

The Politics of Intellectual Integrity

Richard Wellen
Associate Professor
Division of Social Science
York University, Toronto
rwellen@yorku.ca

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Max Weber's writings on science and the meaning of intellectual activity have been criticized in the light of his apparent willingness to limit the evaluative aims of intellectuals by rejecting the appropriateness of social criticism in their professional work. In response, defenders of Weber have been struck by his insistence that intellectuals must think of their professional activity as a kind of service to 'moral forces'¹ even though they must also - for the sake of intellectual integrity - avoid partisanship itself. Paradoxically, 'value-free' social science itself is portrayed as an enterprise in which confrontation with critical and evaluative stances is indispensable and directive of intellectual interests. This paper is an attempt to find a broader platform for addressing Weber's seemingly paradoxical attachment to both 'value-freedom' and a model of social science that requires an irreducible attunement to the world of cultural meanings and moral-practical problems.

Two Views on Disenchantment: Weber and Pragmatism

One starting point for reexamining this paradox, and the ambivalence that seems to underline it, might be a comparison of Weber's views on science (*Wissenschaft*) with criticisms of traditional theories of science and philosophy within American pragmatism. Along these lines, James Kloppenberg has recently argued that Weber and the pragmatists share the 'anti-foundationalist' sentiment that we enter the world of intellectual meaning only from within a given and contingent configuration of values and commitments.

¹ Weber 1946: 152.

According to Kloppenberg this framework of disenchantment highlights the kind of intellectual responsibility and critical self-understanding called for by modern forms of scientific, moral and political endeavor.² Both Dewey and Weber held that science strives for objective knowledge. At the same time, however, when it came to interpreting what this means they gave different answers from each other, and from the tradition. For Weber objectivity is rooted in those generalizable “norms of thought’ that apply to the disciplined observation of empirical reality. However, he also added that objectivity does not presuppose an independently knowable world. Instead, the individuality of phenomena is the ultimate object of any cultural science and this is a function of how one constructs the problems of one’s own society.³ Pragmatists, as Richard Rorty has recently argued, see objectivity simply as maximized intersubjective agreement, which means that much of what theorists and philosophers do is find symbols that will help us identify attractive value-choices and practices.⁴

What unites Weber with pragmatism is the fact that neither holds out the hope that science could replace philosophy as a source of certainty, or that scientific theories could be offered as ways of mastering reality or providing laws for deducing its essential structures. Nevertheless, it is often remarked that Dewey was optimistic where Weber was more despairing about the status of science. For Weber the inability of science to promise objective meanings entailed a crisis of cultural authority. Because science could not be used to rationally justify value-judgments he felt that its challenge was to both preserve an ability to critically respond to evaluative problems, and to avoid the slippery slope of being the servile representative of social interests. Early pragmatism, especially the variety represented by Dewey, displayed considerable faith in science as a tool for informing the experience and decisions of human beings in their attempts to coordinate means and ends within a shared way of life. Although Weber did not fail to recognize the problem-solving and experimental character of science, he did believe that disenchantment meant that science could not be decisive in helping individuals and communities to improve and critically reformulate their desires, beliefs and goals. Pragmatists had no similar anxiety about science being employed as a directive force in

² Kloppenberg 1994: 75.

³ Weber 1949: 72.

⁴ Rorty 1991a: 23.

the field of social values and choices. This is because they portrayed science as an evolving human tool to help us respond to the stimuli of practical problems. This evolution, at least as Dewey saw it, was coextensive with the rise of a certain kind of moral culture, namely, that of democracy, which fosters the kind of human adaptability, openness and creativity necessary for science to do its job. Far from positing a tension between science and politics, Dewey considered democracy itself as the discovery of the right relationship between intellectual life and politics.⁵

In more recent years Richard Rorty has revived the pragmatist account of disenchantment and he has drawn conclusions about the status of social criticism and responsibility in intellectual life that is more nuanced than that of Dewey.⁶ Much of the advice he wants to give to modern social theorists rests on an account of how the development of our post-metaphysical culture has transformed our thinking about goals like ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’. Once modern thought leaves behind representationalist and realist epistemologies, it can no longer claim the status of an objective, or context-transcending understanding of our world. Echoing the assertions of Nietzsche and James, truths become indistinguishable from useful or adaptively significant meanings and beliefs. Just as Dewey could equate objectivity with well-formed intersubjectivity, Rorty envisages an intellectual culture that would be happy to blur the distinction between truth and imagination. The end result of abandoning epistemological preoccupations, Rorty believes, would be a new and more open acknowledgment that ‘there may be no need to reconcile all one’s beliefs with all one’s other beliefs – no need to attempt to see reality steadily and as a whole’.⁷ Rorty clearly sees this as a kind of ethics of responsibility for scholars and social critics, one that might engender a pattern of more trustworthy and flexible relationship between intellectual striving and our attempts to address social and political problems.

But before we return to the implications of Rorty’s neo-pragmatist framework, we need to reconsider what elements of ‘anti-foundationalism’ can be recovered from Weber’s own reflections on intellectual responsibility and integrity. Of course, we cannot

⁵ Dewey 1927: 166.

⁶ For two accounts that question whether Rorty’s neo-pragmatism can support social criticism while devaluing truth, theory and philosophy see Smith (1999) and Habermas (1998: ch. 8.)

⁷ Rorty 1999: 270.

ignore the fact that Weber's detractors most commonly argue that his narrow delimitation of scientific and intellectual competence leaves us without any critical or moral purchase for defining the responsibilities of theorists and inquirers themselves. What these accounts often forget is that Weber's own attachment to value-freedom in science stemmed from a concrete institutional analysis of the university scholar, and his position on this issue cannot easily be submitted to philosophical controversies about the status of the epistemological authority of the social sciences.

Intellectual Integrity: Beyond Validity

I have already mentioned Weber's seemingly paradoxical account of the relationship of social science to social criticism. In part this paradox stems from his attempt to situate the postulate of value-freedom within the problematic of 'intellectual integrity' (*intellektuellen Rechtschaffenheit*) with its overtones of a morality of professional duty. In his essay on 'value-freedom', intellectual integrity is not primarily associated with the logical requirement to keep facts and values separate but is rather portrayed as an obligation of professional self-restraint. It is introduced to help characterize the institutional need for value-freedom within science seen as a specialized vocation, not to establish the source of validity in social science explanations and theories.⁸ In Weber's eyes, this guarantee of professionalism should take the more explicit form of the subjective self-clarification of value-standpoints and the resistance to expedient politicization in their academic expression. He even goes so far as to say that academics should consider attempts to produce 'theoretical' defenses of policy or normative postulates as intellectually dishonest.⁹ The responsibility of the teacher and the presenter of academic work is to clearly and consciously identify those ultimately subjective values presupposed by any policy, and to distinguish their relevance from that of the validity of factual claims about social phenomena which one may be trying to evaluate or change.

Weber's model of academic professionalism is also clearly linked to his arguments about the importance of maintaining the objectivity of inquiry. Weber

⁸ Weber 1949: 4-5.

⁹ Weber 1949: 45.

explicitly suggests that objectivity in social science depends on making empirical-analytic procedures free of subjective presuppositions about the desirable or undesirable qualities of facts and their actual or possible implications. Having established a conceptual scheme, accounts of social action can be couched in empirical-causal terms and are thereby subject to validity tests that don't themselves depend upon value assumptions of the inquirers.¹⁰ However, even in his purely methodological passages, Weber takes pains to distinguish between the 'construction' and the 'use' of conceptual schemes. It is only with respect to their 'use' that we are justified in specifying conditions of validity that are foundational for objective inquiry.¹¹ The fuller process of theorizing, however, is decidedly *not* free of presuppositions since it involves assumptions about value relevance, assumptions about what makes reality worth knowing. Conceptual schemes have no universal criteria of validity, and discussions about the values that have prompted them cannot transcend value-conflict itself.¹² In the face of this account of value-relevance how can one then argue that the value-conditioned side of inquiry and empirical investigation does not pose insuperable obstacles to 'objectivity' and the value freedom required by it?

To put this another way: Weber's defense of value-freedom seems to fail in its own terms since the 'norms of thought' that he says apply to the activities of scientific researchers do not choose themselves but are, rather, socially constructed. As post-positivist theorists have shown, the value-conditioned nature of our conceptual schemes therefore carry over from the conceptual domain to the discussions of causal empirical validity-claims about the object domain itself.¹³ Perhaps the most radical criticisms of Weber's paradoxical concerns with value-freedom have been advanced by critical theorists who argue that Weber's dichotomy between concept and reality is itself ideological.¹⁴ Certainly it is hard to contest the claim that the strict methodological argument for value freedom is untenable: science cannot thereby be value-free if, as

¹⁰ In this connection see Weber (1949: 84). By the time of his 'Science as a Vocation' speech Weber (1946: 143) regards the issue of the universal validity of empirical-causal analysis in science as the least interesting issue when discussing the larger questions of the meaning of science.

¹¹ Weber 1949: 84.

¹² Weber 1949: 14.

¹³ Some excellent accounts of Weber's ambivalent relationship to post-positivist thought can be found in Hekman (1994: 271-75) and Ciaffa (1998: ch.8).

¹⁴ See, for example, Marcuse (1968: 201-226)

Weber himself otherwise acknowledged, it cannot be context-free. Weber's answer to these problems is to try to press for an awareness of both the special, inexhaustible quality of reality from the standpoint of routine science, as well as to encourage an ability withstand the peculiarly modern irony of distancing oneself from evaluations of reality for the sake of responsibility itself.¹⁵

There is a sense, then, in which Weber's nominalism, and his concomitant rejection of a 'realist' epistemology, is marked by a kind of ambivalence that he does not try to resolve. We carve up reality as members of a particular community, or as individuals adhering to certain values and holding prospective decisions in mind. Our discussions of facts are therefore going to be more or less successful and satisfactory depending upon factors like our membership in a given community or the commitments that are entailed by the values we hold or simply by their 'interesting' quality.¹⁶ Success and validity are therefore two different, and equally legitimate, aims of science. By the same token, however, this means that the rationality of science is strictly limited in the claims it can make about how our social beliefs should be changed or how our social reality might be interpreted. And yet, anyone who reads Weber knows that he does not want the commitment to value freedom itself to undermine the reasons intellectuals might have to make their work relevant to the concerns of politics and social criticism.

The 'Critical Thinking' Model and its Limits

Despite his account of the limits of rationality Weber does not think that irrelevance is the price that must be paid for the distinction between value relevance and value freedom, or for the distinction between social science and partisanship. One way of giving Weber's views more resonance within today's intellectual context, in the wake of both post-empiricist philosophies of science and postmodern affirmations of heterogeneity and incommensurability, is to distil from his methodological writings an ethics of critical thinking. At first sight we are given ample material by Weber to attempt this reconstruction of the meaning and function of intellectual integrity. Value-freedom, on this view, is a pedagogical matter, an injunction for the academic teacher to stimulate his or her students to push their examination of policy alternatives and moral

¹⁵ Weber 1949: 111-12; 1946: 152.

¹⁶ Weber 1949: 81-82, 90-93.

commitments toward relentless self-clarification, highlighting the competing ultimate evaluative standpoints which they entail.¹⁷ The critical thinking model teaches students how to confront what Weber called the ‘necessity of choice’.¹⁸ Students would be taught, as Weber urged, to try out different and competing political arguments and show how their own ultimate assumptions and those of others can be genuinely confronted only to the extent that they become willing to deal consciously with personally inconvenient facts. In the end what would be taught in the classroom would be neither facts nor values but rather a kind of second-order willingness, and even the personal ability, to question our attachment to our value-assumptions. The job of teaching science is to test how, and whether, choices that depend upon commitments to values can be clarified by our first-order interest in the facts and the implications of competing values.¹⁹

The critical thinking model outlines a potentially more fruitful view of the meaning and purpose of value-freedom since it plays down distinctions mandated by criteria of method in favor of the exploration of the possible moral and critical uses of social science. The focus on critical thinking – and its technique of self-restraint and experimentalism - would seem to partially mitigate the paradox of value-free social science, since it encourages a reflective connection between our value-conditioned interests and effective inquiry.²⁰ Indeed, for Weber, social science is highly dependent on feedback from value discussions, and is also premised on the ability of the practitioner to use his or her capacity for evaluation as a prerequisite – although not the goal - of adequate concept construction. And yet Weber believes that the critical thinker’s recognition of competing values provides no moral solace, and cannot be used to rationally defend ethical educational mandates: one either believes or one doesn’t, and the different value standpoints are rationally irreconcilable. So, on the one hand, we can

¹⁷ Hennis (1993) argues strenuously that Weber’s connection between value-freedom and intellectual integrity can only be understood properly from within a pedagogical project. Weaver (1998) makes the argument that Weber’s approach can be used to show the merits of a critical thinking approach over the alternative models of civic education and service learning in political science.

¹⁸ Weber 1946: 151.

¹⁹ Weber 1949: 53; Weber 1946:152

²⁰ Schluchter 1979: 109.

follow Weber's suggestion that the critical thinking model makes science morally useful. On the other hand, however, we need to heed his warnings about the limits of reason. Weber's framework provides little sanction to reconstitute a model of 'practical reason.' Indeed, his model of intellectual integrity does not promise freedom from non-rational authority, nor does it anticipate the moral ideal of giving each value-standpoint its due.

The Boundaries of Scientific Authority

As Alan Scott points out, Weber sees science in the light of its claims to authority. But the kind of 'authority' that science can acquire by becoming a platform for critical thinking, reflects its limited competence in the sphere of moral or political authority. This the case even when scientific clarification strives for a certain kind of pragmatic usefulness – or 'relevance' – for policy and moral decisions. If one is looking to rescue the theme of value-freedom from inconsistency or paradox, it is necessary to follow Weber's less widely noticed, more implicit account of the institutional dilemmas of science. As both Wolfgang Schluchter and Scott have shown, Weber views the requirements of intellectual integrity in terms of the need for the scholar to take an independent stance toward values. Schluchter points out the interesting way in which Weber distinguishes the roles of civil servant and university scholar. The sphere of competence (and therefore authority) of each is grounded in a form of value freedom. But only the scholar's value freedom rests upon independence from politics, and cannot therefore be defined in terms of expert advice and execution. Impartiality toward value commitments is the very functional basis of the professional authority and duties of the civil servant; it is not based on any value assumptions about the role of the profession. Consequently, any competition or overlap between bureaucratic and political authority can rest upon a distinction between the functions of execution and decision.²¹ Schluchter notes that the politician does not have a function that can be defined as 'service': it is also a platform for subjective freedom and personal responsibility.²² Although Weber was preoccupied with the either/or question of who would expropriate politics – leaders or

²¹ Schluchter 1979: 101. See also Weber (1978: 1403-1404, 1419-1423)

²² One could argue that the organization of politics in terms of party discipline and other similar mechanisms reduce personal responsibility in politics. Weber's answer to this, of course, is that this element of politics is not eliminated, but rather rarefied in the form of leadership.

bureaucrats – the problems of political ethics do not go beyond defining the relationship between the two functions. For scientists and professional scholars, however, the ethical problem of defining both function and responsibility is different (from the case of either administration or politics) because boundary definitions are much harder to make in the light of the unavoidable and pressures of the marketplace, service and partisan expectations, and so on. The very fact that modern science itself leaves the world ‘bereft of objective meaning’ only makes the complexity greater. If science performs a ‘service’, it is laden with irony: its goal of designing new and better questions – where the only authority is the process of questioning itself – always supplants the extra-scientific demands it will forever be expected to serve.

Various clients and competing authorities become tempted to think that the function of science could be exhausted by the aims of calculability or by the use of scientific findings in lending validity to political claims. In the end, Schluchter concludes, ‘[a]dministration can exist for politics only if it lives from it, but science must remain independent from politics in order to be able to live for it.’²³ One then faces the familiar Socratic dilemma: because very few participants in the non-scientific spheres will be fully contented with defining truth as a process of inquiry undertaken for its own sake, scientists must have political strategies and bulwarks for dealing with dissonant feedback²⁴ What becomes decisive, according to Schluchter’s institutional analysis, is that the professional scholar must establish a ‘cultural claim’ for his or her ‘free’ relationship towards politics. An important passage in Weber’s ‘*Wertfreiheit*’ essay is suggestive here in its warnings about the dangers of failing to achieve this ‘independence toward’, a failure that, among other things, might tempt social scientists to translate their value-free professionalism into an institutionally complacent approach to evaluative standpoints.

What we must vigorously oppose is the view that one must be “scientifically contented” with the conventional self-evidentness of very widely accepted value-judgments. The specific function of science, it seems to me, is just the opposite: namely, to ask questions about these things which convention makes self-evident.

²³ Schluchter 1979: 108.

²⁴ Scott 1997: 52-53; Schluchter 1979: 106-108.

It is the job of social science to teach us about collisions among ultimate values and fateful choices to be made among those values. Beyond this, Weber asserts that the appropriate place of value judgments in teaching is itself scientifically indemonstrable.²⁵

Now it cannot easily be argued that this is simply a void that Weber refuses to fill. Nevertheless, his view itself lays him open to charges of hypocrisy, for if one ‘chooses’ value-freedom then intellectual integrity itself presupposes an evaluation of social reality, that is, it appears to privilege the ‘ultimate’ character of the sphere of non-arbitrable subjective decision in moral and political life.²⁶ Hence, if we are to establish other sources of coherence to Weber’s ‘methodological writings’ we must assess him as a polemicist concerned with a crisis of institutional competence, authority and jurisdiction within a specific academic system that – in his time - had become the stage upon which larger crises of culture and politics were being played out. Indeed, he is quite frank that his apprehension over scientific contentment was part of a very concrete polemical struggle that featured multiple temptations owing to a greater specialization and commodification of knowledge, the use of value freedom as a mere political expedient and the demands that knowledge express cultural outlooks.

The Ironies of Academic Freedom

In the last section of this paper, I want to explore the possibility of identifying those elements of Weber’s point of view that prefigure Richard Rorty’s approach to intellectual autonomy. Rorty has declared: ‘if we stop trying to give epistemological justifications for academic freedom, and instead give socio-political justifications, we shall be both more honest and clear-headed’.²⁷ At the very least, the reconstruction of Weber’s implicit ‘political sociology’ of scientific autonomy would allow us to explain the relevance of his accounts of intellectual integrity without the help of his epistemological formulations. Scott, in fact, takes the division between Weber’s ‘methodological’ and ‘pragmatic’ projects a step further by proposing that we may be able to assume an ironical intention behind Weber’s own handling of the issue of value freedom:

²⁵ Weber 1946: 1.

²⁶ See Breiner (1996).

²⁷ Rorty 1994: 55

These arguments [about Weber's failed philosophy of social science] imply that even if strict value freedom is impossible there are nevertheless both strategic and 'ethical' grounds for us to act as if something like it were possible...[I]t is Weber's view that we are duty-bound to act as if value freedom were possible even if this may amount to no more than a mixture of self-restraint and dissemblance.²⁸

On this reading, one of Weber's central concerns in defending value-freedom was to ensure that universities will not 'cut their own throats' in preserving the academic freedom of scholars.²⁹ This urge to describe the pragmatics of scientific reason in terms of moral dangers helps explain why so many of Weber's methodological reflections are prefaced by accounts of battles against the corruption of the academic institution. Nevertheless, it may be asked: why, in his excursions into the question of academic freedom (in the German University system), did Weber so strongly favor self-restraint over expressiveness? By today's standards, it seems odd that a concern to preserve the academic freedom of professors should be used to bolster the case of value freedom, and it is perhaps odder still that the argument should include the bolder claim that value-freedom was important precisely because the entry of themes and problems into science is necessarily and unavoidably conditioned by extra-scientific interests.³⁰ To understand this argument we need to pay special attention to two of the related themes that Weber uses to develop it.

The first theme concerns the changing cultural and political context of the university itself. On several occasions Weber places a leading emphasis on the differences between the German and American university systems. He observes that the German system is characterized by closer supervision by the state and the predominance of a program of civil service education, both of which are largely due to the university's status as a creature of the state. By contrast, the American system features a more decentralized model, with less extra-institutional administrative authority and obligations. He also notes the predominance of market-like relationships between students and

²⁸ Scott 1997: 48.

²⁹ Weber 1973: 22.

³⁰ For a qualified, but passionate, version of 'expressive' intellectual and academic freedom one can consult Said (1994).

academic professionals on the one hand, and between the (mostly) independently founded institutions on the other. Although Weber finds the greater institutional autonomy of the American system ‘envious’, he also believes that the context of American society reduces the pedagogical situation to something akin to a retail transaction, partly because its universities more patently resemble knowledge factories. Moreover, the culture of American democracy, characterized by a lack of respect for officialdom, destabilizes the university’s ability to function as an ethical proving ground.³¹ Ironically, however, this tendency to commodify professional service has the advantage, Weber hints, of demystifying the leadership and prophetic pretensions that, he believes, too many Germans assign to the professorial role. The American system is premised on the belief that what is primary in the academic situation is a technical certification process in which the play of market forces, the requirements of bureaucratic organization and rewards for student acclamation combine to determine the social and ethical requirements of service. In a sense, then, competitive meritocratic selection, and subsequent tenure, is expected to deliver academic freedom, and there is no supervening status given to scholars as special bearers of culture. Although he speaks of increasing ‘Americanization’, Weber insists that an aristocratic ethos and a sense of a more socially distinctive and protected ‘calling’ is more entrenched within the German system, making the process of rationalization more complicated and fraught with tension. His general belief was that, in an age of an increasingly specialized division of labour, the challenge was to promote and sustain ‘cultural consensus’ for a type of vocation that was being organized in terms of external cooptation, functional authority and ministerial control and loyalty.³²

This cultural comparison – one of Weber’s favorites – is offered as a prelude for addressing a second, and more decisive issue: for it is not yet clear why this need to sustain cultural authority requires expressive restraint. Weber sees academics themselves as occupying a unique position with respect to the relationship between the economic, political and cultural sphere. What this means for social science specifically is that it must have the ability to maintain itself as *merely* value-relevant, which means avoiding the slide into advocacy, democratic accountability, or mere instrumental application. In

³¹ Weber 1973: 24-25; Weber 1946: 150-51.

³² Weber 1973: 28-29.

Scott's terms, this would inform the scholar's strategy for creating ethical meaning. In particular, this is a strategy that requires the *right kind* of autonomy from external powers.³³ What jeopardizes the relative autonomy of the university is the increasing predominance of those who pursue academic careers without a claim for the profession's cultural distinctiveness (that is, those who perform their duties as either as pure specialists, producers of marketable ideas or instructors in 'ultimate values').

Scholars, Weber seemed to imply, must take care in managing the exchanges that necessarily regulate the relationship between the academic sphere and the other spheres. To use an analogy, the university would be in the position of a country that is heavily dependent on external trade and must pay for its development of strategic resources by exporting social theories and academic certificates. In a sense, the modern social and political context not only makes 'external trade' unavoidable, but also threatens to make the university a 'price-taker', thereby also threatening its competitive advantage. If academics fail to guard against 'scientific contentment', if they fail to remain value-free in their privileged and protected environment, they run the risk of either instrumentalizing their relationship to value questions or they make it too easy to sell theories to political constituencies, thereby ruining their cultural distinctiveness. In either case, the end result would be a breakdown of any 'cultural consensus' about higher education as the flow of diverse contracts rush in.³⁴

It is interesting that Weber concedes that one cannot question the legitimacy, on formal or logical grounds, of attempts to organize academic freedom in terms of expressiveness in the teaching of values. Adopting the expressivist model would entail

³³ In order to explain Weber's discontent with direct social accountability Scott (1997: 57) has observed that Weber regards the university professor as a member of a politically endangered status group which can only protect the unique strategic advantages it has - and therefore its autonomy - by exercising reserve in the claims it makes about its usefulness to non-academic life. Scott's argument can be compared to Pierre Bourdieu's claim that the academic role has come to be defined in terms of Aascetic aristocratism. @ Bourdieu (1988: 223) suggests that the academic determines the ethical meaning of his or her role in response to his or her middle status position between the non-academic professionals, whose work is instrumentalized by the state and the market, and the intellectual and artistic non-professionals.

³⁴ Weber 1973: 22; Weber 1949a: 8

that academic freedom itself would have to be identified with political rights; in other words, it would have to be defined in terms of guarantees of equitable representation of social interests, perspectives and groups. This is tantamount to asserting that the university should function as a competitive arena for those seeking an opportunity to justify alternative social demands.³⁵ Weber himself suggested that the translation of academic freedom into a system of representative or constituency rights would be consistent as a form of academic freedom only if all relevant social interests were able to receive publicly sponsored support to organize institutes and seek markets and constituencies for their value standpoints. Consistency here, according to Weber, would come at the price of our ethical responsibility to recognize the relationship between principles and their consequences. Value free meritocracy may have no more warrant than the competing principle, but it is an arrangement that would stand the best chance of making universities accountable for their confrontation with the forces of the market or the prevailing partisan interests of the state, each of which involves direct or indirect powers of censorship or exclusion.³⁶

As with so many of Weber's analyses of politics and history, integrity and responsibility demand awareness of the possible, and perhaps inevitable, conflicts between the formal and the substantive. Avoiding the politicization of science or the corruption of the formal purity of scientific standards does not have *independent* importance for Weber, nor does it yield a principle of intellectual responsibility that stems from the intrinsic nature of science itself. Rather, what is crucial is that the rights and freedoms attached to the academic role be defined in a way that professors themselves will not want to be externally coopted and will accept self restraint as an inward demand and as a response to the disenchantment of the world that science itself has brought about. Weber's messages are full of political irony here: he is concerned with responsibility toward the future, that is, he wants the great debates about value questions in science to produce individuals who will *care about* safeguarding the moral resources of the academic profession against inflationary social and political expenditures. Neither

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³⁶ This, in any case, is my reading of Weber's claim (Weber 1949a: 8 note) that '(i)n almost every country there exist, openly or hidden, actual restraints. The only differences are in the particular evaluative positions which are thereby excluded.'

academic freedom nor ‘relevant’ inquiry can be governed by principles alone. Rather, everything depends upon those forces of selection that will result from the adoption of principles. Theories of knowledge can and must offer principles about how science and its addressees should think about the relationship between inquiry and the world, but in themselves they offer little in the way of safeguards against scientific complacency, external cooptation or the appearance of uncritical attitudes.³⁷

Re-thinking the Competence of the ‘Knowers’: From Weber to Rorty

So far I have concentrated on the proposition that Weber advocated restraints on value-expressiveness as a cultural and political strategy, rather than merely as an easily discredited epistemological precondition of intellectual responsibility. Whether this strategy itself makes available promising resources for social criticism and moral reflection is an important and difficult question. Certainly we can say that Weber’s political self-understanding of social science prefigured some of the more ‘reflexive’ themes characteristic of post-empiricist, postmodern and neo-pragmatist thought. He saw ‘method’ as a presupposition of scientific practice and communication but not as a presupposition for access to an observer-independent world.³⁸ The value of ‘theories’ is therefore identified with their success in processing facts and observations in the medium of cultural interpretation which itself cannot be free of presuppositions. This caused him to make the following remark:

[W]hether we are dealing simply with a conceptual game or with a scientifically fruitful method of conceptualization and *theory*-construction can never be decided *a priori*. Here, too, there is only one criterion, namely, that of success in revealing concrete cultural phenomena in their interdependence, their causal connections and their *significance*.

The use of the term ‘success’ here lends a pragmatist bent to at least part of Weber’s concerns about the value of science. In other respects, pragmatism may look like a bad fit with Weber’s thought and scientific practice, since, as an intellectual framework, it asserts that truths (or successful theories) are akin to what Rorty calls ‘networks’ of beliefs that are functional for a given context of practical life; that is, they are either

³⁷ Scott 1995: 51-52; 57-58.

³⁸ Weber 1946: 143.

reflections of - or ways of improving - a given state of society's desires and aversions.³⁹ By contrast, because Weber had the perception that the conflict of ideals has a certain tragic quality, he also assumed that the very value of thought is necessarily compromised when it is measured by its capacity to produce socially useful narratives and symbols.⁴⁰

What Weber does share with pragmatism is a specific understanding of how social science must function as moral inquiry: its goal is not to supply more objective standards for moral argument and social criticism, but rather to recast the terms of moral argument by offering new ways of thinking about and interpreting the problems of one's culture. Rorty often prefaces his 'neo-pragmatist' stance with the suggestion that too many of today's intellectual practices and self-understandings are the result of preoccupations with the question of whether foundations can be supplied which allow 'theories' to serve as justifications of belief and action. In particular, he regrets the fact that philosophers and theorists of knowledge are mired in debates about rationality and relativism. On Rorty's view, philosophers and social theorists need to internalize what literary and journalistic intellectuals have taken for granted, namely, that truths are best seen as 'means of happiness'. As such, they don't tell us about some reality 'out there' but, rather, they tell us about what strategies for creating meaning and motivating action have worked for us or are likely to work for us.⁴¹ Seeing things in this way implies that the relevant and interesting questions have to do with how those strategies have functioned in one's society, how they have competed for supremacy or survival and whether one can or should invent better, alternative strategies.

From this point of view, intellectual integrity should not be seen as a compensation for the loss of ultimate truths, but as a contingent social tool of a specific kind of culture. Pragmatism teaches us to see that socially responsible inquiry and intellectually responsible engagements with cultural and political problems does not depend on the prior ability to make knowledge objective or to find the 'right' theoretical

³⁹ Rorty

⁴⁰ For more extended discussions of the comparison between Weber and pragmatism see Diggins (1996: 29-30, 151-153) and Wellen (1996: chs. 6 and 7). See Kloppenberg (1994) who identifies a strong concordance between Rorty and Weber (as anti-foundationalists), but in a harshly critical way and as a prelude for aligning himself with Dewey's and Habermas' greater faith in rational and philosophic foundations for democracy.

⁴¹ Rorty 1991: 74.

context. In a ‘post-philosophical’ culture there would be no despair about the failure to find predetermined standards according to which we might judge the adequacy of the relationship between a theory and the world. Rather than leading to fears of relativism this development might encourage us to see the problems of knowledge in terms of the task of learning how to identify better and worse discussions. Rorty portrays theory in a way that affirms the ‘contingency’ of our criteria for intellectual responsibility: namely, that ‘theories are like tools: you only reach for them when there is a specific problem to be solved’.⁴² We would then be able to see not only that strict epistemological criteria are not decisive, but also that accounts of the limits of scientific rationality and of the ‘disenchantment of the world’ are not themselves threats to meaning or scientific progress.

To reinforce this point Rorty offers an argument that is at once brilliantly disarming but also infuriating to philosophers of social science or theorists of social criticism who believe that the very legitimacy of the academic profession, its capacity to justify its social mandate, depends upon the stance one takes on the relation between facts and values in social inquiry. In answer to the concerns around whether the academic profession can do without objectivity as a justification for academic freedom and intellectual integrity, Rorty writes:

The experience that we professors have had with decisions about curriculum and appointments should persuade us that the distinction between academic politics and the disinterested pursuit of truth is pretty fuzzy. But that fuzziness does not, and should not, make us treasure free and independent universities any the less. Neither philosophers nor anyone else can offer us nice sharp distinctions between appropriate social utility and inappropriate politicization. But we have accumulated a lot of experience about how to keep redrawing this line, how to adjust it to meet the needs of each new generation... As long as we ...manage to keep the traditions of civility alive within the academy ...”traditional standards of objectivity, truth and rationality” will take care of themselves.⁴³

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Rorty 1996: 75.

⁴³ Rorty 1998: 70-71.

It is well known that Rorty wants intellectuals to become comfortable with the idea that truth itself might come to be replaced by other criteria like responsible subjective self-clarification, acknowledgements of the historical contingency of thought, and, ultimately, the authenticity of belief and commitment.⁴⁴ In many respects, this seems to return us to the option of ‘critical thinking’. However, he is alert to the problems with this model, namely, that mere awareness of competing ideas, or the aim of making commitment more reflective, skirts the question of what we are capable of as ‘knowers’. To the chagrin of his critics, he is also aware that he has not helped us become better at making the distinction between influential ideas and those that are true or objective, a distinction upon which the cultural authority - as well as many of the practices - of the university itself seems rests.⁴⁵

According to Rorty’s suggestion above, the question of the value of science and professional inquiry will be decided by informal and socially concrete tests that lie beyond those which are usually used to justify the competence of social inquiry. He does not think we need to revisit attempts, like Weber’s, to shore up the authority of science in the wake of controversies around its competence. He believes it is important to find a new basis for the trustworthiness of scholarly and educational achievements even if we cannot distinguish the merely influential from what is true or objective. Rorty’s response to this challenge is rather unique in that he recommends that we should replace theory itself with engagement, or at least a specialized style of engagement. He observes that, implicitly at least, contemporary culture has become accustomed to the way in which theoretical debate has always turned out to be a way of creating new terms in which to view the practical-political problems of the day. The mid-century American intellectuals he admires were able to instinctively adapt to this view without philosophical anxiety. They could then see the progress and reliability of knowledge as the result of a process whereby influential citizens learned how to ask new and more relevant and interesting questions about the state of their society, rather than as a process of making discoveries about the ultimate nature of the world. Rorty argues that freedom from theory leads to affirmations

⁴⁴ Rorty 1991b: 33.

⁴⁵ A similar argument is made by Charles W. Anderson (1993) in a work that otherwise contains some serious misunderstandings of Rorty’s approach to the problem of authority in the sphere of academic knowledge and inquiry.

of social narratives, which, in turn, make it easier to form diverse kinds of attachments to the goals of social criticism. The efforts of utilitarian agents (like unions) and the creators of symbolic capital (intellectuals) can therefore be attuned to one another.⁴⁶

Rorty believes that this concrete, cultural legacy of American pragmatism has been threatened by recent attempts to characterize all knowledge as infused with power, a strategy that, he says, has been adopted by today's 'cultural left'. In particular, it has taken the form of a new theory-laden attitude toward academic engagement that has become widespread among recent generations of scholars who have been schooled in the recognition of the relativity of knowledge to practical interests and the socially constructed character of reality. In one sense, Rorty believes that these developments have produced some extremely worthy results. They have imparted new critical energies to contemporary politics, much of which come from the drama of undermining previously settled languages and symbols. However, he warns that moral and political achievements cannot be codified – as he fears too many 'theorists' want to do – by assuming that the linguistic drama itself is the most serious precondition of those achievements.⁴⁷

Academics are good at testing out how words like 'justice' and 'alleviation of suffering' function, and might function differently, but politics is about what we should do as a result of our attachment to those words. The theorist's job is to press for 'a higher level of abstraction' but not to promote or guarantee access to the 'one general common reality' that lies behind our concrete achievements.⁴⁸

It is clear that, like Weber, Rorty is a virulent opponent of prophesizing theory with its urge to interpret the world and its struggles in terms of neat distinctions between power and justice, persuasion and truth or principles and success. The difference between the two thinkers lies in the fact that Rorty believes that 'our' culture has become more relaxed – whether by necessity or choice - about recognizing the historical contingency of thought. In such a culture all theorizing is merely contextualist reasoning about the advantages and disadvantages of the contingencies we have inherited or are trying to resist. Rorty is aware of the dangers of generalizing from an experience that is rooted in American liberal democracy, but he thinks it is inevitable once we accept that the culture

⁴⁶ Rorty 1998: 49-55.

⁴⁷ Rorty 1989: 94.

⁴⁸ Rorty 1996: 71.

cannot be expected to understand itself in terms of the theoretical-philosophical presuppositions that motivated its development. All of this presupposes a culture in which controversial beliefs about human nature and ultimate values can be safely relegated to the private sphere, while public neutrality toward these controversies still leaves room for valuable attempts at understanding difference, fighting oppression and imagining alternative moral ‘vocabularies’ for achieving these goals.⁴⁹ In these circumstances, intellectual integrity might mean avoiding unnecessary and misplaced profundity however much it is rewarded by the academic system.

Whatever one might think of pragmatism’s recognition of the dignity of liberal democratic reformism, it requires that intellectuals – especially professional academics – should realize that their models of relevance, social criticism and independent thought will have to be judged by local and concrete achievements. Pragmatism is a philosophy that is produced and sustained by liberal democracy, but it only promises contingent suggestions on what liberal democracy should be about. Thinkers like Weber, by contrast, did not share pragmatism’s worries about the inflation of profundity. Indeed, Weber’s approach can only be understood as a reflection of a context that could not arouse confidence in the moral openness of society.

There will always be a certain dissonance between the motivational and organizational needs of the sphere of moral and political achievement and those which are at play in the discussions scholars have about how to construct the ‘right’ question. In this respect, there is a great deal of suggestiveness in Rorty’s effort to balance a Weberian-like aspiration for the inner integrity in academic life with the external flexibility needed to confront contemporary conditions. In particular, it helps us draw upon the potential of the moral openness of modern society in a way that might provide a useful, politically mature model of the relationship between intellectual *and* public responsibility.

⁴⁹ Rorty 1991: 182-183.

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