What is methodological individualism?

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1 Introduction

Methodological individualism is one of those confusing doctrines: On first glance it strikes you as containing an undeniable truth, as necessarily true, even; but on second thought it appears to lead to blatantly wrong conclusions, conclusions that are downright crazy. For this reason alone it deserves philosophical attention.

Not only is it impossible to have a war, if nobody comes; a market where no goods are exchanged or a company no one works at are equally unimaginable.\footnote{If things were—per impossibile—different, the BPS’s (Banca populare di Sondrio) slogan “The bank you can talk to” probably wouldn’t work; it wouldn’t be clear that it has to be taken metaphorically. “So I can talk to this bank, but not to others?”, people would ask, and: “How come? Is it, because the others are deaf, or because they don’t speak my language? And why would I want to talk to your bank in the first place?”} What is more: Everyone always likes to denounce their philosophical opponents as ‘Platonists’; but there is some justice to calling the rejection of methodological individualism “(metasociological) Platonism”.

Since this would amount to the assumption of a reality—call it “the realm of institutions”—over and above human action, a reality whose connection to the world of human action—the manner of its influence on human life, for instance—can be left unspecified. (For all that matters, it might have no such connection whatsoever. In any case, there is no need for an account of such a connection in an account of what it means to exist for a component of the imagined ‘realm of institutions’.) What is still more: The methodological anti-individualist seems to be committed to the assumption of a type of agency and personhood metaphysically different from our’s—after all, associations, companies etc. \textit{are} persons of a sort, they are \textit{legal} persons.
But on the other hand methodological individualism seems to commit its adherants to the view that institutions (and the like) are made up out of (nothing more than) individual actions. And this seems to be blatantly wrong: It is ridiculous to assume that a large sum of individuals’ actions in and of themselves utterly unconnected to each other (that is: perfectly describable in isolation from each other) should somehow miraculously transform into a reality of a different kind. You spend your lunch break at the duck pond in the park—just the same as you did for the last couple of weeks. I also spend my lunch break at the duck pond in the park—just the same as I did for the last couple of weeks. Are we a family now? A club?, a movement?, a cult?—If the repetition of behavior were all that is needed to form an institution, we should probably all be a lot more careful what we do, how often we do it, and in whose presence—unless we don’t mind ending up in another unhappy marriage or (even worse) participating in the formation of a new state.\(^2\)

So methodological individualism seems to pose something of a dilemma. Of course, everything depends on how we understand the idea of reduction. A notion of reduction familiar from philosophical debates on the reducibility of e.g. the mental to the physical would be the idea that everything expressible in the (e.g.) mental vocabulary can be adequately (though maybe more complicately) expressed in a language that doesn’t contain expressions for mental concepts (e.g.). On such a reading of “reduction”, methodological individualism entails the magical view ridiculed above.

Instead of attempting to straightforwardly sketch how we should understand methodological individualism, in what follows I shall try to show that what Weber means when he talks of the reduction of institutions to the actions of individuals is not the idea of reduction that entails what I just called “the magical view”. But carrying out that project might also provide some insight into how to flesh out the idea of methodological individualism such that it will not collapse into that compositional view.

\(^2\)As if this weren’t bad enough, methodological individualism seems to declare concepts such as the concept of the state redundant by virtue of their being definable concepts. Thus, since they are not basic concepts (Grundbegriffe) they do not seem to merit philosophical attention. Political philosophy is an oxymoron.
Outline of the method of the present essay

As is often pointed out in the literature, the term “methodological individualism” was invented by Joseph Schumpeter, who uses it to refer to an idea he finds in Weber’s writings. Weber himself does not use this expression though he uses closely related expressions. In any case, it is obvious that we have to take a closer look at Weber’s writings in order to gain an appropriate understanding of methodological individualism as the term was understood by the people who originally felt the need for an expression for whatever they were trying to express by its means.

I hope to show that Weber does not conceive of the individualistic method he advertises in the way it is often construed. What in my view proves that he doesn’t, is the way he distinguishes the notion of Einverständnishandeln from the notion of Gemeinschaftshandeln in the so-called Category-Essay. This might need some elaboration.

In discussions of the possibility of methodological individualism almost no attention is paid to the way Weber procedes in the introduction of his technical terminology. This is unfortunate. For instance, the first chapter of what is today called “Economy and Society”, entitled “Soziologische Grundbegriffe” (The Fundamental Concepts of Sociology), begins (§ 1) with a definition of action and ends (§ 19) with a distinction of the state and the church. In some way Weber seems to attempt to construct the notion of the state from the starting point of the concept of action. Read backwards this construction should in turn provide us with a sense of what it means to reduce institutions to individuals’ actions.

This being said, I’m not going to do that. Not only would it be unne-

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5I won’t bother to translate Weber’s technical terminology. The main reason for this is that Weber’s choice of terms is not particularly helpful to speakers of the German language either. To give an example: According to the classification from Weber’s Category-Essay both states and languages are Verbände, but only states are also Anstalten, a language is of course not an Anstalt, otherwise it would have to be a Gesellschaft—which it obviously can’t be. The ordinary german nouns “Anstalt”, “Verband” and “Gesellschaft” do not work this way.
cessarily cumbersome; I also, at the moment, do not feel up to the task. The problem is that Weber’s construction—as I’ve just started calling it—of the concept of the state has some intricacies of its own, complications I neither understand nor understand the necessity of.

Instead, I will focus on the earlier and less elaborate essay *Ueber einige Kategorien der verstehenden Soziologie*\(^6\), which not only covers much of the same ground but seems to have served as something of a nucleus for the chapter *Soziologische Grundbegriffe*.\(^7\)

This should suffice to make the point of the present paper, but I also hope that a close reading of the *Category-Essay* might further our understanding of the more ‘baroque’ passages of *Soziologische Grundbegriffe*.\(^8\)

3 The structure of the *Category-Essay*

The *Category-Essay* may be viewed as consisting of two parts: In the last three sections Weber defines some concepts he apparently calls “categories”,\(^9\) namely the following: *Gesellschaftshandeln* (§ V), *Einverständnishandeln* (§ VI), Anstalt and Verband (§ VII). Why Weber chose this order of introduction, is not fully clear to me. For, as the text proceeds, it turns out that *Gesellschaftshandeln* really is a special case (“Spezialfall” (p. 461)) of *Einverständnishandeln*. Also, Weber lets us know that an Anstalt is a type of Verband: “Das »Anstaltshandeln« ist der rational geordnete Teil eines »Verbandshandelns«, die Anstalt ein partiell rational geordneter Verband.”\(^10\) Weber further tells us that Verbandshandel stands to Einverständnishandel in the same relation as Anstaltshandel stands to Gesellschaftshandel—


\(^7\) See Günther Roth’s Preface to the 1978 Re-issue of the English translation of *Economy and Society*, Berkeley 1978, p. xxix.

\(^8\) The *Category-Essay* will not get us to the distinction of state and church, but we might gain an understanding of why Weber needs to give a more elaborate account in order to do justice to the difference between state and church.

\(^9\) Section IV ends with the sentence: “Das ist streng festzuhalten auch bei jenen Kategorien, welche nun weiter zu erörtern sind” (p. 442).

\(^10\) p. 467 — ‘Institutional action’ (Anstaltshandel) is the rationally regulated part of an ‘organizational action’ (Verbandshandel); the institution a partially rationally ordered organization” (p. 175).
namely: Verbandshandeln is a special case of Einverständnishandeln.\footnote{Witness: “Als Verbandshandeln gilt uns [...] an Einverständnis orientiertes, also ein Einverständnishandel” (p. 466).} So, Gesellschafts-, Verbands-, and Anstaltshandeln are all special cases of Einverständnishandeln. (Also, it may by now have already become clear that an Anstalt just is the special case of a Verband that is also a Gesellschaft—a Gesellschaftsverband, if you will.)

If you now ask, what all of this has to do with our topic, let me tell you that Weber’s primary examples for Anstalten are the church and the state\footnote{Cf. p. 466. — Since in respect of their being Anstalten the church and the state do not differ, we now understand why Weber needs to make a bigger effort in Soziologische Grundbegriffe to distinguish them.}—which are precisely the kind of thing into whose metaphysical nature we set out to inquire. It is clear that in order to understand anything here we first need to understand, what Einverständnishandeln, the most general category mentioned (so far), is. We’ll get to that shortly.

Now, the first half of the Category-Essay, §§ I–III, is mainly concerned with distinguishing sociology from other scholarly disciplines: especially from psychology (§ II) and from jurisprudence (§ III).

The fourth section can be seen as a sort of bridge or joint connecting the two parts I have so far described; because, on the one hand, it is concerned with the introduction of a further category (for this reason the section can be viewed as belonging to the second part of the article), on the other hand, it serves to isolate sociology among the “studies of specifically human behaviour”\footnote{G. Ryle: The Concept of Mind, p. 320. — This is a slight misuse of Ryle’s phrase, because Ryle precisely includes jurisprudence and psychology among what he calls “studies of specifically human behaviour”.}, among the empirical (though interpretive) studies of human action (“Disziplinen vom Handeln”\footnote{M. Weber: Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, Tübingen 1980, part one, c. I, § 1, p. 9.}) (this aspect of the section relates it to the sections of the first part of the article).\footnote{For the purpose of the present essay it is inessential that the fourth section plays this double role. I draw attention to that fact anyway, because I think it sheds some light on Weber’s use of the term “category”. Not any concept is definitive of a scientific discipline.} What is more, it does the one thing by doing the other. This is possible, because the category Weber seeks to define in that passage is the one category that is definitive of (Weberian) sociology as a whole.
zurückung wichtig. Aber es ist das primäre Objekt einer »verstehenden« Soziologie.\textsuperscript{16}

So section IV isolates sociology among the humanities by introducing the most general category special to \textit{Soziologie}.

4 \textit{Gemeinschaftshandeln}

I said earlier that Weber’s definition of \textit{Einverständnishandeln}, to be more precise, the way \textit{Einverständnishandeln} is distinguished from \textit{Gemeinschaftshandeln} in general proves that Weber does not conceive of his postulate of methodological individualism in the atomistic fashion in which it might be construed. On our journey toward this distinction the notion of \textit{Gemeinschaftshandeln} needs to be discussed first. For, as you might already have guessed, \textit{Einverständnishandeln} is a type of \textit{Gemeinschaftshandeln}.\textsuperscript{17}

This is how Weber introduces the term "\textit{Gemeinschaftshandeln}":

\begin{quote}
Von »Gemeinschaftshandeln« wollen wir da sprechen, wo menschliches Handeln subjektiv \textit{sinnhaft} auf das Verhalten anderer Menschen bezogen wird.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

So, an action qualifies as a \textit{Gemeinschaftshandlung}, iff it is related to the behavior of other people in virtue of its subjective sense. It is evident that we cannot understand this definition unless we get a hold on what Weber means when he talks about subjective sense.

For this purpose it might be helpful to draw on some of Weber’s remarks in \textit{Soziologische Grundbegriffe}. In this later work he no longer uses the term “\textit{Gemeinschaftshandeln}”, instead the concept definitive of \textit{Soziologie}\textsuperscript{19} receives the title “\textit{soziales Handeln} (social action)”.\textsuperscript{20} But the idea seems to be

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[16] {p. 441—“Social action is not the only kind of action significant for sociological causal explanation, but it is the primary object of an ‘interpretive’ sociology” (p. 159).}
\footnotetext[17] {Cf. p. 451, p. 458, p. 462.}\footnotetext[18] {P. 441.—“We shall speak of ‘social action’ wherever human action is subjectively related in \textit{meaning} to the behavior of others” (p. 159).}
\footnotetext[20] {By contrast, the term “soziales Handeln” \textit{does} occur in the \textit{Category-Essay}—\textit{at least} it occurs once, namely on page 439. But this passage is not particularly helpful in the present context. One of the reasons why it is not, is that it is not evident that Weber uses the term here with the same meaning he uses it with in \textit{Soziologische Grundbegriffe}.}
\end{footnotes}
basically the same:

»Soziales« Handeln aber soll ein solches Handeln heißen, welches sei-
nem von dem oder den Handelnden gemeinten Sinn nach auf das Ver-
halten anderer bezogen wird und daran in seinem Ablauf orientiert
ist.\(^{21}\)

4.1 Subjective sense

For the following reflections to be intelligible you need to know that Weber
uses the notion of subjective sense to define the concept of action:

»Handeln« soll dabei ein menschliches Verhalten \(\ldots\) heißen, wenn
und insofern als der oder die Handelnden mit ihm einen subjektiven
Sinn verbinden.\(^{22}\)

Thus action is distinguished from mere behavior by its having a subjective
sense. Read backwards this gives us at least a preliminary idea of what Weber
means when he talks about subjective sense: Subjective sense is whatever it
is that marks off intentional action from mere behavior.

4.2 Schütz’s interpretation

I want to start by briefly discussing, how Alfred Schütz understands the
expression “subjective sense” in Weber’s writings. My main reason to discuss
Schütz’s reading is that it is an especially clear-cut manifestation—if not the
origin—of a current in the interpretation of Weber I am strongly opposed
to. Schütz’s misunderstanding is not uncommon, but more recent writers
usually do not put it forward as unflinchingly and as coherently as Schütz.

Schütz motivates his constructive efforts in Der sinnhafte Aufbau der
sozialen Welt (The Phenomenology of the Social World) by an extensive cri-
tique of Weber’s views on understanding (Verstehen). Since Schütz thinks
he can criticize Weber, he must assume he understands Weber’s (technical)
terminology. Accordingly we can gain a hold on Schütz’s interpretation

\(^{21}\)M. Weber: Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, Tübingen 51980, part one, c. I, § 1.—”Action
is social in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting
individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby
oriented in its course” (T. Parsons: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization,

of Weber’s technical vocabulary by reflecting on his critique: The concept of subjective sense as Schütz understands it must be such as to allow the objections he puts forward.

Schütz essentially puts forward the following two objections:

1. Weber’s definition of action is inaccurate.

2. Weber naïvely presupposes that it is possible to grasp the subjective sense of another’s actions. He doesn’t pay attention to the difference between Selbst-Verstehen and Fremd-Verstehen, i.e. he does not pay due respect to the difference between the understanding I have of my own actions and the understanding I have of someone else’s.

(These aren’t independent objections, I reckon. But I’ll come to that later.)

Schütz’s first objection runs as follows: Weber’s definition of action can’t be accurate since I can assert (aussagen) of any behavior I may manifest that it has a sense. Whether this objection is appropriate, is not our concern at the moment. What is important to me is that this objection reveals the following aspect of Schütz’s understanding of subjective sense: Subjective sense is such that I can attribute it to any behavior I may manifest whatsoever. Whether I do so is purely a matter of whim.

Schütz’s second objection is more elaborate. Contrary to Weber’s assumptions, Schütz claims, it is in principle impossible to grasp the sense another person attaches to her actions. It would be sheer luck, to say the least, if a’s understanding of b’s action were to coincide with b’s own understanding of this action. The details of this argument do not matter to us. For my present purposes it suffices to note what it reveals about Schütz’s conception of Weberian Sinn, namely: In general the sense I attach to your action isn’t the sense you attach to your own action.

To sum up: According to Schütz’s interpretation Weber’s concept of subjective sense is subjective in two ways: Subjective sense is subjective in the sense that it is essentially private; apart from the agent no one can truly know the sense of her actions. This seems to follow from the second sense in which subjective sense is subjective: What sense a person puts into a particular behavior of her’s is totally arbitrary. I can give a certain behavior of mine any meaning I happen to come up with.\(^{23}\) So there is no way for you to know what the meaning of my action is; you can only guess.

\(^{23}\) In a way this is correct, of course: I do, what I want to do. And I put my intentions into
But if this were right, sociology as Weber defines it would be impossible. Because the goal of (Weberian) sociology is to understand (verstehen) social action, i.e. to understand its subjective sense. Of course, Schütz could be perfectly comfortable with this consequence, since his motive is to expose the philosophical naïveté of Weber’s account, anyway. Nevertheless, this conflict between Weber’s definition of sociology and the result of Schütz’s criticisms might just as well indicate that Schütz’s interpretation of Weber’s notion of subjective sense is misguided. It may well turn out that Weber’s account is not in grave need of a foundation through a phenomenological Konstitutionsanalyse as Schütz claims.

4.3 Objectivity in the Objectivity-Essay

In Weber’s Essay Die »Objektivität« sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis we find proof that Weber works with a different distinction between the subjective and the objective—at least sometimes. The second part of the Objectivity-Essay is not much else than a puzzle to me. I won’t go into it here. On the other hand, the structure of Weber’s reflections in the essay’s first section is fairly perspicuous. Its objective is to establish Weber’s famed principle of value-neutrality: empirical sciences cannot establish value-judgments.

Eine empirische Wissenschaft vermag niemanden zu lehren, was er s o l l, sondern nur, was er k a n n und—unter Umständen—was er w i l l.24

This has to be read as meaning that it is not the job of empirical scientists to assess categorical imperatives. For, Weber admits that it is possible and permitted to engage in the discussion of values in other ways: Scientific endeavor may lead, for instance, to a technical critique (technische Kritik) of a project. But here a certain goal (or a set of goals) is assumed as given.

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24p. 150.—“An empirical science cannot tell anyone what he should do—but rather what he can do—and under certain circumstances—which he wishes to do” (transl.: E. A. Shils & H. A. Finch).
so technical critique deals only with *hypothetical* imperatives. And of course Weber is not opposed to investigating what values are upheld in a particular culture. But the result of such an investigation would only be a (theoretical) judgement *about* certain values and not a value-judgement itself, the investigation wouldn’t tell you what you should or shouldn’t do. An empirical study of foreign cultures cannot provide an *evaluation* of values.\(^{25}\) Qualifications of the principle of value-neutrality such as these actually take up a major proportion of the first section of the essay, as well as reflections on what needs to be done in order to put the principle into practice. Both do not concern us now.

The only thing I’m interested in here is the *argument* Weber gives in favor of the principle of value-neutrality. I’m interested in it, because in the process of expounding it Weber demonstrates how he operates with the notion of objectivity. The argument runs as follows:

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\text{Es ist und bleibt wahr, daß eine methodisch korrekte wissenschaftliche Beweisführung auf dem Gebiete der Sozialwissenschaften, wenn sie ihren Zweck erreicht haben will, auch von einem Chinesen als richtig anerkannt werden muß oder – richtiger gesagt – dass sie dieses, vielleicht wegen Materialmangels nicht voll erreichbare, Ziel jedenfalls \textit{ermüden} muss, [...] – während ihm für unsere ethischen Imperative das »Gehör« fehlen kann, und während er das Ideal selbst und die daraus fließenden konkreten \textit{Wertungen} ablehnen kann und sicherlich oft ablehnen wird, ohne dadurch dem wissenschaftlichen Wert jener denkenden \textit{Analyse} irgend zu nahe zu treten.}^{26}\]

Value-judgements cannot live up to their own claim\(^{27}\) to objectivity, because it is conceivable that some people just cannot be convinced of a particular

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\(^{25}\) Cf. p. 152.

\(^{26}\) Cf. p. 155. —“It has been and remains true that a systematically correct scientific proof in the social sciences, if it is to achieve its purpose, must be acknowledged as correct even by a Chinese—or—more precisely stated—it must constantly strive to attain this goal, which perhaps may not be completely attainable due to faulty data. Furthermore, the successful logical analysis of the content of an ideal and its ultimate axioms and the discovery of the consequences which arise from pursuing it, logically and practically, must also be valid for the Chinese. At the same time, our Chinese can lack a ‘sense’ for our ethical imperative and he can and certainly often will deny the ideal itself and the concrete value-judgments derived from it” (transl.: E. A. Shils & H. A. Finch).

\(^{27}\) Compare: “[D]ie höchsten und letzten Werturteile, die unser Handeln bestimmen und unserem Leben Sinn und Bedeutung geben, werden von uns als etwas \textit{objektiv} \textit{Wertvolles} empfunden” (p. 152).
4.3 Objectivity in the Objectivity-Essay  

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value-judgement.

This argument can’t be any good; but it makes evident, nevertheless, how Weber operates with the concept of (scientific) objectivity. Only what everyone should—in principle—be convinced by is objective, is objectively valid.\(^\text{28}\)

As far as I can see, Schütz mentions at least three things in his critique of Weber he calls ‘objective’ in contrast to subjective sense:

1. The idea of objective sense in the sense of the meaning of signs, expression, sentences and judgements (“die objektiven Sinngehalte der Ausdrücke als »ideale Gegenständlichkeiten« (p. 45)). In the present context this is irrelevant and I will therefore ignore it.

2. What he calls “die objektive Gegenständlichkeit des Handlungsablaufs” (p. 36) and (if this is the same thing) “der objektive von uns zu deuten-de Sachverhalt [der Bewegung] des fremden Leibes” (p. 33). By these expressions he seems to mean something like the ‘uninterpreted behavior underlying all our interpretations, the purely bodily behavior stripped of all attributions of sense’.

3. Objective sense, meaning: the sense someone attributes/attaches to another’s behavior.

This probably fits well with Schütz’s picture, but it is clear that neither of these notions of objectivity have anything to do with the idea of the objectivity of scientific truth that Weber refers to in the Objectivity-Essay.

This might lead us to ask, whether traces of an application of the idea of objectivity to the idea of sense can also be found in Weber’s writings.—Some of them are hard to miss: In the first annotation to § 1 of Soziologische Grundbegriiffe Weber states that objective sense is the topic of ethics, jurisprudence, logic and aesthetics—which search for the correct or valid sense.\(^\text{29}\) In the third section of the Category-Essay, which deals with the difference between

\(^{28}\)True enough, in the passage just quoted Weber makes no use of the term “objektive”. But in the passage preceding it Weber argues that neither syncretism nor compromise is a guarantee for scientific objectivity (“wissenschaftliche »Objektivität«”) or scientific validity (“wissenschaftliche Gültigkeit”).

4.4 Weber’s account of action in general

We cannot avoid taking a closer look at what Weber himself has to say about the notion of action any longer now. Let us start with the passage quoted most often—the definition Weber gives in the first section of Economy and Society:

»Handeln« soll [...] ein menschliches Verhalten (einerlei ob äusseres oder innerliches Tun, Unterlassen oder Dulden) heißen, wenn und in-

30 Economic action involves a conscious, primary orientation to economic considerations. It must be conscious, for what matters is not the objective necessity of making economic provision, but the belief that it is necessary (T. Parsons: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization, New York 1947, p. 159).
This doesn’t really tell us much: Human behavior can only be counted as action if and insofar as the agent attaches a subjective sense to said behavior. Even Schütz’s interpretation is in accordance with this. Now, this definition of action is immediately preceded by Weber’s famous definition of sociology:

Soziologie […] soll heißen: eine Wissenschaft, welche soziales Handeln deutend verstehen und dadurch in seinem Ablauf und seinen Wirkungen ursächlich erklären will.²²

Because this sentence is quoted so routinely in the literature on Weber, it is no surprise that students of Weber’s writings sometimes fail to read it closely. On a superficial reading one might easily take Weber as defining sociology as a discipline with two distinct aims: a) understanding actions (of a certain type)—thus, providing an interpretation of them—and b) explaining actions (of this type)—thus, discovering their causes. Weber will then seem to fit in well with the line of authors proposing a dichotomy of understanding and explaining (or alternatively of reasons and causes) in order to salvage the humanities from obsolescence (and—equivalently—intentional action from naturalization). He will seem to fall in line with those authors; apart from the fact, that is, that he—eclectically—claims the activities on both sides of the dichotomy as appropriate manners of proceeding or methods for his Soziologie. And this will then come across as the deep insight to be gained from Weber: that sociology is essentially eclectic.

But Weber explicitly rejects the dichotomy of explaining and understanding. He does not assign two separate objectives to the discipline he calles “Soziologie”. Weberian sociology doesn’t do two different things, it does one thing (explaining) by doing another thing (understanding). The fifth annotation to § 1 makes evident that this is not an accident or even a lapse on Weber’s part. For there he states that in the studies of specifically human

³¹M. Weber: Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, Tübingen 1980, part one, c. I, § 1, p. 1.—“In ‘action’ is included all human behavior when and in so far as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it” (T. Parsons: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization, New York 1947, p. 88).

4.5 Gemeinschaftshandeln

Let us now combine what was said about Gemeinschaftshandeln at the beginning of this section with the understanding of Weber’s notion of subjective sense we just reached. An action is a social action (Gemeinschaftshandeln), iff the explanation of it in virtue of which it qualifies as action (i.e. understandable behavior) contains a reference to the behavior of others or of

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34What else should Weber mean when he writes that its subjective sense is attached to the action by the acting individual?—Also, witness the discussion of “faktische objektive Richtigkeitsrationalität” (p. 434) in his sketch of the difference between interpretive sociology and psychology, as well as the discussion of the four types of action.
another (person). All of this nicely summed up in the following passage, in which Weber once again seeks to delineate the subject matter of interpretive sociology:

Das für die verstehende Soziologie spezifisch wichtige Handeln nun ist im speziellen ein Verhalten, welches 1. dem subjektiv gemeinten Sinn des Handelnden nach auf das Verhalten anderer bezogen, 2. durch diese seine sinnhafte Bezogenheit in seinem Verlauf mitbestimmt und also 3. aus diesem (subjektiv) gemeinten Sinn heraus verständlich erklärbar ist.\[35\]

I want to briefly note that Weber (quite) consistently speaks of ‘the other person’s behavior (as opposed to understandable action)’ in definitions of this kind of the concept of social action, which constitutes the subject matter proper to Soziologie. And we have already seen how important it is to Weber to distinguish action from behavior in general. This means that Weber doesn’t want to restrict the concept of social action as he defines it to actions which have an (interpretive) explanation that makes reference to an understandable action of another person. (Even though the examples he gives might suggest the opposite.) From this it in turn follows that Weber’s idea of a social action does not coincide with Reinach’s idea of a social act (sozialer Akt) but (probably) includes it.

This might be the appropriate occasion to launch into a heartfelt critique of present day academic sociology from a Weberian point of view. Sadly I do not have time for that.

5 Gesellschaftshandeln

Earlier I pretended to have no idea whatsoever, why Weber introduces the categories he seeks to describe in the sequence he introduces them in, or more to the point: why he introduces the notion of Gesellschaftshandeln before delineating its genus, Einverständnishandeln. This is not quite true. The proximal explanation for this procedure is that he introduces the general idea of Einverständnishandeln by abstracting from an aspect of Gesellschaftshandeln, namely from the aspect that the orders\[36\] which guide Gesellschafts-

\[35\]P. 429.
\[36\]Following Talcott Parson’s lead I will translate Weber’s “Ordnung” by “order”. It is important that this word is not taken as a synonym for “command”. 
handeln are—as he sais—gesetzt. (But, why he cannot introduce this notion in a different manner, is unclear to me.)

Weber’s notion of Satzung, the aspect of his concept of Gesellschaftshandeln from which we will have to abstract in order to gain an understanding of his idea of Einverständnishandel, is already quite abstract. It is necessary that we get a sense of its abstractness—otherwise our abstraction from the character of the Gesatztheit of the orders that guide Gesellschaftshandeln will be insufficient.

In what I just said it was implied that the idea of an order that is gesetzt is essential to Weber’s idea of Gesellschaftshandeln. But what is a gesatzte Ordnung?—This is what Weber tells us at the beginning of the section on Gesellschaftshandeln:


Note that Weber here points out that this definition is only provisional. I’m not sure, whether I can list all the points on which he revises it later on in the article. But one thing that is clearly revoked is the requirement that an order needs to be explicitly decreed or declared out loud for it to be gesetzt.

Geltendes Einverständnis darf dabei nicht mit »stillschweigender Vereinbarung« identifiziert werden. Natürlich führt von der explicite vereinbarten Ordnung zum Einverständnisseine Skala von Übergängen, auf welcher sich a u c h ein solches Verhalten findet, welches die Beteiligten durchschnittlich gegenseitig als eine stilschweigend vereinbarte Ordnung praktisch behandeln. Dies bietet aber prinzipiell gegenüber der ausdrücklichen Vereinbarung keine Besonderheit. […] Dagegen das

37P. 442 sq.—“An established order (ordnung)—in the purely empirical sense intended here—may be provisionally defined as either (1) a unilateral demand by some persons to others (in the rational limiting case, the demand is explicit) or (2) a mutual declaration (in the limiting case, the agreement is explicit)” (p. 160).
This quotation comes from the section on Einverständnishandeln, which we haven’t got to yet, so it might seem rather unintelligible at this point; but read it again, after we’ve discussed Einverständnis. It proves my point, because Weber here states that a tacit agreement does not in principle (for the present purpose we might well read this as: qua agreement) differ from an explicit one; neither explicit nor tacit agreement is essential to Einverständnishandeln. Abstracting from the explicitness of the Satzung of its order will not get you from Gesellschaftshandeln to Einverständnishandeln. So the “Satzung” of an order in Weber’s sense doesn’t require its codification or even its public proclamation.

Now, in the passage just quoted much use is made of the term “Vereinbarung” (agreement). This might lead you to think that at least some mutuality is necessary for something to count as a Satzung, that a Satzung at least in some way depends on the participation of everyone concerned by the order to be gesetzt. “Everyone gets a say in the Satzung”, you might think. That thought would be wrong. Though Weber’s avowed paradigm of Gesellschaftshandeln is manifested in what he calls a “Zweckverein”—a Kegelklub (bowling club) or a writer’s association seem to be equally good examples—which is constituted by an order all of its members have agreed on, a Satzung may perfectly well be unilateral. That everyone concerned ‘got a say’ in the Satzung of its order is not a necessary condition of Gesellschaftshandeln. This is proven by the first case of Weber’s ‘provisional definition’ quoted above, where he states that a gesetzte Ordnung may be unilateral and (which is to say the same thing) something the implementation of which some people expect from others.

So, abstract from explicitness, abstract from mutuality of any sort!, what are you left with?—Not much, to be sure. But it is safe to say that whatever

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38 p. 457 sq.—“For all that, valid consensus must not be identified with ‘tacit agreement.’ Naturally a range of transitions leads from the explicitly agreed-upon order to the consensus, and within this range one also finds behavior that the participants on the average reciprocally and practically treat as a tacitly agreed-upon order. This, however, does not differ in principle from the explicit agreement. […] Conversely, the ‘valid’ consensus in its pure type entails nothing of enactment or, especially, of formal agreement” (p. 169).


40 For more explicit formulations view p. 468 sq.
it is that the Satzung of an order consists in will still have to be an action
of some sort, “Vergesellschaftungshandeln” as Weber, if I’m not misled, calls it.\footnote{“Das […] eine »Vereinbarung« bedeutende Handeln heißt uns, im Gegensatz zum
an dieser Vereinbarung orientierten »Gesellschaftshandel«, das »Vergesellschaftungshandel«” (p. 444).}—By contrast, Einverständnishandeln (in general!) does not depend on
any Vergesellschaftungshandlungen at all.

Weber, of course, has a lot more to say about Gesellschaftshandeln and
the orders that guide it; for instance, he states that an order’s obtaining\footnote{Parsons renders Weber’s “Geltung” as “validity”. I worry, that this could be misleading. The
important thing to note is that an order does not need to be good, correct or just for it to be geltend. Therefore, I shall use the verb “obtain”. (Parsons does not suffer from the
aforementioned misunderstanding, but he strangely feels the need to point out that “the
validity in question is not empirical […] validity”. On the face of it this flatly contradicts
Weber’s text, who speaks of the “empirische »Geltung«” (p. 443) of orders all the time. Parsons
seems to have something special in mind.)} is
not only manifested by actions which exemplify it, but also in actions which
go against the order by intent. But I think we can for the present purpose
pass over those considerations.

6 Money, the market and language

To briefly remind you: We originally embarked on our journey halfway
through the Category-Essay because I claimed that the way Einverständnis-
handeln is set off against its genus Gemeinschaftshandeln proves something
(namely that the reduction Weber talks about in his avowals of methodologi-
cal individualism is not to be taken the way it sometimes is taken—namely as
implying that talk of institutions can be analyzed in terms of statements that
contain no reference to any conceptual repertoire peculiar to institutions.)

Now that we have gained some idea of what Gesellschaftshandeln is we can
finally turn to Weber’s introduction of the notion of Einverständnishandel.

For many reasons the beginning of the section on Einverständnis is one
of the most difficult passages of the article. Weber starts by claiming that
there are complexes of social action (“Komplexe von Gemeinschaftshandeln”
(p. 452)) where everything is, as if there were a gesetzte Ordnung behind it,
only that no Vergesellschaftungshandel has taken place.

Es gibt Komplexe von Gemeinschaftshandeln, welche ohne eine
zweckrational vereinbarte Ordnung dennoch 1. im Effekt so ablaufen,
Weber immediately proceeds to discuss some cases, these appear to be: money, the market and language. He concludes this discussion with the comment that the two of them (the market and the exchange of money apparently only count as one thing) do not have much in common—apart from their satisfying the first criterion just quoted, that is.

He ends this ‘conclusion’ of sorts with the enigmatic claim that “all analogies to the ‘organism’ and to similar biological concepts are doomed to sterility”. For the present purpose we can probably pass over this riddle.

This is followed by the discussion of a host of phenomena: race, mass-conditioned behavior, and the imitation of behavior. This seems to be something of a digression, because, as Weber himself notes, all of these phenomena do not even (or at least: not as such) amount to Gemeinschaftshandeln, but our objective was to understand Weber’s idea of Einverständnishandeln (and Weber’s aim in this section is to elucidate this idea), and we already established that Einverständnishandeln is a type of Gemeinschaftshandeln. For this reason we will not return to this passage in our subsequent discussion either. Weber ends this digression on uniformities of behavior that

\[ \text{als ob eine solche stattgefunden hätte, und bei welchen 2. dieser spezifische Effekt durch die Art der Sinnbezogenheit des Handelns der Einzelnen mitbestimmt ist.}^{43} \]

\[ \text{Weber immediately procedes to discuss some cases, these appear to be: money, the market and language. He concludes this discussion with the comment that the two of them (the market and the exchange of money apparently only count as one thing) do not have much in common—apart from their satisfying the first criterion just quoted, that is.}^{44} \]

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\[ \text{\footnotesize{\cite{43}P. 452 sq.—“There are complexes of social action, which in the absence of a rational agreement on an order, (1) may in effect operate as if such an agreement had occurred, (2) and in which this specific effect is codetermined through the nature of the meaning of the action of the individuals” (p. 166).}}^{43} \]

\[ \text{\footnotesize{\cite{44}P. 454.—“These two illustrations, however, have little more than that characteristic in common. For in both cases, the way that total effect evolves can be illustrated in several external parallels that have no substantial cognitive value. The ‘as if’ assumption is thus merely the basis of sociological inquiry in both cases; however, the subsequent conceptual development of each is distinct” (p. 167).}}^{44} \]

\[ \text{\footnotesize{\cite{45}p. 167.}}^{45} \]

\[ \text{\footnotesize{\cite{46}This concerns the examples of similarities in behavior corresponding to membership in a particular race and of the imitation of behavior.}}^{46} \]
aren’t results of \textit{Gemeinschaftshandeln} at all by pointing out that language can neither be understood as crowd-influenced behavior, nor in terms of the imitation of the behavior of another. Then he says something about domination (\textit{Herrschaft}) that might have something to do with his point about language, but which is also rather distracting in the present context.

Weber then repeats his dissatisfaction with the description of a type of complex of action he opened with and voices the need for a further distinction:

Eine durch brauchbare Merkmale ausgezeichnete Kategorie von Erscheinungen gibt also jenes durch \textit{als ob} gekennzeichnete Phänomen nicht ab. Wir wollen statt dessen im Anschluß an das über die \textit{Nachahmung} und die \textit{Herrschaft} soeben Gesagte eine andere Unterscheidung in dies Vielerlei von Sachverhalten hineintragen.\footnote{P. 456.—“That phenomenon characterized by the ‘as if’ does not, therefore, produce a phenomenal category having useful criteria. Instead, in connection with what has just been said about ‘imitation’ and ‘domination,’ we want to introduce another distinction into this complex situation” (p. 168).—To me “complex situation” seems to be a mistranslation, “variety of situations” might be more accurate.}

He then proceeds to define \textit{Einverständnis}. I’ll quote this definition shortly, but first: What are we to make of all this?

The important thing to note is, I think, that the criteria Weber lays down at the very beginning of the section do \textit{not} amount to a definition of \textit{Einverständnishandeln}, and, likewise, that the first two examples he gives are \textit{not both} examples of \textit{Einverständnishandeln}.\footnote{This is inaccurate. It is evident in Weber’s text that money and the market vastly depend on \textit{Einverständnis} (cf. p. 458) and even \textit{Vergesenchaftung} (cf. p. 453). (This is one of the aspects of this whole passage that make it difficult to understand.) But the market can still be used as a counter-example to the idea that the mentioned criteria are sufficient conditions of the concept of \textit{Einverständnishandeln}.} Rather, the examples of the market and language precisely illustrate the fact that the criteria laid down in the opening of the section do not amount to a definition of \textit{Einverständnishandeln}, because they both satisfy these criteria but only one of them, language, is used as an example of \textit{Einverständnishandeln}.

So what is the difference between a linguistic community and a market?—Both consist in complexes of social action, which manifest certain regularities, i.e. they appear to be determined by a \textit{gesetzte Ordnung}; the rules of grammar are Weber’s example for the case of language, in the case of the
market Weber points to something he calls an “Ordnung der Güterbedarfsdeckung”. Now, I don’t exactly know what he means by this expression. But it seems to be the idea of an order that assigns goods to people in respect of their needs, the idea of an order that—at least to some extent—makes sure everyone gets what they need. In an imperfect way the market has a similar effect: people get rid of things they don’t need and get things they do need instead. So it seems as if the market were determined by an Ordnung der Güterbedarfsdeckung. But it is essential to the market that it is not determined by such an order. Living under such an order, Weber notes, would amount to living in a collective household (Gemeinwirtschaft)—which doesn’t have to be a bad thing; it would just be the end of a market where people buy and sell things.

(The complex of behavior that constitutes the market even satisfies the second criterion Weber states at the beginning of the section. The appearance of its being determined by an Ordnung der Güterbedarfsdeckung is not just a strange coincidence but a result of the subjective sense of the actions of the market participants—at least, this is what Weber tells us, and for the sake of getting a grasp of his terminology this is all we need.)

Now to the allegedly parallel case of language: It seems as though a language were governed by rules of grammar its speakers have agreed on. But it is evident that the reality of a language does not depend on any

49Hanke translates this phrase as “order of want satisfaction”.

50“[D]as, mindestens relative, Fehlen einer solchen (»gemeinwirtschaftlichen«) Ordnung der Bedarfsdeckung der am Geldgebrauch Beteiligten [ist] ja gerade Voraussetzung des Geldgebrauchs” (p. 453).—“[T]he at least relative lack of such a communal order of want satisfaction is for the users of money prerequisite to the use of money” (p. 166).

51“Dennoch ist nun dessen Gesamtergebnat normalerweise in vieler Hinsicht so geartet, »als ob« es durch Orientierung an einer Ordnung der Bedarfsdeckung aller Beteiligten erreicht worden sei. Und zwar ist dies der Fall infolge der sinnhaften Bezeugenheit des Handelns des Geldgebrauchers, [... ]” (p. 453).—“Nevertheless, that net result (the use of money) is, in many respects, normally fashioned ‘as if’ it had been reached through orientation by all participants to an order of want satisfaction. And indeed this is the case because of the relatedness of the action of the money user, whose situation, like that of every trader during an exchange, within certain limits is usually so structured that his interest will normally require of him a certain measure of consideration for the interests of others, for these are the normal bases for those expectations that he, from his viewpoint, may justifiably hold about the action of those others” (p. 166).—“The net result (the use of money)” might not be the best translation for “dessen Gesamtergebnat”, because with the latter phrase Weber refers to the overall result of the use of money—on my reading, in any case. Hanke’s translation also omits that the relatedness Weber goes on about in the second sentence is one in virtue of the sense of the action. This is rather uncongenial to the point I was just trying to make.
Satzung or Vergesellschaftungshandeln. People spoke long before they wrote books on grammar, and presenting an (allegedly) improved grammar is (as such) insufficient for altering the language concerned. This is so clear that Weber doesn’t even feel the need to specifically point it out to his readers.

So far we sought to get a clearer picture of the similarity of linguistic communities and markets Weber has in mind: in both cases there is an appearance of (a gesatzte) order, some sort of regularity of social action, in the manifest absence of Vergesellschaftung.—But the difference between them, in virtue of which difference they cannot fall into a single category, seems to be that the regularity in the case of the market exists without its being known to the money-users. Market participants do not need to know that their actions taken together have the effect that people (to some extent) get what they need for this effect to take place. By contrast the regularities we know as the rules of grammar only exist because they in some sense guide the linguistic behavior of the members of the linguistic community concerned, even though no Vergesellschaftungshandlung in favor of them was ever perfomed. I take it that this is what Weber is trying to get across in his definition of Einverständnis:

Unter »Einverständnis« nämlich wollen wir den Tatbestand verstehen: dass ein an Erwartungen des Verhaltens Anderer orientiertes Handeln um deswillen eine empirisch »geltende« Chance hat, diese Erwartungen erfüllt zu sehen, weil die Wahrscheinlichkeit objektiv besteht, dass diese anderen jene Erwartungen trotz des Fehlens einer Ver-

52 p. 453.—“That something approximating this occurs en masse among a multitude of people through similar usage of certain outwardly similar symbols, ‘as if’ those speaking were orienting their behavior toward rationally agreed-upon grammatical rules, constitutes another case corresponding to the characteristic ‘as if’ mentioned at the outset since the effect is determined through that relatedness of meaning of the acts of the individual speakers” (p. 167).
7 HOW DOES THIS PROVE ANYTHING?

So, Einverständnishandeln (in its pure type, as Weber (cf. p. 458) might say) differs from Gemeinschaftshandeln (in general) in that it can only be understood by reference to its subject’s consciousness of a regularity it manifests.

7 How does this prove anything?

When Weber talks of the reduction of institutions to individuals’ actions he cannot mean that talk of institutions can (and for scientific purposes maybe even should) be replaced by a language that speaks only of individual actions and makes no reference to conceptual resources peculiar of institutions.

Let’s stick to our example, the state. As I said earlier, that the state is an Anstalt. Anstaltshandeln is a type of Gesellschaftshandeln: it is guided by man-made orders, orders whose existence depends on a Satzung. It is also a type of Verbandshandeln; this means that the orders are not such that agents only fall under them in virtue of a decision of their’s (thus, the laws of a state apply to you simply in virtue of your having entered and not left its territory, regardless whether or not you wanted to be subjected to them). In any case, Anstaltshandeln is Einverständnishandeln. But Einverständnishandeln, as we have just seen, is constituted by the fact that it is to be understood by reference to its subjects’ consciousness of the order their Einverständnishandel manifests. This does not hold true of any action or correspondingly any regularity of actions. This was illustrated by the example of the market and the Ordnung der Güterbedarfsdeckung.

So in a way it is true that Weber attempts to analyze the state in terms of individuals’ actions, but the actions in question can only be conceived of in a manner that is special to institutions.

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53 P. 456.—“Namely, we want to understand by the term ‘consensus’ (Einverständnis) that situation when an action oriented toward expectations about the behavior of others has an empirically realistic chance of seeing these expectations fulfilled because of the objective probability that these others will, in reality, treat those expectations as meaningfully "valid" for their behavior, despite the absence of an explicit agreement” (p. 168).