

Conclusion

The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy was a young man's book. Peter Winch was 28 years of age when he wrote it. It is big in its claims and somewhat polemical in much of its delivery. However, the corrective to dominant misunderstandings of the social studies, both at the time that Winch drafted *ISS* and today, is of crucial importance. We have sought to convey to the reader this importance. We have not been concerned to rescue Winch from his critics (and those who would subject him to 'friendly fire') for scholastic reasons. We share Winch's concerns, and his sense of the importance of these concerns.

How the present book has unfolded might to some seem a little unconventional. One might have expected more textual commentary and explication of *ISS*. One might have expected chapters on such things as rule-following and on language-games. It is our view that Winch speaks for himself. His work is accessible and clear enough, read in the right spirit.

It is this, however—the right spirit—that has often been lacking in those that have read Winch over the fifty years since publication of *ISS*. There seems to be a number of things afoot that serve as barriers to much in way of accurate representations of Winch in the literature. We here take a stab at identifying some candidates.

One failure to read Winch's work in the right spirit, evident in some of the original responses to *ISS*, seems to be borne of those respondents having been affronted that someone (maybe particularly someone as young as Winch was then) would write such

radical book, critical of the very idea of a social science. It's not a great feeling to be told that you are well and truly barking up the wrong tree—barking up the tree of the empirical sciences, when that cat one was chasing is sitting up the tree of philosophy, to maybe stretch the metaphor a little. But to be told that you are so along with everyone else who calls themselves a social scientist might well lead to anger. So much for our psychological diagnosis.

Other failures to read Winch in the right spirit seem to be based in a failure to have grasped the philosophical voice in which Winch, following Wittgenstein, is speaking. For, if so many have failed to grasp the therapeutic nature of Wittgenstein's philosophy, then why might we expect a better state of affairs in the secondary literature on Winch? Winch had no interest in and made no attempt to advance philosophical theses. That was not his method of philosophising. Many then, unfortunately, read Winch's broadly 'therapeutic' moves as if they were advancing doctrines.

Some seem not to have read more than the first edition of *ISS*. This leaves out most obviously the *preface* to the second edition, "Understanding a Primitive Society", "Can We Understand Ourselves" and "Persuasion." Now, of course one is not obliged to read everything we recommend. Nor is one obliged to read what Winch writes after *ISS* (even if it is clearly directly related to what he said in *ISS*) if one is concerned to generate a criticism of *ISS*. But, if one does marshal such a defence one might find it difficult to respond to the question as to what purpose one's criticism serves? For are we in the business of philosophy to score points off our interlocutors or to engage in dialogue aimed at furthering (our) understanding?

What we have therefore sought to show in the preceding pages is that read in the correct spirit—read by one who is free of the anger that someone who feels under attack often harbours; read by one who acknowledges the ‘therapeutic’ voice in which Winch writes philosophy; read by one who cares to engage in meaningful dialogue with Winch—Winch is not the philosopher one might hitherto have assumed him to be.

As we noted toward the close of our Introduction, we make no apology for any repetition. We are trying to make sense, and to find ‘the liberating word’: the right word(s) to help one (including: to help ourselves) to avoid delusions of sense, as well as of grandeur. We circle around and around these difficult waters, of the desire to reach for a scientific understanding of ourselves (our society/societies), sketching the seascape again and again, looking to help one to get to know this familiar place for the first time. It isn’t easy reflectively to know one’s way about that with which one is so familiar. To do a decent job of work in philosophy, one has to be prepared to continue to explore familiar routes and paths anew.

Furthermore, as we mentioned in our Introduction there are certain (repeated) features of thought in this area from which many misunderstandings of Winch can be seen to stem. These features will likely be clear to our readers now. They are, in addition to the ‘therapeutic’ voice in which Winch writes, *the identity of action and the character of understanding*. The starting point we should like to say is that people constantly grasp the meaning of actions in everyday transactions and interactions. This is where one ought to look for guidance. It is tempting to begin with cases where breakdown of understanding has occurred or where understanding what someone is doing is difficult (where we have

failed to grasp what they're up to). It is tempting to begin with cases where we just find it difficult to discern what someone is up to (we find it difficult to identify their action). If we begin here, then it is tempting to think we need a general method for understanding, which will tell us in all contexts, on all occasions, what the identity of the action is.

We say: don't begin from here (with cases of breakdown or difficulty in understanding). That might superficially sound like the old joke about the man who is lost asking for directions, only to be told that he should not begin his journey here. Of course the joke is, in the case of that old joke, that one *is* here and one *needs* directions from here! However, our advice, following Winch, is that students in the social studies have a choice as to where they begin. We recommend that the starting point be with how people constantly grasp each others' meaning, without the need for a sociological method; without familiarity with the methods of Giddens, Bhaskar, Habermas, Bourdieu and so on.

To, in some sense come full circle and end as we began by quoting J.L. Austin, only this time we'll paraphrase. Everyday understanding might not be the last word, but it certainly ought to be the first.