



A cognitive approach to Max Weber’s “comprehensional sociology” (with an exclusive focus on the *Soziologische Grundbegriffe*)

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Abstract

In this essay, a cognitive-psychological reinterpretation is proposed for Weber’s *Soziologische Grundbegriffe*. This is not a “Weberological” study, for Weber would likely have rejected most of the proposals made here—primarily due to his metaphysical presuppositions, which admits a *tertium* (or even more?) *datur* beyond the physical and psychological realms. That metaphysical conjecture is rejected in this chapter. Based on this intentionally anti-Weberian reinterpretation of Weber, several key concepts are reformulated through a more restrained metaphysical lens—one that firmly denies the existence of neither-physical-nor-psychical realms. The concepts discussed here are: (1) the concept of *Sinn*, redefined as “cognitive-and/or-emotional contents consciously or subconsciously present within a specific individual’s consciousness”; (2) the concept of *Motiv*, subjected to a complex analysis that resists concise formulation; (3) the concept of *soziale Handlung*, which is—*pace* Weber—shown to be of a purely solipsistic-psychological nature; (4) the concept of *Evidenz*, whose role is significantly restricted.

I wish to thank Olimpia Loddo for her critical comments on a previous version of this chapter. I’m also indebted to Elena V. Timoshina, as my proposals are inspired by my subscription to the main tenets of Petrażycki’s theory of law and it was she who first developed in a rigorous manner the idea of comparing its tenets to those of Max Weber’s comprehensional sociology. The responsibility for all mistakes is exclusively my own. Further, a brief remark on style is in order here. The alternation between contracted and non-contracted forms in what follows is deliberate. Contractions are used to prevent theoretical density from hardening into unnecessary rigidity, whereas full forms are reserved for definitional passages or argumentative inflection points requiring a slower cadence. When introducing a sustained reformulation strategy, I occasionally employ the progressive (e.g., “I’ll be writing”) rather than the simple future (“I’ll write”), in order to signal an ongoing methodological posture rather than a punctual declaration. The variation is thus rhythmic and aspectual, not accidental.

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Key words

Cognitive approach; *soziale Handlung*; psychological approach; *Sinn*; *Motiv*; *Evidenz*

Resumen

En este ensayo se propone una reinterpretación cognitivo-psicológica de las *Soziologische Grundbegriffe* de Weber. No es un estudio “weberológico”, pues Weber probablemente habría rechazado la mayoría de las propuestas aquí formuladas, debido a sus presuposiciones metafísicas, que admiten un *tertium* (¿o incluso más?) *datur* más allá de los ámbitos físico y psicológico. Esa conjetura metafísica es rechazada aquí. Sobre la base de esta reinterpretación intencionalmente anti-Weberiana, varios conceptos son reformulados desde una lente metafísica más restringida, que niega la existencia de ámbitos ni físicos ni psíquicos. Los conceptos tratados son: (1) *Sinn*, redefinido como “contenidos cognitivos y/o emocionales” presentes consciente- o subconscientemente en la conciencia individual; (2) *Motiv*, sometido a un análisis complejo; (3) *soziale Handlung*, que —*pace* Weber— se muestra como de naturaleza puramente solipsista-psicológica; (4) *Evidenz*, cuyo papel es significativamente restringido.

Palabras clave

Enfoque cognitivo; *soziale Handlung*; enfoque psicológico; *Sinn*; *Motiv*; *Evidenz*

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[Es] gibt... keinen Zweifel, daß [Durkheim]... einen wesentlichen Schritt auf dem Weg einer *psychologischen* Erklärung des sozialen Ursprungs der Selbstmordhäufigkeit getan hat.

(Alfred Bohnen, 1975, emphasis in the original)

1. Introduction

In this article I propose a cognitive approach to some—though in no way all¹—key notions of Weber’s comprehensional² sociology (*verstehende Soziologie*) as presented in his *Soziologische Grundbegriffe* (“Fundamental Sociological Concepts”):³

1. *Sinn*,⁴
2. *Motiv* (“Motive”),
3. *Soziale Handlung* or *soziales Handeln* (“social action” or “social action”/“social actions”), and
4. *Evidenz* (“evidency”).⁵

In this chapter, I propose a *cognitive* re-interpretation for each of these terms, and so, even if—as I point out below—Weber would have probably rejected it due to its psychological nature.

Prior to formulating my proposals, it should be clarified that by “cognitive approach” — in sociology—I understand an approach that, to the goal of providing causal explanations and predictions for one or more interactions between (chiefly human) animals, avails itself of hypotheses concerning what is, was, or will be present or occurring in their, respective, *consciousnesses*, that is, hypotheses concerning what they have in mind: such as:

- their conceptualizations (independently of their usefulness or correctness),
- their thoughts (independently of their truth or correctness),
- their beliefs (independently of their truth or correctness), and
- their emotions.

My understanding of the term *cognitive approach* is quite broad, as I understand it as an approach that incorporates, not only cognitive psychology, but also psychology of

¹ For example, I don’t discuss the notions of *Sinnadäquanz* and *aktuelles Verstehen* (as distinct from *erklärendes Verstehen*).

² I avail myself of this obsolete adjective instead of *interpretive* because—*pace* Parsons 1937 (583, fn. 2)—I believe that the *interpretation of symbols* (i.e., the identification of the immediate goal to which Ego produces a symbol and of the manner Alter [or Tertius] identifies it) is but a very peculiar case of Weber’s *aktuelles Verstehen* (and in doing this, I’m developing Weber’s statement in this regard). This process of identification has little—if anything—in common with the Heideggerian-Wittgensteinian hermeneutics or with the semiotic turn in sociology, while it strictly depends on human animals’ ability to re-experience (*nacherleben*) what other human animals experience. As to the present participle *understanding*, it cannot be used either; as it *also* means a *sympathetic* grasping of what is inside somebody else’s mind, while Weber’s *Verstehen* can also be an absolutely detached one. (Throughout, I refer to the actor as *she*. If there are two or three interactants, they are, respectively: “Ego” [she], “Alter” [he], and “Tertius” [he].)

³ I confine myself to this work because it is here that Weber—for the last time—expounds his epistemological program and re-shapes his fundamental sociological conceptualizations.

⁴ The reason why I’m not yet proposing a translation for *Sinn* will become apparent just below.

⁵ The reason why I avail myself of an obsolete term is explained below.

emotions, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology (this one, though, without accepting its transcendental claims).⁶

As I said, this chapter is on Weber's concepts of *Sinn*, *Motiv*, *soziale Handlung*, and *Evidenz*. More specifically, here the following issues are discussed:

- The notion of *Sinn* (of an action) and its connection to the notion of *Motiv*;
- The question whether for an action (which Weber understands as a behavior causally and more or less consciously causally impacted by a *Sinn*) to be *social*, Ego must "orient" it:
 - o 1.1. to the *behavior* of Alter,⁷ as this behavior *objectively* is;
 - o 1.2. to the *Sinn* Alter connects to his behavior, as this *Sinn* *objectively* is;
 - o 2.1. to what Ego *believes* is Alter's behavior—whether Ego's belief is true or not;
 - o 2.2. to what Ego *believes* is the *Sinn* causally and somewhat consciously impacting Alter's behavior—whether Ego's belief is true or not.
- The question of why we should subscribe to Weber's epistemological program, and notably:
 - o Why we should search for the *Sinn* of ^bbehaviors⁸—if any—and
 - o Why the *Evidency* (*Evidenz*) of the *Sinn* we hypothesize should matter, and to what extent.

This chapter is organized as follows. In Section 2, I discuss the notions of *Sinn*, *Motiv*, and *Soziales Handeln*. Section 3 is devoted to the ontological issues raised by some Weberian claims. Finally, Section 4 concerns the scientific legitimacy of Weber's comprehensional sociology. In this section the notion of *Evidenz* is also discussed.

Prior to beginning the discussion of these notions and problems, a terminological remark is in order.

So far, I've been writing *orient* in inverted commas. I did so because Weber's usage of *orientieren* is metaphorical, and therefore obscure. To remove this obscurity, from now onwards rather than write sentences like "Mary oriented her action to her expectations concerning John's behavior", I'll write something like: "Mary's action was cognitively-and/or-emotionally *impacted* (i.e., *causally produced* or *modified*) by her expectations concerning John's behavior". I'm aware that this wording is way more cumbersome than Weber's, but at least it forces the reader—each time she stumbles upon it—to reflect on the connection between *Orientierung* and the context where it is used (the same goes with the cumbersome translation I propose for *Sinn*, i.e., "cognitive-and/or-emotional contents within a given consciousness" [more on this, below]). *Generally speaking*, I

⁶ This list is not exhaustive. For example, also radical interactionism is included.

⁷ To keep the discussion simple, I confine myself to the discussion of interactions between maximum three individuals (interactants). Therefore, I do not discuss such phenomena as the action of saving *money*.

⁸ I use ^b*behavior*—which stands for "behavior broadly understood"—to refer to both (1) actions—that is, behaviors causally "oriented" to a *Sinn*—and (2) mere behaviors—that is behaviors *not* causally impacted by a *Sinn*. To refer exclusively to these latter, I use ^m*behavior* (or *mere behavior*).

believe that scholars' wish to use *the minimum possible number of words* (not necessarily always the *same* words, though) to translate Weber's terms has been conducive to several misunderstandings, which conceal both the importance and the shortcomings of Weber's scientific proposals. Only a cumbersome explanatory rendering of his terms can hopefully reduce the chance of such misunderstandings. Needless to say, the correctness and viability of my proposals is open to debate; nor are my proposals in any way final—not even for myself.

2. On *Sinn*, *Motiv*, and *Soziales Handeln*

In this Section, I discuss *Sinn*, *Motiv*, and *Soziales Handeln*.

2.1. On *Sinn*

My point of departure for proposing a clarificatory translation for *Sinn* is Parsons's contention that in Weber *Sinn* and related terms, among other things, refer to "features [?] of content[s] of ... subjective state[s] of mind" (Weber 1919-1920/1978: 57, n. 3).⁹

In my interpretation of both Weber's sociological usage of *Sinn* and Parsons's clarification of its meaning, that term refers to:

α. *what an actor has in mind, that is, a content within somebody's consciousness—if any—,*

β. *when she is taking a ^bbehavior b,*

γ. *with regard to b,*

δ. *provided that b is causally impacted by that content.*¹⁰

A necessary condition for a *content of consciousness* to be sociologically relevant is that it should *impact* the actor's ^bbehavior.

As is known, among said "contents"—that is, what there can be within the actor's mind, or consciousness—Weber lists, not only

1. the fully conscious pursuit of a goal (*Zweckrationalität*,¹¹ i.e., "teleological consciousness"), but also
2. the fully conscious subscription to a value (*Wertrationalität*, i.e., "axiological consciousness"),
3. the half-conscious presence of emotions within one's consciousness (*Affektivität*, i.e., "emotionality"), and

⁹ For the sake of completeness it should be pointed out that Parsons holds that Weber uses *Sinn* in the sense indicated in the text as well as in the sense of "symbolic systems that are ultimately referable to such states of mind" (ibid.); which latter sense, instead, I regard as wrong (see also above, fn. 2). As for the word *feature* used by Parsons, I have no idea of what it could possibly mean.

¹⁰ For the sake of clarity, I'm using the present tense; but this definition can be modified as to be also used with reference to past and future behaviors.

¹¹ Without being perfectly consistent, Weber uses *Rationalität* to refer to the full consciousness of something.

4. the half-conscious repetition or imitation of one's own or others' ^bbehaviors (*Traditionalität*—a Weberian neologism¹² that I also render with a neologism: “traditionarity”).

In this connection two remarks are in order.

Firstly, in Weber's *Soziologische Grundbegriffe* there is no trace of a distinction between *values* and *norms*. Therefore, Weber's *axiological consciousness* is to be understood as also comprising *deontological consciousness*.

Secondly, it remains theoretically unclear whether and to what extent the distinction between teleological (*zweckrational*) and axiological (*wertrational*) consciousness can reliably ground a distinction between the actions of *homines oeconomici* and those of *homines normativi*. For example, within Weber's own framework, it is far from evident how one should classify the case of a social actor who saves money with the purpose (*Zweck*) of repaying a time-barred debt to a creditor who has entirely forgotten about it.

I wonder whether Weber would have contended that there are cases in which the distinction between *teleological* and *axiological* consciousness is *flüssig* (“fluid”).

At any rate, based on the above, we can conclude that a clarificatory translation of *Sinn* could be *cognitive-and/or-emotional content of a state of mind or of a state of consciousness*.¹³ (From now on, “of a state of mind” and/or “within consciousness” will be often dropped.) Further, it should be borne in mind that in the case of, not one single content, but of a *plurality* of contents that make up a *relatively coherent set* of cognitive-and/or-emotional-contents of consciousness Weber uses more or less consistently *Sinnzusammenhang*.)

If (1) a cognitive-and/or-emotional content within an actor's consciousness is addressed to a certain ^bbehavior of that very actor and (2) this ^bbehavior is causally and fully or half-consciously impacted by it, we are dealing with a ^bbehavior characterized by its having a *Sinn*; which ^bbehavior, in Weber's jargon, is an *action* proper.

In the absence of a *full* or at least *half*-consciousness, we are dealing with mere behaviors (^mbehaviors). However, since in the *Soziologische Grundbegriffe* there is a curious passage in which Weber makes bizarre claims (1919–1920/2013, 172), I will return to this issue—and discuss that passage—in the next sub-section.

2.2. On Motiv (and its relationship with Sinn)

As is known, Weber's *Fundamental Sociological Concepts* also contain a distinction between *Sinn* (which, I reiterate, I render with *cognitive-and/or-emotional-content-of-consciousness*) and *Motiv* (“motive”); this latter being stipulatively defined by Weber as follows:

¹² At Weber's times, standard German seemed to have been only *traditionell*. Therefore, by the neologism *traditional* Weber seems to mean something different from *traditionell*—and so, despite his sometimes using the two terms interchangeably. It is therefore necessary to render *traditional* with a neologism.

¹³ I believe that a cumbersome translation of *Sinn* is absolutely necessary to force Weber's readers to reflect on the way his epistemological program should or could be implemented each time he is using *Sinn*, *sinnhaft*, etc.

„Motiv“ heißt ein Sinnzusammenhang, welcher dem Handelnden selbst oder dem Beobachtenden als sinnhafter „Grund“ eines Verhaltens *erscheint*.¹⁴ (1919-1920/2013, 159, emphasis added)¹⁵

[The term] *motive* shall mean a set of cognitive-and/emotional contents of consciousness that to the actor herself or to the observer *appears* as a cognitive-and/or-emotional *Grund* of a certain behavior. (Emphases added)¹⁶

If this translation is correct, a *motive* is a set of relatively coherent cognitive-and/or-emotional contents of consciousness—that is, a *Sinn*—that:

1. an actor believes it to have consciously and causally caused a given behavior of hers, or
2. an observer hypothesizes that an actor believes it to have consciously and causally caused a given behavior of hers.

For those who have an in-depth command of both English and German, the term *reason* is obviously unsuitable as a rendering of *Sinn*.¹⁷ Let us therefore turn to a more complex issue.

Weber’s understanding of *Motiv* implies that the *cognitive-and/or-emotional contents of consciousness that actually caused an action* may differ from its *motive* (if any), which latter—among other things—merely amounts to a set of cognitive-and/or-emotional contents that are *believed* to have caused it—independently of the truth of this belief.

To better understand this point, let’s examine (1) first the case of the actor and (2) then the case of observer.

¹⁴ All emphases are in the original, unless specified otherwise.

¹⁵ When the emphasis is in the original no specific information is added.

¹⁶ All translations are mine.

¹⁷ Since not everybody may have had the opportunity to gain such an in-depth command, a clarification concerning the rendering of *Grund* is necessary. Although *reason* is often given as its standard English equivalent, the connotations of the two terms vary significantly depending on context. In contemporary English usage, *reason* frequently carries a justificatory or rationalizing undertone, implicitly suggesting the presence of a coherent or defensible ground for action. This is particularly evident in marked constructions such as “For what reason did you do this to me?”, which typically conveys the expectation that some intelligible—or at least articulable—justification should exist. By contrast, the more neutral “Why did you do this to me?” does not necessarily carry such normative pressure.

The German term *Grund*, however, is semantically and pragmatically broader and less positively connotated. The question *Aus welchem Grund hast du das getan?* may be posed even in cases of impulsive, confused, or poorly articulated conduct, without presupposing the existence of a rationally coherent or normatively defensible basis. While *Grund* can, of course, denote a “good” or sufficient ground, such evaluative force must be explicitly marked, for example, with a modifier (e.g., *aus gutem Grund*).

That, in English, one may pointedly ask “For what reason did you do this to me?” while perfectly aware that no such reason exists further illustrates this asymmetry. In such contexts, the question may amount to a subtle form of verbal aggression, insofar as the lexical choice of *reason* tends to presuppose the availability of a rationally articulable ground. When the speaker knows that none is forthcoming, the force of the utterance arises from the tension between this justificatory expectation and its evident absence. The German counterpart does not typically generate the same effect, as *Grund* does not, by itself, carry an equivalent normative presupposition. For this reason, rendering *Grund* uniformly as *reason* risks overstating the degree of rational coherence or justificatory force that the German term does not necessarily entail in Weber’s usage.

In case (1):

(α) The actor may believe that her own behavior was caused by a certain motive, while it wasn't caused by any cognitive-and/or-emotional content of consciousness;

(β) The actor may believe that her own behavior was caused by a certain motive rather than by the cognitive-and/or-emotional contents of consciousness that *actually* caused it.¹⁸

In case (α), we are dealing with a *mere behavior* (^mbehavior), while in case (β) with an *action proper*. Both cases are relevant for a sociologist:

- because the actors' beliefs—whether correct or not—about the motive why they took certain ^bbehaviors may impact their answers in surveys or interviews concerning them;¹⁹ and,
- because, even if certain believed-in motives didn't actually cause the actors' ^bbehaviors—once realized or “realized” (respectively, correctly or incorrectly)—, they may causally impact their future actions as a consequence of psychical changes within them.

To my knowledge, Weber didn't offer any epistemological justification for his conceptualization of *motive*, but I believe that those just offered are possible ones.

Let's now turn to case (2), namely, that of the observer. Here, (α) and (β) are two possibilities he₃ also must take into account when considering Ego's ^bbehavior.

But (2) raises a specific problem. Who is the observer?

The *observer* could be:

- i. Tertius, that is, a third interactant who
 - o confines him₃self to observing Ego's action or her interaction with Alter: a third interactant who
 - o is also a subject of study for the sociologist, or
- ii. a *sociologist herself*.

To my knowledge, nowhere does Weber clarify this issue. At any rate, I believe that (i) and (ii) must be sharply distinguished and that it is of the utmost importance to always clarify whether one is using the term *observer* in sense (i) or in sense (ii).

At the end of Section 2.1. above, I hinted at a bizarre Weberian passage in his *Soziologische Grundbegriffe*. Let's examine it now:

Das *reale* Handeln verläuft in der großen Masse seiner Fälle in dumpfer Halbbewußtheit oder Unbewußtheit seines ‚gemeinten Sinns‘. Der Handelnde ‚fühlt‘ ihn mehr unbestimmt, als daß er ihn wüßte oder ‚sich klar machte‘, handelt in der Mehrzahl der Fälle triebhaft oder gewohnheitsmäßig. Nur gelegentlich, und bei massenhaft gleichartigem Handeln oft nur von Einzelnen, wird ein (sei es rationaler, sei es

¹⁸ In either case, the actor's belief may be the result of her un- or subconscious *desire* to believe in that belief. This is close to what psychoanalysts refer to as *rationalization*.

¹⁹ It should be borne in mind, though, that the actor may know her motive or believe she had a particular one, and prefer not to disclose it in a survey or interview.

irrationaler [i.e., being subject of a conscious reflection or not]) Sinn des Handelns in das Bewußtsein gehoben. Wirklich effektiv, d.h. voll bewußt und klar, sinnhaftes Handeln ist in der Realität *immer nur ein Grenzfall* [emphasis added]. Auf diesen Tatbestand wird jede historische und soziologische Betrachtung bei Analyse der *Realität* stets Rücksicht zu nehmen haben. Aber das darf nicht hindern, daß die Soziologie ihre *Begriffe* durch Klassifikation des möglichen ‚gemeinten Sinns‘ bildet, also so, *als ob* [emphasis added] das Handeln tatsächlich bewußt sinnorientiert verlief. (1919–1920/2013: 172)

In most of its cases, *real* actions proceed in a dull semi-consciousness or unconsciousness of the “cognitive-and/or-emotional contents currently present in the actor’s consciousness”. The actor “feels” them more vaguely than she would know them or “makes them clear to herself”, and in the majority of cases acts instinctively [i.e., emotionally/*affektiv*] or habitually [i.e., traditionally/*traditional*]. Only occasionally, and in the case of mass similar actions—often only by individuals—, are the cognitive-and/or-emotional contents whether fully or half-conscious) of actions raised into consciousness.²⁰ In actual reality, an action involving cognitive-and/or-emotional contents referred to it by the actor, and so in a really effective, i.e., in an actually conscious and clear manner is *always just a borderline case* [emphasis added]. Every historical and sociological observation will always have to take this fact into account when analyzing *reality*. But this should not prevent sociology from forming its *concepts* by classifying the “cognitive-and/or emotional contents” possibly “present in consciousness”, therefore—in this manner—*as if* [emphasis added] the actions were actually consciously impacted by cognitive-and/or-emotional contents present in the actors.

As can be seen, Weber holds that his comprehensional sociology must aim,

1. *at discovering* the cognitive-and/or-emotional-contents-of-consciousness that causally impacted (one or more) given human actions, and,
2. if in actual fact given action actions weren’t causally impacted by any cognitive-and/or-emotional-content-of-consciousness, *at fabricating* ones to be treated *as if* they had causally impacted them.

It is very unfortunate that Weber does not clarify how such an *as if* is to be understood, nor does he write whether and how Vahinger’s *Philosophie des Als Ob* should be used in this context.

I believe it would have been preferable had Weber plainly acknowledged that in such circumstances his comprehensional sociology is confronted with a problem he was not (yet) able to fix. The acknowledgment of the existence of a problem within one’s own proposal or theory does not amount to self-refutation. Be that as it may, I believe that a promising way to fix this problem could be:

- the hypothesis that in the cases mentioned in Weber’s quotation
- in-depth interviews with samples of the actors involved

²⁰ To my translation it could be objected that, if a cognitive-and/or-emotional content is fully conscious, it cannot definitionally be raised into consciousness. In my opinion, a counter-objection to this potential objection is that here Weber means “stored in memory and easily raisable into consciousness”.

- could cause_α them to *realize* the cognitive-and/or-emotional-contents-of-consciousness, if any,
- that in similar situations might *cause*_β²¹ them to act again that way,
- except for the cases in which this realization would consciously *cause*_β them to act otherwise.

Of course, the thus realized cognitive-and/or-emotional-contents-of-consciousness (if any) may sometimes be but an *artifact* produced by the said in-depth interviews. The cognitive-and/or emotional contents of consciousness conjectured in this manner must be turned into testable hypotheses. A way for testing them is to observe whether under similar circumstances the actor will act in a similar way, provided that interviewer didn't cause her to subscribe to cognitive-and/or-emotional-contents-of-consciousness wrongly identified by herself or—è *peghju ancù*—by the interviewer. (In this connection it is key to bear in mind that without a conjecture arising from an in-depth interview, it would be impossible to identify *similar* situations in which the actor could be predicted to act in a *similar* way. Behaviorism just can't address such issues.)

It is now in order to try to clarify the obscure term *Grund* (“foundation”? / “reason”? / “motive”?). My hypothesis is that Weber uses *Grund* to refer to a set of cognitive-and/or-emotional contents of consciousness that—whether correctly or not—Ego rationalizes²² as the cognitive-and/or-emotional contents of consciousness that would have caused her action, or else that can be hypothesized as such by Tertius or by a sociologist.

2.3. On the notion of social action (soziales Handeln)

Weber offers his definition of a social action in the following passage:

Nicht jede Art von Berührung von Menschen ist sozialen Charakters, sondern nur ein sinnhaft am Verhalten des andern orientiertes eignes Verhalten. Ein Zusammenprall zweier Radfahrer z.B. ist ein bloßes Ereignis wie ein Naturgeschehen. Wohl aber wäre ihr Versuch, dem andern auszuweichen, und die auf den Zusammenprall folgende Schimpferei, Prügelei oder friedliche Erörterung soziales Handeln. (1919–1920/2013: 173)

Not all forms of contact between people are of a social character, but only behaviors that are cognitively-and/or-emotionally impacted at a conscious level by another's behavior. A collision between two cyclists, for example, is a mere event just as a natural one. However, their attempt to avoid the other person, and the scolding, fighting, or peaceful discussion that follows the collision would be forms of social actions.

Based on this passage, it seems that an action can be social also in a purely solipsistic-psychological manner. To be characterized as social, it appears sufficient that no more than one of the possible interactants (e.g., Ego and/or Alter and/or Tertius) be cognitively-and/or-emotionally impacted by how the other interactant's behavior is—whether in actual fact or merely in interactant_i delusionary construal. Why Weber provided such a radically solipsistic-psychological conceptualization remains one of the sorrowful mysteries concerning him.

²¹ I am using subscripts to stress that we're dealing here with two distinct causal processes.

²² I am well aware that the notion of *rationalization* is *toto coelo* incompatible with Weber's antipsychological stance.

Further, an obvious (Petrażyckian) corollary of Weber's definition is that if, say, Ego experiences a stone that hit her arm as an animate entity—whose key feature (animateness) exists only in Ego's consciousness—and, out of revenge, destroys it, this would qualify as a social action in a Weberian technical sense. (To be sure, this is a charitable interpretation of Weber, as he never stresses the difference between animate and inanimate entities, and, frankly: [o]gni limite ha una [carità].)

In brief, when Weber speaks of "somebody's own behavior [here, definitionally an action] cognitively-and/or-emotionally impacted by the behavior of somebody else", only the interactant's consciousness is involved, including her/his solipsistic (and possibly erroneous) hypothesization of the presence of contents of consciousness within the other interactants' consciousness—just as in the example of Ego's social interaction with a stone.

However, this is not the sole startling conclusion that one is to draw from Weber's definition. It is worth stressing that Weber—unlike, say, Petrażycki—never expressly addressed the issue of whether "der Andere" must be objectively animate, or whether it suffices that Alter be subjectively construed as such by Ego; thus, leaving the ontological purport of his conceptualization structurally underdetermined.

In my opinion, if we are to develop Weber's comprehensional sociology in a way consistent with its main tenets, the following two cases should be distinguished:

1. Whether and how Ego *believes*—independently of the correctness of her belief—that Alter's ^mbehavior
 - 1.1. took place,
 - 1.2. is taking place,
 - 1.3. will take place;

without considering possible cognitive-and/or-emotional contents within Alter's consciousness;

2. Whether she *believes*— independently of the correctness of her belief—that within Alter's consciousness there are cognitive-and/or-emotional contents that
 - 2.1. causally impacted Alter's action,
 - 2.2. are causally impacting Alter's action,
 - 2.3. will causally impact Alter's action.

In brief, it seems to me that comprehensional sociology, when it comes to social actions, should consider how Alter's ^mbehavior or action manifests itself in Ego's consciousness, rather than focus on ^bbehaviors without clarifying whether Ego's beliefs concerning them should be correct.²³

²³ Frankly, I regard as quite maladroit using *social* (*sozial*) to refer to such actions. At the most, had I had been in Weber's shoes, I'd have rather used *quasi-social*, as in the final analysis we are here facing *solipsistic* actions (such as those taken by a solitary backcountry skier who *believes* from a certain slope an avalanche might break out). It seems to me that only in the event of mutual satisfactorily true beliefs concerning Ego's and Alter's respective cognitive-and/or-emotional contents of consciousness can be properly spoken of *social* actions, such as those that successfully give rise to languages, markets, and other—to use Hayek's terminology. This issue lies outside the scope of this chapter. At any rate, it can't be neglected what can happen in the event of false beliefs about each one's cognitive-and/or-emotional contents within,

3. On the wrongness of Weber's ontological assumptions

My—admittedly to some extent charitable—interpretation of Weber's *Sinn* as *cognitive-and/or-emotional contents within somebody's consciousness* amounts to an ontological understanding of Weber's *Sinn* in *psychological terms*; a construction that Weber would have definitely rejected even in his last years.

Suffice here to read the following passage:

Der Irrtum liegt im Begriff des ‚psychischen‘: Was nicht ‚physisch‘ sei, sei ‚psychisch‘. Aber der *Sinn* eines Rechenexempels, den jemand meint, ist doch nicht ‚psychisch‘. Die rationale Überlegung eines Menschen: ob ein bestimmtes Handeln bestimmt gegebenen Interessen nach den zu erwartenden Folgen förderlich sei oder nicht, und der entsprechend dem Resultat gefaßte Entschluß werden uns nicht um ein Haar verständlicher durch ‚psychologische‘ Erwägungen. (1919-1920/2013: 169)

The error lies in the concept of the ‘psychical’. Supposedly, what is not ‘physical’ is to be ‘psychical’. Yet the *cognitive content* of a *calculation example* [emphases added] that somebody has in her consciousness is not ‘psychical’. The rational reflection of a person about whether a certain action, based on the consequences to be expected from it, will or won't be favorable to certain interests, and the decision based on the result [of this reasoning] don't become a jot²⁴ more comprehensible to us through ‘psychological’ considerations.

In my opinion, the reason why Weber's examples do not—or, more correctly, seem not to—become “a jot” more comprehensible with psychological considerations is simply that they already are nothing but hyper-compressed psychological processes or scripts. What Weber describes are psychical activities carried out within consciousnesses. Further, the fact that two *very similar*—but *never ever identical* (which can be safely hypothesized as impossible)—calculations or reasonings may be present within two distinct consciousnesses, and with such a degree of *similarity* as to be taken to be (1) phenomenologically indiscernible, or (2) even as the very same ontological object bilocated within two consciousnesses²⁵—doesn't entail that they are something neither-physical-nor-psychical which just manifest themselves in consciousness without being a psychical phenomenon.²⁶ Finally, it should be always borne in mind that whenever sociology (or any other science concerned with human mental processes) is concerned with calculations and reasonings, it is first of all concerned with them regardless of their

respectively, Ego's and Alter's consciousnesses. Consider a Continental motorist, who has just disembarked from her ferry and is driving on a lonely narrow country road on the British Isles. Also imagine she unexpectedly encounters Alter, an “native” motorist, and that the foreigner, oblivious of her being on the British Isles, tries to avert a collision by keeping to the right, mistakenly expecting that Alter will do the same; while, alas, Alter follows to local driving laws by keeping to the left, which ultimately leads to a collision.

²⁴ Expression borrowed from Weber 1919-1920/2019, 96.

²⁵ This is the hypothesis widespread the believers in some religions that the very same God can manifest itself contemporarily in two or more different consciousnesses; especially in the event of collective prayer.

²⁶ It should be borne in mind, though, that even if, not only two phenomenologically indiscernible mental objects, but even the a given ontologically identical object could be contemporarily present in two distinct consciousnesses, this would not imply that this latter object has a neither-physical-nor-psychical nature. The possibility of truly shared psychical entities cannot be logically ruled out: it is the subject of a scientific conjecture that must be turned into a falsifiable hypothesis. See, Fittipaldi 2024.

correctness or incorrectness—and this point is fully consistent with Weber’s main tenets.²⁷

4. Why should sociology be comprehensional (*verstehend*) and aim at evidency (*Evidenz*)?

According to Weber, (1) sociology should be comprehensional, or at least—among other sociologies—there should also be a *comprehensional sociology*²⁸—(2) and this sociology should aim at *evidency* (*Evidenz*).

In Sections (4.1) and (4.2), I deal, respectively with (1) and (2).

4.1. *On why sociology should be comprehensional* (*verstehend*)

In my opinion, for a science to be epistemologically legitimate, it suffices that it should:

1. *aim* at discovering causal antecedents of causal consequents, and so at probabilistically²⁹ explaining and/or predicting causal consequents; and/or
2. *avail itself* of causal knowledge from other fields to explain certain events as causal consequents of certain causal antecedents; and/or
3. *aim* at discovering clusters (or syndromes) of over-average co-occurring phenomena—no matter whether their causes have yet been discovered; and/or
4. *aim* at discovering these causes.³⁰

The identification of the cognitive-and/or-emotional contents that were, are, or will be involved in given actions does make it—to some extent—possible to explain and predict those actions. For example, by invoking psychological phenomena such as anchoring effects, loss aversion, reference-dependent preferences, and the endowment effect one can explain why a contraction in housing demand does not necessarily produce lower transaction prices (and possible will never produce them). In the absence of such psychological mechanisms, the only possibly delayed price adjustment characteristic of real estate markets would remain entirely mysterious. The very possibility of predicting that selling times will increase before—if at all—average prices decline presupposes assumptions about cognitive and emotional processes within market actors. Thus, even

²⁷ Their correctness matters when sociological investigations start addressing more complex phenomena. Just for the sake of clarification, a new or stretched meaning for a “word” may begin getting stabilized if the sender (Ego), by using it that way, successfully causes the emergence of the representations she aims to produce within the receiver (Alter). To offer a personal example, the author of this chapter started referring to chatGPT with *Cipciapachi*, which in Milanese literally means “chip (i.e., AI) grab [it] here”, and could be rendered with “AI-grab-this”, and was surprised by observing other people understanding this “nickname” and even starting using it; even if not Milanese!

²⁸ Honestly, I do not know whether Weber claimed the monopoly of the term *Soziologie* for his *verstehende Soziologie*.

²⁹ Probabilistic causation includes deterministic causation as a limiting case in which $p(E) < 1$ $p(E|C) = 1$.

³⁰ So-called *purely descriptive* sciences invariably rely on causal assumptions. This is evident not only with respect to our perceptual apparatus, but also in the case of historical sources. For what historians call “sources” are themselves presently observable phenomena whose existence calls for explanation: they must have been produced, preserved, transmitted, and possibly altered through specific causal processes. Without presupposing such causal regularities, one could neither account for the present existence of these sources nor assess their authenticity or reliability—let alone formulate hypotheses about what happened in the past.

the most elementary economic explanation *covertly relies on psychology*.³¹ Needless to say, I've chosen this example to show how mistaken Weber was when claiming that the explanation and prediction of economic actions does not need psychology. Further, this simple example shows how cognitive and emotional components of actions are intertwined. All in all, it is not possible—short of delusion—for comprehensional sociology to do away with psychology.³²

Pace Weber, the very hypothesization of the cognitive-and/or-emotional contents of consciousness that consciously or half-consciously causally impact human actions, inevitably involves psychology, psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, etc.: *Extra psychologiam, nulla salus*.

4.2. *On why comprehensional sociology should also aim at evidency*

As we know, according to Weber, comprehensional sociology should not content itself with identifying the cognitive-and/or-emotional contents of consciousness that causally impact certain actions but should also attempt “to make them understandable by *re-experiencing* them through our empathic fantasy” (“[sie durch die einführende Phantasie *nacherlebend*] verständlich ... machen”, 1919–1920/2013: 151).

This is what Weber refers to as *Evidenz*, a term which I render in English with the archaic term *evidency*, as all other translation proposals (e.g., *insightfulness*, *clarity*, etc.) appear to me as unable to capture the complexity of this notion.

In my opinion, evidency can be accepted as a criterion for the selection between two hypotheses only if these provide *identical* epistemological (i.e., predictive and explanatory) performances.

Unfortunately, such a situation is extremely rare—quite plausibly absolutely impossible. Sure, striving for evidency may be a useful heuristic means for formulating hypotheses, not only in sociology, but also in psychology, and even in ethology.

However, the case of ethology, and of the mistakes which anthropomorphism may be conducive to, shows that the pursuit of evidency cannot be anything more than:

1. a heuristic means and—as I said—
2. an ultimate criterion for choosing between two identically performing hypotheses, that is, something that is barely possible even in hard sciences.

The same holds for anthropology, history, and ethology.

³¹ This holds only if most immovables are owned by households, not by firms investing in immovables.

³² Crudely put, Weber runs into these paradoxes because his sociology is not at all a sociology in Petrzycki's or Hayek's sense, but rather a form of historical and sociological application of his own common-sense psychology. Unfortunately, for all his extraordinary erudition, Weber—just like Émile Durkheim—turns out not to have ever realized what specifically is a sociological mechanism, as distinct from a psychological one. Thus, at the end of the day, he produced nothing but exceptional psychological-historical works in a sociological travesty.

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³³ I have used italics for the first year(s) listed when a text was not published directly by its author. In such cases, the year refers to the period in which the text was presumably written.
