

Tradition and Cognitive Science

Oakeshott's Undoing of the Kantian Mind

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In this discussion, the author asks the question if Oakeshott's famous depiction of a practice might be understood in relation to contemporary cognitive science, in particular connectionism (the contemporary cognitive science approach concerned with the problem of skills and skilled knowing) and in terms of the now conventional view of "normativity" in Anglo-American philosophy. The author suggests that Oakeshott meant to contrast practices to an alternative "Kantian" model of a shared tacit mental frame or set of rules. If cognitive science, in its connectionist forms, allows us to give a naturalistic though nonreductive sense to his words, Oakeshott, like other philosophers who have employed the concept of tradition, expanded his discussion into a broader reconsideration of the nature of theorizing, a metaphilosophy. And this extension can be understood in relation to such recent thinkers as McDowell and, in particular, to the problem of the acquisition of the normative.

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Of the ideas of Oakeshott that resonate today, perhaps the most resonant are found in the passages in the essays collected with "Rationalism in Politics" (Oakeshott 1962b) and in *On Human Conduct* (Oakeshott 1975) in which Oakeshott characterized traditions and human practices in terms of their irreducibility to other notions and contrasted the moral content of traditions with explicitly formulated or formulatable moral ideals. One of the most succinct descriptions of a tradition of political behavior is found in an essay titled "Political Education" (Oakeshott 1962a). Oakeshott (1962c) says that

a tradition of behavior is a tricky thing to get to know. Indeed, it may even appear to be essentially unintelligible. It is neither fixed nor finished; it has no changeless centre to which understanding can anchor itself; there is no sovereign purpose to be perceived or invariable direc-

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tion to be detected; there is no model to be copied, no ideal to be realized, or rule to followed. (Pp. 128-29)

And after this, he lists more "nots": that it is "not an abstract idea, or a set of tricks, not even a ritual"; that its "authority is diffused between past, present and future," which is to say that there is no moment at which it becomes authoritative, or permanent; that "to know only the gist is to know nothing"; that it is "flimsy and elusive but not without identity"; that none of its parts are "immune from change"; that it is neither ever wholly in motion or wholly at rest; that although everything is temporary, nothing is arbitrary; that there will always be something of a mystery about how it is learned, and no point at which learning it can properly be said to begin. By comparison, what is said in a positive way is slight: "that knowledge of it is unavoidably knowledge of its detail" and that "what has to be learned is but a concrete coherent manner of living in all its intricateness" (pp. 128-29).

So the concepts of practice and tradition, as Oakeshott formulated it here and in many places, especially in the opening chapters of *On Human Conduct* (Oakeshott 1975), are very much defined by oppositions or contrasts. In what follows, I propose to focus on the contrast with one of the "nots," a particular model of the mind that is a pervasive part of academic common sense that I will call the Kantian mind. By this, I simply mean the very familiar model in which mental "frames" constitute objects and, when shared, enable communication and other familiar aspects of social life. Even if we give up on the epistemological project of finding the ultimate frame, it is more difficult to give up the various usages that have been found for this concept and its conceptual kin. Nevertheless, as I shall suggest here, cognitive science and the broad set of ideas associated with connectionism represent a challenge to this model of mind that may lend some support to its past critics. It has long been clear that there are affinities between connectionist approaches and the family of tradition thinkers, which includes in addition to Oakeshott, Hayek,¹ Polanyi,² MacIntyre and Gadamer, and (in some respects) Popper.³ My aim in this discussion is to explore the relationship in connection with Oakeshott, the thinker in this group who I take to have the best account of tradition.⁴

As this list suggests, there is a strongly political undertone to the issues discussed here, with the list dominated by "liberal conservatives or conservative liberals," to use a term of Edward Shils. Oakeshott published "Rationalism in Politics" at a time in which

ideological politics dominated, and many politicians and political writers of the Left, and also those formerly of the Left, understood politics as a struggle between rival worldviews. For standard theories of ideology, ideology was a frame: a worldview, quite literally, was a view of the world from within a frame. And frames were themselves thought of in terms of analogies to the explicit—to assumptions, pre-suppositions, and so forth. One of the claims of Marxian sociology of knowledge was that the opponents of the proletarian ideology were themselves “ideological” and that the tacit ideological “assumptions” of their thought could be revealed. Oakeshott and other theorists of tradition of the time responded to this line of thinking, which was wholly dependent on the Kantian model of mind, by arguing that the issue was more fundamental: first, that the category of “ideological thinking” was an inadequate account of political traditions; second, that traditions were ubiquitous and not inimical to rationality but in fact a condition for it; and third, that the model of thought implied by the theory of ideology was a manifestation of a tendency rooted more deeply in the history of modern philosophy and indeed modern thought more generally that needed to be exposed and rejected.

The political passions that gave interest to these arguments at the time have of course faded. Today, however, an aspect of this argument has been given new relevance. The “ideological” systems that these thinkers opposed were, incidentally, normative. To be a Marxist was to be committed to a worldview in which the significance of ordinary facts was transformed in a way that also transformed their valuative significance. This “normative” aspect of the problem of frames has become central to the present concern with “normativity” by writers such as Robert Brandom and John McDowell. Their different views of Kant’s current relevance each engage the idea that there is a normative element to what Michael Friedman (1999) characterized as the process that “injects a priori forms, constructions, or categories of our own—which, for Kant, express universal capacities of the human mind—into our experience” (p. 11).

For Brandom (1998), “Kant’s big idea is that what distinguishes judgment and action from the responses of merely natural creatures is neither their relation to some special stuff nor their peculiar transparency, but rather that they . . . express commitments of ours” (p. 127). McDowell’s view, which will be discussed in more detail below, is that children must acquire the norms of reason through ordinary processes of socialization, which they can then correctly recognize to be normatively binding. Brandom uses the term *practices* to formulate

his account of the Kantian conditions; McDowell uses *tradition*. The appeal to these concepts alone poses a question: what is the relationship between Oakeshott's usages and theirs? The answer, I will suggest, is that they conflict very fundamentally and do so in ways that reveal strengths in Oakeshott's conception and weaknesses in theirs. But I will also conclude that accepting Oakeshott's account is not without costs.

THE KANTIAN MIND IN COGNITIVE SCIENCE

In what follows, I propose to first deal with the contrasts in the broadest terms, and to do so, it will be important to make the conflicts more concrete. Cognitive science and many of the inquiries that have been spawned from the cognitive science tradition provide a variant of the basic model of the Kantian mind that allows this to be done. The traditionally dominant cognitive science model of the mind constructed mental processes on the analogy of a rule-governed machine. Capacities were explained in terms of rules whose properties could be inferred from activities. This worked nicely for grammar and basic mathematical thinking. The strategy could be extended to other activities as well, and this seemed to suggest that the mind was a very complex computer with various pre-preprogrammed routines.

One of the principal supports of this notion of framing, and of the "shared premises" form generally, has its origins in Kant, in the form of the kind of transcendental argument that asserts the necessary existence of these frames or shared premises on the grounds that they are the conditions for the possibility of some uncontroversial fact, such as the fact that people of a particular type with a particular background communicate with one another, whereas people of another type with another background cannot communicate. In this case, the reasoning is fairly straightforward but obviously questionable: the frame is the condition of communication that is possessed by members of the one group and absent in those who cannot communicate.

There are many reasons this line of argument represents a somewhat strange procedure, but I will point to only one. It seems as though the explanatory necessities at stake in these 'conditions for the possibility' argument are themselves as uncontroversial as the facts to which they refer, such as the fact of communication—unproblematic and uncontroversial enough to overcome the possibility that there might be an alternative explanation of the very same uncontroversial

fact, which differs and has different implications. But if we think of the idea of a frame as simply a hypothesis like other scientific hypotheses, the problem becomes much clearer. Frame is a theoretical entity whose existent properties are being asserted on the basis of the appearances it explains but always with the important proviso that other theories positing other theoretical entities might very well explain the same facts.

The Achilles' heel of transcendental arguments is that they depend on a unique result—that the conditions for the possibility of something are not only specifiable but uniquely so. The appearance of “uniqueness,” however, is sometimes achieved by characterizing the thing to be accounted for in ways that ensure that the explanation is unique, thus making the argument at once circular and vulnerable to an alternative description of that which is to be accounted for. These arguments, however, routinely omit any consideration of alternatives and indeed characteristically describe the phenomena to be explained in such a way that excludes alternatives. This means that transcendental arguments are commonly circular: the description is constructed so that no alternative explanation is possible.

What makes these arguments persuasive is that there are many things—concepts, the symbolic, meaning—that seem to be categorically different from the things that can be accounted for “naturalistically,” and to the extent that we accept this notion of categorical difference, it seems that we are compelled to accept the transcendental arguments that go with them. If we accept that there is such a special nonnatural domain as “the social” that is irreducible to the individual, to choose one that Oakeshott himself comments on, it seems that there is no alternative to accounting for it in terms of the conditions of the possibility of the social, and these conditions turn out to be the constitutive shared premises of the objects that exist in the domain, such as society. The relation between individual and society—the traditional topic of political theory—thus is preformed by the relation of culture to cognition. The realm of the political, the explicit, and deliberation comes later and depends on “the social.”

This reasoning, which is so conventional today that it is now difficult to disarticulate it into its elements, also has a form like that of a transcendental argument. Margaret Mead once expressed this in connection with culture by depicting culture as a collective choice from a basket of possible values, a story reminiscent of the founding of sovereign authority in Hobbes, and equally metaphorical. Once this act of selection occurs, the culture, values, concepts, rules governing them,

and so on must be “internalized” by the members of the group, so that they act in accordance with these rules without outside coercion, or at least recognize and understand them “internally” as conceptual or normative, that is, as something other than a fact of nature to be adjusted to. “Sharing premises,” or “having common categories,” and “following common tacit rules” are merely different ways of characterizing these collective mental processes. Thus, the characterization itself, together with the fact that objects like the state are “social” in the sense that they occur as they do only in specific social groups, pushes us to this solution. Only through these concepts are the actions of people in this society intelligible or meaningful. They are meaningful, or in the category of meaningful; therefore, the objects that are the condition for this meaningfulness are real.

Given what I said earlier about transcendental arguments, it is good to look for the trick part of this argument in the way the facts that must be explained are characterized, and there is much to puzzle over. But the bottom line is that the requirement of explaining the level of concepts, the symbolic, the rule governed, the intelligible, and so forth limits us to a small class of solutions. These objects differ from society to society, profession to profession, and so forth. So in each case, they must be said to be in some sense constituted by these groupings, and it seems that the only way for this to occur is through some sort of collective mental or ideational act specific to the group in question—“mental” or ideational because nothing that is mental or ideational can come from the nonmental or nonideational.

What does this have to do with the symbolic processing model of cognitive science? There are two directions here—from culture to the mind and from the mind to culture—and each involves some affinities that come very close to making it seem that the rules model of the mind and the rules model of culture require one another. But consider the following:

The serial digital computer is not a self-organizing system. It does not learn easily. Indeed, the easiest metaphor for learning in a system of this kind is programming; that is, the rules that must be applied to inputs of some kind are placed directly into the system—by man, by Nature or by the hand of God. (Bates and Elman 1993, 628)

Nature, God, and individuals, however, are not likely suspects for “programming” or placing rules into the system. The “solution” that does come to mind is “society” or rather the rules that are shared. So the idea of shared rules fills a serious lacunae in the symbolic process-

ing model—indeed, it seems as though the social origin of cultural programming is a condition for the possibility of cultures that are distinctive to social groups. The rules model also solves the problem of congruence in mental structures between the constitutive rules and the rules that operate in the individual mind: the stuff that needs to be “internalized” fits the computational model of the mind perfectly. Internalizing norms is nothing more than having them programmed into the individual mind. So, the concepts fit in both directions, and indeed each appears to be a condition for the possibility of the other: unless culture can be internalized as rules, it is difficult to see how it can be internalized to a mind that is a symbolic processor at all, and if the mind is not a symbolic processor, it is difficult to see how it can “internalize” cultural rules.⁵

TROUBLES WITH THE KANTIAN MIND

These “conditions for the possibility of” congruences, however, are peculiar. It is not that there are well-established phenomena that are congruent but rather that the congruences result from the fact that the metaphors (or to be somewhat more polite about it, the theoretical concepts) used to describe social life and the operations of the mind come from the same source—an analogy between explicit rules and rule following and tacit rules and rule following. Oakeshott, as it happens, points repeatedly to the issue that provides a wedge into these arguments—learning. And the problem of learning has always been trouble for the “premises model.”

The transcendental arguments point away from the problem of how the premises got into the mind, and one can see why when one considers how these arguments arose in the history of philosophy. The neo-Kantians recognized two things. The first was that frames were not historically universal. The second was that they were relative to particular disciplines or forms of activity. The activity itself was said to have presuppositions, presuppositions that participants in the activity were assumed to share and that had the effect of giving the activity itself its normative character. What is striking about this particular formulation is that the ideas of sharing, normativity, and the movement of the frame concept away from the individual cognizer as possessor of the frame occur together in one step and without any particular argument. The idea of sharing and the idea that frames were relative to an activity and to historical moments of that activity

were the givens of the argument, and the conclusion that there was such a thing as a shared set of constitutive suppositions simply followed from the "transcendental" inference that the coherence of the activity itself implied the existence of the presuppositions. There was no account of acquisition, or learning. "Socialization" and "internalization" were never much more than names for a mystery, a mystery that could be studied empirically in its external aspects, that is to say, in terms of the process of training and experience. And the mysterious aspect of the process showed up particularly in connection with "normativity." The older utilitarian notion that the relevant learning was a matter of recognizing the bad consequences of, say, stealing, was not persuasive. It was convenient to ascribe the normativity to the frame itself and to say that the normative content was part of the constitutive character or derived from the constitutive character. But this simply replaced the older problem with the problem of acquiring the frame.

It might be supposed that learning is the strong suit of cognitive science and that the symbolic processing model would provide a solution to the problem. But, in fact, it is a weakness of this approach. As Bates says,

To be sure, there is a literature on computer learning in the field of artificial intelligence. However, most of these efforts are based on a process of hypothesis testing. In such learning models, two essential factors are provided a priori: a set of hypotheses that will be tested against the data, and an algorithm for deciding which hypothesis provides the best fit to those data. This is by its very nature a strong nativist approach to learning. It is not surprising that learning theories of this kind are regularly invoked by linguists and psycholinguists with a strong nativist orientation. There is no graceful way for the system to derive new hypotheses (as opposed to modifications of a pre-existing option). Everything that really counts is already there at the beginning. And this matches up very poorly to actual learning. Because the hypotheses tested by a traditional computer learning model are discrete in nature (based on the rule and representations described above), learning (a.k.a. "selection") necessarily involves a series of discrete decisions about the truth or falsity of each hypothesis. Hence we would expect change to take place in a crisp, step-wise fashion, as decisions are made, hypotheses are discarded, and new ones are put in their place. But human learning rarely proceeds in this fashion, characterized more often by error, vacillation and backsliding. (Bates and Elman 1993, 628)

Connectionism matches up somewhat better to actual learning, at least for the kinds of things that Oakeshott describes as a tradition of

behavior. But more important, the connectionist approach brings together as part of the basic learning process several of the features that are so puzzlingly separated by the older model.

CONNECTIONISM AND THE SOCIAL

Connectionism is preeminently the model of the mind that deals with thought as skilled activity, and rather than give a technical account of the models, the notions of nodes, weighting, learning rules, and so on, I will consider a typical artificial intelligence application of connectionist learning: the use of feedback into connectionist systems to enable them to interpret X-ray images of, for example, breast cancer. The systems work inductively by feeding in the images in digital form and then feeding back whether it is a tumor or not. The connectionist machine *learns*, a phrase that is in a way not dissimilar from Hegel's notion that habits are already ideational (cf. McCumber 1990), and by differentiating what is only minimally differentiated by associating differences with one another, the medical systems can learn to differentiate and indeed differentiate more skillfully than human beings. This is not an example of rule following because the connectionist machines, like the diagnosticians, having learned from a series of actual cases will continue to diagnose in the light of the particular set of actual experiences that have been produced by feeding the data and outcomes into them, and consequently, each will diagnose somewhat differently in the face of new experiences.

The learning in question is not to be found in a rule that is learned (though there is a basic "learning" algorithm that a connectionist system needs to start with) but is a product of the changes produced on the system as a whole—a web-like system of "connections" in which connections are built up or eroded by experience, by the particular inputs and feedback from outputs that alter the weights of the connections. What is fed in and, up to a point at least, the order in which it is fed in determine the properties of the system of connections as a whole, its skills, and its biases. And like skilled practitioners generally, they vary with respect to the degree that they get the right answer and with respect to their biases, which fits with "the rather fuzzy properties of human categorization that are so elusive in psychological models inspired by the serial digital computer" (Bates and Elman 1993, 632). This is indeed characteristic of skilled behavior, which is not merely the assimilation of some package of rules but depends on

the experiences that made up the skill. We can say that the machines can diagnose “more skillfully” because we can compare skilled, unskilled, and machine diagnosticians with respect to their capacity for differentiating correctly.

This is an image that is entirely consonant with Oakeshott’s view of human practitioners. The “learning” done here has a series of properties that fit the list of “nots” with which I began. The connectionist net learns not by being programmed, except with a basic learning rule, but by experience and experience produced by activity, such as the activity of identifying tumors and predicting the course of disease. It is holistic in that it is the whole net and the weightings of the myriad connections that make up the net that are modified by experience. There is no part that is fixed and unchanging. Change is continuous because learning is continuous, and the history of experience—its “authority,” so to speak—is built into the weightings that are produced and thus into what is learned: the past is thus always in a sense present but as a consequence of the modifications it has produced that are retained in the weightings of the connections.

It not only appears to be essentially unintelligible, it literally is unintelligible, in the sense that the units and processes by which it operates cannot be transformed into or stated as rules or principles, the kinds of explicit things that can be said to be intelligible. It is never fixed, though it becomes quite stable, so that new experiences do not dislodge what is learned. There is no changeless center or sovereign purpose, either: as Bates and Elman (1993) put it, there is “no final arbiter, no homunculus or central executive who puts all these . . . inputs together. Rather, the ‘solution’ is an emergent property of the system as a whole, a global pattern produced by independent, local computations” (p. 632). The knowledge that is built into it is unavoidably knowledge of detail. To know only the gist indeed is to know nothing. There will always be something of a mystery about how whatever is learned is learned, if by this we mean that there is no way to restate the process as a series of intelligible steps and no point at which learning a particular skill can properly be said to begin, because what we are talking about is the acquisition not of “rules” but of a capacity; it is always to some extent arbitrary to draw a line marking the point at which a capacity can be said to be possessed.

These properties may be reasonably supposed to carry through to the collective aspect of practices, at least to that aspect that is not part of the relatively fixed and public world of external symbols and arti-

facts—the tacit part. A practical activity can succeed with skilled practitioners whose skills are not identical but are acquired in such a way that they enable the practitioners to act cooperatively and even to improve their skilled performances in relation to one another, to adjust to one another, and to learn more generally to adjust to others, as in, for example, the joint activities of skilled practitioners and in the improvement and adaptation gained through practical cooperative activity involving other skilled practitioners. And the “inherited” condition of this activity, the tradition or practice, to the extent that it consists of the skills that the practitioners have, will also have no changeless center, no gist, and so forth.

This alternative model nevertheless allows us to account for many of the puzzles that drove the “shared premises” or “rules” model. Chief among these is the constitution of objects. In this model, there simply is no moment of constitution—no rule or concept, for example, of “tumor” that is taught to or programmed into the connectionist learning machine. Objects are not separate from, or presupposed by, the activity, but the machine learns to distinguish as a product of activity and through inputs that are neither preformed nor conceptualized. In short, it operates on the Kantian manifold itself, on experience, and not on the world of objects or sense data. This is a point congenial to the conclusion of Oakeshott’s ([1933] 1978) early book, *Experience and Its Modes*, especially with respect to Oakeshott’s refusal to distinguish between reality and experience or to give primacy to any particular experience, and indeed gives a sense to the notion of experience as a whole (pp. 322-56).⁶

The identification of shared premises or rules with social groups was motivated by the recognition that the objects of thought that were “constituted” for people, such as the state, varied from one historical setting to another, so it was inferred that whatever categories did the constituting had to vary similarly. But this argument can now be seen to be essentially circular: it is only if we assume that objects need to be constituted by shared premises or categories that we need an explanation of this sort. The fact that differentiations of things are local and historical is better understood as a consequence of the fact that practices, joint activities, are local, and what is learned in a connectionist sense from participating in these activities is also local—not to a “group” that possesses premises or categories together but to the persons who have developed capacities through learning by participating in the same activities.

INTELLIGENT SUBSCRIPTION

I have so far said nothing about normativity, but in an important sense, the problem of normativity is paired with the problems discussed here—constitutivity and shared premises are problems with the normative. It seems as though there is something to be said about normativity that cannot be said in the replacement language of Oakeshott, though it is not so easy to say what it is. Indeed, one must suspect that the problem of the circularity of some transcendental arguments is also a problem here, and at the same point: to treat as unproblematic claims about the normativity of some shared object, such as a given social practice or rule, is already to define a particular class of solutions as “required” or as “conditions for the possibility.”

One peculiar point at which this issue of circularity becomes obvious is in recent discussions of Wittgenstein’s famous example in the *Philosophical Investigations* of the builders who have a language game that consists of the term *slab* and so on and whose activities insist in saying *slab* and giving a slab to another person on, one might say, command. But command, description, request, and so forth are inappropriate to these utterances because there is no additional structure to this game, no possibility of raising questions, and in particular no language for correcting or identifying error. Robert Brandom (1994), accordingly, denies that the builders had a language at all and argues that having a language is bound up with the “counting as” relation so that it is possible to not merely use the word *slab* but to count some class of uses as proper uses and therefore to distinguish others as improper uses (rather than merely as incomprehensible uses), something that seems not to be possible in the language game of the builders (pp. 172-73; see also Brandom 1999, 144-45). The question of propriety, the question of “counting as,” for him comes to be seen as the beginning of normativity, and “language” in the true sense is impregnated with this normativity. Brandom then argues that normativity here consists in a “commitment” to use something to count as in the instance of a word. So, the relation of constitutivity is intrinsically normative, and therefore everything conceptual is normative. Brandom goes on to say a great deal to the effect that binding ourselves in this way by these normative commitments is what allows for human freedom and associates this with the greatness of German idealism, which is to make the point that choice is always conditioned by the constitutive and also made possible by the prior normative commitments that do the work of constituting. It is this kind of reasoning that

I wish to question here. The telltale sign of trouble is the use of "commitment" in such an odd context, equivalent to what I discuss here as commitment to a framework.

Begin with a puzzle. On one hand, we acquire a moral language and reason with it and within it, so the deliberations that we make are deliberations about preconstituted objects and problems. We then deliberate on our "ideology" and lose confidence in it or choose to acquire another one as a result of deliberation. But since our deliberation is within the framework of terms and constituted objects of the prior framework, we can never really "choose." This is not a happy conclusion. It is not the case that deliberation occurs, or could ever occur, in a world of unconditioned and especially conceptually unconditioned choice to which one can then apply such universal principles as truth and right. On the other hand, and this is a point that was especially important to Oakeshott, we also on occasion reflect and deliberate on our frameworks, concepts, and standards of what counts as a good reason. This is to say that there is something relatively tangible that corresponds more or less to two realms of thinking about the problem of morality and normativity. The one realm I will simply refer to as the constitutive or as the "counts as" side of the problem, and the other one I will refer to in the same kind of shorthand as the side of deliberation, choice, and truth. These are only partial representations, but they do enable us to see some of the peculiarities that arise because of the problem itself, as well as the problem of conceptualizing the problem.⁷

The question of the ultimate end of deliberation, the ultimate standard to which deliberations point, seems to be the product of the notion of deliberation itself. The question of the basis of these constitutive rules, that is to say the rules that determine whether something counts as something, seems also to require some kind of backing, some kind of basis, some kind of commitment. And this has meant that much of the discussion of the problem of normativity has taken the broad form of importing language appropriate to deliberation, the language of faith, commitment, ultimate truth, and so forth, and applying it in some peculiar extended sense to the constitutive "counts as" conceptual level. In Brandom, that has amounted to a substantial expansion of the realm of the normative, so that even the employment of a concept in inferential reasoning, by virtue of the fact that to use a concept one must count something as something, is said to represent a "commitment" in the linguistic game of inference. Oakeshott seems to be pointing to something like this when he uses

the term *subscription*. But what is subscribed to is quite different from a set of normative rules of the game, and to see how it is different enables us to get a much clearer sense of what Oakeshott (1975) is up to in the first part of *On Human Conduct*.

As we have seen, Oakeshott is extremely sensitive to the fact that practices must be acquired and, specifically, that they must be learned. What is learned when we acquire a practice is the use of a language that is already adverbial. We do not start out with a language of "brick" and "slab" that we then add normative commitments to by employing it in uses that are in effect promises to other people of some sort, as Brandom would have it. Our learning is "intelligent" by definition since it is learning rather than "internalization." Yet this is not the end of the story. In a small way, we as deliberate agents are engaged in a continuous remaking of ourselves by learning and employing in conduct new concepts and new usages. We "subscribe" by actions as modest as a wink (Oakeshott 1975, 15), but more reflection produces more complex subscription. Subscribing is a continuous process of the exercise of intelligence and of being transformed through this exercise into a skilled, intelligent performer. "Commitment" or normative decisions are not conditions for subscription but are the products of moments of reflection and abstraction in which the practice is brought into thought as an object of evaluation.

It is evident that this is an alternative way of describing the problem that the conventional idea of normativity addresses. Does it avoid the puzzle produced by the notion of constitutivity? We can separate the problem into two parts. The first will be taken up in the next section: it involves Oakeshott's previous undoing of the Kantian mind and his elimination of the need for the supposition that anything is socially constituted by shared premises. If this holds, there simply is no problem about frameworks to be solved. The second is the problem of whether we can make sense of the kind of reflection that intelligent subscribers to a practice engage in without appealing to the problematic notion of "frameworks" about which deliberation seems to be inherently impossible. Oakeshott gives an answer to this question that distinguishes him from his peers.⁸ We can come to see our own "values" as contingent but not arbitrary, and as valid. We do so in the fashion of Charles Lamb's (1888) story about the discovery of roast pig. We fall into a form of life as a result of being born into it, and it is a historical product of largely blind past choices, but once we experience its benefits, we can come to recognize and appreciate them as benefits and to improve on our achievement of them, as Lamb's char-

acters did when they realized that they did not have to burn down the house to roast the pig.

THE SPOOKINESS OF THE NORMATIVE: MCDOWELL IN OAKESHOTTIAN TERMS

Oakeshott was an idealist by virtue of the intellectual tradition in which he can be located, in which Bradley and behind him Hegel appear. In *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott (1975) objects to the notion of subject/object relations in a way that has affinities with various forms of idealism, particularly of the 19th century. This is very much not the same as saying that Oakeshott is an adherent of a kind of idealism that employs variants on the metaphor of framing. But there is something of a puzzle here—how can one reject what Oakeshott rejects without accepting the Kantian model? Oakeshott's commentators have sometimes simply read him in straightforwardly Kantian terms. Consider a remark of Maurice Cowling in his chapter on Oakeshott. Cowling (1980) observes that for Oakeshott, "knowledge is experience organized according to the postulates of a 'world' which the mind has established" (p. 257). This, I will argue in the next section, is a fundamental misinterpretation, for this is the picture Oakeshott rejects.

The significance of Oakeshott's variation on, and rejection of, this Kantian picture can be most easily understood if we have something to contrast it to. Perhaps the most vivid contemporary version of the idea that knowledge is experience organized according to the postulates of a "world" that the mind has established is presented in John McDowell's (1994) *Mind and World* (cf. Friedman 1996). McDowell's account departs from traditional Kantianism and idealism by its focus on an Oakeshottian concern, which makes the comparison more revealing. McDowell argues that children are not born rational but have to acquire the norms of reasoning. This avoids the original Kantian mystery of how the normative schema that shape experience are acquired—a genuinely spooky process that does seem to require a God—by locating the acquisition of the norms of reason in the process of acquiring norms generally, of socialization, of acculturation, and so on. The problem with this strategy, which McDowell acknowledges, is that there is still something "spooky" about the normativity of reasons thus understood. What appears to be a natural, causal process of groping around the world by an infant and then a child produces a nonnatural, noncausal result: normativity. McDowell does not treat

this problem as particularly central, even to his discussion of the spookiness of normativity, but it is a manifestation of his core problem, of how a nonnatural, noncausal phenomenon of normativity arises within and relates to the causal, natural world. His own appeal to Gadamer's (1975) *Truth and Method* as a resource for understanding tradition brings the issue into contact with Oakeshott, and the contrasts are revealing. For Oakeshott, as I have argued, learning is critical—so whatever is, in McDowell's language, "normative," has to be learned. And for Oakeshott, this constraint determines the central features of a practice: nothing can be part of a practice that is not learned in the way practices are learned.

McDowell comes to the problem from a different direction: his aim is to show that the idea of the normative demands of universal reason is not "spooky." He draws some conclusions from Davidson's ([1974] 1984) "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in support of his picture of a space of reason. He supposes that Davidson has established that rationality in the normative sense is unitary and universal, that there is no genuine problem of relativism with respect to normative reason (as distinct from belief), and that, therefore, in the course of socialization into any culture a child acquires this body of norms of reason along with the rest of the inheritance. If we leave aside the question of how such a miraculous convergence on common norms of reason would emerge from the variety and contingency of human learning and "cultural" experiences, a question that McDowell believes Davidson has relieved him from answering, we can focus on the puzzle of how normativity figures in the process of acquiring culture at all—including the element McDowell identifies with the normative demands of reason.

A peculiar feature of McDowell's argument, shared with Brandom, is that a profound transition needs to occur between two stages in a child's development. In one stage, the child is prenormative and prerational in the sense that he or she has not yet acquired the norms of reason (or "normative" language as distinct from sound making in the case of Brandom) and a second stage in which the relevant norms have been acquired. The problem is how they are acquired. By definition, they cannot be assented to rationally, accepted on normative grounds, and so on, because the resources to do this have not yet been acquired. Whatever is acquired must be acquired with resources available in this state. This threshold problem thus is also a bootstrapping problem. The way the threshold problem has been frequently defined, influenced by Davidson and before him Stuart Hampshire

(1959, 99), is this: that normative rationality, intentionality or intentional ascription, and concept possession and belief (understood normatively) presuppose one another—they are a kind of cartel. From the point of view of acquisition, consequently, they are a common threshold. And this means that none of these elements are available as a resource for bootstrapping from the nonnormative side of the threshold to the normative one.⁹

I have not directly attacked this now commonplace thesis about the conceptual interdependence of norms, intention, and language,¹⁰ but it is perhaps appropriate to register my extreme skepticism about it here. In the first place, the argument depends on a certain amount of redefinition. In the usual uses of the notion of “attributing intention,” for example, the thesis is simply false: psychologists of infant behavior claim that young infants (8 months old) can reason about the intentions of others. There is a similar problem with the idea of the “normativity” of language as being connected to a capacity to read intentional states. In fact, high-functioning autistics, who are unable to read the intentions of others, have been known to be linguistically gifted, able to pick up a grammar book and rapidly acquire a foreign language. One might conclude from this that the capacity to speak grammatically and acquire “rules” and the capacity to recognize intentions are independent. But the commonplace view depends on arguing that some language use, for example, that of Wittgenstein’s builders and, presumably, young children, is not really “language” and that the attribution of intention to infants is not “really” interpretation of intention. These arguments serve to immunize the hypothesis and circularize the claim.

My point in what follows, however, involves a different aspect of the problem. By creating a threshold and calling it normativity, and claiming that the concepts that might be employed to explain facts about normativity, such as intention, are conceptually bound up with and indeed inseparable from normativity, make explanation impossible. There is a transition from the prenormative infant or prenormative form of human life to the normative. But if all the explainers are on the normative side, they cannot explain the transition, and the transition becomes a mystery. My purpose here is to simply identify some forms of argument, some explainers that appear to escape this problem. Of course, one response to them is to insist that these explainers also belong to the normative side, for example, the magical or charismatic. In my view, this move simply extends the circularity mentioned above.

How does McDowell (1994) deal with this problem? In two ways: by free use of metaphor in characterizing the acquisition of reason and by insisting that it is a nonproblem:

It is not even clearly intelligible to suppose a creature might be born at home in the space of reasons. Human beings are not: they are born mere animals, and they are transformed into thinkers and intentional agents in the course of coming to maturity. This transformation risks looking mysterious. But we can take it in our stride if, in our conception of the *Bildung* that is a central element in the normal maturation of human beings, we give pride of place to the learning of language. In being initiated into language, a human being is introduced into something that already embodies putatively rational linkages between concepts, putatively constitutive of the layout of the space of reasons, before she comes on the scene. This is a picture of initiation into the space of reasons as an already going concern; there is no problem about how something describable in those terms could emancipate a human individual from a merely animal mode of living into a full-fledged subject, open to the world. (P. 125)

Once a language, and with it conceptual capacities and reason, is acquired, their normative character need merely to be recognized—one's eyes are opened to them.

The idea is that the dictates of reason are there anyway, whether or not one's eyes are opened to them; that is what happens in a proper upbringing. We need not try to understand the thought that the dictates of reason are objects of an enlightened awareness, except from within the way of thinking such an upbringing initiates one into: a way of thinking that constitutes a standpoint from which those dictates are already in view. (Pp. 91-92)

With this, we are very close to Oakeshott's notion that the normative or, for Oakeshott, simply what we see to be good is discovered within a practice we have already subscribed to. But there is a deep difference in their notions of how acquisition occurs, which leads to a difference in their accounts of where it leads. For McDowell, acquiring a culture leads to an awakening to the dictates of reason, a normative structure that is in some sense already there. The question of how this acquiring of a culture is possible, given the threshold and bootstrapping problems mentioned earlier, is never addressed. Oakeshott, however, does address them.

For Oakeshott (1989), there is no threshold. Learning begins neither with information nor judgment but with these two components

together. They “can both be communicated and acquired, but cannot be communicated and acquired separately” (p. 56). His idealism consists in this claim, and it has a particular significance if we understand it in the light of connectionism. All experience is, so to speak, experience through one’s own abilitied body. The body is one in which inputs lead to changes in how future inputs are processed. These inputs are the “information” that combines with “judgment” to produce experience. The conjoining occurs prior to experience. And in connectionist terms, we might think of it as occurring in the synapses and the connectionist net to produce the conditions of experience. Intelligence, learning, and so forth appear at the subrational level, that is to say, prior to the point at which McDowell (1994) would say “we acquire conceptual powers” (p. 115), as recognition and differentiation improve through repetition and feedback. Intelligence is not something superadded to this process; it is a feature of the process itself.

THE COST

In the beginning of this article, I said that I would explain Oakeshott’s significance and the significance of the conjunction between Oakeshott’s account of practice and connectionism in relation to contemporary concerns. In the briefest of terms, the interest is this. Oakeshott provides an alternative vocabulary for addressing the fundamental problems posed by idealism, such as those discussed by McDowell. The vocabulary avoids what I have called the threshold and bootstrapping problems: what for McDowell must be acquired is already, for Oakeshott, being acquired, and in a way that is intelligible “naturalistically” or at least not “spooky.” It is acquired through the bit-by-bit improvement of skills modeled by connectionism. Does this “solve” the problem posed by the normative account of reason? It does not pretend to. But it might provide a vocabulary within the features of intellect we wish to understand, such as our capacity to make sense of one another, which for Oakeshott (1989) is “the ability to detect individual intelligence at work in every utterance” (p. 61) rather than our mutual subordination to the dictates of normative reason, can be adequately described, and within which the problems of idealism that continue to haunt us do not arise. *Intelligence* and *detecting intelligence* are a change in terms from *concepts*, *intentionality*, and

reason. But this is not merely a change in terms. The former avoid the threshold problem; the latter do not. And we may put the matter another way. Without an account like Oakeshott's of the process of learning as acquiring the "manifolds of abilities" that the "inheritance of human achievements" (p. 56) consists of, we are compelled, as McDowell is, to speak metaphorically about processes, such as the acquisition of an "inheritance" of normative reason, which inevitably remain, as McDowell says, "spooky," despite his insistence that they are not. Indeed, they avoid the spooky notion of the "normativity" of reason entirely.

But this solution is not cost free. To accept it, we must accept something akin to Oakeshott's own account of the way in which objects of thought emerge from experience—the problem, to be short about it, of concepts. This problem has traditionally been held against connectionism, especially by Fodor, and for similar reasons. It seems as though conceptualized experience requires concepts; unconceptualized experience, by definition, cannot fully supply them. So, they must come from some other source, possibly already resident in some sense in the mind itself.

Oakeshott's ([1933] 1978) idealism rests on a rejection of the distinctions that make up this problem (p. 67) by arguing that the real world is the world of experience, which is also (and already) a world of ideas. Thus, for Oakeshott, what is to be accounted for is not the transformation of unconceptualized experience into conceptualized experience but something that is a matter of degree. The experiences we first have are confused, or incoherent, and we make them more coherent "when noticing becomes thought and when, in virtue of distinguishing and remembering likenesses and unlikenesses in what is going on, we come to inhabit a world of recognizables" (Oakeshott 1975, 3). This was done in the course of what Oakeshott describes as a "continuous and unconditional engagement of learning to understand which is well on its way in even the most exiguous acts of attention" (Oakeshott 1975, 2). Distinguishing and remembering likenesses and unlikenesses are what connectionist machines do by virtue of their capacity to associate inputs with feedback and to statistically associate elements of input with other elements. Thus, a machine comes, so to speak, to inhabit a world of recognizables through association.

Is this a good enough account? The answer to this question depends on how one understands the break between having concepts and not having them. Oakeshott employs the language of "identifica-

tion" to avoid this problem, but his discussion of identification is at the same time a clear attempt to face the substance of the problem by providing a surrogate language to describe it. His argument is that the break between having concepts and having an experience is not absolute, and the process of identification, of seeking less confusion, especially by identifying the "ideal characters" in terms of which we identify something as a particular kind of thing, is a continuous process and one that operates on a world of experience that is already ideational.

Characteristics are themselves rudimental ideal characters. Such a character is a reflective composition that may begin by being no more than a sketch. It emerges from a selection, combination, and arrangement of characteristics in which recollection has superseded remembering, in which observation is directed by anticipatory guesses, and in which the characteristics on which attention is focused cease to be recognized merely in terms of resemblances and differences and merely as indications of one another and are understood as the lines or marks that together delineate a conceptual identity. (Oakeshott 1975, 4)

Identification is not, however, as concept acquisition is usually supposed to be, a normative matter, at least in the sense that a rule is—whose normativity consists in its correct use. Identification is fallible, and "mistake is possible," but "mistake here is confusion." "Such conclusions as, 'not a boy but a dwarf,' 'not a bird but a kite,' 'not a court of law in session but a scene from a play,' are its characteristic outcomes" (Oakeshott 1975, 5). They are also, it may be noted, the characteristic outcomes of the learning done by connectionist machines, which distinguish, for example, tumors from shadows. In the higher reaches of the understanding, in theorizing and reflecting, identifications, still fallible, can be refined and also come to have different objects, including the second-order identification of the "ideal characters" that enable identification itself (Oakeshott 1975, 5-6).

It is at this stage of questioning and refining past identifications that it makes sense to speak of assumptions and postulates—at the stage in which we abstract from what is going on and explore what Oakeshott calls a "platform of conditional understanding." But to speak in this way is no more than to consider as problematic conditions of understanding that we have been treating as unproblematic. To enter into such consideration is not to reveal presuppositions resident in the mind but rather to enter into a series of novel conditional understandings, in which we treat some conditions as unproblematic

in order to treat some other condition as problematic. Postulates are simply conditions of understanding treated as potential objects of inquiry. They are not something pregiven, in the original Kantian sense, through universal endowment in the mind or through the internalization of a frame. The conditions in question are established through the continuous process that leads from the initial stirrings of differentiation of experience through to identification. Thus, "identification," as Oakeshott understands it, adds nothing in the way of ideal content to what is already there in experience. To the extent that there is anything normative in our understanding, the same holds: it is produced out of what is already there—not injected, as Friedman says.

NOTES

1. Compare Barry Smith (1997).
2. For example, Arthur Reber (1989), a psychologist who has shown experimentally the presence of "tacit" learning as a result of subconscious patterned inputs, has been taken to have confirmed some key ideas of Polanyi (cf. Bechtel and Abrahamsen 1991, 229, 236), and he is also a figure in the background to the understanding of connectionism approaches to the mastery of symbolic systems (Bechtel and Abrahamsen 1991).
3. One might add to this list Ryle's (1945-46) distinction between knowing how and knowing that, which appears in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* article, and more extensive discussions in *The Concept of Mind* (Ryle 1949, 25-61). For Oakeshott's comments on this, see Oakeshott (1989, 50-56), and it has figured in later discussions of skills, which some recent writers, notably John Searle (1995) and Hubert Dreyfus (1998), have linked to cognitive science.
4. I have discussed the merits or otherwise of the various concepts of practice and tradition among these thinkers elsewhere. With respect to social theory and the historical context of the 1940s, see Turner (1999). For a discussion of the comparative superiority of Oakeshott's account, see Turner (forthcoming). For treatments of Polanyi, see Turner (1998, 2002).
5. The issue is usually formulated in terms of language and grammatical structure, and the arguments involve the question of whether grammatical rules can be accounted for without appealing to some sort of "rules in the mind" that are analogous to and logically of the same type as the grammatical rules of language, though more sophisticated and able to account for exceptions. But similar problems arise because people can learn to follow rules. As Bechtel and Abrahamsen (1991) suggest, "The pre-connectionist assumption has been that in order for people to function as conscious rule-interpreters it is necessary that they function internally as rule-processing systems" (p. 249). The more radical alternatives to this "rules behind the rules" approach discussed by various connectionists, as Bechtel and Abrahamsen characterize them, begin with the idea that

the novice human acquires the ability to interact with the external symbols by lower level processes (such as connectionist pattern recognition that do not involve a direct internalization of these symbols. That is the infant *learns how* to use external symbols. (P. 249)

"On this view symbols are primarily human artifacts such as linguistic and mathematical expressions, but they may eventually be internalized in the same format as non-symbolic expressions" (p. 253).

6. See also, throughout this book, his comments on "judgment" (Oakeshott [1933] 1978).

7. For a clear formulation of the issues in these terms, see Hookway (2000).

8. An example of this is his discussion of freedom in connection with Henry Simons (Oakeshott 1962c, 38-39).

9. In a sense, this is an example of a more general problem with cartels and holisms, such as one described by Paul Roth (1987) as the paradox of language learning. If only sentences taken as an interrelated group make sense—Quine's view—we are faced with the puzzle of how infants, who should find any single sentence to be meaningless, could learn to speak, as they must, by learning individual sentences (p. 21).

10. This is nicely formulated in Ramberg (2000).

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