

# Winch's double-edged idea of a social science

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## ABSTRACT

Peter Winch's 1958 book *The Idea of a Social Science* contains two distinguishable sets of theses, one set bearing on the individual-level understanding of human beings, the other on the society-level understanding of the regularities and institutions to which human beings give rise. The first set of claims is persuasive and significant but the second is a mixed bunch: none is well established and only some are sound.

*Key words* atomism, individualism, participation, practice, rules, sociology

Like many others who came to philosophy and social science in the 1960s and 1970s, I took eagerly to Peter Winch's 1958 book on *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (Winch, 1990). While it derived support from relatively novel ideas in Wittgenstein, it seemed to establish common sense in an area populated by the then high-flown and heady pretensions of social science.

Rereading Winch's book now, I am struck by two things. There are indeed a number of theses that are sound and important for the understanding of social science; these I must certainly have learned, at least in part, from an early immersion in the book. But there is also a set of claims that I had not remembered and that I think is a rather more mixed bunch; the claims are false or confused, at least by my lights, and they cast undeserved doubt on certain forms of social theorizing.

The sound theses all bear, in one way or another, on what it is to be an individual human agent and how this impacts on the nature of individual-level understanding. The more dubious ones bear on what is involved in the appearance of social forms of life and how this impacts on the nature of society-level understanding. I survey the former set of theses in the first part of the article, the latter in the second.

My article is an attempt to provide, at least for my own satisfaction, a retrospective assessment of a book that had a profound impact on many in my generation. I shall concentrate on the book, rather than on Winch's essays on social science, but in any case I do not think that the essays would significantly affect the assessment. They mainly bear out the theses that I find persuasive, illustrating them in discussions of ethnographic work; they do not bear on the claims with which I take issue. They do raise a new question, it is true – the issue, broadly, of cultural relativism – but I am happy not to have to deal with that here.

### 1 THREE INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL THESES

The salient individual-level theses in Winch's book are the following.

- 1 *The rules thesis*: understanding human action involves seeing the rules or proprieties in accordance with which it is produced, not just detecting regularities in its production.
- 2 *The practicality thesis*: understanding human action does not mean just grasping the intellectual ideas that permeate it but, more deeply, cottoning on to the practical orientations of the actors.
- 3 *The participation thesis*: understanding human action involves participating in the society of the agents, at least in imagination, not just standing back and surveying that which they are doing.

#### *The rules thesis*

Of these claims, the first is the most basic in Winch's book and it is also the claim that gives a distinctively Wittgensteinian flavour to the position that he adopts. He defends the rules thesis, as I am calling it, on the basis of Wittgenstein's considerations on rule-following (see Wittgenstein, 1953; Kripke, 1982). And while the intent and import of those considerations have always been much debated, the line of argument in Winch is admirably straightforward (1990: 24–33).

He first claims, uncontroversially, that if a mind is to make contact with reality – say, the reality of Mt Everest's being a mountain – then it had better be able to recognize the particular entity, Mt Everest, as the same particular

now at this time, now at that; and it had better be able to recognize the general kind, being a mountain, as the same property here at this particular location, there at that. And this is just to say, in Winch's terminology, that if a mind is to make contact with reality, then it had better be able to follow rules such as the rule for reidentifying Mt Everest, or indeed any particular, and the rule for recognizing a mountain, or indeed any recurrent property of things.

If a mind is to map things along different dimensions of sameness, finding this particular entity, Mt Everest, to be an instance of that general property, being a mountain, then there must be a possibility of the mapping going wrong. Thus Winch adds to his initial remarks the observation that the rule-following for which he argues involves the possibility of error: 'the notion of following a rule is logically inseparable from the notion of *making a mistake*' (32).<sup>1</sup> Were there no room for failure, then it is not clear how the mind's achievement could be described as making contact with reality; making contact is, precisely, an achievement and it could not be that were failure ruled out as a matter of necessity.

It follows directly from this line of thought that if we are to understand how a person represents things, in particular what they say about things, then we need to know what are the rules or proprieties that govern their thoughts and words. We need to know what would make it right for them to think or say what they think or say, and what would make it wrong. Otherwise we cannot see them as intelligible thinkers or speakers.

But in Winch's book, and again the claim is hardly controversial, something much more general follows too. This is that in order even to understand the things that a person does, not just the things they think and say, we have to know the rules that govern their thoughts and words: the rules, as he often puts it, that determine their concepts. He spends the second chapter of his book elucidating the extent to which meaningful or intentional action presupposes conceptualization on the part of agents and the impossibility of understanding such action without understanding the background concepts; in effect, the impossibility of understanding such action without understanding the rules or proprieties that govern the minds of those agents.

The core theme is that a meaningful or intentional action is done for a reason or, if not done for a reason, at least has a sense that the agent must be capable of recognizing: a sense, for example, that determines what the action commits the agent to. The argument is, then, that agents can find such a reason for their actions, or such a sense in their actions, only so far as they conceptualize them under certain rules.

Consider the person N, Winch says, who votes in a parliamentary election.

In the first place, N must live in a society which has certain specific political institutions – a parliament which is constituted in a certain way and a government which is related in a certain way to the parliament. . . .

Secondly, he must himself have a certain familiarity with those institutions. His act must be a participation in the political life of the country, which presupposes that he must be aware of the symbolic relation between what he is doing now and the government which comes into power after the election. (50–1)

In his Preface to the 1990 edition of his book, Winch softens this more general claim about meaningful or intentional action. He had written in 1958: 'It is only because human actions exemplify rules that we can speak of past experience as relevant to our current behaviour' (62). In 1990 he modulates to the claim that the 'relevance of past experience to current behaviour can be brought out only in so far as that behaviour exemplifies rules or is, in relevant respects, analogous to behaviour which exemplifies rules' (xvii). But the change of mind registered here does not have any major implications for the general thesis, as indeed Winch recognizes, and we need not dwell on it further. The rules thesis, as he presents it, seems to me to be fundamentally sound.

### *The practicality thesis*

Winch follows Wittgenstein, however, not just in thinking that rules or proprieties are at the heart of human performance, but also in holding that those rules or proprieties cannot all be grasped in an intellectual manner. They cannot all be registered in formulae, and following them cannot just consist in the application of such formulae to concrete cases.

Wittgenstein's (1953) argument for this conclusion had been that if rule-following always amounts to formula-application, then we face a regress. The application of a formula is itself rule-governed, so that if rule-following is just formula-application then for every application of a formula there must be a further formula to dictate how indeed it should be applied. As Winch puts it: 'no *formula* will help to solve this problem; we must always come to a point at which we have to give an account of the application of the formula' (29).

Going beyond Wittgenstein, however, Winch makes a very striking connection – though once made, it is obvious – between this observation and the point that Lewis Carroll had emphasized in his reworking of the tale of Achilles and the Tortoise (55–7). In that tale, Achilles plays the dupe, as always, to the Tortoise. The Tortoise finds himself unable to derive Z – say, that q – from A: if p, then q; and B: p. He wants, it seems, another premise, C: if A and B, then Z. Achilles, who thinks it is indubitable that Z follows, is willing to grant him this. But of course, once granted C, the Tortoise finds that he still needs another premise, D: if A and B and C, then Z. And so on.

For any set of premises, what the Tortoise is seeking is a further premise that will assure him that those original premises are sufficient to yield the

conclusion. And of course that means that he will still find something lacking when Achilles has expanded the premises to include this extra one. For there will now be a similar question as to why those expanded premises support the conclusion and a similar request for a premise that tells us that they do.

The lesson, obviously, is that for anyone who wishes to conduct reasoning of the kind illustrated, it is necessary to adopt some rules of inference in a wholly practical way. It is no good wanting always to register that rule in a formula that can itself be treated as a premise. For acting on that desire leads to an endless and futile regress in search of the finally conclusive argument.

By analogy, what Winch wants us to see is that while human thought and language and action essentially involve rule-following, the rules in question cannot all be grasped in an intellectual manner. Rule-following ultimately rests on a bedrock of practice. As Wittgenstein had said, in the beginning was not the word – St John's gospel notwithstanding – but rather the deed.

Winch uses this practicality thesis, as I call it, to criticize any suggestion that there is a serious divide between habitual behaviour – merely habitual behaviour, as we might have been inclined to say – and behaviour that is properly reflective and rule-governed. He thinks he finds that suggestion in Oakeshott and responds by insisting that we are always rule-governed in our behaviour, whether we are in habitual or reflective mode, and indeed that we are all equally rule-governed in this way: there is no deep divide between those of us who are more habitual in our responses and those of us who are more reflective. 'I want to say that the test of whether a man's actions are the application of a rule is not whether he can *formulate* it but whether it makes sense to distinguish between a right and a wrong way of doing things in connection with what he does' (58).

If this is right then, as Winch himself insists, that means that to grasp what another is doing it is never sufficient to lay hold of the intellectual ideas that the person contemplates and employs. It is also going to be necessary to gain access to the person's mind at the level where explicit ideas or formulae run out – for everyone they will always run out somewhere – and the person just goes on in the appropriate way: just goes on, in the way most of us just go on, unaware of the principle of *modus ponens*, from admitting that if p, then q and that p to admitting that q. Thus, while being quite sympathetic to Collingwood's claim that to understand action is to rethink the thoughts of the agent, Winch finds himself obliged to recognize that in one way this is an 'intellectualistic distortion' (131). It is a distortion, precisely so far as it suggests that understanding does not need to go beyond the level of explicit ideas and formulae.

I mentioned in discussing the rules thesis that Winch seemed to have second thoughts about it in the 1990 Preface, distinguishing between behaviour that exemplifies rules and behaviour that is analogous to behaviour that exemplifies rules. One reason for not giving much attention to those second

thoughts is that they seem to overlook the practicality thesis that had been so important, rightly, in the earlier work. The 1990 distinction would make better sense, on the assumption that rule-following is always an intellectual, and never just a practical, achievement.

*The participation thesis*

But there is also a third strand in the web of Winch's ideas about the understanding of people's actions; indeed he describes it in the preface to the 1990 edition as 'the central core of the argument' (x). By his own view of things, this appears once we ask about what is involved in there being a propriety by which someone orientates in their thought and speech and action, in particular a propriety such that their orientating themselves by it may not involve grasping an abstract formula: may consist in their just going on in a certain practical manner. His response is to say that it clearly involves the person's being enmeshed in a practice shared with other people such that the person takes the responses of those other people to what is thought or said or done as relevant indicators that he or she may have made a mistake. 'Establishing a standard is not an activity which it makes sense to ascribe to any individual in complete isolation from other individuals. For it is contact with other individuals which alone makes possible the external check on one's actions which is inseparable from an established standard' (32).

Winch moves more quickly here than is appropriate but I happen to think, and I have argued elsewhere, that the position he endorses is broadly right (Pettit, 1993: Chs 2 and 4). His line of thought, roughly cast, is this. If it is entirely up to me to judge on whether what I think or say or do in a given case is right, then there is no room for the idea that I might think or say or act wrongly: that is, think or say or act in a way that does not conform to the rules I embrace. If it is entirely up to me to judge on whether I use the word 'regular' rightly as I extrapolate to other shapes from simple squares and circles and triangles, then all possibility of my using the word wrongly has been removed. What I describe as 'regular' will count by that very token as regular, so it might be said. My saying that something is regular will not be informative for me or for anyone else, since it will not be clear how it could have been wrong: it will not be clear what it rules out. My saying that the object is regular will be more of an exercise in baptism – 'This too I call "regular"! – than an exercise in description.

Winch moves too quickly in this argument, I believe, because he fails to allow that it is logically or abstractly possible for a solitary individual to gain a sense that sometimes the circumstances shaping his or her reactions are favourable, and sometimes not; to develop a way of determining whether or not they are favourable in any case; and to think of their use of a word as correct if circumstances are favourable, and possibly incorrect otherwise (see

Blackburn, 1984). Certainly I do not think that Winch provides any knock-down argument against that logical possibility and that he is not entitled to carry on as if he has done. But we should be happy enough to overlook that failure at this point for it is undoubtedly true as a matter of contingent fact about our species that the checks whereby following a rule becomes an available, conceivable option for someone are provided by other people. I think that this indeed is a deep matter of fact, in the sense that it is presupposed by our frequently manifested ability to tell in a non-inductive way what rule another person is following. But that is a theme for elsewhere, not for here (Pettit, 1993: Ch. 4; Pettit, 1998).

Let us go along with Winch, then, in holding that no one follows a rule except so far as they belong to a certain society, subject to the judgment of certain fellows. The upshot is what I describe as his participation thesis. There will be no way of understanding some rule-following agents that does not involve, at least in imagination, getting oneself into the position of someone who participates in their forms of life and endorses their modes and sources of adjudication.

Winch puts the point by asking how the sociologist of religion might understand his or her subjects. He argues that this sociologist must take as given the criteria used to determine what is what – what is prayer, what is holy, what is sinful – and must enter into the society of those whose responses police and give content to such criteria. As he says, the relation of the sociologist ‘to the performers of religious activity cannot be just that of observer to observed. It must rather be analogous to the participation of the natural scientist with his fellow-workers in the activities of scientific investigation’ (87–8).

The participation thesis represents the high ground for which Winch strives in *The Idea of a Social Science*. It is the ground that gives him the critical vantage point that he seeks in relation to a scientific image of social inquiry and theory: an image under which it is fundamentally of a kind with natural science. The book is a great success, in my view, so far as it does take us convincingly to this standpoint. It enables us to see, more clearly than any argument up to that point could have done, that the scientific image is deeply mistaken.

Suppose that going to a scientific point of view meant treating us as if we were fair game, on a par with natural phenomena, for the detached formation and testing of hypotheses. In that case going to a scientific point of view would mean losing touch with what we find most distinctive about ourselves and doing a physics or chemistry or biology of human subjects. If science is going to be properly social or indeed human – if it is to teach us things about ourselves, as we know ourselves in our own experience – then it must privilege the understanding of the participant, not the point of view of detached observation, generalization and conjecture.

Winch makes the relevant point when he says: ‘a man who understands Chinese is not a man who has a firm grasp of the statistical probabilities for the occurrence of the various words in the Chinese language. Indeed he could have that without knowing that he was dealing with a language at all’ (115). The person who understands Chinese is the person who can speak it. And, by analogy, the person who understands any social activity is the person who sees what it involves and is capable of participating in it. ‘“Understanding”, in situations like this, is grasping the *point* or *meaning* of what is being done or said’ (115).

## 2 THREE SOCIETY-LEVEL THESES

The claims rehearsed in the first part of this article bear on the nature and accessibility to understanding of human subjects, as they act and interact in the social world. They are the main claims defended in *The Idea of a Social Science* and they remain, to my eye, as convincing as when Winch first formulated them.

But his book, especially in the later parts, also contains theses that bear on the nature and the accessibility to understanding of higher-level social realities: of the aggregate regularities and the institutional structures that characterize any society. These society-level claims are not so well formulated, nor so well argued, as the individual-level theses that we have been discussing but they must be taken into account in any overall assessment of Winch’s book.

There are three salient, society-level claims made in the book.

- 1 *The anti-atomism thesis*: people non-causally depend on their social relations with one another for being able to follow rules and, more generally, for being able to conduct themselves in an intentional, meaningful manner.
- 2 *The anti-individualism thesis*: this non-causal form of mutual dependence means that methodological individualism is false: sociological models cannot be explained in terms of the attitudes and relations of individuals.
- 3 *The sociology-as-philosophy thesis*: the sociological discovery of high-level, social regularities is more like the logical or philosophical articulation of rules of reasoning than scientific discovery proper; it explicates patterns that are implicit in the categories that we use to find our way about the social world.

### *The anti-atomism thesis*

Although Winch speaks only later in the book about the fact, as he puts it, that social relations are ‘internal’ in character, his most straightforward argument for the anti-atomism thesis suggested by those words is the argument



that he puts for the participation thesis (on atomism see Taylor, 1985). This is the argument noted above, that the idea of someone's being guided by rules, and being capable of going wrong, only makes sense in a social context where there are others whose reactions serve as a check on his or her performance. To quote again from his discussion of this line of thought: 'if I make a mistake in, say, my use of a word, other people must be able to point it out to me. If this is not so, I can do what I like and there is no external check on what I do' (32).

I pointed out that this argument needs a lot of buttressing, since it does not say enough to rule out the possibility of an individual whose self-engagement over different times enables him or her to develop a sense of there being a right and a wrong way to go on. But it is surprising that, investing confidence in the argument to the extent that he does, Winch doesn't derive directly from it the conclusion that people's social relations to one another are essential to their being rule-followers and, therefore, to their being thinkers, speakers and agents. This might reasonably be expressed as the conclusion that the obtaining of social relations with others is guaranteed by the character of any human agent as a rule-follower – no rule-following without social relations – and that they are in this sense internal to such an agent. They are part of what is involved in the agent's assuming the identity of a rule-follower. And that identity, of course, is by Winch's lights – and surely, indeed, by anyone's – of the greatest importance to a human being; it is not a dispensable identity like that of being a judge or a politician or an academic.

Winch does clearly assume that atomism is false; he does clearly take it that the identity of being a rule-follower is crucial for the individual human being and that that identity presupposes the obtaining of relations with other people – though not any relations in particular and not with any particular people. But, surprisingly, he offers a different argument in support of the claim from that which is suggested by the participation thesis. The argument proposed comes out nicely in the following passage. 'If social relations between men exist only in and through their ideas, then, since relations between ideas are internal relations, social relations must be a species of internal relation too' (128).

An internal relation is generally taken to be one such that the characters of the relata ensure that that relation, or at least some such relation, holds between them; in this sense the relation of being 'heavier than' is internal, since it is determined by the weight of the relata, whereas the relation 'being to the left of' is not. Winch certainly sees this as a necessary condition for a relation to be internal but he thinks that something else is also necessary. An internal relation has to be such that its obtaining is ensured by a significant or important character on the part of the relata, not just by something as changeable as weight. A relation to an electrical storm is guaranteed by a noise's having the character of a clap of thunder, he says, but that very same

noise might not have had that character; the character is not intrinsic or, as he ought really to have said, important to the noise's being what it is (125). Thus the relation is not internal in the strict sense of the term.

Are the relations between ideas internal in something close to the sense that Winch has in mind? The question can be made to bear both on ideas in the sense of contents or concepts, and on ideas in the sense of conceivings: states or acts of understanding on the part of a subject. And in each bearing it does indeed seem to attract an affirmative answer.

Take the concepts of being red and of not being yellow, or the concepts of being coloured and of being extended. That in virtue of which the paired concepts are respectively of red and of not-yellow, or of coloured and of extended, ensures that where one applies the other does too; in that sense they are internally connected. Or to go now to the other reading of 'idea', take the act or state of understanding what being red or what being coloured is. It is hard to imagine how a subject could understand such a thing without at the same time understanding what being not yellow and what being extended amount to: and that, by virtue of what those acts or states of understanding involve. Again, an internal relation obtains.

We may readily agree with Winch that the 'social relations between men exist only in and through their ideas'. The question then, to go back to his argument for anti-atomism, is whether that fact combines with the fact that ideas are internally related to entail that social relations have to be internal too. And here I have no hesitation in saying that I think nothing of the kind is entailed. For, putting aside the earlier argument associated with the participation thesis, there is no incoherence in the thought that while my ideas are internally connected with one another – while they come together in a holistic package, as thinkers like Quine have emphasized – still I might conceivably have had those ideas, and employed them in envisaging the possibility of being related to others, and yet been the only person around. I might have had those internally related ideas without myself being internally related, whether in the character of a rule-follower or of anything else, to other people.

I think that what goes wrong here in Winch's thinking is that when he speaks of ideas being internally related to one another, he ought really to have spoken of one person's ideas being internally related to the ideas of others. And he might have tried to argue for that premise on the basis of the argument associated with the participation thesis. But this suggestion is pure speculation and is designed to make sense of a text that at this point is hard to understand.

#### *The anti-individualism thesis*

The part of the book in which Winch presents this bad argument for anti-atomism is also faulted by his going on to suggest that the anti-atomism

defended entails what I will describe as anti-individualism. In a transition of startling abruptness he writes: 'What I have been saying conflicts, of course, with Karl Popper's "postulate of methodological individualism"' (126–7). In order to reveal the *non sequitur* here, I need to make a brief detour.

Anti-atomism is a thesis about the relations between human beings and while I do not think that Winch characterizes or defends it adequately, I am happy myself to embrace the doctrine. Anti-individualism, however, is a thesis of quite a different kind. It ascribes a distinctive reality to aggregate or institutional features and typically holds that they act downwards, as it were, on individuals: they pre-empt or predetermine what individuals do. One form will say that social-aggregate facts causally shape the mental lives and actions of individuals, notwithstanding the appearance of individual autonomy; another will say that social-aggregate laws or constraints have a priority whereby we can be assured that those individuals around at any time will be disposed to act in a way that means those requirements are satisfied. Anti-individualism is a vertical thesis, postulating this inter-level constraining of individual action, whereas anti-atomism is a horizontal thesis, bearing on relations at the same, individual-to-individual level (see Pettit, 1993: Ch. 3).

Another way of presenting anti-individualism is this. The doctrine ignores the question of whether the horizontal relations between people are atomistic or not – atomistic or holistic, as it is often put – and asserts that just postulating individuals in existence, even individuals possessed of familiar attitudes and familiar relations to one another, does not yet amount to postulating an arrangement in which society proper is in existence; it is in that sense that aggregate or institutional features have a distinctive reality. The idea is that social life, and the obtaining of distinctively social laws, requires something over and beyond all that is guaranteed by putting individuals and individual-to-individual relations in place. It is not 'supervenient' on such individual-level facts, as it is often put nowadays; in principle, they could remain as they are and yet it cease to obtain. Social reality relates to individual action and interaction as an emergent factor. It has the autonomous status that used to be ascribed to the life force – the *vis vitalis* – prior to our gaining a chemical understanding of the bases of life.

There is a long tradition of confusing anti-atomism – a more or less plausible doctrine, as I see it – with anti-individualism; indeed it may even be as old as social science itself. But it is disappointing to find Winch, who is so circumspect in other ways, falling headlong into this confusion. Having outlined a case for anti-atomism, he thinks without any obvious reason that he is thereby obliged to reject individualism. He thinks that he is forced to reject the idea, as he quotes it in Popper's own words, that the claims made in sound sociological models – claims that explicate aggregate-level facts about society – should all be analysable 'in terms of individuals, their attitudes, expectations, relations, etc.' (127).

How can he think that he is obliged to deny such analysability? He might have said, reasonably, that if analysis is thought to require synonymy between analysandum and analysans, then there is little reason to expect any one discourse to be analysable in terms of another. But he does not say anything of the kind, which suggests that he thinks that even when analysis bears a much less demanding interpretation – even when, as he suggests (127), it just means ‘explain’ – there is no analysing the claims and concepts found in sociological models in terms of the concepts whereby we characterize individuals, their attitudes and their relations. Analysing sociological concepts might mean nothing more than identifying individual-level thoughts, actions and interactions such that we can be sure that if things at the individual level are of that character, then certain sociological concepts are going to apply: this, in the way that we can analytically explain rising inflation in terms of people’s charging more and more for their goods and services – for this or that reason – or analytically explain secularization in terms of people’s individually putting less energy and faith, for whatever reasons, into religious practice. But even in this limited sense of analytical or reductive explanation, Winch obviously thinks that he is obliged to hold that it will fail.

It is really hard to see where he thinks the argument against analytical explanation – the argument, in effect, for taking aggregate-level social realities to have an autonomous existence – comes from. The crucial claim on which he relies seems to be that the concepts required to analyse aggregate-level realities are ones ‘the meaning of which certainly cannot be explained in terms of the actions of any individual persons’ (128). This claim may bear either of two interpretations, however, and it does not support anti-individualism under either reading.

It may mean, first, that aggregate-level realities cannot be analysed in terms of concepts that individuals might have developed in isolation. But then nothing can be analysed in such terms, since by Winch’s account there are no concepts of that kind. Or it may mean, second, that those realities cannot be analysed in terms of concepts that reflect only patterns in the actions of individual persons, and not patterns in their relations with one another and in their ways of thinking of each other. But then that is hardly surprising and it would certainly not be denied by Popper: he explicitly mentions the need to analyse aggregate-level realities ‘in terms of individuals, their attitudes, expectations, relations, etc.’.

I conclude that Winch makes no case for the sort of anti-individualism he claims to espouse; and I should add that in any case I think that anti-individualism a deeply implausible doctrine. Perhaps he is simply misled into thinking that because there is more to individuals being rule-followers than their individually acting in certain ways – specifically, because their being rule-followers depends on their interacting after a certain pattern – there must also be more to the emergence of social life than anything discernible at the

individual level. Obviously there must be more to social life than people's individually acting in certain ways, since that follows trivially from the anti-atomism. But the claim in anti-individualism is that there is more to social life than people's acting *and interacting* in the fashion envisaged by anti-atomists – the claim is that social life requires another, distinct regime of law to come into force – and nothing Winch says supports that conclusion.

*The sociology-as-philosophy thesis*

Finally, to perhaps the most intriguing thesis of all that I found on rereading Winch's book. This appears in his only discussion of an aggregate-level sociological claim: Simmel's thesis that religious or political parties tend to degenerate into particularly virulent hatred, when each party comes from a background of similar and even shared commitments: this, because the threat of confusion between such closely related movements makes it crucial to emphasize and fight for points of difference (135). Winch wants to insist that this sort of sociological claim – this 'sociological law', as he calls it in scare quotes – does not relate to instances of the law in the fashion of an empirically based, scientifically explanatory generalization. He suggests that its articulation spells out something implicit in our understanding of various divides between political parties and religious sects (135). Indeed he even goes so far as to describe the sort of sociology in question as an exercise that parallels the attempt of a logic to articulate something implicit in our understanding of how to reason.

This account of sociological theorizing is extraordinary. It allows that as the logician who looks at how people reason must first of all learn the language they speak, so the sociologist who looks for laws in the social life of a certain group must first of all learn the meanings with which they invest their words and actions. 'The relation between sociological theories and historical narrative is . . . like that between theories of logic and arguments in particular languages' (134). But that done, it suggests that as logicians can confirm a theory *a priori*, just by considering how well it fits with their intuitions about the validity of various patterns of reasoning, so sociologists can confirm their theories by an equally non-empirical route. Sociological theory, on the picture sketched, involves nothing more or less than philosophical reconstruction of connections that are supported by the meanings that various institutions have for the people who live under them. Hegel is clearly on the horizon and it may be no accident that Winch refers with some favour to the tradition of objective idealism that Hegel represents (90).

This last thesis is no better supported than the previous one. We may agree that sociological theory has got to be tested in observation of actions and institutions, as they are pre-theoretically understood. And we may agree, as Winch wants to insist, that this marks an important difference from natural

science (113–14). But it does not follow that sociological theory can be derived from the pre-understanding of social actions and social institutions, in the way in which logical theory can be derived from our pre-understanding of how to reason. Here, as in the movement from anti-atomism to anti-individualism, there is a *non sequitur* of the most striking character.

One of the things that makes it striking, of course, is that the conclusion derived is so outlandish. The claim is that *a priori* philosophy ought to be enough to confirm – to ‘prove its validity’ (113) – such a presumptive fact as that increased unemployment leads to increased crime, or that urbanization leads to secularization, or that a decline in manufacturing industry leads to reduced unionization. Any argument that supported such a claim ought to be called into question straightaway. One feels that there simply has to be something wrong with it.

I said at the outset that Winch’s book offered a useful antidote to the high-flown and heady pretensions of social science in the 1960s and 1970s. But as I reread it now, I am struck by a darker side of the argument, as well as by the side that shed such light. For if the book helped to undermine overweening ambitions on the part of social science, it surely represented an equally hubristic aspiration on the part of philosophy. Philosophical reasoning is a powerful instrument but it should never have been invested with the sort of authority that this last thesis would confer on it.

I hasten to add, however, that Winch indicates that that is how things struck him also, when he reissued the book more than 30 years after its initial appearance. He speaks there of ‘serious distortions’ that are ‘apparent in the final Chapter’; he rejects ‘the rather cosy picture suggested by the way I had compared social relations to a conversational interchange’; and he emphasizes ‘the enormous *contrast* between human relations ruled by ideas of justice and those governed by force’ (xvii–xviii). I think that in these remarks he is registering among other things the fact that at the aggregate, structural level the social world displays patterns, many of them brute and pathological, that can only be explored and explained in the hard toil of empirical investigation and modelling. Social reality is not guaranteed of the rationality that might have enabled us to explain it in a philosophical elucidation of social ideas.

It is a commonplace that the subintentional aspects of human life – physical, chemical and biological – are not fit matter for the sort of understanding that is well charted in Winch’s book. What I think Winch came to recognize in his 1990 Preface was that the same holds of the suprainentional aspects of human life also: the aggregate and structural patterns to which human beings give rise – according to the individualist thesis – as an unintended consequence of their actions and interactions. Understanding the ideas with which people work will never be enough for making sense of this reality, even if any explanation of the reality must square with how we understand the role of

such ideas. There is more in society, as there is more in heaven and earth, than will ever reveal itself to *a priori*, philosophical reflection.

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I dedicate this essay to Denys Turner on the thirtieth anniversary of his introducing me to Winch's work – and to much else besides.

### NOTES

I am grateful for some useful comments to anonymous referees.

1 Page references in parentheses are to Winch, 1990.

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