

Values on Paper, in the Head, and in Action: On Max Weber and Value Freedom Today

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Abstract

This article starts out with a summary of Weber's views on value freedom, by emphasizing: (1) that value freedom constitutes a special constellation of values; and (2) that value freedom makes it possible for the social scientist to theorize on the basis of new and more extensive knowledge than if she had simply stated her own values and focused the analysis around these. The latter point emerges most clearly in Weber's instructions for how a social scientist should proceed when carrying out an analysis of her own preferred social policy. After the section on Weber's views on value freedom, an attempt is made to update his views. This is done by arguing that the impact of values (and value freedom) differs, depending on where these can be found: on paper, in the head of the social scientist, or in her actions. "Actions," in the context of value freedom, refer to the research process and especially to the element of theorizing. Value freedom helps to guide the research into new and fruitful directions and to steer it clear of propaganda.

Résumé

Cet article commence avec un résumé des idées de Weber sur la neutralisation des valeurs, en mettant l'emphase sur les idées suivantes: (1) la neutralisation des valeurs constitue une constellation spéciale de

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valeurs ; et (2) la neutralisation des valeurs rend possible pour la spécialiste des sciences sociales de 'théoriser' en fonction d'un savoir nouveau et plus large que si elle avait simplement établie ses propres valeurs et orientée l'analyse en fonction d'elles. La deuxième idée émerge plus clairement dans les instructions données par Weber concernant la manière dont la spécialiste des sciences sociales devrait procéder lorsqu'elle fait une analyse de ses politiques sociales préférées. Après une section présentant les idées de Weber sur la neutralisation des valeurs, une tentative est faite afin de les mettre à jour. Cela est fait grâce à l'argument voulant que l'impact des valeurs (et la neutralisation des valeurs) diffèrent, dépendamment d'où on les retrouve : sur papier, dans la tête du chercheur ou dans ses actions. Dans le contexte de la neutralisation des valeurs, les 'actions' réfèrent au processus de recherche et plus spécifiquement à la dimension de la théorisation. La neutralisation des valeurs nous aide à orienter la recherche selon des directions nouvelles et fructueuses et de la garder libre de propagande.

THE TERM "VALUE FREEDOM," AS USED by Max Weber and many other social scientists, is an unhappy choice since the literal meaning of this term contradicts its basic message.¹ What is meant by value freedom (*Wertfreiheit*) is not that the analysis should be free from values, but the very opposite. In order to do science, you have to affirm and seek to realize certain values (e.g., Weber 2012:344–47; see also, e.g., Merton 1979, 1982). According to Weber, in brief, science can only be carried out on condition that the scientist takes the stance of value freedom.²

While Weber laid the foundation for the modern view of value freedom, this view needs to be updated and possibly expanded. One way to move forward, it will be argued in this article, is to focus on the concept of values—what they are and what role they play in human action. The argument that will be made is as follows. The impact of values differs, depending on their context. More precisely, they differ depending on whether they can be found on paper, in the head of actors, or in their actions.

Taking this stance also means that the concept of value freedom will look somewhat different, depending on where these specific values can be found. Before outlining this argument in more detail, an account of Weber's view of value freedom will be given. The main reason for this is that his views are often misunderstood. One example of this, to repeat, is the idea that value freedom represents a set of distinct values, as opposed to no values at all. To this should be added that these values also allow the social scientist to deepen the analysis and to theorize better. The reason for this is that value freedom allows the social scientist to continue to analyze,

¹ We thank Ola Agevall for helpful information on Weber.

² While "value freedom" appears to be the most common translation of *Wertfreiheit* in English-speaking Weberian studies (Parsons, Bruun, Runciman), one can also find terms such as "ethical neutrality" (Shils) and "value-neutrality" (Roth and Schluchter; for references, see Swedberg and Agevall 2016:365).

and now with new facts, instead of just stating her preferences. Weber's ideas on means and ends are especially helpful in this, as we will show later.

WEBER ON VALUE FREEDOM

Weber's view on value freedom is mainly to be found in the following three essays: "The 'Objectivity' of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy" (1904), "The Meaning of 'Value Freedom' in the Sociological and Economic Sciences" (1913, rev. 1917), and "Science as a Vocation" (1919; see Weber 2012:100–138, 304–34, 335–53). Weber's preferred term for "values" in his discussion of value freedom is not the customary *Werte* but *Wertung*, usually translated as "valuation."³ Here, as so often in his social science writings, Weber used a term with associations to action and process rather than to what is stationary and stable. In his comments on what he meant by *Wertung*, Weber repeatedly stated that he was mainly interested in the *practical* process of valuation (e.g., Weber 2012:304, 310).

Weber's recommendations for how to realize value freedom, and what it entails, can be summarized as follows. First of all, a professor should repress his personal values when lecturing. To lecture is a task that should be carried out in an objective and sober way. If this was not done, the analysis would suffer.

Furthermore, value freedom does not mean that values are excluded from the analysis. There are three reasons for this. First of all, science itself is based on a constellation of values, especially the idea that some things are worth knowing and that you should try to get as close as possible to the truth. Clarity is another value in science; and also that the rules of logic and methods should be followed (e.g., Weber 2012:344–47, 352; for a similar standpoint, see "the ethos of science" in Merton 1979, 1982). Second, in studying people, the social scientist must also take people's values into account (e.g., Weber 2012:310). And third, the topic that the social scientist chooses to study depends on the major values of the time. Weber's term for the latter phenomenon was "value relation" or "value-relevance" (*Wertbeziehung*; e.g., Weber 2012:138, 317).

What is usually not mentioned is that Weber also argues that value freedom enables the social scientist to *probe deeper and to make a more sophisticated analysis* than if she includes an advocacy of her own values. This thesis is not only valid in general, Weber says, but also under certain conditions *when the study focuses on the personal values of the social scientist*. The example that Weber uses to show this latter point is that of

³ When Weber uses the term values (*Werte*) in his writings on value freedom, he does so roughly in the meaning of phenomena to which the actor may orient her action and that are worthy of approval or are desirable (Weber 2012:304, 310). The social scientist should produce "empirical knowledge" and not "value judgments" (*Werturteile*; e.g., Weber 2012:108).

social policy (Weber 2012:102–106, 312–16). He also makes clear that this argument extends to other values that are held by the social scientist (e.g., Weber 2012:350).

In Weber's view, the social scientist must not advocate his own preferred version of social policy in his lectures or writings in social science. This will not only constitute a transgression of value freedom; it will also block the analysis. Weber was very firm on this last point: "I am willing to demonstrate [with the writings of German historians as my evidence], that whenever the man of science introduces his own value judgments, complete understanding of the facts *ceases*" (Weber 2012:347).

What the social scientist who is interested in some special social policy, however, can and should do, is instead the following. She should carefully investigate the chances for the conditions under which the policy can be realized. She should also do the same for the social policies advocated by her opponents. In both cases, the side effects of the different social policies should be explored as well.

In carrying out this type of analysis, Weber says, it is very helpful to use the categories of *means* and *ends*. These allow the social scientist to distinguish two elements that should be treated differently: the values involved (the ends) and how to attain or realize these values (the means). The following quote, which may well be the most important statement on value freedom in Weber's work, shows how proceeding in his way allows the social scientist to not only understand under what conditions her values can be realized, but also to adjust these to a certain extent:

We can in this manner estimate the chances of achieving a certain end with certain means at our disposal; and consequently we can, against the background of any given historical situation, indirectly make a critical evaluation of the choice of the goal itself as being practically meaningful, or as being meaningless under the given circumstances. (Weber 2012:102)

Weber's term for this type of critique is "*technical critique*"; and it differs from what we may call "value critique" in that it is based on an analysis of the chances to realize a certain policy with the help of certain means (Weber 2012:102, 311).

According to Weber, the type of questions that the researcher will want to consider and try to answer when she deals with issues of social policy, include the following. What are the means available to realize the social policy I support? What are the chances that these will be used? If this particular policy was carried out, and its ends realized, what would their costs or side effects (*Nebenerfolge*) be? And how would these side effects affect the original project of realizing a certain policy, based on specific values? Similarly, which means are available if an effort was made to realize other social policies, such as those of one's political enemies?

By drawing on social science to try to answer questions of this type, Weber argues, the social scientist will end up with a more nuanced knowledge of the empirical situation than she would have had, if she had simply stated what kind of policy she wanted and why. In the process of doing so, the social scientist will also have acquired a more thorough knowledge of her own values, by having to confront the issue of what means can be used and what their side effects or costs would be. The same goes for the knowledge of the social policies advocated by her political opponents. In Weber's famous summary formulation: "An empirical science cannot tell the social scientist what he *ought to do*, but only what he *can do* and—possibly—what he *wants to do*" ("The 'Objectivity' of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy"; Weber 2012:103).⁴

To reiterate the point just made, by working in a value free fashion of this type the social scientist will acquire a better knowledge of the situation she is interested in furthering. She will also learn more about the values she herself espouses by having to look at these from new angles. In addition, she will be stimulated to seek out new empirical problems and try to theorize these in her research. Weber describes the push toward new knowledge in the following way:

However, the *usefulness* of a discussion of practical valuations, at the right time and in the correct sense, is by no means restricted to such direct "results" that it may produce [of means to be used and insight about the values involved]. If it is conducted correctly, it may moreover provide a strong and lasting stimulus for empirical research by providing it with the *problems* for investigation. (Weber 2012:317)

Value freedom, in brief, may also be of help in discovering new problems of importance to research and to theorize. In the previous quote Weber is speaking about social policy but as earlier noted, this type of action represents just a special case of a general principle. Values are typically part of all social science analyses, and the advantages with carrying out research in a value free fashion is therefore also of a general nature.

It deserves to be added that Weber uses the idea that any human action can be split into goals and means as a very effective research tool in his own work. It plays a key role in *The Protestant Ethic*, which can be described as a study of how to realize religious values with different means, and the historical side effects that these attempts have. It is also present in the famous typology of social action in *Economy and Society*, more precisely in the terms value-rational action (*wertrational*) and instrumentally rational action (*zweckrational*).

⁴ In this quote Weber's "someone" has been replaced by "the social scientist."

Table 1

Robert K. Merton's Summary of the Doctrine of Value Freedom

- # 1. The values of scientists affect their selection and formulation of problems.
 - # 2. Differently formulated problems have differing potentials of utility for differing sectors of the society.
 - # 3. Moral choices are thus involved in the selection and formulation of problems.
 - # 4. Science itself, as a social institution, has its own set of values and norms.
 - # 5. That normative framework (e.g., the norm of organized skepticism) makes for objectivity in science.
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Source: Merton (1982:67).

THE NEED TO UPDATE THE DOCTRINE OF VALUE FREEDOM

In his writings on value freedom Weber was very careful to make clear that different historical situations need to be handled differently since they raise different problems. His own views on value freedom, for example, were deeply influenced by the fact that many members of the Historical School often advocated their own preferred version of social policy in their lectures and also in their writings (e.g., Käsler 1988:96; Nau 1996).

But it is also clear that today's situation differs in a number of important respects from the one that Weber was concerned with, and this means that his ideas on value freedom need to be added to and updated. Reflecting on Weber's doctrine of value freedom about a century after it was formulated, Robert K. Merton has, for example, suggested that the social scientist has to take into account that her research may affect certain groups differently. In his view, the social scientist's decision about what topic to choose is also a moral one (see Table 1).

In this paper we will follow a different route and instead focus on the concept of values, which in our view needs more discussion and differentiation. One way to proceed, we argue, is to realize that values (including the special case of value freedom) differ according to whether they are to be found on paper, in the head of the actors, or in their actions.

#1. Values on Paper

In discussing what may be called values on paper, it is helpful to begin with some helpful concepts in the philosophy of language. J.L. Austin distinguishes between the literal speech act, on the one hand, and the intention with which this act is infused, on the other (Austin 1962). The former is called a locutionary act, and the latter an illocutionary force. Using this distinction, we realize that when something spoken is written

down, the intention tends to get lost; and the content that the reader encounters in a text represents an impoverished version of the original message (e.g., Olson 1996). If we broaden the intention to also include the intonation, the gestures, and the context, it is clear that quite a bit of information is lost in the transition from thought or speech to a text.

Another useful concept in Austin's work is that of a perlocutionary act or the effect of the speech act. If you say "give me the salt" to somebody, the person is likely to hand it to you, and this constitutes the effect. Something similar happens with the thought of the writer when it is read by someone else, it has a certain effect.

When today's students encounter the idea of value freedom, as part of their education in social science, it is typically through reading. But it is hard to grasp values simply by reading. You may think that you have acquired some values, once you have read about them and approved them in your mind, but in the case of value freedom (as with many other values), this is not always enough. What primarily matters is how these values become part of your actions; and in the case of value freedom, this means how well you are able to draw on your values when you carry out your research.

#2. *Values in the Head*

It is clear that value freedom is best safeguarded if students and scholars have studied and internalized this type of values, and in this way will have them easily accessible when they think and do research. Research on values shows however that believing in values does not necessarily mean that you also act on them. This is a problem that social scientists are well familiar with, not only for values but also for attitudes. People may say one thing but behave in another (e.g., Jerolmack and Khan 2014; Lieberson 1987:231; Vaisey 2009).

Some of the issues involved when it comes to values and acting on these or not, can be illustrated with the help of a typology that Robert Merton constructed in his critique of *The American Dilemma* (1944) by Gunnar Myrdal (Merton 1949; see also Merton 1940). According to the famous argument by Myrdal, Americans are caught in a conflict between their ideas of equality (the American Creed), on the one hand, and the unequal ways in which they behave toward Blacks, on the other. In Merton's view, however, this was much too simplistic. People, he argued, may have certain values, and either act on these or not. They may also *not* have these values, and either act on this or not. In brief, having values and acting on them are two different things.

It is possible to construct a typology along the lines of Merton, but instead of using attitudes toward discrimination as the example, using that of value freedom (see Table 2). The two types in this table that are of special interest here are Type II and Type III. In the former case, the researcher believes in value freedom but does not use these values in her

Table 2

Value Freedom: A Typology of Values in the Head Versus Values in Action

	Attitude dimension: Belief in value or not ^a	Behavior dimension: User of value freedom in research denial of it or not ^a
Type I: Believer in and user of value freedom	+	+
Type II: Believer in and nonuser of value freedom	+	-
Type III: Nonbeliever in but user of value freedom	-	+
Type IV: Nonbeliever in and nonuser of value freedom	-	-

Note: ^aWhere (+) = conformity to the creed of value freedom and (-) = deviation from the creed.

actions, that is, in her research (Type II). What would the reason for this be? It could simply be the result of having a superficial view of what value freedom means, something that is probably quite common. And by not knowing how to use the principles of value freedom in her research, the social scientist will be unable to make a number of distinctions and moves that could have improved the analysis. The result, in short, is a lower quality of the analysis.

The result is similar for the case where the researcher does not believe in value freedom but still says she believes in value free research (Type III). This is a case that comes close to opportunism as well as conformity. Since the social scientist is unlikely to have understood much of the doctrine of value freedom, the price will again have to be paid by producing studies that are of lower quality than they could have been.

In a discussion of this type, we also realize the need for having empirical knowledge about the way that value freedom is used, in order to avoid speculations. To my knowledge no such knowledge currently exists but is clearly much needed.

#3. *Values in Action*

Weber's central term in his discussion of value freedom is, to recall, not values or *Werte* but valuation or *Wertung*. While the main translators of Weber's articles agree that "valuation" is the preferable translation of *Wertung*, it will be suggested here that "values in action" is a better translation in some cases (Weber 2012:499).

If we return for a moment to Merton's typology, as applied to value freedom (Table 2), we see that it contains two types that have not been discussed so far. One is when the researcher believes in the value of value freedom and also acts accordingly—in other words a straightforward case of values in action (Type I). The other type is when the researcher does not believe in value freedom, nor does she act on these beliefs (Type IV).

One can imagine several reasons why a researcher may not want to follow the values of value freedom and carry out the behavior that these entail (Type IV). The researcher may, for example, live under a dictatorship or in an authoritarian state. But he or she may also have made a voluntary decision to reject value freedom—because of a belief, say, in Marxism, libertarianism, feminism, or some other political doctrine. The personal/political values of the researcher are in this case judged to be more important than the values of science, also when she conducts her research.

Are there then no advantages to taking the perspective of, say, the oppressed? It is true, Weber argues, that if the researcher looks at things from the perspective of someone in a marginal position (his example is that of an anarchist), she may see things that mainstream researchers are unable to see (Weber 2012:318–19). But whatever advantages the researcher may get from looking at things from a certain perspective, these advantages are counteracted by two tendencies, particularly if the researcher also decides to follow the values of the person in the marginal position in her research. She will be unable to push ahead along the lines opened up by the doctrine of value freedom. And she will tend to produce propaganda instead of research.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Since the primary result of the argument in this article is that value freedom allows the social scientist to do research and theorize in a more sophisticated manner than if she just introduces her personal values into the analysis and goes from there, more needs to be said on this theme. As argued earlier, a value free position, in combination with an effort to consistently follow it through in an empirical research project, means:

- that the values of the people who are studied should be included in the analysis;
- that the researcher may want to choose a topic for her research that is related to the key values of the time;
- that the chances of pushing through your personal values as well as those of your opponents (e.g., in the form of a social policy) have to be carefully analyzed in terms of the means to carry them through, their chances to succeed, and their side effects; and
- that the researcher will have to clarify her own values and also those of her opponents.

Table 3

**How to Research the Role of Values with the Help of Value
Freedom, According to Max Weber**

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- Question # 1:* Which are the appropriate means to realize certain values (your own as well as those of your opponents)?
- Question # 2:* What are the chances of success when these means are used?
- Question # 3:* What are the side effects or costs of these attempts?
- Question # 4:* How will the different attempts to realize these values affect the actors' understanding of their own values?
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Each of these four points, when viewed as an active research task to carry out, forces the researcher to ask and to try to answer a number of questions that are likely to make the analysis more differentiated and also of higher social science quality than an analysis that closely follows the personal values of the social scientist (see Table 3).

Take, for example, the notion that you need to study people's values as part of the analysis. Much of modern sociology is focused on behavior and does not consider the way that people view things. When a researcher studies people's values, however, not only does she have to study the meaning with which actors invest their actions, along the lines that Weber advocates in his interpretive sociology. She also has to factor in the extra force that comes with meanings that take the form of values and are linked to action (valuation). Stated in this general way, this may not seem like a very difficult task, but when you are dealing with a concrete case there are usually many difficult problems to solve. Note that these may also constitute opportunities to produce a more complex and accurate analysis.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the doctrine of value freedom needs to be discussed by each generation of social scientists. Today's students are not getting a good education in what value freedom means. This may well have negative consequences because value freedom is not only important in that it prevents the social scientist from turning into a propagandist; it also helps her to produce analyses that are more complex and interesting.

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