

Philosophy of Social Enquiry // Spring 2018

Handout 2

Objectivity: Weber

GENERAL OUTLINE. In this long essay, there are a number of overarching claims and themes. Let us preview them briefly.

- (a) Social enquiry must take account of values.
- (b) The irreducible role of values does not preclude the objectivity of enquiry.
- (c) Causal laws have a role to play in social explanations.
- (d) The presence of values marks a division between natural sciences and social sciences.
- (e) Ideal types are a main methodological tool of social science.

SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY. Social research pursues explanation of action—whether in economics, sociology, or history. Action is essentially described in terms of ends and means. Now science can tell what means are efficient in achieving a given goal. But it cannot say whether a goal is ‘efficient’. The goal is set in accordance with the actor’s value judgements. It is not a task of social science to decide the validity of values on technical grounds—i.e. to say whether a particular value or goal is suitable. To do that would be to introduce our personal ‘world-views’, i.e. *our* values. This is a source of much confusion in social research.

How, then, objectivity is to be attained? At the first approximation, we say that subjectivity is where authors appeal to emotions or supposed moral conscience. But if an enquiry pursues to understand reality intellectually, then its results are valid across times and places. Another mark of objective enquiry is that it must clearly separate the intellectual part from the other (emotional, moral) parts.

ECONOMY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE. The fundamental condition of all social phenomena is scarcity. Presumably even in the condition of plenty we could speak of ‘actions’. But because of scarcity actions have intrinsic complexity, such as planning and labour. Next, scarcity demands cooperation. Hence only in that condition we could have social cooperation and social conflict.

In this sense, then, social phenomena are economic in nature. But on the other hand, many other phenomena, such as religious ones, can also acquire economic significance. An example would be religion or Christian church. In themselves, they are not to be interpreted as economic phenomena (or economic organisations), and yet they may very well influence economic development.

Remark 1. See here Weber’s work on protestantism and capitalism.

Another instance of this indirect relationship is social phenomena that are themselves influenced by economic life—for example, artistic composition and artistic taste can change under the influence of economic factors.

SOCIAL SCIENCE AND NATURAL SCIENCE. Social science studies reality. As with any science, the investigator must select some objects from the multitude of all the other objects. Which objects he selects is determined by his *interest*. In this (as I understand Weber) there is no contrast between natural science and social science. But if so, then one may think that, just as in natural science, the goal of social science is to come up formulation of causal laws governing the relationships of social phenomena. Even if this cannot be achieved at present, it is a goal for the future.

Weber resists this analogy with natural science (‘astronomy’), but the exact line of reasoning is rather complex. As I see it, in the first place, we cannot argue even in the case of ‘astronomy’ that that reality can be deduced from laws. Laws only trace evolution from an individual body *A* to the individual body *B*. The very possibility of investigating constellations rests on the existence of laws—actual laws, one wants to say—governing those constellations. Where we reach, in tracing back the evolution of astronomic bodies, the lawless combination of matter, astronomy ceases to exist. More properly, we should say that this the concept of such lawless matter is meaningless—i.e. meaningless from the perspective of astronomy and mechanics. But, on the other hand, social science is interested often precisely in such lawless phenomena, such as ‘primitive society’, where normal social and economic laws are suspended. I am not sure what Weber is arguing here. Is this interest

in primitive society illegitimate (like the interest in lawless cosmos), or is it a reason to distinguish social science and natural science?

Much clearer is another thought: that natural science pursues formulation of quantitative relations between the phenomena, while social sciences are interested in qualitative relations. But this difference, Weber argues, is illusory. There is no complete quantitative formulation of laws in natural science either (except perhaps mechanics). And on the other hand, there can be quantitative relations (say, psychological) discovered in the social sphere too.

The real difference is that social science does not *aim* at discovering lawlike relations. Such relations would be too general for us to have any interest. The aim of social science is to investigate the phenomena that are meaningful and significant *for us*. Hence, at the foundation of any social science lies a value judgement. It separates phenomena into important and unimportant, interesting and uninteresting.

YSB