

THE NATURE OF MEANINGFUL
BEHAVIOUR1. *Philosophy and Sociology*

IN Section 7 of the last chapter I tried to indicate in a general way how philosophy, conceived as the study of the nature of man's understanding of reality, may be expected to illuminate the nature of human interrelations in society. The discussion of Wittgenstein in Sections 8 and 9 has borne out that presumption. For it has shown that the philosophical elucidation of human intelligence, and the notions associated with this, requires that these notions be placed in the context of the relations between men in society. In so far as there has been a genuine revolution in philosophy in recent years, perhaps it lies in the emphasis on that fact and in the profound working out of its consequences, which we find in Wittgenstein's work. 'What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—forms of life.' (37: II, xi, p. 226c.)

I said earlier that the relation between epistemology and the peripheral branches of philosophy was that the former concerned the general conditions under

which it is possible to speak of understanding while the latter concerned the peculiar forms which understanding takes in particular kinds of context. Wittgenstein's remark suggests a possibility of rephrasing this: whereas the philosophies of science, of art, of history, etc., will have the task of elucidating the peculiar natures of those forms of life called 'science', 'art', etc., epistemology will try to elucidate what is involved in the notion of a form of life as such. Wittgenstein's analysis of the concept of following a rule and his account of the peculiar kind of interpersonal agreement which this involves is a contribution to that epistemological elucidation.

This conclusion has important consequences for our conception of the social studies; particularly the theoretical part of general sociology and the foundations of social psychology. As is well known, there has always been some dispute about the role which sociology ought to play *vis-à-vis* the other social studies. Some have thought that sociology should be the social science *par excellence*, synthesising the results of special social studies, like economic and political theory, into a unified theory of society in general. Others, however, have wanted to regard sociology simply as one social science on the same level as all the others, confined to a restricted subject-matter of its own. However, whichever of these views one adopts, one can in the end hardly avoid including in sociology a discussion of the nature of social phenomena in general; and this is bound to occupy a special place amongst the various disciplines devoted to the study of society. For all these disciplines are in

one way or another concerned with social phenomena and require, therefore, a clear grasp of what is involved in the concept of a social phenomenon. Moreover,

all the subjects of investigation which are attributed to sociology, urbanism, race contacts, social stratification, or the relations between social conditions and mental constructions (*Wissenssoziologie*), are in fact difficult to isolate, and have the character of *total* phenomena which are connected with society as a whole and with the nature of society. (2: p. 119.)

But to understand the nature of social phenomena in general, to elucidate, that is, the concept of a 'form of life', has been shown to be precisely the aim of epistemology. It is true that the epistemologist's starting point is rather different from that of the sociologist but, if Wittgenstein's arguments are sound, that is what he must sooner or later concern himself with. That means that the relations between sociology and epistemology must be different from, and very much closer than, what is usually imagined to be the case. The accepted view runs, I think, roughly as follows. Any intellectual discipline may, at one time or another, run into philosophical difficulties, which often herald a revolution in the fundamental theories and which form temporary obstacles in the path of advancing scientific enquiry. The difficulties in the conception of simultaneity which Einstein had to face and which presaged the formulation of the revolutionary Special Theory of Relativity, provide an example. Those difficulties bore many of the characteristics which one associates with philosophical

puzzlement and they were notably different from the technical theoretical problems which are solved in the normal process of advancing scientific enquiry. Now it is often supposed that newly developing disciplines, with no settled basis of theory on which to build further research, are particularly prone to throw up philosophical puzzles; but that this is a temporary stage which should be lived through and then shaken off as soon as possible. But, in my view, it would be wrong to say this of sociology; for the philosophical problems which arise there are not tiresome foreign bodies which must be removed before sociology can advance on its own independent scientific lines. On the contrary, the central problem of sociology, that of giving an account of the nature of social phenomena in general, itself belongs to philosophy. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, this part of sociology is really misbegotten epistemology. I say 'misbegotten' because its problems have been largely misconstrued, and therefore mishandled, as a species of scientific problem.

The usual treatment of language in textbooks of social psychology shows the inadequacies to which this may lead. The problem of what language is is clearly of vital importance for sociology in that, with it, one is face to face with the whole question of the characteristic way in which human beings interact with each other in society. Yet the important questions are usually left untouched. One finds examples of the ways in which analogous concepts may differ in the languages of different societies with, perhaps, some indication of the ways in which these differences correspond to differences in the main interests which

are characteristic of the life carried on in those societies. All this can be interesting and even illuminating if brought forward by way of illustration in discussing what it is, after all, for people to have a language at all. But this one hardly ever meets. Instead, the notion of having a language, and the notions that go along with that: such as meaning, intelligibility, and so on—these are taken for granted. The impression given is that first there is language (with words having a meaning, statements capable of being true or false) and then, this being given, it comes to enter into human relationships and to be modified by the particular human relationships into which it does so enter. What is missed is that those very categories of meaning etc. are logically dependent for their sense on social interaction between men. Social psychologists sometimes pay lip-service to this. We are told, for instance, that 'Concepts are products of interaction of many people carrying on the important business of living together in groups' (30: p. 456). But the authors go no further with this than to remark on the way in which *particular* concepts may reflect the peculiar life of the society in which they are current. There is no discussion of how the very existence of concepts depends on group-life. And they show that they do not understand the force of this question when they speak of concepts 'embodying generalizations'; for one cannot explain what concepts are in terms of the notion of a generalization. People do not first make generalizations and then embody them in concepts: it is only by virtue of their possession of concepts that they are able to make generalizations at all.

2. *Meaningful Behaviour*

Wittgenstein's account of what it is to follow a rule is, for obvious reasons, given principally with an eye to elucidating the nature of language. I have now to show how this treatment may shed light on other forms of human interaction besides speech. The forms of activity in question are, naturally, those to which analogous categories are applicable: those, that is, of which we can sensibly say that they have a *meaning*, a *symbolic* character. In the words of Max Weber, we are concerned with human behaviour 'if and in so far as the agent or agents associate a subjective sense (*Sinn*) with it'. (33: Chapter I.) I want now to consider what is involved in this idea of meaningful behaviour.

Weber says that the 'sense' of which he speaks is something which is 'subjectively intended'; and he says that the notion of meaningful behaviour is closely associated with notions like *motive* and *reason*. "'Motive' means a meaningful configuration of circumstances which, to the agent or observer, appears as a meaningful "reason" (Grund) of the behaviour in question.' (*Ibid.*)

Let us consider some examples of actions which are performed *for a reason*. Suppose that it is said of a certain person, N, that he voted Labour at the last General Election because he thought that a Labour government would be the most likely to preserve industrial peace. What kind of explanation is this? The clearest case is that in which N, prior to voting, has discussed the pros and cons of voting Labour and

has explicitly come to the conclusion: 'I will vote Labour because that is the best way to preserve industrial peace'. That is a paradigm case of someone performing an action for a reason. To say this is not to deny that in some cases, even where N has gone through such an explicit process of reasoning, it may be possible to dispute whether the reason he has given is in fact the real reason for his behaviour. But there is very often no room for doubt; and if this were not so, the idea of a reason for an action would be in danger of completely losing its sense. (This point will assume greater importance subsequently, when I come to discuss the work of Pareto.)

The type of case which I have taken as a paradigm is not the only one covered by Weber's concept. But the paradigm exhibits clearly one feature which I believe to have a more general importance. Suppose that an observer, *O*, is offering the above explanation for *N*'s having voted Labour: then it should be noted that the force of *O*'s explanation rests on the fact that the concepts which appear in it must be grasped not merely by *O* and his hearers, but also by N himself. *N* must have some idea of what it is to 'preserve industrial peace' and of a connection between this and the kind of government which he expects to be in power if Labour is elected. (For my present purposes it is unnecessary to raise the question whether *N*'s beliefs in a particular instance are true or not.)

Not all cases of meaningful behaviour are as clear-cut as this. Here are some intermediate examples. *N* may not, prior to casting his vote, have formulated any reason for voting as he does. But this does not necessarily preclude the possibility of saying that he

has a reason for voting Labour and of specifying that reason. And in this case, just as much as in the paradigm, the acceptability of such an explanation is contingent on *N*'s grasp of the concepts contained in it. If *N* does not grasp the concept of industrial peace it must be senseless to say that his reason for doing anything is a desire to see industrial peace promoted.

A type of case even farther removed from my paradigm is that discussed by Freud in *The Psychology of Everyday Life*. *N* forgets to post a letter and insists, even after reflection, that this was 'just an oversight' and had no reason. A Freudian observer might insist that *N* 'must have had a reason' even though it was not apparent to *N*; suggesting perhaps that *N* unconsciously connected the posting of the letter with something in his life which is painful and which he wants to suppress. In Weberian terms, Freud classifies as 'meaningfully directed' (*sinnhaft orientiert*) actions which have no sense at all to the casual observer. Weber seems to refer to cases of this sort when, in his discussion of borderline cases, he speaks of actions the sense of which is apparent only 'to the expert'. This means that his characterization of *Sinn* as something 'subjectively intended' must be approached warily: more warily, for instance than it is approached by Morris Ginsberg, who appears to assume that Weber is saying that the sociologist's understanding of the behaviour of other people must rest on an analogy with his own introspective experience. (See II: pp. 153 ff.) This misunderstanding of Weber is very common both among his critics and among his vulgarizing followers; I will say more about it at a later stage. But Weber's insistence on the

importance of the subjective point of view can be interpreted in a way which is not open to Ginsberg's objections: he can be taken as meaning that even explanations of the Freudian type, if they are to be acceptable, must be in terms of concepts which are familiar to the agent as well as to the observer. It would make no sense to say that X's omission to post a letter to Y (in settlement, say, of a debt) was an expression of X's unconscious resentment against Y for having been promoted over his head, if X did not himself understand what was meant by 'obtaining promotion over somebody's head'. It is worth mentioning here too that, in seeking explanations of this sort in the course of psychotherapy, Freudians try to get the patient himself to recognize the validity of the proffered explanation; that this indeed is almost a condition of its being accepted as the 'right' explanation.

The category of meaningful behaviour extends also to actions for which the agent has no 'reason' or 'motive' at all in any of the senses so far discussed. In the first chapter of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* Weber contrasts meaningful action with action which is 'purely reactive' (*blöss reaktiv*) and says that purely *traditional* behaviour is on the borderline between these two categories. But, as Talcott Parsons points out, Weber is not consistent in what he says about this. Sometimes he seems to regard traditional behaviour as simply a species of habit, whereas at other times he sees it as 'a type of social action, its traditionalism consisting in the fixity of certain essentials, their immunity from rational or other criticism'. (24: Chapter XVI.) Economic behaviour

related to a fixed standard of living is cited as an example: behaviour, that is, where a man does not exploit an increase in the productive capacities of his labour in order to raise his standard of living but does less work instead. Parsons remarks that tradition in this sense is not to be equated with mere habit, but has a *normative* character. That is, the tradition is regarded as a standard which directs choices between alternative actions. As such it clearly falls within the category of the *simhaft*.

Suppose that N votes Labour without deliberating and without subsequently being able to offer any reasons, however hard he is pressed. Suppose that he is simply following without question the example of his father and his friends, who have always voted Labour. (This case must be distinguished from that in which N's *reason* for voting Labour is that his father and friends have always done so.) Now although N does not act here for any reason, his act still has a definite sense. What he does is not *simply* to make a mark on a piece of paper; he is *casting a vote*. And what I want to ask is, what gives his action *this* sense, rather than, say, that of being a move in a game or part of a religious ritual. More generally, by what criteria do we distinguish acts which have a sense from those which do not?

In the paper entitled *R. Stammers 'Überwindung der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung*, Weber considers the hypothetical case of two 'non-social' beings meeting and, in a purely physical sense, 'exchanging' objects. (See 34.) This occurrence, he says, is conceivable as an act of *economic* exchange only if it has a sense. He expands this by saying that the present

actions of the two men must carry with them, or represent, a regulation of their future behaviour. Action with a sense is symbolic: it goes together with certain other actions in the sense that it commits the agent to behaving in one way rather than another in the future. This notion of 'being committed' is most obviously appropriate where we are dealing with actions which have an immediate social significance, like economic exchange or promise-keeping. But it applies also to meaningful behaviour of a more 'private' nature. Thus, to stay with examples used by Weber, if N places a slip of paper between the leaves of a book he can be said to be 'using a bookmark' only if he acts with the idea of using the slip to determine where he shall start re-reading. This does not mean that he must necessarily *actually* so use it in the future (though that is the paradigm case); the point is that if he does not, some special explanation will be called for, such as that he forgot, changed his mind, or got tired of the book.

The notion of being committed by what I do now to doing something else in the future is identical in form with the connection between a definition and the subsequent use of the word defined, which I discussed in the last chapter. It follows that I can only be committed in the future by what I do now if my present act is the *application of a rule*. Now according to the argument of the last chapter, this is possible only where the act in question has a relation to a social context: this must be true even of the most private acts, if, that is, they are meaningful.

Let us return to N's exercise of his vote: its possibility rests on two presuppositions. In the first

place, N must live in a society which has certain specific political institutions—a parliament which is constituted in a certain way and a government which is related in a certain way to the parliament. If he lives in a society whose political structure is patriarchal, it will clearly make no sense to speak of him as 'voting' for a particular government, however much his action may resemble in appearance that of a voter in a country with an elected government. Secondly, N must himself have a certain familiarity with those institutions. His act must be a participation in the political life of the country, which presupposes that he must be aware of the symbolic relation between what he is doing now and the government which comes into power after the election. The force of this condition becomes more apparent in relation to cases where 'democratic institutions' have been imposed by alien administrators on societies to which such ways of conducting political life are foreign. The inhabitants of such a country may perhaps be enjoined into going through the motions of marking slips of paper and dropping them into boxes, but, if words are to retain any meaning, they cannot be said to be 'voting' unless they have some conception of the significance of what they are doing. This remains true even if the government which comes into power does so in fact as a result of the 'votes' cast.

3. *Activities and Precepts*

I have claimed that the analysis of meaningful behaviour must allot a central role to the notion of a

rule; that all behaviour which is meaningful (therefore all specifically human behaviour) is *ipso facto* rule-governed. It may now be objected that this way of speaking blurs a necessary distinction: that *some* kinds of activity involve the participant in the observance of rules, whilst others do not. The free-thinking anarchist, for example, certainly does not live a life which is circumscribed by rules in the same sense as does the monk or the soldier; is it not wrong to subsume these very different modes of life under one fundamental category?

This objection certainly shows that we must exercise care in the use we make of the notion of a rule; but it does not show that the way of speaking which I have adopted is improper or unilluminating. It is important to notice that, in the sense in which I am speaking of rules, it is just as true to speak of the anarchist following rules in what he does as it is to say the same thing of the monk. The difference between these two kinds of men is not that the one follows rules and the other does not; it lies in the diverse *kinds* of rule which each respectively follows. The monk's life is circumscribed by rules of behaviour which are both explicit and tightly drawn: they leave as little room as possible for individual choice in situations which call for action. The anarchist, on the other hand, eschews explicit norms as far as possible and prides himself on considering all claims for action 'on their merits': that is, his choice is not determined in advance for him by the rule he is following. But that does not mean that we can eliminate altogether the idea of a rule from the description of his behaviour.

We cannot do this because, if I may be permitted a significant pleonasm, the anarchist's way of life is a *way of life*. It is to be distinguished, for instance, from the pointless behaviour of a berserk lunatic. The anarchist has reasons for acting as he does; he *makes a point* of not being governed by explicit, rigid norms. Although he retains his freedom of choice, yet they are still significant choices that he makes: they are guided by considerations, and he may have good reasons for choosing one course rather than another. And these notions, which are essential in describing the anarchist's mode of behaviour, presuppose the notion of a rule.

An analogy may help here. In learning to write English there are a number of fairly cut-and-dried grammatical rules which one acquires, such as that it is wrong to follow a plural subject with a singular verb. These correspond roughly to the explicit norms governing monastic life. In terms of correct grammar one does not have a choice between writing 'they were' and 'they was': if one can write grammatically the question of which of these expressions one should use just does not arise. But this is not the only kind of thing one learns; one also learns to follow certain stylistic canons, and these, while they guide the way in which one writes, do not *dictate* that one should write in one way rather than another. Hence people can have individual literary styles but, within certain limits, can write only correct grammar or incorrect grammar. But it would plainly be mistaken to conclude from this that literary style is not governed by any rules at all: it is something that can be learned, something that can be discussed, and the fact that it

can be so learned and discussed is essential to our conception of it.

Perhaps the best way to support this point will be to consider a persuasive presentation of the case against it. Such a presentation is offered by Michael Oakeshott in a series of articles in the *Cambridge Journal*¹. Much of Oakeshott's argument coincides with the view of human behaviour which has been presented here, and I will begin by considering this part of what he says before venturing some criticisms of the rest.

Very much in accordance with the view I have been advocating is Oakeshott's rejection of what he calls the 'rationalistic' misconception of the nature of human intelligence and rationality. (See 21.) According to this misconception the rationality of human behaviour comes to it from without: from intellectual functions which operate according to laws of their own and are, in principle, quite independent of the particular forms of activity to which they may nevertheless be applied.

A good example (not discussed by Oakeshott himself) of the sort of view to which he objects is Hume's famous assertion that 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them'. On this view the ends of human conduct are set by the natural constitution of men's emotions; those ends being given, the office of reason is mainly to determine the appropriate means of achieving them.

The characteristic activities carried on in human societies spring then, presumably, from this interplay of reason and passion. Against this picture Oakeshott

¹ Reprinted in *Rationalism in Politics*, London, Methuen, 1962.

is quite correct to point out that: 'A cook is not a man who first has a vision of a pie and then tries to make it; he is a man skilled in cookery, and both his projects and his achievements spring from that skill'. (21.) Generally, both the ends sought and the means employed in human life, so far from generating forms of social activity, depend for their very being on those forms. A religious mystic, for instance, who says that his aim is union with God, can be understood only by someone who is acquainted with the religious tradition in the context of which this end is sought; a scientist who says that his aim is to split the atom can be understood only by someone who is familiar with modern physics.

This leads Oakeshott to say, again quite correctly, that a form of human activity can never be summed up in a set of explicit precepts. The activity 'goes beyond the precepts. For instance, the precepts have to be applied in practice and, although we may formulate another, higher-order, set of precepts prescribing how the first set is to be applied, we cannot go further along this road without finding ourselves on the slippery slope pointed out by Lewis Carroll in his paper, justly celebrated amongst logicians, *What the Tortoise Said to Achilles* (5).

Achilles and the Tortoise are discussing three propositions, A, B, and Z, which are so related that Z follows logically from A and B. The Tortoise asks Achilles to treat him as if he accepted A and B as true but did not yet accept the truth of the hypothetical proposition (C) 'If A and B be true, Z must be true', and to force him, logically, to accept Z as true. Achilles begins by asking the Tortoise to accept C,

which the Tortoise does; Achilles then writes in his notebook:

"A
B
C (If A and B are true, Z must be true)
Z."

He now says to the Tortoise: 'If you accept A and B and C, you must accept Z'. When the Tortoise asks why he must, Achilles replies: 'Because it follows *logically* from them. If A and B and C are true, Z *must* be true (D). You don't dispute *that*, I imagine?' The Tortoise agrees to accept D if Achilles will write it down. The following dialogue then ensues. Achilles says:

'Now that you accept A and B and C and D, *of course* you accept Z.'

'Do I?' said the Tortoise innocently. 'Let's make that quite clear. I accept A and B and C and D. Suppose I *still* refuse to accept Z?'

'Then *Logie* would take you by the throat, and *force* you to do it!' Achilles triumphantly replied. '*Logie* would tell you "You can't help yourself. Now that you've accepted A and B and C and D, you *must* accept Z". So you've no choice, you see.'

'Whatever *Logie* is good enough to tell me is worth *writing down*,' said the Tortoise. 'So enter it in your book, please. We will call it

(E) If A and B and C and D are true, Z must be true. Until I've granted *that*, of course, I needn't grant Z. So it's quite a *necessary* step, you see?'

'I see,' said Achilles; and there was a touch of sadness in his tone.

The story ends some months later with the narrator

returning to the spot and finding the pair still sitting there. The notebook is nearly full.

The moral of this, if I may be boring enough to point it, is that the actual process of drawing an inference, which is after all at the heart of logic, is something which cannot be represented as a logical formula that, moreover, a sufficient justification for inferring a conclusion from a set of premisses is to see that the conclusion does in fact follow. To insist on any further justification is not to be extra cautious; it is to display a misunderstanding of what inference is. Learning to infer is not just a matter of being taught about explicit logical relations between propositions: it is learning to do something. Now the point which Oakeshott is making is really a generalization of this: where Carroll spoke only of logical inference, Oakeshott is making a similar point about human activities generally.

4. Rules and Habits

All the above fits in very well with the position outlined in Chapter I. Principles, precepts, definitions, formulae—all derive their sense from the context of human social activity in which they are applied. But Oakeshott wishes to take a further step. He thinks 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. This seems to me a mistake for reasons which I shall now try to give.

In *The Tower of Babel* Oakeshott distinguishes

between two forms of morality: that which is 'a habit of affection and behaviour' and that which is 'the reflective application of a moral criterion' (20). He seems to think that that 'habitual' morality could exist in abstraction from 'reflective' morality. In habitual morality, he says, situations are met 'not by consciously applying to ourselves a rule of behaviour, nor by conduct recognized as the expression of a moral ideal, but by acting in accordance with a certain habit of behaviour'. These habits are not learned by precept but by 'living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner'. Oakeshott appears to think that the dividing line between behaviour which is habitual and that which is rule-governed depends on whether or not a rule is consciously applied.

In opposition to this I want to say that the test of whether a man's actions are the application of a rule is not whether he can *formulate* it but whether it makes sense to distinguish between a right and a wrong way of doing things in connection with what he does. Where that makes sense, then it must also make sense to say that he is applying a criterion in what he does even though he does not, and perhaps cannot, formulate that criterion.

Learning how to do something is not just copying what someone else does; it may start that way, but a teacher's estimate of his pupil's prowess will lie in the latter's ability to do things which he could precisely *not* simply have copied. Wittgenstein has described this situation very well. He asks us to consider someone being taught the series of natural numbers. Perhaps he has first to copy what his teacher has

written with his hand being guided. He will then be asked to do the 'same' thing by himself.

And here already there is a normal and an abnormal hearer's reaction. . . . We can imagine, e.g. that he does copy the figures independently, but not in the right order: he writes sometimes one sometimes another at random. And then communication stops at *that* point. Or again he makes 'mistakes' in the order.—The difference between this and the first case will of course be one of frequency.—Or he makes a *systematic* mistake: for example he copies every other number, or he copies the series 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 . . . like this: 1, 0, 3, 2, 5, 4 . . . Here we shall almost be tempted to say he has understood *wrong*. (37: I, 143.)

The point here is that it *matters* that the pupil should react to his teacher's example in one way rather than another. He has to acquire not merely the habit of following his teacher's example but also the realization that some ways of following that example are permissible and others are not. That is to say, he has to acquire the ability to apply a criterion; he has to learn not merely to do things in the same way as his teacher, but also *what counts* as the same way.

The importance of this distinction may be brought out by taking Wittgenstein's example a stage further. Learning the series of natural numbers is not just learning to copy down a finite series of figures in the order which one has been shown. It involves *being able to go on* writing down figures that have not been shown one. In one sense, that is, it involves doing something *different* from what one was originally shown; but *in relation to the rule* that is being followed, this counts as 'going on in the same way' as one was shown. There is a sense in which to acquire a habit is to

acquire a propensity to go on doing the same kind of thing; there is another sense in which this is true of learning a rule. These senses are different and a great deal hangs on the difference. Let us consider the case of an *animal* forming a habit: here there can be no question of 'the reflective application of a criterion'. Suppose that N teaches his dog to balance a lump of sugar on its nose and to refrain from eating it until N utters a word of command. The dog acquires a propensity to respond in a certain way to N's actions; we have here a type of case which fits reasonably well into the behaviourist's cherished category of stimulus and response. N, however, being a simple dog-lover rather than a scientist, no doubt speaks differently: he says the dog has learned a trick. This way of speaking is worth looking at, for it opens the door to the possibility of assessing the dog's performance in terms which do not belong to the stimulus-response set of concepts at all. He can now say that the dog has done the trick 'correctly' or 'incorrectly'. But it is important to notice that this is an anthropomorphic way of speaking; it requires a reference to *human* activities, and norms which are here applied analogically to animals. 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.

The same point is involved in pointing out that what counts as 'always doing the same kind of thing when the word of command is uttered' is decided by N rather than by the dog. Indeed it would be nonsensical

to speak of the dog's doing this. It is only in relation to N's purposes, involving as they do the notion of a trick, that the statement that the dog 'always does the same kind of thing' has any sense.

But whereas a dog's acquisition of a habit does not involve it in any understanding of what is meant by 'doing the same thing on the same kind of occasion', this is precisely what a human being has to understand before he can be said to have acquired a rule; and this too is involved in the acquisition of those forms of activity which Oakeshott wants to describe in terms of the notion of habit. A legal analogy may help here. Oakeshott's distinction between the two forms of morality is in many ways like the distinction between statute law and case law; and Roscoe Pound is taking up an attitude to this distinction somewhat analogous to Oakeshott's when he refers to statute law as 'the mechanical application of rules' and distinguishes it from case law which involves 'intuitions' (reminiscent of Oakeshott's discussion of politics in terms of 'intimations': see 22). This may sometimes be a helpful way of speaking, but it should not blind us to the fact that the interpretation of precedents, just as much as the application of statutes, involves following rules in the sense in which I have been using the expression here. As Otto Kahn-Freund puts it: 'One cannot dispense with a principle which links one decision with another, which raises the judicial act beyond the realm of sheer expediency'. (27; the reference to Pound is his *Introduction to the Philosophy of Law*, Chapter III. E. H. Levi gives an excellent concise account, with examples, of the way in which the interpretation of judicial precedents involves the application of rules: 14.)

It is only when a past precedent has to be applied to a new kind of case that the importance and nature of the rule become apparent. The court has to ask *what was involved* in the precedent decision and that is a question which makes no sense except in a context where the decision could sensibly be regarded as the application, however unselfconscious, of a rule. The same is true of other forms of human activity besides law, though elsewhere the rules may perhaps never be made so explicit. It is only because human actions exemplify rules that we can speak of past experience as relevant to our current behaviour. If it were merely a question of habits, then our current behaviour might certainly be *influenced* by the way in which we had acted in the past: but that would be just a causal influence. The dog responds to N's commands now in a certain way because of what has happened to him in the past; if I am told to continue the series of natural numbers beyond 100, I continue in a certain way because of my past training. The phrase 'because of', however, is used differently of these two situations: the dog has been *conditioned* to respond in a certain way, whereas I *know* the right way to go on *on the basis of* what I have been taught.

5. *Reflectiveness*

Many of the statements Oakeshott makes about habitual modes of behaviour sound like the things I have been saying about rule-governed behaviour.

Custom is always adaptable and susceptible to the *nuance* of the situation. This may appear a paradoxical

assertion; custom, we have been taught, is blind. It is, however, an insidious piece of misobservation; custom is not blind, it is only 'blind as a bat'. And anyone who has studied a tradition of customary behaviour (or a tradition of any other sort) knows that both rigidity and instability are foreign to its character. And secondly, this form of the moral life is capable of change as well as of local variation. Indeed, no traditional way of behaviour, no traditional skill, ever remains fixed; its history is one of continuous change. (20.)

Nevertheless, the issue between us is not a merely verbal one. Whereas Oakeshott maintains that the sort of change and adaptability of which he here speaks occurs independently of any reflective principles, I want to say that *the possibility of reflection is essential to that kind of adaptability.* Without this possibility we are dealing not with meaningful behaviour but with something which is either mere response to stimuli or the manifestation of a habit which is really blind. I do not mean by this that meaningful behaviour is simply a putting into effect of pre-existing reflective principles; such principles arise in the course of conduct and are only intelligible in relation to the conduct out of which they arise. But equally, the nature of the conduct out of which they arise can only be grasped as an embodiment of those principles. The notion of a principle (or maxim) of conduct and the notion of meaningful action are *intertwined*, in much the same way as Wittgenstein spoke of the notion of a rule and the notion of 'the same' being interwoven.

To see this, let us look at one of the things Oakeshott says about the contrast between his alleged two forms of morality. He says that dilemmas of the form 'What

ought I to do here?' are likely to arise only for someone who is self-consciously trying to follow explicitly formulated rules, not for someone who is unreflectively following an habitual mode of behaviour. Now it may well be true that, as Oakeshott alleges, the necessity for such heartsearchings is likely to be more frequent and pressing for someone who is trying to follow an explicit rule without a foundation of everyday experience in its application. But questions of interpretation and consistency, that is, matters for *reflection*, are bound to arise for anyone who has to deal with a situation foreign to his previous experience. In a rapidly changing social environment such problems will arise frequently, not just because traditional customary modes of behaviour have broken down, but because of the novelty of the situations in which those modes of behaviour have to be carried on. Of course, the resulting strain may lead to a breakdown in the traditions.

Oakeshott says that the predicament of Western morals is that 'our moral life has come to be dominated by the pursuit of ideals, a dominance ruinous to a settled mode of behaviour'. (20.) But what is ruinous to a settled mode of behaviour, of whatever kind, is an unstable environment. The only mode of life which can undergo a meaningful development in response to environmental changes is one which contains within itself the means of assessing the significance of the behaviour which it prescribes. Habits too may of course change in response to changing conditions. 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 into 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. This condition is fulfilled only if the agent could defend what he has done against the allegation that he ought to have done something different. Or at least he must be able to *understand* what it would have been like to act differently. The dog who balances sugar on its nose in response to its master's command has no conception of what it would be to respond differently (because it has no *conception* of what it is doing at all). Hence it has no alternative to what it does; it just responds to the appropriate stimulus. An honest man may refrain from stealing money, though he could do so easily and needs it badly; the thought of acting otherwise need never occur to him. Nevertheless, he has the alternative of acting differently because he understands the situation he is in and the nature of what he is doing (or refraining from doing). Understanding something involves understanding the contradictory too: I understand what it is to act honestly just so far as and no farther than I understand what it is not to act honestly. That is why conduct which is the product of understanding, and only that, is conduct to which there is an alternative.