

The importance of  
overcoming scientism,  
if we are to bring light to  
the darkness of this time

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It is an honour to be asked to write in response to Vinten's sober, useful and thorough book.

He does me the honour of treating my work (on the areas under discussion in his book) very respectfully and often fertily. On my work on Rawls and on care ethics and future generations (including that co-authored with Makoff), and on my joint work with Harkin (critiquing Temelini), we are in fundamental agreement. I will therefore focus my remarks here upon his fairly in-depth and partly critical treatment of my book authored along with Hutchinson and Sharrock (2008).

Specifically, I will focus on one moment in that treatment, which I found revealing; of a lack of ambition and self-confidence in the vision of 'social science' Vinten offers. It is this, from p. 45 of his book:

In contrast to Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock, I want to stand by the claim that social sciences are indeed scientific - that there is such a thing as a social science. ...One reason to claim that social studies are, or at least can be scientific is that calling something 'scientific' plays a role in legitimising that discipline. ...[T]he term 'unscientific' is used as a term of criticism and we live in a world where social sciences and humanities come under attack for being unscientific. The mere fact that social sciences are unlike natural sciences in various ways does not imply that they are illegitimate courses of study or that they are any less valuable than the natural sciences.

Vinten says "one reason" here, but in fact this turns out to be the core explicit criticism that he makes of our approach. It is an extremely weak one, and moreover counter-productive. Yes, calling something 'scientific' plays a privileged role in legitimising that discipline (or activity or result)—*in a scientistic society!* Vinten in effect gives away the store, when he allows the image of science to dominate canons of epistemic legitimation.

It is as Wittgenstein remarks:

Science: enrichment and impoverishment. The one method elbows all others aside. Compared with this they all seem paltry, preliminary stages at best (1980, p. 69).

The impoverishment which exclusive reliance on science and the wish to ape science creates is a central feature of a scientific society/worldview. It is above all what Wittgensteinians should aim at overcoming.

Yes indeed, we live in a world where ‘social sciences’ and humanities come under attack for being unscientific. The only long-term sustainable answer to such criticism is to stop bowing down before the idol of science. Hard though it is, we have to campaign for the humanities to be recognised as legitimate *in their own right*. And for the social studies to be.

So long as the ‘social sciences’ seek to be legitimated by reference to the epistemic and methodological canons of the (natural) sciences, they are bound to come up short; because of the way that any would-be social understanding overtly or covertly obliterates or at least ignores the self-standing nature of the understanding of those one is seeking to understand, insofar as it tries to ape the character of natural science (in which of course there is no analogue to the self-understanding-in-action of subjects). Such an approach will always produce inferior results, precisely insofar as it seeks to confine itself to the approach of the (natural) sciences. ‘Go forth and quantify’ is a terrible maxim, if by doing so one is fantasising hard ‘data’ where none exist, and occluding the rich, founding, qualitative understanding that subjects and collectives have of the social worlds they co-create.

In social study, one needs as it were to stand *under* those one is seeking to study, not over them. If one is actually serious about understanding.

Here is how I put the matter some time ago:

Those who feel a need to argue that their discipline is as good as the natural sciences (or at least could be, if only it had a paradigm) are ipso facto still utterly in thrall [to] the prestige of the natural sciences...

The alternative of course is for ‘the social sciences’ to regard themselves as truly *sui generis*—as not needing to look to methodological aspects of the sciences with paradigms in order to validate themselves (Read 2001, p. 99).

The passage from Vinten than I have quoted reveals a truth about his approach: that, for all the many excellences of his approach, he is still in such thrall.

Rather than seeking a paradigm that would enable them allegedly to start to function exactly on a par with actual sciences, ‘social sciences’ ought to seek out the constellations of belief and practice that are already somewhat akin to paradigms *in* the actual human behaviour upon which they are parasitic. That is the burden of the argument I make in the paper of mine from which I have just quoted.

This will never be a properly executable strategy until the ambition of producing social *science* is set aside, and until the social studies instead come to align themselves closer with human action itself, and with the humanities (especially, as Winch implicitly pointed up in the very title of his great first book, philosophy). There have of course been versions of the social studies which have done just this. As Hutchinson, Sharrock and I point out, perhaps the most brilliant is ethnomethodology, which recognises that it is the methods of people/peoples themselves (as one might put it: the *ethos* of the *ethnos*), and not of ‘social scientific’ ‘experts’, which must always be one’s starting point — and in a way, criterially, one’s ending point — if one is serious about wishing to avoid misunderstanding human action. The same point is present in the culmination of Winch’s argument, at III:6 of his 1990, “Understanding social institutions” (and in the Preface thereto), for instance when he stresses that any “reflective understanding must necessarily presuppose, if it is to count as genuine understanding at all, the participants unreflective understanding. And this in itself makes it misleading to compare it with the natural scientist’s understanding of his scientific data.” (p. 89). It is also present at the greatest moments in the salient work of Collingwood (especially his 1984), in Henry (2012), and in Merleau-Ponty (2002). And it is of course present over and over in Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

It is (of course) completely understandable that any discipline may try to characterise itself as ‘scientific’ in a desperate manoeuvre simultaneously of puffing itself up *and* of bowing and scraping (to the ideal of

‘Science!’)—in a scientific society. It is a potential way to popular acclamation and to larger funding-pots, at least for a while. But it is also selling out, and giving up on the ambition to inhabit a *culture*. Somewhere where one doesn’t have to pretend to be able to theorise or quantify, in order to be taken seriously.

At the very heart of Wittgenstein’s philosophy was his fervent wish to contribute toward creating a world that is (much) less scientific than that that we inhabit. A world which created a proper, central place for the arts and humanities, which saw the social studies as best begotten deliberately and humbly from philosophy, and in which the richness of self-understanding *already present* in human action is properly recognised as super-ordinate to the attempts of social scientists to theorise or reproduce it. I can’t help thinking that, relative to this ambition, Vinten’s book, for all its undoubted virtues, on which I have briefly commented, falls some way short, as (to be fair) most Wittgensteinians (and *soi-disant* ‘Wittgensteinians’) do most of the time. Wittgenstein is a severe critic of culture; and our civilisation demands severe such criticism. And reconstruction.

The times are incredibly dark (their greatest darkness is vested in the ironic and deadly fact that most people aren’t willing to see how dark they are (Read 2019)). We are lurching, on balance, at the present time, yet further *away* from having a culture in Wittgenstein’s sense; further towards crude techno-scientific delusions of comfort and control, even as those delusions knock our very planetary life-support-systems further out of control. And yet (and partly of course because of that spiral out of control): We might conceivably be headed for a world that is closer to what in Wittgenstein’s philosophy is dreamt. For techno-science is going to struggle to continue to rule the world, in an era in which it will increasingly come to be understood that it has basically devastated the world, by ending the Holocene. John Michael Greer has compellingly argued in a series of books that the entire edifice of techno-science, including, sadly, the good bits (such as research into genuinely renewable energy), may become tarred, if the future slouches roughly into the landscape of collapse for which on current trends we are headed.

Roy Scranton (2015) famously points out that what our time calls for, more even than it calls for green tech, is philosophy. Being willing to face personal and civilisational mortality. Being willing to look into the abyss, so that we might yet avoid it or at least descend into it with some grace and integrity.

Perhaps then the 21st century might even yet turn out to be Wittgensteinian. But if it is to do so, then we are going to need a good dose of courage, self-confidence and self-belief. We are going to have to quit the fake comforts of scientism more thoroughly than Vinten has been willing, as yet, to do.

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