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In defence of language-interpretive social science: on the critiques of Peter Winch’s conception of understanding

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Abstract
In his highly influential book (The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy, first published in 1958), Peter Winch introduces an alternative concept of interpretive social science, in which the focus is shifted from the actors’ subjective motives to the common elements found in every understandable action: language-games and rule-following. This Wittgensteinian, linguistic version of interpretive social science has had its vast array of critics throughout the years: according to some of them, it neglects the practical side of sociology; while others claim that it fails properly to answer the questions raised by the translation from one language-game to another, or that it renders critical social theory impossible. In my article, I try to reflect critically upon these critiques themselves, showing that the Winchian theory does not overlook the practice in understanding the different forms of life; that with slight modifications it is able to cope with the problem of translation, and that it does not aspire to be the critical theory that many of its critics would like it to be.

Keywords
critical theory, interpretation, social science, understanding, Peter Winch

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Introduction

Ever since it was first published in 1958, Peter Winch’s *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* has been the subject of many debates in both interpretive sociology and the philosophy of social science. Understanding and interpreting human behavior has always been the cornerstone of non-positivistic tendencies in social science – trying to account for reasons and motivations behind individual actions of a given society’s members. Dilthey’s interpretations of experiences and Weber’s notion of a subjectively intended meaning both tried to elucidate why a solitary actor did what she or he did, all the while relying solely on the individual’s point of view. The Wittgensteinian approach that Peter Winch proposed seemed to go against these trends in interpretive social science: every action can be understood as rule-following (or rule-breaking), thus they inherently involve a social component that cannot be disregarded if we are to give a full account of meaningful behavior.

The basic concepts of Winch’s book gave way to different readings and arguments about what its implications are for the philosophy of social science and social science in general. The reading that this article tries to advocate could be controversial in the light of recent literature on the Winchian theses, especially in the way it goes against certain revisions Winch himself made in the preface to the 2nd edition of the *Idea*. However, the centrality of rules present in every human interaction, the ‘social student’s’ task in recognizing and interpreting these rules and the qualitative difference that this presence makes regarding the subject matter of the social sciences (as opposed to naturalistic approaches) is a reading that is very much alive and worth defending. The general aim of this article is to show how such a position could be tenable by pointing out the shortcomings of certain objections raised against it based on linguistic, empirical social scientific or critical theoretic grounds. The first part of the article concentrates on the reconstruction of the Winchian framework while the remaining sections introduce and attempt to confute the criticisms held against it from the three areas mentioned above. The four subsections aim to treat different questions regarding the theoretical side (linguistic problems), the practical implications (empirical social science) and the Winchian language-interpretive social science in general (critical theory).

The general idea

The Wittgensteinian notions of ‘forms of life’ and ‘language-games’ stand in the center of Peter Winch’s conception of *Verstehen*. Members of a society follow intersubjectively generated rules while acting and interacting, and the meaning of their actions is constituted by obeying or disobeying these rules. When we engage in verbal communication, when we use our language – we participate in language-games (and we could potentially be participants in many different kinds of language-games, ranging from simple greetings through storytelling to formulating a scientific hypothesis). One thing is common in each of them, though: they involve a social setting, for there could not be a language that is not or cannot potentially be understood by anyone else except the speaker himself or herself. A language-game therefore is linked to a social precondition – it belongs to a *form of life*: ‘to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life’ (Wittgenstein, 1999: § 19).
Winch begins his investigations under the guidance of Wittgenstein’s notion of rule-following: the meaning of our words is constituted in their usage, which itself is tied to the rules of the language-games – rules that involve a social context and cannot be articulated and followed by only one solitary person. Winch extends this rule-following to the realm of all social phenomena, and introduces the term ‘meaningful behavior’. He gives a detailed description of the differences between methods of enquiry to be used in the natural and the social sciences (criticizing Mill and Pareto for their views that are deeply rooted in positivism), but his conclusion significantly differs from the vision of interpretive social science held by Max Weber and his followers. Weber would like to elucidate the ‘subjectively intended’ meaning of actions, while Winch, on the contrary, puts the emphasis on the components that are common in all of those actions: the rule-following in the usage of everyday language. That is what ‘social students’ should try to reconstruct and understand in their investigations concerning the different forms of life.

The meaning of a meaningful behavior is determined by the rules properly or improperly followed in it – the task of the social scientist thus becomes the understanding and interpretation of these rules and the accompanying social relations. The connection between language and social relations is crucially important: a central thesis of the Winchian concept of understanding is that our ideas, social relations and language are inseparably interconnected. The rules constituted in our language-games determine our social relations – and as certain changes take effect in our society (culminating in the introduction of new ideas), the usage of the language-games changes accordingly, since ‘our language and our social relations are just two different sides of the same coin’ (Winch, 1990: 113). Social relations therefore could only be understood as language and praxis interwoven, and are considered internal, since their existence depends on the conceptual framework (we cannot, for example, grasp the meaning of the concept of ‘slavery’ without presupposing the concept of ‘master’ too). This nature of the social phenomena gives ground for Winch to compare the task of the interpreting ‘social student’ with that of the anthropologist encountering an alien culture: one who wishes to study society, has to understand the rules influencing the actions of social actors, and cannot fully understand these without getting to know the language and the rules of the particular language-games. Language-games and rules different from those of the researcher’s own need to be translated in the process – and the act of translation is not free of controversies either.

In the parts that follow, I will assess some critical remarks concerning the Winchian suggestions, arguing that most of them are not well grounded or do not lead to consequences that would render language-interpretive social science untenable. I do not wish to claim that the Winchian approach is resistant to any and all kinds of criticism – for a legitimate critique of his Weber interpretation, see, for example, Erdélyi (1992) – I would only like to point out that certain remarks brought up against it are not plausible enough. An exhaustive review of the last few decades’ criticism would go beyond the scope of the present article, therefore my enquiry will proceed in three steps: the first part will deal with the problems of translation between different language-games; the second with the critical comparison of language-games in the face of empirical data; and, finally, the third part will concern itself with the possibility of social criticism within the Winchian framework.
The problem of idealism

Jürgen Habermas (1988) discusses Winch’s conception of meaningful behavior and rule-following at great length, then turns his attention to the sentences and assertions that, according to Winch, play a constitutive role in our social relations. He concludes that ‘Winch’s thinking is quietly radical: he dissolves sociology into a specialized linguistic analysis. And he does not hide the idealism that this approach contains’ (Habermas, 1988: 129). The charge of idealism leaves us with the following questions: to what extent are Winch’s theses idealistic – and what consequences does this idealism have for the social sciences?

Wittgenstein himself has also been accused of being a linguistic idealist – and if that were the case, it would not be surprising that the same problem should resurface in Winch’s work, which draws heavily on the Wittgensteinian investigations. David Bloor (1996) analyses the threat of idealism in the Wittgensteinian approach in great detail. Bloor suggests that what many have mistakenly identified as idealism is rather the socio-logical aspect of Wittgensteinian thought, something that could potentially be fruitful for the social sciences. We encounter such ‘idealism’ when we talk about language as something that creates the very things that it refers to: ‘there are cases where the grammar of our language does not mould itself to a set of independent “essences”: rather, these are constituted in and by the grammar’ (Bloor, 1996: 356). When we talk about rights, rules, social relations, etc., we fix their existence by referring to them. To illustrate the point, Bloor cites the following passage from Wittgenstein:

Why can’t my right hand give my left hand money? – My right hand can put it into my left hand. My right hand can write a deed of gift and my left hand a receipt – But the further practical consequences would not be those of a gift. When the left hand has taken the money from the right, etc., we shall ask: ‘Well, and what of it?’ And the same could be asked if a person had given himself a private definition of a word: I mean, if he has said the word to himself and at the same time has directed himself to a sensation. (Wittgenstein, 1998: § 268)

The transaction shown in the example could not be understood as a donation, since we need something more than the mere observable actions to understand it as anything else beyond the physical movement of money. In our case, this ‘added meaning’ would be the concept of a gift and the social institution of gift-giving, which is constituted by our referring to it as such and adding certain moral elements to its process. The intersubjective context is necessary for it to have any kind of meaning – constituted by both its concept and practice.

More recently, Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock (2008) have also argued that idealism plays no part in the writings of Wittgenstein. He wished to distance himself from any kind of theory, and his investigations go no further than examining our language in use, without committing himself to a materialist or idealist doctrine about the nature of reality (ibid.: 71–5). A ‘social science’ based on Wittgensteinian foundations, therefore, cannot concern itself with the ‘explanation’ of social phenomena as understood by advocates of empirical methods. Its main task is conceptual clarification, since it never truly severed its ties to philosophy: ‘The clarifications are primarily addressed to the confusion between empirically-based claims about social activities, institutions, and the like …
and claims about what those facts signify’ (Hutchinson et al., 2008: 75). If we consider social science not to be an empirical enterprise but – in Winch’s words – ‘misbegotten epistemology’, then the only thing we would have to add to defend it against the claim of idealism is that this epistemology is, in essence, social. Thus, the linguistic idealism should rather be called ‘sociologism’ and could be useful for the tradition of interpretive social science – as it has already proven to be:3 Winch was able to formulate his language-interpretive idea on the grounds of this sociologism.

The problems of translation

The Winchian approach aims to concentrate on the forms of life, as modes of expression for language and praxis, the two crucially important features of language-games. Habermas argues for the inseparability of these features – ‘The approach of linguistic analysis to the realm of social action is plausible only if internal relationships among symbols always imply relationships among actions’ (Habermas, 1988: 118). He then accuses Winch of putting too much emphasis on the constitution and usage of concepts (the linguistic feature of a language-game), while neglecting the side of praxis, the side of social actions carried out in our everyday practices:

Winch’s analysis leads from the question how a meaning can be identified to the problem of the application of criteria, and ends with Wittgenstein’s concept of rule-guided behavior. But it does not go beyond the intersubjectivity of the validity of linguistic rules. (ibid.: 130)

What Habermas attempts to criticize is the apparent disregard on Winch’s part of the practical implications of the theory of language-games and the role it plays in understanding actual interacting, communicating agents of actual societies. For him, the Winchian analysis stops at the metaphysical level: it gives an elaborate interpretation of the nature of rules, but falls short of transferring its consequences to everyday communicative actions. Habermas suggests that the Winchian conception of rule-following is lopsided: its emphasis has been placed almost entirely on the intersubjectivity of linguistic rules on a theoretical level, while the empirical situations that these rules make possible seem to fall out of its scope. In order for a social science to be successful, it has to account for the empirical phenomena it tries to elucidate not only from a theoretical point of view – it also has to reflect on the practices through which rule-following behavior is acted out.

To defend the Winchian approach against such a claim, it should be said that while the understanding of rule-governed behavior does indeed wish to arrive at the analysis of social relations against the background of language analysis and the philosophy of language, Winch himself has always taken the connection between language and practice to be equally important. Formulating the rules in sentences of a given language admittedly belongs to the linguistic side, but rule-following behavior and the understanding of certain actions carried out when applying (or deviating from) said rules could only be investigated on the side of praxis. Let us suppose we are studying a community whose institutions are unknown to us, and we observe that when two men belonging to this community meet each other on the street, they both make hand gestures that are
perfectly identifiable as a form of greeting in our social setting. We can, on the linguistic level, formulate the rules they seem to be following, but the ultimate test our interpretation has to pass in order to qualify as correct will lie in the practical aspect of their actions. It is entirely possible that they did in fact greet each other, though it could turn out that in a matter of minutes they both pull out their guns and engage in a battle – because what counts as the set of rules for the language-game of greeting for us counts as the set for challenging the other person to a duel for them. The above example tried to show that both the linguistic and practical sides are indispensable in order to arrive at a valid understanding – and when Winch talks about the internality of social relations, he has those relations in mind that manifest in actions and that are ruled by conventions.

When analysing the nature of language-games, Habermas poses the problem of their being grammatically closed and defined (the problem of ‘perfect order’ in forms of language). Should we dismiss the possibility of a metalanguage-game and accept that people belonging to different forms of life tend to act according to rules of different language-games, we should also face the consequence that the understanding of any action becomes problematic because of the internal logic and unity of these different language-games. In order to arrive at the correct understanding, one would have to learn the rules of the particular language-game in question and internalize the norms that define the scope of possible actions – for we could only grasp the meaning of an action in its context, and to identify this context successfully, we would need to understand the concepts used in it. ‘These grammars can be elucidated only “from within”, that is, through the application of the grammars themselves’ (ibid.: 134). Furthermore, the social student himself or herself is part of a language-game while conducting his or her language-interpretive investigations – he or she is part of the language-game of language analysis. The social student will have to rely on translations if she or he would like to understand forms of life alien to her or him. This translation, however, is far from being unproblematic, because there is no unique set of rules according to which one could arrive at correct translations, there is no ‘translation manual’ to be used. According to Habermas, this problem renders the Winchian approach unsuccessful, for Winch establishes a claim to exactly that kind of translation manual – it presupposes a metalanguage into which the logic of every specific language-game could be translated. This presupposition is implicitly found in some of the Winchian theses: when, for example, he talks about the understandability of the language of participants in different forms of life (the translation of their language-games into ours) as the precondition for uncovering the specific rules guiding their actions.

Habermas is not alone in criticizing the Winchian approach on the basis of the problem of translations – Paul A. Roth (1987) raises similar objections. With such critical remarks in mind, the question is the following: to what extent could Winch rely on the possibility of a metalanguage as the basis of translations; and how would his concept of understanding change in the face of relinquishing the claim for a universally valid translation manual? Accepting that members of a society are aware of the rules constituting intersubjective relations among them, we could understand their actions by translating their interiorized and mostly unreflected sets of rules into our own language in a way that they become intelligible, plausible and usable – in a word: if we translate them correctly. These sets of rules have a universally accepted meaning for members of a given
society – a meaning that can only be properly uncovered if we are able to give an adequate translation of these rules themselves.

According to Roth, this standpoint is ‘the assumed existence of either universal meanings or incontrovertible logical standards’ (Roth, 1987: 131). To count as adequate, the translation presupposes one and only one meaning that can be attributed to the concepts used by members of a given society – and a translation with any validity-claims has to uncover exactly that meaning. ‘These semantical or logical universals are the standard against which attempts at understanding are measured. I dub this view “meaning realism”’ (ibid.: 131). Meaning realists then, according to Roth, aim to arrive at the meaning the concept has in the language to be understood, and presuppose that there is only one adequate meaning to be arrived at. Roth takes the Winchian approach to be a meaning realist account.

Regarding this objection, one could question whether there is only one correct translation of any unfamiliar or alien language-game. Roth – drawing on Quine (1960) – argues for the underdeterminacy of translations to refute the meaning realist claims. According to meaning realism, when designing a translation manual for a language alien to us, we should give the correct translation of exactly those meanings that speakers of the given language attach to their concepts – meanings that are common and universally valid (since these provide their social character). We encounter the first problem when we try to grasp these meanings: on what grounds should we believe that we are truly able to uncover the correct meaning? An attempt at translating should begin on the level of observation sentences: we observe a user of the language as he or she produces some kind of sound upon seeing a certain object. We identify the object on the basis of the rules of our own language, then assign the sentence uttered as the object’s identification in the language to be understood. In doing so, we have to face the problem whether the subject truly did think of the same thing that we took to be the meaning of his or her utterance – for reference cannot be deduced from his or her behavior alone. When such difficulties present themselves even in the translation of observational sentences, we cannot be sure of managing to find the correct meaning in the case of assertions and grammatical rules at a higher level.

According to Quine and Roth, it is very likely a corollary of there being no such uniquely correct meaning and translation. There are no universal standards against which adequacy on the level of meaning could be measured. (If we would like to gain knowledge of what exactly happened inside the subject’s head – what meaning she or he truly assigned to a phenomenon – we could arrive at a subjective interpretation at best, even if such a procedure could be carried out. This result would, however, put the emphasis back on the subject and guide understanding towards a rather Weberian standpoint – something that Winch definitely tried to avoid.)

Accepting the arguments against meaning realism does not mean that we have to regard any kind of translation as impossible – it only denies the possibility of one exclusive translation. If translation is indeed underdetermined, we would have to look at various alternative options and use the one that we hold to be adequate – not on the level of meaning, but empirically. Roth’s proposal concerns the hypothesis-based testing of simultaneously available translation manuals to determine whose logic suits the studied reality the best. This solution – as Roth himself points out – has remarkable similarities
to Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shifts: much like science, translation does not have a universal logic either; the logic of an empirically adequate translation has to be in accord with the logic of the language to be understood, and the concept of rationality of its users.

The Winchian understanding and interpretation of meanings and meaningful behavior, however, could hardly be rejected based on accusations of meaning realism. To be fully convincing, such an argument should be able to show how Winch implicitly suggests that there is only one correct translation, or how he explicitly denies the possibility of any rival interpretations. Winch does nothing of the sort: if anything, he tries to debunk such claims made by sociologists and anthropologists alike, for whom universally valid interpretations of social phenomena provided the foundations of a more ‘science-like’ social science.

The objection to the concept of universal rationality and irrationality is already to be found in Winch’s work – he argues for a concept of rationality that is guided by the rules of the language-game to be understood (see Winch, 1990: 95–103). Criticizing Winch for being a meaning realist could only be wholly acceptable if Winch himself had not been arguing for the different logic of different language-games – if he supposed that universal standards of logic and rationality do exist, overarching all forms of life and language-games. It is true that Winch often talks about the ‘correctness’ of a translation, the correct understanding of the rules that obtain, but this only applies to the rules of the certain language-games to be understood – and does not presuppose incorrigibility. Those who argue for the indeterminacy of translations claim something very similar: there is not only one translation manual, there is not only one determinate meaning. Accepting this thesis, we have no reason to discard the Winchian approach as meaning realist: social phenomena, examples of meaningful behavior, are understandable as rule-following. We would, however, have to add one complementary condition: there is not a proposed interpretation of these phenomena that could claim universal validity – a proposal cannot be universally ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’.

Thus, the Rothian criticisms can in part be made compatible with the understanding of rule-governed behavior. The suggestion that ‘the more empirically adequate a proposal is, the more useful it could be for further investigation’ could function as a threshold that keeps off-the-charts interpretations out of scientific dialogue. Empirical adequacy has another advantage that Winch himself made use of in his later writings: it helps us avoid passing judgement on language-games to be understood based on our preliminary beliefs about their character and purpose.

Winch’s most detailed argument against universally correct interpretations can be found in ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’ (1970). In this highly influential article, he criticizes the account E. E. Evans-Pritchard gives of the magic among the Azande, and further opposes the view of universal logical standards. In his investigations, Evans-Pritchard found that the concept of witchcraft plays a central role in Azande culture, and they use the method of the so-called ‘poison oracle’ in answering questions regarding magical activities (consisting mostly of curses placed on fellow members of their society). In this process, they administer the poison (called benge) to a fowl, and the fowl’s subsequent death or survival is taken to mean ‘yes’ or ‘no’, according to stipulations determined prior to consulting the oracle. This method contradicts the logic
according to which people of the western civilization decide upon the truth or falsehood of certain hypotheses. Winch suggests that thinking this way leads us to make exactly the same mistake that gave grounds for criticism in his analysis of Pareto’s ideas: we try to expand our logical standards over forms of life that contain a system of ideas entirely different from our own. Winch points out that using analogies to understand something alien to us could be rather fruitful for the enterprise, but he holds that the analogy Evans-Pritchard chooses to employ (that of scientific hypotheses) is particularly flawed: if we would like to compare Zande rituals to our culture, we would rather not forget that we are literally talking about a ritual, not a scientific accomplishment. Since Zande people try to consult supernatural forces through their oracles, it would be more adequate to compare their rituals with the Christian prayers, through which people of the western civilization wish to communicate with the transcendental sphere.

We should also keep in mind that, regardless of the chosen analogy, we would like to understand the given forms of life, not evaluate them. A proper understanding of alien forms of life could then help us to discover and learn something new about our own: it could lead to a better understanding of ourselves. ‘What we may learn by studying other cultures are not merely possibilities of different ways of doing things, other techniques. More importantly we may learn different possibilities of making sense of human life’ (Winch, 1970: 106). This is not something that we could understand by trying to force our standards of logic upon these alien cultures, but rather by attempting to give a translation (as we have seen above, an empirically adequate translation) of what we experience.

Accepting that translations should claim only empirical adequacy (and abandon meaning realism), we could not be accused of ‘contemplating a linguistic version of Dilthey’ either (Habermas, 1988: 136). Using these translations, we could understand the rules without leaving our own language-game and trying to transpose ourselves into another. In light of this, we are able to view the following critical remarks made by Habermas from a different aspect:

Winch could avoid the hermeneutic self-reflection of linguistic analysis and interpretive sociology, which he wants to establish as a special form of linguistic analysis, only under one condition: if he found a metalanguage for theory into which the grammar of any everyday language whatsoever could be translated. Then the translation of the primary language in question into the language of the analyst, and thus the translation of one analyzed language into another, could be formalized and undertaken in accordance with general transformational rules. The circle in which the reflexivity of everyday language, as the ultimate metalanguage, places us would then be broken through. Linguistic analysis would no longer be tied to the practice of language-games; it could be made theoretically fruitful for sociology without needing hermeneutics. (ibid.: 137–8)

This kind of translation into a metalanguage would only be inescapable if we accepted the principle that there could only be one correct translation, something we refused to do in the review of meaning realism above. The Winchian approach seems to be a viable alternative even when replenished with the aspects of indeterminacy of translations and empirical adequacy: when we understand meaningful behavior, we attempt to
understand language-games and actions using a proposed translation – without claiming it to be universally correct.

Habermas returns to the Winchian theses in his monograph *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), addressing the question of universal rationality. He reconstructs the rationality debate (that *Understanding a Primitive Society* started) in six steps and concludes that the Winchian arguments are not conclusive enough to abandon the concept of universal rationality altogether, but they could be helpful in making instrumental rationality (which plays a central role in western civilization) the object of critical reflection. While agreeing that studying alien cultures could help an advocate of scientific rationality to develop a certain sensibility for self-criticism, he still regards rationality-based comparisons of different cultures’ world-views as acceptable. For him, the main problem lies in the way the cognitive-instrumental rationality of the western societies lays claim to exclusivity ‘not only in our dealings with external nature, but also in our understanding of the world and in the communicative practice of everyday life’ (Habermas, 1984: 66).

After a thorough examination of the Winchian arguments, Habermas makes the Popperian three-world theory and the dimension of ‘openness’ and ‘closedness’ the standards for comparing world-views. However, when he argues for the acceptability of the cross-cultural validity of scientific rationality, he fails properly to answer questions raised by the category-mistake that he himself is aware of: is it not the western researcher who commits this mistake when he or she tries to evaluate alien cultures based on questions of coherence that members of the given society would never have brought up unless pushed to answer somebody from the outside? During his reconstruction of ideas, Habermas mentions that this mistake could rightfully be attributed to advocates of universal rationality, who argue that (for example) Zande thought is only partially consistent – though Zande people themselves never reach the point of scientific reflexivity, the point where contradictions in their beliefs could become discernible. The view that Habermas takes to be amenable for cultural comparisons affects the constitutive role of world-views in personal identity too: the more open world-view of modernity leaves less space for sanctity, for the concept of taboo. While this may in fact be true, when we wish to interpret the distinction between rationality and irrationality using notions of identity-constitution, we face the same problem: we are looking for concepts of scientific rationality in certain world-views according to which such rationality is not an integral part of the concept of reality.

Berel Dov Lerner (2002) also criticizes Winch on the grounds of understanding alien cultures: he holds that when interpreting magic among the Azande, Winch tries to show that magical rituals are merely symbolic – hence his proposal of the analogy with Christian prayer. What the Winchian interpretation fails to take into account is that Azande rituals are – according to Evans-Pritchard – instrumental actions: their *purpose* is to affect physical phenomena, not to communicate with the transcendental. Winch fails to accept that Azande people are capable of applying instrumental reason, for he is an ‘instrumental monist’, and cannot accommodate Zande instrumentality with ‘the’ instrumentality – that of western civilizations (Lerner, 2002: 92).4 Winch, however, does not disagree with Evans-Pritchard because of the anthropologist’s inappropriate description of Azande culture: he believes him to be at fault for forcing his own conception of rationality on them. Evans-Pritchard wanted to press criteria of western science upon the
practices of an alien culture – and Lerner’s interpretation of Zande rituals seems to be doing the same when it labels their actions instrumental without reflecting on what our notion of instrumentality may or may not have in common with their practices. As Lyas (1999) rightly points out, whatever the Azande might consider witchcraft to be (a form of entertainment, communication with deities, or even science), we cannot understand their notion from the stance of western rationality. Winch attempted to argue against the conception of a universal logic and rationality, therefore it would undermine his whole enterprise to hold the instrumental rationality of western civilization as the only acceptable rationality. With the help of the indeterminacy of translations, we seem to be able to suggest a solution to Lerner’s problem: Winch did not think that it would be tenable to give an adequate translation based on a universal concept of rationality, and as the Rothian critique suggested above, we should not talk about only one adequate translation at all – not even in Lerner’s case, who tries to present it in the name of methodological pluralism.

**Empirical methods**

Another type of objection to the Winchian approach can be found in Karl-Otto Apel’s remarks: he regarded Winch’s work as an attempted foundation for linguistic hermeneutics, and he criticized Winch for his anti-empirical stance. Apel does not take the utilization of observations based on different statistical methods in the historical sciences to mean the colonization of natural scientific methodology – they merely help bring forward understanding and self-interpretation:

... the possibility of such methods of explanation does not in my opinion indicate that the methods of the natural sciences are beginning to replace the understanding of the Geisteswissenschaften. I think, to the contrary, that these objectivations of certain aspects of human behavior, which cannot (yet) be articulated in the ‘language of self-understanding’, nevertheless are serving to further this self-understanding. (Apel, 1994: 42)

Apel’s proposed analogy seems to be rather problematic: ‘the sociologist ... explains “fragments” of human behavior (e.g., economical behavior) by means of statistical laws – no different, in principle, from the explanation of, say, the behavior of gas molecules’ (ibid.: 42). Contrary to that, we maintain that there is a significant difference: in explaining and predicting the behavior of gas molecules and other natural phenomena, we have the laws of nature to rely on, whereas in the case of societies, the behavior we are trying to explain and predict has to be already understood to some degree in advance. It could turn out that we mistakenly identified a given behavior as following or deviating from a certain rule, and no matter how much empirical data we are able to provide to underpin our theory, the preliminary understanding still remains mistaken. The following example should help to clarify this: let us suppose that we understand the rain-dance of an Indian tribe as a form of entertainment. Following its identification, we observe the bodily movements, their frequency and choreography, we draw all kinds of charts and construct statistical tables to help formulate a causal explanation for the phenomenon of ‘movement as a form of entertainment in primitive societies’. In doing so, we have no chance to revise a primarily mistaken understanding of this particular action.
When Winch talks about the inapplicability of statistical methods in the social sciences, he has this fundamental difference in mind – human behavior, unlike the behavior of natural phenomena, is meaningful. It is of course by no means inconceivable that we understand this behavior correctly, but prognoses based on such an understanding can be just as misleading:

Even given a specific set of initial conditions, one will still not be able to predict any determinate outcome to a historical trend because the continuation or breaking off of that trend involves human decisions which are not determined by their antecedent conditions in the context of which the sense of calling them ‘decisions’ lies. (Winch, 1990: 92–3)

When Apel argues for the applicability of empirical methods, he holds that these methods are useful in bringing about self-interpretation and participation in the hermeneutical discourse for the social sciences. Such language-analytic hermeneutics could provide the methodological foundations for a comparative concept of the social sciences – contrary to Winch’s Wittgensteinian philosophical commitments that intend to leave ‘everything as it was’. Apel proposes that proponents of language-analytic hermeneutics should not think that their work is done after the understanding and descriptive characterization of language-games:

As finite human beings who cannot know \textit{sub specie aeternitatis} the final result of history, we will have to accept with Wittgenstein the existence of different forms of life as different forms of understanding. But from this it does not follow, in my opinion, that philosophy should give up all attempts to critically evaluate the knowledge attained in various forms of understanding (e.g., in religion, or in myth, science, and philosophy). Instead they all should be related to the common interest in knowledge of mankind, the latter participating in a concrete historical dialogue. (Apel, 1994: 40)

When refusing to do so, philosophy would have to resort to a monadistic conception of language-games and needlessly commit itself to relativism – and such relativism is incompatible with the main theses of Apelian philosophy. Monadism, understood as such, would imply that all language-games are closed systems without the capability of understanding reality outside their scope and which regard their own inner logic as universally valid. The Winchian remarks concerning the logic of language-games (or, as Apel would say, ‘forms of understanding’), however, suggest the opposite of monadism: the different language-games cannot in themselves contain the only possible way to understand reality, they cannot presuppose the universality of their inner logic. ‘For connected with the realization that intelligibility takes many and varied forms is the realization that reality has no key’ (Winch, 1990: 102). The inner rationality and logic of the language-games of science, religion, or philosophy cannot serve as the measure of one another: we cannot pass judgement upon religious questions with scientific logic, and vice versa. From the standpoint of one language–game’s rationality we cannot decide whether an act counts as logical or illogical in another – the best we can do is to take them to be non-logical, for we could only answer the question of its being logical or illogical on the grounds of the concept of rationality applied in the language-game to be understood.
Apel holds that according to Winch, meaningful behavior is only understandable through the analysis of a system of certain grammatical rules, while the issue of praxis and the possible contradictions between the two aspects remain left out of the picture:

Winch is right, when he points out – against the behaviorists – that the behavior of a medi-

eval monk cannot be understood as being meaningful without knowledge of the rules for his

behavior, which stem from his religious conceptions. But does this prove that the actual

behavior of that monk is completely understandable in terms of the ‘institutional fiction’ of that religious form of life within which the monk is living? (Apel, 1994: 42)

If our aim is to understand rule-governed behavior, it is certainly important not to

limit our investigations to the grammatical structure and the rules of certain language-
games, leaving their practical consequences unexamined. Winch, once again, seems to be stressing the same point: he emphasizes that language and praxis are of equal impor-
tance – as we have pointed out earlier, he views them as different sides of the same coin regarding meaningful behavior. The reason he seems to be more concerned with rule-

following is because this is what guarantees the intelligibility of actions carried out in

practice – the categories of obeying or disobeying a rule make it possible for the prac-
tices to be considered actions in the first place.

Apel would like to reconcile analytic philosophy with interpretive social science by

grounding hermeneutic understanding in the analysis of language, and he holds that it could be possible with some modifications of the Winchian approach (the critical com-
parison of different language-games and the incorporation of certain empirical research

methods). Winch, however, did not attempt to take it upon himself to tackle these kinds of tasks: he did not want to propose an activistic or an empirical-comparative theory – regardless of how the Apelian criticisms might try to read these aspects into it.

Social criticism

In recent literature on the Winchian approach, Nigel Pleasants and Stephen Kemp both try to bring Peter Winch and the concept of a critical social science closer to each other. According to Pleasants (2000a), the supposed difference between Winch and critical social theorists is not as pronounced as one might be led to believe:

The idea of a critical social theory means in essence: a form of theoretical account in which individuals are depicted as active, knowing, interpreting, meaning-bearing agents – which is pretty much the picture that Winch introduced with his Idea of social study. (Pleasants, 2000a: 85)

According to Pleasants, Winch and his critics are basically doing the same: they try to analyse the general nature of social phenomena, with varying emphasis on central con-

cepts (for Winch, this is rule-following. Habermas concentrates on subjective action, while Giddens emphasizes structure). Pleasants clears Winch of the charge of relativism too: he stresses that the concept of action as rule-following behavior sounds more like an essentialist notion. When he takes this essentialism to mean that key notions of the
Winchian approach have a universal character, then Pleasants is admittedly right: every action can be understood as rule-following. The charge of relativism, however, usually comes from a different perspective (as Pleasants himself is ready to admit elsewhere [see Pleasants, 2000b: 289]) – these kinds of accusations (as we have seen above in Apel’s remarks) concern themselves with the incommensurability of the rationality and logic of different forms of life.

The aspect of social criticism described by Pleasants is based on Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘perspicuous representation’: ‘A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in “seeing connexions”’ (Wittgenstein, 1999: § 122). And insofar as we are representing social phenomena perspicuously, we cannot hide their inner inconveniences either:

Where the phenomena to be described are social and cultural practices, laden with moral and political values, clearly the difficulty will be compounded and it is to be expected that these descriptions will, unavoidably, be highly contentious. Although Wittgenstein does not address such issues directly, he does not, and cannot, say that they cannot or should not be addressed. (Pleasants, 2000b: 294)

Pleasants therefore suggests that social criticism should be a descriptive enterprise, not something rooted in metaphysics like the theories of Giddens or Habermas. These metaphysical theories try to analyse social phenomena with the help of categories that are not directly observable in their description, but still play a significant role in their constitution (the Habermasian system and life-world and Giddens’s structures are his prime examples). In contrast to Habermas or Giddens, Winch is mostly descriptive, though not absolutely free of metaphysically grounded claims: he introduces the universal concept of action understood as rule-following – an essentialist doctrine one should jettison in order to arrive at a purely descriptive critical theory. Pleasants agrees with the main points developed in ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’: to label the customs and rituals of an alien culture as illogical based on the scientific knowledge of western civilization is an ethnocentric mistake. His objections concern the analogy Winch proposes, for Christian prayer plays a relatively minor role in today’s western societies – while witchcraft is still a major part of the Azande culture. According to Pleasants, it would be more fruitful ‘to think of a set of practices and beliefs in western society which are equally ubiquitous and pervasive as magic and witchcraft in Zande society’ (ibid.: 303) – and this set of practices and beliefs is the concept of money, commodity production and exchange.

What follows from this reformulation of the Zande–western analogy is a critical theory indeed – though that of Pleasants’s own, which uncovers the alienating and oppressing nature of commodity production and exchange in western societies, comparing it with the possession of benge in Zande culture. ‘Perspicuous presentation’ therefore makes two kinds of criticism possible: we could critically reflect upon our own form of life when studying another culture; and we could, with the help of the descriptive method, shed some light on certain contradictions that may have always been embedded in our concepts. ‘The purpose of these descriptions is not to teach us, via explanatory theory, something new, but to “remind” us of what we already know and do, practically,
in our everyday lives’ (ibid.: 307). Nonetheless, these suggested critical implications of the Winchian approach leave room for some objections.

Pleasants argues for implicit critical aspects in Winch’s theses that we could put to use by ‘reversing’ the critical remarks made in studying and attempting to translate an alien culture’s language-game, and applying them to our own. An example of this could be the way in which Winch mentions the boundaries of our own (capitalistic) social system and way of thinking to account for the apparent illogical (and unintelligible) features of the Azande culture. ‘Our blindness to the point of primitive modes of life is a corollary of the pointlessness of much of our own life’ (Winch, 1970: 106). The outcome of this pointlessness is, *inter alia*, that the western civilization can only make commodity production intelligible when it is intertwined with the concept of consumption – Winch even says that it contributes to the alienation present in industrial societies.

However, he never expands on this point any further, and it is only mentioned to illustrate the mistake that scientists of western societies often make (understanding rationality to be universal). In the few passages where Winch does indeed talk about understanding our own culture and civilization more accurately (which might shed some light on certain injustices we experience in our everyday lives), he seems to be pondering the useful implications of an anthropological study done correctly. This can hardly qualify as a thorough critique of modern civilization, and could rather be viewed as a reflection on what consequences the study of an alien culture may have for certain forms of life (in this particular case, for capitalism). Should Winch attempt to criticize western civilization as a whole, he would need to analyse the capitalist system and its shortcomings in depth – a topic he never endeavors to dwell on. His critical remarks on the western way of life merely attempt to show how a certain mode of living can influence our way of thinking – and even though the ‘pointlessness of our own life’ can provide grounds for a critical social theory, this is not the point that Winch wishes to focus on. He does not elaborate on the flaws of western civilization, he does not propose a possible solution for them – he does not formulate a critical program. Pleasants would still like to view the Winchian approach as a critical social theory, and he certainly has a way to do it given his definition of a critical theory mentioned above. In that case, however (if a theory becomes critical by referring to active agents capable of carrying out actions of social relevance), we could easily regard *any* theory of social phenomena as critical, if it postulates individuals not merely obeying physical and biological laws.

If Pleasants wants to find a central position for social criticism in Winch’s theses, he has a good reason to give the afore-mentioned definition of a critical theory, for other ways of direct criticism are not easily made compatible with a Wittgensteinian conceptual framework. A social science based on the understanding of rule-following, by the nature of its central notion alone, does not leave much room for criticizing social order. Accepting that the rules of language-games and the concepts we use are constituted inter-subjectively and are based on agreement, it becomes especially hard to formulate critical remarks that wish to attack the social reality ‘from the outside’. Such a critique would have to attempt to compare the world to our concepts and discover implicit contradictions – admittedly a hard task, since ‘the world *is* for us what is presented through those concepts’ (Winch, 1990: 15). This Winchian statement makes Pleasants suggest the abandonment of metaphysically grounded critical remarks that try to challenge social
order from the outside, and focus on the Wittgensteinian-based perspicuous presentation. Pleasants himself applies this method when analysing the concepts of commodity production and money, and he finds that a more detailed description can show the negative aspect of property and money – namely their *exclusivity*. If somebody possesses certain goods, other people are necessarily excluded from the possession of the same goods at that moment – somebody’s money is other people’s ‘lack thereof’. Pleasants illustrates his point with the following example:

A contemporary professional footballer [earns] one million pounds per annum. If we express this in Marx’s descriptive manner it will be seen that this individual acquires the equivalent to 20 of his fans’ homes *each year*. If we agree with Marx (and Aristotle) that there is a kind of ‘absurdity’ in the proposition that ‘$X$ quantity of boots is equal to $Y$ quantity of linen’, how much more absurd is the equivalence in the proposition that ‘the annual performance of one footballer is equal to 20 houses’? . . . There would surely be outrage if footballers forcibly evicted twenty families from their homes each year in order to draw their annual salary. And yet this does in effect take place, mediated by the monetary system, such that the internal relationship between some people’s gains and others’ losses is visible neither to victims nor benefactors. (Pleasants, 2000b: 306)

Descriptive criticism makes it possible for us to draw attention to this negative feature of the monetary system – and it does so without informing members of the society about anything new. Or does it? A review of this question and of internal criticism in general can be found in Stephen Kemp’s paper (Kemp, 2003); he has some critical remarks of his own, which will be addressed later on. Kemp agrees that members of a society have to have some kind of knowledge about the nature of possessions; that when something constitutes their (exclusive) property, the same thing cannot belong to others as well – without such knowledge, they could hardly maintain a capitalist social system at all. This social order – as Pleasants himself puts it – gives grounds for the ‘fetishism’ in the concept of money: it overemphasizes money’s positive features, while hiding the negatives away. ‘But if this is the case, then surely criticism that identifies these effects reveals something new, something that was previously unknown to actors, rather than reminding them of something they already knew’ (ibid.: 69). With the addition of new information, the criticism ceases to be internal, for it goes beyond the thesis that the nature of rule-following behavior presupposes the exact knowledge of factors that agents must take into account in order to qualify as people obeying or disobeying certain rules.

Though it may seem plausible, Kemp’s objection presumes something that Winch did not take to be necessarily true: that *every time, everyone* needs to be well acquainted with *every* aspect of the concepts they use in order to be considered rule-followers. Regarding this question, we should take a look at what Winch has to say about the kind of ‘externalization’ Weber uses (the characterization of everyday objects and processes relying solely on their external features – for example, defining money as a coin made of metal that one hands over to others in exchange for a variety of different things in certain situations):

I am not denying that it may sometimes be useful to adopt devices like Weber’s ‘externalization’. . . . It may serve the purpose of drawing the reader’s attention to aspects of the
situation which are so obvious and familiar that he would otherwise miss them, in which case it is comparable to Wittgenstein’s use of imaginary outlandish examples, to which I have already referred. (Winch, 1990: 118)

Winch does not mention the process of externalization to underpin social criticism, he merely takes it to be a potentially useful practice that could help in reflecting upon and understanding social phenomena. Turning now back to the definition of a critical theory given by Pleasants, externalization – just like any other description containing decision-making individuals – could certainly gain a critical overtone. In his article arguing for perspicuous presentation, Pleasants defines critical theory once again, though in a different way: ‘The point of a “critical” theory, obviously, is to persuade others that some aspect[s] of social reality are deficient in terms of rationality, justice, or morality’ (Pleasants, 2000b: 313–14). In this latter case, the Winchian approach seems to be hardly compatible with social criticism – for Winch would certainly like to persuade his readers, though not about the rational, just, or moral deficiencies in social phenomena; he would like to persuade them to accept that the best way to understand these phenomena is the reflective understanding of language-games and forms of life, based on the analysis of rule-following. He would like to understand society, not to change it.

Much like Pleasants, Stephen Kemp opts for internal criticism too, while stressing that if we understand rule-following to mean – according to Wittgenstein and Winch – obedience to agreements reached in an intersubjective context (agreements that we are constantly aware of), then we would not be able to argue for bringing tacit contradictions of these rules to the surface. In order to do that, we would need to go beyond the sphere that constitutes reality for us.7 Kemp judges this position untenable – we need to show that our concepts and rules are not only valid because of certain agreements, but that they have some defining characteristics of their own. Should we successfully identify these features, we would be able to point out contradictions in the interpretations we plan to criticize. The question of these characteristics beyond intersubjective agreement remains unanswered though, for Kemp never attempts to identify them – he merely notes that they would make the job of the critic easier.

If agreement is the basis of the correct application of rules then whatever actors agree on as a correct application simply is a correct classification. Should actors agree that they are wealthy, happy, beautiful, etc., then they will be all of these things. . . . The most obvious way to avoid this is to suggest that concepts and rules have content that is not decided by the agreement of actors, but is intrinsic to those concepts. (Kemp, 2003: 72)

Analysing the concepts Kemp mentions from a Wittgensteinian perspective, it seems that despite the radical examples he would like to present, he does not succeed in refuting that meanings of our words are constituted by their usage. Suppose that actors (every member of a society) agree that the word ‘rich’ would hereafter no longer imply that the person characterized by it possesses certain other qualities (that she is in the possession of ‘money’ and other ‘properties’), but that she has five fingers on both of her hands. Suppose further that these same actors pass this new usage on through generations in their language-games, and the meaning of ‘rich’ (defined by usage) could be attributed
to almost every member of their society. While this indeed could happen, it is important to notice that neither Wittgenstein nor Winch attributes the kind of power to the constitution of our rules and concepts that would enable them to physically change their creators. We do not change when we start referring to ten-fingered people by calling them ‘rich’ – our concepts do. The Winchian thesis quoted above, stating that ‘the world is for us what is presented through [our] concepts’, continues with the following remarks: ‘That is not to say that our concepts may not change; but when they do, that means that our concept of the world has changed too’ (Winch, 1990: 15).

Kemp’s metaphysical commitment regarding further intrinsic properties of our concepts does not turn out to be a conclusive argument, since Kemp does not elaborate on just what these properties should be. Nonetheless, he outlines his alternative for internal criticism from this standpoint, which is – drawing on Steven Lukes – the critical evaluation of concepts of rationality. Lukes distinguishes between universally valid and culture-specific aspects of rationality, stressing that there are certain universal standards that should constitute the basis of every kind of logic. In our critical overview of a given culture, we can allude to these basic principles (non-contradiction, consistency), though we cannot leave the studied culture’s local characteristics out of consideration. Kemp’s objection to this view is that should we apply it, we would not be able to convince the ‘locals’ – we would fail in trying to show why our interpretation based on universal logic is more adequate than theirs, why ours is not simply an alternative to it.

Kemp suggests that in order to meet this objection, we should abandon one kind of rationality. His choice is to jettison local concepts of rationality, since if there are universal criteria that we have to allude to in our interpretations, then these criteria also give us grounds to judge that local concepts of rationality are inconsistent – and being such, they are not even rationalities. ‘As an alternative, I would argue that an apparent disagreement in the logical judgements of inquirers and actors suggests that the beliefs in question have been misidentified by the former’ (Kemp, 2003: 78). Rejecting meaning realism, it is entirely plausible to propose that inquirers may have suggested an improper translation. Accepting indeterminacy, though, it seems less sound to reject an interpretation because it does not correspond to a concept of logic and rationality that vindicates universal validity. When talking about the universality of non-contradiction, we used logical concepts – and if an alien culture’s system of logic happens to be such that certain terms contradictory to us could be used unproblematically in it, then that system – according to its own logic – would be just as non-contradictory as ours.

To underpin his argument, Kemp – following Lukes again – turns his attention to the study of Nuer religion by Evans-Pritchard. Nuers believe that twins are birds. This statement is controversial for us: if something is a human being, it cannot be a bird – and vice versa. Kemp says that we cannot fully grasp the meaning of such a concept relying only on culture-dependent logic. In agreement with Papineau, he states that in the Nuer culture, there is a common element in the concepts of ‘twin’ and ‘bird’: they share the implicit meaning that both are ‘children of God’, something they lack in western civilization. We therefore do not interpret the same utterance as contradictory (according to universal logic) and coherent (according to context-dependent logic) at the same time, ‘rather, there are two different statements: one that calls on western concepts and is
contradictory, and one that calls on Nuer concepts and is consistent. Only one, general, concept of logic is required to make these judgements’ (ibid.: 79).

Thus it seems that the Nuer statement regarding twins being birds at the same time could be interpreted along the lines of ‘birds and twins are both children of God, therefore they are identical’. Taking this step hardly brings us closer to resolving the contradiction, it only provides a (probably) more adequate translation of the original Nuer statement. Giving a possible reason for the identity of humans and birds in Nuer religion does not make the utterance more plausible for the universal logic of the western observer. It would seem reasonable that – assuming there is a universal system of logic – the adequate translation should eliminate the apparent contradictions; yet it is unable to do that. According to the universal concept of logic, something either is or is not controversial: we should be able to translate consistent Nuer statements into equally consistent western ones. The problem with our current example is that in this case, the consistency of Nuer concepts is secured by something (reference to common origin) that is just as unacceptable for the western observer as the original translation itself. How could it be, that the identity of twins and birds is logically consistent for the Nuers? The answer should be that they do not employ the western concept of consistency in their everyday life – and we could not acquire a solely adequate translation that is perfectly in accordance with our concept of identity. All that was said above regarding context-dependent logic is to be applied here, and we can say that – paraphrasing Winch – there is still no universally appropriate key to reality.

Conclusion

The interpretation of Winch that this article advocates tried to defend a reading that concentrates on the notion of rule-following, the description of social phenomena in different cultural environments (different forms of life) and the concepts of rationality and translation that are crucially important for a ‘social student’s’ understanding and interpretation of any kind of meaningful human behavior – entirely familiar or thoroughly alien to us. The arguments against such a concept of interpretive social science have been hopefully shown to be inconclusive. They are either answerable with certain adjustments made to the general idea (as it was the case with the empirically adequate translation proposals); are mistaken in what Winch takes to be the role and purpose of a social science (the disregard of empirical methods); or are based on assumptions that are not entirely justified (the idea of a critical social science). According to this reading, the interpretation of social phenomena cannot be an explanatory enterprise – not because of the actors’ subjectively intended meaning (as previous theories of interpretive social science emphasized), but due to the inherent nature of the phenomena themselves. Rule-governed behavior, however, is understandable and lends itself to interpretation – but its nature prevents any attempt to arrive at universal validity from ever being successful.

Notes

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the first draft of this article and offering his suggestions, and two anonymous referees who have
provided useful advice and criticism.
1. He draws heavily on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein in making that comparison.
2. Analysing the nature of folk-psychological discourse, Demeter (2009) too argues that our
statements about social and mental phenomena constitute their own objects (as opposed to our
utterances about the physical world).
3. Pleasants (2000a) also discusses the question of linguistic idealism, but arrives at a significantly
different conclusion. He holds that when Habermas views language and reality in a dualistic
framework, he himself is more ‘guilty’ of being an idealist than Winch has ever been: the meta-
physically separated ‘language’, as an idealist category, detaches itself from ‘reality’ – and
Winch was never an advocate of such a radical distinction (Pleasants, 2000a: 81).
4. There is a remarkable difference between criticisms of Habermas and that of Lerner: while
Lerner claims that Winch is bound to western rationality, Habermas – all the while arguing for
a certain kind of universality – maintains that one of the most beneficial consequences of the
Winchian approach is the possibility of a critique of instrumental rationality’s ‘colonialism’.
5. Benge is a rare substance, the possessors of which belong to the highest stratum of society – and
are able to establish an oppressive social system: members of the lower strata depend on the
elite, because everyone could be accused of being a witch, and to decide whether a charge
stands or falls, one needs to consult the poison oracle. Pleasants also points out that members
of the power elite in Zande society have never had to face these kinds of charges.
6. We shall return to certain implications of this idea later on.
7. In his answer, Pleasants (2003) points out that Kemp does not use Wittgenstein’s notion of
rule-following adequately – a mistake that could be discovered in his treatment of Winchian
concepts too.

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