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Elective Affinities of the Protestant Ethic: Weber and the Chemistry of Capitalism

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ABSTRACT

Although scholars have long recognized the importance of “elective affinity” as a keyword in Weber’s sociology, surprisingly little systematic research has gone into understanding this metaphor in Weber’s writing, or in the source from which he drew the term. For Weber, this was an implicit reference to Goethe’s novel, well known to Weber’s educated German audience, entitled Elective Affinities (1807). In this paper, I provide a systematic account of Goethe’s conception of elective affinity as a chemical metaphor, and of the way that it is related to Weber’s uses of the term in the Protestant Ethic essays and in his critical rejoinders. By understanding elective affinity as a Goethean chemical metaphor we can better understand the causal claims that Weber makes in his famous essay: Weber’s argument is best understood as an analysis of emergence in the chemistry of social relations.

Keywords: Weber, Goethe, Protestant Ethic, Metaphor, Elective Affinity, Emergence

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When Gerth and Mills' first published From Max Weber (1946), many English-speaking readers who knew only Parsons' translation of The Protestant Ethic and The "Spirit" of Capitalism (1930) were no doubt surprised to learn that the: "...decisive conception by which Weber relates ideas and interests is that of 'elective affinity'" (1946, p. 62). Elective affinity, which in Gerth and Mills' estimation is a "decisive" concept, does not appear in Parsons's translation, but not because the German term (Wahlverwandtschaft) plays no important role in the Protestant Ethic; it appears instead as "correlation". Parsons thereby transforms a chemical metaphor that Weber took from Goethe's famous novel by the same name, and turns it into a more palatable metaphor for Anglo-American social scientists—that of statistics¹

"Affinity" and "Elective Affinity" are indeed important terms in Weber's work, as many scholars have recognized (Gerth and Mills 1946; Stark 1958; Howe 1978; Thomas 1985; Buss 1999; Löwy 2004). There is, however, very limited consensus about what the term in fact means. It is probably going too far to suggest, however, that "the exact meaning of this term, which Weber often used, is contested" (Swedeberg 2005, p. 83), because "contested" implies an active and ongoing debate. As Michael Löwy points out, the absence of debate (and even very limited discussion) is particularly surprising, given that it is such a frequently used keyword in some parts of sociology². Few scholars seem to have given the term much thought, and fewer still have made any concerted effort to understand the term in Weber's work in light of its origins (Löwy 2004).

PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF ELECTIVE AFFINITY

In the one of the few comprehensive overviews of the different interpretations of “elective affinity” to date, J.J.R. Thomas (1985) argues that the different understandings can be divided largely by whether the interpreter tends towards a “materialist” or “non-materialist” understanding of Weber. This is probably not the most helpful pair of terms by which to understand any social thinker, and is more reflective of 1970s and 1980s sociology than it is of Weber’s discursive framework. The concepts are not entirely foreign to Weber either, however, though Weber talks about ‘idealist’ instead of ‘non-materialist’ understandings of social phenomena. He then typically argues that although either viewpoint is consistent and plausible, neither is entirely adequate to the understanding of most phenomena. It therefore seems justifiable to divide previous interpretations of “elective affinities” along the lines of materialist and non-materialist readings, so long as we take it as a schema for organizing Weber interpreters, rather than one for understanding Weber himself.

The ‘materialist’ reading of Weber’s elective affinities begins with Gerth and Mills’ argument that “elective affinity” was Weber’s means of connecting interests and ideas, and this proved to be quite influential in American sociology, particularly during the era of the Marx-Weber debates. It serves as a Weberian placeholder for the Marxian notion of ideology, and provides scholars who lean towards Weber rather than towards Marx a keyword for Weber’s superiority. After all, Weber (unlike Marx, so the argument goes) provided the means of relating material interests and ideas, without assuming that ideas are simply expressions of interests. This ‘materialist’ reading has also been adopted by other theorists, with minor variations, including Anthony Giddens (1971), and Frank Parkin (1983). Both argue that religious innovators have

considerable autonomy from their social locations, but that the ideas will tend to be appropriated by groups ('carriers') with whose interests they fit (see Thomas 1985).

Of these readings, one of the most sophisticated is still the description provided by Werner Stark:

[The social world] is no place for disembodied spirits; even ideas must have bodies if they are to last, and so they are on the lookout for appropriate social groupings who can take them in and carry them along. But human groupings, of whatever kind, will, for their part, always be on the lookout for appropriate ideas to give expression to their essence and their strivings, for, material as this life is, it nevertheless has a spiritual side to it. Thus, there will be a gradual convergence between the substructures and superstructures, not convergence ab initio (1958, p. 257).

Stark's theory has the virtue of emphasising the mutual accommodation of ideas and carriers: groups are on the lookout for ideas, and ideas are on the lookout for groups. As I will argue below, this is an indispensable dimension to Weber's concept of elective affinity that is typically glossed over by 'materialist' readers, who often have no idea what to make of the suggestion that ideas actively search out a 'carrier'.

While these materialist accounts of Weber's provide a tenable account of the connection of ideas to interests in the social world, the readings diverge considerably from Weber's own texts, especially his early ones. The primary problem, insofar as they are intended to represent Weber's views, is that while elective affinity may articulate the relation between ideas and interests, Weber sometimes uses the term in such a way that relates ideas to ideas, or "interests" (if we use this as shorthand for more material forces) to "interests"³ as Löwy (2004) quite rightly observes. Thus even if elective affinity does sometimes connect "ideas" with particular "social carriers", it does not only do this. The second problem is that these 'materialist' accounts overlay

Weber's texts with a Cartesian division of the material and ideal (interests and ideas) that is only doubtfully consistent with Weber's theoretical orientation (Thomas, 1985). Thus, while their contributions to understanding Wahlverwandtschaft can by no means be dispensed with, neither do they exhaust what Weber means by the term.

Some of the 'non-materialist' accounts (for example, Bendix, 1962) are virtually indistinguishable from the 'materialist' accounts—except that they emphasise that ideal factors can have causal efficacy. How this actually works is a matter of some ambiguity, and the writers who make such assertions are typically less consistent than the 'materialist' authors in this respect, although in this they are more true to a certain ambiguity about the term in Weber's texts (Thomas, 1985). Non-materialist interpretations typically stress, quite rightly, that Weber sometimes uses the term to describe the relation between two beliefs, and they tend to emphasise those passages of Weber's writing in which this is the case, such as the elective affinity of ethical prophecy and monotheism. While Parsons exorcised the term from his translation of the Protestant Ethic, when he discusses it in The Structure of Social Action (1937), elective affinity refers to the way certain ideas and beliefs tend to cluster together due to the internal logic of each.

Perhaps the most consistent non-materialist (and most widely cited) understanding of Elective Affinity is R. H. Howe's (1978) argument for a Kantian logic in Weber's analysis. Howe understands Wahlverwandtschaft as a parallel term to Kant's Affinität; it thus specifies not the relations between ideas and interests, but articulates the connection between the inner logic of ideal types (as Kantian phenomena) in an analysis. Despite the many strengths of Howe's argument, including recognizing the methodological importance of Kant for Weber, and the important place

he accords Goethe in his attempt to come to terms with Weber's theoretical logic, in the final analysis his argument is not really compelling. The connection between Affinität and Wahlverwandtschaft works better in English than it does in German –both are translated using the English word “affinity” (Thomas 1985, p. 46). The two terms do not fully correspond with one another in Weber's, Kant's or Goethe's thought.

In Weber's first published use of the term “elective affinity” he suggests that it is worthwhile “accepting for the time being this superficially ambiguous term” (1949, p. 56). For J.J.R Thomas, Weber's use of elective affinity is shorthand for ambiguity itself. He rightly observes that the reference to Goethe's Elective Affinities would be perfectly obvious to turn of the century German readers. Drawing on Gundolf's famous critical study of the novel (1916) in which the literary critic insists that the central meaning of the novel is the theme of ambiguity, Thomas suggests that “elective affinities” is Weber's shorthand way of signalling that there is a relationship between the two things connected by that term, but it is non-deterministic and ambiguous, a short hand “etcetera clause” for this indeterminacy.

Thomas' argument does have considerable intuitive appeal, especially when it comes to suggesting that the term plays a role in his non-deterministic conception of social relations. Thomas assumes, however, that Gundolf's interpretation of the novel is decisive for Weber's use of “elective affinities”, and that Weber could expect his readers to understand what he meant in the terms Gundolf had proposed for interpreting Goethe's novel. While Weber's first published use of elective affinity dates from 1904, and it is used extensively in the 1904-5 version of the Protestant Ethic (2002) as well as Weber's responses to his critics, Gundolf's study was not published until 1916, the year he joined the faculty at Heidelberg.

Like Howe (1978), Thomas, having clearly articulated the importance of Goethe for understanding what Weber means by an “elective affinity”, then turns to a source other than the novel after which the concept is named—Howe turns to Kant, and Thomas turns to Gundolf. In like fashion, Michal Löwy (1988; 2004) argues that Weber derives the notion of elective affinity from Goethe’s use of the metaphor, but shifts his attention to the meaning of the term in a tradition of chemistry that had long since lost its currency by Weber’s time. Further, he complicates the question by trying to understand the term in all of Weber’s writings synoptically, without due attention to the question of how the concept may have changed in Weber’s texts. While Löwy is quite right that the chemical analogy is central to understanding the concept of elective affinities, all of these analyses could have benefited from closer attention to the source all three recognize as the origin of Weber’s analogy itself, Goethe’s novel Elective Affinities ([1807] 1994).

There is good reason to believe that Weber took the term “elective affinity” from Goethe’s novel by the same name. Since Weber doesn’t reference the book, or identify the term as deriving from Goethe, however, we are forced to rely on strong circumstantial evidence, including the importance of Goethe’s thought in Weber’s life and work, the expert witness testimony of Weber scholars as to the likely provenance of the term, and the original social context in which Weber expected the text to be read. Most importantly, there are remarkable parallels between Weber’s uses of the term and the way that the metaphor of elective affinities is used in Goethe’s novel, which I will discuss at length below.

Goethe exercised an enormous influence over the cultural and intellectual life of the German-speaking world of the 19th and early 20th century (Hoffmeister 2002); he

was a figure of “almost divine proportions for generations of Germans, revered from all sides” (Albrow 1990, p. 70). A thorough familiarity with Goethe’s life and fiction was a requisite mark of distinction for the cultured, educated bourgeois in that milieu, including the ability to quote from his writings by heart. In Thomas’s words, Weber’s “reference, in employing the term ‘elective affinity’ is as surely a reference to Goethe’s novel as a reference by an English social scientist to Hamlet would be a reference to Shakespeare” (1985, p. 48). Indeed, if Weber had wanted to avoid any perceived allusion to a novel by Goethe, he would have been well advised to choose a different expression than the title of one of them. While Faust was widely acclaimed as Goethe’s masterpiece (even if its meaning was hotly contested) the ‘minor’ works were by no means considered unimportant. When Walter Benjamin set himself to establishing his reputation as a literary critic, it was to Elective Affinities that he turned his attention (Benjamin 1996).

Goethe was a major force in Weber’s intellectual and aesthetic life. As we know from Marianne Weber’s biography of her husband, she notes that Weber read the entire 40 volumes of Goethe’s collected works while Weber was still in his Tertia (1988, p. 47-8), and in his adult life regularly read and re-read Goethe for pleasure. In his scholarly work, Weber regularly quotes Goethe, and there is a growing literature on the important role of Goethe in Weber’s thinking, one that is comparable with that of Nietzsche, Kant and Marx (Kent 1983; Green 1988; Albrow 1990; Scaff 1991; Goldman 1992; Baehr 2001; Sahni 2001; Kemple 2001; Wilding 2007). As in many of his other essays, in the Protestant Ethic essays, Weber quotes Goethe several times. In the Protestant Ethic, he does so four times with a reference (2002, pp. 103, 120, 143,

178) and at least one further time without attributing a source (2002, p. 116, see also the editor's note at p. 127 n. 62).

Among Weber scholars who have commented on the term “elective affinities” in passing (Roth 1993, p. 10, Bendix 1962, p. 64 n. 27, Poggi 1983, p. 74, Swedberg 2005, pp. 83-4) or who have examined it at length (Howe 1978, Buss 1999, Trevino 2005, Mather 2005, Sica 1985, Löwy 2004), there is a clear consensus that Weber takes the term from Goethe. Indeed, it is difficult to know where else it might have come from: by Weber's time, it was an antique chemist's concept that had long fallen into disuse except as an allusion to the novel. Other than Goethe's novel, no other potential sources for this otherwise highly unusual expression have been identified in the Weber literature.

Although the source of Weber's allusion has often been noted, there has not yet been any thorough examination of the influence of Goethe's novel Wahlverwandtschaft on its namesake in Weber's work. Here I aim to fill that gap with a close reading of both Goethe's Elective Affinities ([1809] 1994) and Weber's 1904-1905 Protestant Ethic essays (2002), as well as Weber's responses to his earliest critics (primarily Felix Rachfahl) where Weber found himself forced to restate the basic premise of the book in light of significant ‘misunderstandings’ of his argument. I will argue that the chemical metaphor of elective affinity plays a much larger role in Weber's text than perhaps even he realised, and that it is helpful for reconstructing the logic of the argument and addressing the recurring questions about the causal claims of the Protestant Ethic thesis.

THE “ELECTIVE AFFINITIES” OF THE ELECTIVE AFFINITIES

Goethe's novel is the story of a couple, Eduard and Charlotte (landed gentry, both in their second marriage) and the changes that follow when two new people are added to their household: Eduard's best friend, referred to throughout as 'Captain', and Otilie, Charlotte's niece. Quite predictably (and this seems to be part of Goethe's point), Eduard falls in love with Otilie, and Charlotte develops an intense attraction for the Captain. If this is not sufficiently to be expected, Goethe foreshadows these events with a conversation between Charlotte, Eduard and the Captain about "elective affinity". Goethe uses this discussion as a means of reflecting on, and having the characters reflect on, the nature of affinity, or *Verwandtschaften* (which can simply mean family relations) and to develop a theory of the 'chemistry' that draws pairs together—and that can break apart previously bonded couples. Near the beginning of the novel, Charlotte asks the two men, who had been discussing some scientific matter, to explain to her the meaning of "elective affinity", and an elaborate conversation follows. In the course of this conversation, Goethe develops a foreshadowing of the events of the novel, and a 'chemistry' of social relations.

The Captain begins by explaining to Charlotte that in nature, everything is "drawn to itself", a basic scientific principle in the early 19th Century:

Think of water, oil, or mercury and you will see a unity, a coherence in their composition. From this united state they will never depart, unless by force or some other intervention. Remove that force and they once restore themselves to wholeness' ([1809] 1994, p. 31).

The Captain explains to Charlotte that affinity indicates the oft noted tendency that "like attracts like". Charlotte adds that she has noticed this phenomenon—raindrops form together into streams and quicksilver (mercury) beads quickly unite with one

another into larger beads. Charlotte senses that she did know something about affinity after all, and interjects:

‘Let me run ahead...and see if I can guess what you are aiming at. Just as everything has an attraction to itself so too there must be a relationship with other things.’

‘And that will vary according to the different natures of the things concerned,’ said Eduard in haste. ‘Sometimes they will meet as friends and old acquaintances and come together quickly and be united without either altering the other at all, as wine for example mixes with water. But others will remain strangers side by side and will never be united even if mechanically ground and mixed. Thus oil and water shaken together will immediately separate again’ (p. 31).

The discussion quickly picks up two additional themes that go beyond the principle of homophily. The first is that in the same way that like attracts like, opposites are typically repelled by each other: “You can’t mix oil and water”. Of particular importance is the second theme, introduced here by Eduard: there is an anthropomorphic analogy between chemistry and social relations (indeed much of the discussion uses terms derived from social relations). Some elements quickly develop friendly relationships and unite with the other, Eduard explains. Some, on the other hand, will not “mix” even if they are immediately in one another’s presence. They repel one another, remaining strangers.

Charlotte quickly recognises the metaphorical comparison with social relations:

‘It would not take much’, said Charlotte, ‘to see people of one’s own acquaintance in these simple forms; and I am particularly reminded of the social circles people move in. But what these inanimate substances most resemble are the large social groups which confront one another in the world: the status groups [die Stände]

and the different vocations⁴ [Berufsbestimmungen], the nobility and the third estate, the soldier and the civilian.

‘And yet,’ Eduard replied, ‘just as these may be joined by custom and the law, so in our world of chemistry there are agents which will bind together the things that are holding one another off.’

‘Thus,’ the captain interjected, ‘we join oil and water by the agency of an alkaline salt’ (p. 31).

In the same way that like attracts like in ‘nature’, like attracts like in the social world as well: those of particular human forms [formen die Menschen], including status groups and vocations. While some may have a ‘natural’ affinity for one another, others, whether in the social or in the natural world, can be joined or maintained in relation by the action of a mediator—custom and the law, or an alkaline salt.

Clarifying the men’s discussion, Charlotte asks whether they are not already discussing ‘affinities’ (Verwandtschaften).

‘We have indeed,’ the Captain replied, ‘and let us at once now get to know them in what they are and in what they do. We say of those natures which on meeting speedily connect and inter-react that they have an affinity for one another. The affinity may be very remarkable. Alkalis and acids, although opposed to one another and perhaps precisely because they are so opposed, will in a most decisive way seek out, take hold of, and modify one another and form, in so doing, a new substance together. We have only to think of lime, which manifests towards all acids a strong inclination, a decided wish for union...(p. 32).

Here the Captain provides a definition that thus far has only been alluded to: “those natures which on meeting speedily connect and inter-react” have an affinity for each other. Complicating the story, however, is that those substances that have a “very

remarkable” affinity for one another, may inter-react not because they are the same, but despite being different. Rather than staying the same, like drops of water or mercury, by virtue of their interaction, “modify one another and form...a new substance altogether”.

In the German tradition of chemistry, the principle of ‘like attracts like’ was dominant, although at the turn of the 19th century, the state of the chemical arts (mostly coming from France and England) emphasised that chemical attraction did not necessarily depend on similarity (Levere 2001 p. 45-50). Goethe’s text is positioned at the crux of this unresolved international debate, and reflects this ambivalence. The ‘affinity’ of two substances for one another neither excludes the possibility that they are different nor requires that they are similar; they nonetheless show by their actions decided attractions for one another. The affinity of two substances for one another is more a ‘spiritual’ relationship, rather than one based on readily observable similarities or blood relations, as Charlotte will explain. Charlotte brings the analogy yet again from nature to the social world, and makes precisely this distinction:

I must confess, said Charlotte, ‘that when you speak of these wondrous entities as related they seem to me not so much blood relations [blutsverwandte] as related in spirit and in the soul [Geistes- und Seelenverwandte]. In precisely the way true and important friendships may come about between people: opposing qualities make an intenser union possible (1994, p. 32) ...

For the wealthy characters in the book, these can only be ‘opposing’ qualities in people of an appropriate station in life, and not those of a different class. If affinities are to be seen as elective affinities, however, this means that choice is involved, or at least a preference can be seen for one kind of union rather than another. Sometimes, as Eduard explains to Charlotte’s dismay, this desire for union results in a divorce from another

substance. These 'choices' are the way that the elements preferences, and the strength of those preferences, can be recognised. The 'choices' that different substances make, and how readily they interact with one another allows the chemist to analyse "the degree of affinity" (die Grade der Verwandtschaften), because a substance will have different 'preferences' for other substances. Particularly strong are those affinities which are so strong to break up a relationship between two other substances: "Affinities are really interesting when they bring about separations" (wenn sie Scheidungen bewirken).

Charlotte is none too happy to hear her husband suggesting that "separations" ("that unhappy word... which we hear all too often in our world today") occur in nature, and could then be seen as 'natural' in human relations. According to Captain, the important thing is not the separation, but rather the "new combination", the new coupling that follows the divorce. When this happens, he says, the elements that have been drawn together to form this new relationship have clearly made a choice, and we are justified using the term "elective affinity", because "it really does seem as though one relationship were preferred to another and a choice [erwählt] made for one over the other" .

In the discussion between Charlotte, Eduard and the Captain, Goethe has developed the idea of both affinity and elective affinity in ways that are directly relevant for helping us understand Weber's usage of these terms. Affinity expresses first of all a certain similarity and can be observed in attraction of same and same (water, mercury), or at least similar, such that they have the ability to meet "as acquaintances and old friends" (wine and water). Others are inclined to repel each other, unless they are bound by a chemical reaction. In the case of human groups that

tend to repel each other, the nobility and the third-estate, they may be joined, but only by force of custom or law. These however, cannot be said to have an affinity for each other, they are different and act upon each other only to repel the other.

This conversation about the nature of elective affinities between three of the four principle characters foreshadows the events which will unfold when the fourth character arrives. The Captain's description of the effect of elective affinity on four elements soon finds parallel in their own lives:

Imagine an A closely bound to a B and by a variety of means and even by force not able to be separated from it; imagine a C with a similar relationship to a D; now bring the pairs into contact; A will go over to D, C to B without our being able to say who first left the other, who first with another was united again (p. 35).

Soon Charlotte's niece Otilie will arrive, and before long we will sense the attraction between her and Eduard, and the growing mutual affection of Charlotte and the Captain. In the conversation that foreshadows the events as well as in the rest of the novel it is clear that the chain of reactions is set off precisely by the arrival of D (Otilie). There is never indication of a bond forming between Charlotte and the Captain until attraction between Eduard and Otilie begins to pull Eduard from Charlotte. As in a chemical equation, the bonds created between two elements create a substance that may be very different than either of the elements so united. But such merging of the two people (such as the "two joined as one" of a marriage bond) creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, and the parts themselves can sometimes be indistinguishable from one another.

Much of the rest of the novel is not directly applicable for understanding Weber's use of 'elective affinity'. However, there is a miraculous product that results from the elective affinity of Eduard and Otilie, Charlotte and the Captain, and this

needs to be mentioned. As the attractions have begun to powerfully draw in the characters, Eduard and Charlotte spend the night together; each of them, however, imagines their new elective affinity. Nine months later, after Eduard and Charlotte have separated, Charlotte gives birth to a child. The child, however, looks like the Captain and Otilie, not Eduard and Charlotte—this is a source of amazement to everyone who looks at the child, including his two biological parents (1994, p. 173). The child is a product of the elective affinity, as Charlotte said earlier of the chemical reactions, “they seem to me not so much blood relations [blutsverwandte] as related in spirit and in the soul” (1994, p. 32).

In the elective affinities, it is not possible to identify the ‘cause’ in the sense that this term is used in much of contemporary social science. The two forces attract and act upon one another such that “[i]t would not have been possible to say who first seized hold of the other” (1994, p. 81). An elective affinity often involves a break with a previous relationship, as Eduard puts it: “I know very well that relationships of this kind are neither annulled nor formed unless things fall that are at present standing, and unless things shift that only desire to stay” (1994, p. 201). The events result from the addition of Otilie; she cannot, however, be said to be the cause of the events, which are brought about by a complex of attractions between the four characters.

Elective affinity may involve similarity (upon which the principle of ‘like attracts like’ is based) or it may not (as in the case of acids and alkali); in either case, the attraction is clearly demonstrated by the ‘choice’ that each makes for one substance over another. If it is based on similarity, then it can be seen as an extension of affinity, if it is different, or even opposite, then it can become the basis for, as Charlotte says, an ‘intenser union’. Goethe’s book, while recognising that attraction among opposites (the

sexes, for example) can be powerful, tends to emphasise the election of affinities, the attraction of those substances, or people, that share a spiritual likeness⁵.

WEBER'S APPROPRIATION OF THE TERMS IN GOETHE'S NOVEL

How does Weber use the terms “affinity” and “elective affinity” in his texts? Does Goethe's novel help illuminate a careful examination of Weber's uses? Three methodological principles guide my analysis here. First, I am concerned with letting Weber speak in his own language, and I will pay close attention to the way he does this before trying to make systematic sense of it. Second, I will follow Weber's use from the beginning, in the 1904-5 essays that comprise the Protestant Ethic and his responses to the earliest critics (notably Rachfahl), rather than introducing a certain anachronism by using his later work from the comparative ethics of the world religions to make sense of his earlier usage (Buss 1999). Finally, I do not assume that the concept of elective affinity was clearly delineated in Weber's own mind, such that he in fact could have readily provided a definition on demand, should he have been asked. J. J. R. Thomas is right: “elective affinities” is a somewhat ambiguous term (1985), but it is an important term, because it is the trace of Weber's thinking, an attempt to construct a new analytic for comprehending the social world.

Weber's Affinities

Most interpreters of Weber's elective affinities have tended to either ignore the related terms “inner affinity” and “affinity”, or they have treated them all as synonyms. It is worthwhile, especially in light of Goethe (where the terms are related but distinguishable), to look first at “affinity” before we go on to consider “elective

affinity”. I will also suggest that Weber’s use of “inner affinity” suggests that it is a synonym for affinity, but not for elective affinity. In The Protestant Ethic essays and in Weber’s responses to Felix Rachfahl (2002), affinity seems to denote two separate but related things. First, it marks a similarity, and a (real or potential) ‘sympathy’ between two things, be they movements, structures or ideas. Second, this shared resemblance may arise from a genealogical relationship: children often resemble their parents.

‘Affinity’ in the Protestant Ethic essays indicates, first of all, not just a theoretical or abstract similarity, but a sympathy of one thing for another, whether abstract or concrete. Having provided his famous portrait of Ben Franklin, Weber writes that

...it is scarcely necessary to state that Luther cannot really be regarded as having an “inner affinity” with the “capitalist spirit” in the sense that we have hitherto understood this word [in the preceding discussion of Ben Franklin]. Even those within the church who are keenest to praise what the Reformation ‘achieved’ are today in no way sympathetic to capitalism in any sense whatever. Even more certainly, Luther himself would without any doubt have rejected any affinity with a philosophy such as that espoused by Franklin (p. 30, emphasis added throughout).

Significantly, in this passage, we find “affinity” and “inner affinity” being used synonymously. While this by no means amounts to a definition of either term, or even a statement that the two terms are truly synonymous—the terms are used in parallel, and there is no effort made to distinguish the use of one from the use of another. Weber is here suggesting that Luther would not have had any sympathy for, or attraction to, the spirit of capitalism as expressed in the philosophy of Benjamin Franklin. Since such an attraction is conditional on Luther encountering it, the comparison that he is expressing here is entirely abstract (Weber is emphatic that Fugger is not to be seen as

representative of this new ethic (2002, p. 270)). The ‘sympathy’ here is based on similarity, and lack of sympathy on difference. Nothing of the capitalist spirit, such as we find it in Franklin, can be found in Luther, whose economic ethos is in most respects typical of peasant economic traditionalism.

This similarity suggests that affinity expresses a comparison between different ideal types, which is the argument Parsons and R.H. Howe made about elective affinities. While there are clearly instances in which this is the case, even more frequently, we find Weber making a comparison of similarity based on the genealogy of movements. In other words, children tend to resemble their parents: the similarity is a result of verwandtschaft (affinity: literally, a familial relation). Weber makes this argument with respect to the ‘affinity’ between Pietism and Methodism, a resemblance which is ‘historically determined’ (2002, p. 95 and 167 note 188), by all that the Wesleys took from Pietist spirituality.

Similar in this respect to the comparison between Pietism and Methodism is the affinity that Weber posits between Protestant and Catholic asceticism. When he responds to Rachfahl’s critique of the conception of ‘asceticism’, Weber writes that:

For [Rachfahl] asceticism is a ‘flight from the world’, and since Puritans (in the broad sense encompassing all of the ‘ascetic sects’) were neither monks nor pursued the contemplative life, then that which I term “innerworldly asceticism” must ipso facto be a ‘false’ concept, which wrongly implies an affinity with Catholic asceticism. (2002,p. 249).

Weber defends his use of the term “innerworldly asceticism” as a means of describing the life-conduct of the Puritans, and he argues that there are in fact distinct similarities between the two forms of life-conduct, even if there are very important differences—these are largely indicated by his use of the preface “innerworldly”. Weber proceeds to

argue that Protestant asceticism looks in certain respects like Catholic asceticism, because the Protestants inherited particular Catholic ascetic practices. It is perfectly legitimate to call both of these practices ascetic, Weber argues, because:

...as far as the matter in hand is concerned (the inner affinity with Catholic asceticism), I might just mention that no less a man than Ritschl has gone so far in identifying the ascetic features (as I understand them) of “Pietism” (which he understands in the broad sense), with traces of “Catholicism” left behind within Protestantism...from now on, not only monks by vocation, but every man must be a monk for his whole life...(2002, p. 249).

Weber further develops this parallel in his “final rebuttal” of Rachfahl (who still will not accept that Puritan asceticism and Catholic monasticism have anything to do with each other). Weber writes that:

...if the ‘spirit’ which reveals itself in the principles of monastic life should be judged not to be parallel to or to have, in its innermost essence, an affinity with that which is revealed in Protestant asceticism, then I do not know when one can ever speak of an ‘affinity’ (2002, p.310).

Here Weber means both ‘similarity’, and ‘sympathy’ as the most typical instances of an ‘affinity’, as he explains when he continues:

I shall only mention in passing how strongly many Pietists lamented the disappearance of the monasteries. Nor do I intend to say much about the many instances of the creation of monastic-style organizations by these same Pietists.... Finally, inner tension and an inner affinity between both sides regarding the position of ascetic ideals in the total system of the religiously oriented life originate from the already mentioned source (2002, p. 310).

The “already mentioned source”, the origin of both the similarity and differences of the types of asceticism, is the role of ascetic beliefs and practices in the religious system:

What for the monks was important as the real basis for the expectation of salvation was important for ascetic Protestantism because it was regarded as an indication that they possessed it (not the only one but probably one of the most important). And since even modern ‘methodologists’... cannot always distinguish between these two matters, it is scarcely surprising that Protestant ‘justification by works’ often appears identical with Catholic practice. However, the seeds of each have a different spiritual paternity, and, consequently, the fruits developed into a very different inner structure (2002, p. 310).

Thus, if we say that two things have an affinity for one another, we may be making a comparison between the two, and suggesting that these two phenomena have a certain (real or potential) sympathy for one another. It may be, however, that this affinity is based on a genealogical relationship: the children resemble their ‘spiritual’ parents, like the child born to Charlotte resembled the attractions of his parents. Affinity, Weber is clear here, does not mean that the two things that have an affinity are the same. Most importantly, he notes, that they are not the same because the two do not share the same ‘spiritual paternity’. Luther’s doctrine of Beruf is “father” to innerworldly asceticism.

Elective Affinities

Weber used the term ‘elective affinity’ much less frequently than “affinity”, but—even though the exact meaning of the term has remained somewhat unclear—many scholars have recognised that it is the more important term. Unlike “inner affinity” and “affinity”, terms Weber seems to use interchangeably, we do not find him doing the same thing with “affinity” and “elective affinity”, suggesting a distinction to be made between the concepts in his texts. The one occasion on which Weber does use the two terms together, however, is helpful for understanding when Weber was inclined to identify a relationship as one of “elective affinity”—and the parallels with Goethe

are striking. In the concluding pages to his “final rebuttal” of Rachfahl, Weber suggests a number of related research topics that stem from his original essays and would contribute to a fuller understanding of the Protestant Ethic and its articulation with the ‘spirit’ of capitalism. At the conclusion to a list of topics, Weber writes:

Urgent, too, is an investigation of how to explain, from the economic point of view, those elective affinities of the bourgeoisie with certain styles of life (affinities that reveal themselves repeatedly, in constantly varying but fundamentally similar manner), including (but not exclusively) affinities with certain individual components of religious stylizations of life offered most consistently by ascetic Protestantism. A great deal has already been said by many people about that more general problem, but a great deal, and, I believe much of a fundamental importance remains to be said (2002, p. 315).

This “urgent” investigation became something that Weber certainly attempted in later writings. What it means to explain the “elective affinities” of the bourgeoisie from an “economic” point of view does not need to detain us now. What is most important for the moment is the connection that Weber makes between “affinity” and “elective affinity”. Just as the Captain in Goethe’s novel explains:

A separation and a new combination [eine neue Zusammensetzung] have come about and one even feels justified in using the term ‘elective affinity’, because it really does seem as though one relationship were preferred to another and a choice [erwählt] made for one over the other (Goethe [1807]: 1994, p. 33).

In Weber’s text, “affinities” reveal themselves repeatedly, in constantly varying but fundamentally similar manner, and this suggests that a choice is being made. From the ‘economic point of view’, the bourgeois choose certain styles of life, but following Goethe’s logic, certain styles of life (inner-worldly asceticism) also choose the

bourgeoisie. This is why Weber can talk about examining the relationship “from either side.” It is neither equivocation, nor mere perspectivalism: the attractions works from both sides and an examination of either can help us understand how the two are attracted to each other.

Weber discusses the elective affinity of ascetic Protestant belief and the ethic of the calling in the following oft-quoted passage. In concluding the text of the first essay on the Protestant Ethic, Weber describes and sums up his argument (which concerns the vocational ethic and its origins in Protestant belief). Constructing a hinge between the two essays, Weber writes:

We have no intention of defending any such foolishly doctrinaire thesis as that the ‘capitalist spirit’ ...let alone capitalism itself, could only arise as the result of certain influences of the Reformation. The very fact that certain important forms of capitalist business are considerably older than the Reformation would invalidate such a thesis. We intend...to establish to what extent religious influences have in fact been partially responsible for the qualitative shaping and the quantitative expansion of that ‘spirit’ across the world, and that concrete aspects of capitalist culture originate from them (2002, p. 36).

This is a fair summary of his claims in the first essay, which Weber follows immediately with the following reflection on elective affinity:

In view of the tremendous confusion of reciprocal influences emanating from the material base, the social and political forms of organization and the spiritual content of the cultural epochs of the Reformation, the only possible way to proceed is to first investigate whether and in what points particular “elective affinities” between certain forms of religious belief and the ethic of the calling can be identified. At the same time, the manner and general direction in which, as a result of such elective affinities the

religious movement influenced the development of the material culture will be clarified as far as possible. Only then can the attempt be made to estimate the degree to which the historical origins of elements of modern culture should be attributed to those religious motives and to what extent to others (2002, p. 36).

With these words, Weber concludes his first essay. He uses the notion of elective affinity both to sum up his first essay, and to introduce the themes with which he will be preoccupied in the second essay. Weber's use of quotation marks here is instructive. He uses these not just to indicate a new term, but to flag a borrowed term, whose source he assumes his readers will readily recognize.

If the “ethic of the calling” is central to modern capitalism—and Weber clearly argues that it is—then the elective affinities between the ethic of the calling and ascetic Protestantism is a matter of no small importance. Here, however, the claim is put in quite modest terms: certain forms of Protestant belief and the vocational ethic tend to choose each other; in Weber's second essay he will assess the product of their elective affinity on the further development of modern culture. Once this claim is established, we can assess the result of such a religious movement on the development of modern capitalism per se. In the second essay, Weber will begin to assess how this elective affinity affected the development of capitalist growth as the result of the confluence of particular religious doctrines (the calling and inner-worldly asceticism particularly in its Calvinist form) and their associated practices contributed to the “qualitative shaping and the quantitative expansion of that ‘spirit’ across the world, and that concrete aspects of capitalist culture originate from them” (p. 36).

Throughout the second essay, Weber does not describe the relation of the spirit and form of capitalism as an elective affinity. However, when he goes to clarify the argument of his essays in response to Felix Rachfahl, he does so precisely in these

terms; this suggests that this metaphor may have provided the implicit framework for his argument all along. If the elective affinities of certain religious beliefs and the vocational ethic contributed to the growth and development of the capitalist spirit, it remains to be seen how the capitalist “spirit” and the capitalist “form” are related. This, Weber seeks to clarify using the notion of elective affinity. “What are we to understand by the ‘spirit’ of capitalism in relation to ‘capitalism’ itself” Weber asks.

As far as ‘capitalism’ itself is concerned, we can only understand by this a particular ‘economic system,’ that is, a form of economic behaviour toward people and goods that can be described as ‘utilization’ of ‘capital’ ... As we have said: We either analyze everything that was common to such economic systems at all times, or we analyze the specifics of a particular historical system of this type. Here we are concerned solely with the latter alternative. A historically given form of ‘capitalism’ can be filled with very different types of ‘spirit’; this form can, however, and usually will, have different levels of ‘elective affinities’ to certain historical types of spirit: the ‘spirit’ may be more or less adequate’ to the ‘form’ (or not at all). There can be no doubt that the degree of this adequacy is not without influence on the course of historical development, that ‘form’ and ‘spirit’ (as I said previously) tend to adapt to each other, and finally, that where a system and a ‘spirit’ of a particularly high ‘degree of adequacy’ come up against each other, there ensues a development of (even inwardly) unbroken unity similar to that which I had begun to analyze (2002, p. 263).

As Parkin suggests, Weber presumes that the ‘spirit’ and ‘form’⁶ exist independently historically—some times and places we will find neither a capitalist form nor capitalist spirit; there can be the capitalist form without the capitalist spirit (pariah capitalism or Venetian capitalism); the capitalist spirit without the capitalist form (Benjamin

Franklin's printing shop); or, one can have the explosive results when both are present. This is the unique situation which led to the development of Modern Capitalism.

Rather than looking at the presence or absence of both the capitalist spirit and form, we should keep in mind Weber's contention that there are a variety of economic forms and economic spirits, which have varying degrees of adequacy. Some of these have a "particularly high degree of adequacy"⁷ and will be drawn together by very strong mutual attraction. What they produce is a phenomenon of "unbroken unity", like an acid and an alkali that together form a bond to produce a salt. Rather than a table that expresses the combination of presence or absence of two different substances, it is perhaps more helpful to think of an affinity table for showing the relations between different kinds of substances. Like a spreadsheet, in affinity tables, chemical substances appear in rows and columns, and the substances they form are indicated in the cell where the row and column meet.

By Weber's time, such tables had passed out of scientific fashion with the development of the periodic table for chemists' purposes, and the notion of elective affinity found its way into the annals of ancient historical terms of chemistry. Part of the reason that they fell into disuse was that they kept growing larger (by one row and one column) with the discovery of every new element, and one needed a different table to represent the different conditions under which elements have an affinity for each other (in or out of solution, hot or cold, etc. etc.). More complex forms of chemical compounds (with more than two elements) are not easily represented at all.

While Weber may have never seen such a table, it does represent the range of choices that any given element may exercise, and that it will tend to chose some elements over and above other elements. The logic of the affinity table suggests that

certain elements can be drawn together, and will together produce something new. Further, they may be attracted to each other only under different conditions (hot, cold, wet, dry), or by means of another element that can bind together elements that would otherwise remain strangers, or even enemies. Affinity tables were produced for each of the different conditions under which substances might be expected to interact. Thus, going back to Goethe's staged discussion, an alkaline salt can bind together oil and water, tradition or the law can bind together classes that would otherwise repel each other.

If the chemical metaphor from Goethe's elective affinity plays a role here, what about the relationships for which it was a metaphor in Goethe's novel? While marriage and the offspring that it may produce is not a frequent metaphor in Weber's essays, he does choose this metaphor in trying to explain and justify the logic of his argument in response to Rachfahl. In utter exasperation and feeling deliberately misunderstood, Weber explains that in the Protestant Ethic essays he argued that modern capitalism "took root" where the ascetic Protestantism combined with the capitalism of the middle class traders (2002, p. 307). Putting this in terms that he felt all his readers would be able to understand, and which not incidentally recalls Goethe's novel, he wrote:

There was quite simply a marriage between a strand of psychological elements, which originated from quite specific moral and religious roots and capitalist opportunities for development (2002, p. 308; emphasis added).

As I have already argued, affinity for Weber sometimes indicates that there is a genealogical relationship between two phenomena that seem similar, even if there are (consistent with the metaphor) multiple parents (Chalcraft 2005, p. 37), and differences arise when there may not be shared paternity (implying that there is the same mother).

Nietzsche's influence on Weber is understood, so we are not surprised to read Weber explaining that in the Protestant Ethic essays what interests him "...is the origin [Herkunft] of that irrational element which is contained in the concept of the calling" (2002, p. 28), or when he argues that a "...constituent part of the capitalist spirit... was born out of the spirit of Christian asceticism [geboren aus dem Geiste der Christlichen askese]" (2002, p. 120). Even acknowledging the Nietzschean lineage of the Protestant Ethic argument, it still resonates strongly with Goethe's Elective Affinities in its thematic coherence. The attractions between two people draw them together, and as a result, something new, something different than either of the two is born from their relation. The "spirit" of capitalism and the capitalist form join together, divorcing economic traditionalism, and together they produce something new: modern capitalism.

CONCLUSION: THE CHEMISTRY OF SOCIAL LIFE

Goethe's elective affinity metaphor helps us to clarify Weber's argument (and his use of this metaphor as a metaphor) in the Protestant Ethic. Weber traces a double elective affinity, one that produces the spirit of capitalism, and the other that produces modern capitalism. First, there is an elective affinity of the ethic of the calling and the asceticism of certain Protestant groups. The chemical reaction produced in the interaction between these two elements produced something quite different from either of them: the spirit of modern capitalism, as it appears in Weber's example of Benjamin Franklin, whose ethic is different from either of the two elements, though it emerges from it. The second elective affinity is the attraction of the "spirit" of capitalism and the "form" of capitalism that had long been found in small pockets of Bourgeois merchants: the interaction of these two together produced modern capitalism.

This argument framed in the logic of elective affinity becomes the basis for Weber's comparative-historical studies; by means of affinity tables, the chemist (and more importantly, the community of chemists) can develop an understanding of what "bodies" tend to be drawn together. Collectively, the entries on the table, and the relations between the entries, begin to provide a better understanding of the force that draws each affinity together. How forcefully two substances attract one another creates the outcome of their interaction; their attraction for each other has more to do with the characteristics of each, though it may be shaped in the context of enabling or prohibiting conditions. The elective affinity of the doctrine of the calling and certain forms of asceticism was sufficiently strong to displace other beliefs that had previously been tied to asceticism (monasticism, for example), and together these form a new spirit, the spirit of capitalism (Turner 1992. p. 26). The elective affinity of the capitalist form and the capitalist spirit was sufficient to displace the traditional economic ethos, to sue for divorce from all elements of economic traditionalism.

Readers of the Protestant Ethic have long debated the causal relationships of Weber's argument, and whether these are best understood as a "weak" or a "strong" causal claim. The understanding of causality, however, that has been often presumed in this debate is inconsistent with Weber's chemical metaphor, something that Weber himself does not seem to fully grasp. While he lashes out quite aggressively against his critics (especially Rachfahl), he always defends his arguments in terms of how they are misunderstood, and never clearly articulates the logic that he implicitly assumes (and which is different than the argument that is criticised by Rachfahl and Fischer, at least).

Elective affinities cannot readily be understood in the standard terms of cause and effect. Rather, pursuing the chemical metaphor, the elements form bonds and

together produce a new substance because of the characteristics of each element, and this is better understood as a kind of ‘emergence’, a term with considerable sociological resonance (Turner and Killian 1957; Sawyer 2002; Hannigan 2006). As the noted Italian chemist Pier Luigi Luisi describes it, “emergence describes the onset of novel properties that arise when a certain level of structural complexity is formed from components of lower complexity” (2002: 183). To use one of the simplest examples from Luisi’s explanation, the properties of water “are not present in hydrogen and oxygen, so that the properties of water can be considered as emergent ones” (189). As Luisi explains, one can deduce a posteriori the likelihood, and under what conditions, that Hydrogen and Oxygen will join together in a particular formation, but there would be no way to determine a priori what the properties of H₂O will be (at what point it will freeze, liquefy, boil, etc.).

The modern chemistry that Luisi discusses posits different mechanisms for the way that chemicals form bonds compared with Goethe’s understanding (though Weber did have some understanding of modern chemistry (Weber 1984)); however, the implications of the metaphor still work in terms of the applicability of emergent properties in social relations. In Luisi’s description of emergent properties, water is the product of Hydrogen and Oxygen, but we would not normally say that it is ‘caused’ by either of these elements.

Weber’s investigation in the Protestant Ethic is not unlike the attempt to understand the elective affinities that produce a chemical compound. Weber wants to understand what it is about the ethic of the calling and Protestant asceticism that made them attracted to each other, inclined them to bond together, producing the spirit of capitalism. Weber recognised that this could not have been formed except under

particular conditions. Once the chemical genealogy of the Spirit of Capitalism is established, Weber wants to understand the attraction of the spirit of capitalism and the form of capitalism. Why, he asks, did this particular “spirit” have an elective affinity with this particular economic “form”, and under what conditions were they able to bond together to form modern capitalism? The logic of this question framed by the metaphor of elective affinities is incompatible with either ‘one sided’ materialist or ‘one-sided’ idealist explanations; this explains why so many of the attempts (“materialist” or otherwise) to understanding what Weber meant by ‘elective affinity’ have ended up ‘one-sided’ in some way or another⁸.

Part of longstanding debate about the nature of Weber’s argument stems from the fact that his argument was, in the sense I have argued here, primarily implicit. It seems very likely that Weber did not fully understand the significance of using the metaphor of elective affinity, nor did he fully appreciate the extent to which it shaped his argument as a whole. This resulted in considerable frustration and a sense that he was being deliberately misunderstood, as evidenced in his ‘debate’ with Rachfahl. The issue has been further complicated because the implicit emergent logic of the Protestant Ethic conflicts with Weber’s explicitly stated methodological individualism (Sawyer 2001). Michael Lowy argues that Weber’s use of elective affinity in the Protestant Ethic:

may provide a new angle of approach, little explored until now, in the field of the sociology of culture. It is surprising that, since Max Weber, so few attempts have been made to re-examine it and to use it in real research” (1992: 12).

Those ‘few attempts’ may not even include Weber’s own later research. The promise of elective affinities as a logic for social inquiry is no less potent for that.

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FOOTNOTES:

¹ The term co-relation (later correlation) originates as a statistical term and comes from Sir Francis Galton, who first used it in his "Co-relations and their measurement" (1888). This is by no means an isolated example, as Hinkle (1986) discusses.

² It seems to be an especially well-used term in sociology of religion, which is particularly indebted to Weber's work on religion (see O'Toole 1984).

³ I will be discussing these instances below.

⁴ Translation amended: "classes" to "status groups" and "occupations" to "vocations". While there is nothing wrong with the original translations, I want to shift the translation so that it corresponds with the traditional Weberian vocabulary in English.

⁵ This can be seen particularly clearly in the shared names of the characters. Both Eduard's and the Captain's given names are Otto, and part of this name is found in Charlotte and Otilie.

⁶ For reasons that I have never understood, Parkin uses the word 'substance' to describe what Weber himself calls a 'form'; this adds considerable confusion to the discussion.

⁷ It is by no means self evident that what Weber here calls a 'degree of adequacy' is the same thing that Weber elsewhere refers to as 'adequate causation' (Buss 1999).

⁸ Weber's resistance to thinking in straightforward and reductionist causal terms appears, among other places, in his highly sarcastic review of Wilhelm Ostwald's "Energetic Foundations for the Science of Culture" ([1909] 1984). Weber criticizes Ostwald (a recent Nobel Laureate in Chemistry) for reducing all of culture to entropy and energy conservation, rather than recognizing the complex constellations of factors that enter into relation with one another, a view that is distinctly reminiscent of Goethe's in Elective Affinities (1807).