

How Can Worldviews Be Compared? The pragmatic maxim and intellectual honesty¹

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1. Worldviews

When reference is made to a specific worldview, this presupposes one or more alternatives. Worldviews or *Weltbeziehungen* are spoken of in the plural from the perspective of scientific observation. Accordingly, the research program of the Max-Weber-Kolleg focuses on the cultural pluralism of attractive, repulsive, or indifferent *Weltbeziehungen*. But from which point of view can worldviews be compared at all, if this comparison is supposed to go beyond personal presuppositions and evaluations and makes claims to be methodically controlled and scientific? The complexity of the question is increased by the fact that worldviews are not only theories that can be related to each other in an abstract metalanguage, but that worldviews also and above all concern life practice and are expressed in the respective conduct of life. The difficulty of comparing worldviews is exemplified by the topic of faith and knowledge, in the comparison of religious and secular worldviews—as, e.g., recently in Jürgen Habermas’s attempt in *Also a History of Philosophy* (Habermas 2019) to justify from a philosophical perspective the relevance of specific religious traditions for the political discourse of a secular modernity. This chapter will present an American and a European reflection on the problem of referencing and comparing worldviews associated with the names of William James and Max Weber. The fact that in both cases the dimension of space has special significance—on the one hand the metaphor of the hotel corridor and on the other hand the real

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lecture hall—seems a favourable coincidence for the contribution to a book published on the occasion of the Max-Weber-Kolleg's move into the new research building “*Weltbeziehungen*”.

2. James' corridor

The claim of pragmatism to be the superior scientific method of modernity was captured by William James in the seductive image of a long hotel corridor that leads on between the individual rooms on the right and left, always in their center: In one room

“you may find a man writing an atheistic volume, in the next someone on his knees praying for faith and strength, in a third a chemist investigating a body's properties. In a fourth, a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth, the impossibility of all metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.” (James 1995, 21 f.; with reference to Giovanni Papini)

It may then follow from this constellation that pragmatism has “no *fundamental* prejudice against theology” (ibid., 74). The corridor image is perplexing because the methodological middle can be understood as the highest science nevertheless in a hierarchy in relation to all others, while at the same time a complete plurality of all rooms is assumed, which on quasi-neutral terrain no longer form opposites. But is it conceivable that the alternative between atheism and theism is dissolved, while both are convinced of their truth each for itself? (cf. Hingst 2000, 46) The common of the different can probably only be found in the fact that the superiority, the basic understanding or the basic attitude of the sciences, pragmatistically conceived, consists in the fact that there is always the same or at least a comparable basic structure: belief—doubt—(new) behavior, which at the same time compels to the respective truthfulness and consistently recognizes the complete truth as identifiable only in the process of its formation (“in the long run”).

Unlike W. James, who does not want to admit abstract objectivism (“metaphysics”) for the pragmatic “method,” Charles S. Peirce always thematizes the basic structure of the pragmatic maxim also in itself: as logic of research (abduction, deduction, induction), logic as semiotics, threefold category theory, evolutionary metaphysics—thus comprehensively employed in terms of the theory of science and phenomenological life practice, com-

mitted to the existential *unavailability* of existence (cf. Rosa 2018, 67) as much as to the law of nature or the *regularity of behaviour*. The “basic reliability” (Ohly 2017, 50) of the world of life and science, which is presupposed in all sciences, is taken up in pragmatism according to its structure, interpreted, and checked in its claim to generalizability. The more attention is paid to the *creative* basic reliability itself, the clearer the access to the religious or theological dimension in the respective case becomes.

In the following, this basic structure (cf. Deuser 2014, 149–72) will be applied in contrast: To clarify the science-theoretical role of the subject in situations of action—by use, “by their fruits you shall know them.”

3. The wall of natural sciences

Max Weber’s ranking of the competing sciences comes surprisingly close to the corridor image, though this ranking is conceived entirely from the methodological opposition of natural sciences and humanities or cultural sciences. The corridor, to remain in the image, would then be the long demarcation between the natural sciences on one side of the corridor and the cultural sciences on the other, in such a way that when the room doors on the left are opened, those on the right must remain closed—and vice versa. Weber speaks of “incompatibility” and “unacceptability” or also: that *value* judgments (as personal standpoints necessarily at home in the field of culture) have no place in the lecture hall (Weber 1994, 20). But the analysis of this complex relationship, that is, the question of whether the corridor itself has become functionless or whether it needs to be rethought “from its end,” becomes even more important now. The founders of (American) pragmatism were natural scientists who were precisely trying to work out the *scientific*, the inner connection between methodologically different disciplines. Weber, on the other hand, is up against the wall of the natural sciences, which now seem to demand the separation of culture as a matter of course. At the same time, however, Weber is working precisely on the independence of a “lecture hall” for cultural studies to thematize cultural values. Theology thereby becomes a special case (*ibid.*, 21), the particularity of which can be proven with examples from the history of religion, while the actual problem, the concept of revelation, takes the functional place of a (religion-)philosophical justification, with which a bridge (instead of a corridor which image no longer fits) could be built. Weber’s concept of

“disenchantment” limits the validity of theology, which at this point can only be drawn from a—at least respectable—“*quia absurdum*.” But then there remains again only an “unbridgeable” opposition, now of the “value sphere of ‘science’” and that of “religious salvation” (ibid., 22).

4. Subjectivity and contingency

This description of the situation is inevitable because Weber sees the natural sciences as bound to finding facts, while the values in a cultural community as to how one should “act” denote “wholly *heterogeneous* problems.” Here, however, it can be observed how Weber, on the one hand, sees the realm of values downgraded to the activities of “prophets” and “demagogues” who speak in the marketplace; but, on the other hand, concedes the inevitability of “errors” and “subjective sympathy,” which brings up “one’s own conscience” and the “duty to seek the truth”. This last, apparently, cannot and must not be absent: that is what “intellectual honesty” (ibid., 15; cf. Harrington 2012, 100), the scholar’s probity, dictates. But in which room in the corridor of the sciences can cultural studies (e.g., philosophy of religion), demarcated by the natural sciences, take up residence? Or does it, in the sense of James’ pragmatism, stand in the place and function of the corridor? Or at its end, in whose horizon nature and culture integrate? This seems only conceivable if the sense of “subjectivity *and* contingency” (Joas 1999, 40) can be acknowledged by both sides as a condition of understanding and as a task—a much more far-reaching question than the case of conflict referred to by Weber: that a Freemason and a Catholic would not be able to agree on the presuppositions or presuppositionlessness of science; all the more so if one side would refer to miracles and revelation for argumentation (Weber 1994, 16). And would not intellectual honesty consist precisely in the fact that the sciences have the moral duty to enlighten about facts?

5. Religiously musical

What Weber understands by value-commitment in his context has several aspects (cf. Joas 1999, 40):

1. The different “spheres of value” can be empirically-historically discerned and scientifically represented.
2. An objective “value sphere” in the sense of the metaphysical tradition need not and can no longer be assumed. Here, the thesis of “disenchantment” has its philosophical application which results from the authoritative position of natural scientific epistemology.
3. The role of subjectivity (in other theoretical language: the relation to one’s own existence) is value-related indispensable, but in its sphere of action it cannot be decided scientifically in cases of conflict and thus it falls outside of public rationality. Moreover, for clarification, the esoteric misconception of prophetic-demonic attitudes must still be excluded from scientific communication, e.g., “Catheder prophecy”—i.e., “surrogates” (Weber 1994, 23) of a powerful religious tradition that has lost its socially immediate power in modernity. Once the genesis of religion is understood, its validity diminishes (cf. Weber 2005, ch. 1).
4. The moral duty and obligation thus results from a twofold value requirement: On the one hand, the scientific-theoretical separation of natural and (empirical-historical) cultural approaches, and on the other hand, the sensitivity for the resulting responsibility for the right to have value commitments, so long as they are preserved from populist deviations.
5. In objective as well as in subjective reference no pre-ordered determinations of being or essence prevail, but the historicity of existence describes the factual situation: contingency. That this applies to subjective experiences as well as to the “pure” natural sciences entails the rediscovery of continuity (in spite of contingency, cf. Deuser 1990), and shows the prospect of a broad plural dialogue situation (W. James’ corridor), as it was not yet to be expected in Weber’s time in Germany, i.e. the bridge between the separated spheres seems possible (cf. detailed Haudel 2021).
6. But the “final word on life” then remains scientifically inaccessible. What seems possible is a process of interpretation (Weber 1994, 13, 21 f.) or an optional (existential) decisiveness that can be chosen depending on the situation and the level of scientific education, which has its theory-tested, classical model in the Augustinian *quia absurdum*. In Weber’s view, however, this is only a “sacrifice of the intellect”, which one can make or not. It is a question of individual talent and subjective, aesthetic taste to be “religiously ‘musical’” or not. “Revelations” or “sacred states” are in any case excluded by the spirit of the sciences (ibid., 21 f.). By the way, the *quia absurdum* is also found towards the end of Weber’s

famous intermediary consideration: “There is by no means *any* unbroken religion, operating as a life-power, which would not have to demand at some point the ‘credo non quod, sed *quia* absurdum,’—the ‘sacrifice of the intellect’” (Weber 1920, 566).

6. The complicated demand for honesty

If Weber methodologically emphasizes intellectual honesty in this way in his science lecture and also demonstrates it practically in the lecture situation, it remains to be noted, however, that the concept of honesty itself is less unambiguous than his repeated appeal to act with plain and simple honesty suggests. When Nietzsche, to whom Weber refers with his call for intellectual honesty (cf. Bormuth 2018), exhorts the virtue of honesty in the context of his critical genealogy of Christianity, he remains aware of the not least Christian prehistory of this virtue, the demand for unreserved truthfulness. Therefore, a distinction must be made between honesty as an instrument in a concrete situation and honesty as an end in itself (cf. Kleinert 2012; Meier 2023, 95 f., 98). This can also be illustrated by Kierkegaard’s newspaper article “What do I want?” which demands honesty with great vehemence as a minimal demand in a time of confusion between Christian heritage, a secularized church, and a religiously indifferent mass society (Kierkegaard 1994). The demand for honesty must not be detached from the historical situation and set absolute, otherwise it develops a dynamic of its own, in which one’s own truthfulness can only be proven in the compulsive uncovering of the other’s untruthfulness. In contrast, intellectual honesty also and above all shows itself in the disposition for constant self-reflection, for the thematization of one’s own world view. Through this processuality, the perspectives only hinted at here, the pragmatism of William James and the theory of science of Max Weber, can be brought closer together. How the disposition for repeated self-reflection can be aptly expressed in the title of an essay has been shown by Ernst Tugendhat (2007): “*Retraktationen zur intellektuellen Redlichkeit*” (“Retractions to intellectual honesty”).

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