Investigating "Man's Relation to Reality": Peter Winch, the Vanishing Shed and Metaphysics after Wittgenstein

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Abstract

Peter Winch believed that the central task of philosophy was to investigate 'the force of the concept of reality' in human practices. This involved creative dialogue with critical metaphysics. In 'Ceasing to Exist', Winch considered what it means to judge that something unheard-of has happened. Referring to Wittgenstein, Winch argued that judgments concerning reality must relate our observations to a shared 'flow of life'. This implies criticism of the form of epistemology associated with metaphysical realism. Just as, according to Wittgenstein, a sentence has no fixed meaning in isolation, an observation does not constitute knowledge outside shared human practices.

I. Introduction

In the first chapter of *The Idea of a Social Science*, Peter Winch included a general discussion of philosophy, its scope, aims and methods.[1] After that early work, he did not present a comparable mission statement. I suggest nevertheless that his view remained substantially the same despite some change of vocabulary. It will be a useful background for recognizing the unity of his work, which spanned seemingly very diverse areas of philosophy. Moreover, I believe his view on philosophy will be relevant to the question of the place for metaphysics (if any) in post-Wittgensteinian

1. Winch, ISS: 1–39.

philosophy. I focus on his paper 'Ceasing to Exist' and his contribution to the debate that ensued.[2] In that paper, Winch used fiction to engage with a classical theme of Western metaphysics: the question what it means to relate thinking with reality.

I suggest that Winch's long-term project included the creative reinterpretation of critical metaphysics. He presented his aim as 'one of an increased philosophical understanding of what is involved in the concept of intelligibility'.[3] When we confront an instance of thinking and action philosophically, we ask, 'How is such an understanding (or indeed any understanding) possible?'[4] Winch believed that the key was to situate thinking in the context of human practices and social life.

I also believe that contributors to the subsequent debate on 'Ceasing to Exist' – known as 'The Vanishing Shed' debate – were mostly *not* thinking of that background question.[5] They focused instead on the apparently more straightforward question, '*What* kinds of thinking about reality *are* possible?'

Winch on the centrality of metaphysics

In his first book, Winch insisted that 'peripheral', piecemeal philosophical treatments of 'science, art, politics, etc.' – including his own investigation of the nature of sociological understanding – must 'lose their philosophical character' if cut off from the core, which is 'epistemology and metaphysics'.[6] Philosophy differs from empirical investigations. The latter address specific questions about reality, with methods already established[7], but the philosophical question is how exactly *those* methods and questions relate to reality. Winch states boldly, therefore, that the main task of philosophy is to investigate 'the nature of reality as such and in general'.[8]

That formulation is bound to raise some eyebrows with philosophers learning to be suspicious of metaphysics. It has a very traditional ring, suggesting a master science of ontology, the *a priori* investigation of what kinds of thing exist. Winch, however, makes it clear from the outset that *his* idea is quite different. It is not to ask, 'What is real?' but, 'What does

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2. Winch, CTE; Winch (1995). – Other contributions: Holland (1989), Holland (1990), Malcolm (1990), Marshall (1990), Mounce (1988), Mounce (unpublished), Palmer (1995), Phillips (1993), Phillips (1993b).
3. Winch, ISS: 20.
4. Winch, ISS: 22.
5. As far as I can see, only Colin Lyas (1999: 191–92), in his short exposé of 'Ceasing to Exist', explicitly connects it with Winch's treatment of metaphysical realism.
6. Winch, ISS: 7.
7. Winch, ISS: 9.
8. Winch, ISS: 8.

"real" mean?' – i.e., asking what is involved in judging something to be real. We typically do not roam the world compiling lists of real and unreal things; rather, our understanding of what is real shows implicitly in the difference it makes in our various pursuits. Philosophy must clarify 'the *force of the concept* of reality'.[9] To put this differently, it is to outline the spheres of meaning and conceptual possibility that surround particular cases of engaging with reality.

Thus, Winch floats what might be termed an idea of *good* metaphysics, insisting on its distinctiveness from ontology. Winch rejects ontology again in 1995:

> [W]hat we fundamentally need to get away from is the whole idea that we need to, or even can, give a 'description of the world and what it's like and what is in it'. To put it more provocatively, we need to do away with the pseudo-concept of 'ontology'.[10]

Post-Wittgensteinian philosophers, the school of thought where Winch otherwise belongs, quite often – more or less – equate 'metaphysics' with 'ontology' and dismiss both. Wittgenstein had followed that usage, joining the anti-metaphysical stance of the Vienna circle. The naturalist dominance of the English-speaking philosophical mainstream in the late twentieth century subsequently reinforced the equation of metaphysics with ontology, although this time giving it a new twist (for the naturalists) as a legitimate pursuit. These two reasons perhaps explain why Winch, in his later work, avoided referring to his work as 'metaphysics', preferring terms like 'human natural history', borrowed from Wittgenstein.

That shift of terminology is helpful insofar as it highlights that Winch's focus was not on reality but on '*man's* [sic] *relation to* reality'.[11] On the other hand, it downplays his continuous dialogue with metaphysical thinkers like Descartes, Hume and Kant – and with Collingwood, who presented his own investigation as 'metaphysics without ontology'.[12] Winch certainly thought of himself as standing in conscious opposition to much of the metaphysical tradition. At the same time, he was *repurposing* the tradition. While much of the tradition expends its energies bringing our relation to 'reality' under a single formula, Winch insisted on 'attention to particulars'[13]; transposing the general question of

9. Winch, ISS: 9.
10. Winch (1995: 212). What Winch means by 'ontology' is apparent from the quote offered here. Sometimes, especially in the social sciences, 'ontology' more loosely means almost any kind of claim about what kind of a thing something is (e.g., concerning social institutions).
11. Winch, ISS: 9, italics added.
12. Collingwood ([1940] 2002: 17–20).
13. Cf. Phillips & Winch (ed., 1989).

'man's relation to reality' to questions about intelligibility within specific human pursuits. That is already a central message of the opening chapter of his first book.[14] Such investigations do have a kind of generality, however, because the analysis of one language-game also brings in its meaningful connections with other games.[15]

In a sense, Winch was recasting the idea of the *a priori*. There are indeed limits to intelligible truth-claims and intelligible thought – which you see from the fact that you cannot just decide by fiat whether a sentence is meaningful or not – but they are not fixed and universal. Rather, they interact with the contexts that go into your understanding of the sentence you are considering. The nature of the questions that engage you would determine what you *will* be treating as the possible meaning of the sentence.[16] When those things change for you, you will find that you 'can' say things that you previously 'could not', and vice versa.[17]

Vanishing ploughman, vanishing shed

In 'Ceasing to Exist', Winch's immediate question concerned the idea of an object 'simply' vanishing: the supposed scenario where a thing is *there* at one moment and just gone in the next. His question here was not: 'Can such things happen?' nor, 'Can we imagine it happening?'[18] but rather, roughly, 'What would be involved in seriously *judging* that such a thing has happened?' (see CTE: 89[19]) – 'How (if at all) would it square with my other judgments about objects, causation, memory, etc.?' – His main examples come from Isaac Bashevis Singer's magical realism. The fiction piece, 'Stories from Behind the Stove', is set in a rural Jewish community 'near Blonia' (Błonie, Lublin Voivodeship) in pre-War Poland. The place comes across as a kind of ideological no-man's land, poised between previously dominant religious world-views and a modernity that has not quite set in. The villagers confront an apparent series of mysterious events. The narrator is Zalman the glazier, who relates (if that is the word) two events (if that is the word) and the reactions they evoked: first the disappearance of a man and then of a shed.

The first case is one Wojciech Kucek, an old man who simply 'vanished' while working on the field (CTE: 82–83). Winch's initial discussion clarifies the difference between the apparent claim here and a less exotic

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14. Winch, ISS: 19–22.
15. See Winch, UPS: 41, Winch (1995: 208–209).
16. See Winch (1992).
17. See Winch (1987: 132–139).
18. Cf. Graeme Marshall's (1990) response to Winch.
19. References to Winch, 'Ceasing to Exist' (CTE), will be given in brackets in the text.

idea of disappearance. Typically, when family members report a man missing, they do it as the first step as they *try and find him*. More information would allow them to replace 'he disappeared' with a specific description, as in 'he ran away with a woman', 'he fell into a hole in the ground' or (in the cultural milieu that Singer is depicting) 'demons carried him away'. 'Disappearance' would be the *explanandum*. In a somewhat different but still standard case, 'disappearance' would be the *explanans*, as in 'he could not be summoned, because he had disappeared'. However, the apparent claim in the Singer story is that Kucek quite simply ceased to exist. As Winch notes, the 'vanishing' of Wojciech Kucek 'can be taken *neither* as an expression of the explanans, *nor* as a description of the explanandum. What status it has is still obscure' (CTE: 86).

The central issue is what is involved in seriously judging that an event has taken place. This translates to several questions: What kinds of sentence we can cobble together; What kinds of event can be presented in fiction or art; What kinds of description we – i.e., Winch and his presumed readers – could intelligibly endorse. It is certainly possible to say the sentence: 'A man vanished into thin air'. It is also possible to produce a cartoon or a film where he first appears in a place and then is suddenly not visible in that place.

But pictures are not self-explanatory. Winch suggests an analogy (CTE: 90–91). You might represent the statement 'The Yeti doesn't exist' as a cartoon: say, a group of people studying a drawing of the Yeti (the supposed hominid creature in the Himalayas); in the next frame, explorers scouring the mountains; finally disgruntled explorers, tearing up the drawing. The cartoon is intelligible to us because it draws on comprehensive background knowledge of past speculation about hominid creatures, life in remote parts of the Earth, etc.[20] You might say that a picture of Wojciech Kucek ploughing the field is 'compatible' with the next frame showing an empty field, perhaps with a huge question mark hovering above. But try now to reconstruct a background that would allow us to determine that this is a representation of spontaneous disappearance, not of a conjuring trick, abduction by extra-terrestrials, etc.[21]

The main example in the paper is the supposed disappearance of Reb Zelig's shed, again as narrated by Zalman the glazier. The main features of the case are similar to those of the vanishing ploughman, but more detail is included, especially concerning the villagers' reactions. Where a

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20. On the use of pictures, also see Winch (1987: 64–80).
21. Cf. Wittgenstein (1993), 'Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness', 385: '"*Can* that happen?" – Certainly. Just describe it in detail and you will see that the procedure you describe can perfectly well be imagined, although you will clearly not apply such and such expressions to it', quoted in Winch (1987: 40).

heavy structure formerly stood, there is suddenly just high grass and roots, a piece of 'undisturbed ground' (CTE: 103).

If the site is now '*undisturbed* ground', and given the kinds of thing that sheds and vegetation are, the implication seems to be that there never was a shed on that site, after all. (Perhaps, as a building itself *is* a kind of site, we should rather say that *the site* was never there ... on that site?) It seems that Zelig has no choice but to dismiss *something* as illusory: *either* the absence of the shed now *or* his memory of its earlier presence – or *both*. Whatever he might say in support of the empirical certainty that the shed has disappeared could just as well constitute support for thinking that he has taken leave of his senses (CTE: 98).

> [I]nterestingly enough, his [Zelig's] first reaction in the story is not, 'It has vanished', but 'I have lost my mind'. His wife and children and neighbours have reactions that agree with his. [...] The doctor says to the druggist 'If a thing like this is possible, what sort of a doctor am I? And what kind of a druggist are you?' (CTE: 92)

The doctor's expression in the quote is slightly misleading because, as Winch stresses, no 'thing *like this*' has really been specified! Before starting an investigation, one would at least have to specify an *event* to investigate. However, –

> If we look again, more closely, at Singer's story we shall see that we are really offered no more than the title 'the shed vanished' to the story Zalman is depicted as spinning. (CTE: 91)

> What is disturbing is that no sense can be made of the situation; 'the shed has vanished' is not accepted by *anyone* (except Zalman) as making sense of it. It is an admission of failure and of a sort of failure which threatens the whole structure of their lives, their entire ability to make sense of anything. (CTE: 93)

In order meaningfully to judge that a shed has ceased to exist, we must connect to a shared understanding of the various imaginable ways for sheds to be destroyed. If an object appears to have burst like a bubble, one reasonable conclusion is that it was not a shed but something else. We might look for a conjuring trick. When reminiscences and experiences seem contradictory, we question their status *as* memories and observations.

Questioning 'sensations of the present moment'

I believe it is easier to see why vanishing was a relevant issue for Winch if we connect it with a question he was also addressing in other work at the time.[22] He asked what it means for an utterance to be a genuine

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22. Winch (1987: 33–54); Winch (1989: 23); Winch (1996).

expression of a belief; what it takes to believe or claim that something is the case, or that something has happened.

An assertion[23] can be true or false. A hugely simplified answer to Winch's question might be that an utterance genuinely constitutes an assertion only if there is something out there, in reality, in virtue of which it is either true or false.[24] That would be a kind of 'realist' response. The opening passage of 'Language, Belief and Relativism' is a comment on that:

> It is one thing for a man to think that something is so and quite another thing for what he thinks to *be* so. This simple truism is fundamental to what we understand thought to be; for a thought is a thought about something – it has an object – and the kind of relation it has to its object involves the possibility of *confronting* it with its object. [. . .] However, it is considerably easier to recognize this as a truism than it is to understand exactly how it is to be applied in different areas of human thinking. The attempt to win clarity about such issues is philosophy.[25]

In this passage, Winch appears at first to extend a hand to metaphysical realism, and to the correspondence theory of truth typically associated with it. However, he immediately adds that the 'truism' in question does not even begin to address real philosophical questions. That observation hardly needs argument when it comes to the status of aesthetic and ethical judgments. Even for factual statements, the idea of 'confronting' a statement with relevant reality needs explaining. Winch is sceptical of an idea that he identifies as the actual core of realism: that verification involves, at 'the most elementary level', the simple, 'direct' confrontation with facts.[26] For the realist, basic 'observation-sentences' would provide the most straightforward model for how the truth of a statement is established.[27] A kind of immediate presence with the object provides the paradigm of knowledge.

To see why such views on truth and knowledge are problematic, we need not think of obviously complex cases (or should I say hopeless ones

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23. For the purpose at hand, it does not seem essential to make a difference between 'thought', 'belief', 'judgment' and 'assertion' (as expression of belief). Winch moves rather freely from the one to the other, the bottom line being that 'we cannot simply assert anything at will' (1987: 40). In his *Simone Weil* book (1989), discussing a similar point he is making here, Winch explains Wittgenstein's use of *Satz*: 'The context makes it plain that by *Satz* we are to understand something which someone utters, or thinks privately, on some occasion. It is something like the expression of a judgment' . . . 'I believe Wittgenstein is here discussing what it is that makes an utterance into the genuine expression of a judgment' (Winch 1989: 23).
24. See Winch (1987: 39).
25. Winch (1987: 194), italics added.
26. Winch (1987: 41).
27. Winch (1987: 42). Here Winch is relying on the description of realism by Dummett. G. E. Moore was an influential proponent of this form of realism. In his seminal paper 'On Denoting', Bertrand Russell (1905: 492), similarly, claimed that 'in every proposition that we can apprehend [. . .], all the constituents are really entities with which we have immediate acquaintance'. See Lagerspetz (2021).

for a correspondence theorist) like, 'These islands have a sovereign conti-nental shelf' (should I visit the islands and check …?). Just consider the example from Winch's 'Ceasing to Exist': 'There is a shed in the field'. – I go to the field and see a shed. What is it, exactly, that I am con-fronting?

My judgment here draws on my general understanding of what kind of a thing a shed is. It involves a time dimension, because sheds are dur-able. This understanding also comes in later, when I see no shed in the field *now*. An invisible thread runs between the apparently independent empirical statements, 'There was a shed in the field yesterday' and, 'There is no shed in the field now'. The statements *conflict* unless I assume an intervening process (of the shed being dismantled). In grasping what it is for something to be true at an isolated moment, we also think beyond the moment of the verification.

This indicates that what we usually mean by 'seeing' involves much more than just the creation of retinal images. We not only see *a shed*, we can see *that* it was built recently. Conversely, we see the difference between untouched ground and a site where a structure had once been standing. It is not necessary for us to have visited the same place earlier to see such things. The temporal dimension is an integral part of seeing. Seeing, if it is to mean more than standing before a thing with one's eyes open, is also to notice things and their connections with one's previous understanding.

This also casts doubt on the popular idea that our knowledge of the past and the future, unlike our knowledge of the present, can only be indirect. That idea would presuppose a sterile conception of immediacy that fails to do justice to the temporal dynamics of perception. Judgments about the present are *also* about the past and the future.

The example from 'Ceasing to Exist' highlights that the rock bottom of immediate 'sensations of the present moment' is just a philosophical construct.[28] Here Winch quotes Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Remarks*. While verification indeed takes place at a certain 'instant', it can consti-tute *verification* only because it reaches out to past and future:

> The stream of life, or the stream of the world, flows on and our propo-sitions are so to speak verified only at instants. Our propositions are only verified by the present. So they must be so construed that they can be verified by it.[29]

Verification is dipping your toe in the stream of the world. An instanta-neous observation would not have the same significance – it would not

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28. Also see Winch (1989: 18–31).
29. Wittgenstein, PR V: § 48; quoted in Winch, CTE: 98; Winch (1989: 22).

be *the same* observation – if the stream was different, or if no stream was there. Just as you do not *say* anything simply because you put together a random sentence, you do not *know* anything simply because you have a random experience. According to Winch's idea, which he credits to Wittgenstein but also to Kant, 'we make sense of our experiences only in so far as we think of them as belonging to a common world', a kind of intersubjective 'unity'.[30] However, it is 'a *unity of practice*' and not, as Kant would have it, 'a *theoretical* unity'. To put this in another way: In making sense of our experiences, we place them in relation with our shared modes of engagement with reality – and *that* determines what it means, in a given case, to cite one's experience as verification. Such engagement with reality includes, for instance, the link between observing the behaviour of an object and determining, as it were, its long-term identity as the specific kind of object it is.

Winch contrasts his own view with one he attributes to Descartes (CTE: 82): the idea of individual observations as logically disparate. Descartes claims in his third *Meditation* that what is true about things at one moment in time has no logical implications whatsoever about what is true at a different moment.[31] It involves no logical contradiction to imagine any substance (Descartes himself included) appearing or disappearing in the wink of an eye.[32] This is a very radical point because, as Descartes is aware, it would ultimately undermine memory and therefore all thinking. Any reasoning, even in fields like mathematics, requires the retention of memories, but now his present apparent memories might have no connection with the past. Descartes solves the problem by claiming that God sustains him and the world, and even logic and mathematics, through a continuous act of creation.

Let me note in passing that Winch fails to consider the place of Descartes' claim in the general structure of the *Meditations*. The idea that there is no connection between facts at two moments in time does not represent Descartes' final position. It is the perspective of the meditating Ego *before* Descartes musters God as the *a priori* guarantee of his *clara et distincta perceptio*. Descartes' final position appears much closer to Winch's own. It unfolds in a thought experiment presented in the second *Meditation*.[33] Descartes picks up a lump of wax that is completely solid. He moves it close to the fire, and it melts. Empirically, there is nothing at all to indicate that the liquid now in front of him is the *same thing* as the

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30. Winch (1995: 208).
31. Descartes, AT VII: 48–49.
32. G.E.M. Anscombe appeared to agree with that view, in a paper that provoked a response from R.F. Holland (1989). See Anscombe (1981: 151): 'A *lusus naturae* is always logically possible', considering the case of a lump of phosphorus turning into a bird.
33. Descartes, AT VII: 30–34.

solid object he saw a moment ago – or so Descartes tells us.[34] His insight of its continued identity is *solius mentis inspectio*[35], an insight of the mind alone, a result of its inherent faculty of judgment.[36] Our knowledge of physical objects involves a background understanding beyond the empirical: their continuity in time and place, and their general place in a world that is, in a very wide sense of the word, *causally* organized. Descartes and Winch are largely on the same page at least on this. To be sure, for Descartes, unlike Winch, the connection runs through God; but God is to guarantee the insights inherent in *his* (Descartes') faculty of judgment.

Spatio-temporal continuity is not something we confirm by an appeal to memory because, as Winch highlights, continuity itself constitutes a test against which we assess and organize our memories. Addressing this topic (CTE: 100), Winch refers to Kant's second Analogy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[37] Your memories of past events might come in the form of successive mental images. However, the idea that a mental replay of appearances should represent *memories* depends on the fact that you can bring the visualized events into a coherent causal succession.

Winch imagines a situation where he recalls the legs of a journey in the 'wrong' order. He took the subway from Manhattan to central London, *then* flying from Heathrow to JFK and *then* going from there to Earl's Court in London (CTE: 101). In that situation, he would correct his memory sequence, as a matter of course, to agree with geography as he knows it. Memories are corrigible, they allow of intersubjective criticism and comparison with other data – and this is exactly why they *are* memories, a source of knowledge among other sources to which truth and falsity are applicable. '[T]he impression, however overwhelmingly strong, that *this* is what happened by no means has final authority'; otherwise, we would not be able to 'distinguish such a narration from a fantasy' (CTE: 102).

Winch's strategy in 'Ceasing to Exist' is to present stories where something has apparently disturbed the flow of life, and to describe the strains they would present to the protagonists' ability to make sense of

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34. The argument is not vitiated by the fact that a chemical inspection would reveal empirical similarities. The argument concerns what *Descartes* knows, not what someone else might find out later. Moreover, it would be valid even if the empirical qualities of the object at two points in time were exactly the same. On empirical grounds, there is no telling whether the same object persists in time, or is substituted with an exact replica.
35. Descartes, AT VII: 30.
36. Descartes, AT VII: 32.
37. Kant, CPR: B232/A189–B256/A211. See especially CPR: B234: 'In other words, the *objective relation* of appearances that follow upon one another [in my perception of a temporal sequence] is not to be determined through mere perception'... 'Experience itself' ... 'is thus possible only in so far as we subject the succession of appearances, and therefore all alteration, to the law of causality'. See also Winch (1989: 52).

things. In his later comment, Winch describes his own chief point in that paper:

> I wanted to show, first, that the concept of *ceasing to exist* derives its sense from its connections with our conceptions of the 'things' of which we are speaking; and, second, that those concepts in turn derive their sense from the roles they have in the lives we lead – the kinds of life we lead. [...] One way of putting the point would be to say that these concepts belong together in the context of a widely ramified world picture. [. . .] To put it differently, and in some ways I think rather better, they will belong to some system of human practice or other.[38]

As we have seen, Winch does not object in principle to the extremely general idea that to make a judgment is to 'confront' a thought with its object. However, he highlights the very various forms that such 'confrontation' might take. The mere fact that an utterance looks like a factual claim about a 'thing' ('The shed has vanished', 'God upholds all Creation') – does not tell us *in what ways* it might be 'about' that 'thing'. Our normal talk of things existing and ceasing to exist is a temporally extended language-game, involving expectations, possibilities of inquiry, etc. In contrast, if you consider the theoretical idea of 'bare cessation of existence', you will appreciate how '*thin*' its context would be (CTE: 106). It is not that the expression, 'bare cessation of existence', is forbidden; rather, considered merely in the abstract, its meaning thins out, like pizza dough rolled out too far to the sides.

The vanishing shed debate

Contributors to the subsequent debate on Winch's paper were generally sympathetic to its author – they were mostly colleagues who knew him (and each other) well. However, they did not focus on his background questions about what judgment involves. Many writers assumed that Winch was laying down general criteria for what is thinkable or imaginable.

Winch's original paper was in part a response to Roy Holland's essay on miracles. Holland's suggestion had been that a miracle is something which is, admittedly, *conceptually impossible* and yet at the same time, *empirically certain*.[39] It is impossible for water to turn into wine – but it happened! Winch made the obvious reply – which Holland was indeed anticipating – that if we call something conceptually impossible, then we

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38. Winch (1995: 201).
39. Holland (1980: 186).

cannot profess even to tell anyone *what* that 'something' might be.[40] –
Holland continued the debate in two further responses. Anthony Palmer
sums up the contrast between Roy Holland and Winch, as he sees it:

> While Holland can contemplate something really unheard-of happen-
> ing, Winch thinks that if it is something really unheard-of, then its
> happening cannot be contemplated. One thinks that sense can be made
> of violations of nature, the other thinks it cannot. It will be obvious
> from what I have had to say about conditions of sense that if I had to
> take sides in this debate it would be with Holland.[41]

Let us keep one thing in mind, however. What Winch said was not:
'Miracles are impossible to make sense of, because they violate laws of
nature'. Given his other work and the stress he was consistently placing
on the plurality of possible world-views, it would indeed be odd to sad-
dle him with hard-nosed naturalism like that. To make sense of one's
experience is to bring it under a conception of a common world. Never-
theless, however prominent in modern societies, '[b]eing describable in a
system of laws of nature is only one form that belonging to a common
world may take'.[42]

  For Winch, 'miracle' is an established religious concept. To call some-
thing a miracle is *also* to bring it inside a (religious) world-picture and
thus (for the believer) to make sense of it.[43] It is a kind of explanation
or clarification, because it points to God's agency – unlike the idea of
'sheer' vanishing. But the disappearance of Reb Zelig's shed would not
be a good candidate for a miracle. Winch stresses that, in 'Tales from
behind the Stove', the villagers – those of them who still had use for the
concept of a miracle – just could not see how God, out of all things,
could have interest in a shed.

  Still, the idea of violating laws of nature does figure in Winch's com-
ments on miracles. Modern culture, he says, has little room for 'untrou-
bled' talk of miracles, and a chief reason is precisely the role of the
culturally specific concept of 'laws of nature' in our inquiries (CTE:
104–105). The reason is not that miracles involve violations of such laws.
Rather, our tendency to think of miracles *that* way is itself part of the
intellectual condition causing the trouble – we focus on the mechanics

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40. CTE: 95; Winch (1995: 204).
41. Palmer (1995: 199).
42. Winch (1995: 208).
43. 'Making sense of a miracle' might mean, for instance, 'making sense of Christ rising
from the dead' or, alternatively, 'making sense of someone *saying*, "Christ rose from the
dead"'. In 'Lessing and the Resurrection' Winch (2002) sees *the latter* as his philosophical
task. I believe Winch steered clear of the first question ('What is the meaning of Christ's
resurrection?') because it invites a religious, *inside* perspective which he did not want to
take. See Lagerspetz (2008).

of the event, not on the message it conveys.[44] For many of us at least, the difficulty about miracles stems from reluctance to acknowledge Divine presence in anything at all – miracle or no miracle. An extraordinary event as such would not give us that shift of focus.

Holland, for his part, wants instead to think of a miracle as something that *resists* our attempts to make sense. It breaks through our thinking patterns and challenges them. Our normal attitude to events is to look for their causal antecedents. But our lives involve something else too – a less reasoned response, 'animal awareness' or primitive reaction.[45] We dodge when a bulky object comes speedily towards us.[46] We do not ask questions then. A miracle involves a 'sense gap' between such immediate responses and the understanding. It is a gap we cannot bridge intellectually but only by 'flesh and blood'.[47] In the face of an event beyond the normal course of nature, just accepting it may remain the only 'pathway for the understanding'.[48]

In his contributions to the debate, D.Z. Phillips undertakes to defend Winch.[49] He mainly discusses the challenges that the concept of a miracle is facing in modern culture, where 'the prestige of science is enormous'.[50] Phillips warns against trying to give miracles a new lease of life by connecting them with ideas of the paranormal. He suspects Roy Holland and Howard Mounce of doing that. They want to let in God by opening the door for 'a supernatural realm beyond the natural one'. According to such conceptions,

> Now and again, it breaks in on our familiar surroundings, disrupting our normal descriptions and expectations. We call these intrusions 'strange', 'bizarre', 'occult,' but, it is argued, their credibility must not be denied prematurely.[51]

Phillips indicates that those pinning their faith on supernatural events find themselves not 'waiting for God' (as Simone Weil wanted to do) but 'waiting for the vanishing shed'.

But it seems that Holland was forcing a door that was wide open as far as Winch was concerned. Winch did not insist on natural explanations for everything. He simply said that, for an assertion to be intelligible, it must at least 'belong to *some* world picture'.[52] The real

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44. Winch (1995: 210).
45. Holland (1989: 55); Holland (1990: 34).
46. Holland (1990: 34–35).
47. Holland (1990: 40).
48. Holland (1989: 58).
49. Phillips (1993); Phillips (1993b).
50. Phillips (1993: 189).
51. Phillips (1993: 172).
52. Winch (1995: 201).

disagreement between Holland and Winch was probably elsewhere. At bottom, there appears to be a question about the relation between experience and 'world picture'. For Holland, the Zeligs' conviction that their shed had disappeared was based on their 'animal awareness', immediate experience. Unlike Winch, Holland (or so Winch reads him) thinks that judgments of existence are – at least in some circumstances – capable of taking a kind of primitive, constitutive role; a role not mediated by our understanding of the kinds of thing that sheds, fields, etc. are.[53]

Norman Malcolm, while generally sympathetic to Winch, seems to endorse a position similar to Holland's, even though he does not address the question of miracles. The difference of substance between Malcolm and Winch might appear minimal.[54] They agree that, in the situation Singer has envisaged, no coherent description is available of what has happened to the shed. Winch thinks the Zelig family could not now be certain of *anything* about it – not of their memories and not of the present. Malcolm says, instead, that they would be certain of at least two things: the shed was there before, and is now mysteriously gone.[55] Given their lifelong experience with a shed in the back yard, they could not bring themselves to thinking that it was an illusion. They might accept that no explanation is forthcoming: 'It is by no means a foregone conclusion that our understanding of the causal properties of physical things will take priority over our understanding of what the past has been'.[56]

Why is this disagreement important? I believe it has a connection with Malcolm's interpretation of Wittgenstein – especially his earlier attempt, on Wittgenstein's behalf, to fend off accusations of 'linguistic idealism'. Some philosophers have read Wittgenstein as presenting language-games or world pictures as self-enclosed and immune to criticism. Winch was also accused of such language-game relativism.[57] Malcolm now argued that language-games are vulnerable to the discovery of unexpected facts. In the event of 'unheard-of occurrences', we face the choice of either refusing to believe, or of revising our earlier certainties.[58] This is what Malcolm represents as Wittgenstein's authentic view:

> We move about in our language-games with confidence. We name things, report events, give descriptions. In an overwhelming number of cases we are entirely free from any doubt about what to say. [...] But this ease and confidence in speech and action is possible only because

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53. Winch (1995: 204).
54. See Phillips (1993: 178–179).
55. Malcolm (1990: 11).
56. Malcolm (1990: 5).
57. On this, see Ahlskog & Lagerspetz (2015).
58. Malcolm (1989: 217, 228).

the world and life go on in regular ways – because, as it were, things 'behave kindly'.[59]

'[R]eality, the facts, may give one a surprise'.[60] Like Holland, Malcolm envisages unexpected facts cutting through the language-game and challenging it. This seems to imply a notion of context free, direct verification of facts. That is the very conception of verification that Winch saw as problematic. As Winch put it in his response, the verb 'ceasing to exist' does not have 'an independent, autonomous sense' apart from our conceptions of things and their roles in the flow of our lives.[61] Winch's underlying main target is the idea that you can make confronting 'reality, the facts' into a kind of self-validating rock bottom of your thinking – *different and distinct from* our shared, worldly activities of judging what happened.

Disappearance and causal explanation

Winch's interlocutors (Holland, Malcolm, Palmer and Mounce) suspected him of suggesting, intentionally or otherwise, that only what has some 'natural' explanation is intelligible, and of implicitly equating 'natural explanation' with '*causal* explanation'. That looks like a misinterpretation. However, Winch was partly to blame. Much of his argument was couched in terms of what 'we' can make sense of, and he placed emphasis on the dominance of science and technology in 'our' inquiries (CTE: 104). 'We' must here be read as 'Winch and his presumed readers', or perhaps as 'the unreflective consensus of industrial societies', not as 'everyone, by pain of philosophical confusion'. However, Winch does not systematically specify his different uses of 'we'. There is perhaps (here and possibly elsewhere in his work) some tension between two philosophical goals. On the one hand, he asks what it would mean for *him* seriously to make a certain judgment in a situation. On the other hand, he asks what kinds of obstacles, complications and questions one would *generally* encounter when making that judgment – either everyone or those who inhabit a certain cultural environment.[62]

My question here would be whether Winch inadvertently assumes too much homogeneity in the world picture and practices of modern societies. The idea of a world ruled by scientific laws is certainly strong among us, especially if someone *asks* us. In everyday thinking, however, the idea of unexplained disappearance may have more of a foothold than

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59. Malcolm (1982: 266).
60. Malcolm (1982: 267).
61. Winch (1995: 201).
62. For more on this, see Lagerspetz (2008).

Winch expected. If the constancy of objects is a 'general fact of nature', as Phillips would have it[63], in that case their frequent disappearance is also a fact of nature.

Howard Mounce has addressed the question of vanishing in two contributions to the debate. One was his review of *Trying to Make Sense*, the book where Winch's paper was included; the other was a discussion paper, 'On Simply Vanishing'.[64] The latter manuscript was never published, and Mounce informs me that it may have ceased to exist (no pun intended).[65] Phillips, however, quotes some key passages, mainly in his response to Mounce's and Holland's views on miracles. Mounce suggested that the recognition that things may just vanish would involve a challenge to the naturalist world-view, comparable to the paradigm change from Ptolemaic to Copernican astronomy.[66] Phillips took him to task on this in the essays I quoted earlier. On my part, I find it interesting to look at Mounce on 'vanishing' in everyday discourse.

Mounce recalls a childhood scene, with his mother helping him look for a ball that was lost in the garden: 'It *must* be somewhere'.[67] But he also remembers an inner sceptical voice whispering, 'What makes her so certain?' – The exclamation, 'It *must* be somewhere!' certainly feeds on a kind of expectation of a causally closed world. However, it is not obvious that such expectations always guide our practical responses.

Winch wants his example to illustrate how the judgment that something has disappeared is included in a larger framework of expectations. In that framework, the judgment logically implies the appropriateness of certain follow-up questions. Without it, it is unclear (in the kind of case Winch was discussing) whether any kind of judgment has been made in the first place. When we speak of disappearance, we logically *imply* that something has happened prior to it. The object has either been destroyed – in some process that 'fits' the kind of object it is – or it still exists somewhere else. There is room for asking for an explanation. Mounce thinks of a different kind of situation. In some cases, it is not obviously meaningful to insist on answers to what has happened. 'My golf ball has disappeared!' states a fact that I can simply accept and then move on.

Among other things, time constraints and the importance of the 'object' in question inform our responses. It makes sense for a father to wait for years for a son reported missing[68], but not to keep looking for a random golf ball. As to the latter, you might still want to say, 'Yes – *in*

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63. Phillips (1993: 181).
64. Mounce (1988); Mounce (unpublished).
65. Email communication, 3 May 2021.
66. Mounce (1988: 238).
67. Quoted in Phillips (1993: 182).
68. Phillips (1993: 183).

practice, we give up looking, but we know it is somewhere. If we were to look long enough (drag the ponds, do body searches...), we would find it – *and*, provided adequate technology (DNA tests?), identify it as the *right* one!' – That is, however, not a hypothesis but a general *requirement* of how things 'must' be. Winch is right in stressing what an important part of our world-view it is. However, it is not always our dominant response. We would often quite rightly dismiss it as irrelevant (we are not *going* to conduct those searches). Things do disappear, and we do accept it.

These points would constitute an objection to Winch if we were to assume, as some commentators did, that he wanted to lay down the general conditions for *any* meaningful judgment that something has disappeared. However, Winch's argument rather meant that confronting thought with its object is to engage 'some system of human practice or other'.[69] This is compatible with the possibility of a variety of responses. The idea that an object may vanish without explanation – i.e., without any *particular* explanation and with no hope of recovery – is *also* an integral part of our practices of handling objects. This is still different from the abstract idea of 'sheer' vanishing.

Nevertheless, it is useful to point to these alternative responses, if only in order to put the predominance of naturalism in perspective. Everyday practices, even of Western industrial societies, are not in perfect sync with 'thinking of events in terms of natural laws and with the dominance of technological considerations'.[70] This is, in fact, a point Winch makes forcefully elsewhere.[71]

Consider a closely related idea from ordinary life. We speak of chance occurrences, of good fortune and bad luck. I stumble on a rock and hurt myself. You stumble too but get up unharmed. Why? We might say, 'for no reason at all', i.e., 'for no *particular* reason'. By speaking of chance (or sometimes, fate), we put an issue to rest, while someone else might insist on a cause or a culprit. However, from a naturalist point of view, 'Bad luck!' is just as unsatisfactory as, 'It has vanished!' – For the naturalist, there *must* be an explanation, even though we might never know what it is.

On this issue, the Azande, as described by Evans-Pritchard and discussed by Winch, appear less forgiving than the average European. For them, nothing happens at random. Every event has 'two spears', as in hunting: The first spear hits the game, the second spear (known as *umbaga*) fells it. When a so-called accident takes place, it is really their

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69. Winch (1995: 201).
70. Cf. Winch (1995: 201).
71. Winch, UPS.

combined effect. The first spear is causal. The second spear (determining the outcome, good or bad) might be witchcraft.[72] Someone is always to blame, and the Poison Oracle is the way to find the culprit.

On the other hand, in that essay Winch also points to something Europeans and the Azande have in common: the general hope of making sense of life's 'contingencies'.[73] Some calamities can be fended off, others just happen. We, like the Azande, face the question when to give up control. Looking at Winch's work other than 'Ceasing to Exist',[74] we learn that the 'world picture' of modern society is not homogeneous.

Metaphysics as trying to make sense

'Ceasing to Exist' provoked debate, especially on the religious concept of a miracle and its connection to ideas of laws of nature. The essay, however, discussed those topics only in passing. The underlying target of its critique was the form of epistemology that Winch associated with metaphysical realism. In that epistemology, a kind of immediate presence is portrayed as the ideal case of knowledge. It holds that truth-claims are ultimately analysable into basic 'observation-sentences' which, in theory, would admit of 'direct' verification. That would open the door for the idea that 'sheer' vanishing is 'logically possible'.

'Ceasing to Exist' highlights that presence neither *is* knowledge nor can produce knowledge on its own. The trouble with the idea of such direct verification is that it would bypass the central philosophical issue: the complexities of what goes into seriously judging what has happened. First, we need to understand what is involved in human engagement with things like sheds[75], and how different ways of 'vanishing' (fail to) connect with our practices, a kind of intersubjective 'unity' of a world.[76] On this issue, Winch thinks of himself as taking up a theme from Kant but recasting it as an inquiry into human practices. While Kant understood the unity in question in terms of universal laws of nature, Winch (following Wittgenstein) thinks of it as a culturally variable 'unity of practice'.

> An important implication of these [Wittgenstein's] discussions is that the notion of laws of nature, together with the particular concepts involved in them, have their sense because of *their* embeddedness in human forms of life, in the practices constitutive of natural scientific

72. Evans-Pritchard (1937: 74).
73. Winch, UPS: 43–47.
74. E.g., Winch (1997).
75. See Lyas (1999: 192).
76. Winch (1995: 208).

investigation and, at a farther remove, in the more comprehensive culture within which such investigation in its turn has its sense.[77]

As Winch indeed emphasized, this is the description of a task and not of the product. We are back to the basic question of what it is to have contact with reality, the prominent question in the opening chapter of *The Idea of a Social Science*:

> 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 a man; and this again involves a consideration of the general nature of human society, an analysis, that is, of the concept of human society.[78]

Speaking of the implications of such elucidation for 'the life of a man' involves ambiguity. In 'Ceasing to Exist', he asked 'what it would be *for me* seriously to judge an object to have ceased to exist' (CTE: 89, italics added). Yet, clearly, he thought he was also addressing the more general question what it would mean for *any* of 'us' – 'us', either as 'members of a particular culture' or in the general sense of 'anyone'.

Would that enterprise qualify as 'epistemology and metaphysics', the kind of inquiry that Winch, in his early book, described as the indispensable core of philosophy? The answer, of course, depends on how much we read into those terms. It does seem to me that they are useful for highlighting the unity of Winch's work after *The Idea of a Social Science*. It did not merely consist of therapeutic interventions to rectify disparate philosophical confusions – the kind of approach Winch described as 'the underlabourer conception of philosophy'.[79] He had set himself the task to 'elucidate this conception of a *common world*'.[80]

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