

# Questions to ChatGPT about Max Weber: Theory of Power and Authority, Ideal Types

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Version: 13.09.2024

The following exercise is intended for use in teaching. The aim is to enable the students themselves to evaluate the limits and possibilities of programmes such as ChatGPT.

A challenging theoretical text is used to formulate specific questions for the bot, which can then be discussed. In this case, it is a classic passage from Max Weber's 'Economy and Society'. In it, Weber describes the three ideal types of legitimate authority. This is only a suitable example; depending on the subject, a different text can easily be used.

In this exercise, the programme is designed to answer questions about Max Weber and his concept of ideal types without prior input from the students. The aim of this exercise is to show that the programme does not provide an ideal summary and in some places also provides incorrect information, that it takes a considerable amount of work to check the answers and that the programme cannot 'understand', but performs arithmetic operations and works with probabilities.

The exercise illustrates that ChatGPT cannot deal with basic academic tasks such as correct citation and also reproduces text passages in the answers verbatim and without labelling. The example also shows that ChatGPT mixes text reproduction with interpretation.

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Citation:

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[title] Questions to ChatGPT about Max Weber: Theory of Power and Authority, Ideal Types

[date] 2024

[source]

[access date]

## Questions to ChatGPT about Max Weber: Theory of Power and Authority, Ideal Types<sup>1</sup>

**User:** Who was Max Weber?

**ChatGPT:** Max Weber (1864-1920) was a prominent German sociologist, economist, and social theorist, regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern sociology. He is known for his profound analyses of religion, economy, politics, and culture, as well as for his methodology in the social sciences. Weber's work has had a lasting impact on social sciences, and many of his concepts and theories are still intensely discussed and applied today.

Biography

### Early Life and Education:

Born on April 21, 1864, in Erfurt, Germany.

Studied law, history, philosophy, and economics at the universities of Heidelberg, Göttingen, and Berlin.

Received his Ph.D. in law in 1889 and completed his habilitation in 1891.

### Academic Career:

Taught at the universities of Freiburg and Heidelberg.

In 1897, he became seriously ill and withdrew from academic life for several years.

After his recovery, he re-engaged with both academia and politics.

### Important Works and Theories:

**"The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1904/1905):** In this work, Weber examines the influence of Protestant ethics on the development of capitalism, arguing that the Protestant work ethic and the belief in a vocational calling significantly contributed to the emergence of modern capitalism.

**"Economy and Society" (1922):** Weber's magnum opus, published posthumously, contains his comprehensive theories on sociology, especially his typology of authority (traditional, charismatic, and legal authority).

**Methodology of the Social Sciences:** Weber developed concepts such as the ideal type and interpretive sociology, which revolutionized the methodology of the social sciences.

### Political Engagement:

In the Weimar Republic, Weber was involved in drafting the Weimar Constitution and advocated for a strong parliamentary democracy.

### Death:

Max Weber died on June 14, 1920, in Munich from pneumonia.

<sup>1</sup> The Conversation took place on 4th July 2024, using the free version of [openai.com/chatgpt](https://openai.com/chatgpt)

## Influence and Legacy

Weber's theories and concepts have deeply influenced sociology and other social sciences. His work on bureaucracy, rationality, religion, and the economy remains central to academic discourse. His methodological approaches, particularly the ideal type and interpretive sociology, provide foundational tools for sociological research.

Weber's comprehensive analysis of modern society, his critical examinations of power structures, and his reflections on the role of religion in social change make him a key figure in the social sciences.<sup>2</sup>

**User:** The Ideal Types of Power by Max Weber are a classic in the social and human sciences. What is power in Max Weber's theory?

**ChatGPT:** In Max Weber's theory, power is a central concept that he examines extensively in his work. According to Weber, power (or "domination") is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be able to carry out their own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis of this probability. Weber distinguishes between different ideal types of power or authority, which he presents as ideal models to analyze and understand the various forms and mechanisms of exercising power.

The three classic ideal types of authority according to Max Weber are:

1. **Traditional Authority:** This form of authority is based on the everyday belief in the sanctity of long-standing traditions and the legitimacy of those empowered through them. Examples include patriarchal or feudal systems, where power is grounded in traditions and customs.
2. **Charismatic Authority:** This type of authority is based on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual and the normative patterns established by that individual. Charismatic leaders gain their authority through their personal qualities and the recognition of their followers. Examples include religious leaders, revolutionary leaders, or other charismatic figures.
3. **Legal-Rational Authority:** This form of authority is based on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those in power to issue commands under such rules. In this case, power is based on laws and bureaucratic structures. Examples are modern states and organizations, where power rests on legal and rational rules and norms.

Weber's ideal types are used to analyse and categorize real-world phenomena of power, with mixed forms often occurring in practice.<sup>3</sup>

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### 2 Comment on the answer to "Who was Max Weber?":

The question serves to test how ChatGPT presents undisputed, well-known facts. The portrayal of the biography is accurate and corresponds to the facts.

### 3 Comment on the answer Ideal types of power:

The equation of power and domination is wrong and the distinction between the two terms is central to Weber's theoretical model. The phrase "the chance to assert one's own will within a social relationship, even against resistance, regardless of what this chance is based on" is an unmarked quotation and describes power - in contrast to domination, which is "the chance to find obedience for a command of a certain content from recognisable persons". (WuG, p.28). The ideal types cited are also unattested direct quotations from WuG. This is already recognisable from the language no longer in use today.

**User:** In which text do the ideal types appear?

**ChatGPT:** Max Weber's ideal types of authority are thoroughly described in his work "**Economy and Society**" ("*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*"). This foundational work is one of Weber's most important sociological treatises and was published posthumously in 1922. Particularly in the first chapter, "The Three Pure Types of Legitimate Authority," Weber presents his theory of the ideal types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and rational (legal) authority. In this work, Weber analyses the structure and functioning of various forms of authority and their impact on society. "*Economy and Society*" is a central text in the social and human sciences and is often regarded as Weber's main work.<sup>4</sup>

**User:** How do the types of authority differ? What does "ideal type" mean?

**ChatGPT:** Max Weber's types of authority differ in how they establish their legitimacy and authority:

### 1. Traditional Authority:

**Legitimacy:** Based on the belief in the sanctity of longstanding traditions and customs.

**Structure:** Power is passed down through traditions and existing social hierarchies.

**Examples:** Feudal rule, patriarchal family structures.

**Characteristics:** Stability through tradition, often less flexible to change.

### 2. Charismatic Authority:

**Legitimacy:** Based on the extraordinary devotion to the sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of a person.

**Structure:** Power is concentrated in the charismatic leader, whose authority is legitimized by personal qualities and the recognition of followers.

**Examples:** Revolutionary leaders, religious prophets.

**Characteristics:** Dynamic and often revolutionary, can be unstable as it is highly dependent on the leader.

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#### 4 Comment on the passage on ideal types:

The work cited is correct, but the naming of the first chapter as "The three pure types of legitimate rule" is incorrect. The third chapter of WuG is called "The Types of Rule", the first sub-chapter of which is called "The Legitimacy of Rule". "There are three pure types of legitimate rule" is the first sentence of §2 in Chapter III. 1.

### 3. Legal-Rational Authority:

**Legitimacy:** Based on the belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those in power to issue commands under such rules.

**Structure:** Power is established through laws and bureaucratic structures.

**Examples:** Modern states, legal and bureaucratic organizations.

**Characteristics:** More stable and systematic, with an emphasis on rules and laws.

**Legitimacy:** Based on the belief in the legality of established orders and the authority of those appointed to exercise power through such orders.

**Structure:** Power is structured through formal rules and laws, which are rationally and bureaucratically organized.

**Examples:** Modern states, corporations, bureaucracies.

**Characteristics:** Rationality and efficiency, formal and rule-bound decision-making processes.

#### Ideal Type:

An ideal type is a theoretical construct used in sociology to systematically analyse and understand real-world phenomena. An ideal type represents a simplified, "pure" form of a social phenomenon, which does not exist in reality, but exemplifies certain characteristic features in an exaggerated way. This method helps identify and compare the essential traits and differences of social phenomena.

Max Weber used ideal types to make complex social realities more understandable by reducing them to concise and analytically useful models. Ideal types are not exact descriptions of reality, but tools for analysing and comparing real phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

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#### 5 Comment on the distinction between types of rule:

The structure of this answer (legitimacy, structure, examples, characteristics) does not originate from the question, but determines the answer. This answer also contains incorrectly stated quotations. The definition of ideal type is correct. In a human conversation in an academic setting, it would make sense to provide the definition before the answers to the question.

**User:** Apply Max Weber's ideal types to political figures from the 20th century.

**ChatGPT:** To apply Max Weber's ideal types of authority to political figures of the 20th century, we can analyse prominent leaders based on the three ideal types (traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational authority):

### 1. **Traditional Authority:**

**Example:** Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany

**Legitimacy:** Kaiser Wilhelm II ruled based on tradition and hereditary rights, rooted in the monarchic tradition of the German Empire.

**Characteristics:** Power was strongly tied to traditional aristocratic structures and relied on belief in historical and dynastic legitimacy.

### 2. **Charismatic Authority:**

**Examples:**

**Adolf Hitler:**

**Legitimacy:** Hitler gained power through his charismatic personality, oratory skills, and the extraordinary devotion he inspired among his followers.

**Characteristics:** The Nazi movement was heavily shaped by Hitler's charismatic authority, leading to an intense but ultimately unstable rule.

**Mahatma Gandhi:**

**Legitimacy:** Gandhi gained influence through his charismatic personality and his principles of non-violent resistance.

**Characteristics:** His leadership was based on moral conviction and personal integrity, which earned him a large following and made him a symbol of the Indian independence movement.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt:**

**Legitimacy:** Roosevelt garnered widespread support through his charismatic leadership during the Great Depression and World War II.

**Characteristics:** His ability to gain public trust and communicate directly through his "Fireside Chats" was a hallmark of his charismatic rule.

### 3. Legal-Rational Authority:

#### Examples:

##### Franklin D. Roosevelt:

**Legitimacy:** Roosevelt was legally elected through democratic elections and governed within the constitutional framework of the United States.

**Characteristics:** His administration was marked by the implementation of legal and bureaucratic structures, such as the New Deal, aimed at addressing the economic crisis.

##### Angela Merkel:

**Legitimacy:** Merkel governed as Chancellor of Germany based on a rational-legal system, characterized by democratic elections and constitutional norms.

**Characteristics:** Her leadership was marked by a rational, pragmatic, and rule-based approach.

These examples illustrate how Weber's ideal types can be applied to real political figures to analyse and understand the different types and mechanisms of power exercise. In practice, mixed forms often occur, and a person may embody elements of multiple ideal types in their rule.<sup>6</sup>

**User:** What does it mean for authority to be legitimate? What problems arise from this?

**ChatGPT:** For authority to be legitimate means, according to Max Weber, that the power and authority of a ruler or a ruling structure are recognized as justified and lawful by those being governed. Legitimacy is thus a central component of the stability and acceptance of authority. Weber distinguishes between different forms of legitimacy, which he describes through the ideal types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and legal (rational) legitimacy.

#### Meaning of Legitimacy

**Traditional Legitimacy:** Recognition of authority is based on traditional values and customs. Authority is considered legitimate because it has existed for a long time and is supported by customs and traditions.

**Charismatic Legitimacy:** Recognition of authority is based on the extraordinary personality and leadership qualities of the ruler. Authority is seen as legitimate because the ruler is considered inspiring, exceptional, or sacred.

**Legal (Rational) Legitimacy:** Recognition of authority is based on formal rules and laws. Authority is regarded as legitimate because it is legitimized through legal procedures and rational-bureaucratic structures.

#### **6 Commentary on the application of the ideal types to people of the 20th century:**

The categorisation of people into the ideal types is sometimes surprising and not uncontroversial. The categorisation of Adolf Hitler as a charismatic ruler is one of several interpretations in historical research. Citing Roosevelt as an example of two different ideal types is confusing and his categorisation as a charismatic ruler is questionable. For rational rule, it would be relevant that the executive acts constitutionally and legally. Whether the government's official behaviour is rational or pragmatic would not be a central characteristic. Moreover, Merkel was chancellor from 2005 to 2021 and not in the 20th century.

## Problems of Legitimacy

**Erosion of Legitimacy:** When the grounds for legitimacy are questioned or erode, it can lead to instability and conflicts. For example, charismatic authority may collapse if the charismatic leader dies or if followers lose faith in them.

**Legitimacy Crisis:** In modern societies, a legitimacy crisis can arise when rulers can no longer justify their power through rational, legal, and bureaucratic means. This can lead to distrust in state institutions and political unrest.

**Abuse of Power:** Rulers relying on charismatic or traditional legitimacy might abuse their power by disregarding existing laws and norms, which can lead to authoritarian or dictatorial structures.

**Shifts Between Forms of Legitimacy:** In practice, mixed forms can occur, and a regime may attempt to shift or expand its legitimacy base. For example, a charismatic leader might try to stabilize their power through legal and rational structures, which can bring challenges and resistance.

In summary, legitimacy in Weber's theory of authority means that power is recognized as lawful, but this recognition can be fragile and susceptible to changes and challenges. The problem of legitimacy concerns the stability and acceptance of authority and the mechanisms by which it is maintained.<sup>7</sup>

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### 7 Commentary on the problem of legitimate rule:

The programme gives the correct answer that legitimacy requires recognition by the ruled. Here, too, the programme repeats the ideal types and elaborates on them redundantly.



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**User:** What problems can arise when authority is legitimate?

**ChatGPT:** When authority is considered legitimate, it means that the power and authority of a government, ruler, or institution are viewed as justified and acceptable by those being governed. This creates a fundamental stability and legitimacy for the political system. However, several problems and challenges can arise:

1. **Stagnation and Authoritarianism:** When authority is seen as permanently legitimate, it may lead to a lack of political dynamism. The ruling elite might consolidate their power and avoid reforms, leading to political stagnation and an authoritarian style of governance.
2. **Abuse of Power:** Legitimate authority also provides the opportunity for those in power to abuse their authority by restricting citizens' rights and freedoms or suppressing political opponents without facing serious consequences. This can lead to injustice and social dissatisfaction.
3. **Loss of Legitimacy:** The legitimacy of authority can erode if citizens lose trust in the leadership. This can be caused by corruption, undemocratic practices, economic problems, or social injustice. Such a loss of legitimacy can lead to political crises, protests, and even regime changes.
4. **Legitimacy Crisis:** A deeper legitimacy crisis can arise if the political system fails to meet basic social needs or respond adequately to challenges. This can lead to a loss of trust in the entire political order and cause institutional instability.
5. **Change in Authority and Uncertainty:** When the legitimacy of authority is questioned, whether through political opposition, social movements, or external interventions, it can lead to political instability, uncertainty, and even violent conflicts.
6. **Challenges from New Ideas and Values:** In modern societies, new ideas, values, and norms can challenge the traditional foundations of legitimacy. This requires those in power to adapt and create new forms of legitimacy that meet the changing expectations of citizens.

Overall, it becomes clear that while legitimacy is a fundamental prerequisite for stable authority, it also carries potential risks and challenges that require careful management and adjustment to ensure long-term stability and acceptance.<sup>8</sup>

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#### 8 Commentary on the legitimacy of rule and its problems:

If rule is legitimate, it does not mean that it must be legitimate for normative reasons, but according to Weber that the ruled believe in the legitimacy of rule. The renewed enquiry moves away from the text and towards an interpretation. ChatGPT starts from the possibility that domination can become corruptible. The answers are no longer linked to the source text.

**User:** You describe the risks of legitimacy. I want to know what the scientific problem is when using the term.

**ChatGPT:** The scientific problem with using the term "legitimacy" primarily lies in its complexity and context-dependent meaning. Here are some of the main issues and challenges:

**Conceptual Diversity:** Legitimacy can be defined and interpreted differently depending on the context and discipline. In political science, sociology, law, and other fields, there may be various theoretical approaches that capture and analyse legitimacy in different ways.

**Measurability and Operationalization:** It is difficult to empirically capture and measure legitimacy, as it is often abstract and subjective. How does one measure whether a government or institution is considered legitimate? What criteria and indicators are relevant, and how can they be objectively assessed?

**Normative Implications:** The concept of legitimacy is closely tied to normative considerations, i.e., ideas about how power and authority should ideally be. This leads to questions of value judgments and moral evaluations, which are often subjective and subject to debate.

**Dynamics and Change:** Legitimacy is not a static property but can change over time. Political events, societal changes, and economic developments can influence and alter perceptions of legitimacy. Therefore, it is important to view legitimacy as a dynamic and contextual phenomenon.

**Cultural and Historical Contextualization:** Legitimacy is deeply embedded in cultural and historical contexts. What is considered legitimate can vary greatly between different societies and over different periods. This requires a contextualized analysis that takes specific conditions and norms into account.

**Challenges of Transferability:** The transferability of legitimacy concepts between different political systems and cultural contexts is often problematic. What is seen as legitimate in one society may not necessarily be viewed the same way in another.

In summary, the scientific problem with using the term "legitimacy" lies in its complexity, diversity, and contextual dependency. Researchers must be aware of these challenges and develop methodological approaches that adequately consider these aspects to conduct well-founded and comparable analyses.

**User:** What editions of Weber's works are available? Do they differ?

**ChatGPT:**

The works of Max Weber have been published in various editions, differing in structure, scope, and scholarly presentation. Here are some of the major editions of Max Weber's works:

### **Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion (1920-1921)**

**Description:** This collection includes Weber's works on the sociology of religion, including his famous essays on the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.

**Distinguishing Features:** This edition specifically focuses on Weber's sociological studies of religion and its influence on the economy and society.

### **Economy and Society (1922)**

**Description:** This work is considered Weber's magnum opus and was published posthumously. It contains his fundamental theories on sociology, particularly his typology of authority.

**Distinguishing Features:** Various editions of "Economy and Society" are available, differing in their commentary and completeness of the included manuscripts. One of the most well-known editions is the 1956 version edited by Johannes Winckelmann.

### **Max Weber Collected Works (MWG)**

**Description:** The Max Weber Collected Works (MWG) is the most comprehensive and scholarly critical edition of Max Weber's writings. It has been published since the 1980s by the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.

**Distinguishing Features:** The MWG is divided into various sections, encompassing his writings, speeches, letters, and estate. Each section is further divided into several volumes. This edition provides extensive commentary and apparatus for scholarly contextualization and interpretation.

### **Collected Political Writings (1921)**

**Description:** This collection includes Weber's writings on politics, including his famous essays such as "Politics as a Vocation."

**Distinguishing Features:** This edition specifically focuses on Weber's political-sociological works and offers important insights into his views on power and authority in a political context.

### **Collected Essays on the Theory of Science (1922)**

**Description:** This collection encompasses Weber's works on the methodology of the social sciences.

**Distinguishing Features:** This edition provides a comprehensive presentation of Weber's methodological approaches and considerations on the theory of science.

## Differences Between Editions

**Scope and Completeness:** The MWG is the most complete and comprehensive edition of Weber's works, while earlier editions often include a selection of Weber's writings.

**Commentary and Scholarly Apparatus:** The MWG provides detailed commentaries, introductions, and scholarly apparatuses that are either missing or less extensive in earlier editions.

**Structure and Organization:** The MWG is systematically divided into various sections and volumes, whereas earlier editions are often thematically organized.

These differences make the choice of edition relevant depending on scholarly needs and interests. Researchers who want to engage deeply and comprehensively with Weber's work generally use the MWG, while other editions may be suitable for specific topics or an overview.<sup>9</sup>

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### 9 Comment on the question about editions of works:

ChatGPT is not familiar with the term "edition of works" or "complete edition". The programme confuses a scholarly, often historical-critical edition of the texts with several publications by the same author.



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**User:** Did Max Weber work in London?

**ChatGPT:** No, Max Weber did not work in London. He spent most of his academic and professional life in Germany. Weber studied and taught at various German universities, including Heidelberg, Freiburg, and Munich. His academic career and intellectual activities were primarily focused on Germany. While Weber travelled extensively and had contacts with international scholars, there is no evidence that he held an academic position in London or at any other British university. His influence and recognition did, however, reach scholars and intellectuals worldwide, and his works were translated into many languages and received internationally.

**User:** But isn't there a Max Weber Institute in London? So he must have been there.

**ChatGPT:** Max Weber himself did not work in London, and there is no institute in London named after him during his lifetime or where he was active. The name "Max Weber" has been given posthumously to many institutions and research centres in honour of his influence and contributions to social science.

### Max Weber Institute in London

However, there is the Max Weber Programme at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy. This program supports postdoctoral research and teaching in the social and human sciences and is named after Max Weber to acknowledge his significance to these disciplines. This is, however, in Florence, not London.

### Confusions and Misunderstandings

It is possible to encounter confusion when searching for institutes named after him. Some institutions and programs worldwide have been named in honour of Max Weber, but this does not mean he worked there. For example, in the UK, there is the "Weber Network" at the London School of Economics (LSE), which deals with his sociology, but this is a posthumous recognition of his work and not a place where he was personally employed.<sup>10</sup>

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#### 10 Comment on Max Weber in London:

The question is intended to show how ChatGPT reacts when users insist on arbitrarily false statements and the bot cannot provide a particularly likely answer from the data.

Earlier versions of the programme often 'hallucinated' and provided answers without any factual basis. This is less common in this version. However, the programme does not provide any evidence of Weber's extensive travelling. The "Weber Network" is not an existing institution at the London School of Economics (LSE).