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Wittgenstein, Weber and Winch on understanding human behaviour: a "Matter of Continuity"

The aim of this essay is to try to explain what "understanding" is – as a particular form of activity that conveys practical and moral consequences – in the philosophical and ethical conceptions of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Max Weber and Peter Winch.

The key-words around which this paper is structured are "understanding human behaviour", and this topic is tackled by comparing and contrasting these three authors for two reasons. First, because the kind of "understanding" that is in question here plays a fundamental role within the context of their specific philosophical and epistemological investigations, and in relation to the contribution that each of them gave – directly and/or indirectly – to the evolution of contemporary social sciences, in particular, sociology and cultural anthropology. Second, because it is a notion which shows a special kind of philosophical continuity *between theoretical interests and practical attitudes in their shared concern about the ethical consequences of the action. For Wittgenstein and Winch, as well for Weber, ethics seems to be the hidden side of philosophy and human knowledge, but also the most relevant aspect in order to make intelligible the sense of a life.*

The key-words around which this paper will be structured are "understanding human behaviour". The way in which the word "understanding" – its multiplicity of meanings and shades of sense that its interpretation involves – will be considered is from the standpoint of praxis, that is, as *a form of activity* that conveys practical consequences.

The procedure here will be to construct a game of mirrors where some aspects of the intellectual work of Wittgenstein, Weber and Winch will be mutually reflected; in particular, those aspects concerning the attempt to understand what "understanding human behaviour" – or, in other words, "human acting" – is. This, hopefully, will shed some light on both dark or less visible sides of this multiform concept, and these thinker's ideas about such an essential philosophical_subject. Nevertheless, this paper is intended to underline what I would like to mark as "a matter of continuity" in their thought, a continuity between theoretical interests and practical attitudes.

I chose to deal with this concept by comparing and contrasting these authors for two reasons. First, because I think that the kind of "understanding" that is in question here plays a fundamental role within the context of their specific philosophical and

epistemological investigations, and also in relation to the contribution that each of them gave – directly as well as indirectly – to the evolution of contemporary social sciences, in particular to sociology and cultural anthropology. Second, because it is a notion which shows this philosophical *continuity* in their shared concern about something that becomes more and more important as their common attention to ethics grows. Here we need an essential clarification: "ethics" is not intended to be a definite philosophical realm such as that where a moral philosopher does her own theoretical exercises, but rather a pervasive attitude towards philosophy and life, and in particular as that *Socratic* relationship between philosophy *and* life that makes a life shaped by philosophy the only one worthy to be lived[1].

The conceptual space in which I am going to analyze the implications of this "understanding" has been delimited by my first point – it has to be taken as a practical exercise, a form of activity, a human praxis. This point of view, I believe, should show that the sort of concept, and activity, with which we are dealing covers, above all, the sphere of social interaction, human relationships and interconnections that make effective and meaningful our common language, our shared notions, our ability to communicate and understand each other. That is, the same sphere where we are continuously called to answer to ethical demands.

This particular delimitation of the theoretical space where attempting to illuminate some ideas peculiar to Wittgenstein, Weber and Winch on this issue, will be shaped in a certain fashion. A fashion, so to say, that should allow these ideas to become as much a source of light as will be – alternatively – that which is being illuminated. This procedure has the aim of trying to understand what this sort of "understanding" is – as a particular form of activity – in the philosophical and ethical conceptions of Wittgenstein, Weber and Winch.

The idea of tackling such a complex matter by means of these three particular philosophical outlooks derives from the extremely decisive role that the attempt to understand human behaviour – in terms of its individual and social meaning and its practical consequences – plays in the theoretical investigations of these thinkers. What W., W. and W. share is a very special care for, and a great attention to, the ways in which human beings think and act within the context of the actual world in which they live, and of the real lives that they lead in that world. This is not a trivial feature of their work. On the contrary, this is the underlying characteristic that indicates the direction in which the three of them look when they think, when they do philosophy – a direction that leads directly to the sphere of practice, and of real life.

It is not incidental that the analysis of the complex plurality of forms of social life – including the realm of human communication, of spoken language – is one of the main topics that these authors deal with, and that, if this is so, it creates

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1   Here I'm following Conant's suggestion about what is to be understood when speaking of "Wittgenstein on Ethics" and his idea about what it is "doing philosophy"; see J. Conant, "On Going the Bloody *Hard* Way in Philosophy", in J. H. Whittaker (ed.), *The Possibilities of Sense: essays in honour of D. Z. Phillips*, Palgrave, New York 2002, pp. 85-129.

a further link among them. Unsurprisingly, this comparison of their ideas on "understanding human behaviour" also shows very deep differences; differences that are as important and instructive as their notable similarities – sometimes more so. Of course, there are limits within which it is possible to compare and/or contrast some of their elucidations about the concept and practice of understanding; and, indeed, those limits have very much to do with some apparent similarities in the usage of certain words that can happen to be, in fact, only the frame for fairly different perspectives and ideas. In this case, we need to move away from the illusion of an interpretative resemblance given only by the words utilized and the language adopted by means of displaying how much meanings and contexts involved by that terminology actually differ.

In conclusion of this introduction, I offer a few words on the reason for even attempting such a confrontation among some theoretical positions of Wittgenstein, Weber and Winch. The contribution of these three authors in the field of social research is considered very influential. On one hand, Weber is regarded as one of the founders – if not the founder – of contemporary social studies, both for his celebrated empirical inquiries and for his vast methodological and epistemological production that gives birth to the so-called "hermeneutical sociology". On the other hand, Winch's book on *The Idea of Social Science* (1958) is also considered a sort of attempt to innovate the way in which research is done in the context of social sciences by means of a dialogue between these disciplines and philosophy, in particular, Wittgenstein's philosophy – and, subsequently, what he thought to be "philosophy". As a matter of fact, their common anti-metaphysical attitude promises a new autonomous epistemological statute for the human sciences capable of emancipating them from their positivistic "inferiority complex" towards natural sciences. But, besides this, another "family resemblance" among these three authors is also very relevant: the profound ethical inspiration of their philosophical work, that it ought to be read not like a "turning point towards ethics", but rather as a constant concern for the ethical consequences of any social activity, including "doing philosophy".

1. Epistemology within philosophy

> [...] 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*?[2]

This passage comes from Winch's book *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. Two things have to be said at the start. First, as the title of this book suggests, Winch examines the idea of a social science from the point

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2   P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1990², p. 18. The italics are mine. Hereafter cited as *ISS*.

of view of its relation to philosophy, therefore the very concept of philosophy is here a central one. Second, the mentioned passage comes from a section entitled "The Pivotal Role of Epistemology within Philosophy", a title that makes clear that the conception of philosophy with which Winch deals with is one wherein the questions about "understanding" – or, what he calls "intelligibility of reality" – are extremely important.

As a matter of fact, the link between philosophy and social sciences is not in any case of an external nature, because

> […] 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.[3]

What seems to me to be very important here is the way in which we are invited to look at philosophy – that is, as a form of activity in which our efforts to understand something are related to our capacities to pay attention to the way in which human societies actually work. In such a way, a philosophically oriented study of human life has to be grounded and rooted in an epistemology of social life.

This idea is not only a way to overcome the view of philosophy as an activity "parasitic on other disciplines"[4], or, in other terms, to deny the "underlabourer conception"[5] of philosophy, that, starting with Locke, has since then found several supporters. This way to look at philosophy in its substantial connection with human societies is also a reaction against the modern version of the "underlabourer conception" of the philosophical work that sees it "concerned with eliminating linguistic confusions" and the philosopher playing the role of removing "contradictions from realms of discourse"[6] – the well-known version preferred by the neo-positivist philosophers, who claimed to found it on a commentary of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.

The conception of philosophy expressed by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* is basically that of an *activity of clarification*: «a philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations» (4.112), and the need for clarity rests with him in the entire development of his thinking. Only later, though, Wittgenstein makes clearer (partly modifying his former view, but especially by giving – as Conant puts it – "a dramatic reorientation" to his method[7]) which sort of clarity he is seeking. If the

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3   *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4   *Ibid.*, p. 4.
5   *Ibid.*, pp. 3-7.
6   *Ibid.*, p. 5.
7   The modification as mainly to do with the fact that, as Wittgenstein himself realizes, in the *Tractatus* the same fashion in which he wrote, the method there adopted, gives the impression that he is making statements or posing theses. For instance, a these about what philosophy really is, when still in 4.112 he writes: «The result of philosophy is not a number of "philosophical propositions", but to make propositions clear». This is a passage that was (in some way legitimately) interpreted by the Wiener Kreis' participants as a "philosophical

vision of a constant and consistent *therapeutic* nature of Wittgenstein's early and late thought[8] is correct, a philosophical therapy is all the time at work while he is doing philosophy. In his comments on Waismann's *Theses* on the content of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes:

> The only correct method of doing philosophy consists in not say anything and leaving it to another person to make a claim. That is the method I *now* adhere to.[9]

The word "now" here seems to stress, even in a temporal dimension, a radicalization in Wittgenstein's methodology between the *Tractatus* and his later writings. On this aspect, in the *Philosophical Investigations* we find an number of illuminating clues. One of them is in the following quotation:

> § 97. […] We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential, in our investigation, resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, proof, truth, experience, and so on. This order is a super-order between – so to speak – super-concepts. Whereas, of course, if the words "language", "experience", "word", have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door".

The illusion to which Wittgenstein is referring at the beginning of this quotation is, perhaps, one of which he himself was victim at the time of the *Tractatus*. Certainly, *now*, a diagnosis is made about that typical kind of philosophical illness and this has been possible because his methodology is, at the same time, clearly and openly a form of therapy. It's because there is not such a thing as "the incomparable essence of language" (name for a philosophical affection), that the only language we can deal with in philosophy is ordinary language and the way people use it in actual communication: this can be done only if we «bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use» (§ 116) (philosophical therapy). There is a grammar which defines the use of our words, and that *grammar* must obtain a central position in our philosophical interests and sensibility. The same kind of "grammatical" job is also the only one allowed by the tools available in the philosophical field, because: «Philosophy may in no

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proposition", stating (conclusion drawn quite illegitimately) the aim of philosophy in terms of an exercise of clarification of our language.

The last pages (in particular, pp. 293-303) of the Conant's essay "Putting two and two together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors" – in T. Tessin & M. Von der Ruhr (eds.), *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, St. Martin's Press., New York 1995, pp. 248-331 – show, and in a very effective way, how Wittgenstein took distance, in his later writings, from his own previous methodology in the philosophical work. My quotation by this essay comes from p. 298.

8   The important collection of essays edited by A. Crary & R. Read (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein*, Routledge, London 2000, is playing a very relevant role in spreading this thesis, more and more influential, in the field of Wittgenstein's studies.

9   Appendix B to F. Waismann, *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1979, p. 183.

way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is» (§ 124).

The relation between philosophy and language that Wittgenstein is describing is, then, one in which the philosophical work only consists in dealing with those confusions, with nonsense-sentences, that «arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work» (§ 132). Along this way one can achieve the kind of "clarity" Wittgenstein is pointing towards: «For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear» (§ 133).

What Wittgenstein is suggesting here is that the work of philosophical elucidation is such that "its business is never finished"[10]. And the same thing can be said also for the philosopher's concern with language: evidently, this means as well that certain linguistic confusions are very relevant to philosophy. Winch thinks that they need to have some features to be relevant:

> They are relevant only in so far as the discussion of them is designed to throw light on the question how far reality is *intelligible* and what difference would the fact that he could have a grasp of reality make to the life of man. [...]
> 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.[11]

Here, the connection between language and reality is extremely important, because only through it can we make sense of «what it is to *say* something»[12]. And only by means of this grammatical relationship can we raise the question of what the "intelligibility of reality" means – that is, only in the usage context of language can we make reality intelligible[13].

This bring us back to a previous quotation from Winch's first book where he stated how *crucial* is "to philosophy the question regarding the nature and intelligibility of reality". Moreover, taking this point as a piece of evidence, we gain also what gives to philosophical work a *positive* aim, a project to realize, against the picture that describes philosophy as an under-discipline, a peripheral knowledge or – even worse – a parasitic one. This positive – and constructive – aim is defined by "an increased philosophical understanding of what is involved

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10   Conant, "Putting two and two together…", p. 303.
11   Winch, *ISS*, p. 11. The italics are mine.
12   *Ibid.*, p. 12.
13   Winch has a very interesting discussion, in the following pages (12-15), about the necessary correlation between "language and world". By referring to Wittgenstein's work – both the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* – on this essential issue, Winch draws the conclusion that "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". This is, of course, very relevant for my discussion on these matters.

in the concept of intelligibility"[14]. It is, therefore, what "intelligibility" means and involves that makes extremely significant the role of *epistemology within philosophy*. And the labour of philosophy really *essential* to the grammar of social sciences as far as it is a philosophical *therapy* addressed to the their language in order to obtain a comprehension of that piece of reality that, time by time, is at issue. In this sense, Winch's idea of philosophy is of a therapeutic nature.

2. Wittgenstein, Weber and Winch's treatments of the notion of "following a rule"

Intelligibility implies such notions as "understanding", "explaining", "clarifying". But these notions acquire their sense only in the context in which they are being used, or, in other words, their meaning depends on which "language-game" we are playing; and the number of those contexts, or "language-games", is remarkably wide. Furthermore, Winch makes evident the "systematic ambiguity" of the use of intelligibility in those contexts, at the point that "its sense varies systematically according to the particular context in which it is being used"[15].

At this point a question arises: what is "intelligibility" in the context of that particular activity, or "language-game", that is "understanding human behaviour"? We should start with an examination of the various contexts within which the project of reaching a certain kind of "intelligibility" in relation to human behaviour is considered, since they appear to be very significant for the outcome of the quest and for its very meaning.

I take the contexts in question to be mainly the spaces in which human beings live their life, that is *social contexts*, and this of course implies that they are *cultural contexts* as well. Indeed, if – following Winch – we take the practice of understanding as a central one in the human activities we are lead to note "the difference the possession of such an understanding may be expected to make to the *life*" of human beings[16]. This means that is relevant for the actual life of the people, for their substantial capacities to live within the social sphere in relation with other people, to be able to understand each other, and the surrounding world.

> 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*.[17]

It is clear now that the concept of human beings we are referring to is one that considers them, first and foremost, as *social and cultural beings*. I stress this point because, in order to understand which sort of concept of understanding human

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14   *Ibid.*, p. 20.
15   *Ibid.*, p. 18.
16   *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23. The italics are mine.
17   *Ibid.*, p. 23. The italics are mine.

behaviour we are considering, it is extremely important to know which sort of concept of human beings we are dealing with. This also shows clearly the link between philosophy and social sciences, since only a philosophical inquiry (let me add: a grammatically-oriented one) can trace "the implications of the concepts we use"[18], including notions and related concepts employed in social studies.

The strategy adopted by Winch to tackle the problem of our understanding of human behaviour is to illustrate some elements of «Wittgenstein's discussion of the notion of following a rule, in its application to the use of language, and to apply that discussion to human behaviour much more generally»[19]. This is the way in which Winch himself describes his own approach in the "Preface to the Second Edition" to *The Idea of a Social Science*, published in 1990. That procedure, although completely legitimate and also somewhat successful, seems to him, in the light of over thirty years after its first application, to deserve some corrections. The validity of that approach is surely in that interconnection between language and, as Winch puts it, "the more general context of behaviour in which it is embedded". It is a necessary link which allows us to understand what Wittgenstein writes about language conceived mainly as a practice among other social practices; although that same approach is not of great help if we want instead understand a behaviour by means of the functioning model of a language. Indeed, the analogy between language and human behaviour, in relation to the idea of "following a rule", may seem to fall short of its application in analyzing people's conduct and actions. Undeniably, some problems arise from employing the concept of a *rule* in the context of human acting because not all human behaviour can be simply defined as "rule-governed". This pivotal notion is not only thoroughly internal to the Wittgenstein's reflections but, even if Winch seems not to notice it, it is completely consistent also with Max Weber's dissatisfaction towards a common type of sociology that overlaps the idea of a "ruled human action" with that of an "action" that can be accounted for a "causal explanation". We see in the "Preface to the Second Edition" that this very relevant distinction between "rule" and "cause" for an action only becomes clear to Winch on re-reading his first book thirty years later[20].

As everybody knows, both Wittgenstein and Weber play a decisive role in the Winch's first book, mainly because it is a book on epistemology of social sciences. But, about this aspect, I would like to stress that if Winch doesn't hesitate to

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18   *Ibid.*, p. 18.

19   Winch, "Preface to the Second Edition" to *ISS* (1990), p. XIII. As everybody knows exists a very vast secondary literature on Wittgenstein's treatment of "following a rule", and surely an important position in it is covered by the collection edited by S. Holtzman and C. Leich, *Wittgenstein: to follow a rule*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1981. In particular, it is important for our discussion Part Four of this book, where C. Taylor and P. Pettit discuss the theme "Following a Rule and the Social Sciences" (pp. 191-245) with reference to Winch's work.

20   The whole discussion on the necessary distinction between "rule" and "cause", that involves a more careful consideration of "motives" and "reasons" when what is to be analysed is human behaviour, is the most important outcome of Winch's self-criticism in that pages.

recognize his debt towards Wittgenstein's philosophy, he is much more ungenerous with Weber, to the point that he is not able to see his remarkable and original contribution to the innovation and progress of knowledge and methods in the field of social disciplines. Winch shows himself to be perfectly aware of the importance that Weber ascribes to the concept of *Verstehen* in the sphere of sociological interpretation, but all at once he thinks that the kind of "understanding" Weber is proposing, being in Weber's eyes "logically incomplete", needs to be supplemented by a "collection of statistics"[21]. This would relegate the huge and profound epistemological research made by Weber in order to build a brand-new interpretative sociology into a pseudo-scientific space delimited by statistics and computable dates. *Versthen*, in the contest of the Weber's "hermeneutical sociology", represents not only a sophisticated methodological approach, but also a responsible philosophical obligation towards an insightful comprehension of social fact and actors – on the whole, Weber's "understanding" stands for an ethical task for the sociologist. Considered from this point of view, Weber's style in doing epistemology can be said to be similar, if not contiguous, to that of Wittgenstein in doing philosophy and to that of Winch in doing both.

I will try to give one, I believe noteworthy, example on this unacknowledged "family resemblance". The notion of "following a rule" is significantly taken by both, Wittgenstein and Weber (not to speak about Winch), as a helpful model of interpretation capable of supply positive hints about how to shed some light on human behaviour and/or social action as "rule-governed". And, interestingly enough, their analysis of this notion are often made by means of its application as a "rule of a game", only the game considered is different: *Chess* in one case, *Skat* in the other. Wittgenstein's and Weber's procedure here is fairly similar: it consists in an investigation operated through diverse examples and the related questions raised; and the outcomes of this strategy of inquiry are somewhat analogous as well. A notable difference is in the applicability of these results to the field of social disciplines (and to the discussion of their methodologies) in order to allow some form of knowledge of human interactions.

As is evident from *Philosophical Investigations* §§ 82-83, Wittgenstein takes seriously all the difficulties that arise from the attempt to conceive the notion of "rule" because of its intrinsic ambiguity. A decisive step towards a clarification of what is "following a rule", however, is done in § 199, when Wittgenstein writes: "To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions). To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique". This passage implies a pragmatic and performative meaning of a "rule", since it receives its sense from its own application, from being a practical clue to elucidate a behaviour. This can be made clear, perhaps, by drawing an equation between "meaning" of a word and its "regular use": here we can grasp a sense of what is a "rule" in its factual and practical consistency. The parallel between, on one side, the internal relationship

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21   Winch, *ISS*, p. 113.

that links word and meaning and, on the other side, the internal relationship that connects action and rule is a powerful suggestion about the essential role played by usage in defining concepts. Seen from this perspective, a "rule" it's something that doesn't correspond at all to a "cause" for an action, but rather to a sign that makes understandable a regular behaviour. A phenomenology of human acting needs a sort of understanding totally different from that tested and used in the field of natural sciences, where founding a cause for a fact (by means of empirical generalizations) amount to get the capacity for making predictions about that same event. Human beings' practices and behaviours are not only unpredictable, they can be "irregular" by definition: this makes epistemology of social and human sciences "logically incompatible" (to use one of Winch's most famous expressions) with that so efficient and functional in natural sciences. Human acting needs a deeply different *grammar of interpretation* if any sort of comprehension has to be achieved at all.

Winch, going along Wittgenstein's line of thought on the idea of "following a rule" and adopting his *therapeutic* philosophical approach, start up an epistemological revolution in human studies that can be compared only to that one successfully carried on by Kuhn with his book on *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. Winch's philosophy of human sciences is a form of therapy addressed to the methods and language of sociology (especially positivist sociology) in order to compel it to become more aware of its own illusions and misunderstandings. But his epistemological revolution will be completed only when in *Understanding a Primitive Society* he will get to a point where his own methodology of knowledge will be a valid ground to re-found cultural anthropology on *interpretative* basis, a sort of "hermeneutical anthropology" (as the one performed by Clifford Geertz, for example).

Viewed in the perspective of a founder of this new way of doing anthropology (I'm almost sure that his unassuming nature would make him refuse such a role), renders even more incomprehensible his undervaluation of Weber's epistemological construction of "hermeneutical sociology". In the Weberian account of social action the investigation about its meaning (*Sinn*), the "subjective meaning" pertinent to any activity, is of primary importance. Against the positivist picture of sociological work considered as research for a rational-causal explanation, Weber thinks it is possible to grasp this subjective meaning of human action within society through "empathy" (*Einfuehlung*) and a "reliving" (*Nacherbleben*) of the experience at issue. Aiming at an interpretative explanation (*verstehende Erklaerung*) entails a "disenchanted" attitude, scientifically and cognitively speaking, towards empirical social events. The special form of "disenchantment" required by this kind of understanding involves, for the human scientist, a conscious and definitive renouncement to any alleged transparently objective and value-free account[22].

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22   Mostly of Weber's methodological essays are devoted to this theoretical acquisition. See, in particular, *Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy*, and *The Meaning of Value*

Assuming as a starting point the strategic conception according to which "social facts are in the last resort *intelligible* facts"[23], these have to be analyzed renouncing the "rationalistic prejudice of sociology" based on "a belief in the actual predominance of the rational element in life".[24] Interpretative understanding is, then, a way to penetrate the subjective aspects of action, a path that leads inside the domain of its meaning and reason to be; one, though, that doesn't need to be a "rational" motivation. In Weber's sociology we can find four major types of social action: human beings may engage in purposeful or goal-oriented rational action (*zweckrational*); their rational action may be value-oriented (*wertrational*); they may act from emotional or affective motivations; or, finally, they may engage in traditional action. Whereas, as a result of the dominant process of rationalization of modern Western society, human behaviour had come to be controlled increasingly by goal-oriented rationality (in which both goal and means are rationally chosen and a rigid rational calculation is manifest in every situation), in earlier periods it tended to be motivated by value-oriented rationality (characterized by striving for a substantive goal, which may not be rational in itself but which is nonetheless pursued with rational means), by affect (the emotional state of the actor), or by tradition (the customary habits of thought or the conventional, even ritual, practices).

This methodological order that goes from the most rational (calculated) type of action to almost irrational (traditional) behaviour furnishes useful distinctions for an understanding of human activities not simply as "rule-governed" performances. Weber's complex epistemological approach to social acting is in this sense not far at all from that of Winch-Wittgenstein. In the methodological essay *R. Stammlers "Überwindung" der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung* (1907), Weber offers a sort of theory about "rules" of individual and social behavior. As usual, his first move is a delimitation and definition of all the possible meanings, and semantic variations, of the concept of "rule". It can be: *a*) an expression that implies "causal relationships" and "empirical regularities" (like in the case of "the laws of nature"); *b*) a notion involving a normative sense, like that of "rule of law" (like a "precept" or an "imperative"); *c*) a general "principle of conduct" referred to repetitive empirical situations, to recurring behaviors based on already lived circumstances. After that he discusses against Stammler the case of Robinson Crusoe, whose behavior for surviving on the deserted island is governed by rules of an economical nature, here taken as "ideal-types", as instrumental categories of interpretation that should allow to capture the meaning of an action. But what is more striking about Weber's characterization of the concept of a "rule", if compared with that of Wittgenstein, is their common insistence on describing mainly the social contexts of its applicability underlining similar features of it in the same pragmatist spirit.

Neutrality in Social and Economic Sciences, in the collection *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (E. A. Shils & H. A. Finch eds.), Free Press, Glencoe (Ill.) 1949 .

23   M. Weber, *Economy and society* (G. Roth & C. Wittich eds.), University of California Press, Berkeley 1978, Section I.

24   *Ibid.*

For Weber and for Wittgenstein, rules are understandable in their application, when "they do work", not as a metaphor intended to explain an activity, but rather as that activity in itself. For both, neither "action" is something mechanically ruled according to a single, necessary scheme of evolution, nor is the "actor" always aware of the rule or rules governing his actual conduct. But what is overall really analogous in their description is that Weber, like Wittgenstein, besides using the example of a "rule of a game" (*Skat* in his case, rather than *Chess*), fundamentally has in mind the linguistic model of applying rules, the typical procedure – partially unconscious and automatic – of learning the functioning rules of a language, when he wants to explain the way an actor learns and uses a rule of conduct[25]. This means that for both, Weber and Wittgenstein, semantic and referential "density" of a rule is equal to its potential applicability and actual application to real situations of life in present, past and future time.

Therefore, what we could call the "philosophically" pragmatic interpretation of rules proposed by Wittgenstein (afterward adopted by Winch in the field of human sciences) is perfectly compatible with the "sociologically" pragmatic one illustrated by Weber – one that (once recognized) could have helped Winch to make his concepts more precise and to appreciate the Weberian contribution to the evolution of interpretative human and social sciences. Far from implying "that *Verstehen* is something which is logically incomplete and needs supplementing by a different method altogether, namely the collection of statistics"[26] as Winch suggests, Weber's account of what stands for "following a rule" in social acting shows that same philosophical and interpretative sensibility accomplished by Winch through Wittgenstein's treatment of the same topic. The preeminence of a profound consideration of the rule's application context in both Weber and Wittgenstein's considerations put them in a position to open a conceptual space for a true "grammar of rules" extremely useful in order to try to understand meaningful human behavior.

When Winch writes: "'The deed' now [in the so-called "second Wittgenstein"] fills the role taken in the *Tractatus* by the relation of 'name' to 'object'. One important difference is that deeds, unlike 'objects' can be described; another is that emphasis on the deed opens the door to an understanding of how *new* concepts can be created and to a way of grasping concepts and ways of thinking very different from our own"[27], he is thinking about the social and cultural value of language as it becomes increasingly a Wittgensteinian preoccupation.

In his "Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness", Wittgenstein writes: "Language – I want to say – is a refinement, *im Anfang war die Tat* ('in the beginning was the deed').

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25   M. Weber, *R. Stammlers "Überwindung" der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung* (1907), in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenshaftslehre*, Mohr, Tübingen 1922, pp. 291-383; for our discussion, see in particular pp. 323-41.

26   Winch, *ISS*, p. 113.

27   P. Winch, "In Anfang war die Tat", in Id., *Trying to Make Sense*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1987, p. 53.

First there must be firm, hard stone for the building and the blocks are laid rough-hewn one on another. *Afterwards* it's certainly important that the stone can be trimmed, that it's not too hard"[28].

Language, in this vision, is something that springs and flows from, and is also transformed by, action, and by social, interactive action as well. This is another view common to W., W. and W., because they share the conviction that what we do when we act inside the world is a means of building forms of language and of culture.

Soon after this quotation by Wittgenstein, Winch writes: "Goethe's '*Im Anfang war die Tat*' of course has considerable resonances. On the whole, the best thing to do with resonances is to leave them alone to resonate"[29].

A resonance is also at work in this paper. A similar *vocation*, an equivalent aim pursued in Wittgenstein, Weber and Winch's theoretical prospect – such like "understanding human behavior" – entails at the same time a shared consideration of its practical consequences and an interest in its ethical significance (which can call into question both Weberian "ethics of absolute ends" or "ethics of responsibility"). This doesn't involve an engagement in something like moral philosophy, but it embodies a correspondence among "meanings", "reasons", "motivations" for the activities human beings carry out in their ordinary life that constitutes a total difference between these kind of events and natural phenomena. According to this, as Weber never stops stressing in his writings, every cultural, historical and social study implies a "value relevance" and depends on values, intentions, orientations and interests of both the actor and the investigator. Then, "intelligibility" in the field of human knowledge remains the scientific goal of an insightful understanding, but it has an ethical and axiological bearing that requires the kind of interpretative explanation endeavored by all of our three philosophers.

This has to do with what I call "a matter of continuity" in their thought, that continuity between theoretical concerns and ethical-practical matters that we experience while reading Peter Winch's *Understanding Primitive Society* and *The Just Balance*, as well as Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, or Weber's *Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* and *Politik als Beruf*. Philosophical and epistemological subjects and a parallel attention to any human value- choice are growing more and more intertwined in their works. A common ethical sensibility and inspiration animates their philosophical research and outcomes; from those, I believe, originates a peculiar religious questioning that, even if in quite different fashions, influences the theoretical style of all of them. It is worthy to note that religion here, as ethics before, has nothing to do with theology, with a special realm of doctrines, but rather with an entirely human attitude towards the possibility to make sense of reality. In this perspective, the "supernatural", as Winch calls it, is

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28   L. Wittgenstein, "Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness", ed. R. Rhees, trans. P. Winch, in «Philosophia», vol. 6, nos. 3/4, Sept.-Dec. 1976, p. 420.

29   P. Winch, "In Anfang war die Tat", pp. 51-52.

understandable only in the light of "our natural history"[30] as human beings, and similarly , we could say, the "ethical" is intelligible only taking into account our human nature of Aristotelic animals living in society. In this sense, for Wittgenstein and Winch, as well for Weber, ethics is the hidden side of philosophy and human knowledge, but also the most relevant aspect in order to make intelligible the sense of a life.

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30   P. Winch, *Simone Weil. "The Just Balance"*, CUP, Cambridge 1989, p. 211.