

**Philosophical Foundations of Social Research**  
**Professor Sambit Mallick**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati**  
**Week 4 (Max Weber- 2) : Lecture – 09**  
**Methodological Individualism and Interpretative Understanding of Social Action**

Welcome to the 9th lecture of this massive open online course on Philosophical Foundations of Social Research.

**Course outline**

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Week 3 (Two Lectures)	Week 4 (Three Lectures)
<b>Max Weber, Part 1</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Positivism and neo-Kantianism</li><li>• Methodology of social sciences</li></ul>	<b>Max Weber, Part 2</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Methodological individualism</li><li>• (Meaningful) social action</li><li>• Interpretative understanding (<i>Verstehen</i>) of social action: observatory and explanatory understanding</li><li>• Ideal types</li></ul>

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We are in the fourth week of this course, and the fourth week has been designed in such a manner that we are going to discuss the second part of Max Weber in terms of three lectures. And we have already discussed the first lecture.

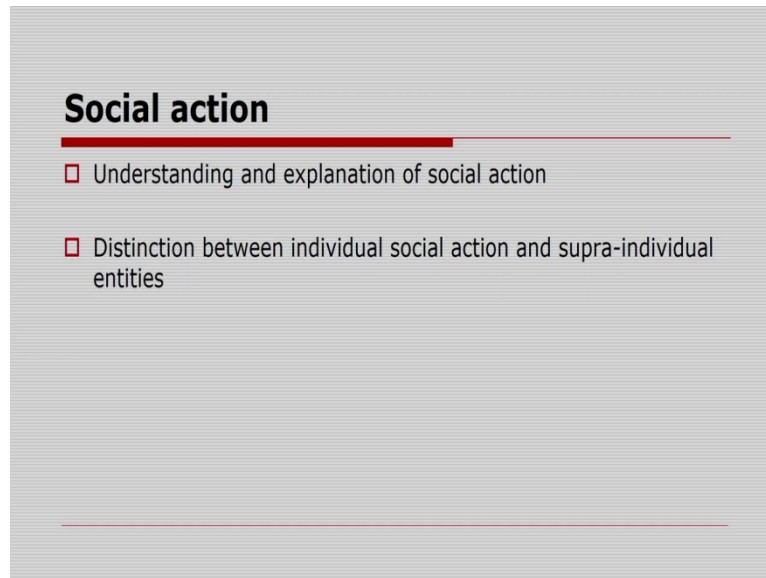
**Interpretative sociology**

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Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a *science* which attempts the *interpretative understanding of social action* in order thereby to arrive at a *causal explanation* of its course and effects.

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If you slightly recall that in the eighth lecture, we have discussed interpretative sociology, that is, in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here, according to Max Weber is a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and consequences or effects.



**Social action**

- Understanding and explanation of social action
- Distinction between individual social action and supra-individual entities

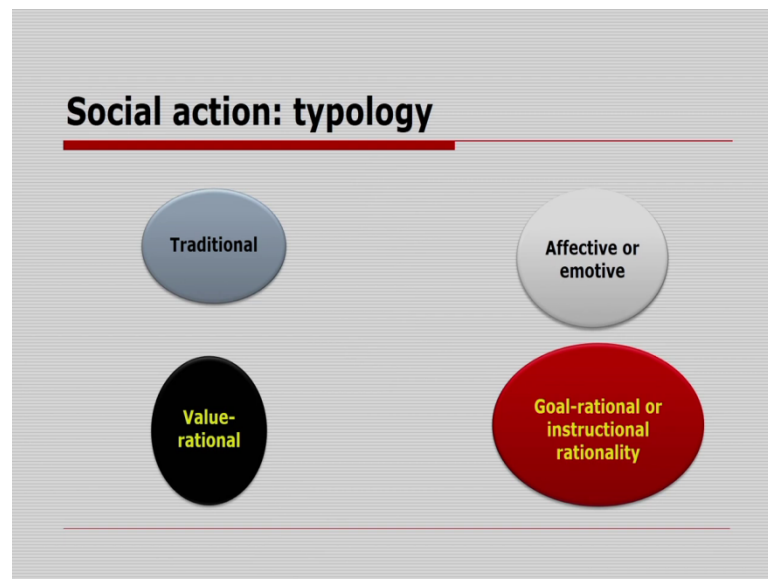
And we have also discussed social action, the characterization of sociology in terms of the understanding and explanation of social action that involves two important contrasts that we have discussed. First, Weber distinguishes the paradigmatic objects of sociological knowledge for him: what are the paradigmatic objects of sociological knowledge for Weber? Individual social actions their meanings and causes and so on.

And when Weber was trying to distinguish paradigmatic objects of sociological knowledge, individual social actions, meanings associated with or attached to individual action and the causes of individual social actions on the one hand, and Supra-individual entities on the other namely classes, states, collective consciousnesses, institutions and so on.

Weber was trying to make a distinction between individual social entities and supra individual social entities, whose existence is supposed in much sociological theorising and also everyday thinking about social relations. Of course, Weber does not deny the existence of such Supra individual social entities, but argues that for interpretive sociology, these Supra individual social entities must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons.

And that is how Weber's position here would be now regarded as a methodological individualist involving the claim that insofar as collectivity is may be used to have

characteristics independent of the individuals which make them up, these characteristics are to be explained in terms of individual actors and their actions.



And then we have discussed in the last class, what are the types of social action for Weber: there are four types of social action that we have discussed. Traditional social action, affective or emotive social action, value rational social action, and goal rational social action. And how traditional social action is based on habits and customs and it is unreflective in nature and hence meaningless; affective or emotive social action is based on emotions and hence unreflective and meaningless.

Whereas these two: value rational social action and goal rational social action, they are meaningful social action for Weber. Value rational social action is based on values, which are higher-order norms, moral values, aesthetic values, religious values, cognitive values and so on.

And goal rational social action is alternatively known as instrumental rationality, aims towards desired results. For this reason these desired results would justify the meanings associated with goal rational social action or instrumental rationality, these desired results will justify the causes the means; the end would justify the means in goal rational social action alternatively known as instrumental rationality.

And on the contrary, in value rational social action, these values, higher-order norms, I mean these aesthetic values, cognitive values, religious values, social values, they will determine the end. This is a typology of social action of Weber, that we have discussed.

## **Methodological individualism**

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- Adequate sociological accounts necessarily involve reference to persons, their interpretations of their circumstances, and the reasons and motives for the actions they take. Weber is of the opinion that such action by no means necessarily follows from the sharing of a common class-situation.
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## **Interpretative understanding of social action**

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- To grasp or 'understand' or interpret actors' meanings
  - 'Intentional' human action
  - Verstehen: not a method, but an objective, goal or achievement; understanding
  - Interpretation:
    - Textual and linguistic meaning of a cultural product
    - Value-interpretation
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In today's lecture we would reflect on methodological individualism and interpretative understanding of social action.

**Methodological individualism**

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□ Adequate sociological accounts necessarily involve reference to persons, their interpretations of their circumstances, and the reasons and motives for the actions they take. Weber is of the opinion that such action by no means necessarily follows from the sharing of a common class-situation.

Individual actions  
↓  
Social phenomena

What is this methodological individualism that we have discussed in the last class that Weber's position would now be regarded as methodological individualist that is involving the claim that insofar as the collectivities may be used to have characteristics independent of the individuals which make them up, those characteristics are to be explained in terms of the individual actors and their actions.

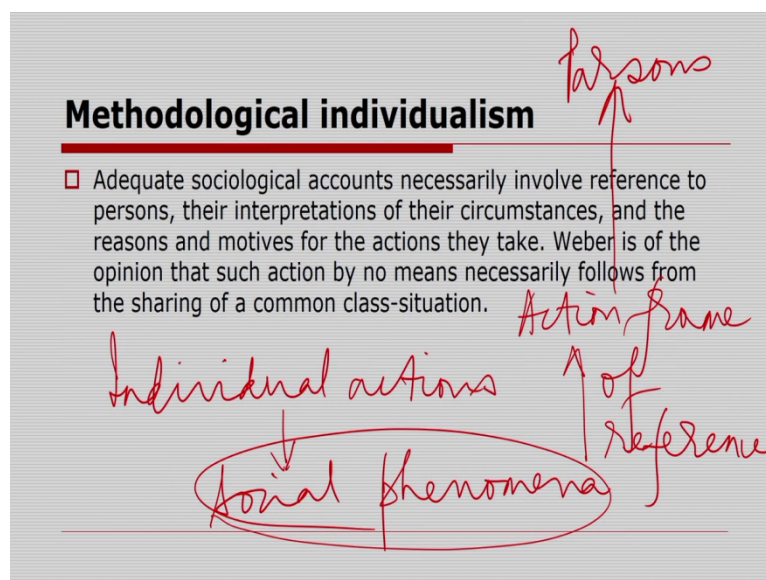
Then what is this methodological individualism? Methodological individualism refers to the theoretical positions that adequate sociological accounts must involve reference to individuals or persons, their interpretations of their circumstances and the reasons and motives for the actions that they take.

Weber is of the opinion that such action by no means necessarily follows from the sharing of a common class situation. For Weber, classes are determined by life chances and causal components. On the contrary, classes, according to Marx, are manifestations of economic differentiation. For this reason, Weber was highly critical of Marx that it cannot be based solely on economic considerations, rather class situation cannot solely determine our action.

There are many factors other than class, which determine our actions, which determine individual actions. Then, there are three important points, which we must try to understand in the context of methodological individualism: (1) that adequate sociological accounts must necessarily involve a reference to individuals or persons. (2) And how do individuals interpret their circumstances, it also differs from individual to individual. (3) Why individuals undertake certain actions in certain circumstances is the third one, why, reasons and motives, with the same reason with the same motive, our individual action may vary

depending on the personal accounts, individual accounts. That is why when we discuss Weberian methodological individualism, we must try to take note of three things, one is it must involve a reference to individuals or persons. Secondly, their interpretations of their circumstances, i.e. individuals interpretations of those individual circumstances and thirdly, the reasons and motives for the actions that they take. And in this context, Weber opines that such action by no means necessarily follows from the sharing of a class situation, that only economic considerations cannot be the sole reason for our individual actions, there may be many other things: our political ideological standpoints, our social circumstances, the family that we belong to, the friends that we make, the peers that we have. There are many other factors apart from economic or apart from material conditions which determine our actions. In this sense, Weber was trying to look at methodological individualism.

This doctrine of methodological individualism was introduced as a methodological precept for the social sciences by Max Weber most importantly in the first chapter of Economy and Society, which was first published in 1922. It amounts to the claim that social phenomena must be explained by demonstrating how they result from individual actions. It involves in other words, a commitment to the primacy of what Talcott Parsons later on would call the action frame of reference.



Weberian methodological individualism amounts to the claim that social phenomena must be explained by showing how they result from individual actions, which in turn must be explained through reference to intentional states that motivate the individual actors.

That is why goal rational social action or instrumental rationality assumes greater significance in the Weberian framework of typology of social action. In this sense, when Weber suggests that intentional human action, purposeful human action, it is nothing but goal oriented or goal rational social action, which is alternatively known as instrumental rationality.

That is why methodological individualism amounts to the claim that social phenomena must be explained through individual actions, which in turn must be explained through reference to the intentional states, instrumental rationality goal oriented social action, goal rational social action, purposeful social action, purposive social action and so on, which motivates individual actors. Methodological individualism in other words, involves a commitment to the primacy of what Parsons would later call action frame of reference.

It is sometimes described as the claim that explanations of macro social phenomena must be supplied with micro foundations, ones that specify an action theoretic mechanisms. The macro social phenomenon, macro collective social action, macro collective solidarity, macro collective consciousness, macro collective representations must be supplied with micro foundations of individual social action. If you slightly recall in the context of Durkheim, we have mentioned that collective is more important than the individual so far as philosophical foundations of social research, and research methods are concerned.

**Methodological individualism** / Holism

□ Adequate sociological accounts necessarily involve reference to persons, their interpretations of their circumstances, and the reasons and motives for the actions they take. Weber is of the opinion that such action by no means necessarily follows from the sharing of a common class-situation.

Macro — Collective  
Micro — Individual

In the context of Weber, individual becomes more primary as compared to the collective. That is why Jeffrey C Alexander is one of the neo-functionalists in the 1980 who suggested that explanations of macro social foundations must be supplied with micro foundations ones

that specify and action theoretic mechanism. Then when I say macro, it refers to the collective, when I say micro it refers to the individual.

A contrast is often drawn following the distinction between methodological individualism on the one hand, and methodological holism on the other. Methodological holism is often attributed to Marx and others, and that this is usually tendentious, since there are very few social scientists to describe themselves as methodological holists.

There are, however, forms of social scientific explanation with more active adherence that methodological individualism precludes or downgrades. These include, most importantly functionalism that is the reciprocity and complementarity of roles in the social division of labour, many types of sociobiology, mimetics or evolutionary cultural explanation, psychoanalytic in depth hermeneutic methods and any form of explanatory generalization grounded in purely statistical analysis.

Nevertheless, defenders of methodological individualism generally claim that it is an innocent doctrine devoid of any political or ideological content. Weber himself in *Economy and Society* of 1922 questioned that it is a tremendous misunderstanding to think that an individualistic methods should involve what is in any conceivable sense an individualistic system of values.

**Methodological individualism**

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Method →      values x

Please try to understand, when Weber said methodological individualism, he was trying to look at only individualistic method. It should not be confused with individualistic system of values. However, the doctrine of methodological individualism became embroiled in a



number of highly politicized debates during the 20th century largely because it was often invoked as a way of discrediting historical materialism of Marx.

Why methodological individualism, where it has been discredited with, precisely because when it is compared with historical materialism in the 20th century. There were two distinct rounds of controversy on this core. The first occurred primarily during the 1950s in response to the work of Friedrich von Hayek and Karl Popper. The second round occurred during the 1980s in response to John Elster, this time as part of critical debates within the movement known as Analytical Marxism. During the later period, methodological individualism became widely associated with what many called rational choice imperialism.

In the 50s, Hayek and Popper tried to look at the distinction between Weberian methodological individualism on the one hand, and Marx's materialist conception of history on the other, and in the 80s how Elster contributed to the critical debates within the movement known as analytical marxism.

Popper's reflections on the logic of scientific discovery, conjectures and refutations, the open society and its enemies, provided different methods of science: how science must start with identifying a problem and then it must provide a tentative solution to a problem or hunch in the form of a hypothesis and that hypothesis should be falsified and that the systematic falsification may result in refutation of the hypothesis or corroboration of the hypothesis. Corroboration means keeping the hypothesis permanently tentative.

We will discuss this in detail in sixth week when we will be discussing Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn. In Popper's principle of falsification in the context of discovery and context of justification, hypothetical deductive model and verisimilitude and so on. But for the time being, what we are trying to do we are trying to look at methodological individualism only as an individualistic method, not as an individualistic system of values.

The phrase 'methodological individualism' was actually coined not by Weber, but by Weber's student, Joseph Schumpeter in 1908 and then in 1909 in the Quarterly Journal of Economics. He wrote on the concept of social value, and the theory of innovation and so on. Schumpeter's views on how social change has been made possible through traditional society, He tried to conceptualize change in terms of five stages, traditional society, then pre takeoff, then takeoff, then drive to maturity, and high mass consumption. Of course, this is not a part

of this course but I am just trying to refer to how Schumpeter tried to look at the concept of social values, social change, and so on.

**Methodological individualism**

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*social phenomena - social collectivity  
states/institutions/classes/  
business corporations/associations/foundations*

In economy and society of 1922, Max Weber astutely articulates the central precept of methodological individualism in this way: that while discussing social phenomena, we very often talk about social collectivities such as states, associations, supra-individuals social entities, institutions, states, classes, collective-consciousnesses, associations, business corporations, foundations, and so on, as if they were individual persons. Suppose if I say states, institutions, classes, associations, foundations, business corporations, though they are part of social collectivities, but we treat them as individual persons.

Thus we talk about them having plans, performing action, suffering losses and so forth. If I say Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, this is a part of social collectivity, but when we discuss the performance of the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, we tend to treat them as individual entities.. Thus, we talk about them having plans, performing actions, suffering losses and so on and so forth.

The doctrine of methodological individualism does not take issue with these ordinary ways of speaking, it merely stipulates that in sociological work, these collectivities must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individuals or individual persons.

Since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action. And for Weber, the commitment to methodological individualism is very closely related to the commitment of Verstehen. We will discuss verstehen slowly in a couple of minutes.

Verstehen in German means understanding, social action, how to interpret individual social action and so on.

**Methodological individualism**

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*Action - Subjectively understandable*

For Weber, the commitment to methodological individualism is very much closely related to the commitment to verstehen or interpretive patterns of explanation in sociology. The reason for privileged individual action in sociological explanation is that only action is subjectively understandable.

Weber reserves the term action to refer to the subset of human behaviour that is motivated by linguistically formulated or meaningful mental states. For example, generally speaking, if I cough, coughing is behaviour, but when I cough I say sorry. I tend to apologize. That when coughing is behaviour, apologizing afterwards is action. That is why, for Weber action is nothing but the subset of human behaviour that is motivated by linguistically formulated or meaningful mental states.

We can say that the defining characteristic of an action is that it is motivated by a mental state with propositional content that is an intentional state. Why coughing is merely behaviour or coughing is not action, because we cough not with a purpose in mind. It is not intentional. It does not have a goal or something. We cough because of certain behavioural change within the body, and we cough, but when we apologize, we say sorry, I say "Sorry, excuse me, please" then this is Part of intentional human action. We will we will see how it happens.

Now, the importance of the significance of action for Weber is that we have interpretive access to it by virtue of our capacity to understand the agent's underlying motive. And this

permits the social scientist to accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely, the subjective understanding of the action of the component individuals.

Action theoretic explanation is central to socio scientific analysis. Therefore, because without knowing why people do what they do, we do not really understand why any of the large scale phenomenon with which they are embroiled occur. Thus methodological individualism is a slightly misleading term since the goal is not to privilege the individual over the collective in social scientific explanation, but rather to privilege the action theoretic level of explanation.

### **Methodological individualism**

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*Action-theoretic level of explanation*

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This is how methodological individualism must be examined. And this privileging of the action theoretic level of explanation is methodological, because it is imposed by the structure of interpretive social science, where the goal is to provide an understanding of social phenomena and the understanding of social phenomena, understanding of social action, it involves certain interpretation.

## Interpretative understanding of social action

- To grasp or 'understand' or interpret actors' meanings
- 'Intentional' human action
- Verstehen: not a method, but an objective, goal or achievement; understanding
- Interpretation:
  - Textual and linguistic meaning of a cultural product
  - Value-interpretation

*Rational*

*Ideal types*

Actions can be understood in a way that other social phenomena cannot precisely because they are motivated by intentional human action, intentional states, yet only individuals possess intentional states and so, the methodological privileging of actions entails the methodological privileging of individuals.

Thus, the individualism in methodological individualism is more a by-product of its central theoretical commitment than a motivating factor. This is what defenders of the doctrine have tried to communicate with greater or lesser degrees of success by claiming that it is politically or ideologically neutral, this methodological individualism. In this sense, Weber's commitment to methodological individualism is closely related to his more or less methodological doctrine, that is the theory of ideal types.

Historical explanation may make reference to the actual content of the intentional states that motivated particular historical actors but the sociologist is interested in producing much more abstract explanatory generalizations and so cannot appeal to the specific motives of particular individuals. Thus, sociological theory must be based on a model of human action. And because of the constraints that interpretation imposes, this model must be a model of a rational human action, goal rational social action or value rational social action.

For Weber, it is convenient to treat all irrational, effectual determined elements of behaviour as factors of deviation from a conceptually pure type of social action. Interpretive sociology refers to a form of sociology united by an emphasis on the necessity for sociologists to grasp, to understand or interpret actor's meanings. It can legitimately interpret the course of action in terms of concepts such as supra individual social entities, namely the states, classes,

collective consciousness, private corporations, foundations, institutions, organizations and so on.

Further interpretive understanding refers to a method that emphasizes on the importance of understanding intentional human action or purposive social human action, goal oriented, goal rational social action which is alternatively known as instrumental rationality.

That is why when I said Weber dwelt upon interpretive sociology by making a reference to a variety of forms of sociology united by an emphasis on the necessity for sociologists to grasp or understand or interpret, actors meanings, it can legitimately interpret course of action in terms of concepts such as Supra-individual social entities, namely states, collective consciousnesses, institutions, organizations, foundations and so on, without any commitment to any of these entities.

Further, interpretative understanding refers to a method that emphasis on the importance of understanding intentional human action. Semantically, any account is an interpretation. Weber considers verstehen to be a method of elucidating the motivations for action: What motivates me to act in a particular way, which did not preclude sociologists making generalizations from the data.

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*Method* (handwritten in red, with an arrow pointing to the 'Interpretation' section)

*Empathy* (handwritten in red)

In some, whilst there is a general commitment to empathy. Empathy means understanding the role of the other. That is why when we say that, each stakeholder must understand the need of the other, must understand the role of the other, the government must understand the needs of the citizens, the limitations of the citizens, the people at large, at the same time, the people the citizens must understand the constraints of the government in policy formulation.

In this sense, empathy is used as understanding the needs of the other. Whilst there is a general commitment to empathy and understanding from the actor's point of view, the research that flows from interpretation is so varied as to be difficult to categorize as a school possibly because the meaning of interpretation is itself subject to interpretation.

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*Interpretation of Interpretations*

We tend to arrive at multiple interpretations, and not only multiple interpretations, but interpretation of those multiple interpretations. In this case, verstehen is not a method at all, it is a method for Weber to elucidate the motivations of action, but in the context of interpretation of interpretations, it is not a method at all, but an objective or goal or an achievement. It is a distinctive type of knowledge which may be achieved by a variety of methods or by no method at all.

**Interpretative understanding of social action**

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*→ Spontaneous and immediate recognition of the acts and their meanings in everyday life*

For Weber, the concept of verstehen refers primarily to the spontaneous and immediate recognition of the acts and their meanings in everyday life. And thus interpretive understanding has two parts; interpretation at the textual and linguistic meaning of a cultural product.

**Interpretative understanding of social action**

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*Handwritten notes in red ink:*  
Social Aesthetic  
Cognitive  
Selective conceptualization of the object in relation to some value

Suppose, if I say in the context of Assam, tea is a cultural product, the Gamucha that we use is a cultural product. Handloom products, they are also part of cultural products, they have deep rooted textual and linguistic meaning and secondly, value interpretation.

This value interpretation does not involve evaluation of action or product, but it involves selective generalization, conceptualization of the object in relation to some value. And when I say some value, this value maybe social value, maybe aesthetic value, maybe cognitive value, maybe religious value and so on.

In this sense, Weber tried to look at an interpretive understanding, I mean in the interpretation of the textual and linguistic meaning of a cultural product and value interpretation does not involve evaluation of action or product, but involves selective conceptualization of the object in relation to some value, value maybe in terms of social value, maybe aesthetic value or cognitive value.

When Weber was trying to understand or interpret verstehen, Weber would primarily be concerned with the question of objectivity and subjectivity going on to make a distinction between social action from social behaviour.



## **Interpretative understanding of social action**

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*Objectivity / Subjectivity*

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Noting that social action must be understood through how individuals subjectively related to one another. Study of social action through interpretive means of verstehen or to understand must be based on understanding subjective meaning and goal or purpose or aim or objective that individuals attached to their actions.

And social actions may have easily identifiable and objective means, but much more subjective ends and the understanding of those ends by a scientist now is subject to yet another layer of subjective understanding that of the scientist.

Weber noted the importance of subjectivity in social sciences makes creation of foolproof universal large much more difficult than in natural sciences, and that the amount of objective knowledge that social sciences may achieve is precariously limited for Weber. What he wrote in objectivity in social science that that there is no absolutely objective scientific analysis of culture and so on.

## Methodological individualism

- Adequate sociological accounts necessarily involve reference to persons, their interpretations of their circumstances, and the reasons and motives for the actions they take. Weber is of the opinion that such action by no means necessarily follows from the sharing of a common class-situation.

Action-theoretic level of explanation

Then what we have discussed in today's lecture, we have discussed methodological individualism, I mean, which refers to the theoretical positions that adequate sociological accounts must necessarily involve reference to at least three things, one is individuals or persons and their interpretations of their circumstances and thirdly, their reasons and motives for the actions that they take.

And Weber is of the view that such action by no means, necessarily follows from the sharing of a common class situation. And we have discussed in today's lecture, interpretative understanding of social action to grasp or understand or interpret actor's meanings, and how it is related to intentional or purposive human action or goal oriented or goal rational social action, which is alternatively known as instrumental rationality.

Then we have discussed how verstehen is a method to elucidate actor's meanings and at the same time, it may not be a method, but an objective or a goal or an achievement to understand intentional human action and how verstehen may be used to make a distinction between objectivity and subjectivity in social sciences, to make a distinction between social action and social behaviour: that is why I gave you the example of coughing and apologizing later on, and how you tend to interpret which leads to interpretation of interpretations.

And interpretation has two parts, I mean, two important parts, that is interpretation of the textual and linguistic meaning of a cultural product. And value interpretation does not involve evaluation of an action or product, but involves selective conceptualization of the object in relation to some value, maybe social value, aesthetic value or cognitive value or religious value and so on.

## Methodological implications

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- Selection
- Value
- Interpretive understanding
- Culture
- Verstehen: imaginative identification, rationality
- Explanation: meaning and statistical generalizations
- Adequacy - Generalizations - Experience
- Multiple Causes - Single Effect model
- Economic, religious and power relations
- Economic phenomena, economically relevant phenomena and economically conditioned phenomena

In the next lecture, what we are going to do, we are going to discuss the methodological implications of Weber's contributions to philosophical foundations of social research. What are the methodological implications in terms of selection of research topic, value, interpretive understanding culture, verstehen, adequacy, multiple causes, single effect model, economic, religious and power relations, how they are interrelated and economic phenomena, economically relevant phenomena and economically conditioned phenomena.

And then we will end the lectures of the fourth week. And today, we have completed the lecture of the ninth week, and then we will have one more lecture in this week. Thank you.