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The Flow of Time and Historical Imagination: Peter Winch on ‘Ceasing to Exist’

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1. Introduction

This essay addresses the conceptual preconditions of making a meaningful truth claim about a past event. It mainly considers Peter Winch and his discussion of that question in his lecture, ‘Ceasing to Exist’ (Winch (CTE) 1987). In that text, he is not directly addressing the epistemology of historical knowledge, but the issue he discusses is certainly relevant to the theme of the present volume. My essay aims in part to present Winch’s argument and, in part, to connect it with the question how historical knowledge is possible.

To assert that something has happened is to make a knowledge claim. However, the fact that we can formulate a grammatically correct sentence that looks like a knowledge claim and might, in some situation, express one, does not in itself guarantee that the sentence *is* a meaningful knowledge claim in the situation we are currently facing. The question here is what kinds of background or surroundings we need for something to *count as* an intelligible assertion about what has happened. The main contention in the present paper is that the statement must be related, or at least relatable, to our ideas of how the world generally ‘works’, with recognisable connections with past and future developments. To put this in a different way: A meaningful statement about what has happened never gives us just a ‘snapshot’, but always implies a bigger picture beyond it. The statement must have a place in a flow of time.

R. G. Collingwood was expressing a similar idea when he pointed out that historical research necessarily involves ‘*a priori* imagination’ ([1946] 1989, 240–241). For Collingwood, the crucial aspect of imagination lies in the ability to *interpolate* and *extrapolate*. If we know that Julius Caesar was in Gaul one day and that he was in Rome later, we will conclude that he, at

¹ I have written the major part of this essay in 2022, as I was working at the Centre of Ethics, The University of Pardubice, Czech Republic. This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 101026669 (WC-Cult). Thanks to Weston Library, Oxford, for use of the Collingwood manuscripts.

some point, traversed the distance from Gaul to Rome. We *know* he did, despite the fact that we might have no documentation of the trip itself. Similarly, if we see a ship on the horizon and, a few minutes afterwards, see the ship again in a different place we are ‘obliged to imagine it as having occupied intermediate positions when we were not looking’. The reverse side is that we cannot seriously assert that Caesar was in two places at once, nor that he was first in Gaul and then in Rome *without* having travelled from the one place to the other. We can say those words, of course, but they would not add up to a meaningful description of a scenario (there is no scenario such as ‘Caesar being in two places at once’). Historical knowledge implies the assumption of *necessary* connections between states of affairs at different points in time.

The idea of historical *a priori* imagination is relevant with regard to a currently central question in the epistemology of history. Given the fact that the past is not *present*, how is it possible for us to know the past? Won’t our knowledge of the past always be *indirect*? We have direct access to documents from the past, but do we have access to the past itself? In a recent paper (forthcoming), Jonas Ahlskog describes this issue as a ‘shadow of metaphysical realism’. While metaphysical realism is probably not the majority position among philosophers of historiography, many of the main questions tend still to be formulated in its terms. The ideal of ‘direct knowledge’ spells out the typical realist contention that the privileged form of knowledge consists in a kind of immediate presence. The ideal form of it would be something like tactile contact or direct eye contact in the present moment. Important early proponents of this view include G. E. Moore (who enlisted it in support of realism) and Bertrand Russell. Knowledge, in its most basic form, would consist in the simultaneous ‘compresence’ of the epistemic subject and object (see Collingwood [1939] 2002, 25). Collingwood was strongly critical of that view. His idea of historical imagination highlighted the fact that an experience would not constitute knowledge if it is considered outside of context. Our knowledge of any event, however immediate, always incorporates the knowledge of other events, without which it would not make sense to assert it. This means that our experience of the present has no special position above our other sources of knowledge. Making sense of one’s own present or recent experiences involves *a priori* imagination just as much as making sense of the experiences of others in the past.

In his essay on ‘Ceasing to Exist’, Winch does not mention Collingwood’s concept of *a priori* historical imagination. Nevertheless, in fact he presents a detailed analysis of what that

concept would mean in a concrete case. Winch considers the imaginary case of a shed that ‘simply’ disappears without a trace. He asks what background we would need in order to understand this scenario – if ‘scenario’ indeed is the right word. His answer is that no amount of direct observation would suffice to make the assertion that things may ‘simply’ disappear so much as intelligible. Our observations, direct or otherwise, are intelligible (and thus, count as ‘observations’ rather than illusions) because they situate the phenomenon in a recognisable time flow between past and future.

This of course implies that the epistemological contrast between historical knowledge and knowledge of the present is to some extent a red herring. Both cases of knowledge involve interplay between the present, which we know, with the past, which we also know, as well as an understanding of the general relationship between them. For example, when I gave this lecture in Oulu, my knowledge that I indeed *was* in Oulu was not knowledge of the ‘present’ in the restricted sense that the doctrine of direct knowledge would presuppose. It implied the past experiences of receiving the confirmation that my paper was accepted for the conference, of boarding a train, and so on; as well as a huge amount of knowledge about geography and travelling, plus everyday skills like reading a text and reading the clock. My mere experience of standing in a lecture hall would not have given me the knowledge that I was in Oulu.

Winch asked, in his essay, what it takes for something to be a meaningful statement of what has happened. He argued that a claim about what has happened situates the event in a broadly ‘causal’ understanding of how the world works. Afterwards, his paper prompted a discussion of what kinds of truth claim his position would rule out. If he referred to a ‘causal’ understanding of the world, would he rule out things like miracles? As his subsequent reply shows, he simply meant that the meaningful description of any event must situate it in *some* intelligible flow of time. As also Collingwood puts it in an unpublished manuscript (1917, 12), a meaningful statement belongs to ‘a system of thought’, in which ‘every judgment is coloured by all the others’.

2. Peter Winch on ‘Ceasing to Exist’

Peter Winch was famous for his early book *The Idea of a Social Science* (Winch 1958). His comments on the philosophy of historiography in that book are limited to the general question of what it means to understand human agency. Another work by him with relevance to historical knowledge is his late lecture ‘Ceasing to Exist’ (Winch (CTE) 1987). To be sure,

this piece does not directly address historical knowledge. However, he engages in a debate with the classical metaphysical tradition, asking the question how our knowledge of the present relates to the past and the future.

Winch was an important developer of Wittgenstein's philosophy. That philosophical tradition has generally professed an anti-metaphysical stance. Yet, unlike some of his colleagues, Winch had a genuine interest in the metaphysical tradition. He regularly engaged in dialogue with the classics, not just criticising them. It is fair to say that while, like Kant, he rejected ontology as an independent area of study (Winch 1995, 212), he was interested in metaphysics 'as natural disposition' (Kant (CPR) 1929, B22). In 'Ceasing to Exist', he attempted to describe the conditions of meaningful descriptions of what has happened *without* subscribing to ontological commitments such as naturalism or realism. Unlike Kant, however, Winch did not aspire to a systematic description of the conditions of meaningfulness. On the contrary, he wanted to highlight their great sensitivity to context.

The essay, 'Ceasing to Exist', raises the question whether we can meaningfully imagine an object purely and simply *ceasing to exist* – just vanishing from one moment to the next. Winch connects his discussion to the magic realism of Nobel-winning author Isaac Bashevis Singer. Singer's short story, 'Stories from Behind the Stove', is set in a rural Jewish community in pre-War eastern Poland. The local shopkeeper has a shed in his back yard for garden tools and firewood. It has been part of his life for years, but one day he discovers that it is gone without a trace. Where there was a heavy log construction, there is suddenly an untouched piece of ground. Singer's story shows us the villagers reacting to this unexpected event – if 'event' is the right word.

We might think that the verification of any claim about a present state of affairs simply takes place in the present. In other words, it does not involve a *logical* contradiction to say, on the one hand, (1) 'The shed was on the meadow on Monday' and, on the other hand, (2) 'The shed was not on the meadow on Tuesday'. Moreover, it is not self-contradictory to say that (3) the shed was not dismantled, it did not burn down, etc. etc. on the night between Monday and Tuesday. These three statements do not *formally* contradict each other. Still it seems to us that the three statements cannot all be true at once.

When Winch juxtaposes the statements, ‘the shed was there on Monday’ and, ‘the shed was not there on Tuesday’, his chief idea is that there is an invisible thread running from the one to the other. We can imagine the transition only by interposing a process where the shed is dismantled, is hit by a bomb, or something else happens – there must be some kind of intervening event.

In other words, a factual statement that seemingly just concerns a single observation in the present implies, in practice, unstated assumptions about what kinds of thing sheds are and what meadows are. Generally, it implies a world as a place held together by a mesh of causal relations, including the identities of individual objects persisting in time. This is why the sentence, ‘The shed has simply vanished’ would imply a challenge to a complete world-picture. Our understanding of the world implies *necessary* relations between the past and the present. If, where we expected to find a shed, there is just a meadow with no traces of a building, the implication is that there has not been a building there at all for a long time. Indeed, already to say that something is a *meadow* is to presuppose ideas about the natural growth of plants, the approximate time it takes, and the like. Anyone would agree to these simple conceptual points unless they have some hopeless philosophical axe to grind. At the same time (even if Winch does not say so), they testify to the existence of metaphysics, in our everyday lives, as a ‘natural disposition’. We just *cannot* agree that descriptions of the present have nothing to do with descriptions of the past and of the future.

In his lecture, Winch employs the expression ‘the stream of life’. He quotes Wittgenstein on the concept of verification:

The stream of life, or the stream of the world, flows on and our propositions are so to speak verified only at instants. Our propositions are only verified by the present. So they must be so construed that they can be verified by it
(Wittgenstein (PR) 1974, V: § 48; quote Winch, (CTE) 1987, 98; Winch 1989, 22).

To verify a proposition is to dip one’s toe in the flow of the world. Any momentary observation would not have the same implications – it would in fact *not be* the same observation – if the flow was different or absent. Famously, a central idea in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language was that a sentence could only have meaning in a context. A string of

words, considered in the abstract, does not reveal us how, or whether, it constitutes an assertion about reality. Quite analogously, a single experience, considered on its own and taken out of the general flow of life, does not produce knowledge. Verification ‘at an instant’ must have a connection with some kind of possible inquiry where it would solve a question.

A heavy wooden structure does not burst like a soap bubble. *Something* must be an illusion: either the villagers’ perception that the shed does not exist now, *or* their previous memory of it existing – or both. To be sure, perception takes place in the present, but it becomes *verification* only through its connections to intelligible causal relations stretching from the past to the future. In a certain sense, *no perception is confined to the present*.

These observations are at odds with the doctrine of immediate knowledge mentioned here in the Introduction. Wittgenstein’s idea was that we *identify* our perception of the present against the background of what else we know to be relevant in the general situation. The doctrine of immediate knowledge holds, on the contrary, that we *build up* our general idea of reality out of immediate observations. These ‘pure’ cases are as it were the Lego bricks of knowledge. Reality enters the mind of the subject *directly* and provides the subject with secure grounds for further conclusions. As Michael Dummett has put it, these secure grounds, at ‘the most elementary level’, can be expressed as basic ‘observation-sentences’: ‘our original grasp of there being something that makes a statement true derives from our use of basic forms of statement as reports of observations’ (Dummett 1973, 465–467, quote Winch 1987, 41).

A central question here is in what way we can say that direct acquaintance with the present provides us with *knowledge*. In Wittgenstein’s own time, Moore and Russell argued, each in their own way, that the ultimate source of knowledge consisted in acquaintance with objects that directly confronted us (Moore [1910–11] 1957, 122–123, Russell 1905, 492, Russell 1923). Direct knowledge supposedly just ‘is’ there: it relies neither on a reasoned assessment of sources nor on weighing different theories against each other. Wittgenstein pointed out that this assimilates knowing to a kind of seeing, where a ‘*fact*’ is directly ‘taken into my consciousness’ (Wittgenstein (OC) 1969, § 90). For Wittgenstein, as for Collingwood, knowledge was, instead, the product of practices of inquiry, such as assessing sources, their implications and their reliability (see Lagerspetz 2021, 56). In this way, knowledge is not neatly separable from the ability to give (at least possible) grounds. From the point of view of

Wittgenstein and Collingwood, it was more plausible to think of direct intuition as not knowledge at all. At most, it was as a problematic, *limiting case* of knowledge.

3. *The Role of Memory*

At this juncture, Winch cites Kant's 'Second Analogy', included in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant (CPR) 1929, B232/A189–B256/A211; Winch (CTE) 1987, 100).² A memory episode is not merely a sequence of mental images. Remembering a series of events is also to relate it meaningfully to a shared, intersubjective world. This is why Kant argues that understanding the sequence of images as a sequence of *memories* implies the concept of causation. Things must hang together in an intelligible natural order in order for the sequence to represent a chain of events.

As an example, Winch describes his memories of a trip from Manhattan to London. Let us imagine, he says, that he remembers his trip in the following order. *First*, he takes *the subway* from Manhattan to central London, *from there* a flight to the JFK in New York, *and from there again* he goes by *Tube* to Earl's Court station in London (Winch (CTE) 1987, 101). It is quite possible that the mental images come to his mind in exactly this order. Yet, in the light of geographical facts, he would immediately correct his memories to agree with facts. '[T]he impression', he says, 'however overwhelmingly strong, that *this* is what happened by no means has final authority'; otherwise, we would not be able to 'distinguish such a narration from a fantasy' (Winch (CTE) 1987, 102).

This of course calls for some clarification. Admittedly, it is possible to produce a film or a cartoon showing Winch travelling in exactly this order. Similarly, the cartoon might show a building and, in the next frame, show the same site without the building. In that sense, we can picture the disappearance of a shed to ourselves (i.e., we can imagine two distinct situations and include them in a sequence of pictures). However, Winch argues that the succession of two images does not represent an *event* of any kind.

Similarly, we can string together a sentence and, in that limited sense, we can 'say', for instance, 'The shed simply vanished'. Winch is asking whether we could use the sentence to

² See especially B234: 'In other words, the *objective relation* of appearances that follow upon one another [in my perception of a temporal sequence] is not to be determined through mere perception' ... 'Experience itself' ... 'is thus possible only in so far as we subject the succession of appearances, and therefore all alteration, to the law of causality'. See also Winch 1989, 52.

represent *an assertion*. In other words, do we understand what it would mean for someone seriously to state that ‘this’ (whatever it is) has happened? As Winch puts it elsewhere,

Of course, I can perfectly well arbitrarily utter certain words which, uttered in other circumstances, would constitute an assertion. But to the same extent as you thought I *had* uttered them arbitrarily, you would be disinclined to think that I *had* made any assertion (Winch 1987, 40).

In ‘Ceasing to Exist’, Winch argues that the sentence, ‘The shed vanished’, does not represent an event, but merely one’s bafflement in the face of what one cannot make sense of. He describes it like this:

If we look again, more closely, at Singer’s story we shall see that we are really offered no more than the title ‘the shed vanished’ to the story Zalman [the narrator] is depicted as spinning (Winch (CTE) 1987, 91).

The owner, coming to inspect the site, does not start by concluding, ‘the shed has vanished’ but instead, ‘I must have lost my mind’ (Winch (CTE) 1987, 92). All that remains is the observation, ‘We don’t understand what has happened’. The words, ‘It has vanished’, are a way to voice this utter bewilderment.

4. Miracles and Unheard-of Occurrences

‘Ceasing to Exist’ gave rise to a debate that engaged, in particular, colleagues in the Wittgenstein tradition where Winch was mainly working. The debate included a clarifying response by Winch (Holland 1989; Holland 1990; Malcolm 1990; Marshall 1990; Mounce 1988; Mounce, unpublished; Palmer 1995; Phillips 1993; Phillips 1993b; Winch 1995). The debate focused on the philosophy of religion, especially on the concept of a miracle. This had not been at the centre of the original lecture, even though Winch did comment on it, making references to R. F. Holland’s (1980) essay on ‘The Miraculous’ (Winch (CTE) 1987, 94, 95, 96).

At least according to one, quite usual definition, a miracle would be an unexplained occurrence in defiance of the laws of nature. – In other words, what *did* Winch say: Did he

say that a miracle not only eludes any natural explanation, but that a miracle cannot even be coherently described or even imagined?

Winch (1995) clarified his position in his contribution to the debate. His idea was that the intelligible description of any event would place that event in some relation to a general world-view. For instance, we have an idea of what kinds of structures sheds are and what one can expect to happen to them. A shed that radically departs from expectations is not a shed but something else. It might be an illusion of some kind. We adjust all our statements about reality to whatever *can* constitute part of ‘the stream of life’ or ‘the stream of the world’ as we understand it.

In a modern industrial society, this would, at least often and generally, mean that we rule out supernatural occurrences: our world must conform to physical ‘laws of nature’ (even if this kind of naturalism is probably less pervasive in our lives than we tend to think it is). In the village of Singer’s short story, the belief in demons was widespread, and religion had an influence on thinking. In a religious community, the concept of a miracle is a legitimate one. A miracle is, however, not the same as an unexplained or unintelligible occurrence, for it does have an explanation. *God* performs the miracle, perhaps through a representative. Religious traditions presuppose that events reported as miracles have some religious significance. Singer’s villagers did not think that they had witnessed a miracle because, as they saw it, God would not conceivably take an interest in a random object like a shed.

Useful applications of the concept of a miracle also presuppose a culture where there is room for informed discussion of would-be miracles. The impossibility, for many of us inhabiting industrial societies, of accepting *any* account of a miracle testifies to our reluctance to attribute *anything* – miracle or no miracle – to Divine agency.

5. Correspondence or Coherence?

The ensuing debate on the philosophy of religion did not really touch the most important question Winch was raising. He did not propose a theory of what kinds of occurrence are *possible*, but rather he was asking what background we need if we are to claim that something has happened. Putting this in more general terms: What is involved in the informed statement that something is the case?

One answer might look correct in its rough outlines: Claims about reality aim to ‘correspond with’ reality. There must be *something* in reality with which we should compare the claims we make. When we think, we think of an object. Our thought is correct if it corresponds with the object. For Winch, that answer was correct *in a sense* and indeed a truism: ‘we cannot simply assert anything at will’ (Winch 1987, 40). We might think this point implies support of the *correspondence theory* of truth. However, Winch points out (also in his other work) that the idea of correspondence tends to paper over important complications:

It is one thing for a man to think that something is so and quite another thing for what he thinks to *be* so. This simple truism is fundamental to what we understand thought to be; for a thought is a thought about something – it has an object – and the kind of relation it has to its object involves the possibility of *confronting* it with its object. [...] However, it is considerably easier to recognize this as a truism than it is to understand exactly how it is to be applied in different areas of human thinking. The attempt to win clarity about such issues is *philosophy* (Winch 1987, 194, italics added).

The correspondence theory of truth at best lays out a research question – the question what it *means*, in various cases, for our ideas to make contact with reality. The theory itself, in this general form, does not provide the answer. At the same time, the theory muddies the waters by introducing the blanket idea of correspondence, as if one could reduce complex relations between thinking and reality to just *one* kind of relation. To ‘compare thinking with reality’ amounts to very different things in different situations. We do not make progress without at first asking what ‘comparison’ would mean in the case we are facing.

Note, however, that the argument in ‘Ceasing to Exist’ hits equally at *coherence* theories of truth. In a narrow sense, ‘The shed was on the meadow on Monday’ is coherent with, ‘The shed was not on the meadow on Tuesday’ as well as with, ‘Nothing happened to the shed between Monday and Tuesday’. There is no *formal* contradiction between the three sentences. However, there *is* a kind of contradiction at play, because we understand that we cannot coherently assert the three statements at once. But once more, coherence theory just states the problem but does not give the answer. The question here would be why we think of the three sentences as mutually incoherent despite the fact that there is no formal contradiction at play.

The crucial thing is that we presuppose the background of something like an ordered universe. Neither correspondence nor coherence gives us *that*.

In ‘Ceasing to Exist’, with these remarks on the relation between experience and the flow of time, Winch in fact continued a discussion he already started in his first book, *The Idea of a Social Science*. In that book, he described the main task of philosophy as that of clarifying ‘man’s [sic] relation to reality’, in other words, ‘the *force of the concept* of reality’ (Winch 1958, 9). He pointed out already in that book that science, religion, art etc. all aim at clarifying our relation to reality, without that implying that they all are branches of a single enterprise. The philosophically interesting task is to discern the various forms that ‘making contact with reality’ may take. In ‘Ceasing to Exist’, he suggested that even the activity that we usually take to be unproblematic – direct observation – holds no privileged position. The significance of direct observation is dependent on how it connects with our various ways of making sense of the world.

5. Conclusion

The relevance of this discussion to the epistemology of history lies in the light it sheds on the idea of experiencing the present. Due to the influence of metaphysical realism, many philosophers of history feel the need to justify historical knowledge in realist terms. The guiding assumption is that the superior form of knowledge is one where the object of knowledge is ‘available’ directly in front of us in the here and now. Through this privileging of the present, a kind of sceptical challenge is introduced.

From that point of view, it would appear that historical knowledge is *direct* only in its relation to records currently in existence: artefacts, written sources, etc. – and apparently only at the very moment we are studying them. It would not be so in relation to the events themselves. But then, as Ahlskog puts it in a critical discussion, ‘how can this present experience ever get in touch with the past that it is supposed to uncover?’ (Ahlskog 2021, 103). Scholarship would give us an interpretation and a narrative, but, supposedly, ‘context kills authenticity’ (Ankersmit 2005, 172, 180; quote Ahlskog 2021, 101). – One alternative, recently offered by *presence theory*, would be that historians should try to recover a ‘presence of the past’. This would be a direct relationship with the past ‘predicated on our unmediated access to actual things that we can feel and touch and that bring us into contact with the past’. Presence theory

is framed as ‘an attempt to reconnect “meaning” with something “real”’ (Kleinberg 2013, 11; quote Ahlskog 2021, 100). Again, the implication is that only what is present is real.

These theories are based on the insistence that our knowledge of the past is inherently problematic while our knowledge of the present is not. However, the problem is shown in a different light once we see that our knowledge of the present has pretty much the same complexities as our knowledge of the past. The sceptical question was whether any knowledge can exist, other than knowledge of the here and now. The implicit answer that we can get from Winch is that there *is* no such thing as knowledge of the here and now; that is, not in the free-floating sense that the question would presuppose. Our knowledge ‘of the here and now’ always presupposes some knowledge of the past and the future, and an idea of their connections. There are important parallels between Winch and Collingwood on this issue, especially – as I have noted – considering Collingwood’s critique of realist theory of knowledge and his concept of historical imagination.

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