Using Wittgenstein to Respecify Constructivism

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Abstract. Taking its orientation from Peter Winch, this article critiques from a Wittgensteinian point of view some “theoreticist” tendencies within constructivism. At the heart of constructivism is the deeply Wittgensteinian idea that the world as we know and understand it is the product of human intelligence and interests. The usefulness of this idea can be vitiated by a failure to distinguish conceptual from empirical questions. I argue that such a failure characterises two influential constructivist theories, those of Ernst von Glasersfeld and David Bloor. These are considered in turn. Both theories seek to give a general, causal account of knowledge: von Glasersfeld’s in term of cognitive subjectivity, Bloor’s in terms of social agreement. Ironically, given that both writers cite Wittgenstein as a source of theoretical inspiration, assumptions of both theories run counter to key Wittgensteinian arguments. To show that Wittgenstein’s views offer no solace to the realist, the article closes with a brief consideration of John Searle’s theory of knowledge.¹

In his book The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy (1958/1990), Peter Winch made the controversial claim that much that passes for empirical inquiry in the social sciences is concerned with issues that are not empirical ones at all. The problems addressed, he asserts, are actually conceptual in nature. As such, they are to be settled not by research but by conceptual analysis, that is, by gaining a clearer understanding of the “grammar” of our language. Inspired by the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Winch argued that such an understanding would reveal many of the central issues of social science to be non-issues, at least from the point of view of empirical science. This claim guaranteed the book’s notoriety, a notoriety that it continues to enjoy today almost half a century after its publication.

In what follows I will argue that, properly understood, Winch’s claim is correct, at least in relation to some currently influential theories in the human sciences. A Wittgensteinian approach to the questions answered by such theories reveals precisely what Winch claimed it would, namely that those questions are misconceived. Empirical solutions are proffered to puzzles that have no empirical substance, at least as they are theoretically formulated. Thus the answers provided to these puzzles are not so much wrong as incoherent. The two qualifications just indicated are important. Winch has been misunderstood by numerous commentators down the years as arguing that there are no empirical questions in the social sciences, that their inquiries can be wholly subsumed within philosophy. A more careful reading, such as is provided by
Colin Lyas (1999), reminds us that Winch’s point referred to general questions concerning the nature of the social. Social scientists, he argued, go astray when they regard these questions as ones demanding empirical answers of the kind provided by scientific investigations. It was no part of Winch’s case to claim that there is no room for empirical work in social science and that empirical questions are never matters of legitimate social scientific interest. Instead, the lesson to be taken from Winch is essentially this: Social science goes astray when it fails to remember that conceptual and empirical issues are like oil and water; they don’t mix and failure to distinguish the one from the other has the capacity to produce catastrophic results.  

Constructivism and the Theoreticist Tendency

Nowhere is this point more clearly demonstrated than in “constructivist” thinking in contemporary social science. Constructivism is arguably the most influential and wide-ranging approach in the human studies. It is a many-headed beast with limbs that are as varied as they are numerous. Over the past thirty years or so social scientists have offered constructivist explanations for an enormously diverse range of phenomena, from social problems in general (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977) to specific ones such as alcoholism (MacAndrew, 1969), child abuse (Gelles, 1975; Hacking, 1991) and female crime (Ngaire, 1987); from mental illnesses such as schizophrenia (Barrett, 1988; Gilman, 1988) to physical ones like leprosy (Waxler, 1981) and diabetes (Posner, 1977); from identities in general (Michael, 1996) to racial identities (Frankenburg, 1993), sexual identities (Kitzinger, 1987) and identities of disability (Goggin and Newell, 2003); from the mind (Coulter, 1979) to the emotions (Harre, 1986); from media news (Tuchman, 1978; Altheide, 2002) to authorship (Woodmansee and Jaszi, 1994); from technologies of missile accuracy (Mackenzie, 1989) and fluorescent lighting (Bijker, 1992) to technological systems in general (Bijker, Hughes and Pinch, 1987); from mathematical reasoning (Bloor, 1982) to, most controversially, scientific facts and findings (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Pickering, 1985).

What, if anything, do these studies have in common? I am tempted to answer “not much” yet at the heart of constructivism is an orienting idea, the deeply Wittgensteinian notion that the world as we know and understand it is a creation of human intelligence and interests, via practices in and through which that intelligence is realised and those interests defined. This view has radical consequences: it “historicizes” rationality and undermines the claim that knowledge in any field of human experience derives from methods and procedures that transcend the circumstances of their use. It thereby opens up to empirical social scientific investigation what Michael Lynch (1993) terms “epistopics.” In so doing constructivism shifts the focus of attention