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REPLY TO HEELAS

F. Allan Hanson

First let me counter a few statements in Heelas' critique. He lists as one of my points "that understanding a philosophy in its own terms presupposes an intimate knowledge of their language and culture. Since his own analysis was made without such a knowledge, Hanson suggests that their own terms need not be well known". But this is by no means my suggestion. It is rather that since I lack intimate first-hand acquaintance with African cultures, the analysis I offered cannot be expected to reveal African thought in its own terms. As for his question of how my theory is to be verified or falsified, see the ninth paragraph of Part II and the paper's last paragraph.

Heelas also objects to the logic of the paper, apparently thinking that I do such confusing or contradictory things as both adopting and rejecting Winch, and urging understanding of another philosophy only in its own terms and also only in our terms. I agree that my use of the word "only" was occasionally lax, and I regret any obscurity this may have caused. I suggest, however, that what Heelas takes as logical confusion or contradiction is really the progression of argument. In Part I some advantages which would accrue from understanding another philosophy in its own terms were mentioned, and I offered what might appear to be this kind of analysis of an aspect of African thought. Part II asked whether the analysis of Part I really does provide understanding of African thought in its own terms, and a series of arguments were offered that it does not. Extending this, one conclusion of the paper was that we cannot expect to understand alien modes of thought in their own terms. Therefore the reasoning of the paper ended with the unequivocal assertions that we understand alien modes of thought in our terms, and that Winch (who in the paper was taken as advocating that we understand them in their own terms) is wrong.

Probably Heelas' main objection is that my paper misrepresents the position of Winch. I agree with Heelas on this point, am grateful to him for pointing out my error and glad for this opportunity to recant. I now agree with Heelas that Winch would have us "extend our 'own' way of looking at things", or "develop a meta-level of organisational devices which are of universal applicability" rather than understand native thought in its own terms. More will be said of Winch, as I now understand him, in a moment.

By now the issues at stake in all this must be badly obscured, and certainly I have added to the confusion through my misrepresentation of Winch. I think these issues are important, so in the hope of clarifying them I shall attempt to set out the essence of what I currently understand this whole discussion to be about.

It all begins with a train of thought which I am here abstracting from Nielsen, and which he says derives ultimately from Wittgenstein and/or his disciples (Nielsen 1967:192-193). For present purposes the following points are enough: the meaning of words is found in their usage in a given mode of discourse (religious mode of discourse, scientific mode of discourse, etc.). A mode of discourse contains its own concepts of reality, rationality and intelligibility. One should therefore understand the meaning of a word in terms of the concepts of rationality, reality and intelligibility of the mode of discourse in which that word is used, not according to such concepts drawn from some other mode of discourse. Finally, we must be content simply with identifying the concepts of rationality, reality and intelligibility of a mode of discourse. Since there simply are no other, "higher-order" concepts against which these concepts can be assessed, here the process of understanding in terms of something else must cease.

Now, assume that the words and their meanings which we wish to understand belong to a mode of discourse in a language and culture other than our own. The reasoning summarized above might be taken to direct us to identify the concepts of rationality, reality and intelligibility intrinsic to that alien mode of discourse and to understand the words and meanings in question in terms of those concepts. I take this to mean understanding the alien mode of discourse in its own terms. The argument in Part II of my paper was that we do not and probably cannot achieve that kind of understanding. I still assert that argument.

But that argument does not refute Winch, for he does not ask that we understand an alien mode of discourse in its own terms. Let me try to explain Winch's position as I now understand it. Consider again the last point of the "Wittgensteinian" reasoning summarized above-- that there are no "higher-order" concepts in terms of which the concepts of reality, rationality and intelligibility of a given mode of discourse can be assessed. This may be taken to imply that each mode of discourse is hermetically sealed, that there is no way of relating one mode of discourse to another. Nielsen calls this the "compartmentalization thesis" and he attributes it to Winch (Nielsen 1967:201, 207). Mistakenly, I think, for Winch writes (approvingly):

Mr. Rush Rhees points out that to try to account for the meaningfulness of language solely in terms of isolated language games is to omit the important fact that ways of speaking are not insulated from each other in mutually exclusive systems of rules. What can be said in one context by the use of a certain expression depends for its sense on the uses of that expression in other contexts (different language games) (Winch 1964:321).

So Winch clearly recognises that meanings in different modes of discourse can be related. And this holds even when the modes of discourse stem from different languages and cultures: "Certainly the sort

of understanding we seek requires that we see the Zande category in relation to our own already understood categories" (Winch 1964:319). But this relation is not to be achieved simply by fitting our categories into theirs, nor theirs into ours.

We are not seeking a state in which things will appear to us just as they do to members of S another society, and perhaps such a state is unattainable anyway. But we are seeking a way of looking at things which goes beyond our previous way in that it has in some way taken account of and incorporated the other way that members of S have of looking at things. Seriously to study another way of life is necessarily 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 (Winch 1964:317-318, see also Winch 1958:89-90).

So I now understand Winch to argue that we should understand another system of thought in terms of a new mode of discourse or "way of looking at things", an extension of ours which in-corporates native concepts of rationality, reality and intelligibility as well as our own.

I am in far greater agreement with this position than with that I thought Winch held when I wrote my paper. However, I think his "new" position (new to me!) requires certain qualifications. It will be seen that these stem from the same line of thinking as I worked out in Part II of my paper.

Presumably the new, extended mode of discourse we construct for understanding another culture, like any mode of discourse, has its own concepts of reality, rationality and intelligibility. Consider just its concept of intelligibility. Is this simply a given? Are there no other concepts of intelligibility against which we can assess it, rendering it impossible for us to criticize the way in which the extended mode of discourse makes another culture intelligible? I do not know how Winch would answer this.¹ But when Winch tries to make Zande magical rites intelligible by relating them to "a sense of the significance of human life" (1964:320-321), or when I try to make them (and certain other aspects of African thought and ~~behaviour~~) intelligible in terms of two metaphysical postulates, we shall probably want to reserve the right of criticism. Therefore, whether or not Winch would think we legitimately can criticize the intelligibility of a mode of discourse advanced for understanding another culture, it seems clear that we constantly do make such criticisms. And I think we make them legitimately.

When we encounter alternative "ways of looking at things" or modes of discourse which provide different ways of making the same elements of language usage and patterned behavior intelligible, we often compare them critically to determine which way of making these things intelligible is preferable. We could not do this if each mode of discourse had its own primitive, unassailable concept of intelligibility, for there would be no external criteria in terms of which to make a judgment of preferability. But there obviously are such external criteria and we do make use of them. One criterion is parsimony: which of the alternative modes of discourse makes the phenomena in question intelligible in the simplest and most economical way? Furthermore, to repeat a point made in my paper, since it is we who make judgments between different ways of looking at the same things, I submit that we do it in terms of our own concepts of what constitutes proper understanding or intelligibility, for example, in terms of a logically realistic epistemology. I do not know how much of this Winch would accept, but I want to be clear on my own position. It is that the concepts of intelligibility imbedded in an extended mode of

discourse which we advance for understanding another culture are not simply "given" and beyond criticism. They are ultimately subject to our own concepts of intelligibility.

I continue to disagree with Winch that understanding in social science is radically different from understanding in natural science. My argument remains as set out in my paper, so here I shall just rephrase one part of it. For Winch, in natural science a theory "establishes" connections between events: "It is only in terms of the theory that one can speak of the events being thus 'connected' (as opposed to a simple spatio-temporal connection); the only way to grasp the connection is to learn the theory" (Winch 1958:134, Winch's emphasis). Social phenomena, on the other hand, are related internally. "Social relations fall into the same logical category as do relations between ideas", and "each system of ideas, its component elements being interrelated internally, has to be understood in and for itself" (Winch 1958:133). Sociological laws may be useful for bringing out features which might otherwise have been overlooked, but the nature of the relations between the phenomena in question is in the phenomena themselves, not in the law or theory (Winch 1958:135-136).

Winch says that we should understand other cultures in terms of an extended mode of discourse or way of looking at things. As I have said above, alternative ways of looking at the same things can be advanced. One of the differences between such alternative ways is that they may lead us to see different kinds of connections between the things in question. (Consider the various ways of looking at totemism, or at the relation between Protestantism and capitalism.) Therefore it seems clear that the connections we see between social phenomena are not necessarily intrinsic to the phenomena themselves. As in natural science, at least some of those connections are functions of our theories or ways of looking at things.

To sum up, I agree with Winch that we should understand another culture in terms of an extended mode of discourse or way of looking at things. But I think that such a mode of discourse is ultimately subject to concepts of intelligibility which derive from our own culture, and that this way of understanding is not fundamentally different from that of natural science.

Note

1. One might think he would reply affirmatively, on the basis of passages like "the notion of intelligibility is systematically ambiguous (in Professor Ryle's sense of the phrase) in its use in those contexts: that is, its sense varies systematically according to the particular context in which it is being used" (Winch 1958:18) and "criteria of logic...are only intelligible in the context of ways of living or modes of social life. It follows that one cannot apply criteria of logic to modes of social life as such. For instance, science is one such mode and religion is another; and each has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself" (Winch 1958:100). On the other hand, one might imagine him replying negatively if one reasons from a statement already quoted: "what can be said in one context by the use of a certain expression depends for its sense on the use of that expression in other contexts (different language games)" (Winch 1964:321).

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