

STUDIES IN
PHILOSOPHICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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THE IDEA OF
A SOCIAL SCIENCE

and its Relation to Philosophy

by
PETER WINCH



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Dem wenn es schon wahr ist, dass moralische Handlungen, sie mögen zu noch so verschiedenen Zeiten, bey noch so verschiedenen Völkern vorkommen, in sich betrachtet immer die nehmlichen bleiben: so haben doch darum die nehmlichen Handlungen nicht immer die nehmlichen Benennungen, und es ist ungeracht, irgend einer eine andere Benennung zu geben, als die, welche sie zu ihren Zeiten, und bey ihrem Volk zu haben pflegte.

(It may indeed be true that moral actions are always the same in themselves, however different may be the times and however different the societies in which they occur; but still, the same actions do not always have the same names, and it is unjust to give any action a different name from that which it used to bear in its own times and amongst its own people.)

(GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING: *Anti-Goeze*).

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CHAPTER ONE

PHILOSOPHICAL BEARINGS

1. *Aims and Strategy*

THAT the social sciences are in their infancy has come to be a platitude amongst writers of textbooks on the subject. They will argue that this is because the social sciences have been slow to emulate the natural sciences and emancipate themselves from the dead hand of philosophy; that there was a time when there was no clear distinction between philosophy and natural science; but that owing to the transformation of this state of affairs round about the seventeenth century natural science has made great bounds ever since. But, we are told, this revolution has not yet taken place in the social sciences, or at least it is only now in process of taking place. Perhaps social science has not yet found its Newton but the conditions are being created in which such a genius could arise. But above all, it is urged, we must follow the methods of natural science rather than those of philosophy if we are to make any significant progress.

I propose, in this monograph, to attack such a conception of the relation between the social studies, philosophy and the natural sciences. But it should not be assumed on that account that what I have to say

must be ranked with those reactionary anti-scientific movements, aiming to put the clock back, which have appeared and flourished in certain quarters since science began. My only aim is to make sure that the clock is telling the right time, whatever it may prove to be. Philosophy, for reasons which may be made more apparent subsequently, has no business to be anti-scientific; if it tries to be so it will succeed only in making itself look ridiculous. Such attacks are as distasteful and undignified as they are useless and unphilosophical. But equally, and for the same reasons, philosophy must be on its guard against the extra-scientific *pretensions* of science. Since science is one of the chief shibboleths of the present age this is bound to make the philosopher unpopular; he is likely to meet a similar reaction to that met by someone who criticizes the monarchy. But the day when philosophy becomes a popular subject is the day for the philosopher to consider where he took the wrong turning.

I said that my aim was to attack a current conception of the relations between philosophy and the social studies. Since that conception involves two terms, what may appear to some a disproportionately large portion of this book must be devoted to discussing matters whose bearing on the nature of the social studies is not immediately evident. The view I wish to commend presupposes a certain conception of philosophy, a conception which many will think as heretical as my conception of social science itself. So, however irrelevant it may at first appear, a discussion of the nature of philosophy is an *essential* part of the argument of this book. This opening chapter, then,

cannot safely be skipped as a tiresome and time-wasting preliminary.

This may be more convincing if I briefly outline the general strategy of the book. It will consist of a war on two fronts: first, a criticism of some prevalent contemporary ideas about the nature of philosophy; second, a criticism of some prevalent contemporary ideas about the nature of the social studies. The main tactics will be a pincer movement: the same point will be reached by arguing from opposite directions. To complete the military analogy before it gets out of hand, my main war aim will be to demonstrate that the two apparently diverse fronts on which the war is being waged are not in reality diverse at all; that to be clear about the nature of philosophy and to be clear about the nature of the social studies amount to the same thing. For any worthwhile study of society must be philosophical in character and any worthwhile philosophy must be concerned with the nature of human society.

2. *The Underlabourer Conception of Philosophy*

I will call the conception of philosophy which I want to criticize the 'underlabourer conception', in honour of one of its presiding geniuses, John Locke. The following passage from the Epistle to the Reader which prefaces Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, is often quoted with approval by supporters of the underlabourer conception.

The commonwealth of learning is not at this time without master-builders, whose mighty designs, in

advancing the sciences, will leave lasting monuments to the admiration of posterity; but everyone must not hope to be a Boyle or a Sydenham; and in an age that produces such masters as the great Huygenius and the incomparable Mr. Newton, with some others of that strain, it is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge.

Locke's view is echoed in A. J. Ayer's distinction between the 'pontiffs' and the 'journeymen' of philosophy; it is translated into the idiom of much modern philosophical discussion by A. G. N. Flew, in his introduction to *Logic and Language* (First Series); and it has many points of contact with Gilbert Ryle's conception of philosophy as 'informal logic' (Cf. Gilbert Ryle: *Dilemmas*, Cambridge).

I will try to isolate some of the outstanding features of this view which are most relevant for my present purpose. First, there is the idea that 'it is by its methods rather than its subject-matter that philosophy is to be distinguished from other arts or sciences' (3). That obviously follows from the underlabourer conception; for according to it philosophy cannot contribute any positive understanding of the world on its own account: it has the purely negative role of removing impediments to the advance of our understanding. The motive force for that advance must be sought in methods quite different from anything to be found in philosophy; it must be found, that is, in science. On this view philosophy is parasitic on other disciplines; it has no problems of its own but is a technique for solving problems thrown up in the course of non-philosophical investigations.

The modern conception of what constitutes the 'rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge' is very similar to Locke's own: philosophy is concerned with eliminating linguistic confusions. So the picture we are presented with is something like this. Genuine new knowledge is acquired by scientists by experimental and observational methods. Language is a tool which is indispensable to this process; like any other tool language can develop defects, and those which are peculiar to it are logical contradictions, often conceived on the analogy of mechanical faults in material tools. Just as other sorts of tool need a specialist mechanic to maintain them in good order, so with language. Whereas a garage mechanic is concerned with removing such things as blockages in carburettors, a philosopher removes contradictions from realms of discourse.

I turn now to a further, connected, implication of the underlabourer conception. If the problems of philosophy come to it from without, it becomes necessary to give some special account of the role of metaphysics and epistemology within philosophy. For though it may be plausible to say that the problems of the philosophy of science, the philosophy of religion, the philosophy of art, and so on, are set *for* philosophy by science, religion, art, etc., it is not at all obvious what sets the problems for metaphysics and epistemology. If we say that these disciplines are autonomous with regard to their problems, then of course the underlabourer conception collapses as an exhaustive account of the nature of philosophy. Some writers have suggested that metaphysics and epistemology are just the philosophies of science and of psychology

respectively in disguise, but I have never seen this view defended in any detail and it is certainly not *prima facie* plausible to anyone who is at all familiar with the history of these subjects. Others again have said that metaphysical and epistemological discussions are an entirely spurious form of activity and do not belong to any respectable discipline at all. But they treat of questions which have a habit of recurring and such a cavalier attitude soon begins to ring somewhat hollow. It is in fact a good deal less popular than once it was.

Another widely held view is that championed, for instance, by Peter Laslett in his editorial introduction to *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (13). According to this view, the preoccupation with epistemological questions, which has for some time characterized philosophical discussion in this country, is to be construed as a temporary phase, as a period of examining and improving the *tools* of philosophy, rather than as the very stuff of philosophy itself. The idea is that, when this work of re-tooling has been done, it is the duty of the philosopher to return to his more important task—that of clarifying the concepts which belong to other, non-philosophical disciplines.

In the first place this interpretation is unhistorical, since epistemological questions have always been central to serious philosophical work, and it is difficult to see how this could be otherwise. More importantly, Laslett's view involves a reversal of the true order of priority within philosophy: epistemological discussion is represented as important only in so far as it serves a further end, namely to advance the treatment of questions in the philosophies of science.

art, politics, etc. I want to argue, on the contrary, that the philosophies of science, art, politics, etc.—the subjects which I will call the 'peripheral' philosophical disciplines—lose their philosophical character if unrelated to epistemology and metaphysics. But before I can show this in detail, I must first attempt to examine the philosophical foundations of the underlabourer conception of philosophy.

3. *Philosophy and Science*

That conception is in large part a reaction against the 'master-scientist' view of the philosopher, according to which philosophy is in direct competition with science and aims at constructing or refuting scientific theories by purely *a priori* reasoning. This is an idea which is justly ridiculed; the absurdities to which it may lead are amply illustrated in Hegel's amateur pseudo-scientific speculations. Its philosophical refutation was provided by Hume:

If we would satisfy ourselves . . . concerning the nature of that evidence, which assures us of matters of fact, we must enquire how we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect. I shall venture to affirm, as a general proposition, which admits of no exception, that the knowledge of this relation is not, in any instance, attained by reasonings *a priori*; but arises entirely from experience, when we find that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other. Let an object be presented to a man of never so strong natural reason and abilities; if that object be entirely new to him, he will not be able, by the most accurate examination of its sensible qualities, to discover any of its causes or effects. (12: Section IV, Part I)

Now this is admirable as a critique of *a priori* pseudo-science. But the argument has also frequently been misapplied in order to attack *a priori* philosophizing of a sort which is quite legitimate. The argument runs as follows: new discoveries about real matters of fact can only be established by experimental methods; no purely *a priori* process of thinking is sufficient for this. But since it is science which uses experimental methods, while philosophy is purely *a priori*, it follows that the investigation of reality must be left to science. On the other hand, philosophy has traditionally claimed, at least in large part, to consist in the investigation of the nature of reality; either, therefore, traditional philosophy was attempting to do something which its methods of investigation could never possibly achieve, and must be abandoned; or else it was mistaken about its own nature, and the purport of its investigations must be drastically reinterpreted.

Now the argument on which this dilemma is based is fallacious: it contains an undistributed middle term. The phrase 'the investigation of the nature of reality' is ambiguous, and whereas Hume's argument applies perfectly well to what that phrase conveys when applied to *scientific* investigation, it is a mere *ignoratio elenchi* as applied to *philosophy*. The difference between the respective aims of the scientist and the philosopher might be expressed as follows. Whereas the scientist investigates the nature, causes and effects of *particular* real things and processes, the philosopher is concerned with the nature of reality as such and in general. Burnet puts the point very well in his book on *Greek Philosophy* when he points out (on pages 11 and 12) that the sense in which the philosopher asks

'What is real?' involves the problem of man's relation to reality, which takes us beyond pure science. 'We have to ask whether the mind of man can have any contact with reality at all, and, if it can, what difference this will make to his life'. Now to think that this question of Burnet's could be settled by experimental methods involves just as serious a mistake as to think that philosophy, with its *a priori* methods of reasoning, could possibly compete with experimental science on its own ground. For it is not an empirical question at all, but a *conceptual* one. It has to do with the *force of the concept* of reality. An appeal to the results of an experiment would necessarily beg the important question, since the philosopher would be bound to ask by what token those results themselves are accepted as 'reality'. Of course, this simply exasperates the experimental scientist—rightly so, from the point of view of his own aims and interests. But the force of the philosophical question cannot be grasped in terms of the preconceptions of experimental science. It cannot be answered by generalizing from particular instances since a particular answer to the philosophical question is already implied in the acceptance of those instances as 'real'.

The whole issue was symbolically dramatized on a celebrated occasion in 1939 when Professor G. E. Moore gave a lecture to the British Academy entitled 'Proof of an External World'. Moore's 'proof' ran roughly as follows. He held up each of his hands in succession, saying 'Here is one hand and here is another; therefore at least two external objects exist; therefore an external world exists'. In arguing thus Moore seemed to be treating the question 'Does an

external world exist?' as similar in form to the question 'Do animals with a single horn growing out of their snout exist?' This of course would be conclusively settled by the production of two rhinoceri. But the bearing of Moore's argument on the philosophical question of the existence of an external world is not as simple as the bearing of the production of two rhinoceri on the other question. For, of course, philosophical doubt about the existence of an external world covers the two hands which Moore produced in the same way as it covers everything else. The whole question is: Do objects like Moore's two hands qualify as inhabitants of an external world? This is not to say that Moore's argument is completely beside the point; what is wrong is to regard it as an experimental 'proof', for it is not like anything one finds in an experimental discipline. Moore was not making an experiment; he was *reminding* his audience of something, reminding them of the way in which the expression 'external object' is in fact used. And his reminder indicated that the issue in philosophy is not to prove or disprove the existence of a world of external objects but rather to *elucidate the concept* of externality. That there is a connection between this issue and the central philosophical problem about the general nature of reality is, I think, obvious.

4. *The Philosopher's Concern with Language*¹

So much, at present, for the relation between philosophy and science. But I have yet to show why the rejection of the master-scientist conception of the

philosopher need not, and should not, lead to the underlabourer conception. I have spoken of Moore reminding us how certain expressions are in fact used; and I have emphasized how important in philosophy is the notion of elucidating a concept. These are ways of speaking which *prima facie* fit the underlabourer conception very well. And in fact what is wrong with that conception in general is to be looked for not so much in any downright false doctrine as in a systematically mistaken emphasis.

Philosophical issues do, to a large extent, turn on the correct use of certain linguistic expressions; the elucidation of a concept is, to a large extent, the clearing up of linguistic confusions. Nevertheless, the philosopher's concern is not with correct usage as such and not all linguistic confusions are equally relevant to philosophy. They are relevant only in so far as the discussion of them is designed to throw light on the question how far reality is intelligible¹ and what difference would the fact that he could have a grasp of reality make to the life of man. So we have to ask how questions of language, and what kinds of question about language, are likely to bear upon these issues.

To ask whether reality is intelligible is to ask about the relation between thought and reality. In considering the nature of thought one is led also to consider the nature of language. Inseparably bound up with

¹ I am aware that this is a somewhat old-fashioned sounding way to talk. I do so in order to mark the difference between the philosopher's concern with reality and that of, e.g., the scientist. I take this opportunity of saying that I owe the statement of the philosopher's kind of interest in language, in the next paragraph, to an unpublished talk by Mr. Rush Bees on "Philosophy and Art".

the question whether reality is intelligible, therefore, is the question of how language is connected with reality, of what it is to *say* something. In fact the philosopher's interest in language lies not so much in the solution of particular linguistic confusions for their own sakes, as in the solution of confusions about the nature of language in general.

I will elaborate this point polemically, referring to T. D. Weldon's *Vocabulary of Politics*. I choose this book because in it Weldon uses his interpretation of the concern which philosophy has with language to support a conception of the relations between philosophy and the study of society, which is fundamentally at variance with the conception to be commended in this monograph. Weldon's view is based on an interpretation of recent developments in philosophy in this country. What has occurred, he says, is that 'philosophers have become extremely self-conscious about language. They have come to realise that many of the problems which their predecessors have found insuperable arose not from anything mysterious or inexplicable in the world but from the eccentricities of the language in which we try to describe the world' (35: Chapter I). The problems of social and political philosophy, therefore, arise from the eccentricities of the language in which we try to describe social and political institutions, rather than from anything mysterious in those institutions themselves. In accordance with the underlabourer conception of philosophy, which Weldon is here faithfully following, he regards philosophy as having a purely negative role to play in advancing our understanding of social life. Any positive advances in

this understanding must be contributed by the methods of empirical science rather than by those of philosophy. There is no hint that discussion of the central questions of metaphysics and epistemology themselves may (as I shall later argue) have light to throw on the nature of human societies.

In fact those questions are cavalierly brushed aside in the very statement of Weldon's position. To assume at the outset that one can make a sharp distinction between 'the world' and 'the language in which we try to describe the world', to the extent of saying that the problems of philosophy do not arise at all out of the former but only out of the latter, is to beg the whole question of philosophy.

Weldon would no doubt reply that this question has already been settled in a sense favourable to his position by those philosophers who contributed to the developments of which he is speaking. But even if we overlook the important fact that philosophical issues can never be settled in that way, that the results of other men's philosophizing cannot be assumed in one's own philosophical work as can scientific theories established by other men—even, I say, if we overlook this, the work of Wittgenstein, the most outstanding contributor to the philosophical development in question, is just misinterpreted if it is taken to support Weldon's way of speaking. This is obvious enough in relation to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, as can be seen from two representative quotations. 'To give the essence of proposition means to give the essence of all description, therefore the essence of the world' (36: 5.4711). 'That the world is my world shows itself in the fact that the limits of my

language (of the only language I can understand) mean the limits of *my world*' (*Ibid.*: 5.62).

It is true that these ideas in the *Tractatus* are connected with a theory of language which Wittgenstein afterwards rejected and which Weldon would also reject. But Wittgenstein's methods of argument in the later *Philosophical Investigations* are equally incompatible with any easy distinction between the world and language. This comes out clearly in his treatment of the concept of seeing an object as something: for example, seeing the picture of an arrow as in flight. The following passage is characteristic of Wittgenstein's whole approach:

In the triangle I can see now *this* as apex, *that* as base—now *this* as apex, *that* as base.—Clearly the words 'Now I am seeing this as the apex' cannot so far mean anything to a learner who has only just met the concepts of apex, base, and so on.—But I do not mean this as an empirical proposition.

'Now he's seeing it like *this*', 'now like *that*' would only be said of someone *capable* of making certain applications of the figure quite freely.

The substratum of this experience is the mastery of a technique.

But how queer for this to be the logical condition of someone's having such and such an *experience*! After all, you don't say that one only 'has toothache' if one is capable of doing such-and-such.—From this it follows that we cannot be dealing with the same concept of experience here. It is a different though related concept.

It is only if someone *can do*, has learnt, is master of, such-and-such, that it makes sense to say he has had *that* experience.

And if this sounds crazy, you need to reflect that the

concept of seeing is modified here. (A similar consideration is often necessary to get rid of a feeling of dizziness in mathematics.)

We talk, we utter words, and only *later* get a picture of their life. (37: II, XI.)

We cannot say then, with Weldon, that the problems of philosophy arise out of language *rather than* out of the world, because in discussing language philosophically we are in fact discussing *what counts as belonging to the world*. Our idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the language that we use. The concepts we have settle for us the form of the experience we have of the world. It may be worth reminding ourselves of the truism that when we speak of the world we are speaking of what we in fact mean by the expression 'the world': there is no way of getting outside the concepts in terms of which we think of the world, which is what Weldon is trying to do in his statements about the nature of philosophical problems. The world *is* for us what is presented through those concepts. That is not to say that our concepts may not change; but when they do, that means that our concept of the world has changed too.

5. *Conceptual and Empirical Enquiries*

This misunderstanding of the way in which philosophical treatments of linguistic confusions are also elucidations of the nature of reality leads to inadequacies in the actual methods used for treating such questions. Empiricists like Weldon systematically underemphasize the extent of what may be said *a*

priori: for them all statements about reality must be empirical or they are unfounded, and *a priori* statements are 'about linguistic usage' as opposed to being 'about reality'. But if the integrity of science is endangered by the over-estimation of the *a priori*, against which Hume legitimately fought, it is no less true that philosophy is crippled by its underestimation: by mistaking conceptual enquiries into what it makes sense to say for empirical enquiries which must wait upon experience for their solution.

The misunderstanding is well illustrated in the following passage from Hume himself. He is discussing the extent and nature of our knowledge of what will happen in the future and arguing that nothing in the future can be logically guaranteed for us by our knowledge of what has been observed to happen in the past.

In vain do you pretend to have learned the nature of bodies from past experience. Their secret nature, and consequently all their effects and influence may change, without any change in their sensible qualities. This happens sometimes, and with regard to some objects: Why may it not happen always and with regard to all objects? What logic, what process of argument secures you against this supposition? (12: Section IV, Part II.)

Hume assumes here that since a statement about the uniform behaviour of *some* objects is a straightforward empirical matter which may at any time be upset by future experience, the same must be true of a statement about the uniform behaviour of all objects. This assumption is very compelling. Its compellingness derives from a healthy unwillingness to admit that

anyone can legislate *a priori* concerning the course of future experience on the basis of purely logical considerations. And of course we cannot thus legislate against a breakdown in the regular order of nature, such as would make scientific work impossible and destroy speech, thought, and even life. But we can and must legislate *a priori* against the possibility of *describing* such a situation in the terms which Hume attempts to use: in terms, that is, of the properties of objects, their causes and effects. For were the order of nature to break down in that way these terms would be no longer applicable. Because there may be minor, or even major, variations *within* such an order without our whole conceptual apparatus being upset, it does not follow that we can use our existing apparatus (and what other are we to use?) to describe a breakdown in the order of nature as a whole.

This is not merely verbal quibbling. For the whole philosophical purport of enquiries like Hume's is to clarify those concepts which are fundamental to our conception of reality, like *object*, *property of an object*, *cause and effect*. To point out that the use of such notions necessarily presupposes the continuing truth of *most* of our generalizations about the behaviour of the world we live in is of central importance to such an undertaking.

The importance of this issue for the philosophy of the social sciences will become more apparent later on. I shall argue, for instance, that many of the more important theoretical issues which have been raised in those studies belong to philosophy rather than to science and are, therefore, to be settled by *a priori* conceptual analysis rather than by empirical research.

For example, the question of what constitutes social behaviour is a demand for an elucidation of the *concept* of social behaviour. In dealing with questions of this sort there should be no question of 'waiting to see' what empirical research will show us; it is a matter of tracing the implications of the concepts we use.

6. *The Pivotal Role of Epistemology within Philosophy*

I can now offer an alternative view of the way in which the problems of epistemology and metaphysics are related to those in what I have called the peripheral philosophical disciplines. Everything I have so far said has been based on the assumption that what is really fundamental to philosophy is the question regarding the nature and intelligibility of reality. It is easy to see that this question must lead on to a consideration of what we mean by 'intelligibility' in the first place. What is it to understand something, to grasp the sense of something? Now if we look at the contexts in which the notions of understanding, of making something intelligible, are used we find that these differ widely amongst themselves. Moreover, if those contexts are examined and compared, it soon becomes apparent that 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.

The scientist, for instance, tries to make the world more intelligible; but so do the historian, the religious prophet and the artist; so does the philosopher. And

although we may describe the activities of all these kinds of thinker in terms of the concepts of understanding and intelligibility, it is clear that in very many important ways, the objectives of each of them differ from the objectives of any of the others. For instance, I have already tried, in Section 3, to give some account of the differences between the kinds of 'understanding of reality' sought by the philosopher and the scientist respectively.

It does not follow from this that we are just punning when we speak of the activities of all these enquirers in terms of the notion of making things intelligible. That no more follows than does a similar conclusion with regard to the word 'game' when Wittgenstein shows us that there is no set of properties common and peculiar to all the activities correctly so called (Cf. 37: I, 66-71). There is just as much point in saying that science, art, religion and philosophy are all concerned with making things intelligible as there is in saying that football, chess, patience and skipping are all games. But just as it would be foolish to say that all these activities are part of one supergame, if only we were clever enough to learn how to play it, so is it foolish to suppose that the results of all those other activities should all add up to one grand theory of reality (as some philosophers have imagined: with the corollary that it was their job to discover it!).

On my view then, the philosophy of science will be concerned with the kind of understanding sought and conveyed by the scientist; the philosophy of religion will be concerned with the way in which religion attempts to present an intelligible picture of the world; and so on. And of course these activities and

their aims will be mutually compared and contrasted. The purpose of such philosophical enquiries will be to contribute to our understanding of what is involved in the concept of intelligibility, so that we may better understand what it means to call reality intelligible. It is important for my purposes to note how different is this from the underlabourer conception. In particular, the philosophy of science (or of whatever enquiry may be in question) is presented here as autonomous, and not parasitic on science itself, as far as the provenance of its problems is concerned. The motive force for the philosophy of science comes from within philosophy rather than from within science. And its aim is not merely the negative one of removing obstacles from the path to the acquisition of further scientific knowledge, but the positive one of an increased philosophical understanding of what is involved in the concept of intelligibility. The difference between these conceptions is more than a verbal one.

It might appear at first sight as if no room had been left for metaphysics and epistemology. For if the concept of intelligibility (and, I should add, the concept of reality equally) are systematically ambiguous as between different intellectual disciplines, does not the philosophical task of giving an account of those notions disintegrate into the philosophies of the various disciplines in question? Does not the idea of a *special* study of epistemology rest on the false idea that all varieties of the notion of intelligibility can be reduced to a single set of criteria?

That is a false conclusion to draw, though it does provide a salutary warning against expecting from

epistemology the formulation of a set of *criteria* of intelligibility. Its task will rather be to describe the conditions which must be satisfied if there are to be any criteria of understanding at all.

7. *Epistemology and the Understanding of Society*

I should like here to give a preliminary indication of how this epistemological undertaking may be expected to bear upon our understanding of social life. Let us consider again Burnet's formulation of the main question of philosophy. He asks what difference it will make to the life of man if his mind can have contact with reality. Let us first interpret this question in the most superficially obvious way: it is clear that men do decide how they shall behave on the basis of their view of what is the case in the world around them. For instance, a man who has to catch an early morning train will set his alarm clock in accordance with his belief about the time at which the train is due to leave. If anyone is inclined to object to this example on the grounds of its triviality, let him reflect on the difference that is made to human life by the fact that there are such things as alarm clocks and trains running to schedule, and methods of determining the truth of statements about the times of trains, and so on. The concern of philosophy here is with the question: What is involved in 'having knowledge' of facts like these, and what is the general nature of behaviour which is decided on in accordance with such knowledge?

The nature of this question will perhaps be clearer if it is compared with another question concerning the

importance in human life of knowing the world as it really is. I am thinking of the moral question which so exercised Ibsen in such plays as *The Wild Duck* and *Ghosts*: How far is it important to a man's life that he should live it in clear awareness of the facts of his situation and of his relations to those around him? In *Ghosts* this question is presented by considering a man whose life is being ruined by his ignorance of the truth about his heredity. *The Wild Duck* starts from the opposite direction: here is a man who is living a perfectly contented life which is, however, based on a complete misunderstanding of the attitude to him of those he knows; should he be disillusioned and have his happiness disrupted in the interests of truth? It is necessary to notice that our understanding of both these issues depends on our recognition of the *prima facie* importance of understanding the situation in which one lives one's life. The question in *The Wild Duck* is not whether that is important, but whether or not it is *more* important than being happy.

Now the interest of the epistemologist in such situations will be to throw light on *why* such an understanding should have this importance in a man's life by showing what is involved in having it. To use a Kantian phrase, his interest will be in the question: How is such an understanding (or indeed any understanding) possible? To answer this question it is necessary to show the central role which the concept of understanding plays in the activities which are characteristic of human societies. In this way the discussion of what an understanding of reality consists in merges into the discussion of the difference the possession of such an understanding may be expected

to make to the life of man; and this again involves a consideration of the general nature of a human society, an analysis, that is, of the concept of a human society.

A man's social relations with his fellows are permeated with his ideas about reality. Indeed, 'permeated' is hardly a strong enough word: social relations are expressions of ideas about reality. In the Ibsen situations which I just referred to, for example, it would be impossible to delineate the character's attitudes to the people surrounding him except in terms of his ideas about what they think of him, what they have done in the past, what they are likely to do in the future, and so on; and, in *Ghosts*, his ideas about how he is biologically related to them. Again, a monk has certain characteristic social relations with his fellow monks and with people outside the monastery; but it would be impossible to give more than a superficial account of those relations without taking into account the religious ideas around which the monk's life revolves.

At this point it becomes clearer how the line of approach which I am commending conflicts with widely held conceptions of sociology and of the social studies generally. It conflicts, for instance, with the view of Emile Durkheim:

I consider extremely fruitful this idea that social life should be explained, not by the notions of those who participate in it, but by more profound causes which are unperceived by consciousness, and I think also that these causes are to be sought mainly in the manner according to which the associated individuals are grouped. Only in this way, it seems, can history become a science, and sociology

itself exist. [See Durkheim's review of A. Labriola: 'Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l'histoire' in *Revue Philosophique*, December, 1897.]

It conflicts too with von Wiese's conception of the task of sociology as being to give an account of social life 'disregarding the cultural aims of individuals in society in order to study the influences which they exert on each other as a result of community life'. (See 2: P. 8.)

The crucial question here, of course, is how far any sense can be given to Durkheim's idea of 'the manner according to which associated individuals are grouped' *apart* from the 'notions' of such individuals; or how far it makes sense to speak of individuals exerting influence on each other (in von Wiese's conception) in abstraction from such individuals' 'cultural aims'. I shall try to deal explicitly with these central questions at a later stage in the argument. At present I simply wish to point out that positions like these do in fact come into conflict with philosophy, conceived as an enquiry into the nature of man's knowledge of reality and into the difference which the possibility of such knowledge makes to human life.

8. *Rules: Wittgenstein's Analysis*

I must now attempt a more detailed picture of the way in which the epistemological discussion of man's understanding of reality throws light on the nature of human society and of social relations between men. To that end I propose to give some account of the light which has been shed on the epistemological issue by

Wittgenstein's discussion of the concept of *following a rule* in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Burnet spoke of the mind's 'contact' with reality. Let us take an obvious *prima facie* case of such contact and consider what is involved in it. Suppose that I am wondering in what year Everest was first climbed; I think to myself: 'Mount Everest was climbed in 1958'. What I want to ask here is what is meant by saying that I am 'thinking about Mount Everest?' How is my thought related to the thing, namely Mount Everest, about which I am thinking? Let us make the issue somewhat sharper yet. In order to remove complications about the function of mental images in such situations I will suppose that I express my thought explicitly in words. The appropriate question then becomes: what is it about my utterance of the words 'Mount Everest' which makes it possible to say I *mean* by those words a certain peak in the Himalayas. I have introduced the subject in this somewhat roundabout way in order to bring out the connection between the question about the nature of the 'contact' which the mind has with reality and the question about the nature of meaning. I have chosen as an example of a word being used to mean something a case where the word in question is being used to *refer* to something, not because I assign any special logical or metaphysical priority to this type of meaning, but solely because in this case the connection between the question about the nature of meaning and that about the relation between thought and reality is particularly striking. A natural first answer to give is that I am able to mean what I do by the words 'Mount Everest' because they have been defined to me. There are all sorts of

ways in which this may have been done: I may have been shown Mount Everest on a map, I may have been told that it is the highest peak in the world; or I may have been flown over the Himalayas in an aeroplane and had the actual Everest pointed out to me. To eliminate further complications let us make the last supposition; that is, to use the technical terminology of logic, let us concentrate on the case of *ostensive* definition.

The position then is this. I have had Everest pointed out to me; I have been told that its name is 'Everest'; and in virtue of those actions in the past I am now able to *mean* by the words 'Mount Everest' that peak in the Himalayas. So far so good. But now we have to ask a further question: What is the connection between those acts in the past and my utterance of the words 'Mount Everest' now which now gives this utterance of mine the meaning it has? How, in general, is a definition connected with the subsequent use of the expression defined? What is it to 'follow' a definition? Again there is a superficially obvious answer to this: the definition lays down the meaning and to use a word in its correct meaning is to use it in the same way as that laid down in the definition. And in a sense, of course, that answer is perfectly correct and unexceptionable; its only defect is that it does not remove the philosophical puzzlement. For what is it to use the word *in the same way* as that laid down in the definition? How do I decide whether a given proposed use is the same as or different from that laid down in the definition?

That is not a merely idle question, as can be seen from the following consideration. As far as immediate

external appearances go, the ostensive definition simply consisted in a gesture and a sound uttered as we were flying over the Himalayas. But suppose that, with that gesture, my teacher had been defining the word 'mountain' for me, rather than 'Everest', as might have been the case, say, had I been in the process of learning English? In that case too my grasp of the correct meaning of the word 'mountain' would be manifested in my continuing to use it in the same way as that laid down in the definition. Yet the correct use of the word 'mountain' is certainly not the same as the correct use of the word 'Everest'! So apparently the word 'same' presents us with another example of systematic ambiguity: we do not know whether two things are to be regarded as the same or not unless we are told the context in which the question arises. However much we may be tempted to think otherwise, there is no absolute unchanging sense to the words 'the same'.

But isn't *the same* at least the same?

We seem to have an infallible paradigm of identity in the identity of a thing with itself. I feel like saying: 'Here at any rate there can't be any variety of interpretations. If you are seeing a thing you are seeing identity too'.

Then are two things the same when they are what one thing is? And how am I to apply what the *one* thing shows me to the case of two things? (37: I, 215.)

I said that the particular interpretation which is to be put upon the words 'the same' depends on the context in which the question arises. That may be expressed more precisely. It is only in terms of a given *rule* that we can attach a specific sense to the words 'the same'. In terms of the rule governing the use of

the word 'mountain', a man who uses it to refer to Mount Everest on one occasion and to Mont Blanc on another occasion is using it in the same way each time; but someone who refers to Mont Blanc as 'Everest' would not be said to be using this word in the same way as someone who used it to refer to Mount Everest. So the question: What is it for a word to have a meaning? leads on to the question: What is it for someone to follow a rule?

Let us once again start by considering the obvious answer. We should like to say: someone is following a rule if he always acts in the same way on the same kind of occasion. But this again, though correct, does not advance matters since, as we have seen, it is only in terms of a given rule that the word 'same' acquires a definite sense. 'The use of the word "rule" and the use of the word "same" are interwoven. (As are the use of "proposition" and the use of "true".)' (37: I, 225.) So the problem becomes: How is the word 'same' to be given a sense?; or: In what circumstances does it make sense to say of somebody that he is following a rule in what he does?

Suppose that the word 'Everest' has just been ostensively defined to me. It might be thought that I could settle at the outset what is to count as the correct use of this word in the future by making a conscious decision to the effect: 'I will use this word only to refer to *this* mountain'. And that of course, in the context of the language which we all speak and understand, is perfectly intelligible. But, just because it presupposes the settled institution of the language we all speak and understand, this does not throw any light on the philosophical difficulty. Obviously we are

not permitted to presuppose that whose very possibility we are investigating. It is just as difficult to give any account of what is meant by 'acting in accordance with my decision' as it is to give an account of what it was to 'act in accordance with the ostensive definition' in the first place. However emphatically I point at this mountain here before me and however emphatically I utter the words 'this mountain', my decision still has to be *applied* in the future, and it is precisely what is involved in such an application that is here in question. Hence no *formula* will help to solve this problem; we must always come to a point at which we have to give an account of the application of the formula.

What is the difference between someone who is really applying a rule in what he does and someone who is not? A difficulty here is that any series of actions which a man may perform can be brought within the scope of some formula or other if we are prepared to make it sufficiently complicated. Yet, that a man's actions *might* be interpreted as an application of a given formula, is in itself no guarantee that he is in fact applying that formula. What is the difference between those cases?

Imagine a man—let us call him *A*—writing down the following figures on a blackboard: 1 3 5 7. *A* now asks his friend, *B*, how the series is to be continued. Almost everybody in this situation, short of having special reasons to be suspicious, would answer: 9 11 13 15. Let us suppose that *A* refuses to accept this as a continuation of his series, saying it runs as follows: 1 3 5 7 1 3 5 7 9 11 13 15 9 11 13 15. He then asks *B* to continue from there. At this point *B* has a variety of alternatives to choose from. Let us suppose that he

makes a choice and that *A* again refuses to accept it, but substitutes another continuation of his own. And let us suppose that this continues for some time. There would undoubtedly come a point at which *B*, with perfect justification, would say that *A* was not really following a *mathematical* rule at all, even though all the continuations he had made to date *could* be brought within the scope of some formula. Certainly *A* was following a rule; but his rule was: Always to substitute a continuation different from the one suggested by *B* at every stage. And though this is a perfectly good rule of its kind, it does not belong to arithmetic.

Now *B*'s eventual reaction, and the fact that it would be quite justified, particularly if several other individuals were brought into the game and if *A* always refused to allow their suggested continuations as correct—all this suggests a very important feature of the concept of following a rule. It suggests that one has to take account not only of the actions of the person whose behaviour is in question as a candidate for the category of rule-following, but also the *reactions of other people* to what he does. More specifically, it is only in a situation in which it makes sense to suppose that somebody else could in principle discover the rule which I am following that I can intelligibly be said to follow a rule at all.

Let us consider this more closely. It is important to remember that when *A* wrote down: 1 3 5 7, *B* (representing anyone who has learnt elementary arithmetic) continued the series by writing: 9 11 13 15, etc., *as a matter of course*. The very fact that I have been able to write 'etc.' after those figures and that I

can be confident of being taken in one way rather than another by virtually all my readers, is itself a demonstration of the same point. 'The rule can only seem to me to produce all its consequences in advance if I draw them *as a matter of course*. As much as it is a matter of course for me to call this colour "Blue"?' (37: I, 238.) It should be understood that these remarks are not confined to the case of mathematical formulae but apply to all cases of rule-following. They apply, for instance, to the use of words like 'Everest' and 'mountain': given a certain sort of training everybody does, as a matter of course, continue to use these words in the same way as would everybody else.

It is this that makes it possible for us to attach a sense to the expression 'the same' in a given context. It is extremely important to notice here that going on in one way rather than another as a matter of course must not be just a peculiarity of the person whose behaviour claims to be a case of rule-following. His behaviour belongs to that category only if it is possible for someone else to grasp what he is doing, by being brought to the pitch of himself going on in that way as a matter of course.

Imagine someone using a line as a rule in the following way: he holds a pair of compasses, and carries one of its points along the line that is the 'rule', while the other one draws the line that follows the rule. And while he moves along the ruling line he alters the opening of the compasses, apparently with great precision, looking at the rule the whole time as if it determined what he did. And watching him we see no kind of regularity in this opening and shutting of the compasses. We cannot learn his way of

following the line from it. Here perhaps one really would say: 'The original seems to *intende* to him which way he is to go. But it is not a rule'. (37: I, 237.)

Why is it not a rule? Because the notion of following a rule is logically inseparable from the notion of *making a mistake*. If it is possible to say of someone that he is following a rule that means that one can ask whether he is doing what he does correctly or not. Otherwise there is no foothold in his behaviour in which the notion of a rule can take a grip; there is then no *sense* in describing his behaviour in that way, since everything he does is as good as anything else he might do, whereas the point of the concept of a rule is that it should enable us to *evaluate* what is being done.

Let us consider what is involved in making a mistake (which includes, of course, a consideration of what is involved in doing something correctly). A mistake is a contravention of what is established as correct: as such, it must be recognizable as such a contravention. That is, if I make a mistake in, say, my use of a word, other people must be able to point it out to me. If this is not so, I can do what I like and there is no external check on what I do; that is, nothing is established. Establishing a standard is not an activity which it makes sense to ascribe to any individual in complete isolation from other individuals. For it is contact with other individuals which alone makes possible the external check on one's actions which is inseparable from an established standard.

A qualification must be made here to avert a possible misunderstanding. It is, of course, possible, within a human society as we know it, with its established

language and institutions, for an individual to adhere to a *private* rule of conduct. What Wittgenstein insists on, however, is first that it must be in principle possible for other people to grasp that rule and judge when it is being correctly followed; secondly that it makes no sense to suppose anyone capable of establishing a purely personal standard of behaviour if he had never had any experience of human society with its socially established rules. In this part of philosophy one is concerned with the *general concept* of following a rule; that being so, one is not at liberty, in explaining what is involved in that concept, to take for granted a situation in which that concept is already presupposed.

9. Some Misunderstandings of Wittgenstein

The necessity for rules to have a social setting is particularly important in connection with the philosophical problem about the nature of sensations. For it implies that the language in which we speak about our sensations must be governed by criteria which are publicly accessible: those criteria cannot rest in something essentially private to a given individual, as many philosophers have supposed. Wittgenstein's discussion in the *Philosophical Investigations* is intimately bound up with this special problem. But, as P. F. Strawson points out, Wittgenstein's arguments apply equally against the idea of *any* language which is not, at some point, based on a common life in which many individuals participate. Strawson regards this fact as an objection to Wittgenstein's position for, he alleges, it rules out as inconceivable something we can in fact

perfectly well conceivable. He argues that we can quite the concepts of meaning, language, use, etc. From the well imagining, as a logical possibility, a desert-islander fact that we can observe him going through certain motions and making certain sounds—which, were they to be performed by somebody else in another context, that of a human society, it would be quite legitimate to describe in those terms, it by no means follows that *his* activities are legitimately so describable. And the fact that B might correlate his subject's practices with his own does not establish Strawson's point; for the whole substance of Wittgenstein's argument is that it is not those practices considered on their own which justify the application of categories like language and meaning, but the social *context* in which those practices are performed. Strawson says nothing to controvert those arguments. This is well brought out by Norman Malcolm. As he

observes a correlation between the use of its words and sentences and the speaker's actions and environment. . . . Observer B is thus able to form hypotheses about the meanings (the regular use) of the words of his subject's language. He might in time come to be able to speak it; then the practice of each serves as a check on the practice of the other. But shall we say that, before this fortunate result was achieved (before the use of the language becomes a *shared* 'form of life'), the words of the language had no meaning, no use? (32: p. 85.)

To Strawson it seems self-evidently absurd to say such a thing. The persuasiveness of his position lies in the fact that he appears to have succeeded in giving a coherent description of a situation which, on Wittgenstein's principles, ought to be indescribable because inconceivable. But this is only appearance; in fact Strawson has begged the whole question. His description is vitiated at the outset as a contribution to the problem under discussion by containing terms the applicability of which is precisely what is in question: terms like 'language', 'use', 'words', 'sentences', 'meaning'—and all without benefit of quotation marks. To say that observer B may 'form hypotheses about the meanings (the regular use) of the words in his subject's language' is senseless unless one can speak of what his subject is doing in terms of

A. J. Ayer makes very similar objections to Wittgenstein's position. Like Strawson he is prone to describe the activities of his hypothetical 'unsocialized' Crusoe in terms which derive their sense from a

social context. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

He (that is, 'Crusoe') may think that a bird which he sees flying past is a bird of the same type as one which he has previously named, when in fact it is of a very different type, sufficiently different for him to have given it a different name if he had observed it more closely. (4).

This of course presupposes that it makes sense to speak of 'naming' in such a context; and all the difficulties about the sense we are to attach to the notion of *sameness* are raised in a particularly acute form by the phrase 'sufficiently different for him to have given it a different name'. For a 'sufficient difference' is certainly not something that is given for one absolutely in the object one is observing; it gets its sense only from the particular rule one happens to be following. But it is essential for Ayer's argument that this should have a sense independent of any particular rule, for he is trying to use it as a foundation on which to build the possibility of a rule independent of any social context.

Ayer also argues that 'some human being must have been the first to use a symbol'. He wishes to imply by this that socially established rules clearly cannot have been presupposed by *this* use; and if that were so, of course, established rules cannot be a logically necessary prerequisite of the use of symbols in general. The argument is attractive, but fallacious. From the fact that there must have been a transition from a state of affairs where there was no language to a state of affairs in which there was language, it by no means

follows that there must have been some individual who was the first to use language. This is just as absurd as the argument that there must have been some individual who was the first to take part in a tug-of-war; more so, in fact. The supposition that language was *invented* by any individual is quite nonsensical, as is well shown by Rush Rhees in his reply to Ayer. (28; p. 85-87.) We can imagine practices gradually growing up amongst early men none of which could count as the invention of language; and yet once these practices had reached a certain degree of sophistication it would be a misunderstanding to ask *what* degree precisely — one can say of such people that they have a language. This whole issue involves an application of something like the Hegelian principle of a change in quantity leading to a difference in quality, which I will discuss more fully at a later stage.

There is one counter-argument to Wittgenstein's position to which Ayer seems to attach peculiar importance, since he uses it not only in the paper to which I have been referring but also in his later book, *The Problem of Knowledge*. One of Wittgenstein's most important arguments runs as follows:

Let us imagine a table (something like a dictionary) that exists only in our imagination. A dictionary can be used to justify the translation of a word X into a word Y. But are we also to call it a justification if such a table is to be looked up only in the imagination? Well, yes; then it is a subjective justification. . . . But justification consists in appealing to something independent. — 'But surely I can know if I have remembered the time of departure of a train

right and to check it I call to mind how a page of the time-table looked. Isn't it the same here?—No; for this process has got to produce a memory which is actually *correct*. If the mental image of the time-table could not itself be *tested* for correctness, how could it confirm the correctness of the first memory? (As if someone were to buy several copies of the morning paper to assure himself that what it said was true.)

Looking up a table in the imagination is no more looking up a table than the image of the result of an imagined experiment is the result of an experiment. (37: I, 265.)

Ayer's counter-argument is that *any* use of language, no matter how publicly established, is open to the same difficulty; for, he says, even if one's use of a word on a particular occasion is ratified by other language-users, one still has to *identify* what they say. 'No doubt mistakes can always occur; but if one never accepted any identification without a further check, one would never identify anything at all. And then no descriptive use of language would be possible.' (3: Chapter 2, Section V.) Strawson also seems to think that Wittgenstein is open to such an objection for he asks, pointedly, in connection with Wittgenstein's arguments: 'Do we ever in fact find ourselves misremembering the use of very *simple* words of our common language, and having to correct ourselves by attention to others' use?' (32: p. 85.)

But this objection is misconceived; Wittgenstein does not say that every act of identification in fact needs a further check in the sense that we can never rest contented with our judgments. That so obviously leads to an infinite regress that it is difficult to imagine anyone maintaining it who did not want to establish a

system of complete Pyrrhonian scepticism such as is very far indeed from Wittgenstein's intention. In fact Wittgenstein himself is very insistent that 'Justifications have to come to an end somewhere'; and this is a foundation stone of many of his most characteristic doctrines: as for instance his treatment of the 'matter of course' way in which rules are, in general, followed. Ayer and Strawson have misunderstood Wittgenstein's insistence that it must be *possible* for the judgment of a single individual to be checked by independent criteria (criteria that are established independently of that individual's will); it is only in special circumstances that such a check *actually* has to be made. But the fact that it can be done if necessary makes a difference to what can be said about those cases in which it needs not to be done. A single use of language does not stand alone; it is intelligible only within the general context in which language is used; and an important part of that context is the procedure of correcting mistakes when they occur and checking when a mistake is suspected.