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### IV. Understanding Peter Winch

W. W. Sharrock<sup>a</sup> & R. J. Anderson<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Manchester,

<sup>b</sup> Manchester Polytechnic,

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## IV. Understanding Peter Winch

W. W. Sharrock  
University of Manchester

R. J. Anderson  
Manchester Polytechnic

Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science* has been the subject of repeated misunderstanding. This discussion takes one recent example and shows how Winch's argument is gravely distorted. What is at issue is not, as is usually supposed, whether we can accept or endorse another society's explanations of its activities, but whether we *have* to look for an explanatory connection between concepts and action. Winch's argument is that before we can try to explain actions, we have to identify them correctly. This can only be done by seeing how they, and the concepts they are associated with, fit within a way of life. Grasping its rule-following character is understanding action. Once the difficulties in making such identifications are appreciated, we will be less inclined to accept facile explanations why people in other societies do the things they do.

Mark B. Okrent<sup>1</sup> suggests that Peter Winch's argument in *The Idea of a Social Science* contains a *non sequitur* of 'numbing grossness'. This, he says, is Winch's assertion that social scientists have to base their investigations upon the rules being followed within the society in question. Okrent accepts that they may do so, but denies that they have to. The move from the optional to the necessary simply is not on. Okrent's claim might be awarded closer attention than otherwise if it was quite clear that he had understood the thrust of Winch's general case and what its implications might be. But, alas, like many before him, it appears that he has not. So, rather than taking up the specific challenge of the alleged *non sequitur*, it seems more worthwhile to have one (last?) go at explaining just what Winch was trying to do. Once Winch's objective is in view, it will be a great deal easier to see why we do not think that Winch could even contemplate making the step which Okrent says he makes.

As everyone knows, the general topic which *The Idea of a Social Science* addresses is the programme for social scientific investigations as that seems to be typified in the writings of Weber, Mill, and Pareto. In their different ways, it seemed to Winch, all three presumed that the object of study had to be relations which obtain between concepts and action. The attitude adopted defined such relations in line with those which hold between a theory and the subject-matter or domain to which it applies. Concepts stand as explanations of the activities or practices to which they relate. Once this explanatory relationship is put in place, the next obvious step is the determination of the level of acceptability which the explanation can be given. Do the concepts offer a good explanation of the activity? Are there any better ones? If things are cast in this way, then the consideration of the concepts in hand is likely to run in a particular way. If a theory which we have discerned differs from the one

which we might offer, we will have no alternative but to discount it. Thus we know that there can be no causal relation between the performance of the rain-dance and the coming of the rain, or the making of a wish and its fulfilment. Hence, the explanation we might be given by the native or the child, that they are making rain or ensuring good fortune, must be set aside as patently naive and defective. Once we press the competition in this way, a secondary problem pushes its way to the fore. If the native or the child cannot be doing what they say they are doing, under what possible description can what they do be rendered intelligible? How are we to understand their actions? This takes on an overriding importance because it might appear that if we cannot find any grounds for underwriting the intelligibility of their actions, we will have left open the possibility that the behaviour in question may not really be human, and that, therefore, the people doing it may not be human either. The way to block this suggestion, it is felt, is to find some alternative, acceptable explanation of what they are doing; one which connects up the concepts which *they* have with the consequences *we* see their actions as having. They say they are making rain; we say they are reinforcing solidary bonds.

Winch does not want to offer an alternative version of the explanatory connection between concepts and actions, but to question the premisses on which the whole view is based. Because this is not often appreciated, he is usually misunderstood. Many commentators take it that if he is arguing that actions are not to be causally explained by concepts, this must be because he wants to defend some other, preferable explanatory account which gives primacy to what the natives say they are up to. This is the reason why Winch is so often castigated for anti-scientism and relativism. It must be the case (must it not?) that if Winch is against our causal explanations, he is in favour of some others, their's perhaps. This is despite the fact that everything Winch says indicates that he does not, *could not* take this view.

Winch's whole argument is that concepts are not to be seen as any kind of theory – good, bad or indifferent – of the activities with which they are associated. It is only because social scientists are fixated on explanation that they think the way they do. Once it is beyond question that it is explanation we are after, when a piece of behaviour is so bizarre we cannot make out what it is about, and when what they say about it is so at odds with what we would normally accept, the question of intelligibility becomes overwhelming. We have to find an explanation that makes their behaviour intelligible.

We can now move in on Winch's crucial point. It is this: when we seek explanations, even before we can contemplate what sort of explanation might be applicable, we have first to identify what it is that is to be explained. If Mill, Pareto, and Weber are anything to go by, Winch argues, then the social sciences take the identification and description of their objects – social action – for granted. What any social action is and how it should be described is treated as unproblematic. To the social scientist, the difficulties only begin when the search for explanation is begun. *It is this that Winch rejects.* We cannot just presume that a piece of behaviour simply is this or that action, or is even an action at all. The identification of social actions can only take place with regard to the concepts under whose auspices they occur. The two are not independent of each other. Moreover, the decision that what we are seeing is a rain-dance or the making of a birthday wish is not merely the preliminary to the proffering of an explanation, even an explanation which renders the behaviour intelligible. Understanding a way of life involves a great deal more than knowing the relevant concepts and happening upon a way of making

them intelligible. It involves grasping how the things that are done in that society fit together as a way of life. Herein lies the irony. Winch has been vilified as a relativist when he insists that it is the *correct* description of activities that we should aim for.

Let us now summarize the conventional view as Winch sees it and draw out some of the implications of his objections to it. This view begins by treating the concepts which a society possesses as a putative theory of the activities and practices to be seen there. They are a theory of the regularities in that society. The social scientist finds these theories to be (obviously) false. They have to be set aside in favour of others which make the behaviour intelligible. This replacement requires novel ways of identifying regularities for, if a people can be mistaken with regard to the explanations they give, so too may they not be mistaken about the regularities which make up their social life? No one would be silly enough to deny this. Children can hold Post Office accounts and use them quite efficiently without being in the least aware that they are, thereby, involved in the international banking system. Further, we can accept that the technical concepts of economics are better suited to describe the *system* of savings, investments, and loans than anything a child might say.<sup>2</sup> We can even go along with the conventional view and agree that the banking system is the *unintended* consequence of lots of individual actions of saving and borrowing. That does nothing to obviate Winch's point. To see the banking system as the outcome of our social actions, we have to see our activities of saving and borrowing as socially organized. For Winch that means we have to see them as rule-following. We have to be able to see what is borrowing and lending, and distinguish these from gift-giving, buying, and selling. We must be able to determine and describe an action and its intended consequences *before* we can hope to delineate any of its unintended consequences.

Exactly the same can be said about concepts. Another people's concepts must be described correctly. This is where the difficulty and danger lie. If such concepts are wholly orthogonal to our own, we may easily misunderstand them, and fail to see in our lives just what is or is not a close parallel with what they say or do.

For Winch, then, the problems to be faced are those of correct identification and description of concepts and activities. He deliberately turns away from those which social scientists more usually discuss, why a society does the things it does and how these practices came about. Winch is uninterested in these questions because sensible answers to them can only be attained when the prior questions about identification and description have been satisfactorily dealt with. Like Wittgenstein, Winch is of the opinion that once we pay sufficient attention to description and identification, we will be less interested in explanation. Once we have a clear view of what some people are doing, the issue of the intelligibility or otherwise of their actions will not arise and we will have less need to resort to explanations.

Instead of viewing concepts as theories which explain actions, Winch asks us to treat them as constituting the terms within which people carry on their lives. Thus the role which can be ascribed to them is utterly different to that of explanation. This difference is to be seen in the consequence that understanding a way of life and understanding a set of concepts are *one and the same thing*. One does not first identify the concepts and actions, and then go on to see if the actions are explained by the concepts. Identifying concepts is learning to describe actions; it is understanding what a people are saying and doing. The specification of concepts just is the location of the terms in which their actions are to be identified.

We intend to make this only a brief and preliminary comment, and so will not argue at length for any of the points we make. We will only say that in Wittgenstein and Winch there are many arguments to sustain the claim that the identification of concepts is only possible through regularities of human response. The importance of this is that it is Winch's key point that the identification of concepts and actions requires the recognition of many regularities in human conduct and interaction. However, these regularities are of a 'rule-following' and not the 'causal' or 'law-like' kind that many social scientists seem to seek. It is for this reason that we think that Okrent's suggestion (p. 32) that '[t]he fact that the objects known by the social scientist themselves know, and hence follow social rules, in no way prescribes to the social scientist that he must know them as humans' to be quite misplaced. For, as we understand him, Winch is not saying that a social scientist could not adopt a programme such as behaviourism, which disregarded the fact that one was dealing with humans and instead treated them as if they were little different from pigeons or rats, nor that one would not find some things out in this way. What he is arguing is that we should not be misled into thinking that we must follow such a programme, or that the knowledge so gained is superior to that obtained by other ways of coming to understand human social life. Indeed, if the scientific understanding of human conduct is predicated upon the disregarding of the concepts of those who engage in the activities under observation, then it cannot *understand* that conduct because it is the concepts which constitute the action.

When Okrent asks (p. 30, original emphases),

Why then is it *necessary* to make those judgments on the basis of the rules of identity used by that society we are studying? We certainly *may* do so, and in ordinary life as well as social science we often *do* do so. But it is equally true that we often find the categories or the behavior of others so bizarre or wrongheaded that we simply ignore their rules and concepts and understand their behavior in our own investigative terms

it seems plain to us that he has failed to see the point Winch is making. On Winch's argument we cannot identify their actions without mastering their concepts, without seeing how their practices follow from their rules. Mastering concepts, seeing how the things done are to be correctly described is grasping the rules of their application. Whether we come to regard a way of life as misled, abhorrent or pointless, if we want to understand it correctly, we shall first have to understand the concepts that comprise it.

#### NOTES

1 Mark B. Okrent, 'Hermeneutics, Transcendental Philosophy and Social Science', *Inquiry* 27 (1984), pp. 23-49.

2 It should be remembered that Winch does give considerable attention to the link between the theoretical concepts of economics and ordinary activities.