

§1. Sociology, in the meaning understood here of a word often used in quite different senses, shall mean: a science that in construing and understanding social action seeks causal explanation of the course and effects of such action. By “action” is meant human behaviour linked to a subjective meaning⁸ on the part of the actor or actors concerned; such action may be either overt, or occur inwardly—whether by positive action, or by refraining from action, or by tolerating a situation. Such behaviour is “social” action where the meaning intended by the actor or actors is related to the behaviour of others, and the action is so oriented.

[...]

§2. As with any form of action, social action can be determined either (1) by purposive rationality: through expectations of the behaviour of external objects and other people, and employing these expectations as a “condition” or “means” for one’s own rational ends, as sought after and considered objectives; or by (2) value rationality: through conscious belief in the unconditional and intrinsic value—whether this is understood as ethical, aesthetic, religious, or however construed—of a specific form of particular comportment purely for itself, unrelated to its outcome; or by (3) affect, especially emotion: through actual emotions and feelings; or by (4) tradition: through ingrained habituation.

1. Rigorously traditional behaviour, just like purely reactive imitative behaviour (see the preceding section), lies at the very extreme of what one could dub “meaningfully” oriented action, and it is often quite beyond it. For it is very frequently merely an empty reaction to familiar stimuli following an ingrained pattern. The greater part of everyday action approaches this type, which not only represents a marginal case for any systematic taxonomy but also because adherence to the familiar can be sustained with various degrees of self-consciousness (more about this later) and in different senses; in this case, the type approaches (2) above. 2. Rigorously affectual comportment likewise lies at the boundary, and often beyond, of what is consciously “meaningfully” oriented; it can be uninhibited reaction to some exceptional stimulus. It is sublimated when affectually determined action involves the conscious release of feeling, in which case it usually, but not always, finds itself on its way to “value rationalisation,” or to purposive action. 3. Affectual and value-rational orientation of action differ in their conscious elaboration of the ultimate details of action and consistent planful orientation with respect to these details. Otherwise, they share in common the idea that the meaning of action is not contained in its eventual success but in the particular form taken by the action itself. He who acts according to emotion seeks instant revenge, instant enjoyment, instant dedication, instant contemplative bliss, or seeks to satisfy through abreaction current emotions (no matter how great or sublime they might be). Whoever acts in a purely value rational manner acts without regard to the foreseeable consequences of action in the service of convictions, following the apparent bidding of duty, honour, beauty, religious pronouncement, piety, or the importance of a “cause” of whatever kind. Value rational action is in our sense always action made at the “bidding” of “demands” that the actor believes to be imposed on him-or herself. We will talk here of value rationality only to the extent that human action is oriented to such demands—something that occurs in greatly varying degrees, and mostly only in a very small number of cases. As we shall see, this form is important enough to be

distinguished as a special type, although there is no intention hereof establishing an exhaustive typology of action.

4. Whoever acts in a purposively rational manner orients their action to the purpose, means, and associated consequences of an act, and so rationally weighs the relation of means to ends, that of the ends to the associated consequences, and that of the various possible ends to each other; hence, action that is neither affective (especially not emotional) nor traditional. The decision between competing and conflicting aims and consequences can in this way be oriented value-rationally; in this case, only the means are selected by purposively rational criteria. Alternatively, the individual can deal with competing and conflicting aims without resorting to value rationality, taking “dictates” and “demands” simply as given subjective feelings of need arranged on a scale that is consciously balanced according to their urgency, orienting action so that they will, as far as is possible, be satisfied in this sequence (the principle of “marginal utility”). Hence, there are many ways in which the value rational orientation of action can relate to purposive rationality. From the perspective of purposive rationality, however, value rationality must always be irrational, the more so when action is governed by absolute values. For the more that action elevates such absolute values, the less it reflects on the consequence of such action, and the more unconditional do considerations of inner disposition, beauty, the absolute good, and absolute duty become. Absolutely purposive rational action is for the most part a marginal case, however.

5. Action, especially social action, is very rarely oriented solely to the one or the other type. Similarly, these types of orientation are in no way exhaustive with respect to types of action, but are instead conceptually pure types created for sociological ends, to which real action more or less conforms, or from which it is more often combined in reality. Only their outcome can determine their utility for us.

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