form, gedacht habe. Gegen die Terminologie habe ich Bedenken'.

I have had to make painful choices in quoting the relevant texts, which were of course originally in German. I strongly believe that, in principle, the discussion of Weber's thought should be based on the German originals. On the other hand, the demands of communicability cannot be ignored. I have not always been impressed with the 'standard' English translations of Weber's concepts ('ethical neutrality' for 'Wertfreiheit' being just one glaring example), and, anyway, most of the 'primary' texts quoted here have never before been translated into English. I have therefore everywhere done my own translations, for which I must of course take full responsibility. A few of the square brackets in these translations go a little beyond the literal text in order to get Weber's argument right, but should not, in my view, distort the sense. Material not already published in the MWG or in GAW will be given in the original German in a footnote (except for the long 'Nervi fragment', which will be found at the end of the article).

8. Oakes (1987: 434; 1988: 6), consistently, and not a little cavalierly, simply leaves out the rest.

9. Simmel (1892) does not specifically refer to Rickert in the passage alluded to, but Weber obviously sees it as relevant to a discussion of Rickert. For further evidence of the influence of Simmel on Weber in this connexion, see below (pp. 148-49).

had promised for a Heidelberg *Festschrift*, but which he found great difficulty in getting into proper shape and finished in time,¹⁰ so that it eventually appeared in three separate articles elsewhere.¹¹

The text

A number of the methodological notes that Weber took in Nervi have been preserved, some of them neatly ordered in envelopes provided by his hotel, Schickert's Parc-Hôtel. Among these envelopes is one which, in Weber's hand, carries the title 'Rickert's "values"'. It contains a set of notes, which will be referred to as the 'Nervi fragment'. The text, which is here quoted in full in English for the first time, is as follows:

When Rickert says: _____, it would be more fair to say that in the place of a number of admittedly trivial, but completely *understandable* terms, we get a most dangerously shimmering and ambivalent expression, which positively invites misunderstanding. As a test, one can try, wherever Rickert speaks of 'values', to replace that term by _____. A large part of his exposition would then acquire a significantly more trivial outward hue; but if philosophy is [text indecipherable] 'obvious' ('Windelband'), then philosophers should not shy away from explicitly stating the obvious, terminology included.

However much you shake Rickert's concept of 'value' ['Werth'], with the meaning which it is given on p. __, all that emerges is the sense of 'worth knowing about' ['wissenswerth']; consequently, the 'necessity' of relating [historical material] to a value can be reduced to the statement, which *on the face of it* appears quite trivial, that history should describe those parts of empirical *reality* which are *worth knowing*. This in itself implies that Rickert's strict—at least strictly *formulated*—demarcation between 'historical' individuals (those related to a value) and other [individuals]¹² *must* in fact be conceived as historically and individually fluid; and above all, we should not ignore the infinite gradation of the *extent* to which elements of reality are worth knowing.

10. 'At least, I hope to finish the outline of the rest of this bloody piece of work before returning home' (letter of 3 January 1903 to Marianne Weber, quoted in Marianne Weber 1926: 274 ['Ich hoffe wenigstens die Stoffeinteilung für den Rest dieser verfl... Arbeit mit nach Hause zu bringen']).

11. Collected in GAW as 'Roscher und Knies und die logischen Probleme der historischen Nationalökonomie' (Weber 1968: 1-145).

12. The term 'individual' as used in this paragraph, and below (p. 145, quoting Rickert 1902: 358), has the philosophical-technical meaning of, roughly speaking, 'possible object of historical interest'. In the next paragraph, however, Weber uses 'individual' in its normal sense of 'physical person'. For a summary of Rickert's long and involved discussion of the concept (1902: 336-70), see, e.g., Oakes 1988: 72-77.

In reality, the selection [of elements] depends on these constantly fluid and varying *differences* in the interest taken, by the *individuals* who are in each case the historian's *public*, in the various elements of empirical reality; thus, it is *not* only dependent on the degree to which that interest is *universal*, let alone conforms to a *norm*. In the face of the limitations of our receptive capacity, the selection is carried out according to the 'principle of economy', i.e. the *most intensive* interest is satisfied first. The [different] interest[s] may in turn have if not an infinity, at least a practically *inexhaustible* variety of causes. This is also true in the field of cultural phenomena, [where they can range] from the interest of the collector of stamps or slippers to the loftiest impulses that move the human heart.

Once the most pressing questions have been answered, and since our receptive capacity is limited and the multiplicity of the world is infinite, our interest in the remaining questions will quite quickly dwindle towards naught, and in fact, when we look at what it is *actually possible* to investigate scientifically, practically reach zero. But all this only modifies [what was said above] if and to the extent that we accept the idea of quantities 'turning into' qualities. The *fact* that there is *general* interest in many parts of reality, and a *lack*, perhaps in fact a *general* lack, of interest in most of the other parts, is quite easy to explain *psychologically*, and the same holds for at least the *general* features of the *gradations* [of interest]; but in my opinion, the attempt to formulate norms not only leads into metaphysics, that is [text unfinished] As soon as one tries to look for something different, something *objective*, behind the *fact* that in any given instance, historical interest will be limited and graduated, one enters the domain of *norms*, i.e. one is then looking for a principle from which it would be possible to deduce not only *what* should, once and for all, be the object of our interest, but [also] to what *degree* we should graduate our interest in the various parts of reality. Precisely that is in fact the meaning—translated into everyday terms—of the 'value metaphysics' which Rickert ends up with. Here, it must suffice to express doubts as to the possibility of grasping the *substance* of such norms, and simply to add that such doubts might be consistent with the view that the 'absolute validity' of certain 'values' (what we would call 'interests') could be taken as more than simply a *limiting* concept. The *logical* possibility of a 'formal ethics' at least shows us that the *concept* of *norms* [covering] the infinite multiplicity of the object of these norms does not in itself guarantee that [such norms] can be formulated in *substance*.¹³

The fragment is clearly elaborated with a view to publication. The pages are numbered from 1 to 5, in Weber's hand, and one page has its page number altered to '4a', with Weber's own indication that it should be inserted at a given place on p. 4. The formulation 'here it

13. For the original text, see below (pp. 156-57).

must suffice to say...’ also presupposes a wider audience. It would therefore be reasonable to suppose that the Nervi fragment was written as a possible contribution to ‘Roscher und Knies’, which is indeed a patchwork of comments on other authors. This supposition is further strengthened by the fact that the remarks in the footnote quoted above (Weber 1968: 92 n. 1) may almost be taken as a ghostly abstract of the fragment.

The Nervi fragment ranges across a number of problems, and I shall deal with them in turn.

The problem of terminology

It is clear from first paragraph of the fragment that Weber does not like the way Rickert uses the term ‘value’ – at least in certain contexts. He feels that it has two drawbacks: first, it is, as he sees it, too far removed from everyday terms, too ‘lofty’ so to speak; and, second, it is open to misunderstanding. Frustratingly, he has left the precise reference to *Grenzen* blank, and, equally frustratingly, he also leaves blank the indication of the terms which he would propose as alternatives. It is not too difficult to fill in the blanks in a satisfactory way, however. Weber’s doubts are, as we have seen, directed at an argument of Rickert’s in which the latter seems to be advocating the virtues of the term ‘value’ over other terms which are in his view somehow too ‘trivial’. And in *Grenzen* (Rickert 1902: 368) we find precisely this argument:

The words ‘essential’, as well as ‘interesting’, ‘characteristic’, ‘important’ or ‘significant’ – terms which must always be applicable to history – require the assumption of some accepted value in order to have any statable meaning at all. So when we claim that any object which is to be the subject of history must be related to a value, we are in fact only converting the quite trivial truth that everything which the historian describes must be interesting, characteristic, important or significant, into logical terminology.¹⁴

This passage fits snugly as the reference which Weber takes as his point of departure, particularly since it also contains a plurality of

14. ‘Die Worte ‘wesentlich’ aber, oder auch ‘interessant’, ‘charakteristisch’, ‘wichtig’, ‘bedeutsam’, die man auf das Historische immer muss anwenden können, haben ohne die Voraussetzung irgend welcher anerkannten Werthe gar keinen angebbaren Sinn mehr. Wir bringen also im Grunde genommen durch die Behauptung, dass jedes Objekt, welches Gegenstand der Geschichte ist, auf einen Werth bezogen sein muss, nur die sehr triviale Wahrheit, dass Alles, was die Geschichte darstellt, interessant, charakteristisch, wichtig oder bedeutsam ist, auf einen logisch brauchbaren Ausdruck’.

everyday terms which Rickert wants to replace by 'value', and which therefore fall neatly into place in Weber's second blank space: Weber is here most probably simply quoting Rickert back at him.

As we noted, Weber does not just say that the term 'value', in its theoretical aspect, is not really necessary, and could be replaced by simpler words.¹⁵ He also actively criticizes 'value' as being 'shimmering' and 'ambiguous', and 'inviting misunderstanding'. It is not difficult to imagine why. The concept of 'value', taken by itself, certainly 'shimmers' ambiguously between, for instance, its philosophical sense and that in which it is used in economics;¹⁶ and, above all, it invites misunderstanding by having to do service as an explanation of *theoretical* interest while carrying with it the whole paraphernalia of *practical* valuation.

'Worth knowing about' ('wissenswerth')

It is to a certain extent this latter point which Weber seems to be making in his vivid statement at the beginning of the next paragraph of the fragment to the effect that 'However much you shake Rickert's concept of 'value' ['Werth'], with the meaning which it is given on p. __, all that emerges is the sense of 'worth knowing about'. Here again, we have a problem with a blank reference in Weber's text, and this time it is not quite so easy to fill out. However, we are not entirely without clues. Obviously we must seek the reference in that part of *Grenzen* where Rickert is discussing the fundamentals of 'value relation' as the basis of history; it would also be natural to look for it at a place where Rickert couples this with a purportedly clear distinction between 'historical individuals' and other 'individuals'; and finally, since Weber puts the word 'necessity' in quotation marks, we might perhaps also expect that term to appear in the reference. The place which seems best to fit these presuppositions is p. 358 in *Grenzen*, where we find the following sentences:

from this we can infer that the relation to a universal value enables us not only, in any given [part of] reality, to distinguish between two kinds of individuals, but also to effect this distinction in such a way that we can claim that its correctness must be accepted by everyone. The objects

15. The one which he himself seems to have a preference for in the fragment is 'interest', cf. the reference towards the end to "'values'" (what we would call "interests"). His discussion towards the end of the *Objektivität* essay (Weber 1968: 209-12) shows a similar tendency towards the cool formulation of 'value' concepts in terms of 'interests'.

16. Weber (1968: 209-10) calls the term 'value' 'the problem child of [economics]'.

which, from this viewpoint, are classified as 'in-dividuals' are those which will form the stuff of history, which, as a science, has to distinguish the essential from the inessential in a way which is universally valid, and to shape that which is [selected as] essential into a necessary unity.¹⁷

This argument of Rickert's could well be what Weber wants to translate into the statement that history should select as its material that which is 'worth knowing about'. The latter statement is, so Weber says, 'trivial'. But, as we have seen, he has nothing against 'trivialities' provided they are worth restating and, moreover, don't dress up too fancy. And, secondly, the statement is in his view only trivial 'on the face of it'. One reason why there might be greater depths lurking beneath the 'triviality' could be that Weber is thinking of the intricacies of the neo-Kantian view of 'truth-as-a-value' as *the* foundation of science. But this aspect of the question does not seem to be what he is driving at in the Nervi fragment.¹⁸ What he wants to stress is rather that the 'why' of the historian's selection still has to be answered.

The origin of the values

This brings us to the question of the universality ('Allgemeinheit') of the historical interest. This universality was, as we can also see from the quotation above, a central prop of Rickert's argument in *Grenzen*, since, in his view, if a historical account is to be valid for everybody, the values entering into the selection of its material must be 'universal', i.e. of such a kind that they can claim acceptance by everyone. In the Nervi fragment Weber, as we have seen, handles this aspect quite briskly: the selection of material performed by historians must, if the result of their labours is to be 'worth knowing about', first and foremost satisfy the interests of their public, which in their turn may have a near infinity of causes.

17. '...wir ersehen daraus, dass die Beziehung auf einen allgemeinen Werth es uns ermöglicht, nicht nur überhaupt in jeder beliebigen Wirklichkeit zwei Arten von Individuen zu unterscheiden, sondern diese Scheidung auch so zu vollziehen, dass wir sie Jedem als richtig zumuthen können. Die unter diesem Gesichtspunkt zu Individuen werdenden Objekte stellt dann die Geschichte dar, die als Wissenschaft in allgemeingültiger Weise das Wesentliche vom Unwesentlichen zu scheiden und zu einer nothwendigen Einheit zusammenzuschliessen hat'.

18. In any event, since the neo-Kantian view of truth-as-a-value encompasses both natural science and history, and since Weber is hinting at the complications of the term 'worth knowing' solely in the context of the discussion of history, the *general* argument about truth-as-a-value need not be pursued any further in this connexion.

Weber may be brisk, but he is not quite clear in his formulation. He is a great deal more 'subjective' than Rickert in his overall approach, but we are left a little confused about who is the prime mover in 'selecting' material—the public or the historian. In Rickert's argument, the historian *had to* have the upper hand in this respect (i.e. had to be the one to claim that the values he used were 'universally valid').¹⁹ It is probably also the most natural reading of Weber to see him as putting the historian at the centre of process of selection; but instead of looking for any 'universality' of the principles on which this process is based, he is interestingly 'market-oriented' in insisting that what the historian does is to try to satisfy (according to the 'principle of economy') the more or less urgent needs of the public—including such oddballs as the collectors of stamps or slippers.²⁰

Reality and metaphysics

This, Weber says, is how the process takes place '*in reality*'—a remark with heavy implications. For, although his analysis is basically a psychological one, it actually removes all the stuffing from Rickert's careful philosophical construction based on the supposed universality of values. It is true that in the Nervi fragment, alongside his stress on the interests of the *individuals* making up the public of the historian, Weber still talks of selection taking place 'not only' on the basis of universal values 'or even' corresponding with a norm. But if 'universality' and 'conformity to norms' are not in themselves *enough* to explain what goes on when the historian actually performs his selection of material, and thus to define the logic of history as a science, they lose their methodological relevance. This is what Weber squarely formulates a little later in the Nervi fragment, when he insists that looking for something more objective behind the actual interests gets you into value metaphysics ('which is where Rickert ends up'). By placing the psychological aspect *alongside* the philosophical one,

19. This is certainly also Weber's understanding of Rickert, cf. his correction of Friedrich Gottl in a letter of 28 March 1906 (Weber: 1990 62–63), in which he stresses that Rickert's term 'universally accepted values' refers to values *claimed* to be universal, 'that is to say, a claim...from the point of view of the *historian*'.

20. This double aspect comes out nicely in an endearing and enlightening little phrase which Weber deleted at the beginning of the third paragraph of the Nervi fragment: 'In early times, the selection of historical material was conditioned by love of *spinning a good yarn* and by the satisfaction of basic human curiosity' ('Durch die Lust am *Fabulieren* und an der Befriedigung der rein menschl. Neugier ist die Auslese des Historischen ursprünglich bedingt worden').

Weber has carefully abstained from burning any bridges to philosophy—just as he does when he hedges his bets concerning ‘absolute values’ towards the end of the fragment. But these are bridges that lead away from reality, and which he clearly has no desire to cross.²¹

Summary

Weber’s views on Rickert’s ‘values’, as they emerge from the Nervi fragment, can in my view be summed up as follows: Rickert’s concept of ‘value relation’ provides the correct philosophical basis for claiming a methodological status for the ‘historical’ (non-natural) sciences on a par with that of natural science. But at a price: the term ‘value’ is not an ideal one; and Rickert’s philosophical arguments do not give a fully adequate picture of what actually goes on when historical concepts are formed. In Weber’s eyes, what ‘history’, in Rickert’s broad sense, should select as its subject matter depends on the interests of the historian’s public—and of those of the historian himself. These interests vary greatly over time and between individuals. It is conceivable, but not demonstrated, that the considerations of ‘universality’ and ‘conformity to norms’ which are necessary elements of Rickert’s philosophical construction, are *compatible* with the actual practice of historical concept formation, as Weber describes it. But they do not help us much in clarifying that practice. Read in this way, the Nervi fragment can in fact be seen as a concise statement of central elements of what Weber ‘had already thought out for himself’ and some of his ‘terminological doubts’—to re-quote his letter from Florence to Marianne Weber.

3. Other ‘primary’ sources

How does the Nervi fragment fit in with other substantive, direct comments by Weber on Rickert’s ‘values’ (in manuscript notes and letters, since, as we have seen, GAW has little to offer in this regard)? Let us take the points discussed one by one.

On the *terminology* of ‘value’ we have a further small note from Nervi (in an envelope marked ‘historical world view’), in which Weber, commenting on Simmel’s *Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1892), writes:

21. The formulation ‘where Rickert ends up’ certainly does not express any solidarity on Weber’s part.

The comments by Simmel at the bottom of p. 76 were in this respect already less open to misconstruction than Rickert's 'values' could be.²²

The Simmel reference is probably the following:

There are degrees of subjectivity in cognition—and any such degree of subjectivity is at the same time a degree of objectivity, corresponding conversely to the former—but these should not be interpreted as if the idea in question exhibits a conjunction of a certain subjective with an objective element; on the contrary, the idea is quite unitary, and it is only the subsequent judgement that places it between the categories subjective and objective, *either of which it satisfies to some degree*.²³

Not only does Weber's approval of this passage show us, once again, that the term 'value' was in his view quite dispensable in discussions of the logic of history; but we find an interesting parallel between Simmel's idea of the complementarity of subjective and objective elements and Weber's insistence in the Nervi fragment, against Rickert's strictness of demarcation between 'historical and other 'individuals', on the necessary fluidity and gradation between the two groups, linked to the degree of *interest* which they carry for the public.

On Rickert's use of the term 'value' as philosophical shorthand for '*that which is worth knowing*', Weber has another interesting note from the Nervi days, with the heading 'New sciences':

Objects enter the realm of that which is *worth knowing* when they become *problems*, when *new questions* arise. When we *realize* that there is something that we *don't* know... Economy was already in antiquity 'related to values'. But not seen as a *problem*.²⁴

This passage, which is in many ways a parallel to the famous statement which Wilhelm Hennis²⁵ claims that every true Weberian should be able to quote by heart ('When a new problem is investigated with

22. 'Die Bemerkungen Simmels a.a.O. S. 76 unten waren hier bereits weniger missverständlich als Rickerts 'Werthe' es sein konnten.'

23. 'Es giebt Grade der Subjektivität des Erkennens – und jeder Grad derselben ist zugleich ein solcher der Objektivität, der jenem umgekehrt entspricht – aber diese sind offenbar nicht so zu verstehen, dass der fragliche Gedanke eine Aneinanderfügung eines gewissen subjektiven und eines objektiven Bestandtheiles darstellte; sondern er ist ganz einheitlich und erst die nachträgliche Beurteilung stellt ihn zwischen den Kategorien subjektiv und objektiv, deren jeder er in irgend welchem Masse genügt'.

24. 'Gegenstände treten in das Reich des Wissenswerthen ein dadurch, dass sie Probleme werden, neue Fragen entstehen. Dadurch dass wir erkennen, dass wir etwas nicht wissen. Auch 'Werthbezogen' war das ökonomische auch [sic] im Altertum. Aber nicht als Problem erfasst'.

25. Hennis 1996: 14 n. 32.

new methods, and this leads to the discovery of truths which open up new important points of view, a new 'science' is created'²⁶), may at first seem at variance with the argument of the Nervi fragment, since it postulates that economy in antiquity could be 'related to values' without (yet) being 'worth knowing about'—i.e. becoming the object of historical writing. But we should note that the term 'related to values', as used here by Weber, is not qualified as *theoretical* value relation. It therefore makes more sense, in my view, to see this note as an expansion on Weber's thesis from the Nervi fragment on the *origin of the values*, according to which it is the historian and his public whose 'interest' determines the selection of historical material. Economy was an obvious and important part of ancient culture—the Greeks and Romans cared about it and wrote practical treatises on husbandry—but this economy only becomes 'worth knowing (or writing) about' when we have the feeling that here is something we want to know (more) about—i.e. when we take a theoretical *interest* in it.²⁷ (Weber's note is therefore also a good demonstration of the pitfalls of the term 'value' and the superiority of 'interest' or 'worth knowing about' as terminological substitutes.)

As for the question of *reality and metaphysics*, we find another note from Nervi to bolster the point of view of the fragment; and this time it puts Rickert into a somewhat embarrassing proximity to Roscher, whose naive emanationism Weber dismembers in the first of the 'Roscher und Knies' essays. At the end of a note on Roscher, Weber writes:

While the consistent philosophical proponents of [Roscher's] emanationist ethics are by necessity forced into metaphysical constructions, and at least to make the assumption that the value of the ideal to which the individual must submit is an *absolute* one—this is now²⁸ also Rickert's position—others, among them most historians, usually ignore these metaphysical consequences.²⁹

26. Weber 1968: 166.

27. The discussion by Oakes (1988: 32), although it has Rickertian overtones, basically seems to run parallel to this interpretation.

28. The 'now' is an insertion, which interestingly points to a reflection on Weber's part that this implication only became apparent in *Grenzen*.

29. 'Während die consequenten philosophischen Vertreter dieser emanationistischen Ethik unweigerlich zu bestimmten metaphysischen Aufstellungen, mindestens zur Annahme der *Absolutheit* des Werthes jener Idealität in welche der Einzelne eingegliedert werden soll, gedrängt werden—so jetzt Rickert—[sic.], pflegen andre, darunter die meisten Historiker, diese metaphysische Consequenz zu ignorieren'.

Rickert is at least given full marks for the intellectual rigour which Roscher, for instance, lacks; but, as in the Nervi fragment, Weber makes no move to embrace the results of Rickert's rigorous analysis; and it certainly sounds as if he is more on the side of those historians who ignore the philosophy and get on with the job.³⁰

If there were no other relevant references, it might seem legitimate to form the provisional conclusion from the primary sources that Weber interprets the basic doctrine of theoretical value relation as being an ingenious philosophical argument, which solves a basic philosophical problem, but which, from the point of view of the practising historian, simply covers the fact that reality may be viewed under many different points of view, defined by the various interests of the historian and of his public—in fact something akin to a 'modern' aspect theory of the social sciences.

But this would be too simple, and in a sense miss the main point. Weber has other concerns, and again his own direct comments on Rickert and 'value relation' are our main sources, in particular a series of letters to Friedrich Gottl from the spring of 1906.³¹ The central argument in this respect is that advanced in the letter of 29 March 1906, in which he writes:

Moreover, I do *not* admit that 'value' stands on the same level as 'interest' or 'significance'... Under *all* circumstances, 'valuation' ['Werthen'] takes us into another world (that of the 'subject taking a stand', as Münsterberg describes it).³²

On the face of it, we have here a direct contradiction of the view in the Nervi fragment according to which 'interest' was terminologically preferable to 'value' (and could indeed with advantage be substituted for it), and commentators who have confronted the two texts³³ have seen this as something of a paradox. However, the contradiction is more apparent than real when one looks closely at the passages in question.

In the Nervi fragment Weber deals with the question of the best terminology for describing the selection of elements for a work of 'history' (as opposed to natural science). *In this respect*, he registers a

30. The same point is made in Weber 1968: 254 and recurs in Weber's writings as late as 1917 (Weber 1968: 511).

31. That is, at the same time as the publication of *Kritische Studien*, which was meant by Weber, among other things, as a demonstration of how 'value relation' could work in practice.

32. Weber 1990: 64-65.

33. Bruun 1972: 119-20; Jacobsen 1999: 113-14.

distinct preference for 'interest' rather than 'value', and ties this in with reflections on the gradations of public interest in various 'historical' accounts. *In this sense* also, 'value' ('Werth') does not mean more than 'worth knowing about' ('wissenswerth'). What Weber is stressing in his letter to Gottl of 29 March is something else: He is speaking about 'values' as a basis for active valuation ('Werthen'), and valuation is something that involves taking an *active* stand, and *therefore* has its home on a different level, logically speaking, from that of *theoretical* judgments of 'interest' or 'significance' (or any of the other adjectives that Rickert threw out on p. 368 of *Grenzen*).

Indeed, with this reading in mind, the 29 March letter to Gottl turns from a paradox into a further confirmation of the view central to the Nervi fragment: in both texts, Weber is insisting that, since the concept of value belongs to the realm of active valuation, it is dangerous to use the term 'value' in the 'logical' designation of the process of theoretical, historical concept formation. To use a homely simile: if the elements of reality to be selected are like sheep on the wide Scottish fells, then Rickert describes the sheepdogs as 'wolf-hounds' because they are domesticated descendants of wolves, retaining something both of their genetically savage past and of their peaceful domestic present. Weber prefers to call a dog a dog, and a wolf a wolf, irrespective of genetics. This is first of all to avoid any misunderstanding that Rickert is letting actual wolves close to the poor sheep—in philosophical terms, to avoid any confusion of value judgments with theoretical value relation, i.e. precisely the error for which he castigates a large number of colleagues in his early methodological essays; but also because he has too much regard for the wild and non-domesticated character of wolves—again, speaking in logical terms, because he wants to make sure that the value sphere retains its special character as distinct from that of science.³⁴

4. Valuation and value relation: the ideal type

These two central concerns of Weber's—the clear distinction between valuation and value relation, and the preservation of the essence of the value sphere—come out again in a couple of his early letters to Rickert. And these letters are particularly important because they deal with Weber's concept of the *ideal type*.

34. Jacobsen (1999: 113-14), in his discussion of the relationship between the Nervi fragment and the letter to Gottl, also points to the importance to Weber of values in their non-domesticated form.

Weber explicitly stated at the beginning of the early methodological essays on 'Roscher und Knies' (1903, 1905 and 1906) that one of his aims in writing them was 'to test the usefulness of [Rickert]'s ideas for the methodology of our discipline'.³⁵ The same phraseology is found at the beginning of 'Objektivität' ('This will not be an exercise in logic; [what we want is] rather to make certain well-known results of modern logic useful for us',³⁶ with an especial reference in this regard to Rickert), and is echoed in a letter of 17 July 1904 from Weber to Georg von Below, in which he modestly writes: 'The article ['Objektivität'] really just contains an application of the ideas of my friend Rickert'. But it is important to note that Weber immediately qualifies this by adding: 'apart from the last third of the article, [which is the part] to which I attach most importance'.³⁷ This 'last third' is precisely the part where Weber methodologically develops his concept of the ideal type.

Since Weber already in his introduction to the 'last third' of *Objektivität*, describes the ideal type as 'a kind of concept which is specific, and to a certain degree indispensable, to the sciences of human culture',³⁸ its relationship to Rickert's view of historical concept formation is obviously crucial. Rickert himself, in retrospect, advances a slightly hazy claim to the paternity of, or at least the basic inspiration for, the concept of the ideal type, and couples this with the statement that what really became most important for Weber in his [Rickert]'s thought was 'the distinction between practical valuation and theoretical value relation, on which the essence of history as a value-free science is based'.³⁹ As for Weber, we have seen in his letter to von Below that he certainly felt that he went beyond a mere application of Rickert's ideas in his construction and discussion of the ideal type. But we also have two letters from him to Rickert which not only back up this view but also raise interesting questions concerning the relationship between valuation and value relation.

The first letter, dated 14 June 1904, contains the following sentences:

35. Weber 1968: 7 n. 1.

36. Weber 1968: 146 n 1.

37. 'Ausser dem mir allerdings wichtigsten letzten Drittel enthält der Aufsatz ja eigentlich nur eine Anwendung der Gedanken meines Freundes Rickert'.

38. Weber 1968: 189-90. The reference to 'cultural science' can for our purposes be read as equivalent to the term 'history' as used above. For the complications of the proper understanding of the concept as used by Weber and Rickert, cf. Bruun 1972: 121-31.

39. Rickert 1929: 758.

I am very happy about your acceptance of the idea of the 'ideal type'. I really feel that a category of this kind is necessary to distinguish between 'valuation' and 'value relation'.⁴⁰

In the second, dated 28 April 1905, Weber writes:

'My paternal vanity is saddened by the fact that you have terminological doubts concerning the ideal type... You really should accept the *terminology* which in my view is natural, [to designate] the intermediate step—which is necessary in *substance*—between [the] 'ideal' and [the] 'generic concept'.⁴¹

From this it should be abundantly clear who, in Weber's view, had fathered the concept. But more important is his insistence that an intermediate conceptual category is *necessary* to distinguish properly between valuation ('ideal') and the 'generic concept', and even, more pointedly still, between valuation and value relation. We are led to the conclusion that, in Weber's eyes, Rickert's carefully crafted philosophical progression from practical valuation to theoretical value relation, and constant affirmation of the difference between the two is not in itself enough to safeguard the claim of history to being a value-free science. What is needed for this purpose is a separate kind of concept, that of the ideal type.

The point which is of central importance in this connexion can be stated quite simply: in his whole discussion in 'Objektivität' of the construction of ideal types, Weber insists on the *unreality* of these concepts. They are *constructs*, based on elements of reality but nowhere to be found in reality. They are anchored in the valuational attitudes of the scholar; but while that scholar should be clearly conscious of the distinction *in principle* between the active and the theoretical aspects of such attitudes, he can *in fact* feel free to let the inspiration for his principles of construction come from the active side of the spectrum. The unreal character of the resulting ideal type should, in principle, act as a sufficient firewall.⁴² This unreality is in

40. 'Ihre Zustimmung zu dem Gedanken des 'Idealtypus' erfreut mich sehr. In der That halte ich eine ähnliche Kategorie für notwendig, um 'werthendes' und 'werthbeziehendes' Urteil scheiden zu können'. The German expression 'werthendes und werthbeziehendes Urteil' strictly speaking refers to *judgments* of value and value relation, but this is standard neo-Kantian terminology for what we would call 'valuation' and 'value relation' (cf. Oakes 1988: 58).

41. 'Dass Sie *sprachliche* Bedenken bezüglich des 'Idealtypus' haben, betrübt meine väterliche Eitelkeit... Entschliessen Sie Sich doch, hier auch zwischen 'Ideal' und 'Gattungs-Typus' diese Zwischenstufe, die *sachlich* doch gefordert ist, auch *sprachlich* so zu begreifen, wie es m.E. natürlich ist'.

42. This idea is further developed in the two 'Knies' essays (1905 and 1906)

turn tied not only to the principle of construction as such, but also to the logically necessary shift over time in the values on the basis of which historical concepts are formed. Cultures necessarily change, and this means that what is viewed as 'culturally significant', both by the public and by the historian, will also change. There will be *new* points of view, based on *new* 'cultural interests', and consequently *new* concepts will be needed. In view of this essential cultural changeability historical concepts must, in Weber's view, be sharply defined, since they cannot hope to embrace all relevant aspects. The kind of concept which will give the analysis the necessary clarity, Weber insists, must in fact be an ideal type, whose unreality and one-sidedness will not only guarantee its sharpness, but should also preserve it from the danger of hypostatization. Such ideal type concepts will by necessity be temporary; but by this very token, they will lend the historical disciplines youthfulness.⁴³

With this, Weber has in fact sketched out in the round his solution to the problems tackled in the Nervi fragment: as for *terminology*, we are now no longer speaking of 'value relation', but of 'ideal type';⁴⁴ thus the term 'value' in the sense of '*worth knowing about*' is no longer of much relevance. As for *the origin of the values* used as a basis for the construction of the ideal types, they have their clear basis in the historian's imagination and the interests of his contemporary public; but all manner of links to the values and ideas of the people who form the subject matter of the ideal types can be imagined. Finally, the question of the relationship between *reality and metaphysics* has been solved by elision: since the concept is basically unreal there is no point in searching for possible metaphysical links, even less so since the value standpoints of the historian who constructs it will necessarily change with time.

5. Conclusion

This does not mean, of course, that the primary sources have shown us a Weber whose dependence on Rickert concerning the basic con-

(Weber 1968: 42-145). For vivid formulations, see for instance Weber 1968: 100 n. 2, 125. These formulations also make it clear that in Weber's eyes the 'market' aspect of identifying and grading interests – what the public will 'buy' – (cf. above, p. 146) counts for less than the creativeness of the historian.

43. This line of thought is forcefully developed towards the end of 'Objektivität' (Weber 1968: 205-14).

44. That this terminology is in many ways as doubtful as Rickert's use of 'value' in 'value relation' is another matter.

cept of value relation is radically less pronounced than had hitherto been supposed. But it has perhaps brought a little more light to bear on some of the issues in this connexion which are still under dispute. Above all, two points seem to emerge with greater clarity:

First: While it is a commonplace—in fact, considering the depth of his comments on the work of Rickert and others, more of an overstatement—that Weber was not a philosopher, it is certainly true that Rickert was in no way a historian or social scientist, and not particularly alive to the practical concerns of social science. He was ‘useful’ to Weber in furnishing the tool of value relation which helped Weber succeed in the task of clearing the tangled undergrowth of methodological confusion that he found when he started methodological work in the first years of the century. But this tool was basically a philosophical one, and of most immediate use in polemics. Whenever Weber started turning towards more concrete questions of concept formation—as he did as early as in the Nervi fragment, and in particular in the last third of *Objektivität*—what Rickert had on offer clearly did not seem to him sufficient.

Second: Not only was Rickert’s philosophical tool of value relation not sufficient for Weber in these concrete and constructive respects, but it also tended to cut the wrong way by domesticating the concept of value, both terminologically and philosophically. This domestication ran totally against the grain of Weber’s deepest convictions. To continue with the metaphor used above: he accepted the need for sheepdogs, but he felt much more deeply about the preservation of wolves in their natural habitat. He may technically have kept his philosophical bridges to Rickert, and to the domesticated values, open, as he did in the Nervi fragment. But when, only a year later, in *Objektivität*, he insisted on the unreality of concepts and the essential changeability of all cultural values, he was in fact going off in the opposite direction.

German Text of the ‘Nervi Fragment’

‘Wenn R. sagt: _____, so ist vielmehr zu sagen, dass an die Stelle einer Reihe von freilich trivialen, aber durchaus *verständlichen* Termini ein höchst bedenklich schillernder, vieldeutiger und zu Missverständnissen gradezu auffordernder Ausdruck gesetzt wird. Man setze doch der Probe halber einmal an *allen* Stellen, wo R. von ‘Werth’ spricht, die Ausdrücke ‘_____’ ein. Ein grosser Teil seiner Ausführungen wird dann eine äusserlich wesentlich trivialere Färbung annehmen, aber wenn die Phil. die ‘W.-. Selbstverst’. ist (Windelband), so hat sie die

ausdrückl. Constatierung des Selbstverst. als solchen auch in der Form nicht zu scheuen.

So sehr man Rs Begriff 'Werth' in der S. gegebenen Bedeutung schütteln mag, es fällt nichts Anderes heraus als die Bedeutung 'wissenswerth' u. also bedeutet die 'Notwendigkeit' der Beziehung auf einen Werth nichts andres als der *scheinbar* recht triviale Satz: dass die Geschichte aus der empirischen *Wirklichkeit* das *Wissenswerthe* darstellen solle. Daraus allein ergibt sich schon, dass R's wenigstens in der *Formulierung* scharfe Grenzlinie zwischen 'historischen' Individuen (den auf Werthe bezogenen) u. andren thatsächlich nicht nur historisch und individuell *flüssig* gedacht werden *muss*, sondern dass vor Allem die unendliche Abstufung des *Masses*, in dem die einzelnen Wirklichkeits-Bestandteile wissenswerth sind, nicht ignoriert werden darf.

Auf diesen, in ihrer Abstufung stets im Fluss befindlichen, *Differenzen* des Interesses, welches die *Einzelnen*, das jeweilige *Publikum* des Historikers den einzelnen Bestandteilen der empirischen Wirklichkeit zuwenden, und *nicht* nur auf dem Grade der *Allgemeinheit* oder etwa gar der *Normgemässheit* dieses Interesses ruht in der *Wirklichkeit* jene Auswahl, welche dabei angesichts der Schranken unsres Aufnahmevermögens nach dem 'Princip der Wirtschaftlichkeit' – d.h. der Befriedigung zuerst des *intensivsten* Interesses verfährt. Der *Grund* des Interesses aber kann ein wenn nicht gradezu *unendlich*, so doch praktisch *unerschöpflich* verschiedener sein, – auch auf dem Gebiet der Culturerscheinungen, von dem Interesse des Briefmarken- und Pantoffelsammlers bis zu dem höchsten, was unser Herz bewegt. Dass jeweils angesichts Schranken unsres Aufnahmevermögens und der Unendlichkeit der Mannigfaltigkeit der Welt nach Befriedigung der dringlichsten Fragen das Interesse an den weiter möglichen sich ziemlich rasch dem Nullpunkt nähert und für die *faktisch mögliche* wissenschaftl. Arbeit ihm praktisch durchaus gleichkommt, ändert daran nur in dem Sinn etwas, in welchem der Satz vom 'Umschlagen' der Quantitäten in Qualitäten annehmbar ist. Das *faktische* Bestehen *allgemeinen* Interesses an manchen Teilen der Wirklichkeit u. das *Fehlen*, auch das faktisch *allgemeine* Fehlen von solchem an dem überwiegenden andern Teil derselben ist als Thatsache *psychologisch* recht leicht zu erklären, ebenso wenigstens in ihren allgemeinen Zügen die *Grad*-abstufung ist [sic] der Versuch aber -Normen zu formulieren führt m.E. nicht nur in die Metaphysik, – das ist [text unfinished]. Sobald man aber hinter den *faktisch* vorfindlichen jeweiligen Schranken des historischen Interesses in ihrer *faktisch* vorfindlichen Abstufung noch etwas Andres, *Objektives* suchen will, betritt man das Gebiet der *Normen*, d.h. man sucht dann nach einem Princip, aus welchem deduziert werden könnte nicht etwa nur *wofür* überhaupt wir uns ein für allemal interessieren sollten sondern, in welchem *Grad*verhältnis unser Interesse an den einzelnen Teilen der Wirklichkeit s. abzustufen habe. Nur dies ist ja der ins Triviale übersetzte Sinn jener 'Werthmetaphysik' sein [sic], in der R. ausmündet. An dieser Stelle muss es genügen, den Zweifel an die

Möglichkeit einer *inhaltlichen* Erfassung derartiger Normen auszusprechen u. nur hinzufügen, dass ein solcher Zweifel sehr wohl auch mit einer Auffassung vereinbar wäre, welcher in der 'absoluten Gültigkeit' bestimmter 'Werthe' (wir würden sagen: 'Interessen') mehr als einen blossen *Grenzbegriff* sieht. Die *logische* Möglichkeit einer 'formalen' Ethik zeigt jedenfalls dass in dem *Begriff* von Normen für [word unreadable] unendliche Mannigfaltigkeit des normierten Objektes *nicht* schon die Sicherheit *inhaltlicher* Formulierbarkeit liegt'.

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