Understanding Lived Experience: 
Max Weber’s Intellectual Relationship to Simmel, Husserl, James, Starbuck, and Jaspers

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Abstract
Existing research has paid insufficient attention to Weber’s references to his own epistemological and methodological sources concerning the problem of Verstehen, that is, the problem of understanding someone else’s lived experiences. This essay reconsiders works by Simmel, Husserl, James, Starbuck and Jaspers that Weber quoted as relevant for this problem. While these authors may have exerted influence on Weber, this article will examine the points of agreement and disagreement that Weber demonstrates in his intellectual relationship with them. In summary, Weber disagreed with Simmel’s psychological notion of Verstehen, concurred with Husserl’s limitation on re-experience, was stimulated by William James and Starbuck’s research into religious experience, and held the concept of world-image in common with Jaspers. Examining how these authors formulated and employed their conception of Verstehen may accordingly cast light on Weber’s own conception.

Keywords: Verstehen, Weber’s intellectual context, lived experience, worldviews, causal explanation.

Introduction
A substantial and growing secondary literature has developed on Weber’s work in general, and more specifically on his concept of Verstehen (see for example Burger 1987: 103-111; Buss 1999; Kaesler 1979: 175-78, 275-76; Weiss 1975: 45-64) and the so-called Protestant ethic thesis (Kalberg 2002; Marshall 1982; Seyfarth 1973). To a much lesser extent, however, the literature has focused on how these two themes might be related. There has been little research, accordingly, on how Weber used the Verstehen method while investigating the ‘surprisingly strong congruence’ (Weber 1910: 581) of the Protestant ethic with the spirit of capitalism, and indirectly, of Protestantism with capitalism. What is more, the extant research has paid insufficient attention to Weber’s references to his own epistemological and methodological sources concerning the problem of understanding someone else’s lived experiences and religious experiences.
in particular. This essay sets out to amend this flaw, at least to some extent, by considering those works by Simmel, Husserl, William James, Starbuck, and Jaspers that Weber quoted as relevant for this problem. It will not be argued here that any of such authors exerted influence on Weber, no matter how plausible this thesis may be. Rather, it will be argued that he concurred or disagreed with what they maintained in this connection, and in this sense formed an intellectual relationship to them that was consonant or oppositional. This then allows Weber’s own formulation for the concept of *Verstehen* to emerge from this context. Debates, reactions, and critical assessments or endorsements (though not necessarily reception) of their contributions constitute this context.

*The problem of Verstehen: Weber’s relation to Simmel*

In his epistemological and methodological works, most notably in the second and third part of his essay on Roscher and Knies, elsewhere Weber referred to Simmel’s epistemology of the historical science, and especially to *Problems of the Philosophy of History*. His references concerned its 1905 edition (Simmel 1905; Weber 1973: 42-145, 237 n. 2) where Simmel’s contribution was critically evaluated. In this connection, Simmel’s conception of *Verstehen* will be presented first followed by Weber’s critical appraisals that were formative for his own conception. Simmel formulated his conception not only in the *Problems of the Philosophy of History* (reference will be made here to the 1905 and 1907 editions), but also in other and subsequent works (Simmel 1916; 1918). These works were probably unknown to Weber, but they provide the wider picture of Simmel’s conception of *Verstehen*.

Simmel, accordingly, formulated his conception in the context of a discussion of how historical knowledge — that is, knowledge of past events, lived and produced by other people — is possible. Such a conception may be epitomized as follows: historical knowledge is not objective, in the sense that everybody might grasp and understand historical events in the same way (though it is objective in another sense, as we shall see presently). Rather, this knowledge is subjective, for it is contingent on the historian’s ability to relive past events, select them according to his or her viewpoint, and make them intelligible by means of concepts. Past events are reconstructed as historical individuals. Whether they were real persons such as Julius Caesar, or epochs such as the Renaissance, in any case the historian must be able to relive within his or her self their unique individuality (*Individualität*) as a unitary form and consistent totality. This totality, which is reconstructed out of the psychic elements found in its products and selected as relevant by the historian, constitutes the object of his or her understanding.

Understanding, accordingly, does not concern empirical reality, but rather its psychological form, which the historian partakes in by reliving it as a totality and in its constituent elements, and makes it intelligible by means of a conceptual framework. Understanding an historical psychological form is subjective, in that its psychological elements must be understood, but it is also objective, in the sense that it is not arbitrary, and there is only one correct mode of understanding. Works of art, literary texts, or any other human product may also be understood and reconstructed as a coherent totality. Still, understanding a work of art or other human product is conducted according to some external criterion—aesthetic, or ethical, or some other—whereas only historical individuals make psychological understanding necessary. An historian with a strong ‘personality’ facilitates his or her understanding of an historical subject; the more so as the more clearly profiled is the individuality of this object. By way of summary, there is a plurality of modes to understand objectively, a human product, according to the criterion that has been chosen. There is, however, only one correct understanding of an historical subject, intuitively grasped as a consistent totality by the historian (Simmel 1905: 27-28, 35, 37, 42, 46, 51, 52, 56, 50-57, 61, 65, 69, 77, 129-30. The 1907 edition of *Problems of the Philosophy of History* contains some textual integration. See also Simmel 1916: 60; 1918: 72-75).

As mentioned, Weber referred several times to Simmel insofar as the problem of *Verstehen* is concerned. These references were mostly critical, and may be epitomized as follows. Weber concurs with Simmel in distinguishing between subjective and objective understanding, and contending that there may be as many modes of objective understanding as the number of criteria (aesthetic, ethical, etc.) that have been used. Also, both authors maintain that history or other disciplines cannot replicate reality. Objective knowledge indicates, in this case, consistency with the particular criterion that has been chosen, and involves no interpretative understanding. However, interpretative understanding of any interaction—whether past or present—cannot claim to be objectively valid. History or other disciplines cannot replicate reality, as history and the other sciences, Weber contends in contrast to Simmel, rest their claims that the other sciences provide objective knowledge on the causal verification of hypotheses. The social sciences, including history, resort to ideal types in order to conduct causal imputation.

Weber’s ideal types are in many ways similar to Simmel’s concepts. For they involve the selection of elements from the particular reality, which is the object of investigation, according to some criterion of relevance, and ultimately, to some guiding value. They also imply the condensation of
these elements in a concept, or ideal type, which is formulated for the purpose of obtaining knowledge on that reality. The differences are important, however. Weber provides much more information than Simmel on how to construct these concepts, and makes them instrumental to the goal of obtaining knowledge not of historical events alone, but of the social sciences in general. Furthermore, this conceptual knowledge does not serve the purpose of understanding some unique spiritual totality (a metaphysical entity, according to Weber), but rather of performing causal imputation. The historian’s own personality may facilitate the professional task of finding the presence of some values in historical individuals or events. Clearly profiled historical individuals or subjects, likewise, make prevailing values more apparent, and thereby facilitate the historian’s task of selecting by reference to his or her values the object of inquiry (Weber 1973: 94-95, 100-101 n. 2, 119-26, 136-37, 178-81, 190-95, 427 n. 1. See also Segre 1987: 30-35).

The problem of Verstehen: Weber’s relation to Husserl

Weber’s few references to Edmund Husserl are all to be found in the second and third part, originally published in 1905, of his unfinished critical essay on Roscher and Knies (Weber 1973: 42-143). Husserl was one of the few authors on whom Weber relied without reservations in this essay. The references bear on the problem of how it is possible to understand someone else’s experiences without having direct access to them. In addition to this problem, which concerns ordinary people as well as social scientists, Weber also discussed in the Roscher and Knies essay the related problem, which concerns social scientists only, of providing valid explanations of what has been the object of understanding (Weber 1973: 65-69. See also Bruun 1972: 135-39; Burger 1977; Hekman 1979; Weiss 1975: 52-53). Weber’s citations regarded some passages of the second volume of Husserl’s Logical Investigations (first edition, published in 1901. For an introduction to this work, see Civita 1982: 307-82). A joint consideration of these passages (Husserl 1901: 333, 607, 637-52, 703; Weber 1973: 77, 102, 109-10) may cast light on those epistemological propositions by Husserl that were subsequently incorporated in Weber’s conception of Verstehen. To this extent, it may not be too far-fetched to maintain that there is a unitary Husserl/Weber conception of understanding, insofar as lived experiences are concerned, irrespective of their differing theoretical positions—respectively, phenomenological and neo-Kantian. This conception, based on Verstehen, holds that it is not possible to obtain a direct intuition of someone else’s mental processes and that all knowledge is conceptual knowledge, and may be briefly presented as follows:
• Inner experiences—namely, the experiences of oneself, one’s own sentiments, desires, physical activities—are not more certain or real than outer experiences, that is, experiences of external things.

• One cannot live again, or reproduce, someone else’s, or our own, past experience, for this reproduction would constitute a new experience, based on the conceptual (or categorical) knowledge that is in the original experience, once it has become the object of a judgment (Urteil). Husserl and Weber held that judgments are not contained in perceptions, but rather give them a form, and thereby make knowledge—all knowledge—possible. Any judgment abstracts from the objects of a given perception, and makes it possible to formulate general concepts, and thereby obtain general knowledge.

• All knowledge, and all empirical disciplines, presuppose knowledge of objects. The empirical ‘I’, whether it refers to its own lived experiences or to some outer object, may become the object of observations and is, accordingly, objectively given to the observing subject. All empirical disciplines based upon Verstehen, that is upon understanding one’s own or others’ lived experiences, are then objective, in the sense that they strive to formulate valid judgments on facts and their connections.

The problem of Verstehen: Weber’s relationship to James and Starbuck

This relationship, which Weberian scholarship did not explore until recent times, should not be necessarily construed as one of influence of these two authors on Weber. He may have formulated his concept of understanding lived experiences independently. There was a consonance, however, between his formulation and theirs. Accordingly, Lawrence Scaff (1998) and Wilhelm Hennis (1998) deserve praise for their attempts to cast light on Weber’s reception of James’ The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902). They have called attention for the purpose of their argumentation not only to Weber’s quotations of James and this work in particular, but also to themes that James touched upon and Weber subsequently developed. Among such themes were James’ methodological individualism, his explicit use of ideal typical concepts, his emphasis on the influence of religion on human action, and especially his focus on the influence of religious ethics on economic action. Scaff, in particular, focuses on Weber’s direct experience of ‘the survival of sectarian forms in a secularized society’ (Scaff 1998: 67), as occurred in the United States,

During the visit Weber met William James, as Max Weber himself later recalled. What Weber then knew of James’ work is not known. Weber’s first reference to James’ The Varieties of Religious Experience was made in 1912, as we shall see presently. The conversation topic concerned the extent to which the Protestant ethic still survived in the middle-class ethos, notably the business ethos (Scaff 1998: 67; Weber 2002: 133). In Scaff’s words, ‘the shared central theme of their encounter would have been the meaning of religious experience for personal and associational life’ in a society in which — according to Weber — religious consciousness was still significant for cultural and social life, albeit as a survival (Scaff 1998: 67). Thus, Weber was not interested merely in the religious experience as such of the American Protestant sects. Rather, he was interested in ‘their social reality, the rational pattern of personal legitimation’, and ultimately in their relevance for self-identity, the extant social order, and ‘democratic associational life’ (Scaff 1998: 69; see also Berger 1973: 242-51; Kalberg 2002: lv-lviii).

Hennis, for his part, has emphasized James’ alleged influence not only on Weber’s methodology of the social sciences, but also — what is more relevant in this connection — on his sociology of religion. James’ work — The Varieties of Religious Experience — directed Weber’s attention to the ‘practical impulses to action’, economic action in particular, that are ‘based on the psychological and pragmatic connections of religions’ (Weber 1922: 238). Aside from the possible influence of James’ pragmatism on Weber, on which we shall not dwell here (Hennis 1998: 96-97; see also Wellen 2001 for the relation between Weber and pragmatist philosophy), Weber contended, and as Hennis and other interpreters have stressed, that these impulses follow from the influence of religion on economic ethics and ultimately on life style or conduct (Lebensführung). In Hennis’ judgment, the influence of James’ work on Weber was important for a further reason, namely, that James provided an authoritative comparative investigation of different religious experiences. As Hennis has emphasized, the Puritans’ asceticism was a form of ascetic religiosity James had considered along with other forms of religiosity and religious experience in general (Hennis 1983: 156-58; 1998: 96-100; Weber 1910: 579-99; see also Buss 1999; Molloy 1980; Scaff 1989: 88-90; Swedberg 1998: 145).

Hennis has argued that Weber, having read James’ The Varieties of Religious Experience, was thus led to assess by means of a comparative research the extent to which ‘religiously determined ethics’ may ‘break up the “natural” traditionalism of everyday economic life’ (Hennis 1998: 96).
This was in fact, according to Weber’s well-known thesis, the effect of this-worldly asceticism. Still, James confirmed—in Hennis’ words—Weber’s ‘profound conviction that the human significance of mysticism could not be overestimated’. In fact, as a student of religious experiences, James sought to describe how individuality and personality—healthy as well as sick or divided personalities—find expression in religious feelings (James 1902: 77-185, 492). James also dealt extensively with mysticism (James 1902: 370-420) and other forms of religious experiences, such as conversion and saintliness, of which asceticism is considered a manifestation. Moreover, James did not consider Protestantism only, but other forms of religious experiences as well, both Christian and non-Christian. By doing so, James held fast to his methodological persuasion that empirical research on religious ‘experiences and ideas’ should not confine itself to collecting material on the Protestant religion. ‘For comparative purposes,’ he wrote, ‘similar collections ought yet to be made from Catholic, Jewish, Mohammedan, Buddhist and Hindoo sources’ (James 1899: viii).

James might have been relevant for Weber also in other respects. As a psychologist, James was interested in defining personal and social identity (James 1890: I, 293-99, 330-42, 459-60). Weber’s conception of personality similarly posited that human beings confer sense and orientation to their lives through their conscious and consistent endorsement of some ultimate values, such as religious values. This conception was both empirical and normative. On the one hand, Weber was interested in ‘those psychological motivations’ giving ‘directions to the organization of the believer’s life’, and holding ‘the individual firmly to it’ (Weber 2002: 55). On the other hand, he thought that any individual—insofar as endowed with a personality—faces some obligations when confronted with moral alternatives and conflicting values. Such obligations involve taking a stand, making a decision, and acting accordingly (See Burger 1977; Henrich 1952: 108-128; Portis 1978: 116-17; Tenbruck 1989: 48-50; Weiss 1975: 144-52).

Whether Weber did in fact follow James’ lead, as Hennis has maintained (Hennis 1998: 98-99), or not, Weber nonetheless expanded the goal and scope of his inquiry in any case from understanding the ethic of Protestantism, and therefore the religious experience of the devout Protestant, to understanding a variety of religious ethics and experiences. The previous inquiry, with all its psychoanalytical and biographical connotations (Mitzman 1969: 171-75), then gave way to a broader investigation. In either case, however, Weber was confronted with the task of understanding someone else’s religious experiences, and his knowledge of James’ work proved to be a valuable resource. This does not amount
to saying that Weber’s reception of James’ work was uncritical. A point of disagreement, to which Weber called attention, was in his words the ‘content of the ideas of a religion’, that is, the ‘significance of the rational element in religious metaphysics’, which in Weber’s opinion James had not sufficiently estimated. As Weber contended, ‘the particular type of idea system’, which directs religious experiences ‘into its pathways’, is ‘of the highest importance for practical activities’ (James 1902: 444-45; Weber 2002: 202-203).

The relevance of James for Weber was underlined by a letter Weber wrote to Karl Jaspers in 1912 (Weber 1998). This letter raised the question of how it is possible to understand someone else’s experiences, including religious experiences, and suggested that reading authors such as James and Starbuck may help Jaspers in his attempt to reach a phenomenological understanding, and provide an accurate determination, of ecstatic feelings. In this connection, Weber inquired whether Jaspers had read William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, with which he himself was already familiar. This is—as far as I know—the first indication of Weber’s acquaintance with any particular work by James. In the same context, Weber mentioned another work, hitherto neglected, that both Weber himself and James considered significant (Weber 1998: 729). This work—Starbuck’s *The Psychology of Religion* (1899)—casts light on Weber’s effort to clarify the epistemological and methodological problem of *Verstehen*, both in general and with reference to James. The work was prefaced by James, who quoted it in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* much more frequently than any other work. He also praised Starbuck for having produced ‘a most interesting contribution to individual and to collective psychology’, thanks to the empirical material the author had collected by means of ‘the statistical method’ (James 1899: viii-x; 1902, Lectures IX and X; Starbuck 1899, Part I). Starbuck’s work was likewise praised by Weber for the wealth of its empirical documentation (*das grosse Materialenwerk*). Thus, Weber had both a direct and indirect (via James) knowledge of this work by Starbuck.

Edwin Diller Starbuck, a doctor from Harvard who became Assistant Professor of Education at Stanford University, had already contributed two articles to the American Journal of Psychology on some psychological aspects of religion before publishing in 1899 *The Psychology of Religion*. That Starbuck’s work elicited the praise and attention of Weber and James should not be surprising, for its research method was truly empirical and innovative, and its goal highly relevant to both authors. The method consisted in the careful examination and interpretation of ‘autobiographies written in response to a printed list of questions’. They ‘were framed so as to call out experiences of a certain general character’ that
concerned the experience of conversion and the stages of religious development, while avoiding, as much as possible, biased responses. The sample, which was not random, was meant to be representative of the ‘various vocations, churches and localities’, though not of the age and sex distributions (Starbuck 1899: 12, 22-27, 183-87). The goal was to conduct a study into the psychology of religion, and more precisely, ‘a purely inductive study into the phenomena of religion as shown in individual experience’ (Starbuck 1899: 16).

The study consists of three parts. The first part deals with conversion (its nature, motives, normal and abnormal aspects, the quality of feeling following conversion, the character of new life, etc.). The second part deals with other forms of religious experience beside conversion during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The third and final part compares lines of religious growth with and without conversion. To James and Weber this study thus provided basic empirical knowledge on the different modes and stages of religious experience. James relied heavily on Starbuck for empirical evidence on religious experiences, especially on the experience of conversion. To Weber, Starbuck’s work may have provided information on this kind of experiences, in addition to what he might have obtained from James or other sources.

Weber’s relationship to James and the empirical knowledge he had gathered from Starbuck’s work contributed then to his ability to comprehend sympathetically alien religious experiences. James’, and in some respects also Starbuck’s, contributions may be presented in the following condensed form:

- Religious experiences vary according to the kind of personality, whether healthy, sick, or divided, and to the nature of the experience, whether conversion, or saintliness, or mysticism.
- Religious experiences are formative of the individual and social identities, and provide accordingly orientation to a person’s life course.
- Religious experiences should be investigated by studying and comparing different, Western and non-Western, religious ethics and experiences.

Apart from the topic discussed during Weber’s brief encounter with James, neither James nor Starbuck were however of relevance to the elucidation of the ‘elective affinity between the religiously demanded lifestyle with the socially conditioned life-style’ (Weber 1968: 1180; 2001: 238. For the concept of ‘elective affinities’, as Weber used it, see Buss 1999: 318-19; Howe 1978; Kalberg 2002: lxxvii). This was for Weber a major concern and object of inquiry. Hence, Weber reproached James for
having neglected how a specific type of idea system may orient religious experiences to practical activities, especially to economically relevant activities.

The problem of Verstehen: Weber’s relation to Jaspers

The psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers was a member of a circle of acquaintances and friends of Weber’s who met at his home in Heidelberg on Sunday afternoons. These gatherings occurred regularly from 1911 to 1914, though Jaspers’ first encounter with Weber may have taken place in 1909 (Green 1974: 284; Kaesler 1979: 220; Kippenberg, Niemeier, Schilm 2001: 9). Weber’s relationship to Jaspers is more relevant here than that established by Jaspers with Weber (Green 1974: 284-92; Henrich 1988; Turner 1999: 20-31). From Weber’s point of view, it was a relationship probably endowed with particular significance, because Weber related to Jaspers not only as a scholar and close acquaintance, but also as one of his patients undergoing psychiatric treatment (Henrich 1998: 23). Weber held Jaspers in great consideration, as indicated when Weber sent him the offprints of his articles on sociology of religion that came out in 1916–1917 in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (Henrich 1998: 16).

Weber referred twice in his published work to Jaspers. The first reference, placed at the very beginning of *Economy and Society* (Weber 2001: 1), concerns Jaspers’ notion of Verstehen as formulated in the first edition (the only one with which Weber was familiar) of Jaspers’ *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (1913). The second reference, placed in a footnote toward the end of Weber’s ‘Prefatory Remarks’ to the Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion (Weber 2002: 163, 257), regards Jaspers’ *Psychology of the Worldviews* (1925, originally published in 1919). Weber cited this work, along with Klages’ *Prinzipien der Charakterologie* (published in 1910), as one of the very few examples of works that do not attempt, as then fashionable, to produce unwarranted worldviews rather than scholarly research. In addition to these references, contained in works that were meant for publication, Weber referred to another work by Jaspers in a letter he addressed to Jaspers in 1912 (Weber 1998). This letter has been previously quoted in connection to religious experiences, but is also relevant in other respects. Proceeding in chronological order, we shall consider: firstly, Weber’s 1912 letter, and the coeval article by Jaspers to which it refers; then, the *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (1913); and finally, the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (Psychology of the Worldviews) (1922, originally published in 1919).
Weber’s 1912 letter contained a favorable evaluation of an article Jaspers had just published in a psychiatric journal (Jaspers 1912). The article contained a brief and dense presentation of the phenomenological current in psychiatry, which focuses on the lived experiences of the mentally deranged, and in particular, a presentation of the concept of *Verstehen* and a discussion of its relevance for phenomenological psychiatry. A number of points were made in this connection, most of which were taken up in the subsequent *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (1913). In this letter, which will be also quoted later, Weber affirmed: ‘I have read your article…with the greatest interest and completely, as far as I can judge, with agreement’ (*durchweg, soweit ich urteilen kann, mit Zustimmung*) (Weber 1998: 728). Weber praised the 1912 article for specific reasons that are worth mentioning in elucidating Weber’s concept of *Verstehen*.

Weber concurred with Jaspers in holding, first, that ‘the knowledge of the ambit of what is really experienced’ (*die Kenntnis des Umkreises wirklichen Erlebens*) is ‘a goal worth pursuing as such’ (*ein Ziel an sich*). Secondly, that pursuing this goal is an ‘indispensable preliminary work for the discussion of the genesis’ (*unentbehrliche Vorarbeit für die Erörterung der ‘Genese’*) of psychic phenomena, but has nothing to do otherwise with their origins. Thirdly, that some psychopathological processes may be investigated by means of ideal-typical concepts (not Jaspers’ own designation). Fourthly, that it is not possible to derive mental or psychic processes from the anatomical configuration of the brain. Jaspers and Weber, along with other authors, called this fallacy ‘mythology of the brain’ (*Hirnmythologie*). Finally, that phenomenological investigation should not concern itself with the problem of the unconscious. Jaspers and Weber maintained that unconscious mechanisms could not possibly be known empirically, for this knowledge is not subject to verification but may only be grasped conceptually by means of ideal types. In the letter, Weber referred Jaspers to his own work on this subject. Weber’s letter does not mention, however, that Jaspers’ position was unlike his own insofar as the Freudian movement was concerned. While Weber’s assessment of Freud was ambivalent, his evaluation of Otto Gross, a then well-known representative of this movement, was very negative (see for example Baumgarten 1964: 644-48; Green 1974: 55-56, 161-63; Helle 1994; Kaesler 1979: 22; Mitzman 1969: 278-81, 299-300). By way of contrast, Jaspers was not entirely adverse to psychoanalysis, as made clear in the *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (1913). Most of these points will be presently considered with reference to this work, in which they were discussed in greater detail (Jaspers 1912: 399-402, 405-407; 1913: 8-9, 149-50; Weber 1998: 728-30).
Jaspers formulated his notion of Verstehen, to which Weber approvingly referred, and discussed it along with that of Erklären in the first and subsequent editions of Jaspers’ Allgemeine Psychopathologie, in agreement with a great number of sources. Not all of them were psychiatric. Husserl, James, Starbuck, and Weber, none of whom were psychiatrists, were among these sources, though they were quoted for different reasons. Husserl’s contribution to phenomenological research had already been favorably mentioned in Jaspers’ 1912 article (Jaspers 1912: 393). In the Allgemeine Psychopathologie (1913), Husserl’s Logische Untersuchungen was recalled as a methodologically exemplary phenomenological foundation of psychological research. James’ The Varieties of Religious Experience and Starbuck’s The Psychology of Religion were cited as good psychological descriptions of experiences, religious experiences in particular, that make use of the Verstehen method. Weber’s essays on the ‘objectivity’ of knowledge in the social sciences and social policy, and on Roscher and Knies, were considered valuable methodological works providing at the same time the fullness of the concrete point of view (die Fülle der konkreten Anschauung) (Jaspers 1913: 4, 7, 24, 153, 298-99).

Focusing on the first (1913) edition of the Allgemeine Psychopathologie, none of these sources—not even Weber—had particular salience, in the sense of been being cited several times, or evaluated at some length. Jaspers relied on many authors for pertinent information, but he made use of such information for descriptive or theoretical purposes only. The point is important in this connection, for it makes clear that Weber’s approving reference to Jaspers’ concept of Verstehen, as employed in the Allgemeine Psychopathologie, was not an indirect reference to other works (including Weber’s own) in which this concept had previously been used or discussed. It should accordingly be considered Jaspers’ original contribution.

Jaspers’ Allgemeine Psychopathologie holds that psychology and psychopathology set out to formulate clear concepts of mental phenomena (seelische Phänomene) for their scientific purposes. More specifically, the task of psychology is the conceptual construction of psychic elements, such as sensations and feelings. The task of psychopathology is different. On the one hand it seeks to grasp the genesis, motives, sequences, and temporal changes of these elements whenever psychic processes are so unusual that they can be hardly comprehended, as may be the case of sexual perversions; on the other hand, to recognize the processes characteristic of psychic states (Seelenzustände) that are conditioned by abnormal mechanisms, as may be the case of hysterical reactions. The task of phenomenology is to perform the work—preliminary to psychology and psychopathology—of calling to the mind, to delimit and define psychic
states that have been really experienced by some subjects. The understanding (Verstehen) of psychic states or connections (Zusammenhänge), including those that the subject has experienced but not noticed, is the task of phenomenology. By way of contrast, unconscious mechanisms—such as those investigated by Freud—are not really experienced by a subject. Rather, they are the psychologist’s conceptual and theoretical constructions, which may be useful to understand someone else’s mind, but cannot as such be the object of empirical investigations.

Causal explanations (Erklären) presuppose that events that are not meaningful, which can be therefore neither experienced nor understood, regularly occur, and connections between them may be found objectively. The causal connection between some physical pathology and its physical or mental consequences for the body would be a case in point. Accordingly, Verstehen refers to phenomena that may be called to someone’s mind as experienced by somebody else, Erklären refers to the objective indication of causes, regular course of events, and consequences (Jaspers 1913: 12-20, 144-59, 189-94, 284. See also Jaspers 1965: 22-24, 250-304). The method of Verstehen – as we have seen – was used in the 1912 article and the subsequent Allgemeine Psychopathologie chiefly in order to understand pathological mental processes. It may be applied, however, for the purpose of understanding not only psychopathological processes and conduct (on the part of the psychiatrist), but psychological processes as well, as Jaspers maintained in agreement with Weber (Weber 1973: 67-69). In Jaspers’ Psychology of the Worldviews, as declared in the preface to the first edition (1919), the Verstehen method was employed in order to outline such a psychology.

The Psychology of the Worldviews deals with: (1) Orientations (Einstellungen) toward the objective outer world as active, contemplative, and mystical), toward the subject, and – transcending this distinction – a further type of orientation that Jaspers named enthusiastic. (2) World images, where Jaspers distinguishes between those originating from the perception of the spatial world, those that are mental and cultural, and those that are metaphysical. The mental and cultural images of the world—whether they concern a person’s own world, or somebody else’s, or of objective cultural creations such as the economic, legal or political institutions—are the object of Verstehen on the part of those holding them. (3) Spiritual life, conceived of as a totality or structure, which results from the union of orientations and world images in mental life. This structure may be considered from some particular viewpoints, such as those provided by extreme situations (‘the front lines of life’, as Jaspers’ Grenzsituationen has been translated) (Green 1974: 286), that occur when values collide and the individual experiences the divide between subject
Worldviews are then attempts to escape from the suffering brought about by extreme situations, and may take the form of nihilism and scepticism (wherein the existence of a resting point is questioned), or of the urge to give life some knowledgeable and rational format.

Spiritual life, which has no temporal bounds and is always open to new experiences, comprehends and involves processes of dissolution, ultimately leading to chaos, and processes of structuring, ultimately leading to form. It consists in the synthesis of ‘mutually opposed situations’ (such as the antithesis between the Christian and Greek heritages in European culture) (Jaspers 1925: 344) that originate in the antinomy or split between subject and object, and — within this antinomy — the contraposition between chaos and form. The human fundamental situation is the contraposition between the individual’s single, finite existence on the one hand, and on the other hand, his or her belonging to some totality (whether abstract, such as impersonal moral values, or concrete, such as social collectivities). The realist, the romantic, and the saint are instances of individual spiritual types who have made the attempt to orient their own life between the alternatives of chaos and form, individual and general. The mystic, by way of contrast with these types, does not experience the split between subject and object, or transcends this experience.

Jaspers’ contribution, insofar as it bears on Weber’s conception of Verstehen, may be recapitulated as follows:

- To understand (Verstehen) refers to phenomena that may be called to someone’s mind as experienced by somebody else. To explain (Erklären) refers to the objective indication of causes, regular course of events, and consequences of non-meaningful events.
- Phenomenological investigations call to the mind, delimit, and define psychic states that have been really experienced by some subjects, irrespective of whether they have or have not been aware of such psychic states. The task of phenomenology is precisely to understand (Verstehen) psychic states or connections. This knowledge is essential for the understanding of normal psychic elements, as well as for the discussion of the origins of abnormal—or psychopathological—psychic processes and mechanisms. It is accordingly also essential for conceptual construction in psychology and psychopathology.
- Phenomenological investigations do not concern themselves with the problem of the unconscious, since the individual subjects cannot have experienced unconscious mechanisms. The
concepts concerning the unconscious are ideal-typical constructions that—like other such constructions—may be useful to psychology and psychopathology.

• The method of *Verstehen* is instrumental in outlining a psychology of the worldviews that deals with orientations (such as those toward the objective world or the subject), world images, and spiritual life. World images are the objects that are captured by the process of *Verstehen*.

• Spiritual life may be conceived of as a totality or structure that results from the union of orientations and world images in mental life. As a totality, spiritual life comprehends and provides a synthesis of subject and object, and—within this antinomy—of structuring and de-structuring, of form and chaos. Their conflict, if irreconcilable, may cause the individual the painful experience of extreme situations, from which different worldviews may provide an escape.

*The problem of Verstehen: a discussion of some secondary literature*

The joint consideration of these authors, all of whom Weber considered significant for his conception of *Verstehen*, may clarify some questions on Weber’s epistemology and methodology of the social sciences that have been discussed in the secondary literature. One such question concerns direct observational understanding (aktuelles *Verstehen*), as is the case of emotional or rational conducts (Weber 1956: 3-4). In this case, the actor’s motives are deemed ‘evident’ by the observer without further interpretive inquiry. Schutz has argued in this connection that sociological understanding as pursued by Weber’s *verstehende Soziologie* cannot ensue from direct observational understanding of some actor’s conduct, as in everyday social life. Rather, according to Schutz, from the point of view of Weberian sociology all understanding—including direct observational understanding—is explanatory, namely, the observer interprets the actor’s motives with reference to the observer’s own lived experiences in order to explain objectively the actor’s conduct (Schutz 1974: 37-45). Schutz is correct in holding that for Weber all understanding, as pursued by sociology and the other social sciences, is explanatory. This is however what Weber himself maintained, rather than being some flaw in his epistemology. As we recall, Weber concurred with Husserl—and would have concurred also with Schutz, Husserl’s follower—in stating that no one can reproduce someone else’s lived experiences, for all knowledge, including the observer’s knowledge of someone else’s experiences, is conceptual. Ideal types—Weber added
—are particular concepts employed by social scientists in order to formulate rigorous explanations.

A related question is the problem of how interpretations of social action are warranted in everyday life and, more generally, how the ethnomethodological perspective has taken up the Weberian conception of Verstehen. The question may be especially difficult to answer, since ethnomethodologists do not apparently agree on whether and how their discipline draws from, or is otherwise connected with, the sociological classics. On the one hand, Michael Lynch has contended that ethnomethodology’s ‘comprehensive vision of how “the ordinary society” organizes itself…does not deliver a foundational theory that sets up a coherent program of academic research’. As Lynch further contends, ‘the classical traditions of social science’ are but a source of themes for ethnomethodology, which relocate them in ‘the practical activities and investigations that make up the ordinary society’ (Lynch 1999: 219-20).

On the other hand, it has been argued that Weber’s concept of Verstehen is indeed of direct relevance to ethnomethodology. James Heap, in particular, has dealt with the problem of intersubjectivity explicitly from the Weberian point of view of interpretive sociology: how are, from this point of view, interpretations of social action warranted? Heap has focused on direct observational understanding, which ‘logically precedes explanatory understanding’ (Heap 1977: 178). Warranting this understanding would depend, according to Heap, on the existence of a linguistic community. Since a linguistic community provides a public character to the procedure of identifying and naming an object, sociologists are thus enabled to elucidate ‘the general conditions for some communication used as justification’, while ‘the phenomenon of social action remains indexical and reflexive’ (Heap 1977: 182). More generally, Richard Hilbert has endeavored ‘to demonstrate specific historical continuities between classical sociology and ethnomethodology’, with particular reference to Durkheim and Weber, and in this connection, to the problem of intersubjectivity. ‘Intersubjectivity…emerges,’ he writes, ‘as an accomplishment of social practices in ethnomethodology, indeed the same practices that sustain an objective world and the compellingness of ideas’ (Hilbert 1992: 1, 164).

Perhaps as a consequence of such diversity of judgment between qualified representatives of ethnomethodology, one author has chosen not to ‘emphasize the great difference (or rather the perfect consistency, or something in between) of ethnomethodology in its relation to the procedure of classical traditional sociology’. Garfinkel’s ‘intense’ preoccupation with the sociological classics has not however been disputed (Fele 2002: 13). Though the question of how ethnomethodology is related to
the sociological classics cannot be settled here, it may be worth recalling that ethnomethodological research implies a step-by-step analysis of how members in their everyday interactions constitute reciprocal *Verstehen*, and thereby the social order (Fele 1992). As previously shown, Husserl and Weber emphasized that all knowledge presupposes understanding lived experiences, and their transformation into conceptual knowledge. The consensual categorizing of an object, its naming, involves shared meaning and, ultimately, shared understanding. Ethnomethodologists in conformance to Weber’s reception of Husserl have stressed that this is the members’ joint and contingent accomplishment.

Further questions concern the relation, in Weber’s epistemology and methodology of the social sciences, between understanding (*Verstehen*) and explanation (*Erklären*). Talcott Parsons has emphasized Weber’s attempt to set ‘the Protestant ethic in the broad perspective of… [his] comparative treatment of religion’ (Parsons 1968: 573). As Parsons has contended, the use of the comparative method in the sociology of religion would show the causal significance (in terms of adequate causation) of the Protestant ethic for the rise of capitalism. Some early and recent interpreters of Weber have concurred with this thesis (See for example Bendix 1946: 523; Buss 1999). Parsons has also argued, more in general, that Weber held the task of constructing general analytical theory in the cultural sphere as possible and important. Theory construction involves providing explanations. The method of understanding would require that social scientists apprehend their own values and those of other cultures, past and present, for the ultimate purpose of constructing general analytical theory. *Verstehen* would then be instrumental, subordinate, and preliminary to *Erklären* (Parsons 1979: 82-86).

A different view has been suggested in this connection. It has not been denied that Weber conducted comparative studies on the sociology of the world religions for the purpose of causally explaining Western economic rationalism, but it has also been maintained that exclusive emphasis on this purpose would supply a one-sided interpretation. Weber was likewise interested in providing ‘explanations for the particular routes of development followed by each great civilization’ (Kalberg 2002: lxii-lxiii). This sort of explanation, while still causally adequate, is less abstract, and consequently more dependent on ‘considerations of meaning adequacy’ in the construction of ideal types. In Weber’s epistemology and methodology, *Verstehen* would then be more relevant than *Erklären* (Turner and Factor 1981: 24-25; Turner 1983). This is precisely the conclusion yielded by considering Weber’s relation to Husserl, James and Starbuck, and Jaspers, all of whom he approvingly referred to. These
authors focused on the relevance of *Verstehen*, rather than *Erklären*, for obtaining objective knowledge of, and on, someone’s lived experiences.

As several commentators—including Parsons and some of his critics, such as Kalberg and Tenbruck—have argued, Weber applied the *Verstehen* method to understand not only the motives of particular actors, as in Schutz’s phenomenological sociology, but also the culture and worldviews of religions and civilizations. Direct observational understanding and in general what has been called ‘the ontology of everyday life in Schutz’s analysis’ (Zaret 1980: 1192) would not be possible in this case. Rather, worldviews as such would constitute the object of the *Verstehen* procedure. ‘Ideal types…of the culturally significant connections and developments’ (Tenbruck 1988: 47) were formulated by Weber to underline the specificity of unique cultural phenomena (‘historical individuals’), such as the spirit of modern capitalism. Religious worldviews, in particular, may be constructed as ideal types for the purpose of illustrating their particular aspects, consistency, and consequences. Weber also mentioned in this regard Simmel’s ‘brilliant conceptualizations’ of the life style of the money economy (Weber 1973: 153-54, 172-78, 202-204; 2002: 16, 170. See also Scaff 1989: 83-87; Tenbruck 1959: 619-26). The epistemological requirement of these ideal types, and ideal types in general, is that they be adequate at the level of meaning, while causal adequacy is relevant for historical or sociological explanations (Weber 1922: 536-38; 1956: 5-6; 1973: 280-90). Weber’s interest for additional and authoritative information sources, such as James, Starbuck, and Jaspers, on the psychological processes conducive to religious experiences and the formation of worldviews, was related to his effort to understand unique cultural phenomena by means of the *Verstehen* method. Ideal types of experiences and worldviews should be formulated in order to understand and explain them.

*Weber’s problem of Verstehen: a reassessment*

The authors that have been presented—Simmel, Husserl, James, Starbuck, and Jaspers—have cast light on the problem of understanding someone else’s lived experiences, with particular reference to religious experiences. This epistemological and methodological problem was crucial to Weber, who referred to these authors as a relevant source, whether approvingly or not (as in the case of Simmel). The contribution of each of them has been distinct. Weber concurred with Simmel in holding that objective knowledge of human events is possible as long as it does not set out to replicate them, but rather it is rather selective knowledge based on concepts. He objected, however, to Simmel’s contention
that objective understanding implies grasping the spiritual uniqueness of individuals or sets of events, as their investigators have reconstructed them. Instead, understanding involves the ideal typical reconstruction of the social actors’ motives for the purpose of causally explaining their actions. As Husserl argued, understanding someone else’s lived experiences does not mean its reproduction as a part of the subject’s own lived experiences. Its knowledge presupposes the transformation of the original experience into the object of a judgment, and thereby into conceptual knowledge. Husserl was accordingly relevant to Weber in that he indicated in lived experiences the source of all knowledge, and scientific knowledge in particular. James and Starbuck focused on religious experiences. As they maintained, religious experiences vary according to the type of personality and nature of experience, and influence individual and social identities, and ultimately a person’s life course. The investigation of religious ethics and experience involves the use of a comparative analysis.

All these authors were significant to Weber, for they provided instances of the *Verstehen* method applied to a particular area of inquiry or field of experience. Simmel held that the *Verstehen* method is indispensable as a tool to grasp by means of concepts historical events or individuals. Jaspers advocated the use of this method in order to understand normal and abnormal psychic states and connections. Understanding someone else’s experiences, which is in his view the task of phenomenology, is preliminary to the constitution of psychology and psychopathology as objective disciplines. *Verstehen* applies in particular to the psychological study of worldviews, and therefore to the study of orientations, world images, and spiritual life. Considering these authors may shed light on questions that concern Weber’s conception of *Verstehen*, namely his questions concern—as mentioned—direct observational understanding, how interpretation of social life is warranted in everyday life, and the relationship between understanding and explanation. As Husserl and Weber argued, direct observational understanding is a source of objective knowledge only if based on concepts. Ideal-typical concepts, in particular, are instrumental to the pursuit of objective knowledge in the field of the social or human sciences. They are necessary, therefore, to gain knowledge on psychic states, whether normal or pathological, religious experiences, and worldviews, as Weber has maintained in conjunction with James and Jaspers. Schutz’s remark, that direct observational understanding cannot be a direct source of *Verstehen*, is accordingly consonant with Weber’s epistemological position, far from being a criticism of it.

Moreover, Husserl, Weber, and the ethnomethodological perspective are agreed that interpretations of social life are warranted in everyday life because of shared meanings, accomplished in most circumstances by ordinary members. At least to this extent, therefore, the classical tradition of social science—as represented by Weber—has a direct relevance to ethnomethodology, and is accordingly more than just a source of themes for this perspective. As for the relationship between understanding and explanation, Weber concurred with Husserl, James and Starbuck, and Jaspers, in arguing that Verstehen is preliminary to Erklären for obtaining objective knowledge concerning all foreign lived experiences, including cultural phenomena such as the spirit of capitalism. For the purpose of theory construction, meaning adequacy is then prior to causal adequacy.

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