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The Idea of a Social Science: A Wittgensteinian Sociology?

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In a small book entitled **The Idea of a Social Science**¹, Mr. Peter Winch has argued that sociology logically should be essentially a branch of philosophy rather than an empirical science. Somehow this work has attracted unusually wide and even serious attention. This itself may be an excuse for discussing at some length a work that I consider to be largely without merit, but the more important reason is that I agree with Winch's thesis that sociology is properly a philosophical discipline but wholly disagree with the case he has made out in behalf of this view, and I am anxious to save the cause of philosophical sociology from a misconceived defence and an inept advocacy. There is a further reason for examining afresh Winch's book. By "philosophy" Winch means Wittgensteinian philosophy, and accordingly his work has been taken as a kind of prolegomenon to the eventual formulation of a Wittgensteinian social science. Here too I think that Wittgenstein's work has important implications for philosophical sociology, but at the same time I am anxious to show that Winch has misunderstood Wittgenstein and that his views, whatever their merit, are certainly not Wittgensteinian.

The first point Winch makes is to insist on the philosophical character of sociology. As does Schuetz, he defines the sociologist's task as the elucidation of what is involved in certain forms of social life. His second point is that social action is rule-governed and is meaningful insofar as it is seen as following a rule. His third important point is that social relations are internal relations and belong to the same

logical type as those between ideas or between propositions. Accordingly, he holds that prediction in social science does not make sense, though it does in the natural sciences.

Winch begins by distinguishing between science and philosophy and leads up to his idea of the latter. On both these issues he is uncertain, almost of two minds. However, he copies, throughout, the current vogue in philosophical writing: he adopts the usual tone of cultivated assurance which can hide a multitude of muted doubts; he is always cute, which, in this style of philosophizing, is necessary to produce some impression in lieu of the discarded virtue of vision. Philosophy is formally defined as concerned with the nature of reality as such and in general. Winch frequently tells us, however, that the function of philosophy is the elucidation of our concept of reality. It is assumed, of course, that it comes to the same thing. This assumption is plainly false; for, while a philosopher investigating the nature of reality can certainly conclude that reality is nothing but our concept of it, he cannot by any means begin with it. This lapse is by no means a minor one; as we have just said, Winch is keen to reject what he calls the under-labourer conception of philosophy, without accepting its usual alternative. Failing to show that there is a third concept which is distinct from both, he oscillates between the two.

This attitude is further borne out by the distinction that he insists on drawing between science and philosophy – a distinction necessary to the second (conceptual elucidation) view of philosophy but superfluous for the first (traditional or master science, Gnostic view). He says: "Whereas the scientist investigates the nature, causes and effects of particular real things and processes, the philosopher is concerned with the nature of reality as such and in general".²

Now this position is obviously untenable because no systematic knowledge can remain confined to particulars; systematization invariably involves a view of the whole. It seems that Winch has taken too literally the saying that the scientist is not concerned with the nature of reality. But surely science is keenly interested in the ultimate constituents and composition of the physical reality and, in fact, even

in such questions as the origin of the universe and its destiny; and many scientific laws and theories quite obviously cover the entire range of what “counts as reality” according to science.

The operative conception of philosophy in Winch’s view is the one that he is at pains to eliminate, namely, the under-labourer conception. There is nothing surprising in this self-contradiction; for the under-labourer conception of philosophy is a direct result of repudiating the “master science” view of philosophy, which view is unavoidable if philosophy investigates reality as such— even when one insists on spelling reality with a lower-case.

Now Winch’s whole argument for the philosophical character of social studies boils down to this: Science is concerned with empirical problems about reality; social disciplines study social actions and social relationships, and these disciplines raise not empirical but conceptual problems; hence social science is philosophical in character.

The foregoing should be sufficient refutation of Winch’s position; yet it seems necessary to devote more time to certain specific points made by him. For our own position is that sociology is a philosophical discipline, and I am anxious to save it from mistaken and inept defenses based on untenable notions of philosophy.

First, according to Winch the key to the understanding of social action is the concept of following a rule, for all social behaviour is rule governed. Winch, therefore, invites us to see what is involved in the concept of following a rule. Note that we are not allowed to learn what a rule is; not even to learn to follow it— all that we are permitted to understand is the concept of “following a rule,” which is very odd indeed; for ordinarily we would think of a concept of “following” and a concept of “rule,” but not of a composite concept “following a rule”. The fact is that Wittgenstein invented these composite concepts in the service of his tabu against general concepts and generalizations, and he himself would not allow any general concept of “following a rule” — for it is one thing to follow a rule of chess, another to follow one of good manners, and quite a different thing to follow a rule of grammar.

It would be against the spirit of Wittgenstein to move from these to a general concept of rule or of “following a rule” that is *any* “following” of *any* “rule”. Winch takes over from Wittgenstein the use of composite concepts without understanding its spirit, context, or function. (In fact it never occurred to Winch to ask whether Wittgenstein believed in rules at all).

After a tedious analysis designed to elucidate the notion of “following a rule,” the following “results” are reached:

1. The use of the word “rule” and the use of the word “same” are interwoven.
2. The notion of following a rule is logically inseparable from the notion of *making a mistake*.
3. A mistake is a contravention of what is *established* as correct; as such, it must be recognizable as such a contravention.
4. There are not private rules: all rules are social.

Let me make a few remarks on each one of the above (except 1).

2. The notion of making a mistake is certainly separable from that of rule, for mistakes occur in context where no question of rules arises, and there is certainly no logical reason why a rule may not always be followed without the occurrence of a mistake.

Perhaps Winch has been misled by the fact that to speak of a mistake often implies that something that was not permitted or should not have been done has been done, and this, he thinks, presupposes some rule. However, the notion of “ought to be” is wider than that of “rule” (unless Winch believes in ineffable rules), and, apart from that, if the notion of mistake presupposes that of a rule, it does not follow that the concept of “rule” also implies the commission of mistake. In fact, the notion of mistake presupposes not only rule but reason, unless of course reason and rule are equated.

If it is reasonable to do something, whether or not a relevant rule exists, and I could have reasonably done it but did not do it, then if it is not deliberate, my not doing it is usually called a mistake. Or, if I

did not want a certain thing to happen but did somehow bring it about, then, if I could have reasonably avoided it but did not or could not, I have committed a mistake.

In the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*³ Wittgenstein writes: “For since beginning to occupy myself with philosophy again, sixteen years ago, I have been forced to recognise grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book.” Shall we say that this reference to mistakes implies a reference to certain rules? Or does Winch think that Wittgenstein and Moore and many others who use the words “mistake” and “error” in this way, commit a mistake, that is, violate some rule? What rule?

3. It is a blunder to say that a mistake is a contravention of “rule.” Contravention of a rule means a violation, usually wilful, and it is, according to the nature of the case, an offense, bad conduct, sin, or crime, but never simply a mistake. While contraventions may sometimes occur by mistake, a mistake is never a contravention. A mistake, of course, may sometimes, but not always, involve the contravention of a rule, as when one writes ungrammatically. But it is called a mistake because it is not a wilful violation; when it is wilful, it ceases to be a mistake and becomes contravention.

Were Moore’s or Wittgenstein’s grave mistakes recognizable by others as such a contravention? Are they recognizable as such a contravention even now? Winch says: “If it is possible to say of someone that he is following a rule that means that one can ask whether he is doing what he does correctly or not”.⁴ If “correctly” means “according to rule,” it is redundant to ask such a question. If it means something more than that, then it will make sense to ask those questions, irrespective of whether one is or is not following a rule. But one can do a thing incorrectly not merely by deviating from a rule but by following the wrong rule.

Similarly, we are told that the purpose of a rule is to evaluate what is being done. This again is not true. The point of a rule is to facilitate the doing or making of something and, in some cases, to ensure that it is done only in certain ways and not in others. In still other cases, it

may be to validate or legitimate a doing or a making (for which other things will also be necessary). A rule of succession is established in the first place because it is considered the right way, but, in any case, it is to avoid conflict and uncertainty. It is odd to say that its main point was to enable us to evaluate successions.

4. The rule is socially established. But society is another name for rule-governed behaviour. There is thus a vicious circle – vicious, because, while a natural, concept-independent reality is denied to social life the concept of rule in terms of which social life gets its meaning and sociality is made dependent upon society. The rule must be recognized as such by others, but nothing further is said about “the others.” Does it mean all, some, many, or any? Nothing is said about how a rule comes to be established or what “counts” as establishing it. Obviously, Winch has confounded the notion of rule with that of Oughtness, Norm, Imperative, and, accordingly, the notion of mistake is mixed up with notions of prohibited conduct, offense, violation, wrong, etc. This is a crucial mistake.

I shall next examine his notions of “meaningful behaviour,” understanding, and internality of social relations. His results are as follows: (a) Meaning and concept are logically dependent for their sense on social interaction between men. (b) All behaviour that is meaningful is *ipso facto* rule governed. (c) 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. (d) Conduct that is the product of understanding is conduct to which there is an alternative. (e) (i) To understand a meaningful action, one must himself participate in it, and (ii) to understand a meaningful action, one should be able to understand its alternative and contradictory action. (f) The concept of a meaningful action is intrinsic to it (action). It arises with it, changes with it, is lost with it. Thus, it is distinguished from a natural event, which is prior to and independent of its concept. (g) Men are related to one another through their actions in the same kind of way as propositions are logically related to each other. (h)

Logical relations between propositions themselves depend on social relations among men.

I shall comment on each of these results to show that some are downright wrong, while others are highly misleading.

His first proposition, “meaning and concepts are logically dependent on social interaction between men,” is, of course, the master weapon of his “strategy”. It is used for elucidating the concept of following a rule and is also involved in his view of the internality of social relation, in which connection we shall have to examine it carefully. It may be remarked here, however, that, quite apart from the rightness or otherwise of the proposition, it is inconsistent with Winch’s other equally fundamental thesis: that concepts are intrinsic and prior to social relations, which do not exist at all before their concept is formed.

The equation of the meaningful with rule-governed conduct is regrettably vague, since we have already seen that, as used by Winch, the word “rule” may mean anything from mere informal prescription, moral norm, to a carefully framed legal code of procedure and a military command. If he means merely that to ascribe meaning to a course of action is to presuppose that the conduct is not wholly wayward or a mere chance occurrence, he is of course right, but this sheds no light whatever on the real issue involved in the concept of *meaningful action*.

Following Weber, Winch also starts by emphasizing “subjective meaning to actors” and ends up by equating it with imputed, conventional meaning. He equates “meaning” with the concept of following a rule (a fundamental misunderstanding of Wittgenstein, whose analysis dissolves both), but he is unable to follow its implications, one of which is non-psychological theory of meaning (Wittgenstein saw this clearly). He operates with an individualistic psychic notion of meaning. If meaningful behaviour is rule-governed behaviour, habit and routine should exemplify it par excellence. But Winch does not accept it straightaway. He says that the ability to formulate a rule, and hence the awareness of following it, is not

essential in deciding whether a person is following a rule or not. What is essential is whether it makes sense to distinguish between a right way and a wrong way of doing things. But right and wrong are synonymous with observing and violating a rule. In that case, what is gained by asking this question? For, according to this analysis, either there cannot be any area of life that is free from rules, or, if there is, it makes no sense to characterize any action in that area as right or wrong. (The confusion between norm and rule again: Winch forgets that ultimately notions of right of wrong are based on judgments of reality and not on rules or imperatives or norms).⁵

At the same time, Winch thinks that the possibility of reflection is essential to meaningful action, otherwise it is mere blind habit. But, if it is immaterial whether a person can formulate a rule that he is supposed to apply in his conduct, how do we visualize the possibility of reflection in his case? Winch’s solution is to say that “meaningful behaviour is simply a putting into effect of pre-existing reflective principles; such principles arise in the course of conduct and are only intelligible in relation to the conduct out of which they arise”. But he also insists that the nature of conduct out of which they rise can be grasped only as an embodiment of those principles. The notion of a principle (or maxim) of conduct and the notion of meaningful actions are interwoven, in much the same way as Wittgenstein spoke of the notion of a rule and notion of the same being interwoven.

The philosopher or the social scientist starts with certain interwoven phenomena or concepts; he does not leave things at that. It is his function to disentangle what is tangled. The least he can do is to understand that it makes no sense to speak of X and Y as being interwoven unless it is possible to imagine their separate and independent existence or status. Otherwise, a hierarchical relation must be the case.⁶

Winch thinks that in the creative application of a rule the successive applications are different from one another in response to changing situations. But according to his analysis this idea is bound to give rise to the Lewis Carroll regress, which should be simple to see: There is

Rule X; X₁, X₂, X₃ and X₄ are its various applications. X₁ and X₂ are simple replicas of X; X₃ and X₄ are different but count as the same. However, since the notion of the “same” is interwoven with that of the notion of the rule, there must be another rule, X₁, telling us what will count as the same way of applying X. Now X₁, being a rule, will also have to be applied, and soon we will want another rule, X₂, to decide whether one of the applications of X₁ is to count as “same” or not. It is really surprising to find Winch, who must have read Wittgenstein, falling into those very traps from which Wittgenstein strove to show us the way out.

To understand an action is, according to Winch, to understand its contradiction. This certainly does not hold, say, in the *Hindu tradition*, and Winch is emphatic that a tradition must be understood, and perhaps in its own terms. Moreover, this is a requirement applicable to a choice situation and not to a situation requiring obedience to rules. (Wittgenstein: “When I obey a rule, I do not choose”).⁷ I understand my, as well as other people’s, behaviour when I see them undressing up to the waist before sitting down to meals - if I know of and understand the “rule” in our culture which required people to do so. There is no reason to hold that the Hindu to whom the possibility of taking meals otherwise was inconceivable did not understand this type of action. Nor is there any reason to hold that, in order to understand, I must be conscious of alternative modes of behaviour with respect to that rule: in fact, the emergence of this kind of consciousness is the royal road to the breakdown of the tradition. Indeed, to suppose so is like saying that I cannot be said to observe a rule with understanding unless I do so with full awareness of the possibility of violating it. That is equating to the concept of understanding the behaviour of a coquette or a modern adolescent.

Nor it is correct to hold that one must have some religious feeling to understand religious behaviour. “Some” will not do; it is arbitrary, and it stands to reason that “some” feeling will give “some” understanding only. Either one accepts the traditional equation of understanding or agreement, or the requirement is dropped altogether.

I have already remarked about the infinite regress involved in making logic and social life depend on each other for their sense. This becomes even more vicious in the theory of the internality of social relations, which in the present version amounts to their being of the same type as the logical relations between the propositions. And the oddities and difficulties of this view are sought to be solved by saying that logic itself arises from social life.

But such a solution will not work. Suppose we want to understand the relation among members of a family, such as that between father and son. Now it is obvious that it should be understood in terms of “ideas of filial relations” current among the people. But does it follow that it falls into the same logical category, as do relations between ideas? In any case, how do we understand these relations? Ordinary or symbolic logic is of course not meant by Winch. It is linguistic logic. Very well, shall we understand the familial relations by nothing and analysing all the uses of “family,” “father,” “son,” “love,” and so on? But of how many such words? Will the list include, “rights,” “duties,” “daughter,” “mother,” “marriage”? Will it also include “spiritual paternity” (the Father in Heaven, the Holy Ghost), “puppet,” “sun,” “sky,” “earth,” “deliverance after life”? In what language? And how will we know what notions are currently valid? What will be the criterion or currency?

To all these questions the answer perhaps will be: “What has to be taken as given is a form of life”. But since this “form of life” is assumed for the understanding of language, it must be understood independently. What is the method that Winch would recommend? Intuition? Sympathetic or empathic understanding or imagination? Revelation? Hermeneutics? Exegesis? *The answer to this question will determine the nature and method of the social sciences*; it is, however, a question which Winch fails to see, even though his major purpose is to enlighten us on the idea of social science.

NOTES

1. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958.
2. Winch, *op. cit.*, p. 8
3. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953.
4. Winch, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
5. If Wittgenstein does not say that judgments of right and wrong are based on judgments of reality, he also nowhere lends support to the view that they are based on rules.
6. Winch rejects the investigation of social uniformities a la Mill on the ground that it presupposes the notion of a rule. But if rules and a mode of life are inextricably bound up with each other, investigation of the uniformities of a mode of life seems to be the only way of discovering rules, if there be a way at all.
7. Wittgenstein, *op. cit.*, 219 (p.85e).

Late Professor A.K. Saran, has been Professor and Senior Fellow of Sociology at Indian Institute of Advance Studies, Simla, Lucknow University, Jodhpur University and is associated as a pillar of '*Lucknow School of Sociology*.'

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On V.K.R.V. Rao and Social Science or Social Science

Ramkrishna Mukherjee

Before I met him I knew of Professor V.K.R.V. Rao as *the* expert on National Income Accounting in India and the builder of the Delhi School of Economics. I met him for the first time in 1951 when I went to see my respected senior friend Professor Maurice Dobb of Cambridge at Delhi School of Economics and was introduced by him to Professor Rao. That meeting, however, was merely “social”.

I met Professor Rao more intimately at Planning Commission which, in early 1960s, had set-up the Indian Committee for Social Science Research with Professor Rao as its Chairman, and I was one of the committee members. As is expected of me, I had some altercations with Professor Rao during the sittings of the Committee, but I appreciated his steering of the Committee as on Social Science Research, and *not* on researches in Social Sciences.

The Committee gave birth to ICSSR- the Indian Council for Social Science Research; but, to what extent, it treated the social science specializations as social divisions of labour for the unitary disciplines of Social Science remains, as yet, a moot question. To a certain extent ICSSR has sponsored inter-disciplinary research in social science but, to date, it has not treated the social science as a unitary discipline.

Professor Rao, in the meantime, had sponsored through Delhi School of Economics a Department of Sociology under the auspices of Delhi University; but the Department remains aseptic to even interdisciplinary research in social sciences. Professor Rao was