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COMMENT ON "SOME ESSAYS AT OBJECTIVITY"

by

George Kateb

Winch's book is difficult and too brief for its purposes; and I have little confidence in my ability to sound it to its depths. Still, I feel enough confidence to say that Professor Rudner has not responded, with the right amount of directness, to its challenge. *The Idea of a Social Science* is a challenge. It is an upsetting experience not only for those who advocate the scientific method as the sole road to understanding, and scientific understanding as the sole kind of understanding, but also for those who, more modestly, cherish reason or rationality. Winch threatens to dissolve the world into an aggregate of mutually uncomprehending and disconnected parts. He insists on—he seems to delight in—the autonomy of disciplines, activities, stations of life, ways of life, cultures, and more besides. In my judgment, he goes too far in his book. In his long review-essay on Rush Rhees's *Without Answers* (*Ratio*, June, 1972) he goes even farther in denying the possibility of a "common measure of human understanding" as between disciplines, activities, cultures, and so on. ("The illusion of a common measure of understanding is one to which men have always been subject and is something most philosophers have had to grapple with." pp. 89-90.) I share Professor Rudner's unease in the face of a threatened anarchy of unintelligibility. That is Winch's thought carried to its extreme. Short of that, Winch is saying, saying and implying, something that must be met squarely, and without anxiety concerning its extreme extension. We must allow for the likelihood that, as I say, he goes too far; and then see his point, and maybe save it from him.

What I miss in Professor Rudner's strong paper is just this head-on confrontation with what is for me Winch's main contention, his point. If I understand it right it is that we cannot explain human conduct by reference to laws expressing invariantly regular relationships between the human being and his environment. The reason is that there is no universal human being just as there is no universal environment. There are cultures in their plurality and changeability; that is, there are configurations of various conventions, rules, procedures, beliefs, practices, habits, customs, mores, and manners which constitute human beings, so to speak, by constituting the environment into which human beings are born and in which they are raised and become participants. We must perceive human conduct only as conduct of culturally formed human beings living with each other in a common culture or way of life. We can explain such conduct only by reference to particular conventions, rules, or whatever. Answers to the questions, What is he or she (or what are they) doing? and Why is he or she (or why are they) doing that? are not expressible in a universal language, or reducible to illustrations of universal laws. Human nature (which Winch does not think exists) cannot account for human conduct in society. To let Winch speak for himself:

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Historical explanation is not the application of generalizations and theories to particular instances: it is the tracing of internal relations. It is like applying one's knowledge of a language in order to understand a conversation rather than like applying one's knowledge of the laws of mechanics to understand the workings of a watch. (p. 133)

I think that Winch's critique of physical science as a model for social science is, above everything else, a critique of the desire to discover laws that state invariant regularities about human nature: non-culturally-determined human responses to non-culturally-specified conditions. If Winch is right, or at least more right than wrong, he has worked a profound conceptual reformation. He is presenting an argument on the *aim* of social inquiry. He wants to disallow, as philosophically untenable, the aim of creating a science of human behavior which will consist of a body of law-like propositions that will make prediction possible one day, and that will have additions and refinements as time goes on—a progressive and applicable science.

My major complaint is that Professor Rudner has not made the central issue central to his paper. He has instead taken up two themes which are, of course, seriously implicated in any discussion of Winch, but only one of which even touches on the central issue. Professor Rudner's stress is on methods appropriate to social inquiry. Before one deals with Winch on the methods, however, one must try to determine whether Winch is right on the aim of social inquiry. The basic question is—to put it a little differently this time—In aim, is the study of man like the study of a substance and its properties, or of bodies in motion, or of a plant and how it grows, or of an animal species and its habits, or of a machine and its working? Or is it what Winch says it is and must be; or if not exactly as he says, then significantly closer to his conception than to the scientific model suggested by my mention of substance, plants, animals, and machines? Is its aim like the aim of one who wishes to be taught a game or a language, or to understand and interpret a work of art? Is every culture a world for which the concepts and categories suitable to another are most probably not going to be suitable to it? Must it be taken on its own terms? Have we left the notion of causality as physical science uses it when we say, for example, that a person's conduct is caused by (determined by) a reason having to do with following a convention or a code, or performing in a ritual or a ceremony, or behaving in conformity with the expectations adhering to role or place, or making a successful move or play in a game or sport, or choosing a word or phrase for its felicity or power or precision? Is such conduct though caused in some sense not caused in the prevailing sense among physical scientists?

I cannot answer Winch's central question and the questions that follow inevitably in its train. I only have suspicions: they are favorable to Winch's case. Speech creates human consciousness; consciousness creates distinctions of good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, done and not done, correct and incorrect, bright and stupid, and so on. These distinctions cut humanity off from the natural and the mechanical. Man is an artificial creature: invariant regularities do not pertain to artifice. Man follows rules and forms and habits: these are

his regularities; but they are not naturally necessary responses to given conditions. What is involved is not freedom of will but something else which I cannot name—some terrifying and universal capacity to be shaped in almost any way, and still to modify shapes over time. All I can do is point back to Book I of Aristotle's *Politics*, and realize that Winch, with the help of Wittgenstein and Collingwood, is maintaining a tradition of thought.

He does go too far: that is also among my suspicions. I want to try to reserve some place for human commonality, whether it be universal needs, or drives, or passions, or feelings, or gross vices and clear virtues. I want to believe that the phrase "human condition" refers to permanent human ineluctabilities which make up a substratum, a common underlying human nature. I would like to be able to see *some* aspects of any culture as peculiar forms that express or hide or sublimate or symbolize needs or feelings or whatever that exist elsewhere in different forms, but that everywhere precede all forms. I am sympathetic to Pareto's enterprise, sharply rejecting of it though Winch is. At the same time, I continue to think—and I hope that this is not a self-serving delusion—that I can speak of permanent human ineluctabilities and yet not accept the aim of physical science as the aim of social inquiry.

I would say that Professor Rudner's paper provides solid help not in saving the scientific aim of social inquiry but in weakening Winch's attempt to rule out certain methods as irrelevant to social inquiry. If Professor Rudner can show that Winch has exaggerated the difficulties inherent in understanding human life in society, he has prepared the way for avoiding the "threatened anarchy of unintelligibility." I think that Professor Rudner is right in a number of arguments he presents in the course of dealing with two themes in Winch. But there is an irony: if Professor Rudner *is* right, he has not served his own intention. He has not saved scientific methods (any more than he has saved scientific aims) for social inquiry. Rather, he has helped the cause of common sense which, as I suppose, would resist Winch's determined effort to conceive of each culture as self-enclosed and also almost wholly closed to an outsider's comprehension. Winch's view is ultra-anthropological; it indicates belief in the socio-centric predicament. Professor Rudner goes some way in weakening Winch's view.

Much of social reality is invisible. It is made up of, among other things, what people are thinking and dreaming and being led or driven by inwardly; the unspoken; the silent determination of conventions and rules and forms; the unconscious and barely conscious; the mediations of memory and anticipation; and so on. These are the elements of hidden mind and of meaningful conduct. Even in one's own society the job of understanding what is done and why it is done is often—I do not think I overstate—hard and often impossible. Even in one's own society one must be resourceful to gain a mere rough approximation of understanding. One must use and lend and extend and restrain oneself. Hobbes said, "Read thyself." One must practice introspection; one must be willing to argue from analogous cases; one must re-enact and "put on" new men and women; one must fumble over the right words to employ in analysis and judgment; one must "read" a situation; one is forced to infer and conjecture and follow one's hunches; one must interpret. One must be prepared to be surprised. All these

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things are done without any sure expectation of successful understanding.

The image of the arduousness of understanding one's society is the arduousness of self-understanding. But one goes on trying to have as much of both as possible. By extension, it is usually harder for the self to understand the other than itself, usually harder to understand another society than one's own. I do not know whether the morality of social inquiry resides in the will to discover ourselves in others and others in ourselves, or in the will to acknowledge and respect otherness. In any case, I do not see how we can consider these methods the methods of science; that is, the methods by which we characterize scientific inquiry, the methods of neutral observation from the outside of that which lacks the elements of hidden mind and meaningful conduct. It is finally the imagination which is the source of psychological and social understanding—not in the sense of imagination as it is shown by great scientists but in the sense shown by great writers. The aim of social inquiry is to get inside: to get inside a mind or an act or a situation or an event; or a code or a set of rules or the habits of a vocation or—miraculously—a culture as a whole. The aim is to get the point. Of course, knowledge sustains the work of the imagination; the work is unthinkable without knowledge. The knowledge is knowledge of countless particulars, of numerous concepts; and the tentative half-knowledge of human commonality: such knowledge we generally name "wisdom." But the knowledge is not of universal laws; the methods cannot be those that are part of the pursuit of universal laws.

At the same time, imagination, in its full powers, may climb over the walls Winch thinks are there; if not all the walls, then some, perhaps many. Professor Rudner seems to be right, in his treatment of the first theme, when he criticizes Winch for a species of "the reproductive fallacy." You do not have to be a Catholic to understand Catholicism. (Else how could anyone ever possibly convert? How could one go from ignorance or hostility to an informed and passionate acceptance?) It helps to have some experience of Western religion. But surely a non-Catholic can imagine, say, the power exerted by the ritual on a believer, the solace of dogma, the thrill of engagement in a tradition nearly two millennia old, the esthetic or psychological satisfaction of the view of redemption, and so on. A non-believer, by definition, does not have the experience of belief, and the deepened understanding of Catholicism that belief may grant a first-rate mind. He can still go part of the way. Imagination permits penetration of otherness; it may even permit otherness to penetrate. But imagination sustained by the sorts of knowledge just mentioned is not any version of the scientific method.

I am also sympathetic to Professor Rudner's views on translatability. I wish, however, that he had not chosen the paradigm of verbal translation; translating nouns of one language into those of another; but had instead discussed Pareto's enterprise, dismissed by Winch. The enterprise consists in finding similarity of human intention underneath forms that differ from culture to culture, or from time to time in the same culture. Winch posits a world in which intention cannot exist apart from a rule of convention, and a rule or convention cannot exist apart from a whole set or system of rules or conventions. No single thing can be

detached from the ensemble and be examined for its likeness to a superficially similar thing detached from another ensemble. Pareto compares the use of pagan lustral water and that of Christian baptismal water. All that Winch sees in the comparison is similar physical movements, and they do not prove similar human intention or yield the same cultural meaning. Doubtless Pareto's method levels, indeed crushes meaning; in its parodic execution it shows and spreads a base cynicism. For all that, water cleans. May there not be a widespread connection between dirt and moral impurity, and hence a widespread sacramental use of water? There is no flat assertion here, no claim to universality, no insistence that the sacramental use of water illustrates a necessity of human nature. It seems to me that some less pretentious handling of Pareto's purpose than Pareto's own would be valid and promote a sense of human relatedness. On this score, I think Professor Rudner's instincts are right; and perhaps his procedure, too. But to say that is not to make any concession to the proponents of the scientific method in social inquiry. Comparing conventions of different cultures is not practicing science; it is much more like comparing people or paintings.