

INVITED PAPER

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Giving Hostages to Irrationality? Winch on the Philosopher as Judge of Human Thought

Abstract

Peter Winch, following Wittgenstein, was critical of the notion that philosophy could pass judgment on matters like the sense of words, the rationality of actions, or the validity of arguments. His critique had both what we might call a local strand – the insight that criteria of thought and action are not universal but vary between cultures and between practices – and a personal strand – the insight that those local criteria are ultimately given shape through the particular applications made of them by individuals. These strands are prominent, for instance, in Winch’s discussion of cross-cultural understanding as well as his treatment of the distinction between valid reasoning and illicit persuasion.

1.

On a received view, we turn to philosophy for answers to questions like: what are the conditions for words to make sense; what are the criteria for thoughts or actions to be rational or intelligible; what constitutes a valid argument? As we might put it, it is held to be the prerogative of philosophy to have a handle on the *a priori*. In much of his work – a work which was to a large extent inspired by that of Wittgenstein – Winch devoted himself to challenging this notion. In

the posthumously published essay “What has Philosophy to Say to Religion?”, Winch writes:

It is well known, notorious perhaps, that philosophers regard it as an important part of their task to assess the intellectual significance of other forms of human thinking: moral, aesthetic, political, scientific thinking, for example: and religious. The way they carry on this task will reveal the view they take of the distinction between sense and nonsense: whether they think [of] the criteria for this distinction as independently discoverable by philosophical reasoning; or whether they think of such criteria as fashioned in the different practices of the modes of thinking they are investigating. (2001: 417)¹

Though he admits that both views are bound up with problems of their own – the latter being in danger of giving way to an attitude of “anything goes” – there is little doubt that the latter view is the one with which Winch is in more sympathy. Further on, Winch rephrases the issue as follows:

In my view the most valuable contribution to our intellectual culture of the philosophical tradition [better: the most valuable contribution of the philosophical tradition to our intellectual culture LH]... is sensitivity to, and techniques of clarifying, differences between different uses of language and the kind of argument and criticism appropriate to each... (Ibid.)

Now what I should like to argue is that there are two strands to Winch’s challenge to the *a priori*. For the sake of convenience, let me refer to these strands as the local and the personal. It is the local strand that is being articulated in these quotations. The personal strand is in danger of being overshadowed by pronouncements like those quoted here.

The central idea of the local strand is that the criteria for judging action and speech, rather than being universal, are local to the specific language game or practice in the context of which words are uttered or actions are performed. The personal strand, on the other hand, is constituted by the fact that the application of those criteria is ultimately dependent on the responses of individual participants on particular occasions. It is they who bear up the practice. The

¹ My impression is that the published version of this text had not been finally revised for publication by Winch.

importance of the local, if fully thought through, can be seen to entail the role of the personal. The alternative would be to suppose that the application of local criteria is dependent on a universal logic – but that would mean that the local is explained away; it is reduced to the universal. Ultimately, then, the local and the personal are two sides of the same coin.

In what follows, I wish to explore some of the ways in which these strands are interconnected in Winch's thought.

2.

Throughout his work Winch recurrently addresses the range of problems inherent in the idea that standards of thought are local to various practices. There is a family resemblance – both similarities and differences – between these various discussions. The first time the issue comes up at length is in Winch's essay "Understanding a Primitive Society" (1972), where he responds to Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of *The Idea of a Social Science* (Winch 1963). What characterizes this discussion is that the personal hardly enters.

The central notion in this discussion is rationality (a term which is much less prominent in Winch's later writings). MacIntyre argues, in effect, that if an action is to be intelligible to us, we, as observers, must be able to understand what speaks for it. Explaining an action, in MacIntyre's formulation, "is a matter of making clear what the agent's criterion was and why he made use of this criterion rather than another and to explain why the use of this criterion appears rational to those who invoke it" (quoted in Winch 1972: 28). Or otherwise put, seeing *the action* in what is being done – and analogously hearing *the expression* in what is being said – presupposes that the action or words make sense to us.

Thus far, Winch and MacIntyre are in agreement. However, according to MacIntyre the standards of intelligibility cannot be thought of as a local matter. Thinking of them that way would have two unacceptable consequences. For one thing, it would render the understanding of actions occurring within a different culture with different standards impossible. And secondly, it would rule out the

possibility of members of a culture criticizing their own standards. MacIntyre formulates his alternative view as follows:

the beginning of the explanation of why certain criteria are taken to be rational in some societies is that they *are* rational. And since this has to enter into our explanation we cannot explain social behaviour independently of our own norms of rationality. (Quoted in Winch 1972: 28f.)

MacIntyre's formulation seems to contain an ambiguity between rationality as defined by "our norms" and "rationality full stop", a universal rationality independent of any social norms. This ambiguity is not noted by Winch. Indeed, the whole discussion is characterized by a certain looseness or elusiveness. I remember reading this essay with a great deal of interest and agreement some time around 1970. It has indeed acquired the status of a classic, alongside *The Idea*. Yet today I find it hard to get a grip on what exactly the argument is, on either side. Maybe I was more taken in by the spirit of the essay than by its precise argument.

In the essay there is talk of standards of *intelligibility* and standards of *rationality*, as well as *criteria* of rationality, *norms* of rationality, etc. Perhaps a way of summing up the disagreement, anyway, is this: whereas MacIntyre argues that local standards or criteria as understood by Winch rule out both intracultural criticism and cross-cultural understanding, Winch insists that this is a misunderstanding; it has to be noted that the criteria in question are open-ended: they are responsive to criticism and capable of being extended to encompass forms of action we are initially inclined to consider incomprehensible. In short, people and societies are capable both of changing their ways and of widening their understanding.

As Winch puts it:

We must bring S's [the alien society's] conception of intelligibility... into (intelligible!) relation with our own conception of intelligibility... . That is, we have to create a new unity for the concept of intelligibility, having a certain relation to our old one and perhaps requiring a considerable realignment of our categories... . Seriously to study another way of life is necessarily to seek to extend our own – not simply to bring the other way within the already existing boundaries of our own, because the point about the latter in their present form, is that they *ex hypothesi* exclude that other. (1972: 32f.)

Also, he speaks of “observers from another society with a different culture and different standards of intelligibility” (1972: 30). Now, I am not sure how this way of framing the issue is to be understood. Is there such a thing as “our conception of intelligibility”, do we as a society possess certain “standards of intelligibility” – whether flexible or not? Also, in what sense does our way of life exclude another – and if it does, can it cease to do so while remaining what it is?

Part of what makes these issues bewildering is the fact that understanding or failing to understand someone or something may consist in a variety of different relations, depending on the context of speaking. Consider, for instance, what it would mean for a foreign visitor to come to understand a game of football. It could mean either that she learns to describe what is going on in the game (that is a penalty kick, that player is offside, etc.), or to predict or evaluate what a player is doing, or to take part in a game, or to understand why people like to play it, or to embrace it as something she likes to watch or to play. Also, one might speak of understanding the game in terms of grasping the point *in* the game (trying to score more goals than one’s opponent), or the point *of* the game (say, its being a pastime), or, the place of the game in the culture (how a team’s success or failure may be a matter of communal or national pride or grief, etc.).

Talk of “standards of intelligibility” seems to suit the case of knowing the rules. They are a logical condition for knowing what goes on and for taking part, say, in a game of football. When it comes to understanding rugby, on the other hand, football is both a hindrance and a help. For someone familiar with football, the players in a rugby game seem to be continually flouting the rules without being penalised. Yet knowing football might help her understand how to regard the activity, giving her the idea that this *is* a game with rules, although different ones, or by enabling her to view the activity as a pastime.

When it comes to trying to understand a bullfight, on the other hand, familiarity with games might bewilder an observer. Here we do not find the equality between competitors which we think of as essential to a game. Also, one may find it hard to see how slowly

killing a bull might qualify as a pastime. Perhaps a clue to understanding the practice lies in regarding it as more like a sacrificial ritual than a game.² Yet games and rituals seem to have this in common that their identity lies in their form rather than in the purpose for which they are carried out. One might say: the more pronounced the purpose, the less rigid the form.

Calling a game a pastime is a way of saying that there is no external purpose to be achieved, and that people take part, or watch, simply because they enjoy it. (Saying that people play or watch football because they enjoy it should be thought of as a grammatical remark rather than a psychological observation.) With rituals, on the other hand, there is often a sense that they *have* to be carried out, and that participation is mandatory. In the case both of games and of rituals there may be talk of a purpose, but the formulation of the purpose, it appears, is fitted to the practice, rather than the practice being shaped to fit the purpose. The idea of the purpose of a game is vague, and when there is an attempt to formulate it, it often has the air of a rationalization: “We play football to stay healthy, to build team spirit, to shape character”, etc. Something analogous is true of the talk surrounding rituals.

The rules of a game or a ritual do not explain *why* people engage in the activity – rather, they are part of what is to be explained. (In fact, participation is no guarantee of such understanding: my wife tells me she was made to play hockey while at public school in England but she and some of her friends had no interest in the game; their only concern was avoiding being hit by the ball. Of course, your chances of doing so are better if you know how the game proceeds.) I may come to understand a game or a ritual, or, say, an artistic activity or a work of art, a children’s game, etc., in the sense of understanding why people want to engage in it; of understanding, as we might say, what they *see in it*. But this is hardly a matter of the activity coming up to some standard of intelligibility provided by the observer’s community. Rather, what is in question is a personal response. This is connected with the fact that we speak of “understanding” differently here, than, say, when it comes to

² Consider, e.g., Thomas Mann’s (1954) description of the audience of a bullfight. On seeing or not seeing something as a game, cf. R. W. Beardsmore’s excellent essay (1995).

figuring out people's purpose in engaging in an activity. I see people building a fence along a road. The activity seems pointless to me, since the fences do not enclose anything – until I am told that it is done to keep snow from drifting across the road in winter. We might talk here of an existential vs. an instrumental puzzle. (More on this in the next section.)

Coming to understand the purpose, we might say, is a transitive relation: we realize that X is done *for the sake of* Y – but when it comes to understanding why someone wrote this piece of music, or why children play this game, there need be no way of articulating what our understanding *consists in*: we simply understand (or we do not, as the case may be). The understanding is *intransitive*.

Magic rituals seem to point in two directions at once: they appear to invite a purposive account, to be expressive of certain independent concerns, yet they do not seem to be well designed actually to satisfy those concerns, and in that respect they appear to be non-purposive. This is true, for instance, of the harvest rituals of the Azande as reported by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, which MacIntyre and Winch discuss. Against MacIntyre, Winch suggests that the rituals should not be understood as a case of poor agricultural techniques, but rather as a forum for collectively contemplating the tribe's utter dependence on successful crops for its survival. Thus, it might be fruitful to compare the harvest rituals to forms of thought and activity other than productive ones in our own societies: marriage or funeral ceremonies, the inauguration of a bridge, etc. Forcing them into a purposive mould is likely to produce misunderstandings of the sort Wittgenstein attributed to Frazer in his remarks on *The Golden Bough*. What tempts us to do so, of course, is the way rituals like these are very obviously expressive of urgent practical concerns.

In comparing rituals to non-productive practices of our culture, it would be misleading to speak in terms of our own practices providing a *standard of intelligibility* through the extension of which those rituals may be understood. Rather, Winch may be thought of as proposing a possible perspective (not necessarily the only conceivable one) from which the Azande practices might be easier to comprehend.

There is a parallel here to the way philosophers tend to discuss nonsense in speech. It is often assumed that the possibility of making sense with a certain form of words can be ruled out in advance. This view is fundamentally problematic, however, since understanding what someone is saying is the response of an individual person in a particular situation. My ability to cotton on to what some is trying to say can hardly be subject to regulation by the grammar book (though I might defend my failure to understand by pointing out that words had been used in a non-standard way). In important ways speaking is not like playing a game: in chess, it does not make sense to want to retreat with your pawns, or to go on fighting though your king has fallen; but in life, and hence in language, there are no such *pre*-established limits. (It might be feared that in the absence of standards our speaking would be wholly arbitrary. I shall return to this worry in the final section of this essay.)

3.

In the essay “Can We Understand Ourselves?”, published posthumously in 1997, Winch returns to these issues. The argument is somewhat convoluted and hard to follow in parts, my guess is that this essay too was unfinished. In contrast to the discussion in “Understanding a Primitive Society”, the importance of the personal is clearly brought to the fore in this essay.

The essay arose out of an invitation to a conference asking Winch to address the question whether understanding an alien culture is possible. On the whole, Winch’s discussion in this essay differs from the earlier one in being sensitive to the type of concern I’ve been trying to voice here. He begins by making a distinction between two senses of impossibility: the sense in which a task is impossible because we do not have the means (the knowledge, the technique) required to solve it, and the sense in which the idea of a solution is meaningless.

Now it should be noted in passing that the example with which Winch proposes to illustrate the latter is not well chosen. It is the impossibility of trisecting a triangle. As is well known, the idea of trisecting a triangle can be shown to make no sense in Euclidian geometry. This is comparable to a move not making sense in a

specific game. It does not mean that there is *no* intelligible use for the expression “trisecting a triangle”. If that were so we could not even understand what it is that, according to the principles of Euclidian geometry, we supposedly cannot do. In fact, in many cases trisecting a triangle makes perfect sense; say, in dividing a triangular piece of cake into three equal slices. It is simply that it cannot be done within the premises of Euclidian geometry.³ As will be seen later, this conflation of speech with geometry runs very much against the grain of Winch’s thinking about language and reasoning.

Anyway, according to Winch those who deny the possibility of cross-cultural understanding evidently have the latter type of impossibility in mind: they consider the idea of a solution to be meaningless. Winch sees a parallel between them and those who doubt our ability really to understand another individual human being, invoking what is commonly known as “the problem of other minds”.

As regards that problem, Winch notes that in everyday life, we will sometimes behave as if we understood precisely what is going on in someone else’s mind, and sometimes also as if we failed to know our own mind. Yet when doing philosophy we are easily persuaded to ignore these experiences: we accept the idea that our understanding of our own behaviour sets the standard of what it means to understand a person, and that our grasp of what another is doing can never fully meet that standard. Why are we so ready to think along these lines? The reason this conception is so enticing, Winch suggests, is that while a person’s understanding of what she is doing shows itself in her words as well as actions, we tend to give pre-eminence to the words. Accordingly, we are led to suppose that in explaining her actions the agent manifests her straightforward access to the mental processes which produce her behaviour and thus determine their sense. This view of the understanding of human action gets expressed, for instance, in the so-called belief-desire model which holds sway within contemporary analytic philosophy.

³ On this, see also Floyd (2000).

The view of interpersonal understanding sketched here naturally gives rise to a certain philosophical conception of what is involved in the understanding of an alien culture. In Winch's words:

Understanding another culture is not a matter of understanding the behaviour of all or most individual participants in it; but perhaps we might try saying that it is understanding the inner maps according to which people of that culture navigate and the destinations they are trying to reach. Such maps will be to an indeterminately large degree culturally determined. (1997: 196)⁴

Winch here seems to be endorsing the idea of cultural maps to explain cultural differences in behaviour. Yet it seems clear to me that that is not his actual intention. For as he goes on to point out, even if such maps were thought to exist and even if we had access to them, this would not provide a key to understanding the culture itself:

A sketch, whether physical or mental, is only a map by virtue of the way it is used or applied, and this can be discerned only through study of the actions of those who do apply it. It is no use trying to start with agents' "internal maps" – with their internal "desires and beliefs" in the hope that these will breathe sense and meaning into the otherwise enigmatic actions we are confronted with. On the contrary we see desires and beliefs for what they are only through the behaviour in which they are manifested. (1997: 196f.)

This means that the explanatory role of these mental maps becomes obscure, since in the end the behaviour must stand on its own. Let's assume there are such maps: even so, two individuals with identical maps might behave in totally different ways, and vice versa. What Winch means to be saying, I take it, is that the maps drop out of the picture, like the beetle in Wittgenstein's box (see PI: § 293). On the other hand, we might use map talk as ways of summarizing what we find characteristic about a foreign culture, without attributing an explanatory force to the maps.

Cross-cultural understanding will often take the form of trying to find an intelligible pattern in alien ways of speaking and acting, say,

⁴ Winch adds in a footnote: "Indeterminately' because no sharp boundary can be drawn between what is cultural and what is not". We might also say: there is no sharp boundary between the local and the personal.

by finding analogies with practices with which we are familiar. However, a central point of Winch's argument is that there is no reason to suppose that the line between what we are and are not able to make sense of should coincide with the line between our own and other societies:

parts of "our" culture may be quite alien to one of "us"; indeed some parts of it may be *more* alien than cultural manifestations which are geographically or historically remote. I see no reason why a contemporary historical scholar might not find himself more at home in the world of medieval alchemy than in that of twentieth century professional football. (1997: 198)⁵

It could be suggested, though Winch does not say so, that we tend to model our conception of cultural differences on the relation between different countries with their distinct territories, languages and laws. This tempts us to overlook the fact that the lines between what feels alien and what feels congenial run across societies – indeed, sometimes even across individuals: thus I may feel very much at home with one of my countrymen in discussing the Finnish civil war which was fought a hundred years ago; yet when we come to the refugee policies of our current government we might find a chasm of understanding suddenly opening up between us: not just vehement disagreement in opinions but utter failure to agree on the parameters of the discussion. As we might put it: the frontier between different localities is everywhere perforated by variations in personal responses.

As an example Winch cites R. G. Collingwood, in his autobiography, describing his alienation from some of his Oxford colleagues: he could not see the point of what they were discussing, yet could make contributions to the debate which were recognized as such by the other participants. This was a situation with which Winch must have been able to identify. Similarly, for all her indifference my wife *might* actually have been skilled at hockey.

In this connection Winch quotes a remark from Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value*:

⁵ Contrast this with the quotation from "Understanding a Primitive Society", p. 32, above.

It is important for our approach that someone may feel concerning certain people that he will never know what goes on inside them. He will never understand them. (Englishwomen for Europeans). (CV: 84)⁶

Winch mentions that Wittgenstein in bringing up this problem frequently used the phrase “*ich kann mich in sie nicht finden*”, and he suggests that it might be rendered by “I can’t get the hang of them” (“I can’t find my feet with them” might be an alternative rendering).

Perhaps we could say: the problem of other cultures reconnects with the problem of other minds, though now the connection is different: difficulties of understanding other individuals and other groups are liable to arise in all our dealings with other people, though not in the sense that we will hit our heads against a metaphysical barrier, but rather as a problem dependent on temperament and life experience. Thus, if I am unable to understand some alien practice, I do not fail as the representative of my culture, but as the person I am – as a person shaped, it is true, by my social background, but also conditioned by my personality, including my ability to understand *myself*. The local and personal are intertwined.⁷

This makes it clear why the talk of “our standards and theirs”, in the terms of which the Winch–MacIntyre debate was carried out, in large part fails to capture our difficulty in making sense of the unfamiliar ways of foreign cultures. The word “standard” suggests a measurement of which I am aware and which I have learnt to apply to various ways of acting. However, my membership of a culture is not primarily constituted by my explicitly having been taught specific standards to act by, but rather by my having acquired various habitual manners of acting and judging, habits which will, in turn, acquire my personal stamp. How I will respond from the perspective

⁶ I here use Winch’s new translation from the second edition of *Culture and Value*, rather than the one he quotes in the essay.—It was unfortunate, I think, that Wittgenstein added the parenthesis about Englishwomen – evidently he needed to get something off his chest – since this brings us back to the idea that our ability to understand others is governed, as it were, by administrative borders.

⁷ It may be thought that problems of understanding are more frequent and more intractable the more distant in time and space the lives I am trying to comprehend, but there is no automatic correlation here. We should also consider the fact that we tend to expect greater mutual understanding in the case of neighbours and compatriots; thus behaviour that we would only find puzzling or curious in a foreign country might strike us as positively bizarre if we found that the people next door were engaging in it.

of those habits to people who act and judge in unfamiliar ways is not to be predicted from any articulated premises, but is rather an expression of the sort of person I am.

Winch writes: “The problems spring in large part from certain peculiarities of our notion of *understanding*, rather than from peculiarities about the relation between one culture and another” (1997: 202). Now one may ask what problems he is referring to here: in the preceding sentence he says that the difficulties of understanding that he is discussing “do not pertain exclusively to so-called ‘alien’ cultures”; however, his point can hardly be that *difficulties of understanding* are due to peculiarities of the concept. Rather, it seems clear that the problem he has in mind is the philosophical inclination to argue that interpersonal and/or intercultural understanding are forever beyond our reach.

The arc of Winch’s argument seems to be this: the distinction he gestures towards in the introduction between two types of *obstacles* to understanding – what we might call the informational and the metaphysical – is here replaced with a distinction between two kinds of *problems* of understanding, which roughly correspond to the distinction I made in the previous section between instrumental and existential puzzles. There is one type of problem which may require for its solution the supplying of some new bits of information or a more complete picture, and another type which requires that we look at the information or the picture present to us in a new way. (In many cases, both elements may play a role.) Thus, as a case of the former, I can understand the snow-fence if I see it in winter with snow piling up on one side of the fence while the road on the other side has little snow and cars pass without difficulty. (The idea of a metaphysical obstacle would be that of a case in which the complete picture is irretrievably hidden; as on the dualist view of the mind, or the idea that the thinking of members of an alien culture are simply inaccessible to us.) A case of the latter would be a picture-puzzle in which the drawing, say, of a girl, is hidden in the branches of a tree. In this case, someone might help me see the girl by filling in more details, but the point is that we can imagine a case in which the transition from not being able to make out the girl to being able to make her out may not require anything in the drawing being

changed. Coming to see the girl is the dawning of an aspect. (On this topic, see *PI*, Part II, chapter xi.) Now, when somebody's behaviour is an enigma to me, the reason may be my lacking some crucial piece of information, but it may also be my inability to look at it in the appropriate way. There is the possibility that a different aspect will dawn on me, and that what puzzled me before will then no longer be a puzzle. The case of trying to understand an alien practice may be analogous to this. Now my ability to perform the aspect shift which will remove the puzzle in such a case may be dependent on the kind of person I am, including my attitude to the other. If I am unable to perform it, I may wish as it were that I could look into the other person's mind, as by a metaphysical x-ray vision, to find out what she is thinking. But of course it is an illusion to assume that that would necessarily solve my problem even if we were to imagine it possible, since I might have the same trouble making out what is in the other person's mind.⁸

The analogy between the two distinctions is this: in both cases a contrast is drawn between problems of understanding which can be overcome if some missing piece of information is supplied, and those that can't be overcome in that way. The disanalogy is this: while it is thought that there is no way in which metaphysical obstacles to understanding can be overcome, Wittgenstein is arguing that overcoming (what I am calling) existential puzzles is not impossible in an absolute sense, the task simply has to be regarded in a different way than the other kind: what is required, putting it crudely, is a change in attitude. Since in doing philosophy we may be tempted to regard all cases of understanding as dependent on access to information, however, we easily conclude that if a problem of understanding cannot be overcome by the piling up of information, *it is simply not to be overcome*. For a given individual, the requisite change in attitude may in any case be beyond his reach – for him, the problem of understanding the other may indeed be impossible to overcome in this matter, and no amount of information will remedy the situation. (To say that understanding is impossible in an absolute sense, on the other hand, is to claim that there is something no one

⁸ Cp. "If God had looked into our minds, he would not have been able to see there whom we were speaking of" (*PI*, Part II: § 284).

will ever understand, no matter who one is or how hard one tries; in short, it is to say that *there is no such thing* as understanding the matter at hand.)

Winch illustrates the latter form of understanding by invoking Wittgenstein's discussion of our understanding of another person's pain. In an oft-quoted remark Wittgenstein exhorts us to view our relating to the people around us as living beings rather than automata, not as a matter of belief or opinion but as "an attitude towards a soul" – "*eine Einstellung zur Seele*" (cp. Winch 1987c). A case in point is the way we teach a child verbal expressions of pain, as described in another well-known remark: "A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour" (PI: § 244). This connects with the remark: "Pity, one may say, is one form of being convinced that someone else is in pain" (PI: § 287). The instruction occurs as the outcome of an emotional interaction: hurt and pity, lament and consolation; it is not based on the attempt to guess or infer what may be going on "inside" the child. (It is against the background of such interactions, on the other hand, that issues about the genuineness of expressions of pain may arise later on.)

The recognition that understanding another may amount to a form of interpersonal engagement enables us to do justice to the form interchanges about understanding may often take. My appeal for understanding may be an appeal for sympathy, solidarity or forgiveness. On the other hand, I may blame a person for his inability, or, what comes to much the same, his *unwillingness* to understand. Again, saying "I don't understand you" is often a way of rebuffing the other. It is an important aspect of our use of the word "understand" that questions of understanding may have such a peculiar force, what may in some cases be called a moral force. This is not a point explicitly made by Winch in this connection. It seems to me, however, that his remarks, for instance, about being unable to make sense of the consuming interest many Europeans have for professional football carry more than a tinge of moral

disparagement, rather than simply being an expression of bewildered curiosity.⁹

4.

The two strands in Winch's critique of apriorism, the local and the personal, are brought together in an illuminating way in his essay "Darwin, *Genesis* and Contradiction". The essay concerns the supposed conflict between the story of creation in the Bible, and Charles Darwin's theory of the origin of species. Winch discusses two opposite views of the conflict: one is the idea that the two accounts *necessarily* exclude each other, leading people to argue *either* that science has refuted the Bible, *or* that evolution must be rejected since it conflicts with *Genesis*. The other, which is what one might perhaps expect Wittgensteinians to embrace, is that there is no conflict here, since the two ideas of an account of the origin of things are bound up with different practices – science vs worship – and hence have different meanings. As the saying goes: they belong to different language-games.

The first type of response is one with which we are all familiar. It is shared by atheists like Richard Dawkins, American creationists and many others. Indeed, to most people it may come across as the natural view to take. Let's for present purposes call it "contradictionism". Winch imagines the contradictionist arguing as follows:

If ... we simply say: "This language game is played", are we not abdicating our prime philosophical responsibility – the responsibility of seeking clarity and consistency? Aren't we giving hostages to irrationalism? ... If two beliefs contradict each other, both cannot be right. Shouldn't we investigate which, if any, *is* right? (1987b: 132f.)

Winch retorts by saying we should get clear, first of all, "whether what we have here *is* a matter of two beliefs which 'contradict' each other *in a sense which* commits us to saying one of them *must* be

⁹ The moral aspect of understanding is given an ironic twist in contemporary identity politics, in which various groups assert the impossibility of outsiders understanding *them*; the notion of impossibility invoked here, it seems, is of the metaphysical variety.

‘wrong’” (1987b: 133; first italics mine). Implicit in this remark seems to be the suggestion that the word “contradiction” may be also used in a different sense: it may refer to two assertions which seem, on the face of it, to be in conflict, but where the appearance of a conflict vanishes if one digs deeper, as when someone says “She is my mother and she isn’t”, meaning “She was the one who looked after me when I was little, she always felt like a mother to me, etc., but she didn’t give birth to me” (or *vice versa*). To disregard this possibility and argue that a surface contradiction is necessarily a real contradiction would obviously be a form of apriorism: it would amount to claiming that the logical properties of words spoken can be identified on the basis of their form alone, without regard to the context of use. An important source of the temptation to think so is the oft-repeated notion that logic is purely a matter of “form”, that logical relations are independent of “content”.

Against this idea, Winch quotes Wittgenstein: “A contradiction is only a contradiction when it arises”.¹⁰ The context now is slightly different: Wittgenstein is talking about the idea of a *hidden* contradiction. This sounds like the opposite of a surface contradiction. However, these notions are two sides of the same coin: the idea that logic resides in the system of linguistic expressions. In fact, there is a tension in the Western tradition of formal logic between two senses of form: between the idea of form as defined by the physical marks or sounds constituting a written or spoken expression, and the idea of form as determined by the place of an expression in the language system. What both conceptions share is the idea that logical form is independent of the particular use to which words are put on this or that occasion – in short, the idea that logic is external to our speaking. (On this, see Hertzberg 2006.)

Winch addresses this picture of logic elsewhere, in his unpublished lecture “Reason and Persuasion” (a precursor to Winch 1992):

According to the conception of logic as a “normative science” it is the calculus itself which guarantees the validity of a certain form of inference. When we, human beings, apply the calculus, our ability to

¹⁰ From a conversation with Waismann, no reference given. (Quotation in Winch 1987b: 133.)

understand and *mean* the propositions which appropriately instantiate the logical forms laid down in the calculus, is an ability to connect ourselves up with the logical machinery of the calculus, which then does the work for us, as long as we don't interfere. (n.d.: 17)

Undoubtedly, there is something correct in the idea that in our attempting to reason our way to a conclusion, the process is in a sense independent of us. We may find ourselves obliged to acknowledge some consequence of our commitments that we were not prepared for. Yet it is important that we *will* be able to recognize it as such a consequence. On the other hand, the idea that the logical machinery is something outside of us to which we may entrust our reasoning opens up for the possibility that logic may also suddenly set itself against us; that we may find ourselves committed to conclusions from which we feel totally alien. This picture of logic may partly be modelled on arithmetic, where we may reluctantly have to admit, say, that our purchases add up to a larger sum than we had surmised. Logic, however, will not confront us with those kinds of surprises.

Winch speaks about getting the impression that “*logic* is ‘taking us by the throat’ and forcing us to change our ways”.¹¹ This may indeed be the impression we sometimes get from the way people use an argument. For a case in point, consider the following dialogue from Väinö Linna’s novel *Under the North Star*, a novel dealing with events in a village in the Finnish countryside before and during the Finnish civil war. Jussi Koskela is a tenant farmer or crofter under a vicarage. The vicar has given him permission to clear some of the land for his own use by draining a swamp. The old vicar dies, and a young successor and his wife move in. They and the tenant get along, but after some time, the young couple run into money trouble. The vicar’s wife proposes that they solve their financial problems by reclaiming for their own use some of the land cleared by Koskela. The vicar feels bad about the proposal. The wife says:

“Why should we worry about Koskela’s feelings anyway? He can’t believe he has some kind of property right in the lands of the tenancy ... He has to understand that he is a tenant on someone else’s property

¹¹ This is a reference to Lewis Carroll, “What the Tortoise Said to Achilles”, discussed by Winch in 1963: 55 ff.

that he will have to give up one day anyway ... if you are to have tenants you must not let them get rooted for too long, for then they will instinctively, but without right, begin to regard the land as their own”.

The vicar pulled his napkin from under his collar. He was choking up. In the course of years he had come to know his wife’s feelings from her tone of voice and her attitudes, and he had a sense they were now gearing up for a battle for life and death. Ellen had made up her mind. That was obvious.

“In my view he has a kind of property right. Clearer’s right”.

Ellen’s eyebrows went sky-high in a characteristic manner.

“Did you clear the grounds that are now in the possession of the vicarage?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“In that case you have to give up the right of possession right away. Go and look for whoever cleared them and hand the lands to him as soon as possible”.

“You’re splitting hairs. That’s nonsense”.

“Splitting hairs indeed. Not at all. Property is acquired through purchase, inheritance or gift Tell me how many people in this country have themselves cleared the ground they own”. (Linna 1959: 206f., my translation)

The wife is attempting a *reductio ad absurdum* of the suggestion that the tenant might have some kind of claim in the land he has cleared. Is it a fallacy? Not necessarily. Her argument depends on neglecting the distinction the vicar is trying to make between “a *kind of right*” – as it were a moral right – and a legal right. Quite possibly she does not take her argument any more seriously as an argument than her husband does. Rather, she is signalling her strong objection to the very notion of any kind of moral right of ownership. The vehemence of her response, one may suspect, is driven by her awareness that she might be accused of injustice motivated by greed.

Anyway, the vicar could put her straight by making clear that he was not speaking legally. In fact, this is how an ordinary argument differs from an arithmetical calculation. If I am surprised by the sum of my outlays, I do not have recourse to saying: “I didn’t mean those figures that way”, whereas if someone surprises me by the inference

she draws from my words, it is open to me to say: “I didn’t mean it that way”. As Winch points out in “Reason and Persuasion”:

If for instance someone is uncertain what inferences to draw from something I have said (p), he or she may ask me: “Did you mean such and such when you said p ?” Suppose I say yes. My answer is not a report of a recollection of something that took place in my mind when I said p . (I may or may not have such a recollection.) It is what Wittgenstein often calls “a logical determination”. Or, to put the same point differently, it is a move recognized in the language game, a move that plays a definite logical role.

But someone is sure to object that this opens the door to anarchy, in that I shall be subject to no constraints and can say what I like, that it makes a **fraud** of the use of the past tense in “I **meant** such and such”, and it would be more candid for me to say “I have just decided to mean such and such”. But it does not open any doors that were not already open. I don’t have to be candid when I report what I recollect either. There clearly **is** a difference between someone who simply makes things up as he goes along and someone who sticks to his logical commitments...

It is not true, furthermore, that this account means I am not subject to **any** constraints. The constraints are simply of a different sort than we expected to find. One constraint is that if I go too far in overstepping the acknowledged limits of latitude, I shall find that the people with whom I wish to speak will not know what to make of me, will cease to take much notice of what I say and perhaps just stop talking with me. (n.d.: 18)

Wittgenstein makes a similar point in the following remark in *Philosophical Investigations*:

Someone says to me: “Show the children a game”. I teach them gambling with dice, and the other says “I didn’t mean that sort of game”. In that case, must he have had the exclusion of the game with dice before his mind when he gave me the order? (PI: boxed remark following § 70)

What keeps the other’s reaction from being an arbitrary stipulation in retrospect (unlike what might be the case, say, if I had taught the children checkers) is the way children’s games are regarded in our culture, our attitude to children playing for money, etc. Or, as the case may be, it might be something about the speaker or about the

children, something he might have expected me to know and take into account.

It is not just the case that others may accuse me of inconsistency – I may of course myself come to judge that I had been inconsistent. Perhaps the crucial point could be formulated as follows: it is not to be judged on the basis of words alone whether I am failing to be true to my own commitments, or whether I can honestly maintain that this was not a construal I could ever have wished to be put on my words. But on the other hand, the question whether it is so is not an arbitrary matter.

Given the right sort of context (say, during a search for legal possibilities) Ellen's argument might have been perfectly all right. What makes it manipulative is the use to which it is put: as part of her attempt to thwart her husband's wish to let considerations of justice enter the discussion. The point is that there is no formal characteristic marking off valid argument from manipulative persuasion. Winch refers to Wittgenstein in this connection:

Wittgenstein is quite explicit about the fact that he too is in the business of persuasion. For him sophistical distortion and “the dogmatism into which philosophy so easily degenerates” does not spring from the use of persuasion instead of argument. One of its main roots is, rather, the concealment of what is going on – from others or from oneself. (n.d.: 13)

Or even, as in the case of the vicar's wife, the unabashed use of argument as a means of emotional extortion. The line between honest argument and sophistical sleight of hand, we might say, is constituted by the role words are given in a context of human interaction.

Back to the issue concerning the conflict between Darwin and *Genesis*. Winch writes:

My suggestion has been that it is not obvious that we have a single, unambiguous notion of “an account of the origin of things”, such that we can say that *Genesis* and Darwin offer two mutually contradictory versions of such an account. On the other hand I *don't* want to say that we are merely punning [i.e. exploiting the fact that two expressions just *happen* to sound alike] if we say that both are “accounts of the origin of things”; or that the two stories have absolutely nothing to do with each

other. I want to say that, looked at from one point of view, they seem to contradict each other, and looked at from another point of view, they seem not to. But I don't want to say that either point of view is "*the right one*". We must not lose sight of either. (Winch 1987b: 137)

Thinking along these lines, Winch maintains, puts philosophy back into contact with the Socratic tradition and its exhortation: "Know thyself". Winch concludes:

in clarifying his own mind about what he can and can't accept, a man is making important discoveries about himself: discoveries that may be barely distinguishable from decisions about what manner of man he wants to be. All these issues are involved in the examination of what seem to be deep contradictions in one's thought. It is not just a mechanical exercise in which the work has, as it were, already been done in a hidden realm by logic and simply needs to be revealed to view. (Winch 1987b: 138f.)

It can justly be argued, however, that at this point Winch misconstrues the role of the personal. In trying to make up my mind about what I can and cannot accept I will not, normally, be taken to be making *myself* an object of my thought. On the contrary, my turning the matter into one concerning *who I want to be* is liable to interfere with my ability to attend justly to the matter at hand, and thus to distort my judgment.¹²

All the same, someone troubled by the issue whether there is or is not a conflict between the stories must ultimately rely on her own judgment. Philosophy cannot, as long as it stays truthful, deliver a verdict.

In this essay, I have tried to suggest some analogies between the philosophical problems surrounding the understanding of alien cultures, and those connected with the nature of logical thought. On a traditional account, an appeal is made in both cases to forms of thought that are given *a priori*: to a universal human rationality, or to universal principles of logic. Wittgenstein's later philosophy inspired a criticism of these ideas, emphasizing instead what I have called local variations in human thought and action, in language games and

¹² This point was brought home to me by David Cockburn. In fact, this is precisely a point Winch himself makes elsewhere, say, in his discussion of Casaubon's attempt at art criticism in Eliot's *Middlemarch*. See Winch (1987a, pp. 19f.).

forms of life. Attention to the local was central to Winch's early work. In his later work, I have argued, he increasingly recognized the need to complement the appeals to the local with attention to the variations of the responses of particular persons in particular situations. This change of perspective, I would argue, brought about a deepening of his grasp of the issues.¹³

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