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Max Weber on Explanation of Human Actions: Towards a Reconstruction

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Recent discussions on the explanation of action are permeated with two divergent models of explanation, namely causal model and non-causal model. For causalists the notion of explanation is intimately related to that of causation. As Davidson contends, any rudimentary explanation of an event gives its cause. More sophisticated explanations may cite a relevant law in support of a singular causal claim. Nevertheless, it is erroneous to consider that an explanation ceases to be one without the relevant law.¹ Hence, a causal explanation need not be mechanistic nor even a nomological one. An explanation in terms of purpose, a teleological one, can be a causal explanation if we construe the motive behind the action as its cause. Thus, a causal model of human action considers the motive or reasons as its cause. The non-causalists, on the other hand, hold that when we explain an action we do not ask for the cause, rather we try to understand the action in terms of its meaning. Moreover, they argue that the causal model fails to account for the conceptual priority of human agency. The aim of this paper is to show how Max Weber attempted a synthesis of the two divergent models of explanation in the realm of human actions. The first section of this paper gives an expository account of Weber's theory of explanation. In the second section an attempt is made to interpret Weber's thesis so as to assimilate the two divergent models of explanation.

I

Weber's writings on the methodology and definitive problems of social sciences were a reaction to the 'battle of methods' (*Methodenstreit*) in the German context. Weber found this controversy as one between two equally objectionable methodological positions, the positivists who represent the 'law orthodoxy' and the anti-positivists who moved towards the other extreme with their 'intuitionist idealism'. Weber's solution to this controversy was his *verstehen* thesis and the formulation of 'ideal types'.

For Weber, the subject matter of sociocultural sciences is 'meaningful' human conduct. To understand the behaviour of an agent, a mere description of the physical movements is inadequate. According to Weber the essence of what happens is constituted by the meaning the agents ascribe to their behaviour. He says that it is this subjectively intended meaning that 'regulates' the course of their behaviour. Without this meaning, Weber asserts, 'an action is empirically impossible and conceptually elusive'.² The *verstehen* thesis states that to understand human action is to identify its meaning as understood by the actors. This very meaning constitutes a sociocultural fact. Weber says that the meaning of the observable behaviour of the actors can be conceived in two ways. First, we can conceive the meaning as 'idea'. By 'idea', Weber means a sort of 'norm' for the behaviour or action of the agent. The action is based on this norm and the norm provides the meaning of the action. That is to say, it is both constitutive and regulative. Given this norm, we can formulate the course of behaviour that logically follows from it. In other words, we would be able to derive the implications that follow from the meaning or idea which we as observers ascribe to the behaviour in question. From such a standpoint we can 'evaluate' the actual development of the behaviour. Using this conceptual analysis as a standard we could 'measure up' the actual conduct. On the other hand, we can see the agent's action as a 'means' to realize certain 'results'. In view of the agent's experience or knowledge of the world, he sees his action as a 'means' for achieving certain ends. This means-end understanding of the agent's action reveals the meaning of their behaviour. It implies that the agent's action has an intended purpose. So, in explaining human action what we try to do is not the identification of the events as cause and effect, rather we try to understand the subjectively intended meaning of the action.

Weber conceives motive as a complex of meaning which seems either to the agent himself or to the observer as constituting the meaningfulness of an action. According to Weber, the observer has to interpret the meaning of any action in order to achieve certainty. Certainty can be achieved either by rational understanding or by empathetically reliving the experience in question. Rational certainty is achieved when we interpret the action intellectually so that the intended complex of meaning is revealed in its entirety. We have empathetic certainty when we 'relive' the agent's action in our imagination. This does not mean that we have to be the agent in order to empathetically experience the action. Weber often emphasizes the dictum that 'one need not be Caesar in order to understand Caesar'. There are two stages involved in the interpretation of *verstehen* method. At an initial stage we have direct understanding or *aktuelles verstehen*. Then we can have explanatory understanding or *erklärendes*

verstehen. When we understand the meaning of '2x2=4' we are said to have direct understanding. Similarly, we directly understand that someone is in pain when we see tears trickling down his cheek. We are said to have explanatory understanding only when we grasp the complexes of meaning into which a directly intelligible action fits in virtue of its intended meaning. So, when we understand '2x2=4' as part of a business calculation or the pain as a result of humiliation, we have explanatory understanding. Thus, when we understand the subjectively intended meaning as the agent's motive, we have adequacy at the level of meaning.³

However, an explanation of human action should also be adequate at the level of causation. By causal adequacy Weber refers to a sequence of events that follow the same course with a probability governed by empirical laws. The problem of causality, according to Weber, is concerned with the correlation of concrete effects with concrete causes and not with abstract uniformities. It is the prerogative of social sciences to show whether an agent's doing of an action 'X' has led to the end 'E' or not. Hence, the need to check the probability which will ensure the causal adequacy. Nevertheless, we cannot state the probability of the cause-effect relationship between the facts and sociocultural object numerically. Numerical probability is attained only in the sphere of 'absolute chance'—for example in the throwing of a dice or the drawing of balls of various colours from a box. However, there is no way to assert that a particular way of throwing the dice or shaking the box will effect the desired outcome. Weber calls this type of causality as a 'chance causality'. In chance causality we cannot dictate the outcome with empirical rule. Weber rightly says that in the sphere of social sciences the ability to assign a numerical value of the probability is absent, as such an assignment presupposes the existence of 'absolute chance'. Still, we can offer, generally valid judgements about the occurrence of a type of reaction similar in certain respects, from the agents with a high degree of likelihood.⁴ This implies that even in the realm of social sciences there are certain law-like regularities even though its nature differs from that of natural sciences as the former is context-dependent.

The causal imputation takes place not by simple observation of the course of events. On the other hand, it takes place through a series of 'abstractions'. According to Weber, we make a mental construction of the course of events with a modification in certain directions. It involves mental isolation of the given data so as to construct a complex of possible causal relations. It is done by the use of 'ideal types'. An ideal type is a mental construct that has one sided accentuation of different vantage grounds. However, it is not a jumble of contradictions. It is rather a unified analytical construct that synthesizes various concrete individual phenomena. It is ideal in as much as it cannot be found in

its conceptual purity in the realm of empirical reality. It is a heuristic device which embodies various possible causal relations, out of which only some correspond to reality. Hence, ideal type is a means for explicitly and correctly assigning a cause for particular event thereby to eliminate other causal imputations. Ideal type thus consists of the motives for the agent's action, as well as the course of behaviour for the given motive. We arrive at the adequate causes by first separating the given into various components and fitting them into an 'empirical rule'. Then we can determine with what probability the effect could be expected by the continuous reference to empirical rules. To use a Wittgensteinian expression the 'form of life' suggests as to what extent we should expect the outcome. In other words, our understanding of an action is based on what Weber calls 'ontological knowledge'—that is knowledge of certain facts belonging to the historical situation, as well as 'nomological knowledge'—that is knowledge of certain empirical rules that is concerned with the ways in which human beings are likely to react in a given situation. Hence, we should analyse the object of our sociocultural enquiry into its various components, till we could apply this nomological knowledge derived from our own experience, to our ontological knowledge. Once we have done this we can make a decision whether these facts could bring about the effect which is expected. If it does bring about, then it should be regarded as an adequate cause.

The causal analysis of personal actions takes place in the same way as the causal analysis of the sociocultural object. That is, it involves isolation, generalization and the construction of the judgments of possibility. Weber asserts that the analysis of one's own action which is erroneously thought to be directly given and hence does not require the above causal analysis in fact proceeds the same way. It is not at all distinct from the analysis of the action of the third person. Weber gives the example of a mother who beats her child for his misdeeds. But when the mother who hears the cry of the child afterwards feels sympathetic towards him and when the husband points out that such a reaction towards the child is not the solution, tries to give an explanation as follows: She was agitated by the quarrel with the cook a while ago and in her usual self she would not have reacted in the same fashion. This is to say that the punishment she gave was an accidental one and not an adequately caused reaction.

Weber's writings on the logic of cultural sciences illustrates the causal relations between certain features of a given sociocultural fact and certain empirical facts. He shows the various logical standpoints from which we can appraise the facts of cultural life causally through an example of Goethe's letters to Frau Vonstein.⁵ It is not the written paper, the perceivable fact that is treated as the sociocultural object. It is only the means of knowing the fact that Goethe had such sentiments

towards Frau Vonstein. The meaning of the entire discourse becomes intelligible when we correctly interpret the content of Goethe's letters. Thus, by interpretation of the meaning of the object of our enquiry the historical fact is disclosed. Now, we can integrate this fact into an historical causal context so as to reveal its effects in Goethe's personality or to trace its impact on his writings. Weber says that if it is proved in some way that these experiences have no influence on Goethe's personality, still it is valuable, in spite of its causal ineffectiveness, as a heuristic means in characterizing Goethe's historical uniqueness. That is to say, we can derive from them an outlook on life which was peculiar to Goethe. Then we can integrate this as a real link in the causal nexus of Goethe's life. Suppose these experiences contain nothing characteristic of Goethe as distinct from his contemporaries, rather it represents the typical life pattern of German elite of those days. Then, even if it does not tell anything new about Goethe it serves as a paradigm of mental and spiritual life of those days so that we can integrate these historical facts into a cultural historical causal context as real cause and effect. And finally, let it be the case that those experiences contain nothing which is characteristic of any cultural epoch. Still, a psychiatrist who is interested in the psychology of love relationships could view it from a variety of standpoints as an ideally typical illustration of certain ascetic disturbances. So we could take these facts either as a heuristic means to disclose the causal sequence or as a causal component of a historical nexus.

Weber thus attempts a synthesis of two models of explanation. In line with the non-causalist model, Weber insists on understanding the action in terms of its meaning. At the same time, he retains the causal model by insisting on the causal adequacy.

Without adequacy on the level of meaning, our generalization remains mere statement of statistical probability, either not intelligible at all or only imperfectly intelligible. . . . On the other hand, from the point of view of its importance for sociological knowledge, even the most certain adequacy on the level of meaning signifies an acceptable *causal* proposition only to the extent that evidence can be produced that there is a probability . . . that the action in question *really* takes the course held to be meaningfully adequate.⁶

II

Weber's insistence on the adequacy of cause in the explanation of actions led many philosophers of social sciences to conceive him as offering a causal model of explanation. Those who do so adduce the following remark of Weber to stake their claim.

... purpose is the conception of an *effect* which becomes a *cause* of an action. Since we take into account every cause which produces or can produce significant effect, we also consider this one.⁷

This is to say that purpose or goal motivates the action and motive is the cause of the action. However, they fail to understand what Weber means by a 'cause'. They readily identify the cause Weber refers here to that of Humean notion of cause. Humean model of causal relation holds between two events that are contingently and externally related. It also assumes that cause is temporally prior to the effect. Adherence to this view of causality in the explanation of human action is vulnerable to the criticisms as raised by Melden. Melden argues that to regard motives as causes of action, that they explain the action as events are explained by their causes is a logical error. According to him, to explain an action causally is to identify the bodily movement as the one that occurs when the action is performed. Thus, to explain my action of raising my arm by invoking motive as the cause of the bodily movement that constitutes my arm going up, we have to conjoin the statement that describes the causal relation with a further statement that connects the bodily movement with the action. Now, Melden says that no further descriptions of the bodily movement will provide the link that bridges the gap between action and movements.⁸ Hence, Humean model of causal explanation fails in the domain of human actions.

The 'cause' which Weber here refers to can be understood as distinct from the Humean notion of cause. In Descartes we see that it is possible to regard a thing as its own cause. That is, the cause and effect need not be two distinct events.

... I did not say that it was impossible for something to be the efficient cause of itself. This is obviously the case when the term 'efficient' is taken to apply only to causes which are prior in time to their effects, or different from them. But such a restriction does not seem appropriate in the present context. First, it would make the question trivial, since everyone knows that something cannot be prior to, or distinct from itself. Secondly, the natural light does not establish that the concept of an efficient cause requires that it be prior in time to its effect. On the contrary, the concept of a cause, is strictly speaking applicable only for as long as the cause is producing its effect, and so it is not prior to it.⁹

According to Descartes, 'time' is discrete. The two separate segments of time are independent of each other. Hence, a body which has existed 'from itself', without a cause requires some 'power' in it which enables it to 'recreate' itself continuously. When we could not see any

such 'power' in the idea of a body we can immediately conclude that the body might not have derived its existence from itself. Certainly, this notion of cause is different from the Humean notion of 'cause'. It is possible to construe the 'cause' Weber refers to, when he speaks of motive as the cause of an action, as similar to one that Descartes holds. Even though Descartes speaks of this 'cause' with regard to the existence of 'God', who is the 'first cause', the philosophical insight it provides us is helpful to understand the relation of motives or purposes to human action. In Cartesian terminology 'motive' can be construed as the 'power' inherent in action.

John Searle propounds a concept of cause that is very similar to that of Descartes. According to Searle, what is central to the notion of action is the notion of 'intentionality'. To say that an action has intentionality is to say that it is directed to something. Echoing Descartes, we can say, the 'inherent power' in action gives intentionality. Intentionality, according to Searle, has two components, namely 'content' and 'psychological mode'. The 'content' is that component of intentionality which makes it about something or directed to something. The 'psychological mode' is the way in which the content is characterized say, by my desire, belief or hope. Moreover, these intentional states have what he calls 'conditions of satisfaction'. That is each state for itself determines its truth conditions or conditions of fulfilment. Now he says, sometimes these intentional states cause things to happen as in such cases the cause and effect are internally connected. It is internally connected because 'the cause is a representation of the very state of affairs that it causes.'¹⁰ Here the cause both represents as well as brings about the effect. Searle calls this type of causation 'intentional causation' which is different from Humean notion of causation.

Thus, we see that the cause Weber talks about in the context of action is akin to the 'Cartesian-Searlian' notion of cause in the realm of human action. Hence, for Weber motive is inseparable from, and inherent in action. And this is what the non-causalists hold. According to them, motive is conceptually bound up with action. It is because the agent has such and such a motive, we expect him or her to act in such and such a manner. For example, if I am highly possessive in my motive in falling in love with a young woman, then I am likely to marry her, rather I would try to marry her by all means. Here my motive is not distinct from action, any talk about the priority of motive to action is quite unintelligible. Motive is the means by which we understand the action.

The above analysis shows that Weber's theory of explanation of human action acknowledges the primacy of agency. An action, according to him, is purposive and the purpose motivates or directs

the action. Weber's notion of agency comes near to that of Taylor. For Taylor, the essential aspect of human agency is the subject's power of self-evaluation. He distinguishes between two kinds of evaluation: weak evaluation and strong evaluation. In weak evaluation we are concerned with the 'outcomes' whereas in strong evaluation we evaluate the quality of our motivation.¹¹ In Weber, we find that the agent regards his action as a means to realize certain ends. This means-end evaluation can be called a sort of weak evaluation, since it is concerned with the result of the action. However, his thesis does not preclude the scope for strong-evaluation. Weber says that we desire something either 'for its own sake' or as a means to achieve something which is more highly desired. The agent has the ability to weigh the desirability of a goal or motive not just in terms of the consequences or outcome but in terms of other values. Weber says that the evaluation of goal or purpose cannot be omitted from the deliberation of an agent as he acts with a sense of responsibility. An agent 'weighs and chooses from among the values involved according to his own conscience and his personal view of the world. . . . The act of choice itself is his own responsibility.'¹²

Let us see in what sense Weber has synthesized the two models of explanation. Our discussion has thrown light on his notion of adequacy at the level of meaning. An action is inherently meaningful as the agent bestows subjectively intended meaning on his act. In other words, the meaningfulness of an action consists in the inseparable motive of the agent. Nevertheless, Weber's theory of explanation has a causal component. We can compare Weber's model of causal imputation by means of mental construction of possible causal relations with what Tuomela calls 'conduct plans'. A conduct plan serves to explain the agent's action. It involves the agent's beliefs regarding various means for the attainment of his goal. 'Practical syllogism' is a species of conduct plan. Basically, it has two premises and a conclusion. The first premise states the agent's intention to fulfill the desired end. The second premise states the agent's beliefs in the means to achieve the end. That is, his doing a particular action is factually or conceptually necessary for attaining the desired end. The conclusion states that the agent resorts to such an action that is required of him. Thus, it has the following form:

A intends to achieve an end E.
 A believes that an action X needs
 to be done in order to achieve E.
 A does X.

In the practical syllogism, the connection between the premises and the conclusion is conceptual in a normative sense. As Tuomela says, one should use the verb 'to intend' in the sense that at the right time one performs what one intends, so that it could be considered as

a linguistic norm within the community of agents. However, this norm is internalized by every normal human being so that he obeys it or it guides his behaviour. Now, Tuomela claims that this kind of internalization presupposes a causal mechanism as one cannot internalize the norm if it were not causally effective in producing the desired effects. This type of causation, which at the same time retains the conceptual connections is called 'purposive causation' by Tuomela.¹³ In Weberian terminology, we should analyse the object of our sociocultural inquiry into its various components till we could apply our nomological knowledge, derived from the agent's life-world to his ontological knowledge. This ontological knowledge, we should say, incorporates the language of event causation of concrete effects. It is the knowledge about two concrete events that stand in causal relation. Nomological knowledge, on the other hand, illuminates the meaning aspect. That is, the meaning of an action is based on the idea or norm which not only constitutes but also regulates our action. Since the norm is regulative too, we have to ascertain that the action in question really follows. Though the understanding of rules is essential to understand the meaning of an action, it does not guarantee that the rules are followed in practice. Hence, the need for causal adequacy. Thus, the synthesis that Weber attempted is carried out at two levels. At the level of meaning, he conceives motive as conceptually bound up with action and at the level of causation he emphasizes the need for checking whether the action in question has really taken its course.

From the above discussion, we have seen the nature of the synthesis of the two models of explanation in Weber's theory. The causal model of explanation has its roots in the positivistic tradition and the non-causal model has its roots in the anti-positivistic tradition. Weber's theory of explanation is an attempt to overcome the limitations of these two diverging models. Such an attempt is very significant in the realm of social sciences. In philosophy of social sciences, the controversy regarding the object of sociocultural explanation is well known. Some regard human actions as the data of explanation, whereas others regard the consequences of action as the only relevant thing to social scientific explanation.

However, a preoccupation with the consequences of action ignoring the study of actions themselves serves the positivistic ideals. On the other hand, an exclusive concern with human actions themselves gives an idealistic turn to social sciences.¹⁴ As we have noted, Weber's theory of explanation takes care of both the subjectively intended meaningful human action as well as its effects, the intended or unintended consequences. This is evident from his insistence on the adequacy of meaning as well as of cause. Thus, we can say that Weber's theory of explanation aims at understanding social reality in its entirety.

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