

Argument about relativism has gone on for long enough, so we will attempt, in this and related papers, to put an end to it. We will do so by reviewing the main elements of the controversy from a Wittgensteinian point of view. Looking at the debate from that angle one sees that and why it is futile, originating in confusion and perpetuating itself through unnecessary opposition.

Since Wittgenstein and his chief representative in the philosophy of the social sciences, Peter Winch, are widely held responsible for much of the concern about relativism and are indeed often thought to be relativists themselves it may seem perverse to argue as we do, which is why we devote this first paper in the series to the proposition that Wittgenstein and Winch were not relativists.

It may seem inappropriate to complain about the neglect of Wittgenstein's philosophy in the philosophy of the social sciences since, surely, this has received plenty of attention, through discussion of Winch's arguments at least, if not through direct confrontation with Wittgenstein's own. It is, though, a just complaint, because it is not enough - or so we say - to consider Wittgenstein's views on a particular topic in isolation from his general approach to philosophy but this is what does constantly happen in the philosophy of the social sciences. Wittgenstein did not aim to object to what philosophers said so much as to the way they went about philosophy, but philosophers of the social sciences go on philosophising in just the way that Wittgenstein objected to.

According to Wittgenstein the problems of philosophy are not located where they appear to be, namely in the job of deciding for or against philosophical positions. They are instead with the whole nature of philosophical thinking and the need is not, then, to replace one philosophical argument or conclusion with another or better one but to alter the whole idea of what it is to do philosophy. So much so that if Wittgenstein's suggestions were adopted this would put an end to philosophy in the sense that what would subsequently be done in its name would be barely recognisable as the sort of thing that was done before.

Anyone who inspects Wittgenstein's writings becomes aware that his argument for his point of view was an incredibly intricate one, though one would have no sense of this from the exposition and discussion that his (alleged) views get in the philosophy of the social sciences. Consequently, we must ourselves present a fairly bare and basic version of arguments that cannot satisfactorily be rendered as such and will say that Wittgenstein took the view that one of the things that was wrong with philosophy was that it involved people in forcing themselves to choose between equally meaningless alternatives. This was a consequence of the fact that philosophers put forward theses, made positive but (usually) mistaken looking claims. The apparently natural response to the dubiety of such claims is to counter them with other, and opposing claims, but it was this, or so Wittgenstein claimed, which was the fatal error. What was wrong with the initial claim was not that, as a thesis it was incorrect, but - in the sense in which Wittgenstein used this expression - it was

nonsense. This meant that it was not to be answered by a contradicting claim, but needed to be exposed for the 'nonsense' that it was. The attempt to correct it by, for example, claiming the opposite was to fall into confusion of the same order as that which motivated the putting forward of the initial claim, since the opposite of nonsense is more nonsense. It was not that there was something wrong with the philosopher's answers as that there was something wrong with their questions, and it was this which needed to be brought to light. Rather than set up a situation in which there are two (apparently) unavoidable alternative positions so that one must side with one or the other Wittgenstein recommended that we avoid setting up any positions at all, that we avoid setting forth any philosophical theses or positions - except for those which were utterly anodyne.

Of course, it may be that Wittgenstein is not consistent with his own arguments, and that he does set forth a philosophical theory of the sort he disavowed and that this is a relativist one, but before that conclusion is reached it is important to consider whether Wittgenstein can be read in the manner which he apparently preferred, as someone involved in dissolving philosophical problems not in articulating philosophical theses. In terms of his argument about the nature of philosophy it is quite plain that if 'relativism' is to be opposed to some other philosophical doctrine, be it called 'absolutism' or 'realism', then that relativism will be no more intelligible a doctrine than the absolutism/realism that it opposes. On the strength of his general argument relativism is (simply because it is a

philosophical doctrine or theory) no more likely to work than those to which it is offered as an alternative because their inadequacy does not arise from their distinctive features but from their common acceptance of a pseudo-problem.

At this point, all we aim to establish is that Wittgenstein on his own arguments could not have embraced relativism. This does not mean that he would therefore have had to accept some form of absolutism/realism. He did not accept absolutism/realism but though that the mistake was to attempt to answer them at the same level of argument, thus forcing oneself to take some alternative to them and being left with no alternative but 'relativism'. The failure of realism/absolutism do not show us that we need a better 'theory of knowledge' but that we do not need a theory of knowledge at all. Such a thing is superfluous. If Wittgenstein stuck to his own policies then he could not be a relativist. Of course, some of the things that he does say, if they are understood as attempts to state some 'theory of knowledge', would be construed as relativist just as, we are suggesting, they have been. It is because of this that we insist that consideration of Wittgenstein's specific arguments in isolation from his general conception of a suitable method for philosophy hardly amounts to a consideration of Wittgenstein's views.

Instead of looking for an answer to the question 'what is knowledge?' Wittgenstein encouraged us to ask 'how is the word "know" used in the ordinary way of things?' There are those who will complain that Wittgenstein thereby turns our attention away from what we want to know about, namely 'knowledge', and directs it

toward something else entirely, namely questions about the word knowledge. Such an objection might, of course, be sound but it is often made in apparent unawareness of the fact that Wittgenstein argued (again at great length, and painstakingly) that the question 'how is the word "know used?' does tell us what we want to know when we ask 'what is knowledge', that the two questions are the same and that they are of the sort that he called 'grammatical.' But if the questions are the same, why prefer the one which asks how the word 'know' is used? For the reason that one takes a form which is more likely to mislead than does the other, that the question 'what is knowledge?' does not display its grammatical character on its face in the way that the other does. There is nothing wrong, as far as Wittgenstein is concerned, in asking 'What is knowledge?' so long as we realise that we are, thereby, asking about the way the word 'know' is used. Those who criticise Wittgenstein for substituting questions about the use of the word 'know' for questions about knowledge are, from his point of view, showing the very danger against which he warns, of being misguided by the superficial grammatical form of a saying, in this case a question.

The presentation of anything like a thorough Wittgensteinian treatment of the topics we have touched on would be a protracted affair, and even a fairly rough one of the sort that we will give will spread over several papers. We do not intend, in this first one, to do more than present two gross arguments to back up the claim that Wittgenstein's arguments do not lead to relativist. We shall do this by, first, saying something about the word 'reality'

and,thus,about the way in which Peter Winch is persistently misrepresented,then,second,by talking about the case of 'time zones.' Wittgenstein took the view that his job was to persistently remind us of things with which we are entirely familiar but which we overlook,and the case of time zones will show something about the utility of doing this.

We do not want to suggest that the misunderstandings over Wittgenstein and Winch have been entirely the fault of their critics since the points that these are making are difficult to express in a way which avoids possibilities of serious misunderstanding,and - or so it seems to us - Winch's book The Idea of a Social Science which is an immensely condensed statement of a complex case is written in a manner which invites some of the misreadings that it has received. It is written in a manner which frequently resembles that of the philosophy to which Wittgenstein took exception,and the characterisation that it gives of the nature of philosophy is obscurely related to that which Wittgenstein had developed. A consequence of this is that it can be construed as arguing a relativist case.

It could,that is,be taken to be making claims about 'the nature of reality',proposing to provide some kind of theory about what reality,and its arguments would,therefore,be pitched at the same level as,but in opposition to,such tradition philosophical theories as absolutism and realism (which hold,respectively,that anything which is true is absolutely,generally true,and that that

which is real is independent of human thought and will). Interpreted in that way, Winch does deny what realism asserts, namely that what is real does not exist independently of human thought or will but, on the contrary, is 'concept dependent'. Winch argues (at least on this reading) that what reality is is to be decided in terms of human concepts, that these (somehow) constrain what reality can be. What reality will be therefore depends on what concepts people have. But people have different concepts. At least, different peoples do, and the concepts of one society are not necessarily the same as another. If, then, what reality can be is dependent upon concepts, and if people have different concepts, then there must be different realities. And from this, of course, it follows that there cannot be general truths about reality, since what is true of/in one reality cannot be true of/in another. And this, as many have found, is mind boggling. Just as Wittgenstein warned us it would be, if the attempt was made to respond to realism and absolutism on the same level as that at which they operate.

There is, thus, reason for reading Winch's argument in a different way, one which he himself sometimes indicates is that which he intends, and that involves understanding his arguments as 'grammatical' ones which pertain not to 'reality' but to the 'concept of reality', to the use of the word 'reality' in the language. Winch's preoccupation is with the intelligibility of the concept of reality, and his argument can crudely be restated as follows. We use the word 'reality' (at least in one prominent use) to speak of that which exists independently of human will, and

that word can intelligibly be used in very different contexts, such as - and most importantly for Winch, as for Wittgenstein - in those of religion and science. However, though both the religious and the scientific inquirer might describe what they do as 'seeking to know the nature of reality' they are talking about doing very different things. If we simply take the claim of religion and science that they enable us to know reality in isolation then we might be led, because they both say the thing in the same words, into thinking that they are both claiming to do the same thing but we are, if we do that, being misled by a grammatical appearance of similarity. The religious person who seeks to understand reality is not intending to do anything like what the scientist does, as we shall see if we locate the claims of religion and science against the backgrounds of their respective traditions. Then we shall see that 'the reality' with which religion is concerned is that of God's will, and that the religious person takes God's will to be something independent of human wishes, to be determined through properly religious practices such as (for example) consulting the scriptures as the word of God, engaging in prayer, examining their own heart, fasting and so forth. The reality with which the scientist is concerned is not, of course, that of God's will, but of the structure of matter, the laws of motion, the nature of light and, the scientist naturally and intelligibly employs very different ways of finding out about that, using researches involving experiments, calculations etc.

There is an elusive but vital difference here, and it is that



between suggesting that 'reality is concept dependent' and that which we think much more aptly characterises Winch's intent, that of claiming that 'the intelligibility of the concept of reality is context dependent.' Thus, the concept of 'reality' can play an intelligible role within both religious and scientific settings, but the understanding of what role it plays requires relating it to the context of their respective traditions, within one of which it makes sense to talk about the givenness of God's will and the possibility of this being known by human beings, and in the other of which it makes sense to talk about independent existence and consequent discovery of hitherto unknown phenomena and the requirements of inexorable natural laws. The danger is that, misdirected by grammatical similarities involving the use of the same word, reality, people will, as they often do, suppose that we are talking of two enterprises which both may be said to be seeking to know reality means that we are dealing with enterprises which are each aiming to do the same thing. But they are not.

A further reason why Winch's argument is taken to lead to relativism is because it seems to involve the insulation of one mode of discourse from another, seems to entail, even, that each mode of discourse is self-validating. The way we have presented the argument may indicate both why this impression should arise and why it is a mistaken one. Winch appears to be saying that the standard of 'reality' is internal to a particular discourse, and that, therefore, it is entirely within religion that questions about the existence of God are settled. But within religion the existence of God is insisted upon, therefore religion is judge and

juror on its own cause and naturally finds in its own favour. But we, surely, are not thereby compelled to endorse its conclusions, except that Winch's arguments appear to leave us no choice.

Atheism is, of course, on the cards. We are atheists ourselves. Being atheists we are, of course, excluded from attempting to answer the question: what does God want us to do? We do not believe in God and so it makes no sense for us to try to determine what He requires of us, though it does of course make perfectly good sense to those who are part of the religious tradition, who believe in God and who want to determine what He wills for them. The question 'What is God's will?' is, on Winch's argument, an irreducibly religious question, one which it only makes sense to ask and attempt to answer in a religious background and by means which arise within religious conceptions of how God's will might be involved in the world, how it might be manifest in the world and how it might be discovered there. Amongst religious people there is much disagreement about what God does will, and multifarious methods are competitively employed to determine this, involving inter alia the reading of scriptures, the induction of trance states, the ingestion of drugs, the conduct of Holy Wars, sacrifice. The possibility that (for example) victory in battle might attest to God's desire to punish a certain people is, obviously and trivially, one that makes sense only in the context of religion. Comparably, of course, the business of determining the mass of the universe is something that makes sense within the context of our scientific tradition, on the basis of a

great deal of scientific work that has gone on before and which enables people now to talk intelligibly of 'the mass of the universe' and to propose the possibility of determining this. The methods employed to determine this will not, of course, be those of sacrifice, Holy war or prayer but those of calculation with sophisticated mathematical techniques, drawing upon the laws of physics, the discoveries of radioastronomy and so forth. There might, of course, be extensive controversy as to which appropriately scientific methods are the ones which will give the right result here, which modes of calculations, which assumptions, laws and findings should be used and how they should be employed. It makes no more sense for those who are not party to the traditions of physics, without understanding of the maths, the laws and so on to enter into controversy over what the mass of the universe might be since, without involvement in the enterprise they have no real conception of what is being claimed or denied when a value is proposed for the mass of the universe or of how the truth of such a proposal might be decided. The question of the mass of the universe is an irreducibly scientific question, and to engage with it is to engage in science and so it is only within science that agreement on the right answer is possible but that is so because it is only within science that disagreement on the right value for the mass of the universe is possible also. It is in this sense that a 'mode of discourse' might be said to be closed but that is an immensely long way from saying that religion or science are self-validating. Validating a religious claim presents a religious problem, and validating a scientific claim presents a

scientific problem, but saying this does not involve any supposition that religion or science as such can be validated, and certainly not that they 'validate' themselves.

We shall in a subsequent paper argue that the drive towards relativism arises because of the tendency of realism/absolutism to present the situation as one in which in all disagreements it is necessary to say that one party is right. Since there often seems no way in which one can legitimately say which party is right, there is the temptation to try to get around the difficulty by saying that they are each right in their own way. This, however, is not the same as saying that there are some disagreements about which it makes no sense to say that anyone is right, or that they are wrong either. The Wittgenstein/Winch position does not involve us in taking a general attitude toward disagreements. There are some cases in which, assuredly, it makes sense to say that there can only be one answer and that one party must have it. Within the context of mathematics, for example, there is no doubt of the difference between right answers and wrong ones in a vast mass of cases, just as over many scientific questions there is no denying that if parties disagree they cannot all be right. Only one of them can be. However, disagreements within maths and science are not like (for example) conflicts between ways of life or moral outlooks and it does not follow that because we must in the former cases insist that someone must be right indicate that we must be able to say the same in the latter cases also.

We mentioned that we would say a bit about time zones. The

point has come at which we should do so. Time zones are things we are all now routinely familiar with. We know, for example, that London and New York are in different time zones. Thus, we know that what time it is is relative to the time zone that we are in. If we ask someone we are having lunch with it what time it is they will say, perhaps, that it is two fifteen in the afternoon. Turning on the radio, we hear the announcer say that it is now two fifteen and time for the next programme, and looking out of the window we see that the church clock stands at two fifteen. We can be as certain as we can of anything that the time is two fifteen, that our lunch guest was right when they told us the time. But if we had been having lunch in New York, and had asked what time it was we might have received a different answer, one indicating that we were dining early, namely ten fifteen. Again, the radio and the nearest visible clock confirm the time: the answer we were given is right in this case too. But what are we to say now? Are we to say that there are two rival answers to the question 'what time is it?'. Must we say that the question 'what time is it?' allows only one determinate answer, and that therefore it must be either two fifteen or ten fifteen but it cannot be both. Or are we to say there are two rival answers to the question 'what time is it?' but they are both clearly right in their local circumstances, and that, therefore, there is no single correct answer to the question. There can be a multiplicity of correct answers, each valid in its own terms, but only within those terms? We hope that the case of 'time zones' shows up the kinds of difficulties that realist and relativist see as separating them, and the sense in

which each of them wants to say something that seems right.

Offence is often taken when Wittgenstein says that the main philosophical positions make no sense, and it is often taken on behalf of those serious and powerful minds which have worked up those philosophical positions in an attempt to tackle the deep, difficult and important problems of human life and thought. Wittgenstein did not, however, intend any disparagement, for he thought that the confusions of philosophy were ones which were very far from being stupid, being the kind that the very intelligent make. Nor did he mean to trivialise the difficulties and problems which philosophy tried to face, any more than he meant to suggest that philosophical positions were a kind of gibberish. Philosophical positions are very far from being obviously wrong or empty, else Wittgenstein would hardly have needed to engage in the protracted and painful struggle to figure out just where they went wrong. Indeed, philosophical theories were often (inevitably) unsuccessful attempts to say something that was right. Thus, though thinking that 'realism' as a doctrine made no sense, Wittgenstein did not intend to deny that in its insistence that some questions like 'what time is it?' should receive a determinate answer: we cannot say 'It is both ten fifteen and two fifteen'. He could, correspondingly, acknowledge some point to relativism, namely that it is quite alright for a person in London to answer the question 'what time is it?' with 'two fifteen' and for someone in New York to say 'ten fifteen'. However, these valid observations do not contribute to either realism or relativism. Wittgenstein does not, though, think that when we come

upon conflicting philosophical positions that the necessity is to seek an answer that will improve over those they give, but that it is usually much more helpful to take another look at the question, to see if there is anything wrong with the way that is being understood.

It looks like this: we have, according to realism and relativism two different answers to the same question, viz, 'what time is it?' But can we have two different answers to the same question? The realist says no, the relativist, yes. But do we have different answers to the same question. There are, perhaps, different questions here. Someone having lunch in London who asks, apropos of nothing in particular, 'What time is it?' may reasonably be assumed to be asking the question 'what time is it here in London' and, having asked that question, may be given only one correct answer - namely, that it is two fifteen (if, indeed, it is two fifteen.) The person in New York, correspondingly, asks a different question with the same words 'what time is it?' since this question asks about New York time. The 'relativity' which is built in to this is contained in the question, not in the answers, and thus someone who (correctly) answers the question 'what time is it?' with 'two fifteen' has not given an answer which is relatively true, but an answer which is just true. Questions are asked within our time zone arrangements and the suggestion that one can ask 'what time is it?' without some (possibly implicit) qualification is a nonsense: one asks, when one asks 'what time is it?' about what time it is somewhere, and somewhere within our system of time zones.

Thus, Wittgenstein points out we cannot answer the question 'What time is it on the Sun?' because the sun falls outside our time zone system. There are, of course, ways in which we can give two different times in answer to the question 'what time is it?' but this does not need to go against the realists insistence that the question 'what time is it here' has only one answer: thus we can, and routinely do, say things like 'when it is two oclock in London it is only ten a.m, in New York.

We use the time zone example to show that the appearance of necessary conflict between realist and relativist may be just that, appearance, and that there is no real necessity for them. We do not, though, do this by putting forward any alternative account to theirs but by pointing to some familiar things such as the utterly harmless, in fact positively useful 'relativity' of time zones. Clearly, we choose that example because it is a relatively unproblematical one and not one which is likely to take people in, but the fact that it does not deeply deceive does not mean that it therefore lacks force with respect to more complex and difficult cases. Thus, for example, one might draw out the parallel with respect to the problems of the 'sociology of deviance' which runs up against the problem of whether something is a crime? It is, of course, obvious that something which is a crime in Italy is not one in Japan, or that one which was a crime in the nineteenth century in England is no longer so. Let us suppose that it is rape that is the offence in question. Are we to say that rape is a crime. We seem to have the dilemma outlined above: it is a crime in one place, but not in the other. Do we have to adopt some



relativist account of what crimes are? But this is to suppose that the question 'Is x a crime?' can be asked in a general way rather than, and necessarily, with respect to some specific jurisdiction. Thus, we can answer the question 'Is rape a crime?' with 'It is in Italy, but not in England' and 'It was in the nineteenth century but it's not any more' will do as quite clear and decisive answers which do not require us to take either realist or relativist views of crime, any more than we need take them of time zones. Nor does the fact that we can say these things about crime or time zones license us to think that we can answer questions about science in the same way. We cannot, for example, suppose that the question 'what is the mass of the universe?' can be answered with 'well it was x in twelfth century physics but it is y in modern physics.' One can answer a question like 'what does physics say about the mass of the universe?' can be answered with something like that: we can say 'they used to say it was X, now they say it is Y' but that is not the same question as 'what is the mass of the universe.' In the difference between those questions, though, we can perhaps locate some of the confusions which infect attempts to talk about the sociology of science, and which we will discuss in subsequent papers.