Chapter Four

Winch and Conservatism: The Question of Philosophical Quietism

Can we criticise, from 'inside'; from 'outside'?

The charge of conservatism, so often levelled at Wittgenstein and Winch is mistaken. It is a mythic and oft-repeated mistake. How can so many people be so wrong (so often)? Their thought seems to be that as Wittgenstein allegedly advanced the claim that truth is internal to language-games,[1] Winch advanced the claim that rationality, if one could talk of such a thing, was internal to a culture.[2] This we might call, for shorthand, the **charge of relativism**. If

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[1] See the essays in Crary and Read (2000), especially Crary's own essay, for efficacious disputation of this claim and allegation. See also the 1990 Preface that Winch added to *The Idea of a Social Science*, where he makes very clear that he himself does not accept the claim.

[2] Johann Hari, columnist for the *Independent* newspaper in the UK, when writing a rather ill-tempered article marking the occasion of Jacques Derrida's death, invoked language-games as the problem. He wrote: "If reason is just another language game, if our words cannot match anything out there in the world without doing 'violence' to others—what can we do except sink into nihilism, or turn to the supernatural?" (http://www.johannhari.com/archive/article.php?id=461). As we shall see (below), Hari's claim has more than a passing resemblance to claims made by Norman Geras. Hari's target is Jacques Derrida, Geras's, as we shall see, is Richard Rorty. We do not seek, in what follows, to defend Derrida, post structuralism or Rorty. We seek only to clarify what talk of language-games (following Wittgenstein and Winch) amounts to and why talking of "truth internal to a

accepted, both (related) positions, it is thought, render otiose any attempt at logical or rational critique, respectively, or scientific critique, generally, and have paralysing political consequences.[3]

As if the charge of relativism wasn't damning enough for Wittgenstein and Winch, their accusers also point to Wittgenstein's claim that (his) philosophy "should leave everything as it is"(*PI* section 124), and Winch's implicit endorsement of this in his explicit rejection of the underlabourer view of the philosopher's task, in *ISS*. This we will call the **charge of quietism**.

Wittgenstein, Winch and those who follow them, are therefore taken to hold and endorse a position which entails relativism about truth and reason: a rejection of the critical force of scientific reason: the charge of relativism. And to advocate that philosophers stay quiet about the world (everything): that philosophy is not a servant of the natural sciences, sweeping aside irrationality (narrowly construed) so as to pave the way for the march of

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language-game" does not *entail* an inability to talk meaningfully about injustices. For now it is enough to note that contrary to what is strongly implied by what Hari writes, language-game is not a term employed by Derrida. For a critique of Derrida on deconstruction (which Hari might find is consonant with his views) see Hutchinson 2008, *Shame and Philosophy*, chapter 2.

[3] Compare here the similar charge made against Kuhn, disputed by Sharrock and Read in their (2002).

science: the charge of quietism. It is this pair of charges that underpin the charge of conservatism often levelled at Wittgenstein, Winch and Wittgensteinians, as though they advanced the plainly implausible idea—the quite *absurd* idea—that cultures, being closed to external realities, cannot change. Those holding such a view of Winch are legion, and we cannot possibly deal with each and every one of them in what follows. However, this is, in any case, unnecessary. For the argument, where there is one, is generally the same. Here's a sample from Gerald Delanty[4]:

> The implication of Winch's contribution to the philosophy of social science was relativism. Winch followed Wittgenstein with the notion that reality is structured by language, a position that entailed relativism since linguistic rule systems were seen as specific to concrete forms of life. As with Gadamer, his conception of social science, was rooted in a conservative

[4] We could easily fill a whole book with quotes similar to this. This one from Gerard Delanty will serve as an example. What is common to all such accusations is a seemingly complete and utter failure to have grasped what Winch is saying; indeed, there seems to be very little effort made to even attempt to have grasped what he is saying. It can often seem that what is being commented on is not Winch's writing on these issues but other people's summaries of that writing. Note, in the case of Delanty, that this quote comes from a book published some seven years after the second edition of *ISS* appeared, with the new *preface*, which directly addressed these issues, in response to misreadings of the first edition; Delanty's bibliography contains only the first edition of *ISS*: thus no *preface* to the second edition and no other writings by Winch on these issues are consulted (including, "Understanding a Primitive Society"). Why?

> view of the interpretive capacity of social science, which was for ever context bound (Delanty, 1997, 55).

Previous chapters have dealt with many of the canards one finds in the above quote, from Delanty—see specifically chapter two, though also chapter one and, regarding the specific accusation of conservatism in the last sentence, the final section of the previous chapter, above, where we briefly address Habermasian concerns. In this chapter we seek to show that one cannot generate a charge of conservatism from the charges of relativism and quietism; for both those charges, when levelled at Winch, are misplaced in that they do not follow from anything Winch writes, when read aright. We endeavour to show such by first clarifying the philosophical remarks made by Wittgenstein and Winch regarding language-games and truth-claims, and the remarks about criticising other cultures. We then progress to discuss in more detail the very notion of critiquing another culture with reference to Wittgenstein's discussion of Frazer and Winch's discussion of Evans-Pritchard.

The Charge of Relativism

If one holds that truth is internal to particular language-games, then, the fear seems to be, one rules out any possibility of showing the language-game-

bound truth-claim to be false through resources employed from without the language-game. This has seemed to give rise to two concerns:

a) that truth is not answerable to the world 'outside' language. In this case we are said to be denying the world-answerability of truth-claims; and

b) that one cannot employ the resources of one language-game, (say) that of empirical science, to draw in to question the truth-claims made in another language-game, (say) that of religion; Christianity, for example. In this case we are said to be cutting ourselves off from the ability to engage in *rational critique*.

a: World-answerability

The first concern ((a)) is neatly stated by Norman Geras (1995), in a paper criticising Richard Rorty; Geras writes:

> I shall be travelling in what follows a somewhat winding road, and so here is my central thesis. If there is no truth, there is no injustice. Stated less simplistically, if truth is wholly relativized or internalized to particular discourses or language games or social practices, there is no injustice. The victims and protesters of any *putative* injustice are deprived of their last and often best weapon, that of telling what really happened. They can only tell their story, which is something else. Morally and politically, therefore, anything goes (Geras 1995, 110).

Geras's objection relies on two intimately related confusions. First, Geras misunderstands, along with Rorty,[5] the nature of the Wittgensteinian claim about truth and language-games as a relativist thesis. It is nothing of the sort. And Second, Geras assumes "language" and "world" to be externally related, and thus he is led to the thought that something being internal to a language-game implies it not having contact with or being answerable to the world: linguistic non-cognitivism.[6] In response to the second of Geras's confusions therefore, we need only note that one of the pictures from which Wittgenstein helps us free ourselves, is the picture of language as externally related to the world; indeed, language and world are better understood as internally related; grasping concepts is to further come to see, to grasp, our world. Put another way, 'world' (in this context of use) is not taken by Wittgensteinians to denote some un- or pre-conceptualised brute given world on to which we project meaning through our linguistic capacities, but "world" is rather taken to be the conceptualised world in which social actors, people, reside.

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[5] Unless, perhaps, one engages in a charitable reading of Rorty, along the lines essayed by Alan Malachowski in his (2002).

[6] Of course there is no reason to suppose such follows from Wittgenstein's remarks on language and rule-following. See John McDowell's papers on rule-following, particularly "Non-Cognitivism and Rule-following" (reprinted in his (1998)).

Now Geras takes this thought to imply that the world is, for such philosophers, merely socially constructed. Again, this doesn't follow. Rorty might say such things, or imply such things, but such thoughts are not entailed by the claim that truth is internal to language-games. Therefore, there is no implication in saying that understanding the truth of a claim is to understand it in terms of the 'language-game' in which it is made as entailing that the truth-claim is not answerable to the world. In some 'language-games' it clearly is, in others maybe not. But the 'language-game' being played, or, put another way, the idiom in which the truth claim is made, tells you to what the truth claim is answerable.[7]

The worry seems to be that this leads to a form of linguistic idealism; that in talking of the conceptualised world and eschewing talk of, or appeals to, the pre- or un-conceptualised world, we in some sense lose the (Real) world. But, again, that does not follow. Nor does it follow that creatures without linguistic abilities have no world. Both would be particularly odd claims—though this is not to say that some have come very close to saying as much.[8] We, of course, are arguing nothing of the sort.

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[7] For detailed argument regarding issues of world-answerability and a nuanced defence of the possibility of singular thought, see Charles Travis (2005 & 2007).

[8] Rorty, at times seems to say as much (though he generally denies that he does); Stanley Fish has built a career on making such claims. Neither can claim Wittgenstein or Winch's writings as support for their positions.

"Truth" is a word like any other and its criteria for assessment or verification might vary with use.[9] We come to understand the use through coming to understand the language-game in which the particular truth-claim has its home.[10] Therefore, Geras's claim (above), that if truth is internalised to language-games then there is no injustice, arises from confusion. For Geras assumes that "truth being internal to the language-game" entails truth being "not answerable to the world". When it is the identification of the language-game in which the truth-claim is made which tells you to what the claim is answerable.

Now, Geras is taking issue specifically with Richard Rorty here, and we would not want to defend a 'Rortian position' on the matter. However, while Geras's essay focuses particularly on Rorty it does capture a widespread misunderstanding—albeit a misunderstanding which might well unfortunately find support in Rorty's writing, i.e. a misunderstanding which

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[9] It is in this sense that we here depart from the attempt in the contemporary philosophy of language to advance a general theory of truth. And this is not to say that truth is relative, only that there are many different applications of the word 'truth' and related expressions such as e.g, accurate.

[10] Of course one is not obliged to use Wittgenstein's terminology here. We could just talk of examining the context or occasions of use. Wittgenstein was always very concerned that terms he employed for analogical and therapeutic purposes, such as language-game, would be read in a quasi-methodological manner.

Rorty is at times equally guilty of holding—of what is entailed by Wittgenstein's discussion of truth. To say that truth is internal to a language-game is not to advance a relativist thesis about truth but merely to say that to identify the nature of a truth claim, to understand what the claim is claiming, to understand what would be the case if the claim were true, and to understand how one might tell whether the claim is true or not—is to comprehend the claim against the background of the language-game in which the claim is made. To understand *a truth-claim* is to understand *a language-game*. No understanding of the latter, no *identification* even of the former.

Now, employing the expression 'language-games' in connection with 'truth being internal to language-games' is somewhat problematic if it is intended as a forceful allusion to Wittgenstein, whose own notion of 'language-game' was more sparingly used than 'the literature' would lead one to think. Wittgenstein introduced the term as a sort of contrivance for imaging alternative possibilities to some standard patterns of linguistic usage specifically for clarificatory purposes. *It was never intended as a technical term to be developed as part of the apparatus of a theory*—on the contrary.

Furthermore, 'language-games' have, frequently and somewhat troublingly, come to be treated as equivalent to cultures or institutions, and the idea that 'truth is internal to a language-game' (See Chapter two , on Linguistic Idealism) has come to be understood as saying that the prevalent or dominant doctrines found within a national or tribal culture or

within an institution such as law are true because they are defined as such within 'the language-game' of community life or institutional practice. Thus, the logic underlying Geras' anxiety that the possibility of damning injustice is being excluded is that the idea of 'truth being internal to a language-game' cashes out as 'if people believe they are just, then they *are* just, and so it is impossible to say that people who believe that what they do is just are nonetheless engaging in injustices. (Thus Geras and the Relativism that he opposes are *merely two sides of the same unhappy coin*). Indeed, taken seriously, such a line of thought would require that 'establishes what justice is' be given further specification, to accommodate the fact that the same argument could be applied to each and every community or institution. Thus, there could be no notion of 'justice' as such but only of justice in this community, justice in that community etc., where 'justice' may be in each case something very different. If it is additionally assumed that what is meant by each community determining justice is that each community counts its own ways as just, and then the very notion of 'injustice' is eradicated, for the ways of a community are, *now by definition*, just. It is this kind of logic which reinforces, for those who share Geras' general concerns, the idea that they are defenders of a necessary and universal conception of justice which can be used to measure each and any culture to determine whether it is or is not just. However, at least as far as Wittgenstein is concerned—Rorty being a very different matter—the threat against which they defend is an imagined one, and their

perceived need for a 'universal' conception much attenuated. After all, and somewhat ironically, if the above *were* Wittgenstein's argument or implication then the charges of quietism would be instantly rebutted, for such arguments are surely massively revisionist of a language which features such extensively employed expressions as 'unfair', 'unjust', 'exploitative' etc.

Some alleviation of the anxiety about the import of the (badly expressed) proposal that 'truth is internal to a language-game' might be dispelled if it is noticed that we are quite comfortable with talk of e.g. and *inter alia* 'the truths of science', 'the truths of religion', 'the truths of poetry', 'valid in law', 'mathematically speaking' and so on, where it is quite intelligible to talk of truths belonging to, in the casual use of that expression, specific 'language-games'. That is, those expressions are perfectly intelligible, and objection to assertions involving them would not be to the suggestion that certain truths are associated with, even the property of, science, but to any suggestion that the findings of science or the truths of religion were thereby necessarily being endorsed.

To understand the claim that 'truth is internal to language-games' in the way that Geras conceives it, does not relate to anything that can be found in Wittgenstein or in Winch. The latter's disagreement with Oakeshott (*ISS*, 62-66) is partly about the importance of conceiving of rules in relation to the possibility of 'reflection'. For Winch, to talk of something as a rule is to at least imply the possibility of understanding that one could have done otherwise.

Thus, the example he gives: to be able to behave honestly one must at least understand what it would be to behave dishonestly—after all, the idea of what makes something a matter of honesty is the contrast with its other.[11] The

[11] Again there is much confusion over Winch's discussion of rules in *ISS.* His critics seem unable to see that discussion as anything other than an attempt to provide a rule-following conception/theory of society, so as to replace a positivist conception. Where, in brief, Winch is only concerned to bring to light what it is to identify an action as what it is. Winch is not talking about what it is to do things correctly. Thus, Bohman's (1992) criticism, which draws on MacIntyre (1970 [1967]), "that it is not true that all social actions can be done correctly and incorrectly, and hence they do not all refer even implicitly to rules as constituting part of their description: for example, how do we go for a walk "incorrectly"? (Bohman 1992, 62). Of course, this criticism is 'loaded' in its employment of the word "correctness". If we rather say with Winch that a rule is what tells you when something being done is something other than going for a walk (e.g. when the person is going for a run, when the person is going for a ride on their bike or going for a drive in a car, and so on) we can, on occasions and in contexts, specify what we mean by 'going for a walk' when we say of Reuben that he went for a walk. Specifying what we mean by 'going for a walk', such that we can say with clarity that that is, indeed, what Ruben did, is done by our invoking a rule for what counts as going for a walk. This rule can be said to be established by something like the following: should I have said that Reuben had gone for a swim I would have said something incorrect, for Reuben, in fact, went for a walk through the woods that day and at no time swam. Had Reuben donned his swimming attire and swam, and not 'gone for a walk', that day, then he would not have 'gone for a walk' incorrectly, as Bohman and MacIntyre seem to think Winch must hold, Reuben would have gone for a swim, and *not* gone for a walk. We are simply talking about

notion of 'justice' seems much akin to that of 'honesty' in that seeing what makes something just involves understanding how it would differ from what is unjust—as incarceration at Guantanamo is conceived as unjust, not because people are imprisoned, but because they are imprisoned without opportunity to have their imprisonment adjudicated by a court and in violation of existing international laws governing prisoners of war. This point would have to hold for anything that we would want to translate as 'justice' from another community, and would require that, in that community, there be an intelligible difference between what is just and what is not. What might count as justice and injustice in another community might differ significantly from

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the meaning of to walk, hereabouts. Questions as to correctness, *if* they are appropriate, if they do indeed arise, come later.

Now, Winch does say—and qualifies in the preface to the 2nd edition—that following a rule and making a mistake are interwoven (overgeneralising some kinds of rules). However, he does not say that all actions are rule-following. And he certainly has no need to say it. All he needs is the—obvious point—that many connections in social life are made by rules. This is all that is required to combat the (related ideas) that all explanations invoke causal connections (since rules are used in explaining), and that all relations between actions are causal (since the relation between one action and its successor or between my action and yours are rule related). Whilst it is correct that not all actions are amenable to correct/incorrect assessment, this does not preclude the fact that many of them are, and it is the consequences of this fact, not the propsing of a universal hypothesis, that Winch was trying to develop.

what we count as justice in ours, just as what is legal and illegal do, but this does not mean that the possibility of asking whether *by our standards* their practices are just is not intelligible—as critics of Guantanamo illustrate by their doubts that military justice is not good enough in the current cases and that the standards of the civil courts should be applied.

Some truth-claims are answerable to the way the (conceptualised) world is—to empirically established facts—while some might not be. The truth (or otherwise) of a claim that God exists might be an example of a truth-claim which is not made on the assumption that it can be shown to be true or false in light of empirically established facts about the world. The truth of a claim as to the meaning of life might similarly not be verifiable by reference to facts. It might well be that one takes these latter two types of truth-claims not to be truth-evaluable at all, but, whether they are or not is an open question, as such claims are certainly not, *prima facie*, nonsensical.

The point, therefore, is once again—as it was in the case of actions—a point about identification, not about what can or cannot be done. The point of talking about language-games at all when talking about truth is merely to emphasise this point about identification of the particular truth-claim. If one fails to identify the nature of the truth-claim as what it is then one will simply fail to understand what is being claimed and miss one's target in attempting to assess or criticise the claim.

As with the identification of an action, the point is to look and see, to observe what the relevant criteria of identity are, and not, to abstractly theorise (about) what truth must be. The production of one's theory as to what is the appropriate general form of truth is almost always treated as prior to any attempt at identifying the criteria for assessment of the truth-claim. Indeed, philosophers often seem so absorbed in debates over which form of truth—which theory—should be employed in the philosophy of language that assessment of how people ordinarily employ the word truth is seemingly thought irrelevant.

b: rational critique

What of (b)? As we noted above, here the concern seems to be that the indexing of the truth-claim to the language-game entails an inability to criticise the truth-claim by drawing on the resources of another language-game. To illustrate: if one takes the language of religion to be a 'language-game' and thus providing its own criteria for truth and falsity, the conclusion is thought to follow that the discoveries of the experimental natural sciences, or the insights provided by certain fundamental and basic principals of logic cannot be garnered as support for a claim, say, that the Roman Catholic Church's doctrine of the Unity of the Trinity is, as a matter of logical or scientific fact, false. What counts as true in formal logic and what counts as true in the experimental natural sciences is internal to the logic of those two—

maybe closely related—language-games: that of formal logic and that of the experimental natural sciences. The criteria that need to be fulfilled for a claim to be accorded the status of a true proposition in each language-game is different and is different again to that required in the language-game of religion (specifically Catholicism).

Similarly, if one holds that rationality is internal to a culture, then providing a criticism of the reasoning within that culture by drawing on the resources of reason found in another culture is either illegitimate or merely forlorn. To illustrate: if one takes a hypothetical isolated hunter-gather people in a remote part of the Amazonian forests to have their own culture, thus having their own criteria for what is counted as rational and irrational, the conclusion seems to follow that the principles of Western scientific rationality cannot be employed as support for the claim, say, that taking precious time to chant over one's arrow before shooting the arrow at one's prey (food), is irrational. What counts as rational in 21st century Western culture is internal to that culture: that of a scientifically rational (disenchanted, to coin Weber's term) culture. The criteria to be fulfilled for a practice to be accorded the status of a rational practice are different in the culture of the 21st century West (advanced, late-capitalist, yada yadda yadddа…) and the culture of our (hypothetical) Amazonian hunter-gatherers.

Fortunately, *neither Wittgenstein nor Winch make such claims*.[12]

Wittgenstein and Winch are best understood not as telling you what you cannot do, but rather offering advice, reminders, as to what criteria you must fulfil or observe if you are to do what you, as would-be critic, claim/aim to do.[13] If you wish to subject the proclamations of the church or serious people of faith to critical scrutiny then you had best understand those proclamations: you must understand the 'voice' in which they speak, the 'game' they are playing. Similarly for Winch: if you wish to criticise the practices of another culture you had better understand those practices in their terms, first and foremost: you had better understand their reasons for engaging in those actions, their purpose, the social situation, and so on. Only then might one's criticism be of what they are saying or what they are doing.[14] But this is only part of the story. For to understand another's claims, to understand the practices of another culture, one will need, for those claims and/or practices to

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[12] This is clearest of all in Winch in the 1990 Preface to *ISS*, where, following Rush Rhees, he makes absolutely explicit that it is an illusion, and profoundly un-Wittgensteinian, to treat 'language-games' and 'communities' as isolatable *entities*, independent of one another. This is most strikingly a criticism of Norman Malcolm, whose interpretation of Wittgenstein *vis-à-vis* the matters presently under discussion has much to answer for.

[13] The kicker is that having fulfilled the criteria you realise that you might well find that you no longer wish to pursue your goal of criticism. Not, at any rate, in the manner you had assumed hitherto that you did. (More on this below.)

[14] For a more detailed account of this part of the story, see Chapter 1, above.

be intelligible to one, to understand them in terms of things you might say or you might do. And this is what makes both Wittgenstein's and Winch's remarks, hereabouts, not, as generally understood, methodological—showing the philosopher or social scientist a new method or methodology—but *a work on oneself*,[15] work in self-understanding as much as in the understanding and criticism of others.

For in attempting to reach understanding of the 'voice', or idiom, in which the serious person of faith speaks, one might be best served in examining one's own articles of faith and weighing them against the claims of the religious. In attempting to reach understanding of the practices of another culture, such as the practice of chanting over an arrow before loading the bow and releasing the arrow at the prey, one might be best served in examining one's own culture's employment of ritual or ceremony in analogous situations. One might reflect, for example, on the soldier's practice of polishing boots and ironing 'kit' in the armed forces. One might well find that the language-game of experimental science does indeed allow for articles of faith; that, as Kuhn and Feyerabend showed, progress (as Kuhn understood such) can often rely on *commitment*, which does not follow from any experimental results (i.e. commitment *as* faith) just as much as it can and does

[15] For discussion, see once more Winch's intriguing and too-little-read late (1992) paper, "Persuasion".

follow from experimental results. Similarly, one might find that many of the practices central to 21st century scientifically rational cultures do not conform to the strictures of scientific reason, narrowly construed. One might well find that ritual and ceremony provide both motive for and sense to many of our practices. Understanding this aids us in our understanding of other cultures; it enables our criticism, if such is still relevant, once we have understood. Just ask yourself the question: have you ever kissed a photograph, or an envelope that you were about to post, or for that matter (since you were small) a teddy bear? If you have, then you ought to be hesitant to condemn 'primitive' cultures as unreasonable; not because you ought not to have kissed the photo or the envelope—far from it. Rather, because you ought to be readier to try to make sense of *what* it is they are doing, before you criticise or condemn.

The recruit who simply fails to get to grips with polishing his boots to a 'mirror-like' shine and fails to master the task of ironing a 'razor-like' crease in his uniform trousers will either fail to achieve the status of soldier (he will not pass-out (graduate basic training)) or he will be labelled a poor soldier and constantly subject to disciplinary procedures and failure to progress through the ranks. Poor creases and dull boots do not mean he has failed to incorporate the heroic virtues into his character, much less that he is more likely to be subject to accurate and thus fatal, enemy fire. A dull boot and dull crease will not slow him down, make him less fit, make his shot less straight, nor does he believe they will do so. The practices of polishing one's boots to a

'mirror-like' shine and ironing a 'razor-like' crease in one's trousers are not instrumental in that sense. To take them to be such is to fail to understand what the soldier is doing (or failing to do, in the case of our example). In acknowledging that such practices are not instrumental we might therefore grant that our hypothetical Amazonian archer's chanting over his arrow is, similarly, not (at least, not necessarily) undertaken for instrumental reasons—at least not directly instrumental ones, for they are part of 'military discipline' and strict compliance in military discipline is conceived as contributing to the kind of performance essential to effective combat organisation. It is crucial to entertain the possibility as a live one that the archer does not believe that, in some mystical way, the words of the chant make the arrow direct itself to the heart of the prey or even fly true. And that this is neither the motive for nor the sense of his actions, that it fails to identify the action within its social situation.

As we have noted in previous chapters, the thought that the action under scrutiny needs rendering through description-in-terms-of-instrumental-reason (or in Freudian terms, or in extensional terms, and so on, and so on.) is born of a (scientistic) preoccupation with the form of explanation. The production of one's theory as to what is the appropriate general from of explanation is almost always treated as prior to any attempt at description/explanation of an action. Indeed, sociology and similar 'social science' enterprises often seems so absorbed in debates over which form of

explanation—which methodology—should be employed in social studies that the actual studies seem tangential to the whole subject area. This is, then, how social studies go awry. For our attempt to understand should be read-off the action in question: "How do I/we make sense of/understand this action, in this social setting, given that my/our goal, first and foremost, has to be identification of the action?"

Perhaps like many soldiers in our own culture the archer simply does this, does what he does, because it is part of what archers/hunters do in his culture and he is an archer/hunter—it is how the practice was taught to him and its teaching was intimately related to his inculcation into the arts of the archer/hunter. And furthermore, were we to insist on finding ('the') rationale for the chant or the polishing and ironing we might feel our best explanation was that it is the 'ritualistic' nature of such acts that provides their sense. In each case, the ritualistic activities are conceived as indispensable preparations for the further activities that are to be undertaken, in the first case, getting the individual in the right spiritual state for hunting, in the second, developing the character of a fighter.

Where does this then take us? In trying to understand the practices of the archer/hunter we look for analogous—*genuinely*, not merely[16] superficially, analogous—practices in our own culture; in doing so we

[16] As in Evans-Pritchard.

disabuse ourselves of a propensity to see scientific (instrumental) reason everywhere before us in our own culture and a propensity to assume irrationality in the non-instrumental practices of those from other ('non-scientifically rational'[17]) cultures; in doing so we do *not* rule-out the possibility of criticism of the practices of those from other cultures;[18] we merely note that criticism which depicts the motive for and sense of an act, such as chanting over an arrow, as instrumental seriously risks misunderstanding and thus misinterprets (we might say fails to see) the act before one.

In understanding the act of chanting over the arrow as analogous to that of polishing one's boots to a mirror-like shine and ironing a 'razor-like' crease in one's trousers, we understand that the motive for and sense of the act might be ritualistic or ceremonial (we can allow for more possibilities here). In coming to see this, much of the *social scientist's* motivation for the criticism ebbs. It ebbs because the anthropologist's/social scientist's motive stemmed from the thought that our own culture was exclusively (or at the very least predominantly) one of (scientific/instrumental) reason and theirs was one which saw instrumental value in non-instrumental acts. Neither assumption is worthy of the honorific label 'science'.

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[17] The reason for the introduction of scare quotes at this point should be obvious.

[18] Compare for instance the interesting (political) criticisms made of Zande culture by Nigel Pleasants (2000a & b). See also his 2002 and 2004.

Winch was concerned to critique traditional social science's overwhelming propensity to see other cultures, more 'primitive' cultures, continually, even habitually, as committing the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy (after this therefore because of this), while simultaneously 'bracketing-out' all evidence counter to the (misattributed) causal connection. Other cultures, then, are said to be more primitive because they engage in such rampant bracketing of counter-evidence to their (mistaken) assumptions about causal relations. On this view, they engage in practices such as that of chanting over an arrow before shooting because they think after that the prey will always be struck to the heart by the arrow: i.e. the prey is struck by the arrow because of the chanting that went before. Their primitivity resides in their resolute attachment to this commitment in the face of evidence to the contrary—the prey frequently not being struck to the heart by the arrow following the chant; the archer/hunter bothering to spend time engaged in target practice; and so on. Winch and Wittgenstein seek to avail social scientists of reminders such that they will not themselves fall prey to such misunderstandings and thus misattributions.

Wittgenstein's and Winch's point is a basic one: *understand the practice under study before criticising the practice*. However, it is the upshot of this that troubles traditional social scientists. For as we have seen, if the path to understanding entails anything it is the realisation that one's own claim to

reason is not as utterly secure as one had probably assumed[19] and that the practices of the objects of study, when truly understood, when seen as the practices that they in fact are, are little or no different to practices of ours which we had, hitherto, felt no desire to charge with irrationality on scientific grounds.

Is such a view likely to bring-forth or foster conservatism? We can see no grounds for such an assumption. Having come to see the analogy between certain practices in our culture and certain practices in the culture 'we' (as traditional social scientists) had already depicted as primitive we begin to understand our own lives more clearly. In doing so we are better placed to put those (our) lives and the practices that are partially constitutive of them under critical scrutiny, should we be inclined to do so. However, that—the inclination to criticise—is up to you. Wittgenstein and Winch provide you with reminders as to the necessary conditions for critique of another's words or practices: i.e. what amounts to a perspicuous presentation of those words or practices. They do not provide you with an explanation and, except

[19] If space allowed, it would be interesting to consider here why this assumption is so often taken to be self-evidently a good thing. As if a life lived according entirely to 'reason' would obviously be a good life. After all, there has been a long standing tradition in 'critical social science' of delineating what we might call the night side of reason. One ought therefore to ask whether the application of the idea of reason to all aspects of life itself involves genuinely rational understanding of the task or its consequences.

occasionally and fragmentarily, *they do not provide you with the critique*. That (developing a critique) is up to you, and you must take responsibility for it. And it is in these senses then that *their* philosophy leaves everything as it is.

In sum, it is not 'criticism' that is the target, but a certain sort of criticism, which presents the terms of criticism as though these cast doubt on the target practice/culture for failing to be empirically well-founded, and as though the criticism were made from the standpoint of another practice which is, in contrast, empirically well-founded. It is the sort of criticism which, further, arises from the post-seventeenth century intellectual's fixation on method, and the treatment of understanding as though it must consist in only one singular form, and that a general and impersonal one. This view does not, perhaps cannot recognise, that there are diverse forms of understanding and (that) many of these have a personal character.

Far from finding our own critical capacities disabled by taking this line, we find that they lead us to take a certain line toward and against some of the main tendencies in contemporary intellectual culture, as above, where we are really accusing it of a kind of bad faith, of attempting to reify the sources of its judgements, to dissociate these from their roots in the commitments of people, as if only the deliverances of a mechanically applied moral/political/empirical calculus were respectable.

This brings us directly to the charge of quietism.

Wittgenstein was reluctant to be a philosopher (at all), profoundly despising the idea of the professional, academic Philosopher, and being sufficiently critical of that role to hope that his philosophical policies would eventually more or less liquidate it. Wittgenstein rejected the whole idea that engagement with practical and political affairs need authorisation by way of philosophy, seeing engagement in philosophy as distancing one from real engagement with affairs (which is why he tried on more than one occasion to give up philosophy altogether). Perhaps, in this, Wittgenstein is not all that far removed from Karl Marx (1998 [1845]), who declared that philosophers had only interpreted the world, when the point is to change it. This can be understood to mean that previous philosophers had only sought to interpret the world, whereas future philosophers should attempt to change it. Equally well, though, it might be understood as saying that interpreting the world is the best that philosophers can do (rather more than Wittgenstein thinks they can) and that if changing the world is to be seriously undertaken, then it best be done by others than philosophers, or by philosophers when not doing philosophy.[20]

[20] For development at some length of this idea, see Read's "Marx and Wittgenstein on Vampirism and Parasitism", in Pleasants and Kitching (2002).

Understanding Wittgenstein's view of philosophy is essential to understanding what "philosophy leaves everything as it is" could possibly mean. Throughout, Wittgenstein's basic supposition is that philosophy has nothing to say, which is why the only form that his philosophical thought could take was that of a 'method(s)' (though we must not conceive of even that method, "our method", in too rigid or formulaic a way[21]). For Wittgenstein, philosophy has nothing to say, has no content, can advance no doctrines, can perform only a negative, but nonetheless emancipatory (liberatory)[22] role, that of enabling people to release themselves from illusions—those that insinuate that philosophy does have something to say, that it must, and rightly, put forward doctrines, and that those doctrines will feature a privileged, even final, understanding.

Wittgenstein's own, life-long, view of what he was about is not one that can perhaps easily be taken *seriously* in the social studies, and consideration of his meaning for the social studies almost invariably discounts Wittgenstein's insistence that he has nothing to say. Wittgenstein's first alleged error is to suppose that he could be free of doctrines. Thinking necessarily involves theories, so Wittgenstein must have theories too.

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[21] See Read's (forthcoming) review of McManus's *The Enchantment of Words* for development of this important point; compare also Hutchinson and Read's joint writings on Wittgenstein (*op. cit.*).

[22] See the Afterword to Read's *Applying Wittgenstein*, for development of this point.

Wittgenstein-for-social-studies is therefore reconstructed as an ensemble of positive doctrines, and it is these which are appealed to in drawing the conclusion that Wittgenstein's thought threatens the imposition of awful and, in any case, invalid restrictions on thought.

If Wittgenstein is instead taken at his word, then it becomes apparent that no such restrictions can possibly be involved. Wittgenstein places no limitation whatsoever on what can be thought or said (indeed, his whole project, throughout his life, is to question the very *sense* of any such 'limitation'), arguing only that whatever can be thought or said gets said outside of philosophy. Wittgenstein's philosophy does not leave everything as it is, in respect of its (sometimes) successful effect to emancipate individuals from the impulse to philosophise. Philosophy leaves everything as it is in respect of the fact that someone so emancipated is otherwise no worse off than they were, for they can still say everything that they want to say, except for the things that, through philosophical therapy—which is extensively self-therapy—they have come to recognise do not make the kind of sense they had previously imagined them to.

This should make it clear that one can't treat Wittgenstein's disavowal of doctrines, of theories, as involving only an 'overlooking' of the 'fact' that he is busy putting up doctrines of his own. As mentioned, Wittgenstein was profoundly opposed to the idea of the philosopher as some kind of professional, whose work was the pursuit of a philosophy. People who need

philosophical therapy are not, *per se*, professional philosophers, but those who, without necessarily being philosophers by profession, have become enmeshed in certain kinds of confusions. Much of Wittgenstein's philosophical therapy was directed towards those involved in mathematics—mathematicians—who find themselves drawn into puzzling reflections on the nature and status of mathematics.[23] The philosophical therapy, if effective, would enable those involved in these reflections to recognise them for the distraction that they were from mathematics itself, and leave them free to return to mathematical work itself.

The roots of the 'prisoner of language' misconception are perhaps best exhibited in the 'rationalists'' conception that change in cultures and societies are a product of falsification—rational people, at least, give up their convictions when these are falsified. The distinction between what is represented in language and the way things are 'in themselves' is essential to the conviction that practical refutation is both necessary and possible—reality can on occasion 'break through' the representations and reveal their falsity. Hence, the projection onto Wittgenstein and Winch of a picture of culture as a

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[23] Indeed: Soren Stenlund argues that confusions over mathematics were *the main focus* of Wittgenstein's philosophy in an unpublished paper "Continuity and Change in Wittgenstein." What is undoubtedly true is that the sheer numerical majority, measured in words/pages, of Wittgenstein's *nachlass*, consists of writings broadly in the philosophy of mathematics.

closed circle, closed against both incursions from reality and against validly grounded pre-emption by other cultures. This is because, it is supposed, for Wittgenstein and Winch, reality and representation are entirely coincident. (For discussion see Chapter two, on Linguistic Idealism). For Wittgenstein and Winch, then, it must be that the limits of a culture are fixed by what it can represent and it is then a tautological consequence that nothing from outside the culture can intrude into it for there are no other accepted cultural resources to enable contrary representations. Not only is there no possibility of change through refutation, whether from 'another culture's point of view' or 'from reality'; there is really no possibility of change at all. Presumably a closed circle of this kind cannot be moderated at all.

We touched on the mythologically mistaken assumptions that led to such a view, above; but, to explore further: to start dismantling this point of view it is perhaps wise to begin with the fact that Wittgenstein's philosophy is concerned with 'concepts' rather than convictions. The rationalist conception betrays the shared attachment to the *intellectualist* fallacy that runs through sociology and related disciplines. We mean by this, the notion (naturally attractive to many *academics*) that all human activity originates in ratiocination, and that action is premised in belief (which is itself an inheritor of the deep fixation of philosophy on the form of the proposition, especially in its hypothetical role—thought is the formation of hypotheses, beliefs are those hypotheses we elect to affirm, etc.). The assumption is, then, that the starting

point for understanding a culture is the identification of the beliefs that are expressed in and that underpin the actions of the culture's individual members. If a person's actions are premised in their beliefs, then changes in their actions will be consequent upon changes in their beliefs, and the way in which beliefs change is by being refuted—rationality, as noted above, is identified with the virtue of giving up a conviction when it is proved false.

As always, the mistake is to review Wittgenstein and Winch as though they too shared these intellectualist preconceptions. If one does this, then the conclusion that they postulate closed and incorrigible cultural systems is inevitable. The depth and ubiquity of the intellectualist presuppositions is perhaps such that these are not recognised as presuppositions at all, but are taken for self-evident truths. The possibility that someone—Winch and Wittgenstein for example—might not share these presuppositions is barely conceivable, and so the counter-case is not recognisable for what it is. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein and Winch do *not* share intellectualist presuppositions, but rather *consistently campaign against them.*

Winch saw much of the import of Wittgenstein's philosophy as condensed into the quotation from Goethe that Wittgenstein appropriated: In the beginning was the deed! In the context of the present discussion, the remark can be understood as going up against the intellectualist supposition that in the beginning there is the word (or: that in the beginning there is the belief). For Wittgenstein and Winch it is—in a sense—the other way around;

though really the contrast between belief and action itself needs to be rotated into one between *practices and opinions*.

The consequence of doing that is, we will show, to liquidate the impression that a culture is, for Wittgenstein and Winch, a closed system of beliefs that are immune to refutation. We will thus expose the weakness of the rationalist equation of change in a culture with refutation of beliefs (not that no beliefs are ever refuted, just that rationalists make much too much of this possibility[24]). It is only if one accepts this equation that one could possibly construe Wittgenstein and Winch as precluding the very possibility of change. One can come to see that Wittgenstein and Winch are arguing that whilst cultures change they do not do so primarily as a consequence of the refutation of beliefs. But this does not entail that cultures do not change, only that the rationalists have, at best, a very partial handle *on the ways in which change can take place*. Conceptual change, Winch, Wittgenstein (and Kuhn) remind us, is rarely an effect of empirical information; or, at least, certainly not of empirical information *alone*.

Please note that the claim is *not* that refutation of beliefs never takes place, but that the possibility of such an occurrence requires quite specific

[24] A very vivid picture of this 'too much', and of the alternative—in which refutation is a feature of 'small' changes, rather than knock-out blows—can be obtained by a right understanding of Kuhn's philosophy.

conditions, and yet can be prompted by and can take form via quite varied matters. Think of it this way—the rationalists think of the relation between two cultures as equivalent to the relation between rival scientific theories (construed, crucially, in pre-Kuhnian fashion), as involving cultures which make different hypotheses about the same domain of facts, and which differ, then, primarily in respect of their truth value. They are rival hypotheses, and consequently cannot both be true. Unless, that is, one is, as many opponents of the rationalists are, at least tempted by the idea that they can both be true—that truth is, in some sense, relative. Rather than holding that the rival hypotheses subscribed to by different cultures might both, in their respective contexts, be true, Wittgenstein and Winch insist that many of the main differences between cultures do not consist in hypotheses, and that these differences do not involve cognitive or factual rivalry in the way that competition between scientific hypotheses (at least, within the enterprise of 'normal science') do.

Anyone familiar with the debates in and around sociology over the last six decades can recognise the lineaments of a recurrent opposition that appears there, and one which, for many, seems to involve Wittgenstein and Winch as central figures—they are the patron saints of relativist social science. However, this is not the game in which Wittgenstein and Winch are engaged *at all*, for to take the view that relativists are (usually in a very confused way) drawn toward *is to share far too much with their rationalist opponents.* This whole

picture of the difference between cultures is drawn in entirely the wrong way as far as Wittgenstein and Winch are concerned.

Here is the moment to notice that Winch's criticism of Evans-Pritchard, echoing Wittgenstein's objections to Frazer, is for supposing that all thought is an attempt to understand reality after the fashion of the formation of a scientific theory, and that Winch's counter is that there are different ways of attempting to 'understand reality', not all of them of the same form as or comparable with those of science. Specifically, Evans-Pritchard is guilty of identifying, for example, deliverances of the oracle as equivalent to hypotheses when they do not, in their home context, function as hypotheses at all.

More generally, Winch's objections to Evans-Pritchard are motivated by rejection of the idea of a scientific critique of religion. That idea is appealing to those who suppose that religion consists in doctrines compounded of empirical hypotheses, but mistaken ones, and that can be shown to be so through scientific evidence. But, for Wittgenstein, religion is not necessarily superstition. Religion is not primarily a set of doctrines *at all*, but much more importantly a set of maxims for a way of life. A set of practices. Both Wittgenstein and Winch try to show that religious expressions that might look like scientific hypotheses are not actually hypotheses and do not play a part in magical practice which is analogous to that which the hypothesis plays in scientific practice. This is one reason why Wittgenstein

and Winch are not advancing relativism, for they are indicating the extent to which the scientific tradition is distinctive.[25] Winch tries to explain this by showing that the notion of 'understanding reality' does not signify a single kind of activity which is being pursued by different means (science, religion etc.) but that it encompasses many different kinds of affair, some of which are very unlike science. It makes no sense to say that religion and science are as good as one another, since the question 'good at what?' would indicate that what one is 'good for' the other is no use at. It is not as if science itself achieves the fulfilment of a pre-existing task—the understanding of nature, say—for any history of science will show that the development of science has itself involved a matter of developing and changing (the understanding of) what science is doing, of what 'understanding nature' might both encompass and consist in. 'Understanding' does not, even amongst the sciences, identify one single sort of operation, and science both changes and varies internally with respect to what can be understood, and what kind of thing comprises understanding of it.

[25] In this respect, their enterprises resemble Kuhn at perhaps the most founding and critical moment at which he was understood: Kuhn intended the concept, 'paradigm' precisely to 'demarcate' the huge difference between the sciences on the one hand and disciplines without a paradigm (e.g. the 'behaviourial sciences') on the other.

The argument does not rule out the possibility of criticism[26] though does lead one to a deep scepticism regarding the idea that the only *real* criticism consists in logico-empirical refutation. This way in which this latter kind of criticism is envisaged and practiced often seems effective only because its enthusiasts are actually talking mainly to themselves and talking past those whom they purportedly target. Criticism as a logico-empirical demonstration is possible, but only under restrictive conditions, where there is substantial agreement in place amongst the disputants such that their differences can be focused on a single—empirical—point and adjudicated according to a method that both parties will accept as appropriate for matching the disputed hypothesis against the facts.[27] If the (largely benighted) studies in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (which often anoint Wittgenstein, Kuhn and Winch as patron saints) have shown anything, it is

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[26] See once again Crary's essay in Crary and Read (2000). Her argument is essentially that Wittgenstein must be read as preserving the possibility of criticism. See also Pleasants's work (*op cit*) on Wittgenstein and Winch. Since much of the discussion of 'criticism' is premised upon arguments about whether the latter's thought rules out the possibility of criticism in face of that fact that criticism is both possible and necessary, it is worth erring on the side of caution and pointing out that 'preserving the possibility of criticism' does not mean that Wittgenstein and Winch are trying to legislate on this possibility, as though *they* could decide whether people can criticise or not. It means rather that their arguments do not determine *a priori* whether criticism does or can occur in any specific case.

[27] See Sharrock and Read on 'incommensuraibility', in their (2002).

that even in science, the exemplar of hypothetical reasoning, scientific disputes don't by any means always achieve the kind of consensual close focus that facilitates decisive resolution of the demonstrative kind. If such conditions are hardly satisfied within science, then how can anyone imagine that they could be meaningfully satisfied in any disagreement between religion and science (a disagreement which is often proposed without recognition of how many scientists do not find an inherent conflict between them)? Attempts to make comparisons on the basis of science's experimental methods simply beg the question, just as would the attempt to test science's validity in terms of magical or religious trials.

The notion of 'rationality' has been very narrowly identified with the kind of debate that takes place over (some – relatively 'contained' / 'small-scale') rival scientific theories which can be resolved through the confrontation of hypotheses with evidence, which is why the argument that criticism is possible will nonetheless seem disappointing to many insofar as anything other than the kind of criticism which involves scientific-style refutations will be considered irrational. Wittgenstein's philosophy is intended to be descriptive, and, *as such cannot legislate on whether people are allowed to criticise either another culture, or their own*.

At the same time, it is part of Wittgenstein's task to suggest that and how philosophical thought suffers from one-sided diets of examples, and it is therefore consistent for we Wittgensteinians to observe not only that criticism

does take place, but that criticism takes different forms, and there is no reason to identify 'criticism' with any one of these nor, without reviewing other kinds of criticism, to decide whether any one of these forms is the sole paradigm of rational criticism. The fact that there are deep incongruities between standpoints and practices does not preclude all possibility of rational disagreement between them, if one accepts that 'rational discussion' is not confined to stating contesting hypotheses and reporting evidence to adjudicate between them, but recognises that rational discussion can involve attempting to gain a better understanding of respective standpoints, even a realisation that no agreement can be had, and where the arguments are offered *persuasively*. Indeed, within the social studies themselves the likelihood of demonstrative resolution of even a single dispute between 'social science' approaches is unlikely, for 'social scientists' disagree with each other in their whole conception of what their subject might be about,[28] what things are worth knowing, how to proceed, how to assure the acceptability of an account, what is acceptable as evidence *inter alia*, but this does not prevent them from criticising each other, nor sometimes—even though much of the argument amongst sociologists may be based on mutual misreadings (as we are arguing has been the case with much of Winch's readership)—need this

[28] Once again, this insight is crucial to Kuhn's (1996 [1962]) genesis of the notion of paradigm: see the Preface to his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

lead to them talking past each other rather than to effective critique. One would not necessarily want to condemn all this discussion as irrational—though there is little realistic possibility of refutation of one social studies viewpoint by another.

We are making and re-making this point, but it is *well worth* turning and returning to, in differing formulations that can get it right for each one of us: The relevant issue is not whether criticism is possible or not, but where criticism is appropriate… And whether something deserves to be criticised or not depends critically—*as a matter of logic*—upon *whether or not it has been understood to begin with*. Wittgenstein against Frazer, and Winch against Evans-Pritchard are both opposing particular forms of criticism of magical practices which are misplaced. The argument is not that such practices must not be criticised, but that if more attention is paid to understanding how the practices work, then one wouldn't want to criticise them as being, for example, based on an empirical mistake (which is the kind of criticism that Fraser and Evans-Pritchard want to make).

This point of view invites us to recognise rather more baldly that criticism of another society is a matter of conflict between cultures which stand on the same level as each other, *so far as the job of the sociologist or anthropologist is concerned.* The idea of rational criticism is often used as though it involved us in becoming dissociated from our own home culture, towards which we can take the same fundamentally questioning attitude as

we might to any other, thus enabling us to deliver impartial assessments of the respective merits of each of those cultures, convincing ourselves that we are acting as the representatives of a universal rationality, overlooking the extent to which our conception of rationality is itself a product of cultural traditions, those of our own culture. Recognising that this is so only creates judgemental paralysis of a relativist kind if one accepts the philosophical fantasy of culture-free understanding as an appropriate conception of what 'rationality' is; if one does accept this, then withdrawing from the idea of a 'universal' standpoint entails giving up on the idea of rationality altogether. However, this is to give too much credit to what is, after all, an utterly-unrealistic fantasy, and there is no reason why anyone should suppose that this is the only, let alone the best, way of understanding what rationality is. One can then ask about rationality not as an inhuman demand, but as a humanly achievable matter, and thus be liberated to recognise that there are many and varied forms of e.g. rational disagreement that are not much like the fantasy version.

As recent controversies over science and religion (in the form of debates about intelligent design and creation science) indicate, the parties are very far apart, and there is no meeting of minds between them; the criticisms that are exchanged follow from rather than antedate the fact that each party rejects the other's way of thinking. The opposition between them isn't over any specific hypothesis, but is wholesale dismissal of the parties' respective

ways of thinking. Though the apparent focus of the controversy is Darwinian evolution, it is clear that those who defend Darwin do so 'on behalf of science' in opposition to 'religion', whilst those arguing for creationism are effectively objecting to what we would call the scientism that motivates the Darwinist's most vociferous defenders. The writings of someone like Richard Dawkins (2007) are clearly driven by generalised hostility toward religion, and, though his writings may advocate rationality in the narrow sense described above, they are not themselves notable examples of rational debate in either that or even a broader sense—at best they are polemics, and are perhaps fairly viewed as a manifestation of Dawkins' difficulties in getting any grasp on his opponents' point of view.[29]

There remains a sense in which those that comprise each of the parties to the 'intelligent design' versus Darwinism debate are not all that far apart (and in which there is a greater cultural distance between them and the Azande than between them among themselves)—they carry out their debate *in the form of* a scientific evidence-based dispute. And although, as we have just suggested, this form is deeply misleading, it does at least make perspicuous a respect in which, roughly speaking, would-be scientific advocates of 'intelligent design' are vulnerable to criticism in an important

[29] This line of thinking is followed through in detail in Terry Eagleton's (2006) review of Dawkins's most recent book, *The God Delusion*.

respect as pseudo-scientific / 'superstitious' in which (e.g.) the Azande on Winch's construal are not, for they pledge allegiance to a standard of rationality that they then tend to lose their grip on. This is a flaw by *their own standards.*

This difference between the 'intelligent design' advocates and the Azande is itself a for instance of the way in which the determination of the conception of rationality of a given group or community requires context-sensitivity and philosophical subtlety—of exactly the kind that Winch recommended and demonstrated. It implies no commitment whatsoever to conservatism and does not place any kind of denying-ordinance upon criticism.

Limits to Cultural Understanding

Wittgenstein doesn't say that cultures can't be criticised, either our own or another, and neither he nor Winch suggest that a culture can only be criticised by those who belong to that culture. Winch and Wittgenstein in fact had much to criticise, themselves, in their own societies, and sometimes in others. What they jointly object to is that there is some simple and general way in which a culture can be understood. Many people will think they do have a grasp on what understanding another culture involves, for there is the example of the Azande (and one or two other anthropological instances that get endlessly re-circulated in this discursive context). However, to reiterate

our key criticism of the elitism of social science in this context: before one imagines that one understands another culture better than its inhabitants do one ought to be confident that one understands it at least as well as its inhabitants do. The claim that one does so is a logical prerequisite to securing the demonstration that the inhabitants are, after all, subject to misunderstandings of, or as a result of, their culture. However, those who are confident about their capacity to understand better than the natives are typically confident on *a priori* grounds that this must be so. They have little time for wondering whether they could be so assured in their implied claim to understand cultures even as well as its inhabitants themselves do.

The obstacles that Wittgenstein sees do not arise from the [logical] inaccessibility of a culture to those who are not full blown participants, but in the way that Winch tries to describe in his challenge to Evans-Pritchard, from the obstruction placed in the way by adopting *a priori* conceptions of what understanding has to be. The treatment of prominent cases of misunderstanding involve Wittgenstein and Winch with Frazer and Evans-Pritchard, where the Wittgenstein-Winch argument is that Frazer's and Evans-Pritchard's own data is incongruous with the *interpretation* they offer of another culture, and where their method blinds them to the extent to which they occlude their (own) understanding. Thus, Frazer registers the terrible situation of the priest king of Nemi in his own prose, but not in his arguments, and does not see that the potency of the practice derives from its

configuration as a menacing and eerie affair, not from the influence of any extrinsic [explanatory] factor. If we are shown the configuration of the rite in a perspicuous way, we do not need an explanation of how this practice came to be adopted in the first place—about which, of course, in fact nothing is actually known—in order to understand how the practice works, for we can see from the practice itself its role as a significant ceremonial way of transferring power. Frazer himself cannot see that he has done enough to enable us to understand the rite for simply describing the ceremony does not satisfy his demand for what he conceives to be the proper sort of explanation—one that will be entirely general, and that will construe the event in utilitarian terms: there 'must be' some directly practical purpose underlying any practice, even if it is a misguided one—it is this assumption that *gives* Frazer what seem to be puzzles: what *practical* purposes could conceivably motivate doing things in this way? Given the utilitarian conception of practicality, the underlying purpose which Fraser will ascribe to the practice will prove to be a misguided one.

Note that neither Wittgenstein nor Winch treat 'understanding' here as coming to *believe in* these practices as their possessors do [which does not in any case contradict our early remark about practices not being founded in beliefs since 'believe' here is more 'believe in' than 'believe that'], and thus do not require one to become an 'insider' in the sense of subscribing to the practice. Indeed, for the cases that Wittgenstein and Winch concern

themselves with, the simple fact is we can't bring ourselves to believe in them, very much in the way that the post-modernists tell us we just can't say 'I love you' seriously anymore.[30] If one of us tried going down to the bottom of the garden with a collection of hens and some erratically-acting poison, he would feel like an utter fool, and couldn't act out the rite with anything like the commitment that the diviner brings to his role—he could say the words, but just like 'I love you' in the mouth of a post-modernist, they would be empty of any conviction. Evans-Pritchard pretty much understood the mechanics of oracular consultation and magical rites, but *partially* misunderstood the … *spirit* in which those mechanics are employed.

Religion is a rather different matter, and the notion of 'understanding' often plays a rather different role in that context than it does in the 'primitive magic' case. In the latter, we can feel that we have an understanding of witchcraft and oracular consultation on the basis of an anthropologist's report, where the puzzlement is: how can they possibly believe that that works (and the resolution of the puzzlement can sometimes come in coming to see that it is not *intended* to work in just the way we fantasise)? With religion, however, there are important connections in which the religious belief sets limits to the extent to which we can claim understanding without accepting the practice in question—to 'understand' in that context is more like

[30] Not that *we* really believe this but the *analogy* helps clarify what we are saying.

'feeling the full force' of the religious experience. To understand a religious tradition can be to genuinely experience one's own life in its ways, and in that way, there can be no gap between understanding and accepting: to understand one's life as e.g. being wholly in God's hands is to possess faith, one cannot genuinely experience things that way on the basis of an intellectual simulation or pretence—understanding the mechanics of the outer forms is a long way away from being acquainted with the spirit that animates those. So: the challenge with religion is often: to find a way of imaginatively understanding without joining in believing—*and* without misrepresenting the faith or its practices.

As much as anything else, the argument here is about the contrast between (1) the social science urge for a general method and contempt for the particular case, and (2) the difficulties attending spiritual practices illustrating the fact that there is no general methodology that facilitates understanding, and that, for sure, there is no guarantee that any method will assure understanding. In the first instance, understanding is not a social science problem. The anxiety that Wittgenstein and Winch provoke in this connection is not toward the idea that understanding another culture is possible, but toward the *idea that it can be always be achieved without a great deal of personal effort*, that one could seriously claim to understand another society without 'immersing' oneself in it, and without reflecting on it and upon oneself and 'ourselves' in ways that are not just intellectually but also imaginatively,

philosophically, morally, spiritually, personally and psychologically demanding. The problem of understanding another culture is a problem that people practically overcome, or fail to do so, every day, but social scientists in the midst of their general explanatory project have no particular society or practice that they want or need to understand where they are utterly baffled by what people are doing such that they can't make head nor tail of it. Without a good deal of sensitive familiarity with a society or some aspect of its practices, one is not going to be able to get a good grasp on the sense that its practices have.

Perhaps a way to defuse the problem here is to point out that 'participation' in another culture may include a variety of forms, ranging from reading about a culture (which is how Wittgenstein and Winch, reading Frazer and Evans-Pritchard respectively, came to understand much about the culture of the 'classical civilisations' and the Azande) to joining in the daily life of that culture—signing up for a job on the production line to understand shop-floor culture, say. There is no denying that (some) understanding of another culture can be obtained in the first manner, though the capacity to achieve such understanding will presuppose that others have undertaken a much more intense immersion in the culture in question (to provide good written sources) but there are, nonetheless, points at which one cannot get any significant understanding without being participant in the practice in question. Winch instances the case of the arts and of mathematics, thus

clarifying what 'participation' might mean in this connection—one doesn't have to be a painter or working musician to understand the practice of the relevant arts, but one does have to be able to apply the aesthetic assumptions and criteria involved in painting, improvising or whatever, just as one does not have to be a working mathematician to follow some of the proofs that mathematicians produce but one cannot understand mathematics at all if one cannot follow any of the proofs. For Winch, these are perhaps limiting cases, where—to an extent—being able to understand what other people are doing involves being able to do, yourself, at least to some substantial degree what they are doing. Their significance is that they subvert—they completely turn over—the social science ideal that the correct way to understand human activity is from the outside (which, in the extreme, can demand that anthropomorphism not be employed in understanding human beings), where the better understanding allegedly results from the greatest remoteness from engagement with the affairs in question. They also subvert the other key social science assumption, that understanding people's activity is one single kind of thing which could be pursued (and taught) by one general method, which, if only it could be identified and mastered, would secure the prospect of universal understanding, such that, for the follower of the method, it would be possible to understand all of every people's activities merely be following the time-saving procedure. Winch is casting doubt on any such assumption—the best way to understand the practice of mathematicians is to

learn some maths, but there is absolutely no guarantee that the average social scientist will be able, no matter how hard they try, to grasp much mathematics beyond the relatively elementary forms; the demands which mathematics makes on the understanding are peculiar and not easily, or at all, available to many very clever people.

In conclusion

It is not that one can or cannot 'translate' between cultures, but that translation is not to be thought of as a formulaic matter. One should not be tempted into the thought that translation can be undertaken mechanically, through our having being availed of a methodology for such understanding, which one then applies. It can often be (rather) an imaginative exercise that is dependent upon 'embodied' information—prior understanding of the instance under translation on both sides of the translational equation. Further, the difference between better and worse translations is, in part at least, a function of the sensitivity, care, and contextual alertness and attentiveness that goes into producing the translation. Deciding what translation best fits their way of proceeding involves sensitivity to what, amongst our ways of doing things, is the best comparison to that. The fact that we can do many ready translations between cultures is the accumulated result of extensive experience by innumerable individuals, of contacts between cultures. From the point of view of sociology and broadly cognate 'social/human science'

disciplines, which is (are) resource-poor and possessed of an urgent yearning toward generality, to make these observations probably is equivalent to saying that understanding another culture is impossible for them, since adoption of these policies would—as Wittgenstein and Winch were well aware—obstruct pursuit of standard 'social science' ambitions, and would postpone and redirect effort in a way which would make the sought for objectives of comprehensive schemes for understanding society seem utterly remote, if not wholly unattainable.

Notice, though, that the possibility of understanding another culture is nowhere being ruled out. *Not at all*. Rather, a contrast is being made between what counts, when language is at work, as understanding and what 'understanding' is dogmatically imagined to be under the influence of social science preformations.

Isn't the problem of understanding, though, that of bridging the gap between our concepts and theirs? Doesn't comparison of two cultures show that people in them have different concepts? And, if people have different concepts, and if understanding is achieved through the use of concepts how can we understand them? If our understanding is achieved through our concepts, and theirs through their concepts, then our understanding and theirs are different, and radically so, since our concepts are variant. Their concepts won't fit with/into ours, so we will only be able to understand them through our concepts, not through their indigenous ones: trying to absorb

their concepts to ours will only distort them. We cannot really grasp their concepts, any more than they can grasp ours.

Our response is: isn't this, latter, conviction, and its powerful hold, more a product of a subliming of the idea of understanding than it is an expression of experienced insuperable difficulties? Isn't it an expression of an old and entirely-confused philosophical faithful, the idea that the only way to really understand what it is like is to be that person. This old staple, a legacy of all three of Rationalism, Idealism and Empiricism, has its current life in philosophy as the idea that we are stymied by the question: what is it like to be a bat? The way that question is put is meant to insinuate that we can't even really imagine what it is like to be a bat, that our being us gets in the way. Real understanding involves experiencing what a bat experiences, just as the bat experiences it, which we can't imagine because we can't dispense with the understandings etc that we have as humans, and which, therefore, get in the way of our grasp on the bat's experience which is undergone in complete unawareness of any human concepts. The 'can't' here is surely a stipulative one, stipulative of what is to count as understanding (really), meaning that the many things we can say that we understand about what it is like to be a bat are not to be flatly denied, but to be denied the status of real understanding. Similarly, the idea of radical conceptual closure between cultures is a misbegotten child of a similarly sublimed notion of understanding—those in another culture have their own concepts and lack

ours, therefore the only way we could (really) understand them would be if we could dispense with all our concepts, since understanding the world authentically in terms of their concepts involves complete unawareness of our concepts. (Really) understanding them involves getting outside of our culture and being wholly immersed in theirs, but this would of course mean—even if *per impossibile* we could do this—that we could never bring any (real) understanding of their culture back home. So it would be a profitless performance. As well as subliming "understand" so as to be able to voice a dissatisfaction with anything that we might call 'understanding their culture' there is perhaps too hasty invocation of ideas of being 'in' and 'outside' a culture. Wittgenstein and Winch regard the foregoing kinds of worries as symptoms of the problems they think are spurious, and never in any way faithful to their own. Their concern is absolutely not to show that understanding another culture is *a priori* impossible, but to show how some philosophical preconceptions *get in the way of* understanding some important aspects of some other cultures, a demonstration that requires a distinction between understanding and misunderstanding. Isn't understanding, as we practice it, often a matter of considering the similarities and differences between our ways of doing things and someone else's ways, of grasping where and how what they do diverges from what we do, being something which is a matter of greater or lesser difficulty, depending upon the cases involved?

That last sentence might sound like a rhetorical question, a banality, hardly worth saying. Quite right too. Winch is not a promulgator of any conservative doctrine; he is simply returning us to common sense in its true sense. He offers no revisionist doctrine, but only 'reminds' us of what we have all always-already known. He enables one to retrieve society as it actually is, by enabling one to overcome the delusions that 'social science' and its apologists have placed in the way thereof.