Winch on Following a Rule: A Wittgensteinian Critique of Oakeshott

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Introduction

This paper will address Peter Winch's critique of Michael Oakeshott's view of human conduct. I argue that, as is sometimes the case with Oakeshott, what seems, on the surface, to be a disagreement with another, somewhat compatible thinker about a matter of detail in some social theory in fact turns out to point to a deeper philosophical divide. In particular, I contend, Winch, as typical of those who only picked up on Oakeshott's work in the 1940s and 1950s, when he became known for his critique of rationalism, failed to understand the metaphysics underlying that critique.

Of further interest for our purposes is that Winch "takes it back" somewhat in his 'Preface to the Second Edition,' although not explicitly: I will argue that, if read in light of the considerations in this paper, the modifications Winch suggests to his thesis largely remove his objections to Oakeshott, and do so by re-conceptualizing the notion of the relationship of rules to human action along the lines I suggest here. But to begin, lets look at the position of ontology in idealist philosophy versus the position of epistemology in analytical philosophy.

Ontology Versus Epistemology

Winch, of course, is a Wittgensteinian, and bases his arguments in *The Idea of a Social Science* on Wittgenstein's idea of forms of life. That idea bears an obvious resemblance to the concept of modes in Oakeshott's work. However, I will demonstrate, there is an important difference in the philosophical underpinnings of "forms of life" and "modes of experience": Winch's (and Wittgenstein's?) framework is epistemological, while Oakeshott's is ontological. Winch is trying to explain the puzzle of how, once we accept the subject-object dichotomy as fundamental, is it possible for people to act "reasonably"? With people trapped in their subjective worlds, how can there be any external standard for reasonable behavior? Winch, taking up the Wittgensteinian notion

of a "language game," which exhibits a human-made rationality that has no necessary connection to any larger rationality, grabs upon "following a rule" (a rule that helps to constitute one of these language games) as a drowning man would a log. But for Oakeshott, experience is at its root a "world of ideas," and the only real problem is how its original unity is splintered. As Boucher puts it:

> The point the idealists wanted to make… was that the world is unintelligible without mind and that there is mutual inclusivity. This mutual inclusivity can only be understood, however, by rejecting the question of epistemology that arises when we assume a duality between the mind and its objects. If we begin by assuming that experience is an undifferentiated whole, then the question becomes one of ontology, that is, how out of this unity do we explain the multiplicity of modes of understanding… (2012: 54)

Following a Rule

As a result (I contend) of misunderstanding Oakeshott's metaphysics, Winch makes the following complaint about Oakeshott's view of human activity: He admits that Oakeshott agrees with his own understanding that **"**Principles, precepts, definitions, formulae—all derive their sense from the context of human social activity in which they are applied." But he accuses Oakeshott of going too far in thinking that "it follows from this that most human behaviour can be adequately described in terms of the notion of habit or custom and that neither the notion of a rule nor that of reflectiveness is essential to it" (1990: 45).

We will take up the part rules play in intelligent action in a moment, but first let us note that Oakeshott, in his reply to Raphael, made it clear that he did not view customary behavior as behavior from which reflection[1] is absent:

> The view I ventured to suggest was that explaining conduct… is a different activity from recommending that a certain action should be performed or from approving or disapproving of an action which has been

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[1] Of course, as this paper is arguing, the two authors understand "reflectiveness" differently: for Oakeshott, all experience is thought and therefore to some extent reflective, whereas when Winch uses the term he means self-reflective, abstract, discursive thought only.

performed. This, of course, does not mean that reasoning is foreign to practical discourse; it means only that the reasoning will be of a different sort from explanatory reasoning... (2008: 181)

That Oakeshott did not mean by habit "behavior is that it is completely unreflective," is illustrated in the following passages: "Social being must be recognized as one of the engagements of reflective consciousness, and not as itself —the determinant of reflective consciousness" (1975: 96–97). The 'social being' behaving in a traditional fashion is a creation of agency, and not vice versa: "The contention that the substantive performance of an agent is to be theorized in terms of his —social being‖ makes sense only when —social being‖ is understood as his self-recognition in being related to others in some particular respect…" (1975: 98). And it is the actions of individuals that create social practices: "Practices... are footprints left behind by agents responding to their emergent situations..." (1975: 100).

The rules Winch discusses can be used to *explain* action, but most often are not the genuine basis for decision-making. Simply because a rule can be *abstracted* from some action does not mean it was the *basis* for it, any more than the fact that a course on a map can be *abstracted* from the migration of some birds mean that their migration was *based* upon a course drawn on a map. Furthermore, as MacIntyre noted, Winch's criterion of rule-following, which is that there is a right way and a wrong way of doing the thing in question, does not seem to apply to many conscious actions; as MacIntyre asks, "Is there a wrong way of going for a walk?" (1973: 21)[2]

Winch attempts to buttress his argument by pointing to an alleged categorical distinction between human action and animal behavior. We cannot, he contended, regard animals as following rules in their behavior as we do with

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[2] Williamson makes a similar point when he writes, "If it is said that I am following rules when I smoke my pipe, or look for a lost sock, or switch on my reading lamp, it is not to much to ask that the rules in question be specified" (1989: 489).

humans, except in that we read their performances through the lens of humans' interest in training their animal charges to behave in a certain fashion:

> It is only the dog's relation to human beings which makes it intelligible to speak of his having mastered a trick; what this way of speaking amounts to could not be elucidated by any description, however detailed, of canine behaviour in complete isolation from human beings. (Winch, 1990: 57)

But this is sheer assertion on Winch's part! He continues, invoking Pavlov's famous experiments, to assert that they demonstrate that "the dog has been conditioned to respond in a certain way" (1990: 58), instead of displaying anything even resembling human understanding of the situation it confronts. However, Winch seems to be interpreting animal behavior by means of a mechanistic framework that is not justified by the evidence, but is instead assumed as an a priori truth. As Michael Polanyi notes, regarding Pavlov's experiments:

> the dog does not jump and snap at the bell as if it were food, nor does a red light cause the kind of muscular contraction which results from an electric shock... This entitles us to say, in contrast to Pavlov's description of the process, that in sign-learning the animal is taught to expect an event by recognizing a sign foretelling the event. (Polanyi, 1962: 72)

Furthermore, it is well known that, for instance, the behavior of birds in a flock can be understood by viewing them as following certain, very simple rules, e.g., "Keep a constant distance from your neighbor" but these behaviors are certainly not something the birds have been trained to do by human beings! No, the rule is *abstracted* from their actual behavior, just as many of Winch's rules are abstracted from human behavior.

Winch goes on to accuse Oakeshott of self-contradiction:

> But human history is not just an account of changing habits: it is the story of how men have tried to carry over what they regard as important in their modes of behaviour in to the new situations which they have had to

face... Oakeshott's attitude to reflectiveness is, as a matter of fact, incompatible with a very important point which he makes early on in the discussion. He says that the moral life is **"**conduct to which there is an alternative." Now though it is true that this "alternative" need not be consciously before the agent's mind it must be something which could be brought before his mind... at least he must be able to *understand* what it would have been like to act differently. (Winch, 1990: 61)

But again, once it is understood that Oakeshott readily acknowledges the importance of reflective thought in the development of habits and customs, the appearance of incompatibility between his endorsement of traditional practices as a guide for human conduct and his understanding of morality as inherently supposing alternatives to any morally laudatory choice disappears. Furthermore, in what cultural setting, however traditional, would it not be understood that things *could* be done differently? Could we not bring it before the inhabitants' minds what it would be to behave differently in any case? Only the most isolated of peoples are not aware of the existence of other cultures with different customs, widely criticized because while "our" tribe *could* have done things that way, it is obviously far inferior to the way we *actually* do things.

As noted in the introduction, in his "Preface to the Second Edition," Winch backs off on his claim about the rule-governed nature of "truly human" activity a good deal, writing "The kinds of relevance past experience has to current behaviour can be brought out only in so far as that behaviour exemplifies rules or is, in relevant respects, analogous to behaviour which exemplifies rules" (1990: xvii). Behavior that is "analogous to behaviour which exemplifies rules" is simply behavior from which a rule might be abstracted. If the Winch of 1990 had revisited his critique of Oakeshott, he might have found it melting away before his eyes. But he did not: thus, this paper.

The Abstract and the Concrete

Behind Winch's critique of Oakeshott, we might detect the following notion: behavior is more fully human and rational the more it adheres to abstract rules. While more primitive, traditional mentality deals largely with the specifics of its circumstances without formulating the universal, abstract principles that provide the ultimate means of comprehending human life, to the very extent that way of proceeding is replaced by more abstract reasoning, it becomes more fully human. In fact, only discursive, abstract thought, per Winch really qualifies as thought at all: all else is mere "conditioning." This attitude is quite clear in Winch's treatment of animal and traditional mentality: he does not really see it as mentality at all.

However, R. G. Collingwood devised an ingenious answer to such a line of reasoning, which, although he was working in the context of theology, applies just as readily to practical human action. Examining the idea that the Supreme Being ought to be guided in its actions by abstract, universally valid rules, he contends that, quite to the contrary, such abstractions are only of use to beings unable to fully grasp the concrete details of reality: "For a perfectly moral being, one who really appreciated duty as such, these maxims and laws would recede into the background and disappear; such a being simply ignores and does not act on them at all, but acts merely on his intuition of duty" (1994: 206). Or consider Bernard Bosanquet, writing in a similar vein:

> And we must have read Plato's *Philebus* and Aristotle's *Ethics* to very little purpose if we do not understand that, in principle, the fullest universal of character and consciousness will embody itself in the finest and most specialized and unrepeatable responses to environment; and that life, and especially its intensified forms as morality or knowledge, do not consist in observing general rules, but in reacting adequately, with logical, that is, with fine and creative adjustment to the ever-varying complexities of situations. Precision, measurableness, and universal law, these are in the moral act, but they are features of the solution of problems by constructive organization,

and not of obedience to abstract rule, and the same thing is relatively true of the adjustments and arrangements of a highly unified society. (Bosanquet, 1927: 105–106)

For the idealist, abstract thought is a derivative and defective form of thought. As Collingwood stated this:

The concept is not something outside the world of sensuous experience: it is the very structure and order of that world itself ... This is the point of view of concrete thought . . . To abstract is to consider separately things that are inseparable: to think of the universal, for instance, without reflecting that it is merely the universal of its particulars, and to assume that one can isolate it in thought and study it in this isolation. This assumption is an error. One cannot abstract without falsifying. (1924: 159–60)

Conclusion

Winch, in his critique of Oakehsott, failed to realize that, as an idealist, Oakeshott held abstract, discursive thought to be derivative of the world of concrete ideas. He understood reality to be experience, and all experience to involve some degree of understanding. As he says, "Experience is always and everywhere a world of ideas. What is given in experience is a world of ideas. But what is given is given always to be transformed… Given a world of ideas, the end and achievement in experience is that world made more of a world, made coherent" (1933: 48-49). Missing this aspect of Oakeshott's thought, Winch took "traditional behaviour" to mean experience which was totally unreflective, which Oakeshott would have held to be impossible. By failing to grasp the philosophical underpinnings of the target of his critique, Winch's argument against Oakeshott missed its mark.

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