Adventures in Human Conduct

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At first glance, the opening essay of Michael Oakeshott's *On Human Conduct* (OHC), appears to be a somewhat arid, analytic, and technical work. As described by Oakeshott himself, it is concerned with the "theoretical understanding and human conduct in general" (OHC vii). However, the investigation Oakeshott undertakes not only sheds light on this particular philosophical concern, but also reveals many of Oakeshott's fundamental assumptions and dispositions that influenced nearly everything he wrote. Undeniably, a central concern of the essay is to distinguish practices from processes and to insist that human conduct is the former. Yet, in laying out this distinction we get a glimpse into a host of other, related presuppositions that necessarily follow. We are introduced to Oakeshott's nuanced picture of freedom—one that both avoids extreme visions of freedom while at the same time provides a field for action that provides the resources and the scope to make life a grand adventure.

One of the central points of the essay is to distinction between a practice and a process and to carve out space for the intelligent action of human beings. Much like Aristotle's distinction between sensitive imagination and deliberative imagination, Oakeshott wants to emphasize that one part of our mental activity is reflexive, autonomic, or involuntary, while another part of our mental activity is reflective and intelligent. He uses the example of a blink compared with a wink. A blink, like one's heartbeat, is largely involuntary; a part of what Aristotle called the nutritive part of the soul or psyche that deals with maintaining and reproducing life itself at its biological level (1981, 413a). The wink is a chosen action.

That the action was chosen and intended has powerful implications. First, it presumes, or "postulates" as Oakeshott likes to put it, a "reflective consciousness": "an agent who inhabits a world of intelligible *pragmata*, who is composed entirely of understandings, and who is what he understands (or misunderstands) himself to be" (OHC 36). Oakeshott had said in his first major work, EM, the world is a world of ideas. "We begin, then, with a world of ideas; the given is neither a collection, nor a series of ideas, but a complex, significant whole. Behind this there is nothing at all." (EM 29) In the case of a blink, one need not reflect or be cognizant of the blink. But a wink has meaning, perhaps multiple meanings—meanings which need to be understood. And, the understanding falls to both the one winking and the agent who is the object of the wink. These agents necessarily need to reflect on the meaning of this action in order to make sense of and respond to it, and the reflection takes place within a system of connected meaning.

Oakeshott identifies this reflective capacity as constituting our very freedom. Oakeshott does not deny that we are biological creatures or that some of our behavior and actions are unreflective, if not unconscious, nor is he saying that we should never imagine, or that we are incapable of imagining, the actions of human beings as deriving from purely physical or mechanical causes. Rather, as he puts it, human conduct postulates a free agent. And, "[h]e is 'free' not because his situation is alterable by an act of unconstrained 'will' but because it is an understood situation and because doing is an intelligent engagement" (OHC 37).

Those familiar with Oakeshott's broader work will recognize that Oakeshott is supplying what he identified as the missing theory of volition in Hobbes' thinking. Instead of fear and pain (the impulses for protection and self-preservation, especially in the case of a violent death), Oakeshott is working through the particulars of how we go about making choices and exercising our agency. Describing it the way he does walks a line between the naturalism of Hobbes and the picture of a rational actor faced with unimpeded choice.

We are free agents, but not infinitely free. The specter of the unincumbered individual in a condition of perfect freedom presented in contract theory arises on one side, and the "embedded individual", or in the extreme the fated individual of philosophical determinism, appears on the other. Oakeshott seeks to avoid both of these abstract characters in order to describe more faithfully the situation in which human beings actually find themselves: that is, neither a state of perfect freedom nor a fatalistic condition. Instead, we often find ourselves in choice situations where our options are constrained, either physically or (perhaps more importantly) epistemologically by our own understandings. Critically we produce our responses through reflection and understanding, instead of the responses merely being generated by physiological or mechanistic processes.

Oakeshott continually strives to be concrete and to avoid arguing at some high conceptual level torn from the experience folks actually have. Oakeshott often makes what seem rather startling claims to bring us back to earth, and reinforce his argument. On moral freedom or choice he says, for example:

> Indeed, strictly speaking, there is no such experience as 'moral choice'. What is chosen in conduct is a substantive action or utterance in which an agent embarks upon the adventure of seeking an imagined and wished-for satisfaction in the response of another. And his 'moral autonomy' lies, first, in his character as an agent (that is, in his action or utterance being a response to an understood want and not the consequence of an organic impulse), and secondly, in his action or utterance as self-disclosure and self-enactment in a contingent subscription of his own to conditions of a practice (which cannot tell him what to do or to say) recognized in terms of its authority. Human conduct is not first having unconditional wants (individual or communal) and then allowing prudential reason and moral sensibility to indicate or to determine the choice of the actions in which their satisfaction is sought; it is wanting intelligently (that is, in recognition of prudential and moral considerations) and doing this successfully or not so successfully (OHC 79-80).

This, though Oakeshott doesn't put it quite this way, would seem to be a distinctive characteristic of human beings. Unlike other creatures, human beings are marked by their capacity for *logos* (not to gratuitously repair to Aristotle again): the capacity, not always actualized, to respond intelligently; to provide an account, in speech, of the reasoning, or the meaning, of one's actions. Further, Oakeshott says, this "inherent 'freedom' of a human being lies not only in his ability to make statements expressing his understanding of himself, but also in the world's being for him what the understands it to be, and in his being what he understands himself to be. A human being is 'free', not because he has 'free will', but because he is *in* himself what he is *for* himself" (1989, p. 19). Intelligence is exhibited, and meaning is inextricably woven into, the various moments of an act—in the diagnosis of one's situation; in the reflection on one's imagined responses; and in the chosen response, as well as in the consciousness that the meanings of these moments are intended to be conveyed to others.

We may misidentify a wink for a blink, but if we want to explain or convey to others the meaning of a wink—an intelligent, reflective response to one's situation—in terms of some biological mechanism, we are, for Oakeshott, making a category error. "A belief is what it *means* to the believer", Oakeshott says (OHC 23, emphasis added). That is to say, intelligent, reflective action has meaning. And that meaning is partly found in the intentions of the actor. It is a meaning the actor usually hopes others will understand and respond to appropriately.

The meaning then, is not merely one's own. The meaning is shared as part of a 'world'. This world, and one's place in it, is what *one* understands it to be. But what one *understands* it to be is the produce of having learned to understand it in that way. There is no solid wall of epistemic isolation, no point of pure solipsism. Instead, as Oakeshott puts it, these surely are *my* thoughts but, significantly, these are my *thoughts* (OHC 51). If one's thoughts were purely one's own, they would be incommunicable, indeed ineffable. Oakeshott defines an "agent" (as opposed to a merely reflexive "organism") as "one recognized to have an understanding of himself in terms of his wants and his powers and an understanding of the components of the world he inhabits; and action is recognized as an illustrative exhibition of this understanding" (OHC 32). One may, of course, sing and dance in the rain without anyone there to observe the expression, without this diminishing the self-understanding of an agent. Often, of course, our actions are designed to elicit a response from others. In order for this to happen, others need to understand one's actions. Here the situation gets rather complex.

Oakeshott distinguishes two parts of an action, calling one part self-disclosure and the other self-enactment. Self-disclosure is the action chosen as "responses to contingent situations conducive to the achievement of imagined outcomes" (OHC 70). This part of an action is about the intended outcome or consequences. One may try (as consequentialist ethicists attempt to do) to assess the correctness or justness of a particular action based solely on its consequences. Though the consequences might be assessed by using any number of metrics, the concern here is *dike* or justice: the good, useful, beneficial, virtuous outcome.

Self-enactment is the aspect of an action that has to do with the agent's motive: the agent's "sentiment or sentiments in which it [the action] is chosen and performed" (OHC 72). This aspect too may be evaluated in terms of its moral quality (about this aspect more will be said).

Self-disclosure, it should be noted, is particularly fraught with contingency and unpredictability. Every facet of one's action could be otherwise. And, as we have seen, each facet has meaning; meaning that needs to be conveyed if the action is intended to elicit responses from others. On any given occasion, one might diagnose a situation correctly or incorrectly, or partly correctly. One could choose among a variety of possible intentions (both as to outcome and sentiment of the performer). There is the choice among a variety of possible actions and associated host of possibilities for the manner in which the chosen action is performed—both are critical in order to convey one's meaning and to elicit the intended response from others.

Others, naturally, are doing the same in response: sizing up the situation and responding in a manner to convey their meaning. So much can go awry. Even under tightly drawn parameters, where actors utilize clear and agreed upon meanings (say in a legal contract), there are still so many opportunities for misunderstanding and unexpected responses.

What should be clear, however, is that there is a necessary connection between the two agents; shared meaning is not only possible but a requisite component, otherwise the intended response would not, could not, be expected. Agents necessarily are related, and "agents are related to one another in terms of understandings" (OHC 53). This shared world of meaning has further implications.

Meaning has to be learned. But, what does an agent learn and how does an agent learn? How does one characterize this learning and the relationship of meaning this entails? In his early writings, Oakeshott characterized this learning as being initiated into an inheritance or a tradition of behavior: The "intentional initiation of a pupil into the world of human achievement, or some part of it"; an inheritance not of things or artifacts but "human activities, aspirations, sentiments, images, opinions, beliefs, modes of understanding, customs and practices; in short, states of mind which may be entered into only in a procedure of learning"; knowledge of "a tradition of behavior" (1989, pp. 46, 66, 150). In his later writings (as here in OHC), he favored calling what is learned a *practice* and speaks of *subscribing* to practices.

Practices are shared patterns of action designed to convey meaning. They are sets "of considerations, manners, uses, observances, customs, standards, canons, maxims, principle[s?], rules, and offices specifying useful procedures or denoting obligations or duties which relate to human actions and utterances" (OHC 55). Practices are "adverbial qualification of choices and performances" (Ibid.). That is, practices are

concerned with how an action is performed rather than specifying a particular action. Practices don't tell you what to do, but how to do it (courteously, or promptly, or succinctly).

Two important types of practices are prudential ones and moral ones. Prudential practices are considerations that are subscribed to in order to be successful in our actions. For example, one might be courteous to another driver on a motorway in order that you both get to your destination safely and efficiently. One would be subscribing to a prudential practice here. Moral practices are concerned with the quality of an act itself, with its rightness or goodness or excellence; and not with the success of an act with achieving some substantive outcome. Oakeshott thus calls moral practice the "*ars artium*" of conduct, "the practice of agency without further specification" (OHC 60). One might be courteous because it is simply the right thing to do, or because one wishes to be a courteous sort of person. But to act in this way for these reasons, are not subscribing to a prudential practice. Oakeshott emphasizes, a moral practice is not "a prudential art concerned with success of the enterprises of agents; it is not instrumental to the achievement of any substantive purpose or to the satisfaction of any substantive want" (Ibid.). This connects moral practices to the self-enactment component of action in focusing on the non-instrumental, non-consequentialist aspects of human conduct.

A language is a practice, but practices are also like languages; so much so, that this became a favorite metaphor Oakeshott used to explain himself. Notably, a language does not determine what one says, only how one might say something in order to effectively convey one's meaning. Languages need to be learned in order to use them. The more skillful one is, the better one is able both to express and to convey one's meanings. This is all the more critical, not only because of the contingency of human actions and responses, but because of the historical contingency of our practices. Our prudential and moral practices are, like languages, historical achievements, with all the dynamism that this entails. They are not fixed; they don't rest on a foundation; they change and evolve; and they are transmitted from generation to generation through education.

It is practices that bind people together into a community. Practices that reflect, as we would say today, our shared "values", or the shared conception of the world and our place in it. Some communities favor the prudential and the community's morality reflects the weight placed on this.

But the binding and the unity is not perfect on the individual transactional level, as we have seen. A host of things could go wrong on the part of the acting agent and on the part of the responding one or ones. In a memorable phrase, Oakeshott calls this the "deadliness of doing" (OHC 74). Despite our best intentions and our thoughtful and prudential planning, events often unravel as if by the fickle fingers of *fortuna*.

This contingent element in human life cannot be remedied; there is no cure or release. In one formulation Oakeshott puts it this way:

> Every action is a fugitive transaction between moral agents, its outcome not merely uncertain but fragile and soon dissipated. Every satisfaction is casual and late or soon a casualty. Where conduct is the choice and the pursuit of substantive conditions of things every achievement is evanescent, and (as Augustine says) he who thinks otherwise 'understands neither what he seeks nor what he is who seeks it'. And no projected future can be any different from the present in this respect (OHC 84).

In the face of this somber reality, what is one to do? Oakeshott's response is not to despair, or to deny the value of evanescent achievements by a withdraw into some form of asceticism. Rather, he puts the spotlight on those less ephemeral aspects of conduct and life. He focuses on character and self-enactment: in cultivating a moral language of self-enactment. Moral languages that are "nodal densities of sentiment to which an agent who is familiar with the language and who acknowledges its authority recognizes himself to be incited to subscribe. Learning to speak a language of self-enactment is learning how to subscribe to its intimations of 'virtue'" (OHC 75). In moral conduct as such, there is "an echo of an imperishable

achievement": in staying true, in valor, in loyalty, fortitude, etc. (OHC 84). But, alas, this too is "episodic and an inclusive engagement". Why? Because, the "enacted self is itself a fugitive; not a generic unity but a dramatic identity without benefit of a model of self-perfection" (Ibid.).

Oakeshott also focuses on activities that are ends in themselves, education, philosophy, art (poetic activities), conversation, and friendship. He values skillful displays that express judgment and learning (in addition to moral action he admires connoisseurship of many kinds), and the repose of religion. Each of these and others are also contingent, but in them Oakeshott believes, "the sharpness of death and the deadliness of doing [is] overcome, and the transitory sweetness of a mortal affection, the tumult of a grief and the passing beauty of a May morning recognized neither as merely evanescent adventures nor as emblems of better thinks to come, but as *adventures*, themselves encounters with eternity" (OHC 85).

Oakeshott sees life itself as a grand adventure. He is fond of metaphors of adventure, most prominently nautical ones. There the oft-quoted passage in his essay "Political Education" about political action taking place on a boundless and bottomless sea. More generally in human conduct Oakeshott says, "it may be said that in 'doing' an agent casts off a mooring. He may be seeking a satisfaction, but what he *chooses* is an action; that is, the adventure of aiming at an imagined satisfaction. Hence the saying of Democritus that courage is the beginning of action: courage to put out to sea" (OHC 40).

In the face of the indeterminacies of life, he chooses not to recoil but to embrace the uncertainty. Hence, he is fond of gambling imagery. "Conversation," he says, "is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis; it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure. It is with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning or losing, but in wagering" (1991, p. 490). In human conduct more generally, "acting is making a bargain with an imperfectly imagined future" (OHC 44).

The open and indeterminate nature of life and conduct opens up the choice of approaching life as an adventure—an adventure, hopefully punctuated by encounters with eternity.

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