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Post-Wittgensteinian philosophy: Winch

Consider the following assertion: 'It is a matter of empirical discovery that people talk certain ways, for it is only in the context of the talk that we can claim to understand what they are doing and why they are doing it.'³⁵ The statement comes, not from an 'ethnomethodologist', but from a philosopher (Louch) in the course of a work that disparagingly attacks the claims of social scientists to be able to construct theories of human conduct that are in any way superior to the explanations that lay actors are capable of giving of their own actions. Explanation of human action, the author argues, is necessarily moral explanation – whether it is attempted by actors themselves, or by 'social-scientific' observers of what they do. When we seek to explain an act, we ask for its 'grounds', which means for the (moral) 'justification' that a person has for doing as he or she does. As soon as we know this, we have no more need to ask why the act occurred. It follows that the social sciences, in so far as they involve trying to go beyond descriptively surveying action, and in lay actors' own language, are just so much verbiage. Anthropology, for example, is, 'a collection of traveller's tales with no particular scientific significance', the same is true of sociology, save that in many cases the tales are familiar, 'and so these accounts seem unnecessary and pretentious'.³⁶

The arguments advanced here share affinities with those developed by Winch, although the latter's assessment of the aims and possibilities of social science is more ambiguous than the sweeping judgement which I have just quoted. Winch thinks also that social scientists have pretensions which are doomed to failure, because they mistake the true nature of their endeavours. According to him, the tasks of sociology are essentially philosophical. The claim might initially appear a puzzling one: but we are actually on very familiar ground, for it depends upon the proposal that human action is 'meaningful' in a way in which events in the natural world are not. That which has 'meaning' in this sense, according to Winch, is *ipso facto* rule-governed'. Winch is at some pains to demonstrate the universal correspondence between 'meaningful' and 'rule-governed' behaviour.

It might appear at first sight, he says, that only some forms of meaningful conduct are rule-governed. The actions of a bureaucrat involve an orientation to rules, but it is not so easy to see that those of a social rebel, who rejects the norms of the wider society, do so. The point is, Winch holds, that the social rebel still follows a definite way of life, which is oriented to rules no less than that of the strictest conformist. For conduct to be 'rule-governed' it is not necessary, Winch goes on to say, that someone following a rule, if asked, should be able to formulate it consciously; all that matters is 'whether it makes sense to distinguish between a right and a wrong way of doing things in connection with what he does'.

The implications of recognizing that 'meaningful' conduct is necessarily rule-following conduct, according to Winch's analysis, are profound, and show that there is a radical discrepancy between the methods of natural and social science. The 'regularities' which can be discerned in human conduct are not to be explained in the same terms as those that occur in the natural world. Weber was right in emphasizing that human action is usually 'predictable', but wrong in supposing that its explanation can assume a causal form which is logically, if not in content, the same as that characteristic of natural science. A 'regularity' in observed phenomena presupposes criteria of identity, whereby happenings are classified as 'of the same kind'. In social conduct, these criteria are necessarily given by the rules that express different 'forms of life': it is only in this way, for example, that we are able to talk of two actions as 'doing the same thing'.

Natural science, of course, proceeds according to rules; but these govern the activities of the scientist in relation to an independently given subject-matter. In the case of social science, what we study, as well as our procedures for studying it, are activities carried on according to rules, and it is the rules governing the actions that we investigate which supply our criteria of identity, not those involved in our modes of procedure.

So it is quite mistaken in principle to compare the activity of a student of a form of social behaviour with that of, say, an engineer studying the workings of a machine... If we are going to compare the social student to an engineer, we shall do better to

compare him to an apprentice engineer who is studying what engineering – that is, the activity of engineering – is all about. His understanding of social phenomena is more like the engineer's understanding of his colleagues' activities than it is like the engineer's understanding of the mechanical systems he studies.

The study of social conduct necessarily involves 'making sense' of observed actions, and the observer can only do this in terms of the particular rules to which those actions relate. This does not mean, Winch goes on, that the social scientist has to make use of actors' own concepts and nothing more. Technical concepts, however, must always be 'logically tied' (Winch's term) to the former, which have first of all to be 'understood' if the latter are to be applied. Technical redescription does not mean causal explanation. For, Winch says, 'if social relations between men exist only in and through their ideas... since the relations between ideas are internal relations, social relations must be a species of internal relations too'.³⁷ This is very simply illustrated by considering the connection between an order given by one person to another and the action of compliance to it. Explaining the act, according to Winch, involves specifying conceptual relations between the notions of 'command' and 'obedience', and is thus quite different from isolating a causal dependency between two events in nature.

Following the first publication of *The Idea of a Social Science*, Winch enlarged upon the views stated there.³⁸ The issues raised are obviously manifest in their starkest form when we investigate 'forms of life' that are very different from our own. As an example, Winch takes Evans-Pritchard's celebrated analysis of magic and witchcraft among the Azande, phenomena which seem peculiarly alien to those schooled within the context of European culture. We know, Evans-Pritchard assumes, that what the Azande believe about the influence of magic in, say, healing illness, or of witchcraft in producing it, is mistaken. The task, therefore, is to show how magical practices, witchcraft and oracular divination survive in the face of the fact that they do not yield the results which the Azande believe they do. According to Winch, the question is not one that can be legitimately asked in the first place, in the way in which Evans-Pritchard

poses it. Magic and witchcraft are central and intrinsic to Zande culture, and thus have to be understood quite differently from similar beliefs and practices in so far as they still linger on in our own culture. It is only within the context of the latter that we can speak of such activities as 'irrational', or even as 'incorrect' or 'mistaken'.

In discussing why we are forced to arrive at this conclusion, Winch quotes Wittgenstein's analysis of games. The rules of a game specify a universe of meaning that pertains within the play-sphere. Now suppose that, in a particular game, a person can always win by means of a simple trick; when the attention of the other players is drawn to this, it ceases to be a game. We cannot say that we have realized that 'it wasn't really a game at all'; the point is that she or he has taught us a *new* game, that is bounded by different principles from the old one. 'We now see something different,' Wittgenstein says, 'and can no longer naïvely go on playing'.³⁹ In trying to interpret Zande practices in terms of Western ideas of 'scientific understanding', the observer is committing a category-mistake parallel to trying to understand the rules of one game by means of assumptions grounded in the rules of another. The relativistic implications of this sort of analysis are evident; Winch seeks to skirt them by specifying certain constants in relation to which varying cultures may be interpreted. Having rejected 'scientific rationality', he fastens upon what he calls 'limiting notions' which are presupposed by 'the very conception of human life'. These 'limiting notions' – referring to birth, death and sexual relations – 'are inescapably involved in the life of all known human societies in a way which gives us a clue where to look, if we are puzzled about the point of an alien system or institutions'.⁴⁰

The critical reception of Winch's work is by now well developed in the secondary literature, and I shall not attempt to do much more than reformulate some of the chief points made by his critics. First of all, Winch's treatment of 'meaningful action' as equivalent to 'rule-governed' conduct will not do.

1 The notion of 'rule' does too much work in Winch's discussion, and is not adequately explicated. According to him, we

can show whether any given mode of behaviour is rule-governed, and thereby 'meaningful', by reference to whether or not it makes sense to say that there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' way of doing it. But, as MacIntyre asks, is there a right way and wrong way of going for a walk? He concludes that there is not, although we would certainly want to hold that taking an evening stroll is a 'meaningful' activity.⁴¹ In contradistinction to MacIntyre, however, I shall prefer to say that there are actually two senses in which the criterion of doing something 'rightly' or 'wrongly' may be applied to such an activity as going for a walk, and it is a signal failure of Winch's analysis not to distinguish these. One sense is that in which the *linguistic expression* 'going for a walk' might be rightly or wrongly applied to a particular mode of conduct – this would cover the adjudgement of whether being pushed along in a perambulator would correctly be counted as an instance of 'going for a walk'. The second sense refers to *moral* evaluations of right and wrong, and the sanctions associated with them – the sense in which going for a walk down the centre of an arterial highway may be regarded as an infraction of the law.

2 Winch uses 'rule' in a very elastic way, but it is clear that most of what he has to say is informed by a model of linguistic rules or conventions, where conformity is essentially unproblematic. This has two consequences. First, Winch does not once pose the question, *whose* rules? Language, I shall argue later, expresses asymmetries of power; and social norms, especially moral norms, are frequently *imposed* as obligations within systems of domination. Second, there is more than one sort of orientation which actors may develop *vis-à-vis* social norms: knowing the 'meaning' of an action is quite distinct from the commitment to carry it out. Winch does not deal with the sliding scale between moral commitment and cognitive appraisal involved in 'rule-following', which again is directly connected to the significance of power in social life.

3 Thus Winch tends to confuse the meaning of action with its occurrence. According to him there is an 'intrinsic relation' between an act of command and an act of obedience to that command. But this is only so on the level of 'meaning' or the intelligibility of action – what it *means* to use the linguistic

expressions 'command', 'obedience', etc. Rule-following in the sense of the actual occurrence of an act of obedience to a command, as Weber in this respect quite properly emphasized, is not explained by identifying the intelligibility of 'obedience'.

4 Acknowledgement of the latter point undermines Winch's attempt to make a logical case for excluding the possibility of causal analysis from the social sciences, on the basis that actions merely 'express ideas' and the relation between ideas is conceptual rather than causal. It may indeed be correct to hold that the explanation of why someone obeys a command cannot be expressed as an instance of a causal law, but this is a different matter.

5 Winch's account in one rather important respect exaggerates the differences between the social and the natural sciences, because he does not develop the point that 'why-questions' in regard to observations of nature, both lay and professional, are often oriented to problems of intelligibility. Thus a person who asks, 'Why did the sky light up just then?' may accept as an appropriate answer, 'That was sheet-lightning.'

Winch does not wish to argue that the sociological observer, in attempting to explain social conduct, must confine his or her vocabulary to that used by lay actors themselves. But apart from a number of passing comments, no indication is given of the relationship which exists between lay and technical concepts nor, indeed, is it very clear why the latter should be called for at all. Different cultures are so many different 'language-games' that have to be understood in their own terms, and the activities of the social scientist examining this cultural diversity, Winch says, are like using one's knowledge of a language in order to understand a conversation, not like applying scientific generalizations in order to understand how a piece of machinery works. The implications of this view, although they are not spelled out in any detail, belie the author's claim that his analysis simply elucidates what social scientists already do. One of the things which sociologists and anthropologists already do is to try to establish generalizations about different societies that depend upon similarities which are not, and perhaps cannot be, formulated in the terms employed by the members of those societies, because

they are directed either towards making comparisons that cannot be expressed in those terms or towards explaining why they exist in the first place. But such endeavours are apparently precluded altogether by Winch's position, which seems to reject outright the possibility of making such comparisons.

That there are logical difficulties inherent in Winch's view is indicated by his scrambled retreat from a full-blown relativism, in speaking of certain 'limiting notions' that exist in all human societies. These turn out to refer to biological universals that in some sense play a part in all human existence, and pose exigencies that have to be adapted to or coped with by any form of social organization. But surely this thesis, although suitably hedged in with qualifications, is precisely of the sort that Winch wishes to adjudge as illegitimate. What we are supposed to do, by reference to such universals, is to elucidate puzzling features of alien institutions: these give us an anchor, as it were, in our attempts to work out the internal relationships within the system of ideas that are 'expressed' in those institutions. However, the ideas relating to the bedrock on which we are supposed to build, one could reply, are themselves imprisoned within the same language-game, and may represent some sort of 'inevitable exigencies' of human existence in ways which have nothing whatever to do with what we might regard, from within the form of life of Western culture, as 'biological universals'.

Winch's work was one contribution to a flood of writings by British philosophers from the 1960s onwards, in which the influence of the later Wittgenstein loomed very large, and which were concerned with problems of action and meaning and with explication of these in terms of 'intentions', 'reasons', 'motives', etc. The significance of Winch's work derived perhaps less from its specific originality than from the fact that it was explicitly focused upon the social sciences. The writings of most of those expressing views similar to or overlapping with those of Winch, such as Anscombe, Peters, Melden, Kenny and others, were for the most part notably lacking in any such emphasis. Where they were directed towards any other discipline apart from philosophy, they were concerned with psychology rather than the social sciences (or, perhaps one should say, the other social sciences), and particularly with problems of 'behaviourism'. The

impetus behind this concern was undeniably a product of the themes of the *Philosophical Investigations*, with its much-quoted observation that 'in psychology there are experimental methods and *conceptual confusion*'. This relative neglect of the social sciences on the face of it seems rather strange. For it is a major element of 'post-Wittgensteinian philosophy' that, as Winch puts it,

the philosophical elucidation of human intelligence, and the notions associated with this, require that these notions be placed in the context of the relations between men in society. In so far as there has been a genuine revolution in philosophy in recent years, perhaps it lies in the emphasis on that fact and in the profound working out of its consequences, which we find in Wittgenstein's work.⁴²

Ipse dixit. Here lie both the strength and the weakness of the 'philosophical revolution'. Immediately after this statement, Winch quotes Wittgenstein: 'What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life'. The epigram sums up the new directions of interest in philosophy, and at the same time rigorously circumscribes them. Having discovered social 'convention' or social 'rules', and having perceived that many of the processes of interchange between the individual and the surrounding world are derived from, and expressed in, social conduct, the philosopher takes the forms of social life as given and, as it were, 'works back' from there in attacking problems of philosophy. Established rules set the boundary of investigation, and while the conduct of actors is portrayed as purposeful and cogent, the origins of 'conventions' are left shrouded in mystery, and perhaps even as necessarily inexplicable; they do not appear as 'negotiated', as themselves the product of human action, but rather as the backdrop against which such action becomes intelligible.

Summary: the significance of interpretative sociologies

This is a useful point at which to sum up the contributions and limitations of Schutz's version of phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and the efforts of Winch to apply ideas drawn from the