

CHAPTER 2

The Problem of Rationality in the Social World. A Lecture Delivered at the Faculty Club of Harvard University on April 13th, 1940

EDITORS' PREFACE

The title is that of Alfred Schutz for a lecture he gave at the Harvard Faculty Club on the invitation of Joseph Schumpeter and Talcott Parsons. A shorter version of the lecture was published in 1943 by the British journal *Economica* (New Series, I, 1943, pp. 130–149), and reprinted in Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers*, Vol. II, pp. 79–88 under the same title (although misdated as a lecture given in 1942).

Wagner notes that, historically, this was Schutz's first substantial manuscript written in English and therefore required more than the usual number of editorial changes. These changes are not identified except in a few unusual cases. The lecture itself, Wagner notes, marks the beginning of Schutz's enthusiastic but short-lived hopes for initiating an important dialogue with Talcott Parsons centered around Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). Schutz had read the book before arriving in the United States and thought of it as a study by someone sympathetic to Max Weber and, as Wagner suggests, one who was well on his way to becoming Schutz's American counterpart: a sociologist of phenomenological persuasion. It is no longer a surprise that these expectations were unfounded. According to Wagner, Schutz had misinterpreted Parsons' intentions and thus conceived tendencies to correct Weber's subjective approach as signs of a struggle towards a social-psychological and phenomenological position akin to that of Schutz. In actuality, Parsons had rather acquired a kind of neo-Kantian position which served him in his attempt to establish a "structural-functional" sociological system.¹ In any case, the dialogue and exchange of ideas were unsuccessful. Yet, perhaps for this very reason the published correspondence of Schutz and Parsons remains of great importance for defining two very different views of "rationality in the social world".

¹See *The Theory of Social Action. The Correspondence of Alfred Schutz and Talcott Parsons* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), edited by Richard Grathoff, Foreword by Maurice Natanson, pp. xiif.; and Helmut Wagner, *Alfred Schutz: An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 75ff.

I

This paper deals with the problem of "Rationality in the Social World", or rather with the problem suggested by the term, "rationality". In fact, this term represents only inadequately a conceptual scheme which itself is central to the methodology and epistemology of the scientific observation of the social world. Therefore it is a rather difficult task to isolate the question of rationality from all surrounding problems. In addition, the term, "rational action", is used with many different meanings not only in the general literature but also frequently in the writings of the same author; so, for instance, by Max Weber. But ambiguous use is not the only thing that renders its interpretation uncertain. Taken alone this would be only a terminological discomfort which could be overcome by a conveniently broad definition.

You may remember the scheme of the many and heterogeneous concepts labelled "rationality" presented by Professor Schumpeter. In order to clarify these equivocations and varying connotations we have to penetrate deeper into the structure of the social world and to make extensive inquiries into the special attitudes social scientists have toward their subject matter.

I shall start by giving you the gist of my conclusions from my inquiries, and then will proceed to discuss the steps by which I reached those conclusions.

I want to defend the following thesis: In its *strict* meaning, rationality is a category of the scientific observation of the social world and not a category of the mind of the actor within the social world. Therefore, in its primary denotation, the conceptual scheme of rationality is valid only on the level of theoretical observation; its application to other levels of our experience of the social world is possible only in a modified and restricted sense. Its *restricted* meaning in general has been expressed best in the definition given by Professor Parsons in his most remarkable study, *The Structure of Social Action*: "Action is rational in so far as it pursues ends possible within the conditions of the situation, and by the means which, among those available to the actor, are intrinsically best adapted to the end for reasons understandable and verifiable by positive empirical science." In his careful manner, the author always indicates the methodological problem he is dealing with and comments on the definition as follows:

Since science is the rational achievement par excellence, the mode of approach here outlined is in terms of the analogy between the scientific investigator and the actor in ordinary practical activities. The starting point is that of conceiving the actor as coming to know the facts of the situation in which he acts and thus the conditions necessary and means available for the realization of his ends. As applied to the means-end relationship this is essentially a matter of the accurate prediction of various possible ways of altering the situation (employment of alternative means) and the resultant choice among them. Apart from questions relating to the choice of ends and from those relating to 'effort', where the standard is applicable at all, there is little difficulty in conceiving the actor as thus analogous to the scientist whose knowledge is the principal determinant of his action in so far as his actual course conforms with the expectations of the observer who has, as Pareto says, 'a more extended knowledge of the circumstances'.