



PART THREE

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# After Logical Empiricism



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## CHAPTER NINE

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# The Leopard Does Not Change Its Spots: Naturalism and the Argument against Methodological Pluralism in the Sciences

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*Vulpes pilum mutat, non mores*

### 9.1. INTRODUCTION: THE RED HERRING OF THE MIND AS AN INNER THEATER

The connection between meaning and inner inscrutable psychological items was immortalized by Locke, who claimed that a parrot does not speak a language *stricto sensu*, even though it can utter a word, because there is no idea in the parrot's mind for which the word is the outward expression. Without the underlying idea in the mind the word remains a mere sound and does not qualify as a linguistic item. The parrot does not

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mean anything when it utters a word. This close connection between the meaning of an utterance and the underlying psychological item underpins Locke's well-known account of what it takes to understand others (cf. Locke [1690] 1964: Book III). On Locke's account, when a person speaks, he or she attaches a word (which, like a label, is public and observable) to an idea (which is inner and to that extent inscrutable). To understand the meaning of the speaker's utterance, therefore, the listener must "translate" the public observable sign, the written or spoken word, back into an idea in their own mind, thereby recovering the speaker's original meaning.

In Chapter 2 of *Word and Object*, Quine ([1960] 2001) puts forward a positive proposal for how to "understand" others that dispenses with appeal to mental entities. The task of understanding others, for Quine, can (and should) be undertaken without invoking the mental notions which, on the Lockean picture of the relation between thought and language, are what allegedly bestow meaning onto the speaker's linguistic behavior. Quine ([1960] 2001: 29) considers how a field linguist who only has access to the publicly observable linguistic behavior of "natives," without any prior familiarity with their language, can translate sentences from the natives' language into her own. Translation from alien languages, Quine argues, is "radical," in the sense that the linguist can only appeal to observable behavioral aspects. What enables the linguist to render a term such as "gavagai" as "rabbit" is the native speaker's behavioral disposition to assent to the term "gavagai" when in the presence of a rabbit, rather than some supposed access to the concept or idea which, in the Lockean view, the word signifies. Radical translation, to be clear, is not just the method of the field linguist; it is a proposal for an alternative science of understanding which dispenses with the notion of meaning as no more than a convenient way of speaking (cf. Kirk 2004: 152). Quine's argument for radical translation is therefore often seen as providing indirect support for his earlier (and more direct) attack on intensional notions in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (Quine 1951; for a discussion of this, see Kemp 2006: 35).

In the last half of the twentieth century, Quine's proposal for how to articulate a science of understanding which requires nothing beyond a purely extensional context of explanation has become something of an orthodoxy. What seems to have made Quine's account of radical translation compelling to many is the assumption that—given the close connections between meaning and mental items as depicted in Locke's account of language—rejecting the view that to understand others requires recovering inner, inscrutable psychological items requires abandoning the notion of meaning itself. In other words, if one rejects the Lockean picture of how one understands others (the speaker has an idea, which she translates into a



word; the listener hears the word and translates the word back into an idea in her own mind), one must also reject the Lockean claim that there is more to a linguistic utterance than mere linguistic behavior.

In this chapter, we wish to challenge the view that to provide an account of how to understand others which dispenses with inscrutable inner mental items one must extrude all intensional notions as inherently suspicious and give up altogether on the notion of meaning. We argue that it is based on a red herring which has (quite effectively) diverted attention away from the genuine issues at stake between those who defend the autonomy and possibility of humanistic explanations and those who endorse a form of scientism which denies that such explanations are *sui generis*. The red herring is that in order to develop a humanistic account of how we understand others that does not fall prey to what Quine (1969: 27) refers to as the Lockean “myth of the museum in which the exhibits are meanings and the words are labels,” and is earlier referred to by Ryle ([1949] 1990: 17) as the “myth of the ghost in the machine,” it is necessary to endorse Quine’s positive proposal for a science of understanding—the view that all translation is radical—and its corollary—that there are no fixed meanings (the indeterminacy of translation).

We argue that the bone of contention between those who defend the autonomy of humanistic explanations and those who endorse a form of scientism which denies such explanations are *sui generis* is *not* that the former commit to the existence (and accessibility) of inner mental items that are inscrutable from a purely behavioral perspective, while the latter reject them. What is at stake, rather, is whether explanations which invoke normative considerations are different in kind from causal explanations. Once the criticism that the defense of a distinctive form of humanistic understanding necessarily rests on a commitment to suspicious mental entities is exposed as a red herring, the motivation for endorsing Quine’s positive proposal concerning how to understand others (radical translation) and its corollary (indeterminacy of translation) is substantively weakened. We trace the history of this red herring to the way in which an earlier attempt to defend the possibility of distinctive humanistic explanations—viz., Collingwood’s—was dismissed by falsely accusing it of relying on the early modern conception of the mind as an “inner theater.” Then we consider how this objection raised its head again and was mobilized by the Quinean naturalist against Peter Winch’s defense of humanistic explanations.

Section 9.2 introduces Collingwood’s argument for a humanistically oriented historiography, an argument that was redeployed by W. H. Dray to rebut Hempel’s neopositivist defense of the unity of science. We defend this argument against the *epistemological* objection that humanistic explanations, as depicted by Collingwood and Dray, ascribe historians

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implausible telepathic powers of access to the minds of historical agents and their contents. We argue that, as Dray makes clear, Collingwood's defense of a humanistically oriented historiography neither assumes that historians have special *epistemological* powers of access to the minds of historical agents, nor rests on a commitment to *ontologically* suspicious entities; it consists rather in the claim that explanations which invoke normative considerations are different in kind from causal explanations. Section 9.3 considers a similar objection raised by the Quinean naturalist against Peter Winch's argument for methodological diversity in the sciences. According to Quinean naturalists, Winch's philosophy subscribes to an ontology of stable and determinate mental entities—designated as “the meaning” of human actions—which serve as the objects of understanding in social science research. Since naturalism explicitly denies the existence or knowability of such mental entities, naturalists dismiss Winch's philosophy of the social sciences as a latter-day idealist ontology about ghosts in the machine. We claim, once again, that this objection draws attention away from the true bone of contention; that is, whether or not the logical form of humanistic explanation is irreducible to that of causal explanation. Tracing the history of this particular red herring back to the methodological debate for and against methodological unity in the sciences as it was played out between Hempel and Dray shows that naturalism, like the leopard, has not changed its spots: the same straw man objection is being remobilized here to motivate support for a solution to what is actually a false problem.

Naturalism, of course, comes in many shades of grey that are not examined in this chapter. It could therefore be argued that we are making our lives considerably easier by focusing on the renewal of the argument for methodological unity as it was articulated by naturalism's chief villain rather than focusing on softer forms of naturalism, such as those found in Donald Davidson's anomalous monism and John McDowell's liberal naturalism. They, unlike Quine, do not pursue an eliminativist agenda, but rather a reconciliatory one. Although it cannot be argued here, such attempts to do justice to the normative *sui generis* character of the mental within a naturalistic framework cannot succeed; such reconciliatory efforts are doomed to fail just like the attempt to square the circle, but to explain why this is the case would take a long excursus into deeply buried metaphilosophical assumptions that cannot be fully explored here (see D'Oro 2012 and D'Oro, Giladi, and Papazoglou 2019). We focus on Quine because instead of pursuing a reconciliatory agenda, he seeks to undercut the need to do justice to the distinctive character of normative/rationalizing explanations by dispensing with the very entities (inner mental items) which, he believes, generate the need for such *sui generis* explanations in the first instance. We argue that



the need to acknowledge the *sui generis* nature of rationalizing explanations was never born out of a commitment to the early modern conception of the mind as an inner theater and that Quine's attempt to undercut the need for *sui generis* rationalizing explanations by eliminating the "beetle" in the mind is directed at a straw man. Irreducibly normative/rationalizing explanations are needed not to acknowledge the existence of the beetle, but to do justice to the subtleties of language, to capture the distinction between "actions" understood as bodily movements (and thus as mere species of events which can be explained causally) and "actions" understood as responses to norms (i.e., as a *sui generis* concept, which do not stand to the concept of "event" as a species to its genus in the way in which, e.g., the species "cow" stands to the genus "mammal"). Abolishing the distinction between these two senses of the term "action" is to fail to see the difference between abiding by a norm and following a (natural) law.

## 9.2. THE HEMPELIAN CHALLENGE

The possibility of a distinctive type of humanistic explanation that differs in kind from explanations in the natural sciences was a hotly disputed issue in mid-twentieth-century philosophy. The debate for and against methodological unity in the sciences was reignited by the publication of Hempel's influential 1942 paper "The Function of General Laws in History," where he argues that humanistic explanations are not different in kind from scientific explanations, because, appearances notwithstanding, they share the same logical form or structure. The battle for and against methodological unity in the sciences was by and large fought out on the turf of the philosophy of history, not least because the example used by Hempel to undermine the irreducibility of humanistic explanations was lifted from the pages of a historical text. Hempel's famous example is that of dust bowl farmers who were said to have migrated because of deteriorating living conditions. Hempel's claim is that such a historical explanation is not different in kind from the nomological explanations used in the natural sciences, because it covertly relies on the general law that populations will tend to migrate when living conditions deteriorate. Historical explanations are incomplete nomological explanations or "explanation sketches" that when filled in or duly completed, are revealed to be nomological explanations which are not different in kind from explanations used in the natural sciences to account for natural events such as volcanic explosions or solar eclipses.

Hempel's challenge is picked up by W. H. Dray (1957, 1958, 1963, 1964, 1980), who mobilizes Collingwood's argument for the autonomy of historical explanation against Hempel's claim for methodological unity. Historical

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explanations, Dray argues, are not incomplete nomological explanations, as Hempel states, but complete explanations of a different kind. In a nomological explanation, the explanandum is the conclusion of an inductive argument. The fact of water freezing, for example, is explained by pointing out that this is what normally happens when the temperature drops below 0°C. The explanandum is inferred from a general law (if the temperature drops below 0°C, water freezes) and certain antecedent conditions (the dropping of the temperature). In historical explanations, by contrast, the explanandum is the conclusion of a practical argument, not an inductive one. When explained *historically*, the migration of the dust bowl farmers is presented as the result of a reasoning process in which the conclusion (the migration) is the logical or rational thing to do. Just as in Aristotle's practical syllogism, the conclusion that eating chicken is good is rationally entailed by the premises that chicken is light meat and that eating light meat is good for you, here the migration of the dust bowl farmers is presented (in the context of a historical explanation) as the reasonable conclusion of the argument that it is better to migrate where living conditions are more favorable to the sustenance of life. Humanistic explanations differ from scientific explanations *not* because they are incomplete nomological explanations or explanation sketches, as Hempel argues, but because they are complete explanations of a different kind; they are normative explanations which account for what agents do by invoking what they *ought* to do if they act reasonably.

Dray's criticism of Hempel exposes the claim for methodological unity in the sciences as resting on a failure to distinguish between what Collingwood takes to be the categories of actions and events (cf. Collingwood [1946] 1993: Part V, Epilegomena). Actions (which he takes to be the distinctive subject matter of history) are the correlative of normative/rationalizing explanations; humanistic explanations have a distinctive explanandum because they have a *sui generis* method that differs from the nomological explanations in natural science, where the explanandum is Events (including human bodily movements understood as mere behavior). From Collingwood's perspective, the claim for methodological unity in the sciences is based on a category mistake (the conflation of the category of action and that of event) which arises when one fails to discern the different senses that the term cause/because possesses in different explanatory contexts; cf. Collingwood [1940] 1998: 285–327).

The Hempelian challenge to the claim that there is a *sui generis* form of action explanation does not deny the legitimacy of notions such as beliefs and desires; it rather co-opts them in the context of nomological explanations: just as the dropping of the temperature, together with the general law that water freezes at 0°C, can be used to explain why water in a





bucket froze overnight, so (for Hempel) beliefs and desires can be deployed in the context of nomological explanations to explain, for example, why the dust bowl farmer migrated when living conditions deteriorated. This attempt to co-opt propositional attitudes such as beliefs and desires in the context of nomological explanations is however premised on the mistaken assumption that the relation between the explanans and the explanandum in an action explanation is an empirical connection that is established by observation and inductive generalization, rather than a conceptual connection. But reasons for actions, for Collingwood and Dray, are not Humean causes that are temporally prior to, and logically independent of, their effect: how one rationalizes the action determines what kind of action it is. Whether a person opening a window is “letting air in” or “letting a fly out” is not logically independent of how the action is rationalized. Because action explanations are rationalizations, they resist assimilation in a naturalistic picture in which they are presented as essentially types of events which are caused by antecedent conditions of a particular (internal) kind. As a contemporary causalist such as Albert Mele (2000: 279) would put it, “our actions are, essentially, events ... that are suitably caused by mental items, or neural realizations of those items.” From the perspective of Collingwood and Dray, actions are not events, because they are the correlative of different kinds of explanations; the claim that actions are events, or a species of events (events which are the effects of internal rather than external causes) rests on a conflation of two distinct meanings of the term “because.”<sup>1</sup>

Hempel’s challenge is therefore met (and undermined) by the consideration that rationalizing explanations (of actions) are not causal/nomological explanations (of events), because the former establish conceptual rather than empirical connections and have a normative dimension that the latter lack: even when they are used predictively, rather than retrospectively, rational explanations do not foresee future behavior by subsuming it under a general psychological law, but anticipate how one would act if one acted rationally; that is, as one ought to act in the circumstances. The historical understanding of action is therefore a matter of rendering past behavior intelligible by ascribing agents a practical argument that rationalizes (in an instrumental rather than a moral sense) the action. Rationalization, to be clear, is not a historical method only insofar as it applies to the understanding of past agents. One might say, in an exact reversal of Quine’s claim that radical translation applies not only to the field linguist but also to the translator of living languages, that rationalization begins at home: it is in the same way that we understand our contemporaries, and indeed ourselves, insofar as we explain what is done *qua* action (cf. Collingwood [1946] 1993: 219). The divide between humanistic and historical explanations is therefore not

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a divide between the future-directed explanations of science and the past-directed explanations of history, but between radically different ways of homing in on the explanandum (cf. D’Oro 2018).

One important implication of the distinction between rationalizing explanations and causal explanations as defended by Collingwood and Dray is that actions, unlike events, are identified by invoking the thoughts which they express. Insofar as the description of an action requires appeal to a thought process or rationalization, understanding action requires going beyond a purely extensional context of explanation, or the description of mere bodily movements. For, after all, the same bodily movements could be the expression of different rationalizations, as in Anscombe’s (1957: 41) example of the man who operates a water pump: is he replenishing the water supply or poisoning the inhabitants of the house? It is this claim—viz., the claim that the understanding of action requires going beyond a purely extensional context of explanation to expose the thought of which the action is the expression—that gives rise to the criticism that Collingwood’s defense of the autonomy of historical explanation rests on the dubious *ontological* commitment to the existence of hidden mental processes (the kind that Quine is keen to eliminate) and the equally suspicious epistemological claim that historians enjoy special epistemic powers of insight.

Collingwood came to be seen as the target of Ryle’s criticism of the myth of the ghost in the machine, and Collingwood’s doctrine of reenactment, which claims that to understand an action historically is to rethink the thoughts of historical agents, was mocked for bestowing on historians unlikely telepathic powers of access to other minds (cf. Gardiner 1952a, 1952b: 213). Objections of this nature may have been prompted by Collingwood’s unguarded use of language—by the claim, for example, that actions have an inside which events lack (Collingwood [1946] 1993: 213). But one only needs to scratch beneath the veneer of what he writes to reveal that talk of an “inside” and an “outside” is a highly metaphorical way of expressing the claim that we are dealing here with different kinds of explanations, with a different logical form in each case, which suit the distinctive explanatory goals of scientific and humanistic explanations. The historical meaning or significance of an action, for Collingwood, is not a psychological process of which the action is an outward manifestation in the way in which, for Locke, a word is an observable sign that stands for an idea in the mind that is inscrutable from a third-person perspective. The thought context which historians should take into account are not agents’ inner states. They are the epistemic, moral, legal, aesthetic norms which form the background of their actions. Just as understanding a character in a period novel requires suspending the rules that govern the historian’s own life and imaginatively reconstructing what



it means to live under a different set of expectations and demands, so too understanding agents in history is seeing how they responded to the rules and expectations of their world. In other words, it is to enter into what Wittgenstein calls their “forms of life.” As Collingwood puts it:

The Historian, investigating any event in the past, makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and the inside of an event. By the outside of the event I mean everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements: the passage of Caesar, accompanied by certain men, across a river called the Rubicon at one date, or the spilling of his blood on the floor of the senate house at another. By the inside of the event I mean that in it which can only be described in terms of thought: Caesar’s defiance of Republican law, or the clash of constitutional policy between himself and his assassins. The historian is never concerned with either of these to the exclusion of the other. He is investigating not mere events (where by a mere event I mean one which has only an outside and no inside) but actions, and an action is the unity of the outside and inside of the event. (Collingwood [1946] 1993: 213)

As this passage makes (abundantly) clear, the meaning of Caesar’s action, which is what historical investigation aims to uncover, is not a thought inside Caesar’s head, but what that action signifies in relation to the norms which governed the Roman Republic. To uncover what Caesar’s action means requires understanding republican law, just as to understand the meaning of a word is to understand the grammar of the language to which it belongs, not trying to enter the speaker’s head.

To distinguish the way in which explanations in the human and the natural sciences operate and the nature of their explanandum, there is no need to commit either to the ontological claim that there are mental processes or to the epistemological claim that the historian has a hotline to these thoughts. On Collingwood’s account of Caesar’s action, the crossing of the Rubicon has a determinate meaning which is defined by the laws of the republic along with what counts as an infringement of them, just as the gesture of raising one’s hand at an academic conference, in this specific context, signifies the request to ask a question. Collingwood would have accepted that to understand the meaning of Caesar’s action, one needs insider knowledge of the rules and regulations that applied to Roman generals under the republic, but he would have denied that to have such “insider” knowledge, one needs somehow to peek into the heads of Romans or indeed assume that the meaning of Caesar’s action is captured by an internal monologue that he recited to himself while crossing the Rubicon. Meaning or significance, so

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understood, is not located in the head: to grasp the significance of Caesar's action, one needs "insider" knowledge of the Roman world, not knowledge of what goes on "inside" Caesar's head, just as to understand the meaning of raising one's hand at an academic conference requires understanding the rules of engagement that govern that context.<sup>2</sup>

Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation arguably rests on an equivocation of these two different meanings of "inside." He denies the radical translator (whose task is to render a word into the home language without any prior knowledge of the target language) "*insider* knowledge" in the sense of prior familiarity with the norms (linguistic and otherwise) that govern the agent's behavior on the grounds that presupposing familiarity with the cultural context of the native speaker would be tantamount to being able to "see" "inside" the head of the speaker, just as a bilingual speaker could "see" the idea that stands behind the words of each language.<sup>3</sup> As we see in the next section, this objection has been raised by the Quinean-inspired naturalist against Peter Winch's defense of *sui generis* social science explanations. But once again, the objection that the notion of meaning is inevitably bound up with an earlier conception of the mind as an inner theater misses the target: radical translation is an implausible solution to an entirely fabricated problem.

### 9.3. THE QUINEAN CHALLENGE

Along with Ludwig Wittgenstein, Collingwood is the other main source of inspiration for Peter Winch's philosophy of the social sciences. Winch's seminal work, *The Idea of a Social Science* (ISS; Winch [1958] 1990), makes frequent reference to Collingwood, and the very title of the book consciously alludes to *The Idea of History*. However, while Winch often explicitly acknowledges the Wittgensteinian influence on his work, the inspiration he derives from Collingwood remains far less explicit. One reason for this may be that Winch himself is not fully aware of all the fundamental similarities between his own position and Collingwood's. In addition, Winch is not always the most astute reader of Collingwood, and in ISS he repeats the common misinterpretation of reenactment as psychological *Einfühlung* rather than seeing it, as Collingwood would have insisted, as a critical reconstruction of past reasoning along with the historically contingent conditions of its meaningfulness.

Given these circumstances, it is only quite recently that scholars have articulated fundamental connections between Collingwood's and Winch's work, pointing to ways in which Winch's philosophy of the social science can be read as an implicit development of themes found in Collingwood's



philosophy of history (Ahlskog and Lagerspetz, forthcoming). Collingwood's and Winch's seminal books on "the idea" share views on what the human sciences *are about*. Both thinkers argue that the human sciences involves forms of understanding and explanation that are logically distinct from those employed in the natural sciences. In the following section, we present the challenge to Winch's philosophy of the social sciences that has been mounted from the point of view of Quinean naturalism, a challenge that, if valid, applies ipso facto to Collingwood's defense of a humanistically oriented historiography.

The naturalist critique is inseparably connected with an ontological reading of central arguments in Winch's philosophy of social science. In a key passage in *ISS*, Winch argues that there is, in humanistic forms of explanation and understanding, a logical priority for the participant's unreflective understanding of social phenomena. Winch's crucial argument is that the description of a social or intellectual phenomenon cannot even get started unless the researcher can identify what *belongs to* the phenomenon (and thus counts as "the same thing") according to classifications that the participants in the target society themselves would potentially use—specifically identified by Winch as "the unreflective understanding" of the participants. In that sense, the social scientist is not like an engineer investigating physical processes, but more like an apprentice engineer who wants to understand the activities of his colleagues in terms of their concepts, reasons, and norms of belief (Winch [1958] 1990: 88). However, Winch is keen to point out that this argument is about logical requirements for understanding social phenomena and not an ad hoc stipulation about the supposed impossibility of critical engagement with the participant's own understanding; the latter interpretation has been the source of many misrepresentations of Winch's philosophy (cf. Ahlskog and Lagerspetz 2015). Winch writes:

I do not wish to maintain that we must stop at the unreflective kind of understanding of which I gave as an instance the [apprentice] engineer's understanding of the activities of his colleagues. But I do want to say that any more reflective understanding must necessarily presuppose, if it is to count as genuine understanding at all, the participant's unreflective understanding. ... [A]lthough the reflective student of society, or of a particular mode of social life, may find it necessary to use concepts which are not taken from the forms of activity which he is investigating, ... still these technical concepts of his will imply a previous understanding of those other concepts which belong to the activities under investigation. (Winch [1958] 1990: 89)

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The decisive question raised by this quote is what Winch's notion of the participants "unreflective understanding" means. Throughout *ISS*, Winch explicates this notion as the ideas, concepts, and rules that belong to the social phenomena themselves, and he argues that it is by viewing the behavior of the agents in relation to such ideas and concepts that the social scientist makes sense of actions by historical agents. Winch emphasizes that ideas and concepts are not something apart from the action itself and indeed advances something similar to Collingwood's argument for the internal connection between action and thought. His point is that actions are what they are only in relation to the concepts and ideas embodied in the social relations and institutions of the target society itself. Without an understanding of the relevant ideas and concepts shared by the agents of the target society, one would not be able to explain how the actions and events in question follow from the motives and reasons of the agents. The reason for this, of course, is that it is only in relation to ideas and concepts—expressed in practices and ways of thinking—that actions appear as reasonable responses to some situation the agent is facing. Winch's main argument for showing how the meaning of actions derives from ideas and concepts is based on Wittgenstein's idea of rule-following. Winch argues that actions are cases of rule-following and that this feature distinguishes the category of action from brute biological or psychological dispositions and habits. According to Winch ([1958] 1990: 52), "all behaviour which is meaningful is *ipso facto* rule-governed." Consequently, the social scientist who endeavors to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the agents must do so in terms of the historically specific rules and norms in relation to which reasons and motives carry normative force.

According to the naturalist critique, Winch's notion of rules stipulates an ontology of Platonic meanings that constitutes and supplies the social world with a rigid and univocal structure (cf. Bohman 1993; Pleasants 1999, 2000; Pettit 2000; Roth 1987, 2003, 2011; Turner and Roth 2003; Turner 1994). As Mark Theunissen (2020: 259) has recently summarized this interpretation of Winch: "According to this reading, *ISS* argues that the social world can only have the necessary stability if built on a web of shared rules independent of any one individual, which magically constrains each one of us from destabilizing the social reality we are members of." According to Paul Roth (1987: 134), Winch's philosophy "hypostasizes social rules and talks of them ... as if they were an independent object of study." This reading is found also among scholars sympathetic to Winch. For instance, Nigel Pleasants (1999, 2000) writes that Winch ontologizes Wittgenstein, while Philip Pettit (2000) complains that Winch's ontology of rules imposes overly rigid constraints on the freedom of agency.



There are also those who view Winch's supposed ontology in positive terms. Alice Crary (2018: 31) construes Winch as proposing "a distinctive *social ontology*. At issue is an ontology on which objective features of the social world are irreducibly ethical." Winch, on Crary's (2018: 31) reading, tells us that values are just as real, or almost as real, as physical objects are—for Winch's account "is giving us an image of a region of objective reality as an intrinsically ethical realm." Still, Winch's supposed ontology of rules is more often read as a misguided endorsement of both cultural relativism and social conservatism (Roth 2003, 2011; Turner 1994; Turner and Roth 2003). But it is equally common, especially among naturalists, to construe Winch's supposed ontology as dependent on a hypothesis about mental entities. For example, Roth (1987: 138) derides, with implicit reference to Winch, philosophers of social science "who believe that there exist conceptual models lurking in mental space awaiting discovery."

The main line of attack in the naturalist critique is to contend that Winch's ontology steers social science in the wrong direction. For if translation of meaning is, as Quine argues, essentially indeterminate, then the task of discovering supposedly univocal meaning entities turns out to be an entirely misguided endeavor. According to Roth, this dismissal follows directly from Quine's thesis about the indeterminacy of translation and the uprooting of the analytic/synthetic distinction on which it is based. As Roth writes (1987: 139), the key issue is that Quine's thesis undermines the entire idea of believing that there exists a "mental model that a propitious translation might mirror." The point is, as Quine is supposed to have shown, that in contrast to the "objectively determinable stimulus conditions for observation sentences," there can be no "similar warrant for an assumption about a shared semantic model" (Roth 1987: 143). There are, Roth claims, no observable meaning facts parallel to natural facts. Quine's thesis shows, therefore, that "there is no behavioral fact of the matter [to separate between impositions and discoveries;] moreover ... there are no introspective facts of the matter to settle the question either" (Roth 1987: 234). On the basis of such considerations, Roth (1987: 143–4) concludes that Quine's thesis directly undercuts what he takes to be Winch's central proposal for the social sciences: "If we have no reason for assuming that there exists some unique set of rules by which individuals jointly make sense of their social environment, then it can hardly be maintained that the sole purpose of social analysis is to discover such rules."

There are two distinctly different ways in which one could defend Winch against the naturalist critique. One alternative is to tone down the rigidity of Winch's supposed ontological claims about the social world. Such a defense can be mounted by stressing that Winch makes many qualifying remarks

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in this connection. Social rules, for Winch, are neither static nor univocal building blocks of the human realm (cf. Winch [1958] 1990: § 1.8). Winch also shows the diversity of social rules, some of which are implicit and others explicit; some are rigid while others are more permissive (Winch [1958] 1990: §§ 2.2–2.5).<sup>4</sup> Theunissen (2020: 265) uses this line of defense and writes that for Winch, “rules aren’t a homogeneous class of ontological entities that fix social life as ready for interpretation, rather they are varied, multifaceted, contingently or necessarily indeterminate, subject to change and thus as pluriform and dynamic as we expect social life to be.” However, the problem with this line of defense is that it does not pull Winch firmly enough out of the ontological trench. Emphasizing the diversity of rules simply risks transforming Winch from a rigorous ontologist who subscribes to determinate Platonic meanings into an indecisive ontologist who believes that social rules are so varied that one cannot say much about them at all while, at the same time, lamenting that meaning entities are as complex as life itself. Furthermore, this kind of defense carries no weight against naturalism. For whether meaning entities are univocal or multifaceted makes no difference for the thesis of indeterminacy of translation—the argument is that no specifiable meaning can be discovered “behind” behavioral facts at all (cf. Roth 1987: 143).<sup>5</sup>

An alternative line of defense is to dispute that Winch was engaged with ontology in the first place, which means denying that *ISS* is in the business of determining what kinds of things generally exist in the world. In that case, one must explicate what kind of philosophical work Winch himself assigns to the much-debated concept of rule-following. It is important to note that Winch does not understand rule-following as a concept for making ontological claims, but rather as a concept used for *delineating logical distinctions* between forms of understanding and explanation in social and natural science, respectively. When Winch reflects on the main argument of *ISS* in his new introduction for the second edition of the book, he makes the following clarification:

The discussion of the distinction between the natural and the social sciences in the book revolves round the concept of *generality* and the different ways in which this characterizes our understanding of natural and social phenomena respectively. I expressed this difference by saying that our understanding of natural phenomena is in terms of the notion of cause, while our understanding of social phenomena involves the categories of *motives* and *reasons* for actions. Furthermore, I argued, whereas the category of cause involves generality by way of empirical generalizations, that of a reason for action involves generality by way





of rules. And these notions—of generalization and of rule—differ from each other in important logical respects. (Winch [1958] 1990: xi, original emphases)

In the paragraphs which follow these remarks, Winch furthermore clarifies that he is not merely making a verbal distinction here, as if he was legislating about the way we should use our words. Winch emphasizes that we can, and do, speak about actions as caused—in phrases such as “what was the cause of his doing that?”—which implies that causal terms do apply to human actions also. Nonetheless, Winch ([1958] 1990: xii) points out that this does not matter for the logical distinction that he is investigating: “it would be a great mistake to think that, in saying [that causal terms apply to action], we are saying anything substantial about the form of explanation and understanding of his behaviour that is in question.”

For Winch, the concept of rule serves a logical function in the form of explanation that distinguishes social science from natural science. The social scientist does not start by hypostasizing that such and such social rules exist as ready-made meaning entities. Rather, rules, norms, and concepts are what social scientists must (logically) *look for* in order to render action intelligible by invoking motives and reasons on the part of the agents. For insofar as what counts as legitimate reasons and motives for action are *not* determined by universal human nature, the possibility of giving explanations in terms of reasons and motives will, necessarily, depend on understanding historically specific rules, norms, ideas, and concepts—expressed in practices and ways of thinking—by virtue of which reasons and motives have normative force. In fact, in a very similar way, for the natural scientist, using the concept of cause does not entail the supposition of causes as ready-made entities in the natural world. Rather, “causality” characterizes *the form of explanation* by way of which the natural scientist investigates empirical generalizations. Consequently, the question of whether social rules are univocal or multifaceted—or whether causes are simple or complex—is not one to be solved by ontological theory, but rather an empirical question that finds its answer in the actual work of the social and natural scientists, respectively. Again it is important to note that Winch stresses these points by quoting passages in which Wittgenstein speaks of “language-games” and “rules” not as entities independent of our forms of understanding, but as concepts of comparison through which we render experience intelligible (cf. Winch [1958] 1990: xiv).

The naturalist critique of Winch rests on confusing his delineations of *logical commitments*, inherent in different forms of explanation, with *ontological claims* about what kinds of thing exist in the world. Importantly,

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Winch explicitly rejects the assumption that naturalists believe to be the most problematic feature of his philosophy of the social science; namely, that explanation by way of social rules, norms, and concepts presupposes an idea of hidden mental entities. Winch ([1958] 1990: 119) writes: “It must be said very firmly here that the case for saying that the understanding of society is logically different from the understanding of nature does not rest on the hypothesis of an ‘inner sense.’” Furthermore, Winch’s own account of “social rules” is directly opposed to the idea that such rules are to be understood as “inner” mental, conceptual structures: “In fact it follows from my argument in Chapter II that the concepts in terms of which we understand our *own* mental processes and behaviour have to be learned, and must, therefore, be *socially* established, just as much as the concepts in terms of which we come to understand the behaviour of other people” (Winch [1958] 1990: 119, original emphases). Hence, the core mentalist presupposition which the naturalist critique ascribes to Winch is in fact explicitly undermined by the main arguments of *ISS*.

However, does this mean that Winch is actually closer to naturalist accounts? For if Winch does not think that social rules are ontological entities residing in a hidden “mental space,” does this not mean that rules, norms, and concepts must—as several naturalists argue (cf. Roth 2011)—be construed as mere intellectual tools, devised by the social scientist and imposed for purposes of explanation? Winch addresses this question head on in his critique of Karl Popper’s methodological individualism. Popper’s position (1957) implies that there is no significant distinction to be made between, on the one hand, intentional descriptions of the historical agent’s action and, on the other hand, the theoretical models used by the researcher to explain the agent’s behavior. As Winch points out, Popper’s neglect of this distinction is closely related to his project of presenting the social scientist’s descriptions as analogous to the construction of theoretical models used in the natural sciences, an approach which is very similar to that of present-day naturalists (cf. Roth 1987; 2011; Turner and Roth 2003). Popper was fighting what he called “methodological essentialism,” which, he believed, would involve the assumption that behind the explanatory models of the scientist there would be some kind of “observable ghost or essence” (Popper, quoted in Winch [1958] 1990: 127). Popper claims therefore, again in a way that is reminiscent of present-day naturalists, that our knowledge of social action and events is no different from other kinds of empirical knowledge—for all such knowledge simply consists in the explanation of experiential data by way of the researcher’s imposition of scientific categories and theoretical models (cf. Roth 2012: 315, 2020: 48, 61).



One well-known consequence of this view is Popper's description of social institutions as mere models that are applied for explanatory purposes. Winch ([1958] 1990: 127) calls that idea "palpably untrue." He argues, instead, that the actions of historical agents embody concepts that belong to the perspectives of meaning inherent in the ways of life and thought of the agents themselves. In other words, the explananda of social science embody concepts. Winch argues, furthermore, that this is the chief feature distinguishing the social scientist's relation to their subject matter from that of the natural scientist. As Winch writes:

The ways of thinking embodied in institutions govern the way the members of the societies studied by the social scientist behave. The idea of war, for instance, which is one of Popper's examples, was not simply invented by people who wanted to *explain* what happens when societies come into armed conflict. It is an idea which provides the criteria of what is appropriate in the behaviour of members of the conflicting societies. Because my country is at war there are certain things which I must and certain things which I must not do. My behaviour is governed, one could say, by my concept of myself as a member of a belligerent country. The concept of war belongs *essentially* to my behaviour. But the concept of gravity does not belong essentially to the behaviour of a falling apple in the same way: it belongs rather to the physicist's *explanation* of the apple's behaviour. To recognize this has, *pace* Popper, nothing to do with a belief in ghosts behind the phenomena. Further, it is impossible to go far in specifying the attitudes, expectations and relations of individuals without referring to concepts which enter into those attitudes. (Winch [1958] 1990: 127–8, original emphases)

Again, Winch's argument here is not ontological, but concerns a logical distinction between the different presuppositions for describing phenomena within social and natural sciences, respectively. As Winch emphasizes, the very possibility of describing human action as an intelligible response to a historically specific context is logically dependent on understanding the norms and concepts that belong to the agents' understanding of their situation. Furthermore, as Winch's point about the concept of war aims to show, the normative dimension is not something added to actions by social scientists in and through their explanations. Quite the contrary, the normative dimension is already part of the original context of the agents, which is clear from the fact that appealing to the normative dimension of "being at war" would also be essential if the agents themselves were to make sense of what they were doing. In addition, the concept of being at war would shape

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explanations of their actions independently of the fact that individual agents may have cheered the war on, while others opposed the very idea of war as conscientious objectors. Thus rationalization is not a feature added by social scientists, but an aspect that logically belongs to every form of description of behavior as action—irrespective of whether such descriptions are made by historical agents or social scientists.

The internal relations between ideas, social relations, and the identity of action is further explored in Winch's critique of Max Weber's "scientific" attempt to pry apart those very internal relations by describing social phenomena in purely extensional terms. Winch writes:

Weber ceases to use the notions that would be appropriate to an interpretative understanding of the situation. Instead of speaking of the workers in his factory being paid and spending money, he speaks of their being handed pieces of metal, handing those pieces of metal to other people and receiving other objects from them; he does not speak of policemen protecting the workers' property, but of "people with helmets" coming and giving back the workers the pieces of metal which other people have taken from them; and so on. In short, he adopts the external point of view and forgets to take account of the "subjectively intended sense" of the behaviour he is talking about: and this, I want to say, is a natural result of his attempt to divorce the *social relations* linking those workers from the *ideas* which their actions embody: ideas such as those of "money", "property", "police", "buying and selling", and so on. Their relations to each other exist only through those ideas and similarly those ideas exist only in their relations to each other. (Winch [1958] 1990: 117–18)

Winch does not deny that Weber's "externalization" may have some beneficial results, such as a *Verfremdungseffekt* that offers researchers a possibility for observing details that may have remained unnoticed due to their familiar and obvious status. However, what Winch stresses is that the benefits of externalized descriptions presuppose that the situation has already been rendered intelligible by way of interpretive understanding. The external standpoint is not a perspective that is, somehow, more real or true, but one that is parasitic on the social scientist's ability to make sense of the agent's behavior as action which is expressive of certain concepts and ideas.

Winch's point about logical requirements for describing social phenomena takes us to the heart of the naturalist challenge. For what Winch shows is that without interpretive understanding, there cannot even *exist* any relevant candidate descriptions to choose between for the social scientist's investigation. That there are such candidate descriptions is something



naturalists take for granted. For instance, Roth argues that the translation of meaning is a process of empirical investigation, one that parallels the way theories are tested in the natural sciences (Roth 1987: 240). He concludes that deciding between competing translations is like a “scientific test” in which the researcher does not aim for *the* right answer: “the search, as always, is for the best—the most empirically adequate, simplest—account we can give at the time” (Roth 1987: 244). However, later on in the same section, Roth (1987: 244) concedes that our study may sometimes “[lead] us to unusual translations of what others are about.” The same unwarranted presupposition (that candidate descriptions are available on naturalist premises) is also betrayed by Quine himself. It is embedded in the very argument for the indeterminacy thesis when he speculatively writes about what the “likely” reference of the native speaker’s “gavagai” expression may be (Quine 1969: 34).

If Quine’s empiricist approach is endorsed, with the result that all intensional terms are to be eschewed and only empirical descriptions of behavioral data are permitted, it follows that there can be no grounds for saying that one translation is more “unusual,” “likely,” or “better” than the other. The reason is that the very first attempt to make out what the native speaker’s expression means already requires that the expression in question is grasped from within the context of utterance to which it belongs. This contextualization requires the very understanding of rules, norms, and concepts that Winch argued for. It is in light of this consideration that Sören Stenlund (1990) detects an incoherence at the very heart of Quine’s influential thesis. Stenlund argues that if one takes Quine’s empiricism seriously, then speaking of an “indeterminacy of translation” is already saying too much, for such a position requires candidate descriptions for translation. What one ends up with is, rather, an “indeterminacy of forms of expressions” in which the social scientist is permitted to say nothing more than that the native speakers are uttering expressions that the social scientist cannot understand. As Stenlund writes:

It is presupposed in Quine’s argument that the field linguist, engaged in radical translation, is able to identify phonetically the expressions of the foreign language. He is supposed to be able to recognize two different utterances of the same sentence as such. And this is an important point because it is on this basis that he is able to formulate hypotheses of translation and test them empirically. He must be able to identify the sentences in order to make hypotheses about their correct translation. But how can he even do that? By what criteria is he judging two different utterances as utterances of the same expression? That the linguist thinks

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that two utterances sound alike may not be a good criterion if it is a radically foreign language. Can he determine the “phonetic norms” of the foreign language prior to the investigation of the meaning and the uses of expressions? Quine is obviously presupposing that he can. (Stenlund 1990: 94, original emphasis)

The core of Stenlund’s argument is that Quine neglects the fact that a normative context is also needed for identifying the relevant expressions to be used in the field linguist’s empirical test. Phonetic norms that govern tone, pitch, rhythm, etc. make a great difference to the meaning of what is said, and without this kind of understanding “how is the linguist to know what features of two utterances are essential to them *qua* utterances of the same sentence?” (1990: 95). According to Stenlund, this stronger form of indeterminacy undermines the entire conceptual and methodological structure of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis. What Quine erroneously assumes is that norms governing expressions can be identified in purely naturalistic terms; that is, independently of an investigation of the uses of such expressions in actual contexts of utterance—uses of expressions that must be fleshed out in relation to concepts, rules, and norms of the target society. According to Stenlund, the fact that Quine assumes the possibility of a strictly naturalist identification of expressions shows that Quine assumes actual human language to have a formal structure, like a scientific theory. A structure that can be identified and specified in isolation from the forms of use of its expressions. However, actual language derives its meaning from its application in different contexts of utterance, which entails that understanding a language is not like understanding a scientific theory. As Stenlund (1990: 96) writes: “If a human language is conceived of as a system of rules for using expressions, then *what constitutes following the rules correctly* is determined ultimately within the forms of life where the language belongs” (original emphases).

The naturalist alternative to Winch’s account of the social sciences fails for three related reasons. First, naturalists assume that the only way to account for the normative dimension of action explanation is to hypostasize a hidden mental structure behind the overt behavior of historical agents. Winch makes no such assumption. He argues instead that norms, rules, and concepts are not hidden ontological entities, but rather features of the forms of understanding that logically distinguish social science from natural science. Second, naturalists erroneously assume that the only legitimate way that normativity—in the form of rules and concepts—enters social science research is by way of imposition on the part of the social scientist. Against this idea, Winch argues that concepts and rules belong to the very



identification of behavior as action, which means that normativity is also intrinsic to the ways in which historical agents themselves understood what they were doing. Third, Winch points out that descriptions of social phenomena could not even get off the ground without understanding the background of rules, norms, and concepts in terms of which actions and expressions can be identified for what they are.

Furthermore, as Stenlund's elaboration of the argument shows, the naturalist fails to appreciate that actual human expressions are always already rooted in contexts of utterance that reflect the rules, norms, and concepts of the agents. This entails that there simply is no such thing as a purely naturalist identification of the sense or reference for an expression. Without invoking intensional terms, the naturalist would only be able to speculate about, say, the way in which the tone of voice or the way signs are jotted down on the paper show signs of biologically or psychologically disposed behavior patterns. In a trivial sense, purely extensional descriptions of human behavior are not impossible. However, such descriptions of social phenomena cannot (logically) communicate anything of interest to historians and social scientists. In conclusion, Winch is not putting forward an argument about what kinds of things exist in the world; on the contrary, he wants to outline the kinds of logical commitment that shape our descriptions and explanations of behavior and events *qua* actions and social phenomena.

#### 9.4. CONCLUSION

The Quinean challenge to the possibility of distinctive humanistic explanations is more radical than the earlier Hempelian argument for methodological unity in the sciences. Hempel's challenge treats beliefs and desires as internal causes of external behavior, as antecedent conditions which lie in the mind rather than the external world. Quine, by contrast, dismisses them as belonging to the Lockean "myth of the museum." He is not so much an epistemological skeptic about the possibility of recovering the meaning behind actions or words as he is a kind of nihilist (Kirk 2004: 153).

These differences notwithstanding, the Hempelian and the Quinean challenges to the possibility of a *sui generis* humanistic science of interpretation both rest on a failure to grasp that humanistic explanations have a normative dimension that is irreducible to causal explanations. In both cases, attention is diverted away from the genuine issues at stake by the accusation that any attempt to defend the possibility of humanistic explanations cannot escape a commitment to the early modern conception of the mind as an inner theater. Collingwood's account of reenactment is mocked by Gardiner for endowing historians with telepathic powers of

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access to the minds of historical agents, and Quine's positive proposal for a science of understanding acquires its plausibility from the consideration that any defense of humanistic explanations must be committed to the existence of ontologically dubious entities. Once this misrepresentation is corrected, it becomes clear that there is no need to choose between the Lockean account of the relationship between words and ideas, with its associated model of how we understand others, and Quine's eliminativism about meaning and his associated account of radical translation. The myth which needs debunking is no longer that of the ghost in the machine. It is the myth that any attempt to defend the autonomy of humanistic explanations must involve buying into the Lockean "myth of the museum."

## NOTES

- 1 The debate as to whether humanistic explanations are or are not causal has undergone a recent revival in the philosophy of mind. For more recent discussion and survey, see D'Oro and Sandis (2013) and Schumann (2019).
- 2 Hermenuticians such as Gadamer also deny the need to invoke psychological processes such as authorial intentions to reconstruct the meaning of a text. What is distinctive about Collingwood's account of historical understanding is that the notion of "context" that is relevant to the historical understanding of action in history is the agent's own, not that of the interpreter. He was not an advocate of the presentist view that the past must be understood from the perspective of the interpreter and, therefore, necessarily rewritten from different "presents." He would have been as unsympathetic to Gadamer's notion of the "fusion of horizons" as to the narrativists' claim that the past is a construction from the perspective of the present.
- 3 We have not discussed here Davidson's (2001) more nuanced attempt to avoid recourse to an intensional context of explanation without eliminating altogether the notion of meaning. On this, see D'Oro (2004).
- 4 Important here is also the fact that in the new preface to *ISS* ([1958] 1990: xiv–xvi), Winch himself admits that his account emphasized too strongly the role of rules in meaningful behavior.
- 5 In relation to this issue, it should be pointed out that there are readings of Winch which claim that *ISS* is not really concerned with foundations or methodological questions in relation to the social sciences, but is essentially concerned with an "ethical orientation" and, thus, tries to show how social inquiry is connected with philosophical and cultural questions about self-knowledge (cf. Theunissen 2020). However, it is unclear how this ethical orientation reading could escape the force of the naturalist critique, regardless of Winch's intentions.

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