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SYLVIA TERPE

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'SPHERES OF LIFE':
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Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, PO Box 110351,
06017 Halle/Saale, Phone: +49 (0)345 2927-0, Fax: +49 (0)345 2927-402,
<http://www.eth.mpg.de>, e-mail: workingpaper@eth.mpg.de

Max Weber's 'Spheres of Life': a tool for micro-sociological analysis¹

Sylvia Terpe²

Abstract

In his *Intermediate Reflection* Max Weber famously discusses the idea of different spheres of life, representing their increasing separation and the tensions among them as the predicament of 'modern men'. This paper aims to show that Weber's idea of different spheres of life can be a useful heuristic tool (for sociologists and anthropologists alike) in researching everyday life perceptions of the world people inhabit. Instead of using the concept to describe historical phenomena on a macro level, the paper focuses on how it may guide empirical research on a micro level. In a first step, I outline what the term 'sphere of life' means from a methodological perspective that puts individual actors at its centre. I argue that – as Weber suggests with reference to 'collective entities' – spheres of life exist first of all as ideas and beliefs in the minds of individual persons. Against this background, I ask in the second part of the paper how many spheres can be distinguished and how they are best named. The secondary literature on Weber is indecisive in answering these questions. I suggest – with reference to Weber's concept of ideal types – that they can only be answered empirically from the perspective of the actors themselves. Third, based on Thomas Schwinn's reading of Weber, I introduce the distinction between value-spheres and life-orders as two fundamentally different modes of orientation to spheres of life. While the 'inner logic' of value-spheres is propelled by the interminability of value realisations (Hans Joas's considerations on value commitments give further insight into this), I also emphasize that the inner logic of life-orders, to which people relate in a rather instrumentally-rational manner, can be understood as attributions to these spheres made by the actors. This difference is illustrated using the example of the economic sphere. In the final part of the paper, I outline the usefulness of Weber's idea of different spheres of life for ascertaining various moral dimensions of everyday life. I argue that Weber's concept of life-orders may be helpful in determining what Robert Wuthnow called the structure of moral orders. Furthermore, the idea of separated spheres of life may shed light on moral dynamics in everyday life. Finally, Weber's distinction between value-spheres and life-orders is helpful in disentangling the various ways in which work and morality intersect.

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² Sylvia Terpe, Research Fellow, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), e-mail: terpe@eth.mpg.de

1 Spheres of Life from the Perspective of Methodological Individualism

In the *Intermediate Reflection (Zwischenbetrachtung)*– first translated into English as *Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions*³ – Max Weber introduces the idea that, in the course of history, social life has become differentiated into various parts: the religious, the economic, the political, the aesthetic, the erotic and the intellectual spheres (for further differentiations, see section 2). The genesis and complex interaction of these ‘spheres of life’ (on this terminology, see section 3) is seen by many authors as one of the main, and sometimes even as *the* main theme in Weber’s work (e.g. Hennis 1987: 72f.; Scaff 1992: 93; Schwinn 2003: 96). The idea of separate social worlds can be found in almost any social theory (Knorr Cetina 1992: 407), however differently it is conceptualized (Schützeichel 2011: 73). But it might seem surprising that Weber, as an advocate of methodological individualism, granted spheres of life such a great importance in his work too. It is puzzling that he writes of an “*internal and autonomous working (innere Eigengesetzlichkeit)* of the individual spheres” (Weber 2004a: 219 [1978a: 541]⁴) and of, e.g., “impersonal economic powers” (Weber 2004a: 222 [1978a: 545]). Given his methodological position, one would not expect him to treat separate parts of social life as (sub-)systems of a society or as organic parts of functional differentiation. This raises the question of how the notion of ‘spheres of life’ can be reconciled with his methodological stance. A closer look at Weber’s reflections about so-called “social collectivities” (Weber 1978b: 13f. [1972: 6]) will help to answer this question, because these entities show some similarities to spheres of life.

On the first pages of *Economy and Society*, Weber addresses the question of how a sociology that aims at explaining social phenomena by understanding (*Verstehen*), should deal with “social collectivities such as states, associations, business corporations, foundations” or “a nation, [...] a family, or an army corps” (Weber 1978b: 13f. [1972: 6]). First of all, Weber makes his methodological position clear: only “*individual human beings*” are able to act “in the sense of subjectively understandable orientation of behaviour” (Weber 1978b: 13 [1972: 6]). Hence, “for sociological purposes there is no such thing as a collective personality which ‘acts’” (Weber 1978b: 14 [1972: 6]). Nevertheless, sociologists cannot “afford to ignore these collective concepts” (Weber 1978b: 13 [1972: 6]) and so must find ways to integrate them in their analyses. To start with, Weber explains, this can be done by treating “these collectivities (...) as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action” (Weber 1978b: 13 [1972: 6]). That is not to say that Weber thought of these collective entities to be the direct product of intentional actions alone. They are also produced and reproduced as unintended consequences. I will come back to that point further below. What is more important here is the following: if one looks at individual actions which (re)produce a social entity and tries to understand them, one will often be confronted there with social collectivities too – yet in the particular shape or form as they appear in the minds of individual persons. At a crucial point in his argumentation, Weber draws attention to

³ Weber’s *Zwischenbetrachtung* was first published in German in 1915 and revised for republication in the first volume of *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* in 1920 (Weber 1978a). There are two translations of Weber’s *essay*: an early one by Gerth and Mills which was published in 1946 (Weber 2009b) and a newer one by Whimster published in 2004 (Weber 2004a); see also footnote 6.

⁴ Citations in square brackets refer to the German texts.

“a fundamentally important fact. These concepts of collective entities (...) have a meaning in the minds of individual persons, partly as of something actually existing, partly as something with normative authority. (...) Actors thus in part orient their action to them, and in this role such ideas have a powerful, often a decisive, causal influence on the course of action of real individuals.” (Weber 1978b: 14 [1972: 7])

Using the example of the collective entity, the ‘state’, Weber illustrates this point: “Thus, for instance, one of the important aspects of the existence of a modern state (...) consists in the fact that the action of various individuals is oriented to the belief that it exists or should exist, thus that its acts and laws are valid in the legal sense” (Weber 1978b: 14 [1972: 7]). Hence, from Weber’s methodological perspective, collective entities can not only be treated as ‘the resultants of particular acts of individual persons’, but *also* as the belief of persons that such entities are real, should be real, or should become real.

This argumentation can be transferred to spheres of life. First of all, from the perspective of methodological individualism, such spheres have to be treated and explained as the effects of actions of individual persons, because these alone are understandable for the sociologist. That is not to say that spheres of life are the product of intentional actions. Just because everything depends on the actions of individuals does not mean that everything comes about intentionally. An ‘economic sphere’ or a ‘political sphere’ did arise without anybody planning them. However, if one looks at the actions of individual persons, one will become aware, and must take into account the fact, that these persons themselves have the idea that particular spheres of life exist or should exist (for the difference between these, see section 3). As long as their actions are based on this belief, they produce and reproduce spheres of life. Hence, against the background of methodological individualism, spheres of life are (unintended) effects of individual actions, on the one hand, *and* ideas and beliefs in the minds of people, on the other. It is this latter aspect that will be central for the discussion to come. In fact, the differentiation between spheres of life involves distinctions with which everybody is familiar in everyday life (Knorr Cetina 1992: 407). The existence of different parts of social life is a common and evident experience (Schützeichel 2011: 73). People refer to spheres of life in their daily conversations (e.g., if they complain about ‘politics’) and they know that different rules and standards are applied within each sphere. Although they might have difficulty naming these rules and standards explicitly (in the final analysis, it is the task of the sociologist to reveal them), they sense, for example, that it is out of place to calculate profits and returns of investment in the erotic sphere (Müller 2014: 112). This indicates that spheres of life not only orient actions by actors’ belief in their mere existence, but in the more specific sense that individual actors have the idea that particular modes of action and ways of relating to others are proper or fitting for each sphere. Schwinn (2001: 153, 420f.; 2003: 97) emphasizes that Weber identifies spheres of life by the particular meanings individuals have in their orientations to each other and “toward life” (Weber 2009a: 152 [1988: 608]). This leads to the question of how many ways of relating to others and to life, and which corresponding meanings, can be distinguished. Or in other words: how many and which spheres of life are there?

2 How Many and Which Spheres of Life are There?

The previous section started with a list of six spheres of life (the religious, the economic, the political, the aesthetic, the erotic and the intellectual) which can often be found in the secondary

literature on Weber, e.g., in the *Max Weber Dictionary* by Swedberg (2005: 290). Oakes (2007: 28f.) even claims that Weber was convinced that only these spheres existed. Against this claim, one can find other interpretations which add the “familial” sphere (Scaff 1992: 94; 1987: 743) or kinship, “*die Verwandtschaft*”, (Schluchter 1998: 91) as a seventh sphere distinguished in the *Intermediate Reflection*.⁵ According to Schluchter, Weber was most interested in the relations between family/kinship, economy, religion and politics (Schluchter 1998: 92) and, hence, one would miss a fundamental attitude toward life and others if one were to neglect the familial sphere.⁶ In contrast, Schroeder does not acknowledge a separate familial sphere, but regards the religious, the economic, the political and the intellectual spheres as “the most important” in Weber’s writings (Schroeder 1992: 10, 23). Still other authors notice that the *Intermediate Reflection* misses a sphere of law and try to integrate it in their own workings (Tyrell 1994: 394, 1993: 124; Habermas 1981 I: 331), while others argue that the law cannot be regarded as a separate sphere of life, but as a mechanism of coordination that is relevant for all spheres of life (Schwinn 1998: 312f.).

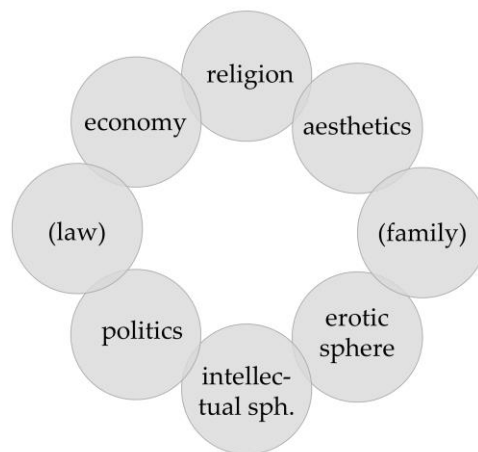


Figure 1: Spheres of life distinguished by Weber and in the secondary literature

Aside from the question of which particular spheres of life Weber distinguished, the secondary literature is divided on the issue of whether Weber’s distinctions were “intended to be comprehensive” or not (Scaff 1992: 96). As Scaff notes, there is “evidence on both sides of the issue” (ibid.). Those who regard the list as final – without or with ‘family’ and/or ‘law’ –, may refer to *Science as a Vocation* (1919), where Weber describes the orientations which constitute

⁵ Before Weber turns to discuss the conflicts between the religious sphere, on the one hand, and the economic, political, aesthetical, erotic and intellectual spheres on the other hand, he writes the following: “Where salvation prophecy has created communities on a purely religious basis, then the first power it came into conflict with [...] was the naturally occurring kinship community (*Sippengemeinschaft*). Whoever is not able to be hostile to his household companions, or his father, and mother, then he cannot be a disciple of Jesus” (Weber 2004a: 220 [1978a: 542]).

⁶ This different interpretation of the *Intermediate Reflection* is also manifested in the two translations. While the original German text – as it was published in the first volume of *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Weber 1978a) – is continuous, Gerth and Mills have inserted subheadings for the economic, political, aesthetical, erotic and intellectual spheres, but not for the familial sphere (Weber 2009b). Hence, they do not seem to regard it as a separate sphere of life. In contrast, Whimster’s translation is without subheadings, but he marks spheres of life by bold type and includes the familial sphere (Weber 2004a). There are reasons for both interpretations. Those who do not include a familial sphere may argue that Weber regarded kinship as ‘natural’ (*naturgegeben*), i.e. as the pre-rational point of departure for the processes of differentiation to come. In contrast, those who include the familial sphere may argue that this ‘natural’ sphere was affected by this differentiation too and could emerge as a separate sphere with its own ‘inner logic’. It is an empirical question whether this sphere revolves then around ‘kinship’, ‘family’, ‘household’, or another related entity.

spheres of life as the “*ultimately possible* attitudes toward life” (2009a: 152 [1988: 608]; emphasis S.T.). This formulation suggests that the number of spheres is definite. From that perspective, cultural and historical variation would still be possible, but only regarding the question of which of the spheres of life are actualized in particular historical situations. In contrast, according to Schwinn (2014a: 261), Weber leaves open how many spheres of life there are, and Scaff says that “on balance the most persuasive view seems to be that any number of competing orders or value-spheres at different levels of generality may be formed out of modern experience” (Scaff 1992: 96).

This latter position is reasonable against the background of Weber’s methodological considerations on ideal types, which deserve a more lengthy discussion here. Right at the outset of the *Intermediate Reflection*, Weber emphasizes the typological character of the spheres of life he distinguishes, i.e. every single sphere of life has to be understood as an ideal type. In general, an ideal type is an “analytical construct” that tries to order the manifold manifestations of the empirical world “by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view” (Weber 1949a: 90 [1988: 191]). With reference to spheres of life that means that Weber “elaborated [them] as rationally closed wholes” (Weber 2004: 215 [1978: 537]), i.e. he constructed them “through the elaboration of the internally most ‘consistent’ forms of a practical behaviour” (Weber 2004: 216 [1978: 537]). Although ideal types are theoretical constructs, they are not the product, simply, of intellectual games, but have to be rooted in the empirical world – or as Weber writes in relation to spheres of life: “to be sure, they could so appear and *have done* so in important historical cases” (Weber 2004: 215 [1978: 537]). Hence, Weber’s list of spheres of life is a typology of historically discovered modes of orientation (Schwinn 2001: 420f.). However, that is not to imply that spheres of life exist or existed in the pure form of their respective ideal type. In fact, “they seldom appear [so] in reality” (Weber 2004: 215 [1978: 537]). Each sphere, as an ideal type, differs from any given empirical case insofar as only the mode of orientation that is constitutive for the sphere in question is accentuated.

But the “conceptual purity” of ideal types (Weber 1949a: 90 [1988: 191]) is important in three interrelated regards. First, it “facilitate[s] the presentation of the otherwise ungraspable (*unübersehbar*) manifold complexity” (Weber 2004: 215 [1978: 537]) of the empirical world. In this regard, ideal types help the researcher to disentangle particular empirical situations because these always show a specific mixture of, e.g., different spheres of life. In this sense, ideal types can also be “thought of as possessing empirical validity” (Weber 1949a: 104 [1988: 206]), because they serve as “mental construct[s] for (...) the systematic characterization of individual concrete patterns [i.e. empirical/historical patterns; S.T.] which are significant in their uniqueness, such as Christianity, capitalism etc.” (Weber 1949a: 100 [1988: 201]). Second, their ‘conceptual purity’ is also “essential for clarity of *understanding*” (Whimster 2004: 409), because the meaning of a historical phenomenon “can very often be brought unambiguously to mind only by relating the empirical data to an ideal limiting case” (Weber 1949a: 94 [1988: 195]). And third, the ideal type is meant to reveal “operations of causality” (Whimster 2004: 409) by enabling the researcher to see “how close to, or far away, it [the historical phenomenon] is from the theoretically constructed type” (Weber 2004: 215 [1978: 537]).⁷

⁷ Weber writes of “the task of determining in each individual case the extent to which this ideal-construct approximates to or diverges from reality” (Weber 1949a: 90), or as it was translated more recently by Whimster as “the task of determining in each individual case how close to, or far from, reality such an ideal type is” (Weber 2004c: 388). The comparison of the ideal type “with empirical reality in order to establish its divergences or similarities” is necessary to “explain them [the divergences and similarities of the empirical case] causally” (Weber 1949b: 43 [1988:535]). Hence the ideal type is also meant “[f]or purposes of the causal imputation of empirical events” (Weber 1949b: 42 [1988: 534]).

However useful the working with an ideal type is, Weber also warned against the “temptation to do violence to reality in order to prove the real validity of the construct” (1949a: 103 [1988: 204]). In such a case, one runs the danger of imposing it artificially on a particular historical situation. Related to that is Weber’s emphasis that one should not regard the ideal type as “as an end” in itself, but only as a “means” for producing scientific insights. As means, ideal types have to be proven as “scientifically fruitful”, and “there is only one criterion” to assess this fruitfulness: “namely, that of *success* in revealing concrete cultural phenomena in their interdependence, their causal conditions and their significance” (Weber 1949a: 92 [1988: 193]; emphasis S.T.). Yet in order to be fruitful as heuristic means in the analysis of empirical phenomena, one has to adjust ideal types according to the object of one’s interest and research questions. Weber never thought of ideal types as comprehensive and eternal.⁸ Instead he emphasized the following:

“The intellectual apparatus which the past has developed through the analysis (...) is in constant tension with the new knowledge which we can and *desire* to wrest from reality. The progress of cultural science occurs through this conflict. Its result is the perpetual reconstruction of those concepts through which we seek to comprehend reality. The history of the social sciences is and remains a continuous process passing from the attempt to order reality analytically through the construction of concepts – the dissolution of the analytical constructs so constructed through the expansion and shift of the scientific horizon – and the reformulation anew of concepts on the foundations thus transformed. It is not the error of the attempt to construct conceptual systems *in general* which is shown by this process (...). Rather, this process shows that in the cultural sciences concept-construction depends on the setting of the problem, and the latter varies with the content of culture itself.” (Weber 1949a: 105 [1988: 207])

Against the background of these considerations, it would make no sense to stick just to those spheres of life Weber distinguished. Of course, that is not to say that one should dismiss them altogether. Rather they can be used at the onset of one’s research as a heuristic tool to focus attention in the midst of “an infinite multiplicity” (Weber 1949a: 72 [1988: 171]) of possible perspectives. However, it is most unlikely that Weber’s distinctions are permanently valid, because adequate analysis of subsequent historical developments may require that they be revised or supplemented. One has to be open not only for changes in the particular orientation of a specific sphere of life, i.e., for changes in its meaning (see section 3) and for its decreased or increased significance in relation to other spheres, but also for the emergence of new ones. The perspective of actors themselves is decisive for that. Any given empirical constellation of life spheres might not only appear to mix the ideal types we know from Weber but might also contain hints for the development of new ones. “At the very heart of their [the social sciences’; S.T.] task lies not only the transiency of *all* ideal types *but* also at the same time the inevitability of *new* ones” (Weber 1949a: 104 [1988: 206]).

It might well be, then, that one comes up with candidates for new spheres of life (or spheres within spheres), which, e.g., might include “friendship”, “leisure time” and “work”⁹, “education”,

⁸ He states that explicitly, e.g., regarding his typology of action: “it may be remarked that there is no intention here of attempting to formulate in any sense an exhaustive classification of types of action” (Weber 1978b: 26 [1972: 13]).

⁹ These categories are used, along with “family”, “politics” and “religion”, in the European and World Value Survey. Respondents were asked to “indicate how important” each one “is in your life”. Of course, answers to such preset questions and items have to be combined with qualitative materials in order to determine whether and in which sense one can really speak of a sphere of life from the perspective of respondents.

“medicine” and “health” (Schützeichel 2011: 73; Schimank 2011: 261) or “military”, “journalism” and “sports” (Schimank 2011: 261).¹⁰ Whether these candidates are worth to be conceptualized as ideal types can only be determined after thorough analyses and in interaction with one’s research questions. First of all, it is the task of the researcher to describe any empirical configuration of spheres of life from the perspective of actors themselves. These configurations can be characterized by the particular spheres of life an actor perceives and experiences as real, by the relative significance each sphere has in relation to the other spheres, and by the degree of separation or overlap of spheres (see figure 2 for two hypothetical configurations).

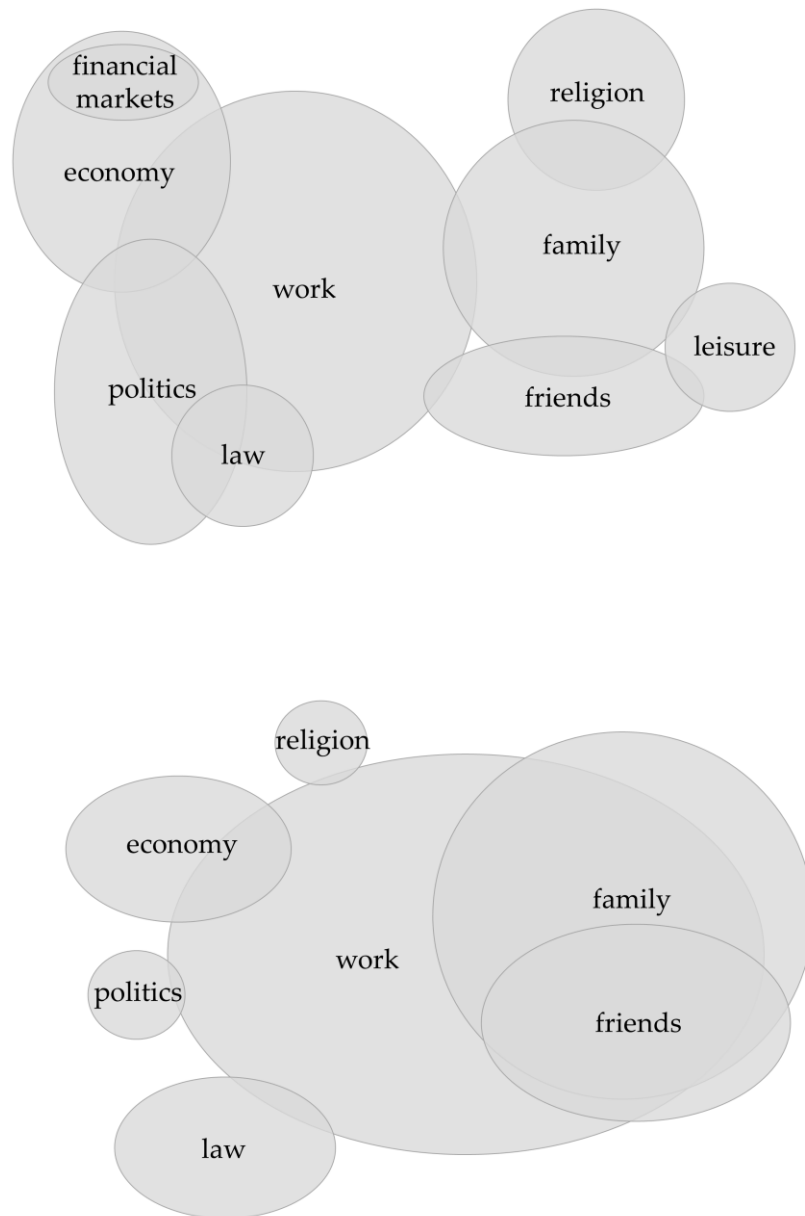


Figure 2: Two hypothetical configurations of spheres of life

¹⁰ These are mentioned by Schimank, besides “economy”, “politics”, “law”, “religion”, “art” and “intimacy”, as further subsystems in a functionally differentiated society. Of course, one does not have to adopt the implied functional perspective by Schimank whose work, although it takes into account the perspective of actors, is in the tradition of Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory (see also footnote 12).

Besides the features illustrated in figure 2, Weber's writings imply another important distinction between spheres of life: that between two fundamentally different modes of orientation which may constitute a sphere of life. Since these modes are related to specific consequences on actions and hence are essential for the internal logic of every sphere, they are introduced in detail in the next section.

3 Spheres of Life as Value-spheres and Life-orders

In the first section I have emphasized that spheres of life exist, from the perspective of methodological individualism, above all as constructs in the minds of individual persons who act on the belief that these spheres exist and that there are sphere-specific modes of relating to others. This section will address the point that spheres of life can be experienced by people in two fundamentally different ways: from the individual's perspective, they may have the quality of a value-sphere and/or they may have the quality of a life-order. As this is an analytic distinction, a particular sphere of life may have both qualities for any individual.

Although Weber uses these two terms most often when he speaks about spheres of life,¹¹ he does not make the distinction between value-spheres and life-orders explicitly. The *Intermediate Reflection* and other writings contain both meanings, without Weber having elaborated on their difference. In the secondary literature there is also no consensus about their usage: some authors tend to use just one of the terms, at times with a tendency to reduce the meaning of the whole concept to this one term; others seem to use them interchangeably and to run the risk of missing the differences between them at the level of experience and, hence, their different effects on action. My suggestion, to distinguish clearly between value-spheres and life-orders, follows Thomas Schwinn. He has elaborated a detailed interpretation of Weber in order to formulate an action theory of social differentiation (Schwinn 1993, 2001).¹² However, unlike Schwinn I emphasize that the distinction between value-spheres and life-orders can be founded from the perspective of actors themselves and their everyday life experiences.

One can approach the difference between value-spheres and life-orders by means of Weber's writings on collective entities and social orders. As we have seen in the first section, Weber argued that people act on the belief that collective entities "exist or should exist"; i.e. that they "have a meaning in the minds of individual persons, partly as of something actually existing, partly as something with normative authority" (Weber 1978b: 14 [1972: 7]). The distinction between the expressions 'exist', on the one hand, and 'should exist', or having 'normative authority', on the other hand, alerts us however to the fact that people may experience parts of the world they are living in as mere facts they simply have to acknowledge – thus constituting a life-order (see below) – or as something that they appreciate and regard as valuable. For the latter Weber uses the term 'legitimacy' in the context of his writings on social orders. If people believe in the legitimacy of a social order, this order is guaranteed by an inner attitude (Weber 1978b: 33 [1972: 17]). It "enjoys the prestige of being considered binding" (Weber 1978b: 31 [1972: 16]). The reference to value-

¹¹ See Schwinn (2014b: 147) for a compilation of all the terms Weber uses for spheres of life. Until now I followed Schroeder's suggestion (1992: 31f.) to use the term 'spheres of life' as the overall term to cover the meaning of both: value-spheres and life-orders.

¹² Thereby Schwinn positions himself against approaches of social differentiation in the tradition of Talcott Parsons, like, e.g., Luhmann's systems theory, which assume that subsystems fulfill a 'function' for a 'society' or 'societal whole'. In contrast, Schwinn rejects functional analysis in favor of figurational analysis which is interested in the specific historical constellations of differentiated spheres of life.

rational action is clearly visible here. This was defined by Weber as “determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behaviour, independently of its prospects of success” (Weber 1978b: 24f. [1972: 12]). Hence, if people act on the basis of value-rational motivations, if they orient their action toward a social order they regard as legitimate, they want to act in precisely that way out of a strong inner wish and conviction to do so.

The same applies if they experience a sphere of life – or some aspect of it – as a value-sphere. In such cases an inner commitment binds them to certain value ideas and corresponding forms of action. The sphere-specific logic (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*) is determined and propelled by these internal value commitments and not by abstract and external powers that force people to act in certain ways. The internal dynamic of value-spheres results from the fact that “the realisation of values in actions is inexhaustible” (Bachmann 2011: 159; translation S.T.). Values release an enormous motivation for action (*ibid.*), which is unknown for instrumentally-rational action. “In principle, such value-rational actions are interminable. Values are insatiable and actions which are oriented to them never come to an end” (Bachmann 2011: 168, translation S.T.). Most famously, Weber elaborated this point in *The Protestant Ethic*, where he described the influence of ascetic Protestantism on the development of an economic ethic which aims at

“the acquisition of money, and more and more money, (...) simultaneously with the strictest avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of it. (...) Accordingly, this striving becomes understood completely as an end in itself. (...) Here, people are oriented to acquisition as the purpose of life; acquisition is no longer viewed as a means to the end of satisfying the substantive needs of life.” (Weber 2011: 80 [1978a: 35f.]

According to Weber, the economic sphere could develop into a separate entity only because economic actions acquired such a genuine value-rational quality. This value orientation is also emphasized by Weber when he speaks of a “devotion to a ‘calling’ of moneymaking” (Weber 2011: 93 [1978a: 55]) and when he explains that “the modern economic order is the result and manifestation of competence and proficiency in a *vocational calling*. *This competence and proficiency* is the actual alpha and omega of Franklin’s [whom he cited earlier] morality” (Weber 2011: 80f. [1978a: 36]). As Schwinn (1998: 305) points out, terms such as ‘end in itself’, ‘devotion’ and ‘calling’ clearly belong to the language of value-spheres. Weber described the corresponding work ethic in a short example:

“‘Couldn’t the old man be satisfied with his \$75,000 a year and retire? No! The frontage of the store must be widened to 400 feet. Why? That beats everything, he says. Evenings, when his wife and daughter read together, he longs for bed. Sundays, in order to know when the day will be over, he checks his watch every five minutes. What a miserable existence!’ In this manner the son-in-law (who had emigrated from Germany) of this prosperous dry-goods-man from a city on the Ohio River offered his judgment. Such a judgment would surely appear to the ‘old man’ as completely incomprehensible. It could be easily dismissed as a symptom of the lack of energy of the Germans.” (Weber 2011: 398f. [1978a: 204])

This passage illustrates nicely the restlessness that such an attitude generates. In contrast, those whose economic action is purely instrumental would stop if they had achieved their goals and only start anew when they had found new ones (Schwinn 1998: 302). Furthermore, a truly value-rational

action is indifferent to the consequences of its action: “the more unconditionally the actor devotes himself to this value for its own sake, (...) the less is he influenced by considerations of the consequences of his action” (Weber 1978b: 26 [1972: 13]). Regarding the economic sphere, that means that actors motivated by value commitments are not even concerned with success in economic terms necessarily, and therefore they are not disconcerted by economic failures.

After thus reviewing Weber’s reflections on the peculiarities of value-oriented action, it is useful to integrate Joas’s contributions on values, since they help to understand the unconditional and perpetual character of value commitments even better. First of all, Joas highlights the emotional character of value commitments when he describes them as a particular form of “experience in which [one has] the subjective feeling that something is a value” (Joas 2000: 10). Accordingly, values are experienced through the “familiar (...) feeling that something evidently and in an emotionally intense way is to be evaluated as good or bad” (Joas 2000: 10; but see section 4 regarding the difference between values and morality). Although values cannot be reduced to emotions, they “are deeply rooted in our emotional life” (Joas 2000: 10). In other words, the experience of a value commitment is not simply a cognitive judgement, but one that is infused with emotions.

Furthermore, Joas emphasizes that value commitments are not simply desires or preferences, “but instead imply what is worth desiring” (Joas 2000: 17). He assumes that

“[w]e are all familiar with the discrepancy between ‘values’ and ‘preferences’ (...) in the deeper sense that we do not experience some of our desires [and preferences; S.T.] as good (...). ‘Values’ evaluate our ‘preferences’. In the dimension of values, we take up a position towards ourselves as well.” (Joas 2000: 16)

That is why people may also feel ashamed about some of their desires or feel guilty when they acted purely on behalf of their interests. Such feelings can be regarded as the emotional expressions of their reflected and not (yet) reflected value commitments.¹³ Despite the negative valence of feelings such as shame and guilt, they are often not experienced as annoying – people sense that they would lose something very important in their lives if they would no longer be able to experience them (Terpe 2013: 9f.). This is related to Joas’s observation that “strong value commitment[s are] not [experienced] as a restriction” (Joas 2000: 5). Although these commitments are not the result of intentional choice – people cannot simply pick some values and reject others at will – “we experience the feeling of ‘I can do no other’ (...) as the highest expression of our free will” (Joas 2000: 5). This corresponds to Joas’s critique of theoretical approaches which conceive of values and morality only “as a sense of duty and the experience of the ‘Ought’, a viewpoint discernible (...) in all (...) writers oriented to Kant (and Nietzsche)” (Joas 2000: 162).

¹³ One of the benefits of enriching Weber’s account of values by Joas’s reflections is the possibility of avoiding Weber’s reduction of values to conscious beliefs. Actors are not always conscious or reflective about their value commitments, but these are often ‘embodied in moral feelings’ and ‘prereflective aspirations’ (Joas 2000: 132–135; Joas 2002: 513f.; Joas and Beckert 2002: 273). Hence, “[a]n adequate theoretical understanding of values in human action has to conceptualize instead the interaction between the values embodied in prereflective aspirations and the situation where we establish which course of action accords with our values” (Joas and Beckert 2002: 274). This is not the place to discuss this issue further. One aspect of it is addressed in Terpe (2015), where I distinguish – following Bergson and Joas – between three modes of morality and their relationship to emotions. In the first mode one’s moral commitments remain unnoticed; in the second mode they are expressed in moral feelings and, so, may become reflective; in the third mode there is a gap or discrepancy between one’s moral commitments and moral feelings. This gap may initiate new articulations and, so, a change in one’s moral horizon.

This latter tendency is at times also visible in Weber's work, e.g., when he writes that value-rational actions are "required by duty" and that "value-rational action always involves 'commands' or 'demands'" (Weber 1978b: 25 [1972: 12]). Such formulations suggest that value commitments are experienced as restrictions. But it would be misleading to reduce value oriented action to experiences in which a "violent effort (...) on ourselves" is needed "to break down a possible obstacle to obligation" (Bergson 1935: 11). Of course, there are situations in which one is "hesitating and deliberating on which way to take" (Bergson 1935: 13) – especially when interests, needs and desires interfere with one's value commitments. But these occasions might be the exception rather than the rule for experiences of value commitments. Because the emphasis and reduction of value commitments to 'duty', 'ought', 'obligation', 'command' and the like blurs the difference between value-spheres and life-orders, it seems more promising to follow Joas in emphasizing instead "the experience of attractive values" (Joas 2000: 162) and speaking of "ideals that attract us and give our life meaning" (Joas 2000: 125). From this perspective, one can say that, if a sphere of life is experienced as a value-sphere, the enactment of its 'demands' does not have the quality of a burden, but is experienced as an expression of one's inner self and one's idea about the kind of person one wants to be.

By contrast, the experience of restrictions is coupled with spheres of life that take on the quality of a life-order. Weber argues that social orders which lack legitimacy can still be guaranteed "by the expectation of specific external effects, that is, by interest situations" (Weber 1978b: 33 [1972: 17]). In such cases actors orient themselves according to the requirements of an order, simply because they pursue certain purposes *and* want to avoid negative sanctions – either in form of "disapproval" by others or of "physical or psychological coercion" (Weber 1978b: 34 [1972: 17]). The expectation of these negative sanctions enters their rational calculations of means and ends, costs and benefits. Because they are interested in the success of their actions, they cannot ignore the demands these orders impose. Hence, the type of action that is related to life-orders is instrumentally or purposively rational action (Weber 1978b: 24ff. [1972: 12f.]). Weber illustrates this mode of relating to a social order with the example of a thief who "orients his action to the validity of the criminal law in that he acts surreptitiously. The fact that the order is recognized as valid in his society is made evident by the fact that he cannot violate it openly without punishment" (Weber 1978b: 32 [1972: 16]). The thief may even assume that the law is regarded as a legitimate order – in other words, that it has the quality of a value-sphere – for the majority of people; but, for him, it is just a fact without value which he nevertheless has to take into account in planning of his actions.¹⁴

But the experience of spheres of life in the sense of a life-order does not result in (hidden) deviations from this order in most cases. On the contrary, Weber emphasized in his writings the opposite effect, most famously when he described developed capitalism as an 'iron cage' (Weber 1992: 123), or as a 'steel-hard casing' (Weber 2011: 177), as Stephen Kalberg has recently rendered the original term, '*stahlhartes Gehäuse*' (Weber 1978a: 203). Weber's metaphor suggests various ways in which actors may experience life-orders. They may, for example, be experienced as something that "encases persons and cannot be thrown off" (Kalberg 2011: 397). This

¹⁴ See Terpe and Röwekamp (2016) where this example is used to give a sociological explanation for so-called 'Happy Victimizers', i.e., persons who violate moral rules and feel good about it. It is argued that Happy Victimizers orient to these rules as something that is enforced upon them externally, i.e., they experience it as part of a mere factual life-order. They may even know that these rules constitute something valuable for other persons, i.e., a value-sphere, but Happy Victimizers comply only as long as these rules serve their instrumental interests.

corresponds to the already mentioned restricting quality of life-orders; they have a constraining effect on one's actions due to the simple fact that they are believed to be real. They may also give the impression that "they exist independently of and prior to the individuals who participate in them" (Brubaker 1984: 72). In a well-known passage Weber elaborates on that experience in the context of the economic sphere as follows:

"[T]he capitalist economic order of today is a vast cosmos into which a person is born. It simply exists, to each person, as a factually unalterable casing (*unabänderliches Gehäuse*) in which he or she must live. To the extent that people are interwoven into the context of capitalism's market forces, the norms of its economic action are forced onto them. Every factory owner who operates in the long term against these norms will inevitably be eliminated from the economy. With the same degree of inevitability, every worker who cannot or will not adapt to the norms of the marketplace will become unemployed." (Weber 2011: 81 [1978a: 37])

Hence, spheres of life in the sense of life-orders are held to "have an objective existence" in the sense that "the individual confronts them as given, as existing independently of his own action" (Brubaker 1984: 72).¹⁵

Weber's writings as well as the secondary literature address various levels or variants of life-orders and it seems to be fruitful to differentiate them in a more systematic way from the perspective of actors themselves – though, here, I can provide only a bare outline. At one extreme, as was emphasized by Weber in the final pages of *The Protestant Ethic*, people have the impression that a life-order works in a "machine-like" way (Kalberg 2011: 397), i.e., that it follows its own laws which are thought to be independent and detached from the individual's influence. Almost like natural laws, the internal workings of a life-order appear as inevitable and uncontrollable to humans, who must adapt to them and discipline themselves in the process (Hennis 1987: 110). From this perspective, then, the internal logic of a life-order exists in the sense that actors *attribute* it to that order. A good example is Adam Smith's metaphor of the 'invisible hand of the market' which can be found in many forms in everyday beliefs about the workings of today's economy.¹⁶ Distinct from that are perceptions of life-orders in which actors (also) emphasize their organizational and institutional character by focusing on collective entities such as 'states', 'business corporations' or 'banks'. These corporate actors may be perceived as parts of the internal logic of a life-sphere, but individual actors may also attribute to them additional, e.g., organization specific, workings. In contrast to perceptions which focus on anonymous laws of life-orders, the emphasis on collective entities allows for (but not necessarily implies) moral judgments – simply because it is easier to recognize human actors at work in the context of corporate actors. For

¹⁵ Although I quote Brubaker here, my interpretation of Weber differs from his. I emphasize that spheres of life in the sense of a life-order are *experienced* as objective from the perspective of actors themselves. Such an interpretation of Weber is also recognizable in some passages of Parson's translation of *The Protestant Ethic*, e.g., when he translates the already cited quotation as: "The capitalist economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and *which present itself to him, at least as an individual*, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live" (Weber 1992: 19; emphasis S.T.). Accordingly, life-orders have an 'objective existence' from the point of view of individual actors. In contrast, Brubaker seems to ascribe them a stronger 'objectivity' when he claims that they "are not created by individuals" (Brubaker 1984: 72). Against such a position one can object with Schluchter: "Although orders restrict actions, this action has to actualize one of its [the order's] possibilities, so that the order exists after all" (Schluchter 1998: 99; translation S.T.).

¹⁶ Other (more or less scientific) attempts to explain the internal laws of the economic or any other sphere are relevant, from the methodological perspective applied here, only insofar as they become part of public discourse, and, so, of attributions that people make in everyday life.

example, while the workings of anonymous ‘markets’ are rather stated as a mere fact one has to deal with in life, states, corporations and banks might be regarded as being responsible for mitigating or intensifying the effects that markets produce. These different assessments – depending on whether a life-order is rather perceived as an abstract entity or as something that consists of concrete corporate actors – have consequences for the possibilities of action (see also section 4).

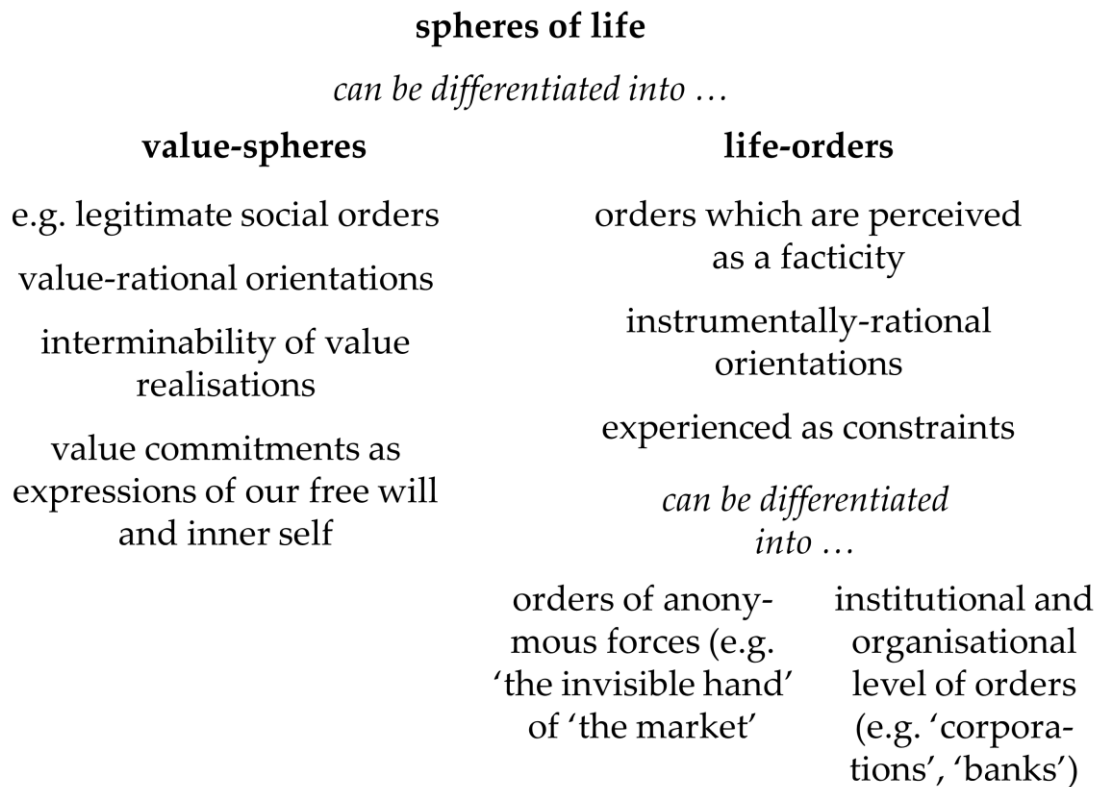


Figure 3: Overview of the distinctions between value-spheres and life-orders

Before I turn to the last section, I would like to emphasize that the analytic distinction between value-spheres and life-orders is able to capture complex empirical constellations of spheres of life as they are experienced by actors themselves. It is an empirical question not only how many and which spheres actors perceive, but also what qualities these spheres display. A sphere of life may have the qualities of both, a life-order and a value-sphere, i.e., some aspects of it may be regarded as external constraints, while others may be experienced as an expression of one’s own value commitments. For instance, actors may experience large parts of the economic world in the sense of a life-order that is ruled by impersonal economic powers, which they have to take into account, if they participate in the market. At the same time, actors may still experience parts of their market-related behaviour as an expression of their own value ideas: for example, to have a job that in their eyes is inherently linked to virtues such as initiative and self-discipline, and which they therefore engage in unceasingly, whether or not it leads to economic success. It is the task of the researcher to disentangle such different orientations and to identify how external constraints (one may speak

of ‘norms’) and value ideas are “specified [by actors themselves] in order to serve as orientations in concrete action situations” (Joas and Beckert 2002: 277).¹⁷

Aside from the fact that a sphere of life may have qualities of both a life-order and value-sphere at the same time, it is also possible that one and the same person oscillates between different interpretations of just one value. That is due to the fact that the interpretation of values is often contested (between and within spheres of life), so that the cultural repertoire available to the person in question contains more than just one valid meaning. Furthermore, one value-sphere allows for more than just one value orientation, which depends on the historical development of that sphere as well as on influence of other spheres. Although Weber focused in *The Protestant Ethic* on the religious roots of those value orientations which propelled ‘modern’ capitalism, he makes clear that “[n]o economic ethic has ever been determined solely by religion” (Weber 2004b: 56 [1978a: 238]). He mentions “economic geography” and “historical conditions” (*wirtschaftsgeographische und geschichtliche Gegebenheiten*) as other possible influences. These may also have shaped some of the value-orientations which turn the economic sphere, or parts of it, into a genuine value-sphere in the eyes of the actors.

Finally, for the empirical analysis of spheres of life from a micro perspective, it is possible and important to ascertain not only how persons themselves experience a particular sphere of life (and how they live their lives in a specific constellation of spheres), but also what they think about the perceptions, commitments and motivations of others. That is relevant, for example, for the question of whether a person is willing to pay taxes, even though he or she may regard paying taxes as an annoying constraint. For this person, the tax system appears as a life-order. Whether he or she complies with its regulations will depend not only on her calculation of the probability of detection, but also what she assumes about the behaviour of the majority (‘am I one of the few fools who pays taxes while all others cheat on taxes’ or ‘although it’s annoying, in the end all others do the same’) or about the commitments of significant others (‘I would be ashamed if he/she knew that I cheated on taxes’). The latter indicates that people may even comply with the rules of a life-order because of value commitments that are not related to this order but to another value-sphere (e.g., they pay taxes because they do not want to disappoint significant others and/or because they regard cheating as bad in their private sphere).

¹⁷ To focus on the specification of norms and values also means to move on from Weber’s teleological model of action – which explains actions as a result of goals and purposes – to a theory of creativity of action as it was formulated by Joas (1996; see for a summary Joas and Beckert 2002). In short, this theoretical perspective emphasizes that norms and values are always interpreted by actors against the background of the perceived circumstances of a specific situation. Although “[a]ctors do enter situations with goals (...), action plans get changed and reformulated as a result of the confrontation with the situation” (Joas and Beckert 2002: 274). Hence “action can never be explained solely from the motives and the plans of the actor”, because “they do not provide complete answers to the challenges actors confront in the situation” (ibid.: 274). The process of interpretation should not be thought of a simple “application” of norms and values to the situation, but as “an exercise in the creativity of action”, as “a dialogical process between the actor and the situation” (Joas and Beckert 2002: 274f.). One can speak of a “creative process” (ibid.: 278, Joas 2000: 170f.), because norms and values are not just enacted by ‘cultural dopes’; rather, they are actively reproduced and transformed in the course of their interpretation and articulation.

4 The Usefulness of Weber's Distinctions for the Research of Morality

This final section will outline three ways in which the analytic distinctions developed so far may be fruitful for the analysis of moral issues in everyday life. *First*, Weber's idea about spheres of life in the form of life-orders may be used to determine which aspects of their lives people may experience from a moral perspective. However, that requires differentiating life-orders more precisely. In the previous section it was suggested that Weber emphasized one extreme in the final pages of *The Protestant Ethic* where he described the 'economic order' of modern capitalism as a 'vast cosmos', as 'a factually unalterable casing' in which anonymous 'market forces' rule. From the experiential perspective of actors themselves such an order must appear as inevitable. In his study, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*, Barrington Moore (1978) determined the perception of inevitability as one of the main obstacles against the development of a sense of injustice and moral outrage. As long as people perceive the circumstances of their life as determined by inevitable forces – be they called 'nature' or 'the market', some might add processes such as 'globalization', 'climate change', 'acceleration' etc., it does not seem appropriate (for the people concerned) to pass a moral judgement on these forces or the effects they produce. Instead of moral feelings such as indignation or outrage, they may rather evoke feelings of awe, fear and helplessness, or they are viewed simply as immutable facts of life. One could say that these forces are beyond the realm of human morality.

The picture may change the more life-orders lose this quasi-natural quality and the more their institutional and organisational character becomes visible. That is not to deny that institutions and collective entities, too, may be perceived as immutable 'iron cages'. In that case, one has to add 'bureaucracy' or 'bureaucratization' to the list of anonymous forces mentioned above. The difference between anonymous life-orders, on the one hand, and life-orders which consist of concrete institutions and organizations, on the other hand, only opens up the possibility (but does not imply necessarily) that persons perceive these orders as man-made and, hence, as subject to the potential control of individual and corporate actors.¹⁸ In contrast to anonymous forces, human actors may be regarded as (morally) responsible for mediating the effects of exactly these forces. So, while life-orders governed by anonymous forces tend to foster resignation to the inevitability of the status quo, life-orders visibly governed by institutions and organizations may at least evoke feelings such as anger and outrage which may motivate individual or collective forms of participation – which may lead to changes in exactly these spheres of life.¹⁹ Life-orders, as they present themselves to individual actors empirically, probably often contain elements of both sides: anonymous forces and identifiable institutions and organisations. However, it might be worthwhile to disentangle these clearly in order to understand their meanings from the perspective of actors and, hence, their possible effects on action.

Second, Weber's idea of separated spheres of life may be useful in conceptualizing and understanding value conflicts, moral conflicts and moral dilemmas as well as moral dynamics in everyday life. Before I turn to that, however, a few words are necessary on the difference between

¹⁸ Robert Wuthnow (1987) addresses a similar distinction when he regards the boundary between a realm of 'inevitability' and a realm of 'intentionality' as a central dimension of moral orders: "On one side of this boundary are forces that the individual cannot control; on the other side is a realm subject to the individual's control, a realm in which intentions govern, rather than obdurate conditions." (1987: 74) Of course, this boundary "is a wavy, unsteady line, always in debate and reflecting cultural bias" (Douglas 1985: 26f.).

¹⁹ See Terpe (2009) for a detailed discussion on how the distinction between 'inevitability' and 'intentionality' is related to experiences of injustice and the absence of social protest.

values and morality. As Weber's definition of value-rational action shows, there are different kinds of values. For instance, aesthetic values revolve around the distinction between the 'beautiful' and the 'ugly', intellectual values around the distinction between 'true' and 'false', and so on. In comparison to such sphere-specific values, the moral values that built on the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' have a special status. In contrast to other values, moral values are not limited to just one sphere of life, nor do they constitute a separate moral sphere. Although Weber assumes that moral values have a propensity to be connected with particular spheres (especially with the religious, the economic and the political spheres), they are not confined to them.²⁰ Moral values can be part of and relevant for any sphere of life. For instance, the constitution of those spheres which revolve around explicitly non-moral values (such as the intellectual and the aesthetic sphere) builds on a moral position that esteems value freedom and the value of freedom (scientists and artists often react with moral anger if politicians or religious representatives try to restrict their activities). Furthermore, it is often a controversial moral issue which parts of human actions or orientations should be the object of moral evaluations or not, as, for example, sexual orientations or eating habits. Hence, there are particular moral values relating spheres of life to each other, which means that the realm of morality and moral values is not completely covered by sphere-specific values.

Because people are usually subjected to more than one sphere of life, moral conflicts and dilemmas may arise. It is "possible for the same individual to orient his action to contradictory systems of order. This can take place not only at different times, as is an everyday occurrence, but even in the case of the same concrete act" (Weber 1978b: 32 [1972: 16]).²¹ For Weber, it is the "fate of our times" (2009a: 155 [1988: 612]) to live with a multitude of conflicts which result from the fact of separated spheres of life. There are conflicts between the values of different spheres (which in the case of moral values are moral dilemmas), because "the various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other" (Weber 2009a: 147 [1988: 603]). For instance, for many it is a common experience nowadays to be torn between the wish to be good parents (or later on, caring children for one's aged parents) and one's own professional work ethic, which requires an initiative that often goes beyond an eight hour working day. Aside from that, there are conflicts between the requirements imposed by the forces and rules of life-orders, on the one hand, and value orientations, on the other (here if moral values are concerned one can speak of moral conflicts). These are "cases of the struggle that the gods of the various orders and values are engaged in" (Weber 2009a: 148 [1988: 604]). Thereby, possible conflicts are not limited to just one sphere (e.g., if the instructions in one's job or the situation in a competitive market stand in opposition to one's professional ethic which appreciates a particular quality of work), but the forces of some life-orders may also infringe on and conflict with the (moral) values of other spheres. Nowadays, it is common to complain that the forces in the economic sphere, not uncommonly in

²⁰ For the religious sphere, Weber discusses the 'ethic of brotherliness' or 'brotherly love', for the economic sphere the various (religious) 'economic ethics', and for the political sphere the difference between an 'ethic of conviction' and an 'ethic of responsibility'. That also shows that Weber tends to use the terms 'ethical values' or 'ethics' rather than 'moral values' or 'morality'. Nevertheless, I use the latter terms in order to emphasize the focus on those moral orientations, commitments, values and actions that can be found in the empirical world of the everyday life. These are to be distinguished from those 'ethics' which are formulated intentionally by philosophers (or nowadays also by corporate management and other organizations) as normative prescriptions about how moral orientations and actions *should* look.

²¹ Weber illustrates such contradictions by referring to a "person who fights a duel" and by doing so "follows the code of honor" (Weber 1978b: 32 [1972: 17]) which can be regarded from his perspective as part of a legitimate social order or value-sphere. But "at the same time, insofar as he either keeps it secret or conversely gives himself to the police, he takes account of the criminal law" (ibid.). In the first case one can assume that the law is perceived by this person as a life-order, while in the second case it might have the quality of a legitimate order (a value-sphere), which could indicate a value conflict or moral dilemma.

collaboration with forces in the political sphere, impose their ‘rational’ and ‘calculating’ logics on other spheres of life, be it the familial or intellectual sphere.

Weber found very strong words for all these kinds of conflicts and dilemmas, e.g., when he wrote: “ultimately everywhere and always it is really a question not only of alternatives between values, but of an irreconcilable death-struggle like that between ‘god’ and the ‘devil’. Between these there are no relativizations and compromises” (Weber 1949b: 17f. [1988: 507]). However, Weber was also aware of that, in everyday life, people are not always conscious of these conflicts (ibid.). There are mechanisms that help people to handle or even to ignore them. Weber’s perspective on these processes can be complemented by insights coming from other research traditions. Through organisational research, we know that the separation of spheres of life is not only the cause for many moral conflicts, but sometimes may also be a solution to them. For instance, people may be able to maintain the image of themselves as moral persons, even though they have acted in ways incompatible with their moral values, because they draw a sharp boundary between their work-related duties and their private self. This can be explained by mechanisms of “corrective behaviour” (Goffman 1982), “accounts” (Scott and Lyman 1968) and “moral neutralization” (Ribeaud and Eisner 2010). However, Joas makes the important point that people’s moral horizons get changed by such mechanisms: although people might believe themselves to be the same person as before, their justifications have an effect on their moral selves.

Joas’s argumentation in *The Genesis of Values* also helps us to see that the picture of the ‘irreconcilable death-struggle’ (Weber 1949b: 17f. [1988: 507]) between (moral) values focuses only on one side of such experiences. Although moral conflicts and dilemmas are certainly often experienced as pressing subjective problems, there is another side to them. As, according to Joas, “there is in the point of view of the right [*des Rechten*] a perpetual, unflagging potential to modify the good [*das Gute*]” (Joas 2000: 173 [1999: 270]), so the different moral and non-moral standards in conflict situations have the potential to modify each other. Of course, it is an empirical question exactly in what way this happens. But combining Weber’s idea of spheres of life with Joas’s ideas regarding the articulation of values may shed light on the moral dynamics of everyday life.²² In processes of ‘moral closure’ people seem to subordinate all aspects of their life to the value orientation(s) of just one value-sphere (and so protect themselves from inner conflicts, while perhaps provoking conflicts with others). The opposite process may be seen in a ‘moral relativization’ in which the experience of moral plurality leads to fundamental moral doubt and scepticism. Between these two extremes lies a broad spectrum of possible articulations. Confronted with moral conflicts and dilemmas, actors may long for new articulations that are felt to fit their moral experiences. In the process, they draw on the (moral) “vocabulary available in a given culture” (Joas 2000: 134), but they do so in creative ways, i.e., they rephrase things, combine new elements and, thereby, also “modify” values and “produce new ones” (Joas 2000: 134).

Third, Weber’s distinction between value-spheres and life-orders helps to disentangle the various ways in which economic actions related to work may have a moral meaning.²³ Although Weber claimed in an often cited quote “The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so”

²² See Terpe (2016) for a more detailed description of these moral dynamics.

²³ With ‘work sphere’ only a segment of the broader ‘economic sphere’ is addressed. The latter has still other possible connections to morality; see Swedberg (1998: 136f.) who indicates that the economic sphere may consist of moral ideas (and norms) not only regarding work, but also wealth and possession, trade and finance, economic change and technical innovation, or charity.

(Weber 1992: 123 [1978a: 203])²⁴, he acknowledged a multitude of different motivations as “decisive” for “economic activity under the conditions of a market economy” (Weber 1978: 110 [1972: 60]). In part, these motivations have a value-rational character, i.e., the economic sphere, or at least the sphere of one’s own work within it, has the quality of a value-sphere. Weber distinguished here between “those without substantial property”, but who can nevertheless “value economically productive work as a mode of life” and “those who enjoy a privileged position by virtue of wealth or (...) education” and who are motivated by “the valuation as a ‘calling’ of types of work enjoying high prestige, such as intellectual work, artistic performance, and work involving high technical competence” (Weber 1978b: 110 [1972: 60]). This latter motive is mentioned again when Weber points out that “motivations [to work] based on absolute values are usually the result of religious orientations or of the high social esteem in which the particular form of work as such is held” (Weber 1978b: 151 [1972: 87]). These quotations show that the core of a work ethic has to be seen in the appreciation of (a particular kind of) work as such, which leads to the interminability of actions thus motivated (see section 3), and that there are religious and other influences which may have shaped such an ethic. It is an empirical question whether a value-rational motivation for work is based on an appreciation of a particular kind of work or of work in general. Beyond that, a work ethic may also be coupled with the idea that one has to be good at what one does, and with further attitudes which are regarded as valuable (and which are often seen as an expression of a person’s moral character): for example, initiative, self-discipline, reliability or trustworthiness. This, too, is ultimately an empirical question.

Aside from such value-rational orientations toward work, Weber also cites purely instrumentally-rational motivations for economic actions aimed at “the satisfaction of one’s own wants” (Weber 1978b: 339 [1972: 199]): “all groups oriented merely toward want satisfaction resort to economic action only so far as the relation of supply and demand makes it necessary” (Weber 1978b: 340 [1972: 200]). In such cases the motivation to work comes from other sources, and work is seen only as a mean to fulfil various ‘wants’. Although, from that perspective, the work sphere might appear as a life-order in which one has to participate in order to reach one’s ends, economic actions may still be embedded in a moral sense. In fact, in many cases such economic actions are motivated by the value orientations of other spheres, e.g., the common wish to afford one’s family a ‘good life’ (whatever that means in concrete cases). Besides that, value-rational orientations in other spheres may be a driving force to start one’s own business, e.g., in order to promote the spreading of products, services or ideas which are regarded as good in a moral sense (e.g., nowadays, the founding of a kindergarten or of a shop for organic, fair-trade or local products). As long as there are no other opportunities to reach these aims, actors may expose themselves to the conditions of the market economy.

Summary

This paper introduced Max Weber’s idea of spheres of life as a heuristic tool for micro-sociological analysis, in particular for researching everyday life perceptions of the world people inhabit. It was argued that, from Weber’s perspective of methodological individualism, spheres of life exist as ideas in the minds of individual persons. Because individuals believe that these spheres are real or

²⁴ Or, as it was translated more recently by Kalberg: “The Puritan *wanted* to be a person with a vocational calling; we *must* be” (Weber 2011: 177 [1978a: 203]).

should be real, they orient their actions accordingly. Furthermore, against the background of methodological individualism and Weber's notion of ideal types, the number and character of spheres of life can only be determined empirically, from the perspective of actors themselves. Following Thomas Schwinn's distinction between value-spheres and life-orders, which remains implicit in Weber's writings, it was argued that these can be regarded as two fundamentally different modes of orientation toward spheres of life. While the inner logic of value-spheres is propelled by the interminable motivation of value-rational action, or, as Hans Joas would say, by the fact that value ideas 'attract us and give our life meaning', the inner logic of life-orders can be conceptualized as an attribution to orders which are perceived as having mere facticity. In contrast to experiencing the enactment of value commitments as an 'expression of our free will', life-orders are perceived as restrictions on our way of living. The dominant mode of orientation they motivate is that of instrumentally-rational action. Finally, I suggested differentiating life-orders, more systematically than Weber did, into those which are perceived as ruled by anonymous forces and those in which the workings of more concrete institutions and organizations are recognized. All these distinctions, I argue, provide useful tools for researching the possibilities of moral meaning, moral conflicts and dilemmas, as well as of moral dynamics in everyday life.

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