

**FROM COSMOS TO DISENCHANTMENT : SCIENCE, LIFE AND EVALUATION  
IN MAX WEBER'S THOUGHT BETWEEN POLYTHEISM OF VALUES AND  
WERTBEZIEHUNG**

Martina Treglia

(Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)

**1) An overview**

Officially inaugurated in 1904 with the publication of Max Weber's essay *Die « Objektivität » sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis*<sup>1</sup>, the so-called « controversy over value judgments »<sup>2</sup> in the historical and social sciences is still far from exhausted. What is certain is that Weber's writings on the subject – especially *Wissenschaft als Beruf*<sup>3</sup>, the aforementioned essay on the « objectivity » of knowledge and *Der Sinn der « Wertfreiheit » der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften*<sup>4</sup> – have represented and continue to represent a decisive point of reference for anyone who approaches the problem.

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<sup>1</sup> Weber M., « Die “Objektivität” sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis », in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, vol. XIX, 1904 ; eng. tr. by Bruun H. H., « The “objectivity” of knowledge in social science and social policy », in *Collected methodological writings*, ed. by Bruun H. H. and Whimster S., London – New York, Routledge, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Originated within the so-called « young » *historical school of economics*, the « controversy over value judgments » broke out concretely in September 1909, on the occasion of the annual congress of the *Verein für Socialpolitik*. On that occasion, Eugen von Philippovich (1858-1917), Weber's predecessor in the chair of political economy at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, gave a theoretical-scientific report on the theme of « The Essence of National Economic Productivity ». Max Weber, Werner Sombart (1863-1941) and Friedrich von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld (1868-1958) questioned the scientific value of the concept of productivity, considering it « evaluating » and too often confused with the concept of « social well-being ». The controversy ended up polarizing the members of the *Verein* on two opposing positions – for or against the principle of value-freedom – and prompting, in 1913, a disappointed and resigned Weber to leave the association. (Cf. Cavalli A., *Momenti di storia del pensiero sociologico*, Milano, Ledizioni, 2012 and Kaesler D., *Max Weber. Eine Einführung in Leben, Werk und Wirkung*, Frankfurt a. M. – New York, Campus, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf » (1917/1919), in *Gesamtausgabe*, part I, vol. XVII (*Wissenschaft als Beruf 1917/1919 – Politik als Beruf 1919*), ed. by Mommsen W. J., Schluchter W. and Morgenbrod B., Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1992 ; eng. tr. by Livingstone R., « Science as a Vocation », in *The vocation lectures*, ed. by Owen D. and Strong T. B., Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », in *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur*, vol. VII, 1917 ; eng. tr. by Bruun H. H., « The meaning of “value freedom” in the sociological and economic sciences », in Weber M., *Collected methodological writings*, *op. cit.*

The postulate of scientific value-freedom, which summarizes Weber's position on the topic, finds an extremely clear formulation in the last of these essays, published in 1917 in the first issue of the seventh volume of the German magazine « *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* ». As Weber explains, the claim for the *wertfrei* nature of the empirical disciplines has to do exclusively with

the demand – which is in itself quite trivial – that, in his research and exposition, the scholar should keep two things completely apart : on the one hand, statements concerning empirical facts (including the « valuational » conduct that he observes in empirical human beings investigated by him) ; and, on the other hand, his own practical, valuational position – that is to say : his judgment of those facts (including any « valuations » by empirical human beings, if those valuations are made the object of an investigation by him) as being desirable or undesirable – a position that is, in that sense, an « evaluating » one. He should make that strict distinction because those two sets of problems are simply heterogeneous<sup>5</sup>.

In this contribution, the point of view from which we intend to approach Weber's exclusion of value judgments from the scope of the historical and social sciences will mainly concern *the strictly philosophical reasons that – from Weber's point of view – would make it not only possible, but necessary*. In particular, we will focus on how Weber's conception of the world, of life and above all of values, on the one hand translates into the need to rigorously clarify the limits of what is legitimate for man to expect from scientific knowledge, and, on the other hand, ends up also affecting the more strictly methodological side of his thought. In doing so, we will investigate the *logical function* carried out by value judgments in the value-free empirical sciences of culture, aiming to show that « scientifically » conducted value-discussions not only are not incompatible with the value-free nature of these disciplines, but also that, far from being meaningless, they can be of great utility, both for *practical and personal life* and for the *actual empirical work of historical-social sciences*. The discussion will be intertwined, on both sides, with reflections concerning Weber's peculiar axiological conception, in relation to which – even on a

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 310.

strictly methodological level – he ends up distancing himself from his neo-Kantian interlocutors of the period, especially from Heinrich Rickert.

It should be noted, in a preliminary way, that however *wertfrei*, each science always aspires to the formulation of « valuable » judgments – both in the sense of their logical and substantial adequacy, and in the sense of their correspondence to specific forms of cognitive interest – and that, in spite of any possible misunderstanding, the empirical sciences of culture rest on the fundamental presupposition of their possibility to « treat “subjective” human valuations as an object of investigation »<sup>6</sup>. What the Weberian principle of value-freedom really implies is only the recognition of the necessity « to rule out the “scientific” advocacy of practical points of view – except, that is, for the discussion of what means to choose in order to achieve an end that has been definitely agreed »<sup>7</sup>. The problem, so far, would seem to rest only on the level of the neo-Kantian distinction between *Sein* and *Sollen* : the validity of a practical imperative as a norm, on the one hand, and the truth value of an empirical statement of fact, on the other, belong to completely heterogeneous problem areas. It is not possible, through the tools of empirical science, to conclude anything about the normative validity of a particular valuational position, in just the same way that « a “realistic” description of the astronomical ideas of, say, the Chinese – in other words : one that demonstrated their practical motives for pursuing astronomy, how they did so, what their results were, and how they arrived at them – could never aim at proving the correctness of that Chinese astronomy »<sup>8</sup>. It is therefore denied – in a first and still strictly methodological sense – any possibility of a scientific determination of ultimate ends and with it that of science itself to offer an answer « to the only questions that matter to us : “What should we do ? How shall we live ?” »<sup>9</sup>

However, it is the general problem of the unavoidable collision between spheres of value diverging in principle that contributes decisively to the Weberian recognition of the inability of scientific knowledge to provide answers to man’s ethical and practical questions. Any theory of values that aspires to really live up to its task, that really wants « to

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 99 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 52 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 312.

<sup>9</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 93 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 17.

look the fate of the age full in the face »<sup>10</sup> cannot ignore, according to Weber, such a state of affairs. Concepts such as those of « system » and « hierarchy » of values clash against the evidence that, as

that old sober empiricist, John Stuart Mill, once said [...], simply on the basis of experience, no one would ever arrive at the existence of one god – and, it seems to me, certainly not a god of goodness but at polytheism. Indeed, anyone living in the « world » (in the Christian sense of the word) can only feel himself subject to the struggle between multiple sets of values, each of which, viewed separately, seems to impose an obligation on him<sup>11</sup>.

In the background of these considerations, lies the shattering of that archaic and originally religious conception of the world as a *rationaly ordered* and *meaningful cosmos* that – presupposing the existence of an harmonious hierarchical composition of ultimate values – was capable of relegating every form of ideal collision to the rank of simple appearance, thus offering man a solid existential grounding. According to Weber, thrown back upon himself by a world which has become objectively meaningless, man is eventually forced to create sense in both theoretical and practical terms<sup>12</sup> : on the one hand, the loss of an « objective meaning » that science would be called to uncover requires a reconsideration of its role, a reflection on its overall meaning in the rationalized and disenchanting world, in an age « alien to God and bereft of prophets »<sup>13</sup> ; on the other hand, also man's relationship with the values that orient his conduct must be completely rethought. Rejecting the Rickertian postulate of their absoluteness and *metahistorical transcendence*, Weber attributes to values a merely *normative transcendence*, that is to say, the possibility of being valid as *normative term of reference* for human action, by virtue of a choice with which the subject

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Weber M., « Zwischen zwei Gesetzen » (1916), in *Gesamtausgabe*, part I, vol. XV (*Zur Politik im Weltkrieg. Schriften und Reden 1914–1918*), ed. by Mommsen W. J. and Hübinger G., Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1984, p. 98 ; eng. tr. by Speirs R., « Between Two Laws », in Weber M., *Political Writings*, ed. by Lassman P., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> To quote Fulvio Tessitore, « there is no doubt that Weber deduces all the logical consequences of the crisis in which Nietzsche had thrown the concept of objective truth by replacing it with the search for the meaning of life among the infinite “interpretations” (and not “facts”) that can be given of the world, which has not *one* sense, but *innumerable ones*. » (Tessitore F., *Introduzione a “Lo Storicismo”*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1991, p. 200-201 ; our translation, our italics).

<sup>13</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 106 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 28.

takes them as guiding criteria. The task of determining ends – before which science manifests all its powerlessness – falls entirely on the shoulders of the individual, who, in front of his own conscience, is called to decide in total autonomy which god or which demon to serve.

Overcoming the pessimistic outcomes of Tolstoyian reflection, Weber asks whether the inability of scientific knowledge to answer the only questions that matter to us – « What should we do ? How shall we live ? » – precludes or not its possibility to offer something truly positive for our practical and personal life. It is precisely the careful consideration of the *direct results* of discussions of value-judgments conducted both on a specifically logical and on a factual-empirical level that leads Weber to answer the question affirmatively. As a matter of fact, discussions of this type prove to be capable of rendering an inestimable service to human life : to provide *clarity*, that is, as we will see, to make sure that the most important decisions of everyone's life take place in the condition of highest possible awareness.

As anticipated above, the usefulness of a value discussion, however, is not at all restricted to such *direct results* : if considered from the standpoint of the *indirect results* it may produce, « it may moreover provide a strong and lasting stimulus for empirical research by providing it with the *problems* for investigation »<sup>14</sup> . In fact, « empirical scientific research is *guided* by cultural interests – that is to say : value interests »<sup>15</sup> : only on the basis of a *Wertinterpretation* can the scientist of culture bring out those historically determined valuational viewpoints in relation to which he can distinguish « *valuable phenomena* » in the *individual reality* and determine « what is considered significant or insignificant, “important” or “unimportant” »<sup>16</sup> about them ; only in this way can he arrive at that preliminary *delimitation of the object of investigation* without which the attempt of historical research to trace the *historical-empirical causal chain* could not take place at all.

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<sup>14</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 61 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 317.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 317.

<sup>16</sup> Weber M., « Die “Objektivität” sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis », *op. cit.*, p. 56 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 120.

## 2) The world as a meaningful Kosmos. From Plato to positivism : science as the « path to truth »

According to Weber, the archaic conception of the world as a *rationaly ordered and meaningful cosmos* would have been irredeemably challenged by that extremely complex millenary process of « intellectual rationalization created by science and by scientifically oriented technology » whose main upshot he refers to as the « disenchantment of the world ». This « growing » process

does not imply a growing understanding of the conditions under which we live. It means something quite different. It is the knowledge or the conviction that if *only we wished* to understand them, we *could* do so at any time. It means that in principle, then, we are *not* ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle control everything by *means of calculation*<sup>17</sup>.

In a crucial passage<sup>18</sup> of the famous '17 lecture on *Wissenschaft als Beruf*<sup>19</sup>, the German scholar proposes to retrace the salient stages of this development in order to highlight the profound antithesis between past and present with respect to the general meaning conferred by men upon scientific knowledge. Let us take a quick recap.

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<sup>17</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 87 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 12-13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88-92 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 14-17.

<sup>19</sup> The Weberian lecture on *Wissenschaft als Beruf* – held on November seventh, 1917 – inaugurated the public forum series on « *geistige Arbeit als Beruf* » (« intellectual/spiritual work as a profession/vocation ») organized by the Bavarian *Freistudentischer Bund* in response to the recent publication of Alexander Schwab's *Beruf und Jugend* (May 1917). Together with Hans Reichenbach (1891-1953), Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and many other young scholars gathered around the German pedagogue Gustav Wyneken (1865-1974), Schwab (1887-1943) had been an exponent of the most radical nucleus of the progressive wing of the *Deutsche Freie Studentenschaft*. The distinctive feature of the so-called *Kreis von Freistudenten um Wyneken* has to be found in a severe criticism of the German university institution : excessively oriented towards the transmission of specialist and professional knowledge, it turned out to be – according to many « free students » – absolutely incapable of educating men with a complete and autonomous worldview. Exacerbating this criticism, Schwab became a supporter of a rigid separation between science and profession that alienated him from the sympathies of many members of the League. As for the reasons behind the choice of Max Weber as lecturer at the four meetings in which the cycle should originally have been articulated, it would seem to have been fundamental Schwab's statement that the brothers Max and Alfred Weber (1868-1958) would have been the only men of his time to have spoken significantly about the subject of *Beruf*. (Cf. Massimilla E., « Professione o gioventù : Alexander Schwab e la riflessione weberiana sul "Beruf" », in Schwab A., *Professione e gioventù e altri saggi*, ed. by Massimilla E., Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino Editore, 2005, p. 35-92).

The starting point of Weber's itinerary is represented by the V-IV century B.C. Greece : the Platonic *Myth of the Cave*<sup>20</sup> – with which Book VII of the *Republic* opens – is assumed as an exemplary expression of a conception of science as « the path to true existence »<sup>21</sup> . It is impossible not to recall the marvelous image whose evocation the Athenian philosopher entrusts to the dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, that of

the cavemen in chains with their gaze directed at the wall of rock in front of them. Behind them lies the source of light that they cannot see ; they see only the shadows the light casts on the wall, and they strive to discover the relationship between them. Until one of them succeeds in bursting his bonds and he turns around and catches sight of the sun. Blinded, he stumbles around, stammering about what he has seen. The others call him mad. But gradually he learns to look into the light, and his task then is to clamber down to the cave-men and lead them up into the light of day. He is the philosopher, while *the sun is the truth of science, which alone does not snatch at illusions and shadows but seeks only true being*<sup>22</sup>.

Such a representation of scientific knowledge is traced back by Weber to the Platonic enthusiasm for the discovery of the *concept*, the logical backbone of scientific judgment and the sublime product of Socratic philosophy<sup>23</sup> : thanks to it, men came into possession of a medium « with which you could clamp someone into a logical vise so that he could not escape without admitting either that he knew nothing or that this and nothing else was the truth »<sup>24</sup> . In relation to this, what Weber is mainly interested in pointing out is that for Plato's contemporaries – still deeply immersed in the horizon of a cosmically portrayed universe – to have the concepts of the Good, the True, the Beautiful and so on, lit-

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<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Republic*, VII, 514a-517c.

<sup>21</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 93 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88-89 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 14 (our italics).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987b and 1078b : « Socrates, however, was busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these ethical matters, and fixed thought for the first time on definitions. [...] Socrates occupied himself with the excellences of character, and in connection with them became the first to raise the problem of universal definition. » (Eng. tr. by Ross W. D. and Barnes J.).

<sup>24</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 89 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 14.

erally meant *being able to master their intimate essence*. From this point of view, the concept – and science through it – seemed to provide a valid solution to the most deeply felt issue in the « political community » of the classical Greek *polis* : how to be a good citizen ? The gateway to the most correct conduct of life could not but appear wide open.

The second fundamental step in the rise of Western rationalism was then taken, according to Weber, during the Renaissance period : it was from the second half of the XV century onward that *rational experiment* – an indispensable tool of scientific investigation and means of a reliably controlled experience – was indeed elevated to « the principle of research as such »<sup>25</sup> . Among the initiators of this crucial methodological turning point, Weber pinpoints the pioneers of artistic experimentalism : first and foremost Leonardo da Vinci, followed by the XVI century harpsichordist masters<sup>26</sup>. Lastly, with Francis Bacon and Galileo Galilei, rational experiment would have been introduced into theory and scientific investigation respectively. The question about the meaning of science found, through the work and ingenuity of these men at the gates of modernity, a new and original answer :

For artistic experimenters like Leonardo and the musical innovators of the sixteenth century, it [science] meant *the path to true art*, and for them this meant *the path to true nature*. Art should be elevated to the rank of a science, and this meant, above all, that the artist should be raised to the rank of a doctor, both socially and in terms of the meaning of his life<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> In this regard, Cf. Weber M., « Zur Musiksoziologie », in *Gesamtausgabe*, part I, vol. XIV (*Zur Musiksoziologie. Nachlaß 1921*), ed. by Braun C. and Finscher L., Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 2004. As well as that in the sociology of religion, Weber's interest in the sociology of music is closely related to his attempt to account for the exclusivity of certain aspects of Western culture on the basis of its general rationalistic orientation. In the unfinished 1921 posthumous work *Die rationalen und soziologischen Grundlagen der Musik* (*Zur Musiksoziologie* in the recent critical re-edition), Weber asks : « Why did polyphonic as well as harmonic-homophonic music and the modern tone system develop out of the widely diffused preconditions of polyvocality only in the Occident ? » (eng. tr. by Martindale D., Riedel J. and Neuwirt G., *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1958, p. 83). According to Weber, both the invention of modern musical notation and the standardization of harmonic intervals due to the development and progressive diffusion of fixed-tuning instruments – especially the organ and the piano – would have significantly contributed to transform the process of western musical production into a calculable affair operating with known means, effective instruments, and understandable rules.

<sup>27</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 90 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 15 (our italics).



As well as the previous classical Greek conception, the Renaissance idea of science as the path to « true art » or « true nature » clearly is established in the wake of this now obsolete worldview. In this regard, it is worth stressing that the so-called « scientific » or « experimental method », formally introduced by Galileo, presupposes a *mathematically structured universe*, a sort of

grand book which stands continually open to our gaze, but it cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and interpret the characters in which it is written. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures, without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it ; without these, one is wandering around in a dark labyrinth<sup>28</sup>.

Mathematics – and *experimental science* through it – became the key to the real essence of the natural world, to its truth, a truth written, as we have seen, in a language that only it showed itself capable of understanding and interpreting<sup>29</sup>.

Continuing his analysis, Weber highlights how in the XVII century – in direct continuity with the formalization of the experimental method and under the indirect influence of Protestantism and Puritanism – the newborn « natural exact sciences » had come to advance further claims about their tasks and their own meaning. Swammerdam's well known saying : « I bring you the proof of God's providence in the anatomy of a louse »<sup>30</sup> thoroughly embodies a new idea of scientific knowledge as « the path to God »<sup>31</sup> :

That way was no longer to be discovered by the philosophers with their concepts and deductions. [...] God is hidden, his ways are not our ways, his

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<sup>28</sup> Galilei G., « Il Saggiatore » (1623), in *Opere*, vol. I, ed. by Brunetti F., Torino, UTET, 1964, p. 631-632 ; eng. tr. by Drake S. .

<sup>29</sup> The modern conception of the relationship between mathematics and reality takes distance from both the Aristotelian and the Platonic interpretation. Aristotle conceived the physical entity as a mobile entity : since what is mathematical is abstracted from movement, the participation of mathematical attributes in the constitution of things was automatically excluded. Although Plato – unlike Aristotle – recognized the interpretative possibilities offered by mathematics (limitedly to astronomy alone), he conceived it as having the only task of « saving the phenomena », that is, of making them indexable in a rational construction that, however, didn't say anything about their true reality. (Cf. Laino L., *Salvare i fenomeni. Saggio sulla fisica greca e sui presupposti della matematizzazione della natura*, Sesto San Giovanni, Mimesis, 2015.)

<sup>30</sup> Swammerdam J., *Biblia Naturae*, Leiden, H. Boerhaave, 1737.

<sup>31</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 91 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 16.

thoughts are not our thoughts. In the exact natural sciences, however, where his works could be experienced physically, people cherished the hope that they would be able to find clues to his intentions for the world<sup>32</sup>.

Human attempts to invest scientific knowledge with unedited objective meanings, however, did not stop here. The last in chronological order that Weber refers to is the one operated by positivism : notoriously animated by a blind trust in the possibilities of reason and science, it optimistically celebrated the latter – placed at the service of man in the form of technique – as « the path to true happiness »<sup>33</sup> .

### 3) The disenchanting world

#### 3.1) Das « Sinnproblem der Wissenschaft » : science and man before questions of value

Weber's journey through the main stages in the rise of Western rationalism culminates with a fatal realization : of the ancient ingenuity with which men had looked at science, advancing from time to time the most disparate claims about what was believed could be achieved through it, nothing remains today : all the ancient illusions – still credible only to some « overgrown children »<sup>34</sup> in the field of natural sciences and to « religiously minded »<sup>35</sup> young people in search of « experience » – have been irredeemably shattered. It is indeed necessary to assume as « an ineluctable fact of our historical situation »<sup>36</sup> that

Science today is a profession practiced in specialist *disciplines* in the service of reflection on the self and the knowledge of relationships between facts and not a gift of grace on the part of seers and prophets dispensing sacred goods and revelations. Nor is it part of the meditations of sages and philosophers about the *meaning* of the world<sup>37</sup>.

By placing the emphasis on the relationship existing between science and self-reflection, this short passage offers us a first indication of the peculiar sense in which Weber believes, as we will show, that science can still hope to have an ethical-practical value in the

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

overall life of contemporary man. In fact, if it is true, on the one hand, that in asking ourselves what the meaning of science could be today since all the old chimeras have disappeared, we cannot but agree with Tolstoy that « science is meaningless »<sup>38</sup> – « because it has no answer to the only questions that matter to us : “What should we do? How shall we live ?” »<sup>39</sup> – on the other, it remains to be understood *in what sense it gives* « no » answer, and above all « whether or not it might after all prove useful for somebody who is able to ask the right question »<sup>40</sup>.

As we mentioned in the introduction, the problem could be addressed, even before referring specifically to Weber's peculiar axiological conception, on a purely methodological level. In his famous '17 methodological essay *Der Sinn der « Wertfreiheit » der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften*, appealing to the Neo-Kantian thesis – implicit in the formulation of the value-freedom principle – of the absolute heterogeneity between the *Sollen* level, to which values pertain, and the *Sein* one, concerning facts, Weber categorically rejects the possibility of a « scientific critique of ideals and value judgements » claiming to establish – on the basis of empirical statement of facts – the normative validity

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* Most critics agree that Weber may be here referring to Tolstoy's 1886 essay *What Shall We Do Then ?*, in which the Russian author accuses science – in particular political economy – of carefully avoiding « all answers to the simplest and most essential questions » (Tolstoy L., « What Shall We Do Then ? », in *The complete works of Count Tolstoy*, vol. XVII, ed. by Wiener L., Boston, Dana Estes & Company, 1904, p. 147). Another plausible source for this statement could be, in our opinion, Leo Tolstoy's *Modern Science* (1898), written as preface to Sergey Tolstoy's Russian translation of Edward Carpenter's 1888 essay *Modern Science : a Criticism* : « But without predetermining the question whether experimental science will, or will not, by its methods, ever bring us to the solution of the most serious problems of human life, the activity of experimental science itself, in its relation to the eternal and most reasonable demands of man, is so anomalous as to amaze one. People must live. But in order to live they must know how to live. And all men always obtained this knowledge – well or ill – and in conformity with it have lived and progressed ; and this knowledge of how men should live has from the days of Moses, Solon, and Confucius been always considered a science – the very essence of science. And only in our time has it come to be considered that the science telling us how to live, is not a science at all, but that only experimental science – commencing with Mathematics and ending in Sociology – is real science. [...] A plain, reasonable working man [...] expects of science that it will solve for him the questions on which his welfare, and that of all men, depends. He expects science to tell him how he ought to live : how to treat his family, his neighbors and the men of other tribes, how to restrain his passions, what to believe in and what not to believe in, and much else. And what does our science say to him on these matters ? It triumphantly tells him : how many million miles it is from the earth to the sun ; at what rate light travels through space ; how many million vibrations of ether per second are caused by light, how many vibrations of air by sound [...] and similar things. “But I don't want any of those things”, says a plain and reasonable man – “I want to know how to live”. » (« Modern Science », in *Essays and Letters*, ed. by Maude A., London, Oxford University Press, 1911, p. 223-225.)

<sup>40</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 93 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 17.

of practical imperatives. To be essential in the methodological objection to the idea of a *scientific ethical prescriptiveness* would be the need to distinguish – in the context of a psychological-empirical or historical investigation of a particular valuational position, considered in its individual, social and historical conditions – between *validity* and *causal efficacy*.

[...] one may investigate the causal effect that the actual existence of certain ethical or religious convictions has on economic life, and possibly estimate it as being considerable ; but surely this does not imply that, because those convictions have perhaps been causally very effective, one therefore has to share them or at least to regard them as « valuable ». On the other hand, even if one acknowledges the great value of some ethical or religious phenomenon, this does not in any way imply that one would also regard the unforeseen consequences of realizing this phenomenon in practice as being equally positive<sup>41</sup>.

A « realistic » science of ethics – « one that demonstrates how the ethical views prevalent at a given time within a certain group of people have been influenced by the other conditions of life of those people, and have in their turn influenced those conditions »<sup>42</sup> – cannot in any way give rise to an ethics capable of asserting something about what « must be worth », in the same way that a « realistic » exposition of the astronomical conceptions of the Chinese could never aim to demonstrate its correctness. We will return to this topic – expanding the horizon of the discussion to the empirical sciences of culture in general – in the fifth paragraph, addressing the problem of the relationship between the *Wertdiskussion* and the empirical work of historical-social sciences.

To the methodological reasons that would prevent science from pronouncing itself – in terms of the recognition of the normative validity of certain ethical-practical evaluations – on the goals that man should be called to pursue, are added, in *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, reasons concerning the problematic relationship of science with its essential assumptions. As Weber asserts discussing Mommsen's controversial hypothesis of a science

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<sup>41</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der "Wertfreiheit" der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 52 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 312.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

« without presuppositions »<sup>43</sup>, in every scientific work at least two premises are always present : the validity of the logical and methodological rules on the one hand, and the value of the object of investigation – which is *supposed* to be « “important” in the sense of “worth knowing about” »<sup>44</sup> – on the other. As Weber observes, it is in the last of these premises that lies the source of all our difficulties : as a matter of fact, far from being demonstrable through the tools of scientific investigation, the validity of this assumption can only be postulated. It is clear : while assuming as obvious the importance of the laws they investigate, natural sciences are not able to establish scientifically whether these laws are *worthy of being known* or not, whether the world they describe is *worth existing*, or if it even makes sense for us to subsist in it. In short, they tell man how to master life « technically », but merely *assuming* that he must or wants to do it. Similarly, for the doctor whose task is « to preserve life as such and to reduce suffering as far as possible »<sup>45</sup> that life is *worth living* is an absolutely unprovable assumption. Aesthetics presupposes the worth of art, but does not inquire whether there should be works of art ; jurisprudence determines in which circumstances specific rules of law must be recognized as valid, but « it does not explain whether such a thing as law should exist »<sup>46</sup> . Moreover, « historical sciences of culture »

teach us how to understand the political, artistic, literary, and social products of culture by examining the conditions that gave rise to them. But they provide no answer to questions about whether these cultural products deserved or deserve to exist. Nor do they answer the other question of whether it is worth taking the trouble to get to know them<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Weber's reference is to Theodor Mommsen's 1901 essay *Universitätsunterricht und Konfession* and to the long-discussed idea, expressed by the German historian, that « our life nerve is research without presuppositions, research that does not find what it is supposed to find according to considerations of purpose and relevance, things which serve other goals lying outside of Science, but what seems logically and historically correct to the conscientious researcher, summarized in a single word : truthfulness. » (Mommsen T., « Universitätsunterricht und Konfession », in *Reden und Aufsätze*, Berlin, Weidmann, 1905, p. 432 ; eng. tr. by Banks D. N.) From Weber's point of view, the only possible sense in which we can speak of a science « without presuppositions » concerns the need for its value-freedom.

<sup>44</sup> Weber M., « Die “Objektivität” sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis », *op. cit.*, p. 46 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 114.

<sup>45</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 94 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 18.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

To these and other questions it will never be possible to provide a « one and only one answer » of whose universal validity science can be guarantor, but as many answers as there are the potentially defensible *Weltanschauungen*. Whether life is worth living or not, for example, is something that no science will ever be able to demonstrate : the fact that this question can be subjectively answered both affirmatively and negatively depends exclusively on the circumstance that even radically divergent positions can be assumed with regard to existence.

Something very similar happens in the field of practical action : facing the problem of the realization of an end, we find ourselves called to carefully commensurate the *desired goal* with the « scientifically » determinable *factual consequences* of its possible achievement ; nevertheless, once determined which *means* and *subsidiary consequences* have to be recognized as unavoidable, science must step aside and man's task begins. In fact, the task to decide whether or not – considering those means and risks – we should tend anyway towards the realization of our own goal « is not one that science can perform ; that decision must be taken by the striving person who, in accordance with his own conscience and his personal world view, weighs the values in question and chooses between them »<sup>48</sup>.

Later in the paper, we will be able to further focus on the ethical issues related to the theme of « decision ». Now, after having called attention to the intimate connection between the problem of determining ends and what Weber believes to be an absolutely non-ironical « conflict between the gods of the different systems and values »<sup>49</sup> – a clash « ruled over by fate, and certainly not by “science” »<sup>50</sup> – all we have to do is turn our attention to this struggle, that is, to the *Polytheismus der Werte* as the only form of metaphysics « fitting »<sup>51</sup> a universe of values articulated in a plurality of spheres.

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<sup>48</sup> Weber M., « Die “Objektivität” sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis », *op. cit.*, p. 26 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 102.

<sup>49</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 100 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 23.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 57 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 314.

### 3.2) The polytheism of values : *Gesinnung* and *Persönlichkeit* against relativization and everyday man

In introducing the topic – both in *Der Sinn der « Wertfreiheit »* and in *Wissenschaft als Beruf* – Weber explicitly refers to John Stuart Mill as the figure responsible for the fundamental intuition according to which « if you take pure experience as your starting point, you will end up in polytheism »<sup>52</sup>. There is no doubt that in attributing to him such a merit Weber alludes to one of Mill's latest writings, *Theism*, published posthumously in 1874 as part of the collection *Three Essays on Religion*. As a matter of fact, it is precisely here that the English philosopher writes :

Though I have defined the problem of Natural Theology, to be that of the existence of God or of a God, rather than of Gods, there is the amplest historical evidence that the belief in Gods is immeasurably more natural to the human mind than the belief in one author and ruler of nature ; and that this more elevated belief is, compared with the former, an artificial product, requiring (except when impressed by early education) a considerable amount of intellectual culture before it can be reached<sup>53</sup>.

The way Weber reinterprets the overall meaning of these statements – shifting the emphasis on the problem, extraneous to Mill, of the relationship between spheres of value – clearly emerges from *Zwischen zwei Gesetzen*<sup>54</sup>, a short essay published in the February 1916 issue of the German magazine *Die Frau*. Taking a stand against the anti-militarist rejection of the *Machtstaat*, Weber underlines how an authentic pacifism should not only abolish war, but also all the goods of civilization that we daily benefit from, as they are produced by « that loveless and un pitying economic struggle for existence [...] in which

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<sup>52</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 99 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 22.

<sup>53</sup> Mill J. S., « Theism », in « Three Essays on Religion », in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. X (*Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society*), ed. by Robson J. M., Toronto – London, University of Toronto Press-Routledge, 1985, p. 431.

<sup>54</sup> Through this writing – published in the form of an open letter to the readers of the monthly – Weber intended to take part in the debate unleashed on *Die Frau* by a previous and homonymous intervention by his friend Gertrud Bäumer (1873-1954), editor of the magazine. In her *Zwischen zwei Gesetzen* (October 1915) Bäumer, analyzing the relationship between evangelical laws and duties towards the homeland, had justified the strategy of the German Reich on the basis of the alleged superiority of State's power interests. In January 1916, a controversial intervention by the Swiss pacifist Gesine Nordbeck had then stressed the need for a Christian to always put the *Wille zum Frieden* (will to peace) before the *Wille zur Macht* (will to power). In general, Weber's contribution must be interpreted as an attempt to take Bäumer's defense.

not millions, but hundreds of millions of people, year after year waste away in body or soul »<sup>55</sup>. Again with reference to Mill and polemicising against the Christian-pacifist idea of the alleged superiority of the *Wille zum Frieden* over the *Wille zur Macht*, Weber writes :

That old sober empiricist, John Stuart Mill, once said that, simply on the basis of experience, no one would ever arrive at the existence of *one* god – and, it seems to me, certainly not a god of goodness but at polytheism. Indeed anyone living in the « world » (in the Christian sense of the word) can only feel himself subject to the struggle between multiple sets of values, each of which, viewed separately, seems to impose an obligation on him<sup>56</sup>.

Fully developed in *Der Sinn der « Wertfreiheit »*, these preliminary observations underlie the aforementioned Weberian maxim according to which that of the relationship between spheres of value is not a problem of simple alternatives, but of « an irreconcilable struggle to the death with each other – as it were, between “God” and the “Devil” »<sup>57</sup>. The loss of a cosmological foundation to which human action can be « organically » traced back and the consequent rejection of the Rickertian thesis of a necessary and systematic connection of universal metahistorical values<sup>58</sup> inaugurate a completely new relationship between the sphere of value that, once chosen, guides the subject's behavior and the subject himself who deliberately chooses it : each value claims for itself autonomous « normative dignity », that is, the possibility of becoming the object of an equally autonomous *Gesinnung*<sup>59</sup>. Unanchored from its ancient metaphysical foundation and alien to any hierarchical or

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<sup>55</sup> Weber M., « Zwischen zwei Gesetzen », *op. cit.*, p. 98 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 78.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 57 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 314.

<sup>58</sup> We will analyze Weber's relationship with Heinrich Rickert – in terms of their convergences and divergences on the themes of axiology and the methodology of « historical sciences of culture » – in the fifth paragraph.

<sup>59</sup> Regarding the meaning of the concept of *Gesinnung* in Kant's original use of the term, cf. Kant I., *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 1788, A151 ; eng. tr. by Pluhar W. S., *Critique of Practical Reason*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2002, p. 109 : « The moral level on which the human being stands (as does, according to all the insight we have, every rational creature as well) is respect for the moral law. The attitude (*Die Gesinnung*) that he is obligated to have in complying with this law is to do so from duty, not from voluntary fondness or even perhaps from an endeavor that on his own he undertakes gladly, without having been ordered to do so ». In the broader Weberian sense of the term, the word « *Gesinnung* » refers to the inner attitude of active acceptance and unconditional obedience of the subject to his own ultimate values.



harmonious composition, each value subsists only as a possible *normative term of reference* for human action, thus being *absolute* only for the one who chooses it, while remaining *relative* with respect to the uncircumventable relationship existing between it and the value choice<sup>60</sup> :

According to his point of view, each individual will think of one as the devil and the other as God, and he has to decide which one is the devil and which the God *for him*. And the same thing holds good for all aspects of life. The awe-inspiring rationalism of a systematic ethical conduct of life that flows from every religious prophecy dethroned this polytheism in favor of the « One thing that is needful ». Then, when confronted by the realities of outer and inner life, it found itself forced into the compromises and accommodations that we are all familiar with from the history of Christianity. Nowadays, however, we have the *religion of « everyday life »*. The numerous gods of yore, divested of their magic and hence assuming the shape of impersonal forces, arise from their graves, strive for power over our lives, and resume their eternal struggle among themselves<sup>61</sup>.

Proceeding further, Weber seems to be perfectly aware – regarding the problem of « relativization » between spheres of value – of the abyss that separates ideality from reality : yes, in the struggle between values there is no room for compromises, but only – as he explains – « if we consider their intrinsic *meaning* »<sup>62</sup>, that is to say, only « in principle ». In fact,

In our daily lives, we all constantly encounter such relativizations and compromises in practice, and therefore believe that they are also possible in principle. The different value spheres intersect and intertwine in almost every single important position taken by persons in real life. People's humdrum « everyday lives », in the truest sense of that expression, make them shallow precisely in that they do not become aware of the fact that irreconcilably antagonistic val-

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<sup>60</sup> In this regard, we could speak of « subjectively absolute » values.

<sup>61</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 101 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 23-24 (our italics).

<sup>62</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der "Wertfreiheit" der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 57 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 315.

ues are thus in practice mixed up with each other, partly for psychological reasons, partly for pragmatic ones. Above all, they do not want to become aware of that fact<sup>63</sup>.

In calling attention to the possibility of identifying psychological motives at the origin of such crossings, Weber alludes to the internal dynamics of those human behaviors that can be traced back to unconscious causative factors, such as « failure to act » (*Unterlassen*) and « passive acquiescence » (*Dulden*)<sup>64</sup>. Meaningful human conduct is then conditioned, as well as psychologically, also « pragmatically ». In fact, for the individual wavering between the *ethic of conviction* and the *ethic of responsibility*, when and if a « value-rational » action (*Wertrational*) should be preferred over a « goal-rational » one (*Zweckrational*)<sup>65</sup> – or in other words, whether compromises should be rejected on the basis of the fidelity to one’s ultimate convictions or justified as *indispensable means* or *unavoidable subsidiary consequences* of the realization of a desired goal – is a problem destined to recur over and over again.

Nevertheless, as Weber explains, not only are men not aware of the hybrid nature of such crossings, they don’t even want to become it : « they evade the choice between “God” and the “Devil”, and the fundamental personal decision as to which of the conflicting values belongs to the realm of one, and which to the other<sup>66</sup> ». From this point of view, as Weber discloses overcoming the traditional « romantic-naturalistic » view of « *Persönlichkeit* » – « which seeks the real inner sanctum of the personal [...] in the vague, indistinct, vegetative “underground” »<sup>67</sup> of irrationality – an « authentic personality » is not at all something spontaneous and « original », but rather the fruit of a demanding, sincere and

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Weber M., « Soziologische Grundbegriffe », in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, vol. I (*Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*), chap. 1, ed. by Winckelmann J., Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1956 ; eng. tr. by Fischhoff E., « Basic sociological terms », in *Economy and society ; an outline of interpretive sociology*, vol. I, chap. 1, ed. by Roth G. and Wittich C., New York, Bedminster Press, 1968.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*.

<sup>66</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 57 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 315.

<sup>67</sup> Weber M., « Roscher und Knies und die logischen Probleme der historischen Nationalökonomie » (1903, 1905, 1906), in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1922, p. 132 ; eng. tr. by Bruun H. H., « Roscher and Knies and the logical problems of historical economics », in *Collected methodological writings*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

responsible commitment of the subject to establish and preserve « a constant inner relationship to certain ultimate “values” and “meanings” of life – “values” and “meanings” that in the actions of the “personality” are translated into goals, and are thereby converted into teleological–rational action »<sup>68</sup>.

Against the « shallowness of our routinized daily existence », Weber tries to outline a path along which – in a world where the unitary conduct of life no longer leads to the salvation promised by the prophecy – it is still possible to attain authentic forms of human personal life. As a matter of fact, as a famous passage from *Der Sinn der « Wertfreiheit »* exemplarily reads,

The fruit of the tree of knowledge, disturbing to human complacency yet inescapable, is precisely this insight : that we cannot avoid knowing about these conflicts, and must therefore realize that every single important act – and to an even much greater extent : life as a whole, if it is to be lived in full awareness and is not just to unfold like a natural event – involves a series of fundamental decisions through which the soul, as Plato describes it, chooses its own fate, – the meaning, that is, of its activity and being<sup>69</sup>.

The problem of the only *subjectively absolute* nature of values<sup>70</sup> – which puts the truly conscious man before the tragic need to make crucial and definitive choices – is taken up and further developed in the Weberian refutation of that « gross misconception »<sup>71</sup> of the thesis of the collision of values which has to be found in the fact that this standpoint continues, from time to time, to be interpreted as « relativism » – as a conception of life, that is to say, that is based on the diametrically opposite view of the interrelations of the value spheres, and is only meaningfully tenable (if it is to be consistent) on the basis of a very special (« organic ») type of metaphysics<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 57 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 315.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. note 60.

<sup>71</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 57 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 315.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

In other words, an authentic form of relativism – such as that represented by the Hindu caste system, which attributes specific « duties » and « virtues » to the members of the different castes – actually requires the admission of two assumptions that Weber categorically rejects from the very beginning of his philosophical reflection : on the one hand, the idea of man's « organic » rooting in a rationally ordered and meaningful cosmos ; on the other, that of a mere irenic coordination between spheres of value.

For the man who has lost faith in the existence of such an objective meaning, there are only two possibilities left : either to abandon himself to the shallowness of daily existence, or to take on the responsibility of finding and obeying « the daemon that holds the threads of his life »<sup>73</sup>. Only those who courageously accept to meet their own destiny, which is to live in an age « alien to God and bereft of prophets »<sup>74</sup>, deserve to be called « personalities », but just as a personality does not exist without a constant inner relationship to certain ultimate « values » and « meanings », so these values and meanings do not exist without a personality who consciously recognizes them as such.

#### **4) Science at the service of life : clarity and responsibility**

Having thus far illustrated the problem of the meaning of science in a rationalized and disenchanted world, we cannot now exempt ourselves from confronting the really fundamental question : if it can't tell us what we should do or how we should live, « what can science achieve positively for our “lives” at a personal and practical level »<sup>75</sup> ?

First of all, as Weber explains, science gives us « knowledge of the techniques whereby we can control life – both external objects and human actions – through calculation »<sup>76</sup>. Secondly, it « provides methods of thought, the tools of the trade, and the training needed to make use of them »<sup>77</sup>. Lastly – and this is the function we are most interested in – *science promotes clarity*. As mentioned in the introduction, to what extent the latter proves to be indispensable for the evaluating and acting person will clearly emerge from

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<sup>73</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 111 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 31.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 28.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 25.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

a careful consideration of the direct results of discussions of value-judgments conducted both on a specifically logical and on a factual-empirical level.

Considered from the standpoint of the direct results it can produce, a discussion of values, Weber explains, can perform four fundamental functions. First of all, discussions of this type allow us to move from the analysis of the interlocutor's concrete particular evaluations to « the ultimate, internally "consistent" value-axioms »<sup>78</sup> from which they actually derive. Although consisting of a purely logical movement, this operation can frequently result in an extremely *clarifying* experience : in fact, as Weber stresses, people are often in error, not only about their opponent's evaluations, but also about their own<sup>79</sup>. A certain practical evaluative attitude may appear consistent with respect to the principles which someone claims to be guided by, but such consistency cannot simply be *assumed* : it needs to be *controlled*. Let's consider this simple but effective example : by claiming to follow his own religious principles, a professed Christian could feel legitimized to radically disapprove and condemn a thief's conduct. But in doing so, does he not forget that for the true Christian the seventh commandment – which prescribes not to steal – is not the only thing worth practicing ? Are not mercy and compassion cornerstones of Christ's Law too ? Not Christian obedience to God's Word, but the fidelity to some other ultimate conviction must therefore be hidden behind his own evaluation. As cases like this show, there is always the possibility that a practical attitude proves to be at least partially if not completely inconsistent with respect to the value-assumptions that are initially claimed to underlie it : when this happens, resorting to the *logical upward movement* described so far allows us to identify the actual value-axiom that guides the practical subject in his evaluation.

Inverse but equally fundamental is the *logical downward movement* from certain irreducible value-axioms to the concrete particular evaluations which would logically follow from them « if those axioms, and they alone, were made the basis of the practical evaluation of factual situations »<sup>80</sup>. It is Weber himself who provides us with a suitable example of this operation : as we mentioned speaking of *Zwischen zwei Gesetzen*, according to the

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<sup>78</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der "Wertfreiheit" der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 60 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 316.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

German scholar pursuing an *authentic* form of pacifism would impose to abolish not only the war fought from trenches, but also « that loveless and un pitying economic struggle for existence [...] in which not millions, but hundreds of millions of people, year after year waste away in body or soul »<sup>81</sup>. In fact,

Anyone who has even a penny of investment income which others have to pay directly or indirectly, anyone who owns any durable goods or consumes any commodity produced not by his own sweat but by that of others lives off the operation of that [...] struggle [...] which bourgeois phraseology designates as « peaceful cultural work »<sup>82</sup>.

By opening the practical subject's eyes to the incompleteness of his *Gesinnung* – and thus putting him under unavoidable obligations of consistency – this operation of logical inference based on empirical observation undeniably proves to fulfil an essential *clarifying* function.

Discussing value-judgements can also allow, according to Weber, the uncovering of « new value axioms »<sup>83</sup> with which the execution of our practical postulate conflicts either « logically » or « actually », that is, in principle or as a result of its practical consequences. In such a situation, to keep defending our practical point of view means to take responsibility for consciously rejecting those unconsidered or unknown values. Making possible to disclose value-axioms that the practical subject did not take into consideration and forcing him to formulate an attitude towards them, discussing value-judgments « compels » the subject « to render an account of the ultimate meaning of his own actions »<sup>84</sup> once again.

Among the functions that scientifically conducted value-discussions can perform at the service of self-awareness and clarity in general, Weber eventually includes the determination of

the factual consequences that the realization in practice of a certain practical valuational position with respect to a certain problem would have : (1) as a

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<sup>81</sup> Weber M., « Zwischen zwei Gesetzen », *op. cit.*, p. 98 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 78.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der "Wertfreiheit" der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 60 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 317.

<sup>84</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 104 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 26.

result of being bound to certain unavoidable means ; (2) as a result of the unavailability of certain, not directly desired side effects<sup>85</sup>.

In the form of « technical-nomological » knowledge and on the basis of inductive generalizations, empirical science can pronounce, first of all, upon the question of the appropriateness of the *means* necessary to achieve a given *purpose*. From this point of view, although it cannot tell men *what* concretely they should do, science can at least indicate to them *how* to do what they want to do. How, exactly ? By stating that

given a technical goal x, the only way of attaining it is by doing y, or by doing either y, y<sup>1</sup> or y<sup>2</sup> ; in the latter case, there are the following differences with respect to the ways in which y, y<sup>1</sup> and y<sup>2</sup> achieve their effect and – perhaps – with respect to their rationality ; and if one attains the goal x by doing y, y<sup>1</sup> or y<sup>2</sup> one will have to take into account the “side effects” z, z<sup>1</sup> and z<sup>2</sup><sup>86</sup>.

From the specific configuration of this set of variables significant complications can emerge for those who have to decide whether or not to act in a certain way : when aiming to realize an end we discover ourselves « scientifically » needed to employ certain « goal-appropriate » means, it may in fact happen that these prove to be so unpleasant – in themselves or for the consequences deriving from their adoption – as to make us question the actual worth of persevering in our intent. Being forced « to choose between the end and the inevitable means »<sup>87</sup>, we are eventually called to confront the Machiavellian dilemma : does the former justify the latter ? Would the objective of defending a small invaded people, for example, justify the many deaths that would inevitably result from entering the war ? Although unable to replace individual consciousness in answering questions of this kind, by promoting clarity science shows itself capable of offering man an incredibly precious gift, that is – as stressed from the very beginning – to make sure that the most important decisions of everyone's life take place in the condition of highest possible awareness. In this sense, science can be said to exercise not only a *clarifying* function, but also an *indirect ethical* one, as it allows men to understand what they *actually want* beyond

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<sup>85</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit“ der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 60 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 316.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 327.

<sup>87</sup> Weber M., « Wissenschaft als Beruf », *op. cit.*, p. 103 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 26.

what they merely *claim to want*. Saying to aim for an end is not enough for an authentic content of will to be identified in it : to really want something means above all to take responsibility for its consequences, to accept all the risks related to its achievement, hence consciously putting into action, one after the other, all the necessary means.

As Weber observes, it may also happen that the realization in practice of a certain practical valuational position turns out to be impossible in principle or highly unlikely because of the lack of adequate means or due to the high probability « that unwanted side effects will appear which are liable, directly or indirectly, to make the realization illusory »<sup>88</sup>. In such circumstances, only two possibilities remain open : either, by acting goal-rationally, to decide to abandon any hope of realizing the belief in light of the existence of an « unambiguous » *developmental trend* that « makes it so unlikely that the goal can be realized that his endeavours in that direction, judged by its chances of success, is bound to look like sterile tilting at windmills »<sup>89</sup>, or, by acting value-rationally, to decide to act anyway, but only and exclusively in order to testify the fidelity to certain ultimate convictions. This is what happens, for example, to the really consistent « syndicalist »<sup>90</sup>, who despite being aware of the fact that his actions, in relation to their consequences, are « socially “useless” »<sup>91</sup> – because « no change in the external class situation of the proletariat can be expected to result from it [*sic*] »<sup>92</sup> – wants only

to preserve, within himself, a certain conviction that he regards as uncondi-

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<sup>88</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit“ der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 60 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 316.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 318.

<sup>90</sup> We can understand more easily why Weber's explanatory choice falls upon the figure of the syndicalist if we hold firm to the fact that here the term is not used in its common sense, but with reference to the « revolutionary syndicalism », a political-union movement that arose in France at the end of 19th century inspired by the theories of Georges Sorel (1847-1922), author of *Réflexions sur la violence* (1908) and theoretician of the « *grève générale prolétarienne* », which he defined as an authentic « *mythe social* ». In this regard, the words addressed by Sorel to his friend Daniel Halevy in a 1907 letter are emblematic : « In employing the term myth I believed that I had made a happy choice, because I thus put myself in a position to refuse any discussion whatever with the people who wish to submit the idea of a general strike to a detailed criticism, and who accumulate objections against its practical possibility. » (Cf. Sorel G., « Letter to Daniel Halevy », in *Reflections on Violence* (1908), New York, Collier, 1950, p. 26-56).

<sup>91</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit“ der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 62 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 318.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*



tionally valuable and sacred, and, if possible, to awaken it in others. His external action, particularly that which is in advance doomed to failure – even total failure – has only one purpose : that of giving him, in his own mind, the certainty that this conviction is genuine – that is to say: that it is not idle boasting, but has the power to « prove itself » in action<sup>93</sup>.

However, whether the first or the second option should be preferred, is once again a scientifically unsolvable problem of ultimate valuations that needs to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, this does not mean that *ethics of conviction* and *ethics of success* are irreducibly antithetical ; on the contrary, they are mutually complementary and fruitfully relativizable. That's what emerges from the last remarks of Weber's '19 lecture on *Politik als Beruf*<sup>94</sup>, in which the attitude of « the authentic human being who is capable of having a “vocation for politics” »<sup>95</sup> is defined as « authentically human »<sup>96</sup> and « immeasurably moving »<sup>97</sup>, as he does not oppose success to conviction, but with passion and discernment strives to realize his own beliefs without this preventing him from constantly referring to an *inner center* with respect to which, in certain circumstances, it is always possible to hear him say « here I stand, I can do no other »<sup>98</sup>.

## 5) Value discussion and empirical work of historical sciences of culture

### 5.1) Selection of scientific material and delimitation of the object of investigation : with and against Heinrich Rickert on value-relation and values

So far, the examination of the *direct results* produced by scientifically conducted value-discussions has allowed us to highlight the invaluable *clarifying function* performed by

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63-64 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 319.

<sup>94</sup> Weber's lecture on *Politik als Beruf* – held on January twenty-eighth, 1919 – was the second in order of time within the public forum series on « geistige Arbeit als Beruf ». (Cf. note 19).

<sup>95</sup> Weber M., *Politik als Beruf* (1919), in *Gesamtausgabe*, part. I, vol. XVII, *op. cit.*, p. 250 ; eng. tr. by Livingstone R., « Politics as a Vocation », in *The vocation lectures*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* Weber refers to the words that, according to a widely contested tradition, Martin Luther (1483-1546) would have pronounced at the end of his speech to the Worms Diet, in April 1521 : « Hier stehe ich und kann nicht anders ! Gott helfe mir, Amen ! » (Cf. *Deutsche Reichstagsakten* (Jüngere Reihe), vol. II (*Reichstagsakten unter Kaiser Karl V*, 1519–1523), ed. by Wrede A., Gotha, F. A. Perthes, 1896, p. 581–582).

scientific knowledge for the benefit of human life. However, as Weber observes, « the usefulness of a discussion of practical valuations, at the right place and in the correct sense, is by no means restricted to such direct “results” that it may produce »<sup>99</sup>. In fact, « if it is conducted correctly, it may moreover provide a strong and lasting stimulus for empirical research by providing it with the problems for investigation »<sup>100</sup>.

The emergence of an *indirect* meaning level of discussions of value judgments obligates us to consider a series of reflections developed by Weber since his very early methodological writings around the Rickertian concept of « value relation » (*Wertbeziehung*). In fact, as he explains, if there is no doubt that the problems addressed by the empirical disciplines must be solved in a « value free » way, since « they are not “value problems” »<sup>101</sup>, it is also true that within these disciplines « they are influenced by the relation of elements of reality “to” values »<sup>102</sup>.

With the elaboration of the concept of *Wertbeziehung*, Rickert took part in the lively controversy that arose at the end of the nineteenth century around the distinction, operated by Wilhelm Dilthey, between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*; a distinction, the latter, founded on the alleged existence of two distinct perceptual levels – inner and outer – deputed to the apprehension of as many types of objects. The debate was inaugurated by Wilhelm Windelband, Rickert's teacher and leading exponent of the neo-Kantian *Badische Schule*, who in 1894, on the occasion of his appointment as Rector of the University of Strasbourg, delivered a famous speech during which, though never explicitly referring to Dilthey, subjected some of his central ideas to harsh criticism. First of all, Windelband opposed the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* with the argument that it would find no confirmation among the ways of knowledge. In fact,

if Locke gave Cartesian dualism a subjective form, to juxtapose outer and inner perception – sensation and reflection – as the two separate organs for knowledge of, on the one side, the outer world, the world of nature, and, on the

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<sup>99</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 61 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 317.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

other side, of the inner mental world, so the most recent epistemological critique has, in turn, shaken this conception more than ever, and rendered doubtful at best the assumption of an « inner perception » as a special kind of knowledge<sup>103</sup>.

Secondly, Windelband opposed Dilthey's attempt at a psychological foundation of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, with the argument that psychology was, contrary to what Dilthey believed, to be counted not among the so-called « human » sciences, but among the natural ones, since like these psychology « identifies, gathers and analyzes its facts only from the standpoint, and toward the end, of thereby understanding the general lawfulness to which these facts submit »<sup>104</sup>. Advancing the idea that the classification of sciences should be based on a purely methodological distinction – and not, as Dilthey believed, on the discrimination of the objects of investigation – Windelband could finally state

that the empirical sciences seek in the knowledge of reality either the general in the form of the natural law or the particular in the historically determined form [*Gestalt*]. They consider in one part the everenduring form, in the other part the unique content, determined within itself, of an actual happening. The one comprises sciences of law, the other sciences of events ; the former teaches what always is, the latter what once was. If one may resort to neologisms, it can be said that scientific thought is in the one case *nomothetic*, in the other *idiographic*<sup>105</sup>.

While accepting the distinction between *nomothetische* and *idiographische Wissenschaften*, Heinrich Rickert strongly felt the need to broaden Windelband's observations. In particular, to worry him was the apparent incompatibility between the notion of *idiographic* sciences (or sciences of the *individual*) and the Kantian assumption of the « intensive and extensive multiplicity »<sup>106</sup> of empirical reality. In fact, as Rickert explains, « knowing the

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<sup>103</sup> Windelband W., « Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft » (1894), in *Präludien : Aufsätze und Reden zur Einleitung in die Philosophie*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1907, p. 361 ; eng. tr. by Lamiell J. T., « History and Natural Science », in *Theory and Psychology*, vol. 8 (1), 1998, p. 11.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 364 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 13 (our italics).

<sup>106</sup> Rickert H., *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung, Eine logische Einleitung in die historischen Wissenschaften*, Freiburg-Leipzig, J. C. B. Mohr, 1896, p. 36 ; our translation.

world, individually representing its individual configurations as they are, is, in principle, one of the insoluble tasks of the finite human spirit »<sup>107</sup>. This stems from the fact that however large we can suppose the number of individual configurations to be reproduced with our representations, there would always be, on the other hand, a multiplicity immense in principle, therefore infinite, of unknown things and processes. [...] It is not only a question of that multiplicity inherent to every single thing, as it is in innumerable relationships with other things. Even isolating a single intuition from all its relationships and considering it in itself, even in the smallest part of reality that we can represent, an inexhaustible and therefore, in this sense, infinite multiplicity is implicitly hidden<sup>108</sup>.

The question arises : in what terms can we speak of a « science of the individual », charged, as Windelband maintains, with the apprehension of « the unique content, determined within itself, of an actual happening »<sup>109</sup>, given the impossibility of reflecting cognitively even the smallest part of the world ? By rejecting its coincidence with all sorts of « realistic mirroring », in accordance with his Kantian presuppositions, Rickert invests the cognitive act with a strictly *selective* meaning. Thus, in general, a conceptual knowledge of the « manifold of intuition » by the finite human intellect dictates that only an equally finite portion of it can be assumed as object of scientific comprehension (and thereby be significant, or, to use Weber's words, « worth knowing about »). This goes hand in hand with the recognition, both by Rickert and Weber, of the indispensability of methodological principles that allow the different sciences to select the elements that are significant for them from the « heterogeneous continuum » of reality. As far as natural sciences are concerned, this principle must be traced in the *general*, that is, in the « law-like » recurrence of certain causal connections. Differently, in the so-called « sciences of culture » the principle of selection must be traced in the *Wertbeziehung*, that is, in the relation of reality to value ideas which lend it significance. However, because of their very different conception of values, Rickert and Weber do not agree at all on what the correct interpretation of this principle should be.

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34-35.

<sup>109</sup> Windelband W., « Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft », *op. cit.*, p. 364 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 13.

From Rickert's point of view, only the absolute validity and objectivity of the values – completely self-sufficient from the logical-formal point of view and distinct from the historical-evaluative world of life – can constitute the foundation and guarantee of both the sense of historical becoming and the objectivity of historical knowledge<sup>110</sup>, in the belief that in a philosophy of values, the mere consideration of the evaluating man is not enough : on the contrary, man must always be placed in relationship « with values that have subsistence independently of him and that therefore are not products of mere evaluation, since, on the contrary, only they confer direction and content to the evaluating life »<sup>111</sup> .

Although abandoning a conception of philosophy as a « general science »<sup>112</sup> aimed at the achievement of a « definitive knowledge of the totality of the real world »<sup>113</sup> and refusing the possibility of any « closed » system of values which philosophy could use – as « doctrine of a *Weltanschauung* »<sup>114</sup> – to advance an objective interpretation of the meaning of human existence, Rickert believes to be essential for it – because of the role it is called to play and for the reasons discussed above – to be able to rely on a « doctrine of valid values ». As Rickert explains in the 1913 essay *Vom System der Werte*, these values – absolute, eternal, meta-historical and meta-individual – have to be thought to be *unreal* but « incorporated into *real* goods which present themselves as products of a historical development »<sup>115</sup>. And although the *indeterminacy of historical cultural life*, related to the evidence that « we cannot know how goods, linked to unknown values, will develop later »<sup>116</sup> , disqualifies any attempt to elaborate closed and definitive systems – in fact, « why [...] should not the next day bring something capable of overturning any value system, built by us again ? »<sup>117</sup> – this does not mean that philosophy should abandon all

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<sup>110</sup> Cf. Giugliano A., « Heinrich Rickert tra *Philosophie des Lebens* e *Lebensphilosophie* », in Giugliano A., *Rickert, Nietzsche, Heidegger (ed altre allegorie filosofiche)*, Napoli, Liguori, 1999.

<sup>111</sup> Rickert H., *System der Philosophie. Erster Teil : Allgemeine Grundlegung der Philosophie*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1921, p. 47 ; our translation.

<sup>112</sup> Rickert H., « Vom System der Werte », in *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur*, vol. IV, 1913, p. 296 ; our translation.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* (our italics).

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

claims to systematicity : as a matter of fact, we can think of an *open system* which basing its systematicity on « factors that overtop every history »<sup>118</sup> would be able to account for the indeterminacy of historical development without coming into conflict with it. In fact, as Rickert explains, what must be considered a « condition of any development » escapes development, thus revealing a supra-historical character.

This simple thought [...] is applied to the evolution of the philosophy of values. Even undergoing, as regards the content, continuous changes relating to the cultural and historical condition, what is part of its formal premises will remain outside the evolutionary course. These premises include first of all any valid value, then any real good that bears these unreal and valid values and then, finally, the subjects who take an evaluative position towards values and goods, as only for these can there be a *Weltanschauung*<sup>119</sup>.

On the basis of such premises, Rickert comes to identify, first in the 1913 essay and then in the first part of the unfinished *System der Philosophie*, three species of « cultural goods » (present, future and eternal), two species of attitudes that can be assumed in their concerns (contemplative attitudes towards objects and active attitudes towards people) and six species of values, three contemplative (logical, artistic and mystical) and three active (ethical, of personal existence and religious).

We can therefore understand why Rickert goes so far as to state that, as cultural objects differ from natural objects in that they are « valuable realities » (*wertvolle Wirklichkeiten*), « through the value relation, which is either there or not there, we can safely distinguish two types of scientific objects and we can do it, only with it, from a methodological point of view »<sup>120</sup>. Considered in the perspective of such a conception of values and cultural objects, the *Wertbeziehung* is then configured not as a mere principle of selection, but rather as the real foundation of validity of historical knowledge and its results.

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299-300.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

For the reasons we have previously considered, Rickert's attempt to outline a system that, however open, claims to organize absolutely valid values in a plurality of merely coordinated spheres is understandably dismissed by Weber. As a matter of fact, as the author explains,

if a consideration that was not empirical but aimed at the interpretation of meaning – in other words : a genuine philosophy of values – went one step further, it would have to acknowledge that no conceptual scheme of « values », however well ordered, would be able to do justice to the crucial aspect of the situation : values are in fact, in the last resort, everywhere and always, not just alternatives ; they are engaged in an irreconcilable struggle to the death with each other – as it were, between « God » and the « Devil »<sup>121</sup>.

Against the thesis of a necessary connection according to which values would be organized systematically, Weber affirms not only the multiplicity of spheres of value, but also the existence of a contrast both within each sphere and between the different spheres. Each sphere appears torn by an internal conflict, whereby the values that constitute it, far from harmonizing rationally, contrast with each other, so that the embracing of one of them entails the simultaneous rejection of other values. This struggle is reproduced, on a larger scale, in the conflictual relationship between the different spheres, therefore unable to connect themselves systematically. To the recognition of presumed universal, necessary and harmoniously connected values, guarantors of the unconditional validity of human action, Weber replaces, as we have seen, the establishment of a problematic relationship based on a choice.

As regards the methodological consequences of his own axiological conception, unlike Rickert, Weber does not pose the problem of conferring absolute critical objectivity to the results of the historical sciences of culture. We could say that for him the problem lies rather in conferring on them a certain degree of *empirical objectivity*, through the elaboration of causal explanations of historical-cultural phenomena which, although starting from a « value interpretation » – which delimits the object of investigation by making explicit its *Wertbeziehung* (and we will see shortly what Weber's position is on this point) –

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<sup>121</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der "Wertfreiheit" der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 57 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 314.

give up on projecting the value or the disvalue attributed to the effects on their causal conditions<sup>122</sup>.

### 5.2) Max Weber on Wertbeziehung, culture and « value interpretation »

Distancing himself from the neo-Kantian philosopher, in *Die « Objektivität » sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis* Weber clarifies that « a system of cultural sciences, even if it only took the form of fixing, in a definitive, objectively valid and systematic way, the *questions* and *areas* that it would be suitable for those sciences to deal with, would be inherently absurd »<sup>123</sup>. This stems from the fact that the value ideas on the basis of which these sciences lend significance to certain individual phenomena are « subject to historical change, with changes in the character of the culture and the ideas governing human beings »<sup>124</sup>, thus being *subjective*. Culture does not constitute an ontologically distinct reality from nature, but only « a finite section of the meaningless infinity of events in the world, endowed with meaning and significance from a *human* perspective »<sup>125</sup>. The *Wertbeziehung* is therefore configured as a purely methodological principle, representing « the philosophical interpretation of that specifically scientific “interest” which governs the selection and formation of the object of an empirical inquiry »<sup>126</sup> :

Empirical reality is « culture » for us because, and to the extent that, we relate it to value ideas ; it comprises those, and *only* those, elements of reality that acquire *significance* for us because of that relation. Only a tiny part of the individual reality that we observe at a given time is coloured by our interest, which is conditioned by those value ideas, and that part alone has significance for us ; it has significance because certain of its relations are *important* to us by virtue of their connection to value ideas. Only for this reason, and to this extent, is it

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<sup>122</sup> Cf. Massimilla E., *Weber*, Milano, RCS Media Group, 2015.

<sup>123</sup> Weber M., « Die “Objektivität” sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis », *op. cit.*, p. 58 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 121.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 119.

<sup>126</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 61 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 317.



worth knowing for us in its distinctive individual character<sup>127</sup>.

Idiographic knowledge therefore means, for the historical sciences of culture, knowledge of those traits of individual reality which appear significant from certain valuational viewpoints shared by both the researcher and his audience. In the empirical history of art, for example, « the interest in works of art and in their aesthetically relevant individual peculiar characteristics [...] is heteronomously given, as an a priori, by the aesthetic value of those works of art »<sup>128</sup>. This simply means that in highlighting the technical, social, psychological (and so on) causal conditions of, for example, a Gothic cathedral, the art historian assumes that the recipients of the research – as well as the one who conducts it – consider that building as artistically accomplished and valuable, and not as an insignificant mass of rock and marble. But while finding in the value relation of its object an absolutely necessary premise, the history of art, as Weber specifies, does not « “value” the Gothic style compared, say, to the Romanesque or to that of the Renaissance [...] ; nor does it – as long as it remains an empirical discipline – “value” individual buildings aesthetically »<sup>129</sup>. The *Wertbeziehung* of the object of investigation does not in any way authorize the cultural scientist to express his own personal evaluations : recognizing the value relation of a given cultural phenomenon does not mean evaluating it, but only and exclusively looking at it from that particular point of view from which it appears significant to us, completely regardless of the evaluative positions potentially assumable towards it. In this sense, even if it does not constitute or entail evaluations of any kind, there is no doubt that the value-free principle of the *Wertbeziehung* is deeply rooted in man’s *evaluating life*, in the ability of this structurally relational and cultural being to take positions towards finite sections of the meaningless infinity of events in the world, endowing them with meaning and significance. As Weber writes,

anybody who wants to accomplish something, however purely empirical it may be, in the field of the history of art, must for that purpose have the ability to « understand » the process of artistic production ; and that ability is of

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<sup>127</sup> Weber M., « Die “Objektivität” sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis », *op. cit.*, p. 50 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 116.

<sup>128</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 50 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 323.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

course inconceivable without the capacity for making aesthetic judgements – in other words : without the *ability* to evaluate. Naturally, the same holds for political historians, historians of literature, and historians of religion or philosophy<sup>130</sup>.

A clear distinction between evaluation and value-relation is absolutely essential to face the misunderstanding of those who claim – on the basis of the indispensability of the *value interpretation* – « that they are not willing to allow themselves to be deprived of the right to make political, cultural, ethical or aesthetic evaluations, and that they cannot do their work without having resort to such evaluations »<sup>131</sup>. As Weber explains, a careful review of historical works would soon show that « when the historian begins to “value”, the relentless and thoroughgoing unravelling of the empirical–historical causal concatenation will almost invariably be interrupted, to the detriment of the scientific results »<sup>132</sup>. The causal regression, which constitutes the properly empirical task of the cultural scientist, can originate only and exclusively from a rigorously value-free *value interpretation*. On the meaning of this concept, on its relationship with the value relation and on its intrinsic value-freedom, Weber expresses himself very well in the *Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet der kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik*<sup>133</sup>, stating that the value interpretation « teaches us to “understand” the “spiritual” content »<sup>134</sup> of the individual phenomenon, bringing into the open « that which we have only “felt” dimly and vaguely »<sup>135</sup> – that the phenomenon is « worth knowing about » – and raising it to the level of a « clear and articulate “evaluation” »<sup>136</sup> by making fully explicit its *Wertbeziehung*. For this purpose, however, « it is in no way compelled to formulate or to “suggest” a value judgement of its own »<sup>137</sup>.

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 324.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 324.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Weber M., « Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet der kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik », in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, vol. XXII, 1906 ; eng. tr. by Bruun H. H., « Critical studies in the logic of the cultural sciences », in Weber M., *Collected methodological writings, op. cit.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 157.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, the value interpretation, as well as the *Wertbeziehung* of which it constitutes the articulation, has its ultimate presupposition in the evaluating nature of both the scientist and the reader, without which – failing the cognitive interest that sustains them – there would be no science of culture at all. In fact, as Weber explains, « empirical scientific research is *guided* by cultural interests – that is to say : value interests »<sup>138</sup>, which means that scientific orientation is necessarily determined by the value ideas of an era, a generation, a specific and very particular historical moment : only in reference to such ideas can the scientist of culture distinguish « *valuable* phenomena » in the *individual reality* and determine « what is considered significant or insignificant, “important” or “unimportant” »<sup>139</sup> about them ; only in this way can he arrive at that preliminary *delimitation of the object of investigation* without which the attempt of historical research to trace the *historical-empirical causal chain* could not take place at all.

The usefulness of a discussion of practical valuations, if considered from the standpoint of the *indirect results* it may produce, therefore lies in the possibility of bringing out through it those historically determined valuational viewpoints in relation to which a certain cultural phenomenon appears significant to us. Since they make this possible, such discussions « may to a large extent relieve the scientific investigator, and in particular the historian, of the task of “value interpretation”, or at least make it easier for him to perform that task, which is extremely important for him as a preparation for his actual empirical work »<sup>140</sup>. The value interpretation, which makes it possible to delimit the object of investigation, is an absolutely essential prerequisite for any cultural discipline that intends to trace the causes of its object : without it, the causal regression could not help but « steer its course in boundless waters without a compass »<sup>141</sup>, that is to say, to proceed *ad infinitum*.

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<sup>138</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 62 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 317.

<sup>139</sup> Weber M., « Die “Objektivität” sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis », *op. cit.*, p. 56 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 120.

<sup>140</sup> Weber M., « Der Sinn der “Wertfreiheit” der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften », *op. cit.*, p. 61 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 317.

<sup>141</sup> Weber M., « Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet der kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik », *op. cit.*, p. 173 ; eng. tr. cit. p. 161.