

THE ANALYTICAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE SOCIAL

Methodologically speaking one might distinguish two broad traditions of philosophising about the content and procedures of the social sciences. On the one hand there is the 'analytical' tradition that has descended from logical positivism via, in particular, Wittgenstein, contemporary philosophers such as Winch and McIntyre, and which is characterized by its concentration on language. On the other hand there is the tradition of what is commonly called on the European continent 'philosophical anthropology' which has descended, particularly from Kant, to become absorbed in the movement of phenomenological philosophy, the influence of which is steadily increasing as it expands beyond its European sources, and as it finds its way from the original descriptive analysis of the immediate data of consciousness (conceived of in a purely mental sense) to the analysis of wider fields, such as aesthetics and the social sciences. In the contemporary philosophical climate in this country, particularly, these two approaches are seen as not merely contrasting philosophical methods, but as mutually exclusive. This attitude reaches to the extent that each school denies or at least questions, that the other is indeed a 'philosophy'. My thesis in this paper will be to argue that, on the contrary, and at least in the social sciences these two methods have not only arrived at essentially the same conclusion vis-a-vis the 'scientific' status of social sciences, but also that the recommendation that they imply for the practical methodology of the social sciences come to exactly the same thing. To illustrate this I will take a representative of each 'school' and examine the reasons they offer for the conclusions they reach. For the Analytical School I will take Peter Winch as my example, and for Phenomenology Alfred Schutz, although I will refer to others of each persuasion where they illuminate a point.

The Phenomenology School

It is worth beginning with phenomenology, because one might assume that this is the least understood of the two traditions in this country. Phenomenology has most recently been defined as:

Rejecting all a priori constructions and system building, phenomenology proposes for aim the description of experience or "phenomena of consciousness". These "phenomena" it understands in terms of world-directed intentions or projects of the subject, incorporated in appropriate patterns of behaviour, whereby the subject endows the world with specific senses and meanings.

Essentially descriptive, its method is confined to the description and classification of the various sense-giving structures of consciousness or types of project (perceptual, cognitive, emotional, etc.) as these are displayed within the self-body-world unity.¹

There are a number of important theses here, notably (a) that the method is descriptive, (b) the notion of the lived-world or 'Lebenswelt' of the actors, and (c) the question of the ascription of meaning to aspects of the world. Each of these raises a host of problems in its wake, but we may remove some of them by explicating more fully these points.

Firstly description must not be taken in the naive sense in which one nowadays denigrates descriptive ethnography 'for its lack of theoretical rigour'. The very point of a phenomenological analysis is to expose what a posteriori allows a theoretical structure to be erected, and this can only be done by rejecting pre-suppositions and describing what is there. The status of sociology and social anthropology as sciences is itself here obviously in question, for, as Merleau-Ponty says,

if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by re-awakening the basic experience of the world of which science in the second-order expression²

a notion which Schutz endorses by noting that:

the constructs of the social sciences are, so to speak, constructs of the second degree, namely, constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene, whose behaviour the social scientist has to observe and explain in accordance with the procedural rules of the science.³

Winch, in his long critique of Mill makes in effect precisely the same point in distinguishing the social from the natural sciences.⁴ Description is thus reintroduced as an approach which is fundamental to accurate understanding of what is happening in the world.

Secondly, the notion of the 'life-world' of the actor or actors in question occupies an important place in phenomenological literature, as the life world is the viewpoint or context from which an individual sees himself in relation to other individuals, to the physical world and to social institutions. The raising of the life 'project' to the status of a phenomenon of philosophical concern will be a matter familiar to the reader of the Existentialist literature, and its significance in phenomenology lies in its being both the point of departure from which analyses of individual aspects of the actors' life-worlds are made, and the point which is returned to when the social world has been 'constituted' or explicated by phenomenological methods.

The most critical question from our point of view is undoubtedly the third: the assertion that the 'sociological' function of phenomenology is to explicate the meaningful behaviour of actors in a social context and thereby understand the specific senses with which the social world is endowed by its inhabitants. The crucial idea here is obviously that the role of the social science is to understand the meanings that people give their social behaviour and institutions, and social science itself is 'an objective context of meaning constructed out of and referring to subjective contexts of meaning.'⁵ Or in other words:

In sum, the purpose of the phenomenological approach to the study of social behaviour is to make explicit what is implicit in the social action of the members of a new community... the whole point of the investigation is to reveal what precisely it is that makes the actor's action intelligible.⁶

This is a very bold statement of the phenomenologists' conclusions, and the complexity of the arguments leading to them need only be mentioned. Schutz's 'Phenomenology of the Social World' is basically entirely directed to demonstrating the last quotation. To phenomenology we will return when considering the precise methodological postulates of this view and how they in practice would effect the social sciences.

The Analytical School

Peter Winch in his The Idea of a Social Science starts from completely different premises: his frame of reference is the philosophy of Wittgenstein and his method is that of the analytic school. From a consideration of the nature of philosophy and of the central role of epistemology, Winch moves to a consideration of how an understanding of reality is possible and concludes that:

To answer this question it is necessary to show the central role that the concept of understanding plays in the activities which are characteristic of human societies. In this way the discussion of what an understanding of reality consists in merges into the discussion of the difference the possession of such an understanding may be expected to make to the life of man; and this again involves a consideration of the general nature of a human society, an analysis that is, of the concept of a human society.⁷

The key concept here, of course, is that of understanding, and this approach to society Winch contrasts explicitly with that expounded by Durkheim. This thesis

is elevated to major philosophical importance when one sees it in the light of Wittgenstein's dictum that 'What has to be accepted, the given, is - so one could say - the forms of life':⁸ the specialized branches of philosophy e.g. of science, art, etc. have the function of 'elucidating the peculiar natures of these forms of life, called "science", "art", etc! while 'epistemology will try to elucidate what is involved in the notion of a form of life as such.'⁹

The notion of a 'form of life' has, if one examines it, a remarkable similarity to many aspects of the phenomenologist's 'life-world' itself, while the specialized phenomenologies, of art etc. explore their respective 'projects' or aspects of the general life-world of their subject.¹⁰ The purpose of the specialized philosophy of social science (and of its phenomenological counterpart) thus becomes the exploration and elucidation of meaningful behaviour, a subject to which Winch devotes some space¹¹ to examining, and to which Schutz devotes his entire time. For reasons much too lengthy to discuss here Winch also rejects the idea of the social studies and science, as conceived by Mill. (pp. 66-94),¹² on the basis of logical arguments: 'I want to show that the notion of a human society involves a scheme of concepts which is logically incompatible with the kinds of explanation offered in the natural sciences,¹² and that motive explanations are not a species of causal explanations on the model of those of the natural sciences,¹³ an argument which also applies to the investigation of regularities in the social sciences:

so to investigate the type of regularity studied in a given kind of enquiry is to examine the nature of the rule according to which judgements of identity are made in that enquiry. Such judgements are intelligible only relatively to a given mode of human behaviour governed by its own rules.¹⁴

Avoiding the trap of complete cultural relativity (and relativity between different modes of discourse, e.g. aesthetic, religious, scientific), which is clearly not proven either way, the postulate of this is clearly that the social scientists role is to penetrate the scheme of concepts held by the society he is studying, to map their inter-relationships in that particular society and to explicate the social relationships which maintain or are maintained by this scheme of concepts. This can only be done by explicating the attitude of the actors towards their own actions, as Goldstein points out in the quote given above. Goldstein's fallacy is to assume that the phenomenologist proceeds merely by describing his own reactions to the behaviour he is studying: in the social sciences of course the object of study is for the investigator to get the actors to explicate their own actions to him or in such a way that he can understand what form of behaviour is occurring.

Conclusions

Thus in many respects phenomenology and Winchian analysis are identical in the methodological postulates they generate. Both are anti-reductionist, Winch because motive explanations (and therefore social explanations) cannot be reduced to physiological explanations,¹⁵ and phenomenology because its aim is to examine the data of consciousness at the level of consciousness, so reduction to a supposedly 'more basic' category of explanations is irrelevant.

It also follows from Winch's assertion that an activity (social, religious, or whatever) can only be understood in terms of criteria internal to that activity that the relation of the investigator cannot be simply that of observer to observed: he must be a participant to some degree in the activity in question. Phenomenologically of course there is no other form of approach. This postulate also requires that one approaches an alien culture without any fixed pre-suppositions: there can be no a priori approach to the social. If we look back at the initial definition of phenomenology it will be seen that this has always been a fundamental tenet of that approach, regardless of the specific subject matter, and to arrive at the same conclusion from the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum is an achievement indeed.

Several more general points are also implied. It follows that statistical data can never themselves make sociology or anthropology: they become so only

when they are interpreted within a sociological framework. Simple counting or correlating is not doing social science until such procedures contribute to an act of understanding: they are only preliminaries, or in certain situations, conditions, for such an act. This is also presumably the general point behind Dilthey's idea that the social sciences, as a generalizing and public activity, provide not the laws of society, but rather the frameworks within which human institutions may be understood.

All these conclusions follow quite naturally, or so it seems in retrospect, from the nature of the material of the social studies which have, as it were, forced social theorists to become aware that this material is not the stuff of science in the usual sense of the term. There is always a danger of losing the world of phenomena that a methodology is set up to explore, and phenomenology and the Winchian philosophy both meet on the common ground of agreeing that this has happened with other approaches to the social sciences, but that a mutually agreeable methodology can be formulated, the postulates of which, whether one is a phenomenologist or analyst, coincide. Both the schools agree that society is an object of philosophical enquiry, and quite necessarily so if one's approach is to be valid, and this, from a slightly different point of view, adds great weight to Marcuse's contention that sociology should be a 'critical philosophy'.¹⁶ Many of the detailed contentions of the two philosophical schools are still in need of further clarification, but there is still the danger that the preoccupation with methodology will lead to lack of application of that methodology to the data. To paraphrase a saying by Marx: the philosophers have described the world of methodology; the point, however, of methodology, is to change the world.

John Clammer

References

1. I. W. Alexander, What is Phenomenology?, p. 3, Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, Vol. I, No. 1, Jan. 1970.
2. M. Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, p. viii. English edition, London 1962.
3. A. Schutz, Concept and Theory Formation in the Social Sciences, reprinted p. 385 of Readings in Existential Phenomenology, E. O. Lawrence and O'Connor, Englewood Cliffs, 1967.
4. P. Winch, The Idea of a Social Science, pp. 86-91, London, 1958.
5. G. Walsh, Introduction to A. Schutz The Phenomenology of the Social World p. xxviii, 1967.
6. L. J. Goldstein, The Phenomenological and Naturalistic Approaches to the Social in Methods, 14, 1961. Reprinted, p. 101 of Manner Theory in Anthropology, London 1968.
7. P. Winch, ibid, pp. 22-23.
8. L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 37: 11, xi, p. 226, Oxford 1953.
9. P. Winch, ibid., p. 41.
10. See for e.g. Husserl, Meditations cartesiennes, Paris 1931.
11. P. Winch, ibid, pp. 45-51.
12. Ibid., pp. 66-94. 13. op. cit., p. 83-86. 14. Ibid., pp. 83-4.
15. Ibid., p. 78.