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What is Good Professional Practice?

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As soon as an individual takes an action, whatever that action may be, it begins to escape from his intentions. The action enters into the universe of interactions. (Edgar Morin, 2008, p. 55)

Part 3: The quest for rational action Our attempt to clarify the notion of good professional practice has already taken us quite far into new and accordingly unfamiliar territory. In addition, some time has passed since I published the first two parts of this series of essays on good practice, in March and May, 2011. It may be useful, therefore, to begin this third of the four planned parts with a summary on where we stand.

In Part 1 (Ulrich, 2011a) we examined the conventional concept of professionalism and concluded that it fails to furnish a sufficient basis for understanding and promoting good professional practice. As it has no methodological basis for dealing with questions of "good" practice in openly and critically normative terms, it ends up with a one-sidedly technical notion of professional competence. This does not justice to the normative core of professional intervention, its inevitable value basis and value implications. Three lines of argument supported this conclusion. First, the "sociological" argument considered the institutional framework and pressures under which professionals work. Next, the "ethical" argument recognized the unavoidable selectivity of all practice with respect to what is considered relevant, good, and rational. And finally, the "methodological" argument analyzed the faultiness of the means-end scheme that underlies the technical concept of competence.

In Part 2 (Ulrich, 2001b) we examined more thoroughly what we mean by good practice**:** What are "good answers" to "practical questions"? As "practical" questions we defined action-oriented questions (What are we to do?) inasmuch as they cannot be answered in the terms of theoretical or instrumental reason alone. As "good" answers to such questions we recognized answers that consider action proposals both in the light of theoretical (i.e., instrumental) *and* practical (.i.e., normative) reason;

moreover, with regard to the latter dimension of reason, they should distinguish between "good" and "right" action proposals, that is, between ethical and moral questions or claims. We then considered what it means to deal "reasonably" (or rationally) with questions of rightness and found the answer to point to the moral kernel of practical reason, the idea that there are some standards of good practice that merit recognition by everyone. But how, we had to ask consequently, can we expect to strengthen this aspect of reason in an age of ethical pluralism and relativism? In fact, It is precisely *because* we accept ethical pluralism, we found, that we need some overarching standards to resolve ethical conflicts peacefully, "with reason" (i.e., argumentatively) rather than just with force (non-argumentatively); this is precisely what we mean by *moral* standards of good and right action. The essence of moral reasoning thus consists not in adhering to some dogmatic standards of what is right and wrong (standards defined by some religious or political authority, for example) but in the idea of basing our claims and actions on "reasons" (motives, principles, and notions of improvement) that can be questioned and supported argumentatively and moreover, because they do not embody a merely private agenda, can be *shared publicly* with everyone concerned. Moral reasoning as we understand it embodies an "open" (tolerant) rather than a "closed" (dogmatic) stance towards what is right and rational for different people. It is grounded in the existential need of humans to coordinate their human affairs, and in the public constitution and use of reason that this need entails (reason's political dimension as a guardian of public arguability, with which we concluded Part 2).

In a subsequent note, I put this deeply Kantian idea into context by aligning it a bit more systematically with Kant's concepts of rationality, morality, and politics (see Ulrich, 2011c). In a previous systematic introduction to Kant's practical philosophy (Ulrich, 2009b), we had familiarized ourselves with the ideal that Kant (1786b, 1788) formulated for practical reason, the principle of *moral universalization;* it helped us to understand not only his "categorical imperative" but also many other well-known concepts of moral reasoning, for example, the age-old "golden rule" of reciprocity of conduct and consideration; the "impartial spectator" of Adam Smith (1795); the "moral point of view" of Kurt Baier (1958); the "stages of moral development" of Lawrence Kohlberg (1968, 1976, 1981); and the "veil of ignorance" of John Rawls (1971). For our present purpose, we may sum up the core idea by saying**:** practical reason is what argumentatively

"disciplines" claims to rationality in all areas of human endeavor against the ever-present danger of their masking merely private agendas. While grounding the quest for good professional practice in theory and expertise remains a meaningful and indispensable idea, it does not guard us against hidden private agendas but often serves to mask them. For this reason, good practice should always *also* (although not exclusively) be grounded in an effort of practical reason.

Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. Practical philosophy, the philosophical endeavor of explaining what practical reason is and how we can put it into practice, has not exactly produced the application-oriented, down-to-earth kind of literature that research practitioners and professionals might be looking for. Its scholarly discourse is far from being easily accessible to practitioners, and to the extent it is accessible, it does not lend itself to being put into practice without further ado. Further, just as the literature on professionalism has tended to ground its concept of professional competence one-sidedly in theoretical-instrumental reason – in "technical" competence along with abstinence from value judgments ("disinterestedness") – practical philosophy has tended to substitute the idea of practical *reason* for that of rational (or reasonable) *practice,* as if the rationality (or reasonableness) of practice could be secured within the bounds of reason. Contemporary discourse-theoretical approaches and in particular the discourse ethics of Jurgen Habermas (1990, 1993a, b) illustrate the point: they tend to equate a model of rational discourse *on* practice with rational practice itself, rather than explaining how the former can support the latter. In effect they thus substitute rational speech for rational practice. (For a substantial discussion of the issue, and for my resulting early doubts about the practical fruitfulness of Habermas' program, insightful as it is theoretically, see Ulrich, 1983, pp. 31-34 and 152-172.)

Both as research theorists and as research practitioners, we should never forget that good practice necessarily bursts the bounds of reason. The quest for good practice needs to move beyond research, reflection, and discourse and must translate into *action.* However compelling our notions *of* good reasoning and discourse *about* practice may be, they must ultimately materialize out there *in* the imperfectly rational world of human practice. There is forever a tension between the idea of practical reason and the struggle for rational practice: rational practice may be *inspired* and

disciplined by reason, but it can be *implemented* only through – always imperfectly rational – action.

Accordingly, the central concern of the present third part of our considerations on the nature of professionalism must be that practical reason and reasonable (or rational) practice are not the same. In this respect, theoretical and practical reason are in the same situation**:** neither can secure rational practice, only rational *action* can. The crux of an adequate concept of rational practice is thus an adequate understanding of what we mean by *rational action.* What constitutes "rational" action, and how can we rationally justify or criticize claims to having achieved it?

Max Weber's typology of rational action More than perhaps any other social theorist, the German sociologist Max Weber (1968) has given a central place to the concept of rational action. It is still worthwhile, and for serious study indispensable, to read his writings today, as they tell us so much about the origins and nature of our contemporary understanding of rationality, concerning, for example, the role of formal and calculating modes of reasoning; bureaucratic modes of organization; and the importance of the rule of law and of professional expertise in modern industrial societies. In his analyses of these topics, Weber has coined many ground-breaking sociological concepts – think of "interpretive" social science, "ideal-type," "process of rationalization," "bureaucratization," "protestant ethic," the "spirit of capitalism," or the "disenchantment of the world" – that not only have been very influential in the social sciences but also continue to be relevant today to many fields of research as well as of professional and everyday practice.

Basic terms Rationality to Weber is a basic sociological concept, for it gives meaning to human action and renders it intelligible. Meaning in this context stands for regularities and patterns of action that allow us to interpret action in terms of certain intentional states or *action orientations,* that is (in my terms), the motives, attitudes, and standards – in short, the subjective *reasons,* whether they are consciously and freely chosen or not – that motivate an action and which also make it understandable to observers, if only they understand those reasons. Actions are *rational* for Weber to the extent such action orientations are chosen consciously. Inasmuch as they are, we will also say that actions are *rationally motivated* (or rationally oriented).

With the role he gives to rational action, Weber does not mean to introduce a cognitive or even rationalistic bias to sociology but only a "methodological device" (Weber, 1968a, p. 7). The subjective reasons that make an action meaningful to an agent, and which also render it understandable to an observer, need not be objectively rational or well-reasoned; they can in fact be mainly emotionally or conventionally determined, so long as they are consciously adopted. We might say, rational actions as Weber defines them are actions that we can explain, whether we find them rational or not. Because they orient action and render it subjectively meaningful, they also provide the social scientist and everyone else with a basis for *interpretive understanding.*

According to Weber's famous definition of sociology as an *interpretive social science,* it is indeed the aim of sociology to help us understand and explain individual actions by relating them to the contexts of meanings that shape them. These action orientations are of two basic kinds; they may be purely subjective, oriented to the agent's individual view and values, or they may also consider the views and values of others and then amount to "social" action orientations**:**

> Sociology … is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with causal explanation of its course and consequences. We shall speak of "action" insofar as the acting individual attaches a *subjective* meaning to his behavior – be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is *"social"* insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course. (Weber, 1968a, p. 4, italics added)

We will thus say that individual actions are *social* to the extent they are influenced by and/or oriented towards other agents; they are *nonsocial* or merely subjective to the extent their rationality does not depend on such an orientation. When several agents act with a view towards one another, there emerges a social relationship. Social action then may (but need not) become *interaction,* depending, for example, on whether the relationship is of an emotionally friendly or hostile nature; whether the situation is one of cooperation or competition; or whether there exist any barriers of space or time to interaction. Actual interaction is not a necessary basis of social action in Weber's sense; it is quite sufficient that two or more agents consciously *orient* their actions towards one another**:**

> The term "social relationship" will be used to denote the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account

of that of the others and is oriented in these terms. The social relationship thus consists entirely and exclusively in the existence of a probability that there will be a meaningful course of *social* action … it is essential that there should be at least a minimum of *mutual orientation* of the action of each to that of the others.… The definition does not specify whether the relation of the actors is cooperative or the opposite. (Weber, 1968a, p. 26, italics added)

Both social and nonsocial actions may be "rational." They are *rational* to the extent they are (again in my terms) consciously oriented towards the views and values that together make up certain kinds of action orientations, whether they are the agent's own or those of other agents; they remain *nonrational* to the extent such orientations are not consciously in play. Rationality as Weber understands it is thus a very broad concept indeed; it is almost synonymous with a *consciously applied* and therefore to some extent also *coherent* action orientation. All that Weber demands of "rational" actions is that they follow a certain logic of which the agents are aware, however subjective and ill-founded that logic may look from the perspective of others. For example, "primitive" man may be understood to act (subjectively) rationally when performing a magical ceremony with the aim of securing favors from a god (cf. Weber, 1968, p. 424).

Methodological individualism One of the major subjects of sociology, and of the social sciences in general, are the *social structures* (e.g., social groups and movements, social classes) and *institutions* (e.g., corporations, the professions, the free market, the political-administrative system) that characterize specific societies or societal domains (e.g., politics, jurisdiction, science, education, civil society, and the economy). Readers might wonder why, if this is so, Weber aims to ground sociology in interpretive social science and the latter in an understanding of the actions of *individual* agents? But what might at first look like a certain inconsistency of ends and means is actually a deliberate methodological strategy**:** in order to understand social phenomena, Weber argues, we need to analyze the way they result from "the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action." (Weber 1968, p. 13) Inasmuch as social structures and institutions have meaning, it is because they are meaningful *in the eyes of individuals* who attach meaning to them.

There is thus an *irreducibly subjective* element in social science, at least inasmuch as it aims at more than merely descriptive social statistics. This

methodological perspective – Weber's earlier-mentioned "methodological device" for explaining social phenomena – is now generally known as "methodological individualism." Although the term was coined by economist Joseph Schumpeter (1909), Weber is one of the main representatives, along with a few other prominent scholars of his time with whom he corresponded, in particular Friedrich von Hayek and Karl R. Popper. Methodological individualism is now often criticized on the ground that it risks losing sight of the *irreducibly collective element* in social phenomena and indeed also in individual consciousness. The issue was central to the work of another founding figure of sociology, Emile Durkheim (1964, 1982), who maintained that the subject matter of sociology – the social realities it aims to explain – cannot be reduced to subjective or psychological phenomena. Accordingly sociology for Durkheim starts with his famous proposition that "social facts are to be treated as things" (Durkheim, 1964, p. xliii; 1982, p. 35).

My own view is that the alternative is wrongly posed. Both perspectives can help us understand the social realities in which we live and struggle to act reasonably. I would maintain that Weber's methodological individualism has its merits; it can provide a stronghold against a merely or mainly functionalist view of social institutions and collectives as it prevails today and which has accustomed us to reify them *as if* they could replace individuals who assume the responsibility for their (the institutions') behavior. As Weber recognized in remarkably foresighted terms, there is a loss of richness in a one-sidedly functionalist view of social structures and institutions (or "collectivities" as he calls them with one word) which can be dangerous**:**

> Functional analysis of the relation of "parts " to a "whole" [as it is useful particularly in the natural sciences but also for purposes of sociological analysis] is convenient for purposes of practical illustration and provisional orientation. In these respects it is not only useful but indispensable. But at the same time if its cognitive value is overestimated and its concepts illegitimately "reified," it can be highly dangerous. [To be sure] in certain circumstances this is the only available way of determining just what processes of social action it is important to understand in order to explain a given phenomenon. But this is only the beginning of sociological analysis as here understood. In the case of social collectivities … we are in a position to go beyond merely demonstrating functional relationships and uniformities. We can accomplish something which is never accomplishable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the action of the component individuals. The natural sciences on the other hand cannot do this, being limited to the formulation of causal uniformities in objects and events and the explanation of individual facts by applying them. We do not "understand" the behavior of cells, but can only observe the relevant functional relationships and generalize on the basis of these observations. This additional achievement of explanation by interpretive understanding … is the specific characteristic of sociological knowledge. (Weber, 1968, p. 15)

Four basic action orientations Weber identifies four basic action orientations that he sees as fairly *universal,* in the sense that they occur in all cultures and epochs of human civilization. At the same time, they are *specific* to different spheres of life, in that they explain the historical development of certain domains of society rather than of human civilization in general. Here is Weber's definition of the four orientations**:**

> Social action, like all action, may be oriented in four ways. It may be**:**
> (1) *instrumentally rational (zweckrational),* that is, determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are used as "conditions" or "means" for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends;
> (2) *value-rational (wertrational),* that is, determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success;
> (3) *affectual (especially emotional),* that is, determined by the actor's specific affects and feeling states;
> (4) *traditional,* that is, determined by ingrained habituation.
> (Weber, 1968a, p. 24f)

Of these four action orientations, only instrumentally rational action and value-rational action are fully rational in Weber's sense of a consciously adopted and rationally considered orientation towards meaningful action. *Instrumentally rational action* (also translated as *purposive-rational* action) embodies for Weber the highest degree of rationality in that it includes the prudent choice of means and ends in the light of expected consequences. Prudent choice of ends in turn includes consideration of the ultimate values to be attained as well as of the scarcity of available means. Its rationality is different from value rationality, however, in that its focus is on ensuring *success*, that is, on reaching the ends in the most expedient manner according to both the *technical* principle of least effort and the *economic* principle of lowest cost (see, e.g., 1968, p. 65f). Not following Weber for a moment, we also call such success-related ends "purposes." In a famous formulation of John Dewey (e.g., 1915, p. 518), purposes are "ends-in-view," that is, means to other ends rather than ends-in-themselves (values). Purposive-rational action accordingly stands for the rationality of the selection of means with a view to achieving purposes, or of the selection of purposes with a view to achieving further ends, but not necessarily for the rationality of the ends themselves.

Value-rational action is best translated as value-coherent action, although such a translation is not customary. Unlike what the term might be

understood to imply, value-rationality as Weber understands it does not stand for the rationality of the values in question but only for the conformity of action with their demands. (This is analogous to purposive-rationality, which does not stand for the rationality of the purposes but only for the conformity of means to ends.) That is, value-rational action is rational in the limited sense that it is consciously oriented towards values and pursues these values methodically so as to secure their best possible attainment, but it does not question the values themselves. It shares this "instrumental" (means-end) orientation with purposive-rationality. Unlike the latter, however, in its pure or ideal-typical form as Weber understands it, value-rational action does *not* consider the consequences such adherence to ultimate values may have. Agents oriented towards value-rational action will adhere to values they recognize as right (e.g., the value of friendship or solidarity, or a moral principle) even when doing so runs counter to their current individual (e.g., economic) interests. Unlike purposes, values hold regardless of expediency. Value-rational action shares this aspect with merely affectual action: "the meaning of the action does not lie in the achievement of a result ulterior to it, but in carrying out the specific type of action for its own sake." (1968a, p. 25)

The other two orientations, *affectual* (or emotional) and *traditional* (or customary) action, may but need not stand for forms of rational actions. They may embody merely habitual or even uncontrolled reactions to situations and then are not rationally oriented at all. However, there is no intrinsic reason why they should preclude any rational consideration of how meaningful they may be in a given situation, which is why Weber includes them in his typology of rational action. Furthermore, they describe residual aspects of rationally oriented action that frequently *go along* with a primary orientation of the value-rational or instrumentally rational type. We need to consider them to fully understand the subjective or social logic of actions, although by themselves (as pure types) they do not stand for adequately rational action orientations.

Ideal-types of action We here encounter Weber's (e.g., 1968a, pp. 6-9, 20f) famous concept of *ideal-types*. The four action orientations do not usually occur in pure form; rather, they all inform real-life practical action to various degrees and in various combinations. This is why Weber (1968a, p. 6) refers to them as "conceptually pure" or "ideal" rather than empirically observable

types of rational action. They stand for rationality patterns or aspects that help us analyze action orientations but which as such we may hardly ever encounter empirically in pure form. As measured by the ideal-types, actions as we observe them in practice are thus nearly always *imperfect* expressions – and combinations – of rational behavior. Accordingly, the ideal-types are useful not only to understand why people act the way they do but also to gain insight into the *rationality deficits* involved**:**

> They state what course a given type of human action would take *if it were* strictly rational, unaffected by errors or emotional factors and if, furthermore, it were completely and unequivocally directed to [the intended meaning]. In reality … there is usually only an approximation of the ideal type. (Weber, 1968a, p. 9, italics added)

Appreciating individual actions in terms of underlying ideal-types is thus a way to do justice to the less than completely rational situations in which people act. Empirical actions are not simply rational or not; they involve different elements of rationality that each can assume a higher or lower degree of practiced rationality; for example, an agent may intend to act instrumentally rational but fail to do so for emotional or value-rational reasons as well as due to a lack of knowledge (i.e., incorrect means-end calculation).

The ranking of rationalities The four ideal-types also stand for a hierarchy of decreasing degrees of rationality**:** instrumentally rational action is (for Weber) more completely rational than value-rational action, which in turn is more rational than emotionally and traditionally oriented action.. The more lower-level elements an action involves, the less perfectly rational it will be in Weber's view.

A useful way to explain and summarize Weber's ranking of the four ideal-types is by means of a scheme proposed by another major theorist of rationality, Jurgen Habermas (1984, pp. 279-284). Referring to a pertinent observation by Schluchter (1979, p. 192; English transl., 1981, p. 129), he characterizes Weber's four ideal-types of action in terms of the four main categories of subjective meanings that Weber uses to describe them – means and ends, values, and consequences (Tab. 1)**:**

Table 1: Weber's typology of action as analyzed by Habermas
(Source: Habermas 1984, p. 282, with reference to Schluchter, 1981, p. 129)

Types of action in descending order of rationality	Subjective meaning covers the following elements:			
	Means	Ends	Values	Consequences
Purposive-rational *(zweckrational)*	+	+	+	+
Value-rational *(wertrational)*	+	+	+	-
Affectual *(affektuell)*	+	+	-	-
Traditional *(traditional)*	+	-	-	-

The scheme explains why a purposive-rational *(zweckrational)* action orientation ranks highest for Weber**:** he sees in it the only form of rationality that takes into account all four sources of meaningfulness, although its central focus clearly is on the adequacy of means for reaching a defined end. All other action orientations increasingly narrow down the range of considerations**:** a value-rational orientation as Weber understands it excludes from its range of considerations the *consequences* of adherence to alternative values; affectual action in addition excludes the *values* concerned themselves; and merely habitual or traditional action also excludes consideration of *ends.*

Consequently, Weber's construction of interpretive understanding depends essentially on his notion of purposive-rational action. The basic outlook of his rational agent is utilitarian. To be sure, Weber understands the four ideal-types of rationality to be present in all social action, although to various degrees. He does not mean to reduce rational action to *nothing but* instrumentally rational action. Even so, since purposive-rationality is the ideal-type of action that most completely embodies a rational orientation, it is clear that social action as seen through his framework is most rational when its dominating action orientation is towards instrumental rationality. Somewhat ironically, the very prevalence of functionalist thinking that Weber meant to avoid with his "device" of methodological individualism thus re-enters through the backdoor of his understanding of rationality. The temptation involved appears to have been too strong**:** purposive-rational action, unlike the other three types of action, allows an "objective" evaluation of its success, simply by observing whether the means chosen to achieve a given end do actually achieve it. Accordingly careful we will have

to be when it comes to this aspect of his typology.

Patterns of rationalization: capitalism, professionalism, bureaucracy The four ideal-types do not only stand for basic rationality patterns that allow us to understand the subjective (or "social") logic of individual actions, they also stand for overarching *processes of rationalization* – for societal modernization patterns – that historically shape the development of specific spheres of life in different societies. While the four types of action just introduced stand for universal human orientations and capacities, rationalization processes are specific to certain societal, cultural, and historical constellations through which empirical patterns of modernization unfold. For example, the differentiation of the capitalist economy (private-sector institutions) and the modern state (public-sector institutions) into largely independent spheres of development (the market vs. the political sphere) is a basic modernization pattern that characterizes the specific rationalization path of Western societies but which is less prominent outside the Occident. Or, as a second example, the rise of bureaucratic principles of administration both in the public and corporate sectors of modern societies can be understood as an important rationalization pattern of the 19th and 20the centuries, particularly in Germany and some other Western societies.

Practical, theoretical, and formal rationality Weber uses his ideal-types of rationality to investigate historical and contemporary rationalization patterns in different spheres of life (e.g., religion, science, economy, law, and politics) and societies (e.g, Western vs. other societies). He does not, however, employ them very systematically, often not even explicitly. Along with instrumental (sometimes also specified as "technical" or "economic") and value-rational action, he also frequently refers to "theoretical" and "practical," as well as to "formal" and "substantive" forms of rationality and corresponding strands of rationalization. Kalberg's (1980) provides a useful survey of the appearance and use of these different categories of rationality in Weber's applied studies. A very brief summary must suffice here. Basically, *practical rationalit*y for Weber is the combined use of instrumental rationality and value-rationality in the everyday quest for "mastering" the world. A pragmatic and self-interested orientation prevails**:** dealing rationally with one's everyday needs and desires means to see realities as they are and to look for the most expedient ways to achieve what is needed or desired. Such a practical perspective is rational to the extent it

relies on proven means to reach ends (*instrumental rationality*) and minimizes the input of resources according to economic principles (the "calculating" rationalization of *formal rationality*). At the same time, it will determine its ends and priorities among the ends in a way that is coherent with the individual's value system (*value-rationality*). Finally, it will systematically consider the consequences of alternative courses of action and for this purpose will rely on established knowledge of their likely effects and possible risks (*theoretical rationality*).

What Weber fails to make clear – and here ends my relying on Kalberg's study – is that philosophically speaking, these expressions of "practical" rationality are not as different as they present themselves sociologically, for methodologically they move within the same, theoretical-instrumental, dimension of reason. Inasmuch as they have no way of rationally questioning the values they serve, they risk amounting to mere *techniques* of rationalization that are blind to the ethics of their own notion of rationality. From a perspective informed by practical philosophy, such far-reaching identification of "practical" rationality with techniques of rationalization arouses the suspicion of a fundamental category error.

Substantive rationality: the ethics of rationalization Interestingly though, Weber finds – empirically rather than philosophically – that under specific cultural conditions, this sort of "practical" rationality becomes impregnated with an ethics that shapes it and has the potential to transform it into an expression of *substantive rationality.* Unlike all other forms of rationality, substantive rationality reaches beyond a mere concern for the conformity of means to chosen ends, and of ends to the demands of adopted values; beyond such mere conformity, it aims at a systematic enhancement of the achieved values themselves (cf., e.g., 1968, p. 85). Weber's most famous example is laid out in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), where he argues that it was the ascetic work ethic of the early Puritans and Calvinists which paved the way for the development of capitalist and industrial forms of production and for a methodical-rational conduct of life in Western civilization quite generally. Everyday practical rationality thus grows beyond its basically instrumental and opportunistic perspective and gains an ethical dimension of its own. We might say, substantive rationality for Weber points beyond mere value-rationality, and with it beyond all primarily instrumental and formal aspects of practical rationality, in that it "cares" for its own

normative content. Just how far it does and how such a concern for value-enhancement rather than mere value-conformity can be pursued rationally within Weber's basically instrumental conception of rationality, remains largely unclear in his account. Inasmuch as his interest as a sociologist is descriptive rather than prescriptive (methodological), he apparently can afford to leave this normative side of rationality – or perhaps better, the rational side of normativity – unclear.

We thus gain a somewhat ambivalent picture of Weber's understanding of rationality. On the one hand, in his typology of rational social action, he clearly attributes the highest degree of rationality to the theoretical, technical, economic, and formal aspects of instrumental rationality and largely equates practical rationality with them. The normative content of such "practical rationality" remains out of focus except in the form of value-rationality, which again is defined in the instrumental and formal terms of conformity of ends to given values. On the other hand, in his sociological analyses, he is keenly interested in the ways in which rationality and rationalization in all spheres of life depend on, and promote, certain sets of values, and these analyses remain insightful and inspiring to this day. Yet his related concept of "substantive rationality," which suggests an attitude of caring about normative concerns – an ethics of rationalization –, is not part of his systematic typology of rational action and remains unclear with respect to the degree of rational treatment to which it lends itself, as distinguished from remaining a mere matter of subjective acts of faith.

Professionalism: rationality and responsibility The perspective of substantive rationality comes to the fore in Weber's views on the nature of good and rational professional practice. In *Economy and Society* and particularly in its parts on the sociology of religion, Weber argues that rationalization, the process that is so fundamental to occidental modernity, has brought forth *and demands* for its further development not only the peculiar value basis that he recognizes in protestant ethics but also a unique type of *rational personality,* characterized by the "alert, rationally controlled patterning of life … [of] the 'man of vocation' or 'professional' *(Berufsmensch)"* (1968, p. 556). In his famous lecture on "Science as a vocation," Weber (1991b) similarly describes the scientist as a man of vocation and characterizes him by values such as intellectual discipline and self-restraint, objectivity or abstinence from value judgments, and integrity.

And in his equally famous lecture on "Politics as a vocation," Weber (1991a) also describes the professional politician and particularly the "charismatic political leader," along with the political journalist and part of the legal profession, as persons of vocation "who (in the economic sense of the term) live exclusively *for* politics and not *off* politics" (1991a, p. 85, italics added).

The hallmark of a professional orientation is for Weber an "ethic of responsibility" *(Verantwortungsethik),* as distinguished from what he calls an "ethic of conviction" or of "ultimate ends" *(Gesinnungsethik)* (1991a, pp. 120-127)*. By an ethic of responsibility, Weber means a moral stance that accepts responsibility for consequences; while by an ethic of conviction he means a moral stance that refers to ethical values or principles without regard for consequences. At this point Weber's notion of professionalism links back to his ideal-types of rational action and reveals its normative core: it is clear from his account that he associates "responsibility" with instrumentally rational action and "conviction" with value-rational action. That is, "responsibility" is located entirely within the theoretical-instrumental dimension of reason, while "conviction" stands for a practical-normative dimension of practice that is taken to allow of nonrational acts of faith only. Although I do not find such an opposition of the two ethical orientations convincing – it represents a basically positivist scheme – I mention it here for two reasons: first, we need not agree with Weber's way of framing the ethical side of rationality to agree with him that there is a connection between rationality and responsibility; and second, it points to some limitations of Weber's concept of *socially* rational action to which we will return in a moment.

So much for a basic introduction to Weber's typology of rational action. Let us now turn to some critical conjectures, as a basis for subsequently drawing some conclusion as to how an alternative typology of rational action might look. We can conveniently begin with Weber's understanding of responsibility, as it is quite characteristic of what is problematic in his framework.

Some critical comments on Weber's typology Weber restricts the reach of his "ethic of responsibility" to those aspects of practice which are accessible to theoretical, instrumental, and formal rationality. This restriction is philosophically as arbitrary as it is unproductive with regard to the need for

guiding decision-makers, citizens, and professionals everywhere towards better practice. True, Weber's notion of "substantive rationality" adds to rational action a sense of *caring* about values, in a way that goes beyond mere conformity of actions to them. But the value judgments that inform such caring (e.g., the professional's ethos or commitment to certain notions of improvement) remain personal acts of faith – mere "convictions" – about which one supposedly cannot think and talk rationally. Inadvertently, Weber thus immunizes not only these value assumptions against critique but equally the consequences of professional action. If values *and their underlying "convictions"* do not lend themselves to rational discussion, who can ask us to defend our value judgments *and their consequences* rationally?

The snag is, indeed, that *value judgments have consequences.* If we immunize value judgments against rational discussion, we also immunize their consequences against rational critique. We thereby weaken rather than strengthen the ties that Weber as I understand him tries to establish between responsibility and rationality. When it comes to the value content of (claims to) rational social action, a thus-conceived responsibility ends; for it can only refer to "convictions" which, according to its own premises, it cannot question or defend systematically. In fact, not only responsibility but also rationality ends at this point, for a rationality in the service of unquestioned and unquestionable values is itself questionable. A thus-conceived rationality has no notion of its own normative implications for those who may have to live with the consequences. At the crucial point where values and consequences meet, Weber's conception of responsible rationality breaks down. Responsibility gives way to mere conviction. Accordingly weak remains the link between rationality and responsibility.

The problem of an ethical grounding of rational practice   In a short formula, we may agree with Weber's intention to tie ethics to rationality; but we must disagree with his attempt to tie *rational* ethics to purposive-rationality only. This attempt creates an unbridgeable divide between the two sides of responsible action that in Kant were still thought together, *man's empirical nature* as an agent who, within conditions set by nature, can exert causality through his will and bring about desired consequences, and *man's moral nature* as an agent who, beyond mere self-interest and natural inclinations, can take an unconditional moral stance of good will. As I would argue, the problem of an ethical grounding of rational action arises precisely

because human agency always has these two sides. Treating them as alternatives means to miss the core of the problem. How should we rationally appreciate empirical circumstances and consequences of intervention without some clear notion of improvements, that is, value standards? And how should we rationally appreciate value standards without some clear notion of their empirical consequences? If rationality and responsibility are to go hand in hand, we must not separate them along the lines of Weber's two ethics, a distinction that of course is reminiscent of the traditional opposition of consequentialist and deontological ethics. Customary as it is even in moral theory, it does not live up to the full meaning of morally responsible action. It avoids rather than meets the demands on rationality that responsible action implies, demands that Kant has explained with unmatched intellectual clarity and consequence.

It follows that the normative core of rational practice cannot be adequately grasped in the terms of Weber's framework, *as if* acting rationally (as measured by consequences) and acting responsibly (as measured by value standards) constituted a meaningful alternative or even an irredeemable opposition. Rational and responsible action thus become separated. Responsibility is narrowed to a matter of correct means-end calculation: if the consequences are not those we wanted, however detrimental they may be for the affected parties, all we can say as professionals is that regrettably, we got our facts or calculations wrong. Our professional ethic and morality is not at stake; for it seemingly remains a private matter of conviction rather than a professional matter of competence. When it comes to values, a thus-conceived responsibility must become silent or in any case cannot respond rationally.

As opposed to such a morality of silence – of taking a rational or intellectual holiday in normative matters so to speak – it would seem to me that between the two limiting cases of purely rational means-end calculation (responsibility for consequences) and merely subjective value judgments (conviction regarding value standards) there lies a wide range of normative issues that in practice are relevant to the ethical quality of actions and also allow of rational and responsible deliberation. The core question touches upon this whole range of issues: What are "adequate" consequences? Adequate consequences are obviously the fruit of employing adequate means for achieving adequate ends, but just as obviously, "adequate" is always a

normative category**:** adequate to whom, with what end in mind, according to what standards of quality or improvement, and applied to what kinds of issues or situations? In rational deliberation about practice, it is neither possible nor necessary to separate these two sides of responsibility – here consequences, there valuations; the ones objectively empirical, the others subjectively normative. Consequences and valuations come hand in hand and matter together; they both have an empirical as well as a normative side. Kant (1787, B75) once famously reminded us that just as "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." Adapting his insight to the problem of an ethical grounding of rational practice, we might say**:**

> *Consequences not informed by values are empty,*
> *values not informed by consequences are blind.*

or simpler**:**

> *Consequences have values,*
> *values have consequences.*

Accordingly difficult it is to see why, then, any effort to question an action's ethical implications (What forms of life does it promote?) and moral basis (What moral principles justify or question such a preference?) should amount to a merely subjective, nonrational or even irrational act of faith, a mere matter of conviction. Can't we *rationally* evaluate and criticize ethical assumptions and moral principles in the light of their empirical or anticipated consequences, just as we can rationally evaluate observed or anticipated consequences in the light of values and principles? It seems to me, the very concept of rational *social* action implies that there is more to responsible rationality than technical or formal means-end calculation. *Responsible rationality* means "rationality that responds."

Weber's conception of rational social action does not respond to the insights of two thousand years of practical philosophy. It suffers not only from a certain lack of terminological clarity and carefulness, as Kalberg (1980, pp. 1146) observed, but also from a striking absence of practical-philosophical reasoning. Despite the important role that Weber was prepared to give to values, value-rationality, and substantive rationality, he apparently was not fully aware of how impoverished his concept of practical rationality remained as compared to that of Kant. Nor has the reception of his influential work, as far as I can see, sufficiently considered this serious limitation of his framework and its resulting lack of clarity about the nature of rational

practice. These shortcomings have had the paradoxical effect that his work, against his best intentions, has actually helped foster the modern triumph of instrumental and managerial reasoning over a richer, "Kantian" conception of responsible rationality.

How come? How is it possible, readers may wonder, that a major social theorist such as Max Weber should have adopted such a rather impoverished notion of the ethics of rational social action? And why, if this is so, should we spend so much effort to try and understand his theory of social action? Taking the second question first, the answer is simple**:** because it exists and still shapes our contemporary notions of rationality. Few other theorists have written so extensively about the concept of rational action; none has been as influential. Our previous analysis of the notion of professional competence (cf. Ulrich, 2011a) illustrates how influential Weber's framework has been and still is as a model for thinking about rational practice. I consider this model symptomatic indeed of what is wrong with today's prevalent understanding of rationality. In a somewhat ironic way, Weber's typology is perhaps more important today than it has ever been**:** it can help us diagnose the spirit of the time of which, against its original intentions, it furnishes a representative, if insufficiently critical, testimony.

Turning to the other question, we need to remind ourselves that Weber aims to explain how an explanatory social science would be possible. He sees in interpretive social science both the medium and the end of an adequate analysis of the nature of rational social action. Accordingly his perspective is that of an interpretive observer, not that of a responsible agent. There are basically two ways in which an observer can interpret the actions of others, that is, understand their meaning**:** actions can be understood as rational (deliberate, reasoned) or spontaneous (affective or customary) responses to situations. But what can be the basis of certainty of such interpretations? It lies for Weber in the intrinsic *logic* of the agent's response to the situation. The more rationally considered the response is, the better an observer can appreciate its logic and provide a reliable account. What matters, then, is the relative weight that *rational* as compared to merely *empathetic* understanding assumes in the social scientist's understanding**:**

> The basis for certainty in understanding can be either rational [or] empathetic.…. Action is *rationally evident* chiefly when we attain a completely clear intellectual grasp of the action-elements in their intended context of meaning. *Empathetic* or appreciative accuracy is attained when, through

> sympathetic participation, we can adequately grasp the emotional context in which the action took place. The *highest degree of rational understanding* is attained in cases involving the meanings of logically or mathematically related propositions; their meaning may be immediately and unambiguously intelligible. We have a perfectly clear understanding of what it means when somebody employs the proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$ or the Pythagorean theorem in reasoning or argument, or when someone correctly carries out a logical train of reasoning according to our accepted modes of thinking. In the same way we also understand what a person is doing when he tries to achieve certain ends by choosing appropriate means on the basis of the facts of the situation, as experience has accustomed us to interpret them. The interpretation of such rationally purposeful action possesses, for the understanding of the choice of means, the *highest degree of verifiable certainty*. (Weber, 1968a, p. 5; italics added)

Weber wants to make sure that interpretive social science is as accurate and reliable as possible. But his attempt to explain the logic of the social scientist's interpretation leads him astray**:** he fails to distinguish sufficiently between the rationality of the social scientist's understanding on the one hand and that of the social practice to be understood on the other hand. As the former moves into focus, the latter becomes blurred. Only for the former are accuracy and reliability adequate criteria; for the latter, it is indispensable to consider an action's quality as *social* action, that is, the extent to which it responds and does justice to the views and values of everyone concerned. Since he fails to distinguish clearly between the two issues, he inadvertently substitutes the former for the latter.

We must, then, understand the inadequacy of Weber's framework as the result of a rather trivial methodological error**:** Weber attaches so much importance to the social scientist's need for understanding the logic of observed actions that he falls into the trap of attributing the highest degree of rationality to that action which is *best understandable* to observers, rather than to the action that *best secures rational social practice.* "Rational" action in Weber's action-theoretic framework has tacitly become equated with what is rationally understandable *to the social scientist,* a criterion that does not at all imply that it is also rationally understandable and acceptable *to all the parties concerned* and that in this richer sense, it could be said to be *socially* rational action, that is, conducive to good social practice.

The fallacy in Weber's typology of rational action is now obvious. That means-end calculation, despite its obvious limitations, becomes in it the pinnacle of rationality is the price that Weber pays for giving more importance to the *observer's* rationality in interpreting social action (the rationality of social science) than to the *agent's* rationality in orienting social

action (the rationality of social practice). Weber may in this way have rendered possible an interpretive social science; but it is a science that achieves little in the way of promoting good social practice. To that end, it would need some grounding in practical philosophy. This deficit strikes back**:** Weber's typology, due to its lacking grasp of the dimension of practical reason, ultimately even misses its purely descriptive aim of explaining the rationality of *social* action properly speaking.

Towards an alternative framework of rational action The question is, where do we go from here? First of all, if an action-theoretic framework is to be adequate for both explaining *and guiding* rational practice, it will need to be informed by practical philosophy as well as by social science. Such a framework will put Weber's typology (as shown in Table 1 above) back on its head, by moving instrumental rationality to where it belongs, locating it at the bottom rather than the top of our understanding of rational social action. Instrumentally rational action will again be treated as that which its very name makes clear it is, a means rather than an end of rational practice. Only because his hero was the interpretive social scientist, purposive-rationality could become a surrogate purpose to Weber as it were; but the true hero of an adequate framework of rational practice is everyone who tries to act rationally and responsibly. In analogy to the notion of the "general intelligent reader," we might speak of the *general responsible agent* as the proper user of a typology of rational action.

Second, the distinction of instrumentally rational vs. value-rational action, as the two genuinely rational action orientations that Weber's typology foresees, is clearly insufficient to capture the rich and complex implications of the quest for rational practice. Weber himself demonstrated this deficit by finding it necessary, in his influential sociological studies, to employ categories of rationality that are not part of his typology of rational action. An alternative framework will need to give room to these missing aspects of rationality. It will thus give an adequate place to the concepts of practical (as distinguished from theoretical) and substantive (as distinguished from formal) rationality; it will consequently also revise the ways in which Weber's four basic aspects of meaningful action – means, ends, consequences, and values – relate to the resulting new list of ideal-types. Based on our discussion thus far, I propose the following revised typology (Table 2).

Table 2: Revised typology of rational action
(Weber's framework revised with a view to explaining *and guiding* rational practice)

Rational action orientations (ideals ranked according to reach of rationality)	Sources of meaning (logic of action)	Types of rationality (Weber)	Dimensions of reason (Kant)
Practical rationality (ideal: practical reason)	Values (norms)		Practical-normative
		Substantive	- - - - - - - - - - - - -
Theoretical rationality (ideal: relevant knowledge)	Consequences (effects)		
		- - - - - - - - - - - -	
Value-rationality (ideal: value conformity)	Ends (purposes)		Theoretical-instrumental
		Formal	
Purposive-rationality (ideal: expediency)	Means (resources)		

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We now have four genuinely rational action orientations, rather than only two. All of them furnish ideal-types of rational action that we will hardly ever encounter empirically in pure form but which nevertheless (or rather, *because* of their pure nature) can serve as models or standards for analyzing and assessing expressions or deficits of rationality as we encounter them in real-world action. Weber's four aspects of meaningfulness now stand for four equivalent *sources of meaning,* a designation that should remind us that they can help us understand an agent's logic of action but do not thereby validate it. Validation of rational action will be a matter of competent argumentation, within democratically legitimated processes of decision-making, among all the parties concerned, rather than just being a matter of the researcher's understanding of an agent's subjective logic of action. Further, the four sources of meaning are now related not only to the ideal-types of action but also to Weber's distinction between substantive and formal rationality, as well as to Kant's distinction of the theoretical and practical dimensions of reason. As in Weber's framework, no rationalistic bias is intended; it is, rather, our purpose which demands a focus on those elements of action which are rationally motivated. We will obviously still need to acknowledge the existence of nonrational, emotionally or traditionally motivated elements; but unlike Weber, we no longer treat them as ideal-types of *rational* action. Together, and in the suggested rank order, the four ideal-types of rationally motivated action orientations constitute what we mean by "rational practice."

To be sure, any such typology is to some extent arbitrary. It is a definition of what we mean by rational practice and as such it can support but not replace careful theoretical and methodological analysis of underlying assumptions

and ensuing validity claims. We have thus far considered the assumptions underlying Weber's theory of social action; we now need to try and find a more adequate basis for our envisaged alternative framework. The most urgent issue such a theoretical basis should clarify is the specific rationality aspects that we take to characterize rational *social* action, an aspect that we have found to be underdeveloped in Weber's framework. This aspect is also of particular importance to the quest for good *professional* practice, as professional intervention almost always takes place in contexts that involve a plurality of agents and stakeholders.

Our guide for a next part of the way ahead will now be the German sociologist and practical philosopher Jurgen Habermas, who probably is the major contemporary theorist of rationality. In *The Theory of Communicative Action,* Habermas (1984, pp. 143-337) develops his "communication-theoretic" framework of critical social theory through an extensive discussion of Weber's framework (a further indication of the ongoing influence and relevance of Weber's thought). It will be sufficient for our purpose to limit ourselves to that part of Habermas' discussion in which he analyses the core issue of present interest to us, Weber's relative neglect of the *social* constitution of rationality in favor of his preference for methodological individualism.

Habermas' communicative turn   Habermas' analysis begins exactly at the point we have reached thus far. It is because Weber does not start from a concept of social action, Habermas argues, that he is bound to end up attaching the highest degree of rationality to nonsocial, purposive-rational action and consequently can recognize in social action a deficient type of rationality only**:**

> Weber does not start from the social relationship. He regards as rationalizable only the means-end relation of teleologically conceived, monological action. If one adopts this perspective, the only aspects of action open to objective appraisal are the *effectiveness* of a causal intervention into an existing situation and the *truth* of the empirical assumptions that underlie the maxim or the plan of action – that is, the subjective belief about a purposive-rational organization of means. So Weber chooses purposive-rational action as the reference point of his typology. (Habermas, 1984, p. 281).

In Weber's own terms**:**

> Action is instrumentally rational *(zweckrational)* when the end, the means, and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighed.… Choice between alternative and conflicting ends may well be determined in a value-rational manner.… or the actor may **…** simply take them as given subjective wants and arrange them in a scale of consciously assessed relative

urgency. He may then orient his action to this scale in such a way that they are satisfied as far as possible in order of urgency, as formulated in the principle of "marginal utility." Value-rational action may thus have various different relations to the instrumentally rational action. *From the latter point of view, however, value-rationality is always irrational..* (Weber, 1968, p. 26; emphasis added.)

It is as consequent as it is revealing that Weber should arrive at such a conclusion. Schluchter (1981, p. 128), who basically aims to strengthen Weber's theory of action, formulates the trap most succinctly**:** "Weber's approach may show weaknesses by proceeding from action rather than interaction." In my own terms, as Weber starts from an individualistic concept of goal-oriented action, he must try to construct his notion of rational social action *around* it, rather than starting from it in the first place. I would argue that in such an understanding of rationality, social action is bound to become an impoverished variant of *economic* action**:** any orientation other than towards economic values, including emotional, cultural/traditional and ethical/moral values, is seen to diminish rather than enhance the rationality of action. Even value-rationality, as we have seen, takes on the formal meaning of calculating the best among alternative courses of actions for achieving given values, a form of means-end calculation. Value-rationality in the richer sense of taking a *moral point of view,* a stance of respect for the views and values of others as well as for different customs and traditions, thus takes at best the place of a footnote to the quest for rational practice; it may be "nice to have" but is not a constitutive aspect of the rationality of social action.

Habermas (1984, pp. 282-284) responds to this situation by abstracting from Weber's work a richer, "unofficial" version of his typology of action, in which the non-instrumental qualities of social action take a more important place. It did not entirely escape Weber in his sociological studies that understanding social action confronts us with questions that his typology is ill-suited to grasp. In particular, how can agents coordinate their actions in ways that are conducive to rationally oriented social action? Or, as Habermas (1984, p. 283) puts it, is coordination to be achieved through some tacit or negotiated complementarity of *interests* or rather through argued agreement on underlying *norms* of action? A distinction thus emerges in Weber's work between social relations that gain stability as a merely *factual* order (based on accepted co-existence) and social relations that embody a recognized *legitimate* or *legal* order (based on social validity, or speaking with Weber,

Geltung). In either case, the degree of rationality involved can be low (based on custom or convention) or high (based on strategic action, with Weber's term**:** *Interessenhandeln,* or on mutually agreed action, *Gesellschaftshandeln).* We may also relate the difference between "low" and "high" rationality to Kohlberg's (1968, 1976, 1981) earlier introduced distinction between the "conventional" and the "postconventional" *stages of moral development* (cf. Ulrich, 2009b, p. 19f). Habermas thus distills from Weber's work *four alternative types of social action* that Weber employs in his work but fails to explicate systematically (Table 3)**:**

Table 3: Weber's "unofficial" typology of action according to Habermas
(Source: adapted from Habermas 1984, p. 283)

Coordination	Degree of rationality	
	Low	**High**
Through interest positions	De facto customary action *(Sitte)*	Strategic action *(Interessenhandeln)*
Through normative agreement	Conventional action based on agreement *(Gemeinschaftshandeln)*	Postconventional action based on agreement *(Gesellschaftshandeln)*

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It is on this "unofficial" typology of social action orientations that Habermas relies for developing his own framework; for it reveals, in the bottom line of the table, the core of his *communicative turn* of the understanding of rationality and morality.

Habermas' typology of action Habermas (1984, p. 285) proposes a typology of action that is partly derived from Weber's analysis but which I find both more comprehensive and more useful, for practical and for practical purposes. It draws on a richer concept of rationality that avoids the trap of reducing practical to instrumental rationality; and it can guide reflective practice. Its crucial new aspect is that it systematically distinguishes between situations in which interpersonal relationships do and do not play a role (*social* vs. *nonsocial action situation*): In addition, it refines this distinction in terms of two different action orientations that matter for grasping the social quality of actions**:** action oriented towards securing *success* vs. action oriented towards reaching intersubjective *understanding.* Cross-tabulating the two distinctions yields the following scheme (Table 4)**:**

Table 4: Social and nonsocial types of rational action
(Source: adapted from Habermas 1984, p. 285)

Action situation	Action orientation	
	Success	**Understanding**
Nonsocial	Instrumental action	— — —
Social	Strategic action	Communicative action

Thus Habermas' fundamental category of *communicative action* emerges as a form of rationally oriented social action that can help us to recover the normative dimension lost in Weber's concept of practical rationality, and in our contemporary notion of rational practice quite generally. At the same time, the scheme explains why counter to what is often assumed in the management and planning literature, "strategic" rationality does not embody a sufficient form of social action: it is oriented towards the actions of others only with a view to securing its own success. It remains bound to the limitations of purposive-rationality and thus is, strictly speaking, only a variant of instrumental action and of its underlying core principle of means-end calculation. By contrast, "communicative" rationality reaches beyond such means-end calculation in that it also addresses the value assumptions and implications of "rational" action. This latter aim can be achieved only through intersubjective exchange oriented towards *mutual* understanding, ideally resulting in some *shared* norms of good practice.

I find this scheme as powerful as it is simple. It is easy to apply to almost any kind of real-world practice, yet can make a genuine difference to the way we think about "rational" social practice. I have discussed the theoretical underpinnings of the scheme in more detail than is possible and necessary here on some earlier occasions (see Ulrich, 1988, pp. 140-146; for the scheme's language-analytical basis, also compare Ulrich, 2009c and d); at this place I am more interested in its implications for a framework of good professional practice.

A two-dimensional view of rational practice As a guide to good practice, a main advantage of the scheme of Habermas is that it avoids the one-sidedly utilitarian outlook of Weber's framework. Instead, it allows us to bring back into play the lost dimension of practical reason, now in the new form of communicative rationality. It thus offers us a chance to ground our notion of

rational practice in a more comprehensive, two-dimensional, understanding of rationality, as I have previously attempted it in my work on critical systems heuristics (CSH; see Ulrich, 1983 and 1988). Such an understanding lends itself to critical purposes such as uncovering the value basis of claims to rationality and related deficits of their knowledge basis; analyzing deficits of communicative conditions and taking measures to improve them, for example, by securing better argumentative chances to ill-informed or otherwise disadvantaged groups of stakeholders; supporting reflective and emancipatory practice by helping those involved or affected to question the notions of rationality and ethics built into action proposals; or training the critical competencies of citizens and other users of professional expertise, for example, in civic education or researchers' training. With a view to such critical and didactic uses, Table 5 offers a comparative characterization of the two dimensions of rationality. The idea is that they embody two complementary concepts of rationality, each of which can furnish a critical perspective on the other.

Table 5: Two dimensions of rational practice
(Source: adapted from Ulrich, 1988, p. 144f)

Aspect	Rationality concept	
	Utilitarian	Communicative
Orientation (Habermas)	Success: nonsocial or social (in a strategic sense)	Understanding: social (in an ethical sense)
Category of practice (Aristotle)	*Poiesis:* work	*Praxis:* interaction
Underlying concept of reason (Kant)	Theoretical reason	Practical reason
Ideal-types of action (Weber/ Habermas)	Purposive-rational and value-rational	Communicative
Perspective of … (in CSH)	Those involved	Those involved *and* those affected
Methodological core problem	Sufficient knowledge: "true" means-end calculation (avoiding surprise)	Sufficient consensus: "right" norms of action (avoiding conflict)
Solution attempt (Habermas)	Theoretical discourse	Practical discourse
Rationalization potential	Functional rationalization of practice: growth of steering potentials	Communicative rationalization of practice: growth of potentials of mutual understanding
Typical paradigm of applied disciplines	Rational choice: decision theory	Authentic communication: discourse theory
Typical method	Cost-benefit analysis (utilitarian calculus)	Participation (ethical dialogue)
Ideal	Control	Cooperation

To be sure, in real-world contexts of professional action these two sides of rational practice are not always as nicely complementary as one might like. More often than not, they clash. Optimizing either type of rationality often tends to work against the other; for example, the attempt to do justice to everyone's views and values (communicative rationality) tends to run counter to the quest for the most economic use of available resources (including time), and vice-versa. The question thus poses itself**:** What does it mean to act rationally when the two dimensions of rationality clash?

Towards a multi-level concept of rational practice In view of the clash of rationalities that characterizes virtually all real-world practice, we need to go beyond Habermas' scheme. Merely "adding" the communicative dimension to success-oriented rationality is not good enough, for it does not alter the fact that in real-world practice, the instrumental-strategic and the communicative-normative dimensions of practice rarely go together easily and harmoniously. The utilitarian perspective has a strong tendency to "take over" and to dominate what ultimately counts as rational, even where an effort is made to integrate the communicative dimension. It may help at this stage to introduce two typical examples, to which we can then also refer later on.

Two examples My first example is the now popular idea of *stakeholder management,* an attempt on the part of private corporations and, to a lesser degree, also of public organizations, to become more responsive to the needs of customers, employees, suppliers, shareholders, and other stakeholders (e.g., local communities, minorities, or underpaid workers in developing countries). As valuable as the basic idea is, I observe that the literature on stakeholder management, the so-called "stakeholder theory" of the firm, has never managed to sufficiently clarify the relationship between the two dimensions of rationality involved. The most cited definition of "stakeholders" reveals this immediately**:** it defines as stakeholders "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46, similarly p. 52). As well-intended as this definition is, in that it does not from the outset exclude those who may be affected but have no influence whatsoever on the organization – it appears to forget that it is proposed within a framework of strategic management (the title of Freeman's book, *Strategic Management: A*

Stakeholder Approach, is quite accurate in this respect). Freeman's subsequent explanation of the aim of stakeholder theory accordingly reads**:**

> Organizations have stakeholders. That is, there are groups or individuals who can affect, or are affected by, the organization's mission. I have shown that *if business organizations are to be successful* in the current and future environment then executives must take multiple stakeholder groups into account. (Freeman, 1984, p. 52, emphasis added)

While the basic definition might be taken to suggest that stakeholder theory is a development of management theory that aims for a two-dimensional understanding of rationality in the sense of Table 5 (a development that would be much needed), this formulation of the aim of stakeholder management makes it quite clear that the underlying paradigm remains predominantly success-oriented. Since stakeholder theory does not reflect on the underlying clash of rationalities, it misses the chance to overcome the one-dimensional utilitarian outlook of managerial thought. The other, communicative/ normative dimension of rational practice moves out of focus just when it might have been recognized as a core deficit of conventional management thought. Instead, stakeholder management quickly relapses into the usual, one-dimensionally utilitarian outlook of strategic rationality. Taking stakeholders into account, we learn, is a must "if business organizations are to be successful." One can find such revealing passages throughout the book; it clearly and systematically puts the focus of stakeholder management on "the stakeholders whose support is necessary for survival" (Freeman, 1984, p. 33). So does the bulk of the stakeholder literature of which I am aware, due to its inadequate philosophical grounding and its resulting failure to question the underlying notion of rational management sufficiently.

To be sure, I do not mean to suggest that the proponents of stakeholder management are not sincere in their efforts, quite the contrary; I appreciate their intent to propose an alternative theory of the firm and to add a social, communicative dimension to the strategic management literature. I recognize that these efforts have actually done a lot to expand the universe of discourse of strategic management and have also contributed to the rise of public awareness about the inadequacy of present-day management education and practice. But the crucial step towards a more adequate framework of thought has been missed; little – too little – has changed in management education and practice. The pioneers of stakeholder theory apparently underestimated

the tenacity with which accustomed patterns of rationality prevail, particularly when they have the economics on their side. As they failed to systematically work out the two different rationality dimensions involved and to clarify their relationship, stakeholder theory to this date includes no methodological provisions that in practice might discipline the prevailing utilitarian outlook of strategic management. As we noted above, it is not good enough merely to add the communicative dimension while leaving the precise relationship and handling of the two dimensions of rationality open. In the terms of strategic management, stakeholder theory fails to take into account the "competitive advantage" of the utilitarian dimension as it were. This situation will hardly change unless we find some systematic ways to integrate the missing communicative dimension into the rationality concepts of management theory, education, and practice, so that rationality claims without it will increasingly become unthinkable and untenable.

A second example is offered by the so-called *open systems approach* in systems thinking. There is a widespread belief in the systems literature that an "open systems" perspective is more conducive to societally rational decision making than are conventional closed systems models. But again, this assumption turns out to be mistaken, as it is not grounded in a clear conception of the two rationality dimensions at issue. I have on earlier occasions analyzed this "open systems fallacy," as I have called it, and have found it a useful way to explain one of the core ideas of my work on "critical systems heuristics" (CSH)**:**

> "Open," in contrast to "closed," systems models consider the social environment of the system; but so long as the system's effectiveness remains the only point of reference, the consideration of environmental factors does nothing to increase the social rationality of a systems design. In fact, if the normative orientation of the system in question is socially irrational, open systems planning will merely add to the socially irrational effects of closed systems planning. For instance, when applied to the planning of private enterprise, the open systems perspective only increases the private (capital-oriented) rationality of the enterprise by expanding its control over the environmental, societal determinants of its economic success, without regard for the social costs that such control may impose upon third parties.
>
> Generally speaking, a one-dimensional expansion of the reach of functional systems rationality that is not embedded in a simultaneous expansion of communicative rationality threatens to pervert the *critically heuristic purpose of systems thinking* – to avoid the trap of suboptimization and to consider critically the whole-systems implications of any system design – *into a mere heuristics of systems purposes.* This means that it is no longer "the system" and the boundary judgments constitutive of it that are considered as the problem; instead, the problems of the system are now investigated. (Ulrich, 1988, p. 156, orig. italics; with reference to Ulrich, 1983, p. 299)

Not unlike what has happened to management theory and education, systems thinking has become seriously impoverished as it has lost sight of the other, non-utilitarian dimension of rationality. The two fields also have in common that they both have been influential, in the past few decades, in shaping our contemporary notions of good and rational practice. So much so that an effective handling of the many pressing problems of our epoch is now almost synonymous with calls for more systemic thinking and for stakeholder management.

Accordingly imperative it is that the two-dimensional nature of rationality receive more attention and become integrated in our contemporary notions of rationality, in a manner that would clarify their mutual relationship and thereby would also *strengthen the communicative dimension.* As long as we merely see in the latter an added dimension that is nice to have but, regrettably, often clashes with the need for successful action, little will change. Since the two dimensions clash, it is indeed difficult to think and argue clearly and consistently about rational practice; accordingly difficult it is for professionals and decision makes to act rationally, and for all the parties concerned to think clearly and argue compellingly about the rationality claims involved. In short, a scheme is needed that would translate Tables 4 and 5 into a basic, widely applicable framework for critical reflection and rational argumentation about good practice.

The need for a multi-level conception of rational practice As I want to argue, a vertical, multi-level conception of rational practice offers such a scheme. Such a solution is in line with Kantian reasoning**:** we can avoid an unresolved conflict between the two competing perspectives of theoretical and practical reason if we bring them into a hierarchical order, so that we recognize both the philosophical (methodological) and the pragmatic (everyday) primacy of practical over theoretical reason.

Very briefly, practical reason is *philosophically primary* because, unlike theoretical reason, it is not limited to what can be decided by empirical observation and testing (i.e., by reference to the phenomena and laws of nature). Its reach is more comprehensive and includes the realm of human freedom and agency – in particular, moral and other norms of conduct we give ourselves, and the efforts we undertake through actual practice (action)

to improve the human condition. Practical reason is *pragmatically primary* because it alone can give to theoretical reason the necessary direction that the latter needs for its proper use; for, as we noted before, as long as we use theoretical reason (i.e, the knowledge and instrumental know-how it yields) for pursuing questionable ends and values, the over-all resulting rationality is also questionable. Taking the two considerations together, theoretical reason may tell us what we *can* do, but only practical reason tells us whether we *should* indeed do it and *why,* that is, for what reasons and with a view to what notions of improvement and justification.

Both philosophically and pragmatically speaking, then, the quest for rational action needs to break through the usual dominance of theoretical-instrumental rationality. To this end, we need to "discipline" the use of theoretical-instrumental rationality by subjecting it to the primacy of practical reason, thus advancing from a state of mere co-existence of theoretical and practical reason ("mere" in that it remains methodologically undefined and gives us no orientation as to how to handle their clash) to an understanding of rational practice that gives practical reason a chance. We should then also be able, for example, to practice value clarification and value discourse as *integral* parts of the quest for rational practice. The basic methodological device for achieving this, I suggest, is to translate the "horizontal" framework of Table 5 into a "vertical" framework as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Three-level concept of rational practice
(Source: adapted from Ulrich, 1988, p. 148, cf. p. 156f, and 2001b, p. 81)

Concept of rationality: dimension of reason	Action type: orientation	Core issue: problem pressure	Example of corporate management: typical objects of rationalization
Communicative rationality: practical-normative	Social: oriented to understanding	Conflict: ethical integration of conflicting interests	Normative management: corporate values/ social responsibility; stakeholder discourse
Strategic rationality: theoretical-instrumental	Social: oriented to success	Complexity: effective steering of complex systems	Strategic management: corporate competitive advantage; strategic change
Instrumental rationality: theoretical-instrumental	Nonsocial: oriented to success	Cost: efficient use of scarce resources	Operational management: corporate operations; organizational structures and procedures

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The three-level framework of Table 6 emerges from an attempt to combine Tables 2, 4, and 5 in a way that keeps it simple and widely applicable. Without simplification, integrating all the ideas of these previous tables would result in an overloaded scheme. The four revised Weberian ideal-types of rational action in Table 2 have therefore been collapsed into merely two types, akin to Kant's two dimensions of reason and also to Habermas' distinction between an orientation to understanding vs. to success. This simplification has two advantages: (i) it makes the core idea of a two-dimensional rationalization of social practice stand out more clearly and (ii) it makes room for differentiating the realm of theoretical-instrumental reason into its nonsocial ("instrumental") and social ("strategic") forms, adopting Habermas' terminology.

The resulting scheme brings the three rationality concepts of Habermas into a hierarchical order, so that we can now understand them as *levels of increasing rationalization.* In this scheme, the three ideal-types of rationality can no longer be seen as meaningful alternatives; instead, they now stand for a progress of rationalization in which all three levels are recognized as indispensable constituents of good practice. Although in actual practice the three levels may of course be developed to varying degrees, it is clear that each one depends for its full rationalization on the other two. Any gains of rationality at the two higher levels build on the two lower levels, and at the same time, the upper levels provide orientation to the good use of the lower levels. The scheme thus suggests that each type of rationality is deficient so long as it is not informed and supported by the other two. It thus lends itself to *critical* use.

Further, the scheme's vertical structure also means that when the rationalities of the three levels clash, the lower levels should basically be seen to have the character of means for achieving the ends specified at the higher levels. The notion that comes into play here is Kant's above-mentioned concept of the *primacy of practical reason.* Although the framework considers theoretical and practical reason as complementary dimensions of rationality, it is practical reason which defines the ends for the use of theoretical reason and not vice-versa. To put it differently, it is practical reason that infuses meaning to both strategic and instrumental thinking and makes them "valuable," that is, oriented to values and thus to creating value. In this way, the scheme

avoids the lack of orientation that results from clashing rationalities (orientation to success vs. understanding; "my rationality" vs. "yours" and "theirs") and which in practice makes it so easy and convenient to limit oneself to a self-interested success orientation.

The example of corporate management: beyond mere strategic rationality

The example of corporate management offers itself for illustrating the difference that the suggested three-level concept of rational practice can make. What is new is not so much that it considers different levels of practice rationalization but rather, that it includes the dimension of practical-normative reason. Multi-level schemes of rational practice were suggested both before and after the original version of my scheme was published (Ulrich, 1988), for example by Jantsch (1970, 1975), Beer (1972 / 1981), Espejo et al. (1996), and Schwaninger (2001, 2009). These schemes offer a useful extension of the predominantly functionalist and managerial perspective of the fields in which they were developed, in particular organizational cybernetics, technological forecasting and planning, and management theory. However, they differ from the scheme suggested here in one important respect**:** they are not grounded in practical philosophy.

Because they are not grounded in practical philosophy, they are prisoners of their underlying *strategic* orientation towards success. Rather like the conceptions of "open systems" modeling and of "stakeholder management" mentioned before, they tend to fall into the trap of tacitly assuming that the organization whose policies and strategies are at issue furnishes the point of reference for defining what is rational and what is not. Thus their focus and language remain geared to aims described in terms such as improving "organizational fitness," "viability," and "complexity management," as understood from a perspective of functionalist systems thinking or, in the terms of Habermas, success-oriented action. Inasmuch as there are references to norms and communication, the former stand for a focus on organizational policy rather than on the idea of practical reason, and the latter for a cybernetic focus on the organization's structures of "communication and control" rather than for a two-dimensional understanding of rationality and for accordingly designed participative processes of decision-making.

In the terms of Table 6, these earlier and later schemes tend to treat the top level of "normative management" in the terms of *complexity management,*

that is, as a problem of adapting the organization's policies to its "complex" environment, with a view to securing its survival. By contrast, Table 6 associates the top level with *conflict management* properly speaking, that is, with the problem of securing rational practice in a sense that is not merely strategic but includes a moral and political basis of legitimation.

Well-intended as these (at first glance) similar schemes are, in practice they risk falling back into a managerialist conception of rational practice. They pursue a Weberian concept of practical rationality, which as we have seen relies on a tacit orientation to success while remaining badly equipped to grasp and analyze its own normative content. There is no place in such a framework for dealing systematically with the "other," practical-normative dimension of reason. It is indeed the hallmark of managerialist thought as I would define it that it ignores practical reason as an integral component of rational practice.

Thanks to their encouraging a wider perspective of management, which for example at the policy level may include environmental issues such as future scarcity of certain resources, these schemes nevertheless embody a certain progress as compared to their fields of origin. It also seems to me they gradually open themselves up to a less narrowly managerial understanding of the "social" aspects of rationality, even if it may be due more to the challenges that strategic management encounters in practice than to their underpinning theoretical assumptions. It just is no longer possible today in many situations to secure strategic success by treating it as a matter of course that "the system's" values (in this example, corporate interests) furnish the main if not only reference point for rational decision-making.

Even so, the underlying orientation of these models of management remains essentially strategic, as they lack an alternative theoretical conception. Meanwhile, the kinds of problem pressure that contemporary management faces is changing. The difficulty now is that it lacks an adequate philosophical basis, and therefore also has no adequate methodological means, for dealing with the normative issues that are emerging ever more urgently. There is an obvious need for questioning the broader environmental and social implications of strategic rationality, as well as the moral and political basis for dealing with the demands of normative management. The prevailing managerial patterns of thought leave managers and planners

ill-prepared for dealing with such issues. The typical response will of course be to ensure the public that "the company is taking its stakeholders very seriously." But how this is to be done in a rational way remains unclear so long as these models only support a strategic orientation. Paying lip service to "stakeholding" does little to remove the lack of clarity regarding the rationality standards to be applied, and thus also regarding the values (interests and objectives) that really count. In an epoch in which successful corporate management is still largely synonymous with increasing the company's balance sheet and "shareholder value," corporate executives are suddenly expected to look after the interests of their company's stakeholders, without clear notions as to how the conflicts of interest involved – diverging interests between the company and its stakeholders as well as between different stakeholder groups – should be resolved and to whom, if not to the company's owners, the managers are accountable. The inevitable result is a blurring of responsibilities – a kind of organized irresponsibility – in which unresolved rationality conflicts go hand in hand with unresolved conflicts of accountability, a situation that the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992, 1995) has described as one of the root problems of what he calls the "risk society."

Sooner or later, contemporary management theory will need to find ways of handling such clashes of rationality and accountability in a manner that is not merely strategic. Today's theory of the firm is rapidly losing its firm ground, so to speak. In this respect, our three-level-concept is apt to make a fundamental difference. Grounded in practical philosophy as it is, its core idea is *vindication beyond mere reference to self-interest* (Ulrich, 2011b, p. 9). That does not mean we should expect everyone to be altruists and to forget about acting successfully; certainly not. There is nothing wrong with an orientation to success, so long as it is embedded in a larger view of what rationality and responsibility mean. The issue is how we can do that without ending up with blurred notions of rationality and unclear values or objectives. Our three-level concept of rational practice permits translating this core issue into a more specific – and manageable – question**:** How can we handle its three levels of rationalization *systematically* as complementary levels and still maintain a sense of clear values and rationalities? In response to this question, I propose a principle of reflective practice that I derive from the three-level concept and suggest as a way to handle its vertical structure; I call it the principle of *critical vertical integration of rationalization levels* or,

as a convenient shorthand, the principle of vertical integration.

The principle of vertical integration The term "vertical integration" was to my knowledge first used by Erich Jantsch (1969, esp. p. 190f) in the context of technological forecasting and planning. He used it to refer to the integration of all the activities (or "functions," as he called them) that such planning involves, from exploration of existing technologies and anticipation of possible technological futures to the definition of objectives and policies. The idea was to bring these functions together within an integrated, systems-theoretically and scientifically based framework of "policy sciences" (the seminal publication is Lerner and Lasswell, 1951). Jantsch called this integration of forecasting and planning functions "vertical" in distinction to the need for considering, in each stage of technology development, the larger context of the different subsystems involved (man-technology, nature-technology, and society-technology), to which he referred as "horizontal" integration. In a different context, Jantsch (1975, pp. 123, 209, 224) also spoke of "vertical centering," in a sense that comes closer to what I mean with the vertical integration of rationality levels. I can best explain my intention by means of a drawing, which again is inspired by Jantsch (1973 and 1975, p. 209), although I have adapted it a bit and more importantly, my understanding of it does not entirely follow his (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: The principle of vertical integration of rationalization levels
(Source: adapted from Ulrich, 1975, p. 75, and Jantsch, 1973 and 1975, p. 209)

The figure betrays its origin in cybernetic thinking and more specifically, in Ozbekhan's (1969, p. 133) notion of *controlling feedback loops* among levels of policy planning, which provided the inspiration for Jantsch's earlier drawing. In my use of this kind of graphic representation of integrative multi-level thinking, the planning levels of course have become levels of rational practice in general. As the previous discussion should also have made clear, I do not follow Ozbekhan and Jantsch in their "cybernetic" rather than moral and political understanding of "control"; the point for me is not to "adapt" our plans or acts to supposedly objective or natural requirements of the plan's (or agent's) '"environment" but rather, to subject them to the views and values of those who may have to live with the consequences – the communicative dimension of rationality as we understand it with Habermas. The fact that the idea of communicative rationality was not available to Ozbekhan and Jantsch at the time may explain why their frameworks for technological planning and policy "sciences" remain strangely apolitical and also do not (or at least, not systematically) take up the ethical and moral questions involved, despite frequent references to values and "normative" forms of planning. Again, the difference is that Ozbekhan and Jantsch did not ground their notion of rational policy-making in practical philosophy but on the contrary, aimed to extend the reach of science into practical-normative territory (compare my recent discussion, in Ulrich, 2012, pp. 6-9, of the two opposite models of improving practice).

As I understand the figure, it suggests that well-understood communicative, strategic, and instrumental rationalization should always move *between* and *across* the different levels at which ends and means, and with them also values and consequences, can be defined and questioned. Only thus can each level of rationalization infuse meaning – whether in the form of guidance or questioning – to the others. Consequently, each of our three levels of rational practice also calls for examination both from a top-down and a bottom-up perspective. To handle the three levels reflectively, we therefore need to conceptualize means and ends at five levels, as suggested by Fig. 1**:**

- *Norms of action:* highest standards or principles of action (e.g., moral and democratic principles); they shape our *values* and ideals.
- *Normative ends:* standards of improvement defined by personal and institutional values and by related notions of intended consequences;

they shape our *policies.*

- *Strategic ends:* objectives defined by policies; they shape our *strategies* and tactics of action.
- *Operational ends:* goals defined by strategies and tactics; they shape specific *operation*s or procedures of action. And finally,
- *Means:* basic resources defined by available sources of support; they shape the *feasibility* and *efficiency* of action.

We may also capture the idea of a mandatory process of moving up and down the hierarchy by referring to the three rationalization levels as *integrative levels,* a concept that to my knowledge Feiblemann (1954) was first to explain systematically, although still in a context of mainly functional thinking (e.g., in biology and ecology). In the present context I understand integrative levels as conceptual levels of rationality that gain their full meaning and validity only in the light of a combined, or "integrative," multi-level perspective. The practical way to implement this idea is by an *iterative process of vertical centering:* each level is at regular intervals (iteratively rather than permanently) to be in the center of systematic review both from above and from below.

This way of visualizing and describing the idea of vertical integration should also remind us that each of the three concepts of rationality has to play a *critical role* with respect to the other two. Each level is to help us "discipline" the claims to rationality of the others, as it were. Well-understood vertical integration is first of all *rationality critique.* The principle of vertical integration is thus a principle of reflective practice; it understands rational action as the result of a self-reflecting and communicative process of rigorous scrutiny of its assumptions and implications across the three levels of rationalization. Speaking of vertical integration is thus really just a convenient short formula for what is more precisely called the *principle of critical vertical integration.*

Application: two examples Our two earlier examples, stakeholder theory and open systems thinking, offer themselves for the purpose of illustrating the difference that critical vertical integration can make to our thinking. Let us try and apply the principle to these two examples.

First example: stakeholder theory Readers will probably recall the widely adopted definition of stakeholders as "groups or individuals who can affect,

or are affected by, the organization's mission" (Freeman, 1984, p. 52). Now, what happens when we look at this definition not only in terms of strategic management (Freeman's perspective) but equally in terms of normative management (Habermas' perspective of communicative rationalization)? Such a shift of perspective immediately suggests to me that the alternative is wrongly posed. Why should the two groups of stakeholders – those who can affect the organizations's policies and those who are affected by it – be treated as alternative target groups of stakeholding? Reading the definition in this way may not have been Freeman's conscious intention, but it is what stakeholder theory has been doing ever since. I would agree that inasmuch as the two target groups may require different ways of integrating their concerns, we face a meaningful distinction; but does that imply we also face a meaningful alternative? Obviously not – it is always the concerns of *both* groups that call for *communicative* as well as strategic rationalization (with primacy given to the former). In fact, from a perspective of *critical* vertical integration the second group ("those affected by the organization's mission") is more important, as it is apt to throw a different light on the organization's strategic management. Freeman thus got it doubly wrong**:** the logical operator that links "those who can affect" and "those who are affected" ought to be a logical conjunction ("as well as") rather than a disjunction ("any of the two"), and in addition he should have made certain that in practice, the primary focus is on "those who are affected" rather than on "those who can affect.".

So long as we leave it open which one of the two alternative conditions applies and is given priority, it is clear that within a framework of strategic management the focus will be on the first group. Within a merely strategic notion of rationality it will obviously be more urgent or "rational" to focus on those stakeholders who can affect the organization (and thus its success) than on those who cannot. Paying attention to the first group *pays*; doing the same with the second only costs. It is then hardly surprising that both in theory and in practice, stakeholder management tends to focus (and from the outset was asked by Freeman to do so) on "the stakeholders whose support is necessary for survival" (Freeman, 1984, p. 33).

Such a focus that does little to improve the social rationality of the organization's policies and actions, for it leaves the underlying reference system for defining good and rational action unchanged. Those stakeholders

who "can affect the organization's mission" will in any case see their interests considered, as they effectively co-determine the reference system for defining what is "successful," "good" and "rational" for the organization. Whether their ability to have influence runs under the name of stakeholder management or not makes little difference in this respect. By contrast, integrating those stakeholders who normally cannot affect the organization's policies would make a real difference. It is in respect to them that stakeholder management could and should shift the managers' dominating perspective of strategic reasoning to one of communicative rationalization; yet it is precisely this group of stakeholders that stakeholder theory's most basic definition permits managers to neglect. Which is precisely what happens in practice**:** the subgroups of stakeholders most considered in stakeholder theory and practice are the organization's owners (or investors and creditors), its customers, suppliers, and (with some restrictions) employees, along with some external groups such as government regulatory and tax-collecting agencies, competitors, the media, and so-called pressure groups. All these are in a position to influence the organization's success so that the organization's strategic management would anyway have to consider their concerns; with or without an explicit commitment to stakeholder management. Much less interest receive, on the other hand, stakeholders such as the population of local communities; underpaid and exploited workers in developing countries; neglected concerns of minorities; the often ignored rights of animals; future generations; and, as a last example, citizen movements and nongovernmental organizations that engage themselves for environmental, social, or human rights issues (except, of course, when they happen to be in a position of "pressure groups" that can affect the organization's success, if only indirectly through their influence on public opinion). The reason for such a limited, merely strategic orientation of stakeholder management is clearly to be seen in stakeholder theory's lack of an adequate conception of rationality, which despite its declared intention of "including" the concerns of stakeholders in the theory of the firm makes it fall victim to an insufficiently reflected, utilitarian outlook. As Freeman explains**:**

> From the standpoint of strategic management, or the achievement of organizational purpose, we need an inclusive definition. We must not leave out any group or individual who can affect or is affected by organizational purpose, *because that group may prevent our accomplishments.* Theoretically, therefore, "stakeholder" must be able to capture a broad range of groups and individuals, even though when we put the concept to practical tests *we must be willing to ignore certain groups who will have little or no impact on the corporatio*n at

this point of time. (1983, p. 52f, emphasis added)

From the outset, stakeholder management thus fails to recognize – or take seriously – the conflict of rationalities involved. It knows only one type of rationality, that which serves its own interests. Consequently it also fails to systematically develop the idea that stakeholding might serve a self-critical purpose and might to this end be driven by different rationalities and corresponding action orientations. In the terms of Table 6, it would indeed make a fundamental difference if we would approach stakeholders not only with a strategic but also, and primarily, with a communicative concept of rationality in mind. In the terms of critical vertical integration, so long as stakeholding relies on an unquestioned strategic concept of rationality, it deals inadequately with the normative level of management and thereby forsakes much of its potential for improving management practice. Which after all is what stakeholder theory, by advancing a supposed alternative to the classical, economic and managerialist theory of the firm, meant to achieve in the first place.

Second example: open systems thinking Applying vertical integration to the theory of open systems thinking is even easier. It allows us to formulate the required shift of rationalities in somewhat more general terms. Generally speaking, reflective practice calls not only for an extension of our horizon of considerations but also for a conscious change of the standpoint from which we seek to extend it. A mere expansion of systems boundaries does not achieve this, as the underlying rationality remains basically the same. Within a framework of conventional systems thinking, chances are that an expanded "systems rationality" will remain focused on the success of the system of interest. It will thus tend to remain subject to a strategic (nonsocial) rather than communicative (intersubjective) handling of the social aspects of the situation. The open systems fallacy occurs when our systems thinking aims at an expansion of rationality without being embedded in a reflective *and* communicative effort of challenging the notions of rationality in play (cf. Ulrich, 1988, p. 156f).

Open systems thinking that understands the issue becomes *critical systems thinking*. Its methodological focus will be on systematically questioning what counts, and what should count, as the *reference system* – the universe of relevant facts and concerns – for defining good and rational action. For

example, how do we delimit the real-world context that we define as the relevant "problem situation"? What selection of facts and concerns do we have in mind when we claim that some action brings an "improvement" or is "rational"? Whose problem are we trying to solve, that is, who is to be treated as a stakeholder and who not? Whose solution has effectively been proposed or implemented as measured by its consequences rather than declared intentions? What benefits, risks and costs may it mean for whom? And so on. Critical heuristics has proposed some basic tools for such contextual questioning. I have explained them on many previous occasions (for some introductory reading see, e.g., Ulrich, 1987, 2000, and 2005) and can therefore merely recall them here. Three main tools are**:**

- the principle of *boundary critique*
- the principle of *systemic triangulation* of reference systems, and
- the *polemical employment of boundary judgments* against people who are not prepared to handle their boundary assumptions critically.

As a fourth basic principle, I would now like to add the idea captured in Fig. 1,

- the principle of *critical vertical integration* of rationalization levels.

The additional principle urges us to systematically shift our perspective between instrumental, strategic, and normative modes of questioning, according to the three levels of rational practice. Further, it gives the primacy among these sources of orientation to the core concept that lies at the heart of normative questioning, the idea(l) of practical reason. The basic concern of open systems thinking – that we should enhance our understanding of situations and issues by adopting a "larger," expanded perspective – thus gets connected to yet another and just as essential kind of conceptual "enlargement," which consists in switching from a one-dimensional to a two-dimensional concept of reason and in employing each of the two dimensions as a reference point for reviewing the other.

Vertical integration, to be sure, is not meant to replace horizontal integration but rather to give it a new depth, so to speak. A well-understood "open systems" perspective will henceforth open our reference systems up and unfold their implications in both horizontal and vertical direction. Horizontally, it will expand our view of a situation and ideally (although this is not part of the classical concept of open systems thinking that I have

criticized) it will then also use this expanded view for systematically shifting our standpoint, at least tentatively for self-critical purposes. Vertically, it will systematically vary between instrumental, strategic, and normative modes of questioning and will thus make sure that we rely on a genuinely two-dimensional concept of reason.

The three-level concept of rational practice thus translates into a process of *systematic rationality review.* In a deliberate reversal of my earlier-quoted critical comment on the open systems fallacy, systems rationality will then no longer focus exclusively on the "problems of the system" but instead will now consider "the system," and the boundary judgments constitutive of it, as a basic problem of rational action (cf. Ulrich, 1988, p. 156).

I suggest to stop our discussion of vertical integration at this point, as its competent use in professional practice will interest us further in the fourth and final part of this series of essays. At this stage, I would like to conclude with a few reflections on what we have learned in the present, third essay.

Summary and conclusion: the quest for rational action, or how to bring practical reason back in to our notions of good practice We started with an analysis of a framework of thought that has shaped our contemporary notions of rationality perhaps more than any other, Max Weber's (1968) ideal-types of rational action. We found an essential idea to be absent in it – Kant's concept of practical reason, along with the basically two-dimensional understanding of practical rationality that is entails. We discussed in some detail two examples of how in the absence of this idea, our notions of rational practice tend towards "horizontal" expansion of existing rationalities rather than thorough-going rationality critique. In the name of theory and expertise, our patterns of thought tend to lack depth of reflection (vertical integration); to champion agendas that we cannot share publicly with all the parties concerned (communicative rationality); and ultimately, to amount to a far-reaching crisis of rationality and responsibility (organized irresponsibility).

As an alternative framework – an antidote to flat systems thinking as well as to hidden private agendas – I have proposed a three-level concept of rational practice that incorporates the practical-normative dimension of reason (Table 6). In addition, I have proposed a methodological guideline for employing it properly, the principle of critical vertical integration (Fig. 1).

We analyzed the underlying ideas in some detail and discussed the difference they can make, again applied to the two previous examples. The core concern is to bring back in to our notions of rational action the lost dimension of practical reason and to give it an essential critical role to play in the quest for good professional practice.

However, practical reason is a difficult idea, related as it is to Kant's ideal of moral universalization. Although the basic ideas of reciprocity and fairness of treatment, as expressed in Kant's (1786b, 1788) "categorical imperative" and Rawls' (1971) "veil of ignorance," along with many related notions of moral action, are fairly easy to grasp and in fact correspond to many people's basic moral intuition, we nevertheless face an ideal that we cannot hope to achieve completely. The question is, is it possible to pragmatize the idea of practical reason, and the way I suggest to embed it in a comprehensive concept of rational practice, so that these ideas may support and enhance the quest for professional competence?

This question will be in the center of the fourth and final part of this series of essays. Although the preceding discussion of the three-level concept of rational practice and of the principle of vertical integration have given some basic hints, an adequate pragmatization strategy still requires more work. My guiding idea will be this**:** given that the quest for rational practice is so difficult and involves ideals (of practical reason and rational action) that are bound to remain unachievable, can we at least learn to deal competently with the fact that they are unachievable? To put it differently, I suggest that the basic way to pragmatize the quest for rational practice is by understanding it as a quest for competence. We may not, under normal conditions of professional intervention, be able to achieve fully rational practice; but we may still be able to improve our competence as professionals. And for such improvement, it is essential that we have a clear sense of what improvement means and how it translates into clear patterns of rational thought.

I risk sounding idealistic, but I don't think I am. The fact that my discussion has thus far focused somewhat one-sidedly on the ideals of practical reason and rational action is an expression of my perception of a contemporary crisis of rationality, rather than of a personal bias against pragmatically oriented and theoretically-instrumentally based modes of reasoning. As a research philosopher interested particularly in the nature of good

professional and research practice, I certainly believe in the relevance of good research and sound theory, as well as in the virtue of acquiring personal expertise and experience. However, to recognize that *the normative is always there* in all research practice and professional engagement, is a matter of realism rather than an idealistic choice of mine. The normative side of rationality exists and that should be reason enough for us to take it seriously and study it, lest we become blind to it. We can choose to ignore it, but a more rational stance is to acknowledge it as an inevitable source of selectivity and to handle it accordingly. The suggested primacy of practical reason is a way to conceive of this task. As it is a new and still unfamiliar idea to most researchers and professionals, it calls for more emphasis and explanation than other, more familiar key ideas such as applied science and expertise or applied systems thinking, ideas that I have discussed with the necessary emphasis on other occasions (see, e.g., Ulrich, 2008b, and 2011d).

But the idea of practical reason is important not only as a basis for diagnosing the contemporary crisis of rationality. It is equally important as a way forward, for it provides the only generally shareable standard there is for handling the normative side of rationality, that is, clashes of people's views and values. Once we have grasped the unavoidability of the idea that *good reasons are reasons that we can share,* it becomes clear that rational practice involves a systematic effort to identify and assess the extent to which our rationalities are particular, that is, less than generally shareable. It may be useful to recall what we concluded in Part 2 about the importance of practical reason and its underlying idea (or test) of moral universalization**:**

> Whenever humans need to coordinate their different views and preferences, whether in the interest of understanding and mastering the complex world we live in or in the interest of living together well despite all the diversity of individual beliefs and values, it is a necessary condition for deciding among alternative views and wishes "with reason," rather than just on the basis of power, that there be a minimum of basic criteria and principles which all the individuals actually or potentially concerned can share. In other words, there must be some standards that are sufficiently general to *merit* being accepted by everyone. *The generalizable is what disciplines the rational.* (Ulrich, 2011b, p. 27, original emphasis)

The generalizable disciplines the rational, that is, *by revealing it as the particular.* Rationally oriented action then needs to review and limit its claims accordingly. Therein consists the value of practical reason as a guide to rational action and personal competence.

It is clear, however, that in real-world practice, instrumental and strategic

considerations will still demand and deserve the lion's share of our attention. We will often need to "bracket" the normative core of action as it were – suspend critique – while focusing on technical, economic, procedural, and strategic aspects. There is nothing wrong with such a pragmatic orientation, *so long as we do not forget that the "brackets" are there.* Being aware that they are there and how they were defined, we will be so much better prepared to handle them adequately, that is, by considering their implications in the light of practical no less than theoretical-instrumental reason.

What I have called here "critical vertical integration" is a way to handle these brackets adequately, in a transparent and self-reflecting manner. Attempting to do this is indeed crucial to the quest for rational practice. For in the end, when reflection ends and we have to take action, no such brackets will protect us any more. Our claims to rationality will then be measured by their consequences and will be challenged – at all three levels of rational practice – by those who may have to live with them.

Final reflection on idealism and realism: Is rational action a mere utopia?
Forecasts and rational action have something in common**:** just as forecasting is difficult when it concerns the future, the quest for rational action is difficult when we face it under real-world conditions of imperfect rationality. Fact is, both are meaningful precisely *because* of the difficulties in question. If it were not that we have to act under conditions of imperfect rationality, it would be pointless to try and work towards a bit more rational practice. The reproach of idealism, rapidly at hand as it is whenever someone comes up with an unfamiliar way of looking at things, is thus rather pointless. The point is not that we should accomplish an ideal, only that we should orient our professional practice – our personal quest for improvement – in the right direction. And improvement, clearly, is necessary. Professional practice today has lost some of its former credibility and status. While the problems it faces are increasingly difficult, the solutions it is able to offer get increasingly contested. We have no choice but to try and do better. The first and essential step towards better practice is to better understand what "improvement" means. Only so can we take some (however small) steps in the right direction.

I realize of course that our current patterns of thought have accustomed us to see the normative core of practice – the presence of values – as an

unwelcome *complication* of the quest for rational action, a kind of embarrassment as it were to any rational agent. Wrongly so, I think. We tend to forget that if we would (and could) keep values out of consideration, rational action would for ever be the prisoner of the past, for it could then only extend the patterns of rationality that have shaped the present. But what an impoverished kind of rational action that would be! *We need to realize that it is only thanks to the presence of critically considered values that we are not prisoners of the past.* It is due to the normative side of practice that we have a chance to improve it, rather than to just prolong it into the future.

There is, then, a truly deep connection between values and rational action: the values that inform our instrumental and strategic rationality make all the difference. Without their normative force, our actions could not burst the boundaries of present rationalities and lead us towards true improvement, towards some genuine gain of rationality.

Adopting practical philosophy in the suggested way does not ask us to be idealists but rather, *to become realists.* To open our eyes, that is, and start seeing the impoverishment and narrowness of the utilitarian and managerial patterns of rationalization that dominate our epoch so much. As realists, we will take the less than ideal tools we have available to help us see through the limitations of these patterns. Instead of closing our eyes to these limitations, we can then have our eyes wide open and look at what we see *in the light of practical reason*. Practical reason, thus understood, is not just an abstract ideal, much less a form of utopianism or ideology. It is, rather, a challenge to confront reality as it is. To become realists in the light of the ideal of practical reason, that is the challenge. The reproach of idealism is always a possible escape in the face of such a challenge; but it does not make us "realists" in a well-understood sense.

What our epoch probably calls for most urgently are improved patterns of thought; notions of rationality that can help us, as professionals and as citizens, to develop our sense of reality. A good sense of reality includes a sense for real (i.e., right) values. Yes, values are "only ideas"; but if ideas don't make a difference in the end to the ways people act, what will?

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Picture data   Digital photograph taken on on 27 December 2011 at 1:45 p.m. ISO 200, exposure mode program; aperture f/18, exposure time 1/800 seconds, exposure bias -0.67; focal length 36 mm (equivalent to 57.5 mm with a conventional 35 mm camera); metering mode center weighted, contrast low, saturation normal, sharpness low. Original resolution 5184 x 3456 pixels; current resolution 700 x 525 pixels, compressed to 140 KB. – Second picture (mouse over): taken on 23 September 2009 around 4:45 p.m. ISO 100, exposure mode aperture priority; aperture f/4.5, exposure time 1/4000 seconds, exposure bias -1.0; focal length 14 mm (equivalent to 28 mm with a conventional 35 mm camera); metering mode center weighted, contrast soft, saturation normal, sharpness soft. Original resolution 3648 x 2736 pixels; current resolution 700 x 525 pixels, compressed to 124 KB.

May-June, 2012

"Vertical integration" (mouse over)

„There is forever a tension between the idea of practical reason and the struggle for rational practice: rational practice may be *inspired* and *disciplined* by reason, but it can be *implemented* only through – always imperfectly rational – action."

(From this essay)

Previous Picture   Next Picture

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