

## **WITTGENSTEINIAN MORALISM, ETHNO-METHODOLOGY AND MORAL IDEOLOGY\***

### **I**

Professor Dieter Misgeld wants to show how there are important parallels between the sociological analysis of moral concepts given by the ethnomethodologists and the work of Wittgensteinian moral philosophers such as Phillips, Mounce, Beardsmore, Norman and Winch.<sup>1</sup> Ethnomethodologists, in a manner reminiscent of Winch, contend that the social sciences should proceed initially by examining and elucidating the characteristic activities of social agents as they are understood by the agents themselves. What sociologists and anthropologists should do is try to understand and make perspicuous the rationales for these activities by the agents. It is a mistake, the ethnomethodologists would have it, to believe, as did Marx, Pareto or Durkheim, that we could give a systematic theoretical reconstruction of the dynamics of society or even of a society as a whole and grasp, in some holistic fashion, how the various institutions of society function. There would be no way, if ethnomethodology is right, of grasping the contours or dynamics of capitalist society or of predicting its collapse; and there could, as well, be no Archimedian point in virtue of which we could assess the justice or injustice of this society or any society or set of social institutions as a whole.

It seems to me that the ethnomethodologists do not sustain their claims and that they are no better sustained by the Wittgensteinian moralists. A central common starting point for these approaches is the belief that the diverse and often incommensurable forms of life of different societies have a cognitive integrity of their own. There is, they believe, no attaining, by either the social scientist or the philosopher, a position of cognitive superiority from where they can assess these forms of life or their distinctive knowledge claims. There is no attaining any kind of theoretical knowledge which could improve the rationality of our daily discourse and action and which could give us grounds for assessing certain beliefs or practices as ideological—as expressions of

a confused conception of social reality. A participant's knowledge if such a conception were correct, could not, in any kind of *overall* or *wholesale* way, be confused, though certain particular beliefs could, of course, be confused or biased; what could and indeed would be confused, would be the claims of the social scientist or the philosopher to have a knowledge which transcends and indeed could correct the *knowledge by wont* of participants. Social science rests on a mistake if it thinks that it can assess as ideological the participants' characteristic understanding of their own social practices; and philosophical morality (normative ethical theory) also rests on a mistake if it thinks it can assess the moral beliefs of moral agents or their common sense morality. The only thing left for the sociologist or philosopher to do is to display perspicuously these social practices and forms of life.

When closely integrated with Wittgenstein's somewhat enigmatic views, such a view can come to seem very compelling indeed. Yet, it has been subject to extended and careful criticism.<sup>2</sup> I think the unproblematic thing to say is that such a view is very problematic indeed.<sup>3</sup>

Misgeld does indeed show that there are close parallels between the ethnomethodologists and the Swansea Wittgensteinians, but what I was expecting, and did not get, and what surely would be important to obtain, would have been some indication of how the approach of Garfinkel *et. al.* might enable us to see how this account was a little less problematic than the account of the Swansea Wittgensteinians.<sup>4</sup> But, if anything, the ethnomethodologists' account is even more vulnerable. I shall try to reveal something of its vulnerability.

## II

The ethnomethodologists follow Winch in recognizing, rightly I believe, that all social science knowledge of how society functions, presupposes a participant's understanding or at least a participant-like understanding of society. They also stress the unjustifiability—indeed the incoherence—of an overall Cartesian skepticism about understanding our actions or the diverse rationales of our beliefs. Any particular misunderstanding could only take place against the background of a massive routine understanding of our actions.

This much of such an account should, I believe, be accepted. But as Winch alone among these theorists recognized, but all the same understressed, and which most of his critics overlooked, the recognition of the necessity of this participant's starting point and the incoherence of a general onslaught on the reliability of our understanding of the vast majority of our actions, and indeed of many of our plain moral commitments, does not preclude the attainment of a more systematic general knowledge that would challenge certain deeply-embedded beliefs and might provide a critique of ideology or (partly as an alternative to common sense moral beliefs) a systematic knowledge of the workings of our institutions.<sup>5</sup> There is no understanding of an alien culture without coming to understand it as the people living in that culture do, and there is no understanding of our own culture, including our own moral beliefs, without such a participant's *knowledge by wont*. But this does not preclude what G. A. Cohen has aptly called a subversive social science that would question the rationality of at least some of our practices—say the businessman's understanding of his own economic activity.<sup>6</sup> Marx's understanding of it, partly in terms of the extraction of surplus value, might, after all, be right and the businessman's view of it mistaken; the plain man's conception of guilt could very well be corrected and, in part, replaced by Freud's account. To rework a slogan of Austin's for my own purposes: ordinary practices, as the ordinary language encapsulating them, may be the first word but they are not the last word.

A translation into the concrete might prove useful. The conception of moral requiredness and the extant moral practices of many plain people in our culture contain the following bits of moral reasoning: If, concerning something we, as a matter of fact, may or may not do, God wills it, then no matter what it is, morality requires that we try to do it. There can be no challenging of God's wisdom and Divine authority. A person who thinks he can pit his strength or his moral understanding against God's simply fails to understand the kind of reality that God is. Even where doing some particular thing, presumably willed by God, would otherwise be horrendous, the Christian, who has a genuine understanding of the form of life that Christianity is, knows that he cannot question the will of God.

Switching to the language of someone talking about this discourse, we can remark, using a familiar idiom, that this is just the way we play those language-games characteristic of Christianity. But surely to know how to use the word 'God' correctly, to know how to play Christian or Jewish language-games, is not to know that there is a God. Indeed to be able to use the term 'God' correctly does nothing at all to show, even for the person who so uses 'God', that 'God' does or even could answer a reality.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps there is no more reason to believe in God, than to believe in the Easter Bunny. That such practices exist, as are captured in religious discourse, with the distinctive moral conceptions and practical discourses they entail, does not establish that they answer to reality, that they are not subject to critique or that the whole domain of discourse, i.e. religious discourse, might not be coherently rejected as unreasonable.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps such a rather common sense critical claim could not be sustained, but the burden of proof is on the person taking that Wittgensteinian turn to show that it cannot. Misgeld neither does anything on his own to show that it cannot be sustained nor does he show that any of the ethnomethodologists have done this. That that is not their concern is not a relevant rejoinder for their account of practices is such as to make such a critique theoretically impossible, but it appears at least to be perfectly possible. The burden of proof is surely on the ethnomethodologist to show that appearances here are deceiving.

Toward the end of his essay, in mentioning the Marxian notion of *Praxis*, Misgeld remarks that it may not be theoretical knowledge that we require for a critique of institutions. What we should question, according to Misgeld, is whether a critique of institutions can be based on universal principles, with some theory providing a superior vantage point, rather than more directly and more simply on the experience of the individuals and the groups who practice the critique. Their pervasive and deeply ingrained everyday convictional beliefs may provide the grounds for the critique of institutions rather than anything theoretical. But, if practising that critique cannot provide us with a superior vantage point in accordance with which we can explain and assess those practices, it is surely, at least, questionable whether such a 'critique from within' comes to anything.

Systematic normative ethicists such as Aristotle, Mill, Sidgwick, Rawls and Nozick do not ignore the participants' starting point in gaining a systematic moral understanding and they do not think that it is simply a matter of 'instrumental knowledge': that is a knowledge of the most efficient means, to attain whatever ends one may happen to have. Rather, starting with our considered judgements, and particularly with our most deeply embedded considered judgements, we utilize what Rawls calls the method of reflective equilibrium and shuttle back and forth between our considered judgements, our knowledge of social facts, our social theories and normative ethical theorizing, making, as we go along, adjustments at various points in our overall structure of moral belief. In the exercise of this shuttling, we can correct our considered judgements—judgements expressive of a participant's understanding of society—embedded in our practices, as well as our general theories. No cluster of claims is sacrosanct and a general fallibilism reigns throughout.

Perhaps in Rawls's own distinctive use of this method too much is recovered in intuition, such that too decisive a weight is given by Rawls to our firmest considered judgements.<sup>9</sup> If that is so in his own practice, his very method of reflective equilibrium provides us with the wherewithal to correct it. But for our purposes, the crucial thing is to realize that Misgeld had done nothing to show that such an otherwise promising method, as the method of reflective equilibrium, giving proper recognition to Winch's insight concerning the primacy of a participant's understanding, is to be faulted on some grounds of fundamental incoherence, such that we should believe that Rawls and others, who use some version of this method, are trying to do something that cannot reasonably be done.<sup>10</sup> But, if this is acknowledged, we should also go on to recognize that the point of this method is to help give us an Archimedian point to assess our moral and social institutions.

It may very well be, as I believe and as many others do as well, that Rawls has not succeeded in providing us with such an Archimedian point, and it may well be, as I also believe, that our extant utilitarian accounts and perfectionists accounts fare no better.<sup>11</sup> But, showing that falls far short of showing that



they are looking for something akin to the color of heat. Perhaps such normative ethical accounts have not been done systematically enough and carefully enough with enough background information and a sophisticated enough political sociology? I am inclined to believe that if we are to gain such a vantage point, we will need—though I hardly have this clear enough in my head to articulate it yet—some kind of integrated combination of systematic normative ethics and critical social theory. Perhaps this can give us the vantage point that Misgeld, with Phillips and Winch, seems at least to think is unattainable. But this is still nebulous and may come to nothing. Yet, given the dead end that moral philosophy has once more got itself in, perhaps this is a hopeful new possibility. Be that as it may, it remains the case that neither Misgeld nor Winch, by far the most reflective and subtle of the Swansea Wittgensteinians, have succeeded in showing that such activities are either impossible or pointless. And, given what seem at least to be the profoundly relativistic and counter-intuitive implications of both ethnomethodology and this Wittgensteinian approach, the promise of such a putatively critical vantage point is very considerable indeed.<sup>12</sup>

### III

I will now make a set of remarks about what Andrew Collier has called *moral ideology*.<sup>13</sup> Ethnomethodologists see our moral life as something embedded in the social rules and practices of the culture in which the agents act and in accordance with which they find the moral requiredness of events. Such moral conceptions are essential for the organization of social environments. In proceeding in this generally realistic way, ethnomethodologists see moral judgements and morality generally as distinctive social practices designed for the "maintenance of these situations as social". They see moral judgements as something which rests on social acceptance and are generally routinely taken for granted in the society in which they are typically employed. The very point of morality, or at least the very point of the moralities extant in our social lives, Garfinkel tells us, is "the production and maintenance of stable conditions of concerted action. . . ." <sup>14</sup>

This seems, at least, to be very vulnerable to Andrew Collier's and Tony Skillen's account of how moral ideology is produced and how it functions. We live—and isn't this a fairly plain matter of fact?—in class-divided societies where a ruling class or at least a dominant elite has predominant influence in that society. For moral discourse and moral practices to function to help maintain stable conditions for concerted action is for it to function in such societies to maintain an ideology which, through mystification, supports the interests of the ruling elites in the dominating class. It enables them, conveniently, to rule not by the use of the police and similar overtly coercive institutions, but by controlling consciousness sufficiently to win our allegiance or at least acquiescence.<sup>15</sup> What Misgeld, the Swansea Wittgensteinians and the ethnomethodologists characterize as moral knowledge is, in reality moral ideology designed to support the *status quo* in a class-divided society. What is characterized as the point of morality, or at least the point of our extant moralities, is, in our society, the ordering of social relations to serve capitalist class domination. What, in reality, is an ideology, is passed off as moral knowledge or at least as a source or moral knowledge.

The charge of being held captive to an ideology is a game that two can play. *Perhaps* Collier's and Skillen's claims about moral ideology are themselves bits of ideology, distorting our understanding of the forms of life?<sup>16</sup> But that itself would seem to be a theoretical matter, or in a part a theoretical matter, requiring social investigation, including an investigation concerning the reality, extent and nature of class divisions.

Misgeld remains skeptical of attempts of a Rawlsian or Sidgwickian sort—to say nothing of a Marxian critique—which would provide a theoretical foundation for the critique of existing institutions. The only reason he gives is his claim that “critique is a question of praxis”. But surely, it is not *merely* a matter of practice, and, if there is anything to Marx at all, we should be very wary about a sharp separation of theory and practice, as if we could have sound practice without theory or sound theory without practice. An impartial—and in that sense “disinterested”—observer need not be uncommitted or without considered convictions. (This is a point powerfully and convincingly stressed by C. Wright Mills.)

## IV

To sum up: the Wittgensteinian moral philosophers and the ethnomethodologists were surely right in seeing the importance of explaining moral concepts by reference to social practices and in playing close attention to how moral terms actually function in live social contexts in which people are faced with questions of significance in their lives. Similarly, and relatedly, they were also justified in stressing the importance of giving contextual answers to many moral questions. They are mistaken, however, in believing that there can be no serious questions about the appropriatenesses, moral requiredness or the rationality of any of these moral practices or moral institutions; and they were mistaken in not seeing how these practices and institutions can, in various ways, be subject to ideological distortion. It is not sufficient to explain the point of moral reasoning simply by clearly describing the way moral language-games are played in living moral contexts. For some of them at least, in some situations, genuine questions can emerge about their objectivity and rationality. Misgeld goes wrong in following the Swansea Wittgensteinians in refusing to face these questions. Where he does not go wrong is in his recognition of how badly scientistic models, whether from sociology or meta-ethics, serve us in understanding moral reasoning and in understanding the underlying rationales of morality. Moreover, there is, implicit in what he says, the recognition of how essentially contested the concept of reasonability is and how context-dependent its criteria are, but he does not turn these matters over and take them to heart. If he were to do this, he would come to see that disturbing problems about conceptual imprisonment emerge, questions that bedeviled Wittgenstein in his *On Certainty*, and which raise for us perplexities about how to attain a genuinely non-ethnocentric Archimedian point either in normative ethics or sociology, such that we could claim, at the points where we need it in ideological dispute, a secure knowledge of good and evil or even a cluster of such warranted moral beliefs.

Swansea Wittgensteinians and others have taught us that we are sometimes perfectly justified in accepting moral truisms. But these truisms are not enough to give us an Archimedian point. Moreover, even a steadfast recognition that a society



must be understood from within its practices, from a situation of an inquirer internal to them, does not establish that the search for an Archimedian point is either incoherent or a pointless utopian pursuit.

I do not, however, want to end on a critical note. Wittgensteinian moralism and ethnomethodology force on us this recognition: we are in some sense inescapably social beings and, as social beings, we are (again in some sense) inescapably moral agents. (There can only be a few Tra-la-las.) However puzzled we may be on reflection about the logical status of our 'moral propositions', we have a *knowledge by wont* of morality. We know that it is wrong to break a promise without reason and that it is vile to torture someone just for kicks and the like. There are some bedrock considered judgements that we are more confident of than we can reasonably be of any metaethical or even normative ethical theoretical claims that would tell us that we do not know these things or are not justified in believing these things. In this way, our most firmly embedded considered judgements are our last bedrock court of appeal in morality. There is no superior vantage point of theory that might undermine them. Critique of society, of institutions, of ideologies only makes sense against that assumed background. We cannot find our feet with people to engage in such complicated critiques without such a background of assumed considered convictions. There can be no disinterested observers' position for a theory of moral critique or for a normative ethical theory of 'the rational foundations of morality', which can 'bracket' such considered convictions. They are presupposed in any claim to a more systematic moral knowledge or a 'moral science', whatever that may mean.

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## NOTES

- \*Presented to the Canadian Philosophical Association's Twenty-Second Annual Congress at the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.
1. Dieter Misgeld, "The Philosophy of Moral Practices and the Sociological Approach Toward a Study of the Moral Requiredness of Practical Actions". Presented to the Canadian Philosophical Association's Twenty-Second Annual Congress at the University of Western Ontario. D. Z. Phillips and H. O. Mounce, *Moral Practices*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), D. Z. Phillips, *Some Limits to Moral Endeavour* (Llandysmul: Gomerian Press, 1971), R. W. Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) R. W. Beardsmore, *Art and Morality* (London: The MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1971), Richard Norman, *Reasons for Actions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell's Ltd., 1971) and Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).
  2. The range of criticism has been extensive, but I have in mind principally Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Idea of a Social Science", Steven Lukes, "Some Problems About Rationality". Martin Hollis, "The Limits of Irrationality" and "Reason and Ritual" all reprinted in Bryan Wilson (editor), *Rationality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970) Kai Nielsen, "Wittgensteinian Fideism", *Philosophy* (July 1967), Ernest Gellner, *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 18-87, Ted Benton, *Philosophical Foundations of the Three Sociologies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), chapter 7 and Roy Edgley "Science, Social Science and Socialist Science", *Radical Philosophy* 15 (Autumn 1976).
  3. I have tried to show how some of these criticisms, including my own earlier one, are not as decisive as they often have been thought to be. See my "Rationality and Relativism", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 4 (December 1974), "Rationality and Universality", *The Monist*, Vol 59, No. 3 (July 1976) and my "Principles of Rationality", *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. III (October 1974). See, as well, Stanley Stein, *The Ontological Status of Social Institutions*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Calgary, 1973.

4. H. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey : Prentice-Hall, 1967) and Roy Turner (ed.), *Ethnomethodology* (Harmondsworth, England : Penguin Books, Ltd., 1974).
5. See the references in note 3.
6. G. A. Cohen, "Karl Marx and the Withering Away of Social Science", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Winter 1972).
7. D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965). See the reviews of Antony Flew, *The Philosophical Quarterly* (January 1967) and by Ronald Hepburn, *Philosophical Books*, Vol. VII (May 1966).
8. The following two articles are crucial articles here. Michael Durrant, "Is the Justification of Religious Belief a Possible Enterprise", *Religious Studies*, Vol. 9 and Robert C. Coburn, "Animadversions on a Wittgensteinian Apologetic", *Perkins Journal* (Spring 1971). See also my *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (New York : Herder and Herder, 1971), chapter 5 and my *Skepticism* (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1973), chapter 2.
9. Bernard Williams, "The Moral View of Politics", *The Listener* (June 3, 1976).
10. Peter Singer, "Sidgwick and Reflective Equilibrium", *The Monist*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (July 1974) and Kai Nielsen, "Our Considered Judgements", *Ratio*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (June 1977).
11. Steven Lukes, "Relativism : Cognitive and Moral", *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XLVIII* (1974) and Kai Nielsen, "On Philosophic Method", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XVI, No. 3 (September 1976).
12. Kai Nielsen, "Conceptual Relativism", *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, Vol. 3 (1977).
13. Andrew Collier, "Truth and Practice", *Radical Philosophy* 5 (Summer 1973), "The Production of Moral Ideology", *Radical Philosophy* 9 (Winter 1974) and "Freedom as the Efficacy of Knowledge", *Radical Philosophy* 18 (Autumn 1977).
14. H. Garfinkel, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-75 and 116-185.
15. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry* (New York : The Seaburg Press, 1974), pp. 3-15.
16. See the articles by Collier refereed to in footnote 13 and Tony Skillen, "Marxism and Morality", *Radical Philosophy* 8 (Spring 1974).

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