Clarity and Confusion in Social Theory
by Leonidas Tsilipakos

Robert Vinten

In the preface to his recent collection of essays, *Wittgenstein: Comparisons & Context*, the eminent Wittgenstein scholar Peter Hacker lamented the state of Wittgenstein scholarship and of philosophy more generally. Work from Wittgenstein scholars has been too taken up with futile debates over the publications of the New Wittgensteinians and philosophers in the wider philosophical world have been led astray by scientism and cognitive science. This has led to a situation where, "Few attempt to apply his [Wittgenstein's] methods to new domains in philosophy or in conceptual criticism of the natural sciences, the sciences of the mind and brain, and the social sciences…" (Hacker, 2013: xvii-xviii). Hacker himself, together with the neuro-scientist Max Bennett, has recently applied Wittgensteinian methods to claims made by neuroscientists (Bennett and Hacker 2003, 2009, 2012) and now Leonidas Tsilipakos

has done something similar for social theory.

Tsilipakos is not the first to have applied Wittgensteinian methods to social theory. Perhaps most famously Peter Winch published *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958) a few years after Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) appeared and many other philosophers have taken inspiration from Wittgenstein in their work on social theory since that time.[1] Nonetheless, Tsilipakos's book is certainly a fresh take on the relevance of Wittgensteinian methods to the social sciences and the 'theoretical' work that he examines in the book mostly dates from after the turn of the millennium. It is a book that many of those currently working

---

[1] See, for example, Nigel Pleasants (1999), Kitching and Pleasants (2002), Kitching (2003), Heyes (2003), Hutchinson, Read, and Sharrock (2008) and Moi (2015).

in the social sciences would greatly benefit from reading.

The first chapter of the book is in the form of a dialogue between two sociologists. It gives a lucid account of what Tsilipakos calls 'Ordinary Language Philosophy' (OLP), which he defines in such a way that it incorporates the philosophical work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, and Gilbert Ryle (as well as philosophers who built on their work), and then defends OLP against common objections. One of the sociologists in the dialogue is a convinced adherent of OLP (representing Tsilipakos's take on things) while the other is not entirely clear about what OLP involves and has doubts about its usefulness. Tsilipakos acknowledges that there are significant differences between Austin, Ryle, and Wittgenstein, but notes that there is also a common thread of dissolving philosophical puzzlement through careful attention to the ordinary use of words (2015, p. 14) and he suggests that this method of dissolving problems can bear fruit in social theory.

The next two chapters are taken up with a discussion of the relationships between scientific explanation, social scientific explanation, and logic. Chapter 2 argues against Hempel's suggestion that explicating the form of explanations is the key to successful scientific or social scientific explanation. Convincing criticisms of Hempel's deductive-nomological model have already been provided by people like Wesley Salmon, who has noted that Hempel's model allows for cases where the purported explanans are not relevant to the explanandum in question (2006 [1989], 46-50). However, Tsilipakos argues that critics of Hempel have often "…not put the question marks deep enough down" (Wittgenstein, 1977, p. 62). The whole project of trying to account for explanation in formal terms should be abandoned given that explanations have many different forms and also given that the success of explanation depends on context. The form of a successful explanation in one context might not carry over to another one (Tsilipakos, 2015, pp. 49-50). What will succeed in providing another person with understanding is not something that can be determined in formal terms in advance.

Tsilipakos does not think that a new philosophical theory in the manner of Hempel is what is needed. That is likely to only produce more confusion. What is needed instead is elucidation in the manner of Wittgenstein. We need to provide 'synoptic representations' of the use of the relevant expressions, targeted at the confusions we want to overcome. We should look at relationships between what people say and the context they say it in, as well as at relationships between the things people say, and relationships between concepts (Tsilipakos, 2015, p. 66).

Having outlined the methodologies of OLP and contrasted them with Hempel's methodology Tsilipakos then moves on to apply OLP

to problems in recent social theory in the second half of the book. Roy Bhaskar's 'Critical Realism' comes in for criticism but so do his opponents who are engaged in similar projects of constructing social ontologies. Just as it was a mistake for Hempel's opponents to continue to attempt formal accounts of successful explanation so it is a mistake of Bhaskar's opponents to go on trying to answer the questions 'what is real?' and 'are social structures real?' using some kind of alternative criterion to Bhaskar's causal criterion. J. L. Austin's observations about the concept 'real' (1962, pp. 62-77) are brought in to cast doubt on the idea that we might be able to characterise objects as real simpliciter (Tsilipakos, 2015, p. 74). As Austin famously observed, something might be a real decoy but not a real duck.

In the final, sixth, chapter of the book Tsilipakos tackles the 'problem of structure and agency' (i.e. the problem of how the two are related), focusing particularly on the work of David Elder-Vass. As in the previous chapters Tsilipakos argues that the problem is not so much with the particular proposed solution in the work of Elder-Vass but with deeper assumptions embedded in the whole project of trying to find a solution to the problem (2015, p. 118). A new ontological or theoretical scheme cannot take the place of Elder-Vass's scheme because the idea of such a scheme is conceptually confused. For example, Tsilipakos argues that according priority to the theoretical scheme of, in Elder-Vass's case,

wholes acting through their parts, leads to conceptual confusion when the scheme is applied to cases such as when a person presses a key on a keyboard. According to Elder-Vass, "The finger does so very directly and the person does so through the finger" (Elder-Vass, 2010, pp. 27-8). However, people press keys *with* their fingers, not *through* them (Tsilipakos, 2015, p. 134). What we need most of all is clarity about the concepts which we already apply without much problem in our ordinary engagement with organisations and the agents that work for or represent them.

Conceptual confusion in social science is not benign. Time is wasted in producing 'theoretical schemes' that do not aid understanding and the concerns of social scientists are reoriented through being baffled by nonsense. For those reasons Tsilipakos's book is very welcome!

Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal
robertvinten @ gmail.com

References

Austin, J. L. 1962. *Sense and Sensibilia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bennett, M. R. & Hacker P. M. S. 2003. *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Bennett, M. R. & Hacker P. M. S. 2009. *Neuroscience & Philosophy: Brain, Mind & Language*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Bennett, M. R. & Hacker P. M. S. 2013. *History of Cognitive Neuroscience*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Elder-Vass, D., 2010. *The Causal Powers of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hacker, P. M. S. 2013. *Wittgenstein: Comparisons & Context*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heyes, C. J. (ed.) 2003. *The Grammar of Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Hutchinson, P., Read, R. and Sharrock, W., 2008. *There Is No Such Thing As A Social Science: In Defence of Peter Winch*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Kitching, G. 2003. *Wittgenstein and Society: Essays in Conceptual Puzzlement*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Kitching, G. and Pleasants, N. 2002. *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, morality and politics*, London: Routledge.

Moi, T. 2015. "Thinking Through Examples:What Ordinary Language Philosophy Can Do For Feminist Theory", *New Literary History*, Vol. 46, pp. 191-216.

Pleasants, N. *Wittgenstein and the idea of a critical social theory*, London: Routledge, 1999

Ryle, G. 2000 [1949]. *The Concept of Mind*, London: Penguin Books.

Tsilipakos, L. 2015. *Clarity and Confusion in Social Theory: Taking Concepts Seriously*. Farnham : Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Wittgenstein, L. 1977. *Culture and Value* (edited by G. H. Von Wright, trans. Peter Winch), Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. 2007. *Philosophical Investigations* (Revised 4th edition by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte), Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.