

1. Introduction: the object of sociological explanation

The great political philosopher Leo Strauss distinguished the modern project in political philosophy from the classical political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle by pointing out that the ancients sought the perfection of the prescientific or ordinary understanding of human things in their philosophy or science, whereas the modern “sciences” of human things, such as sociology, seek to replace this ordinary understanding and are founded on its rejection. Max Weber was Strauss’s principal example of this rejection in recent social science. The ordinary person, Strauss pointed out, understands and accounts for the occurrences of political life evaluatively. Weber denied the possibility of rationally evaluating action. In the last analysis, he argued, there are conflicts among various value positions that are irreconcilable by human reason. So, for Weber, scientific knowledge of human action must be non-evaluative and thus radically unlike the prescientific knowledge it replaces. The other classical sociologists reject the prescientific understanding even more radically than Weber. Durkheim denies that ordinary explanations of action can be any guide to the true causes of action. Ordinary concepts are for him Baconian *Idola*, epistemological obstacles to be overcome. Pareto denies the prescientific understanding by dismissing it wholesale. All action that has moral or religious purport is described by him as “non-logical.” The true explanations of these actions cannot be the ordinary explanations, which Pareto dismisses as pseudo-explanations, “derivations.” They must be sought in deeper causes which, as Pareto characterizes them, are radically unlike the reasons that figure in ordinary explanations.

The sociological project that Weber, Durkheim, and Pareto formed has clearly failed to live up to their expectations. There are neither Durkheimian “laws of the collective consciousness” nor Paretian laws of social equilibrium, and Weber’s elaborate constructions of categories for historical causal analysis have not served to give the account of the unique character of Western society that he sought. But the failure is

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itself perplexing. The less radical diagnoses have suggested that the social sciences simply lack maturity. The proposed cure is time and the amassing of empirical studies and middle-level principles. Yet this diagnosis has been extant at least since John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic*, and the cure has shown few signs of working. The more radical diagnosis places the error at the core of the modern project itself, in the idea of a causal science of man and society that has dominated social and political thought since the advent of the new physics. This diagnosis has its own difficulties. If we formulate the diagnosis positively, it amounts to a claim that the social sciences have been an attempt to apply causal explanatory methods to attain an understanding of that which is already properly understood or can be properly understood by noncausal methods, such as classical teleology and "idealism." This claim in turn depends on an account of these methods. Yet even such a vigorous defender of the methods of classical political philosophy as Leo Strauss concedes that the teleological conceptions of the classics cannot be simply followed today. After the defeat of the teleological conception of the universe, those who followed a teleological conception of man were forced to take up an essentially modern dualism between natural and social science, which constitutes a break with the classics. "An adequate solution to the problem of natural right cannot be found before this basic problem has been solved" (Strauss, 1953:8).

This problem about modes of explanation turns on a more fundamental one, the problem of the object of sociological explanation. The radical diagnosis denies that there is anything that demands any special sort of "sociological" explanation. The less radical diagnosis supposes that there is no special difficulty about the existence and character of this explanatory object; the problem is merely to provide and confirm explanations of the proper form. In this work, I identify one class of explanatory objects and a pattern of sociological explanation that can reasonably claim to include the crucial concerns of sociology. This pattern fits the radical diagnosis in certain crucial respects. It fits Strauss's notion of "the perfection of the prescientific understanding," as the object of explanation arises through ordinary discourse and does not purport to "replace" the prescientific understanding. I also argue, consistently with the radical diagnosis, that these explanatory objects are misconceived as facts that "general theories" of sociology can explain. But the pattern of explanation is quite unlike the sort of expla-

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nations or understanding that the radical diagnosis has usually envisioned, because it constitutes a distinctively “sociological” pattern that can be assimilated neither to the model of hermeneutics nor to models of philosophic inquiry, either that of classical political philosophy or that of contemporary “conceptual analysis.” The pattern resembles translation more closely than it resembles any other form of explanation or explication. By identifying this class of explanatory objects, I give grounds for rejecting both the radical diagnosis and the conception of sociological explanation that informs Weber, Durkheim, and Pareto.

I proceed by considering the most rigorous application of the radical diagnosis to sociology, formulated by Peter Winch in *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958) and in a later article, “Understanding a Primitive Society” (1964). The appearance that difficulties with explanation take in Winch’s writings is often superficially very different from the appearance they take in contemporary American sociology; so it will take a certain amount of effort and perceptiveness on the part of the reader to see their relevance. A similar effort is necessary to see the relevance of these same issues in the forms they have taken in the history of social thought and in the contemporary sociology of the Continent. The effort, however is no greater than and no different from that required to see, for example, the relevance of Habermas’s claims to Garfinkel’s. The advantages in starting with Winch are compelling. The problems take a relatively tractable form in his writings. Difficulties are not, as is typically the case in the sociological literature, handled in asides. The presentation is explicitly and directly addressed to the difficulties and is developed to the point where a wide range of criticisms can find a foothold.

Winch’s position has played a role in British discourse which is roughly analogous to the role that the positions of ethnomethodologists and symbolic interactionists play in North America and which the positions of hermeneutically oriented sociologists and philosophers like Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas play on the Continent. Winch is opposed to conceiving of social inquiry as an extension into the social world of the methods of investigation and theory construction established in the physical sciences. Like those who have suggested that social inquiry is essentially a hermeneutic study, he takes something akin to “interpretive understanding” to be a logical precondition for sociological explanation.¹ Like the ethnomethodologists, he is concerned with the details of the realization of the “normative order”

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in action. The parallel to symbolic interactionism has a foundation in commonalities between the rejections of behaviorism in both Mead and Wittgenstein.²

Some of the immediately visible differences between Winch's account and these others arise from divergences between the various intellectual traditions in which the various positions developed. Winch writes within a philosophical tradition that is particularly sensitive to the traps these cognate positions often have fallen into: excessive technical jargon, political and moral sentimentalism, and a continuously unfavorable balance of programmatic statements to problem solving. A word about this tradition may serve as prophylaxis against some misunderstanding. Winch writes in the context of what is commonly and misleadingly called "the philosophy of ordinary language." The label is particularly misleading in that it suggests that the philosophy of ordinary language is "about" ordinary language, as the philosophy of science is "about" science. Instead, it is about everything that ordinary language is about: from activities like atonal music to activities like promising. Rather than marking off a subject matter, the name serves to distinguish a body of characteristic philosophical strategies. Where traditional philosophy attempts to answer philosophical questions or explain general features of existence and knowledge by inventing philosophical theories, the philosopher of ordinary language has been concerned to show that these questions result from using words where they do not have any natural application or outside the contexts where they are ordinarily - and intelligibly - used. The popular impression that the philosophy of ordinary language presents a theory of language, it should be noted, is doubly false. The ordinary-language philosopher does not present theories (in any usual sense of "theory"), nor are his remarks about language - at least not in any sense that differs from the sense in which ordinary language is also, on occasion, about language. Accordingly, Winch's conceptual remarks, and the remarks made in the course of this study, should not be read as technical claims within a particular philosophical theory or theory of language (in contrast to the way, to choose an extreme example, Lukács's literary criticisms must be read: as claims within a particular Marxist philosophical system). If the ordinary-language philosopher's distinctions and clarifications make sense, they should make sense on their own account.

This discussion is distinctly not "metatheory" in the usual sense of this term in sociology. Usually "metatheory" has a hypothetical char-

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acter: It is a kind of prediction of what successful theory in sociology must or may resemble and a prescription to the sociologist that, if his aim is to achieve this particular end, he must adopt certain means. Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method* is the classic formulation of this genre and probably remains unequaled in its adeptness in dealing with the many philosophical and logical problems that arise in connection with his metatheoretical hypothesis.

The approach I have taken here is to identify certain philosophical and methodological problems in connection with the claims of theoretical sociology that already exist, and to deal with them not by characterizing them as yet unfulfilled theoretical forms but by showing that sociological explanatory discourse has an intelligible character, a "rationality," so to speak, distinct from the rationality of scientific "theory" that some sociologists take as a model and distinct from the rationality of philosophical "theory" that other sociologists take as a model.

This work is thus not merely another exercise in the deflation of the scientific and theoretical pretensions of sociology. It is in precisely the opposite spirit. It constitutes a defense of sociology as having a legitimate and intelligible explanatory interest apart from these pretensions, and it therefore constitutes an apologia for sociology's genuine achievements in satisfying these interests.

2. Winch's account of the sociological explanation of action

Winch's aim in *The Idea of a Social Science* is to set straight the matter of the relations between philosophy and empirical social inquiry. The view he wishes to correct is the prevalent one in the literature on the subject; in considering the nature of society and the features of particular social relations, this view leaves little of studies in this realm to philosophy, and much to empirical inquiry. The core of his case is a demonstration. He devotes considerable effort to elucidating the concept of "following a rule" and uses the results of this effort to support a number of claims - among them, that actors' concepts must be addressed prior to empirical questions about their actions, and that the nature of questions about actors' concepts constrains subsequent empirical inquiry into their actions in ways that have not generally been understood or acknowledged. It is these claims that are of interest here.

Winch's treatment of rule following is largely taken over from Wittgenstein. The general question that concerns him is this: What is it to follow a rule, such as a computational rule, or to follow a definition, which is a kind of rule about the use of a word? He approaches the problem by looking at a closely related question: What is the difference between someone who is really following a rule and someone who is not? It cannot be merely that the rule follower's actions can be brought under a formula, for any series of action can be brought under some formula or other. Imagine a man *A* who writes 1 3 5 7 on a blackboard and asks a friend *B* to continue the series, following the same rule. Almost everyone would write 9 11 13 15. Suppose that *A* refuses to accept this as the correct continuation, saying that it runs 1 3 5 7 1 1 3 5 7 9 11 13 15 9 11 13 15, and then asks *B* to continue it from there. *B* has several alternatives. Say that he chooses one, and that *A* rejects it as the correct continuation. At some point, after *A* has refused to accept one continuation after another as the continuation he meant, *B*

may say, with justification, that *A* is not really following a rule at all, or at least not a mathematical rule; perhaps he may say that *A* is really just following the rule of changing his requirements for what constitutes the correct continuation every time one is proposed. And *B* is justified in saying that *A* is really not following a mathematical rule, even though there are many formulas *A* could produce and say, "But you haven't tried the series defined by this one." This brings out one feature of following a rule: For someone to show that he is following a rule, he must show that he is doing something *as a matter of course*.

The same point may be made with a more "sociological" example. Suppose that it was said that in a particular mental institution people were put in one ward or another without regard to their condition, and that this claim was denied by the director of the institution, who said that decisions about where people were placed actually involved abstruse psychiatric distinctions made on the basis of identifiable psychiatric symptoms. To convince you of the validity of this reply he would need to convince you he was following a rule in making diagnoses: that in making these identifications of symptoms and applying these tags to them he was utilizing an acquired skill. You would not, perhaps, demand that his identifications be right all the time—cases might arise where the identification was difficult. However, he would need to show that he could, in some substantial proportion of cases, pick out the particular symptoms as a matter of course. And to be really sure of the director's reply you would have to be able to "get the hang" of the rule for identifying the symptoms yourself.

It is also part of the concept of following a rule that mistakes are distinguishable from correct applications of the rule. Imagine someone using a line as a rule in the following way: He holds a pair of compasses, carries one along the line that is the "rule," and as he moves along alters the opening of the compass, all the while looking intently at the rule as though it determined what he did. Here we might say that the line that serves as the rule seems to *intimate* to him what to do; but it is not a rule, for the notion of following a rule is inseparable from the notion of making a mistake, and here there is nothing that would count as a contravention.

We can see what is at stake here by contrasting rule-following activities to activities that are merely habitual. A paradigm of habitual behavior is the behavior of a dog trained to do a trick on command. There is a right way and a wrong way to do the trick, but only people

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can apply the criteria. The dog does not recognize that there is a right way and a wrong way and cannot distinguish them; it has acquired only a propensity for behaving in the same way, not a set of criteria for determining what counts as “the same.” Contrast this sort of activity to the activity of the student who is learning to copy the natural numbers: 1 2 3 4 . . . If he copies them in random order, we say that he has understood wrongly, and we correct him. What counts as a copy is not given, but a set of criteria for distinguishing what counts as a copy must be learned. The test of whether he has understood the activity of copying the natural numbers (in other words, the test of whether he is following a rule) is not just that he perform the act to our specifications – although that is the test, and the only test, we can apply to the dog. We would also say that a student did not understand copying in this context if he could not distinguish what counted as a copy from a mistaken attempt at a copy. (The test of understanding, however, is *not* whether the student can *formulate* the rule he has learned to apply in distinguishing correct copies from mistaken ones.)

This suggests that the activity of rule following, unlike habitual behavior, is essentially social. Wittgenstein makes this point in another way by considering what would happen if someone had a rule that was “private,” in the sense that this person could know with certainty whether it had been correctly applied and other people could not (1958: para. 258). An example of the use of such a rule would be someone keeping a diary of the occurrences of a certain private sensation, *E*, and following the rule of writing *E* in the diary on every date the sensation occurred. Wittgenstein asks us to notice what would happen if some doubt arose in this person’s mind over whether he was correctly applying the rule (suspecting that he was misidentifying *E*), or if he came to suspect that at some point in the past he had stopped correctly applying the rule. If such doubts arose over application of a rule that was not claimed to be private in this sense, he could check his own application of the rule by querying other persons. If he was worried about his application of a color word, for example, he might ask an associate a question like “You would call this ‘robin’s-egg blue,’ wouldn’t you?” However, he would have no such recourse if the rule was private. He would have to rely on himself to resolve any doubts. But it is clear that any of the means he could use to assure himself would be open to similar doubts. If he endeavored to check his applications of the rule against a second private procedure, his application of this procedure would be equally open to question. How could he know he was apply-

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ing the second procedure correctly? (If he could assure himself by checking against some public procedure, one of two things would be true. Either the rule could not have been a private one in the first place, or its connection with the public procedure would itself be governed by a private rule – a rule that governed what would count as a check here – and this rule would be open to the same irresolvable doubts about application.)

The lack of a way to check applications is not just a “practical problem.” Remember that we established that it was part of the concept of “rule” that right and wrong applications could be distinguished. But look at what happens when we try to apply the notion of “correctness” in this case: The rule follower is unable to describe or indicate, even to himself, the difference between right and wrong. For because there is no way of checking applications, there is no way of distinguishing, for example, a “right” application of the rule from an application that “appears to be right.” The fact that here it is conceptually impossible to make this distinction means that here we cannot talk about “right” at all – and consequently it is a mistake to call private rules (like the one on the *E* sensation) rules at all.

Then why is rule following essentially social? Because we cannot give a coherent account of the use of a rule without mentioning the actions or potential actions of people other than the rule follower. Everywhere we turn in attempting to give such an account we bump up against the necessity of the involvement of other actors.

It would be a mistake to interpret all this to mean that agreement among a group of individuals is all that is necessary for an activity to be a rule-governed activity, as though “the rules” were a matter of opinion that was to be settled. “So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? – It is what human beings *say* that is true or false, and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life” (Wittgenstein, 1958:para. 241). Wittgenstein is saying here that the agreement is not anything that is up for negotiation. If we have both grasped a rule, we agree on its consequences, but we agree on these consequences because they seem to both of us to flow from the rule as a matter of course, because we have both “got the hang of it.”

Once he has established these basic features of the concept of following a rule, Winch goes on to make the connection to the concerns of the sociologist. A traditional conception holds that the sociologist is

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concerned with “subjectively meaningful behavior.” The behavior in this category, Weber says, is the “central subject matter” of the kind of sociology he develops, and the category is “decisive for its status as a science” (1947:114–15). It is in terms of behavior in this category that Winch will frame his case. If fundamental difficulties with the “law” account arise with behavior in this category, it would clearly be decisive for its status as an account of explanation in sociology. In this step he establishes one point: Behavior that is subjectively meaningful is, *ipso facto*, rule governed (1958:52).

One of Weber’s key subcategories is action that is oriented “to a system of discrete individual ends (*zweckrational*)” (1947:115). This subcategory includes action in which the actor acts to attain a chosen end and makes a reasoned choice of means. Suppose “that it is said of a certain person, *N*, that he voted Labour at the last General Election because he thought that a Labour government would be the most likely to preserve industrial peace” (Winch, 1958:45). This is an explanation that cites such a reason. One subjective meaning of the act for the actor, accordingly, is that it is an act which helps to preserve industrial peace.

Notice the sense in which the act must be rule governed if this was indeed the subjective meaning of the act for *N*. He must take a vote for Labour (in this particular election) as an act that helps to preserve industrial peace. Just as the psychiatrist would need to show us that he was placing patients in a category as a matter of course, *N* would need to show that he would take the act this way as a matter of course. We would reject his own explanation citing the reason “I wished to help preserve industrial peace” if he did not take the act this way as a matter of course, just as we would reject the psychiatrist’s explanation.

What would it be for *N* to fail to take the act this way as a matter of course (which is to say, to fail to take it this way according to some rule that had the force of “to vote for Labour is to vote for industrial peace”)? It might be that *N* was a Tory and, when asked on other occasions, would use the fact that a person voted Labour as evidence of his *absence* of interest in preserving industrial peace. We could reprove *N* by pointing out that he had said such things, and we would regard it as an inconsistency – a failure to follow the rule he would have to be following if his explanation “I wished to help preserve industrial peace” were true. When we spotted this inconsistency we might even describe the rule: “But I thought you took a vote for Labour to be a vote for