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People of Our Word

Jorah Dannenberg*

We bind ourselves to one another by making and accepting promises. We obligate others by issuing orders, commands, even by making requests. We cancel standing obligations others have to us by consenting, or releasing others from promises they have made. And we alter when blame, resentment and other attitudes are appropriate by apologising for our mistakes and forgiving those of others. When we do these things, we appear to exert direct control over what we should do. We seem, to use David Owens' title, to be *Shaping the Normative Landscape*.

Few would deny that this is good for us. But David Owens aims to show something further, something some will find surprising. He argues that the ability to control what we should do is itself good for us, in a way that neither derives from nor reduces to anything else that is good. I may consent to the doctor's cold touch for the sake of my health; we may exchange promises in order that we both profit. But these more mundane, instrumental cases of consenting and promising tend to obscure a deeper fact: abilities like these *in themselves* enrich our lives, not merely as means to our other ends. Making certain actions obligatory, others acceptable, others worthy of blame, and so forth, is something we have a basic interest in being able to do. Owens aims to show that this kind of basic interest—a 'normative interest' as he calls it—provides the foundation for the most illuminating account of these kinds of activities.

*Shaping the Normative Landscape*¹ covers a lot of territory. It cuts across many of the artificial boundaries some would use to divide the sub-disciplines of moral psychology, philosophy of action and normative ethics. In the course of the book Owens offers an account of blame and why blaming is valuable; he discusses intentional action and the conditions of its intelligibility; he argues that the obligations and responsibilities that necessarily arise between friends are an essential aspect

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¹ David Owens, *Shaping the Normative Landscape* (Oxford University Press, 2012). Page references to this work are given in parentheses.

of what makes friendship worthwhile; he gives a characterisation of conscientious deliberation when one has an obligation; and he attempts to characterise our basic interests in being able to forgive, consent, command, request and promise. Someone interested in any of these topics will find that Owens has something to say worth engaging with; someone interested in all of them will find an ambitious attempt to systematically unite them into a single framework, organised around his core idea. It is in our interest to control our normative environment.

Wide-ranging though it is, the book's centrepiece is undeniably Owens' account of promising. According to Owens, the engine driving our practice of promising is an 'authority interest', an interest in sometimes being entitled to another's doing something. This interest is distinct from any interest in her *doing* it—it is a thoroughly normative interest, an interest in the status of another's action. When I promise to dance with you at the party, you become entitled to my dancing with you at the party; I wrong you if I do not, unless you release me from my promise. You may reasonably want my dancing with you to have precisely this status, whether or not you want us to dance. As promisees, we want to be able to get this kind of authority; as promisors, we want to be able to give it.

As Owens sees it, the value that underlies our practice must be one which helps us to understand why it is that promising has its shape. He regards his rivals as those that would ground promising in an interest in either social coordination, or else in reliable information. But he argues that these non-normative interests fare poorly when set against our interest in authority, when it comes to accounting for familiar, salient features of our practice. For instance, there is the fact that extortion tends to invalidate a promise, while desperation need not (if I promise to dance with a gun to my head, I am not obligated; if I promise because that is the only way to get you to be my date to the party, I am). Or again, there are the facts about our largely shared judgements about acceptable excuses for breaking a promise (I've broken my leg is a good excuse; I feel embarrassed about my clumsy dancing is not). By considering a range of examples—some more run of the mill, others by Owens' own admission 'perverse', Owens aims to convince that an interest in authority is the fundamental interest which our complex practice serves—to the extent that we also promise with an interest in coordinating or getting reliable information, these uses can be explained within the more fundamental framework of authority interests.

In his preface, Owens eschews much of the terminology of contemporary moral theory—expressions like 'autonomy' or 'moral reason' are abandoned in favour of his preferred idioms: notions of 'interest', 'value', 'habit', 'practice', 'appropriate', and 'wrong' and 'wronging', conceived in no particularly moralised sense. Some of these terms—'practice' and 'value', for instance—appear regularly in the tradition of moral thought about promising. But others represent a significant departure from the standard vocabulary.

I am not sure I fully grasp the nature of the worry that motivates this methodological choice. It seems perhaps that what attracts Owens is the thought that his preferred terms are less imbued with any particular theory of morality or value, and so can provide a more illuminating explanatory base for his project. This, however,

seems controversial: some of us may doubt whether there is in fact a use of terms like ‘interest’ or ‘harm’ that does not implicitly settle some basic issues in moral theory, or whether a non-specific use of ‘wrong’ and ‘wronging’ is just too far removed from our more familiar commerce with those words to give us any grip. Owens speaks of lies, broken promises, and even rapes which, though they involve wronging someone, involve no harm, nor in any other way affect anyone’s interests. In fact such actions are members of an explanatorily important class for Owens—he calls them ‘bare wrongings’. But I am not sure that one can even countenance the members of such a class without begging some important questions, about which of the sorts of things that can happen to a person should be regarded as harms, or about what her genuine interests are. Even a hopeless attempt at deception, for instance, might be thought necessarily to tread on an interest—namely, the interest in not being seen as a mere tool in the hands of another. To say nothing of a rape, even if somehow it leaves no physical or psychological scars on its victim.

Perhaps most central among Owens’ notions is ‘intelligibility, making sense, or having a point’.² Indeed, it is in terms of this notion that Owens conceives what his project aims to do: to deliver an account of promising (as well as partial accounts of consent, forgiveness and request) in terms of basic normative interests, which renders the activity intelligible—an account that enables us to make sense of the various things we do within our practice.

Since it is fundamental, let me try to say what I think he has in mind with talk of making sense.³ To make sense of something in the general case would seem to involve rendering it explicable: understanding it in a way that makes sense of it. To make sense of what a person is doing *as action* requires more than mere explicability: it requires understanding what she does in a way that makes it clear how what she does is under her control, guided by her. But considerations about what makes sense of an action do not appear to be merely relevant for other parties trying to make sense of what someone else is doing. If I understand Owens, a person acting cannot be indifferent to whether what she does makes any sense. Indeed, it is for this reason that we are to think of ‘making sense’ as normative: considerations of what makes sense set a standard for acting, such that to act at all is to be in some way responsible to them.

Owens is especially interested in rejecting one overly narrow view of what makes sense, according to which action only makes sense when a person acts for an end she deems desirable.⁴ At least one other way in which an action can make sense is if it is

2 Owens tells us that the relation of one thing’s making sense of another is the basic normative relation, and that he uses ‘making sense’, ‘intelligible’ and ‘having a point’ interchangeably (12). Later I will suggest that perhaps we should be careful about equating these notions.

3 My attempt to reconstruct what Owens has in mind by ‘making sense’ is based on his discussion at 12–17, as well as its subsequent use in developing the theory in the rest of the book. I confess, I find the notion as he uses it a bit elusive, but I think my rendering will be accurate enough for the purposes of the points I go on to make.

4 Actually, Owens speaks of the *action* as what must be regarded as desirable. But that seems to obscure the difference between an action that is in itself desirable and an action undertaken for a desirable end. We often perform undesirable actions because they are the best available means to some end we think desirable.

performed *from habit*. According to Owens, acting from habit involves the following three features (79):

- (1) A habit of Φ ing is acquired by choosing to Φ on a number of occasions.
- (2) To Φ from habit on a given occasion, I must not Φ because I have on this occasion deliberated about the merits of Φ ing.
- (3) To Φ from habit is, normally, to Φ intentionally.

Of course habitual action so conceived is neither *ipso facto* intelligible nor unintelligible. To use a couple of Owens' examples, a man who eats sawdust simply because he craves it acts unintelligibly (13); but a man who eats sawdust from habit fares no better (82). On the other hand, a man in the habit of running every day at noon can choose to run at noon today *from habit*, without deliberating about the merits of running at noon today, and his action may well be intelligible.

What makes habitual action intelligible when it is? Owens offers a criterion: in order for actions from habit to be intelligible, our habits must be responsive to our judgements about what is valuable. He urges that provided I can credibly think *being in the habit of Φ ing* is valuable, then an instance of Φ ing from habit can make sense, regardless of whether the value served by *being in the habit of Φ ing* is served by Φ ing *from habit* here and now (82).

This second way of making sense is crucial, for Owens' image of our social practice of promising is something like a complex structure of habitual (or at any rate habit-like) phenomena. Of particular importance is that when we unpack what goes on when a conscientious person is thinking about what to do when she has a promissory obligation, we find that her deliberation is 'shaped' and 'blocked', by the force of habit; she thus chooses what to do without deliberating *directly* about the merits of whether to do it (85–89). This is why others have struggled to see how what we do when we promise could make any sense. According to Owens they are correct insofar as they think that if we *did* have to deliberate about the merits of doing the things we promise to do, it might often not make any sense for us to do them. But if Owens can show that keeping promises is a worthwhile habit, then promises can intelligibly be kept *from habit*. And indeed, he argues, our habit-like patterns of deliberation are valuable, precisely because they are integral to serving our basic interest in authority—our manifestations of these habit-like deliberative patterns when we have promised makes the kind of authority we have an interest in a social reality (150). It thus follows that it makes sense to deliberate this way, and keep our promises.

One thing that seems important to keep in mind is that what counts as making sense is something over which we undeniably exert some kind of control, insofar as what makes sense depends on what we are willing to count as making sense. Obviously it is not up to any one of us to decide what makes sense, nor can we collectively declare that anything makes sense by fiat and have it thereby be so. What makes sense is a highly contextualised, socially conditioned matter, shaped by processes and forces that we at best can only partly comprehend, and almost certainly

cannot harness deliberately. Still, Owens' starting place is with a basic normative notion that yields to our influence, and this sets him apart. For most in the tradition, the basic furniture of the normative world is considerably less pliable—facts about what is good or bad, right or wrong, morally obligatory or permissible, rational or irrational—these facts are not obviously under our control to any great degree, and this is what sets the problem of explaining how we nevertheless seem to be able to bend them to our wills.⁵

In one way, I find myself in sympathy with Owens' attempt to rethink the basic problem. It can sometimes feel as though maybe the traditional problem of promising that moral theorists have grappled with for these many years is insoluble, ill-conceived, or just not the most interesting question to ask. On the other hand, the methodological differences do make putting Owens in dialogue with his predecessors rather complicated. Owens develops his own view by criticising the accounts of the two giants of the social practice tradition, Hume and Rawls. Like Owens, Hume and Rawls both believe that in order for it to be possible to make a promise, the activity must have a certain social reality—promising must be a going concern, for anyone to give her word. But for both thinkers, the fundamental task is not merely figuring out how what we do when we make and keep promises *makes sense*, but rather something considerably more robust: namely, both try to deliver an account that will reveal how the act of giving and keeping one's word could matter so much, in the particular way that it invariably seems to.

For Hume, this takes the form of a question about how keeping one's word can be such a distinctively virtuous act—how there could be virtue in doing something, just because one gave another one's word. For Rawls, it is a matter of understanding how one could be morally obligated to follow the rules of our social practice of promising, and how through that practice a perfectly general principle of justice might bind one to another person in particular. If either can succeed, our making sense when we promise will follow trivially, for it always makes sense to act virtuously or justly (though there is still room to think that it does not follow that doing so is, all things considered, what one should do in every case).

Problematic though their accounts may be, I think Hume and Rawls are both motivated by an outlook I find myself reluctant to give up: whenever an honourable person gives her word, *something* serious is afoot. Understanding our practice of promising is for neither thinker merely a matter of seeing how it is that the various things we do within that practice might all be intelligible; we must vindicate our sense that making a promise to another is one of the more important sorts of things a person can do, for in each and every promise one's character and integrity are on the line.

5 This is not to say that they end up where they start. On my reading, Hume may start with the thought that the facts that underlie human moral life—in particular, facts about the basic motivations of human beings and the operations of the moral sentiments—seem to lie beyond our control. But the genealogical accounts of the artificial virtues reveal how, over time, we can coopt what nature provides, and build for ourselves a second moral nature. In a different way, Rawls does the same: by showing how something we *can* create, a social practice, can allow us to re-direct the moral force of a principle of justice.

The idea that there is an inherent gravity involved in giving one's word seems especially absent in Owens' discussion of what he calls the 'problem of bare wronging' with respect to promises. I have already mentioned some misgivings about the very notion of a 'bare wronging', but set those aside. The kind of promise Owens has in mind is provided by Hume's sort of example, which can be characterised in a neutral way: I have borrowed some money and promised to repay it, but I have since learned that the lender is a bigot and a miser. If he gets the money back, he will not use it (or if, he does, will do bad things with it). He has forgotten about the loan and the promise, and will not remember unless I remind him. The promise was made in private, so there is no worry that my reputation will suffer. We might even suppose that a unique opportunity to use the repayment amount for something distinctively good has just presented itself. Still, it seems that returning the money and keeping my promise would at least *make sense*. Why does it?

If I understand him, Owens thinks that when one keeps a promise in this kind of case, it can only make sense if one chooses to do so *from habit*, despite seeing nothing desirable or good about doing it. In order that this happen, one must choose without deliberating about the merits of returning the loan. Owens concedes, in other words, that if one *did* deliberate about the merits of repaying, one would have to arrive at the conclusion that doing so would have no point. But suppose I decided to keep my promise and you later learned of my decision and asked me: 'Why did you keep your word and return that sum to the bigot who lent it to you? Don't you know what he'll spend it on?' I hope I would not say 'For no reason; I keep my promises, so I did not bother to deliberate about whether to pay him back.' Given what is here at stake, *that* answer is one that seems to me to make very little sense.

Indeed, insofar as such cases can be among the harder ones for us as promisors, I almost certainly *did* deliberate, and probably more than usual. If I decided to repay the loan, I did so fully aware of the downside; nevertheless I thought I ought to do so. If you asked me why I repaid, I might say something like 'I gave that bigot my word that I would; that was more important than whether he would have missed the money, or what he will do with it now that he has it.' I might add 'I am not the kind of person who breaks his word, even in situations like these. A promise is a promise, even when made to a bigot.'

Though perhaps it is more vivid here, what seems true in this case likewise seems true in any case where it is properly said that a promise was *kept*. To keep a promise it is not enough that one merely does as promised. To keep a promise, it seems to me, is to be moved by familiar kinds of considerations about the entitlement of one's promisee, one's own integrity, and so forth. A promisor of good character is not someone who, because of some particularly forceful habits, does not consider the merits of what she does. Rather, she is someone who sees the important sorts of considerations that arise when one has made a promise; she invariably recognises them among the merits of what she does. She chooses to honour her word with an eye toward them. In other words, she sees the value in *keeping* each of her promises; not just the value of being in the habit of doing as she promises. So described, an honourable promisor—a promisor of good character—represents an ideal, one

which many of us often fail to realise when we promise. Nevertheless, if one's theory provides no purchase for this as an ideal, I begin to doubt whether it is a theory of keeping one's word at all.

The thought can perhaps be expressed in another way, by denying something Owens assumes: that talk of making sense, intelligibility and having a point necessarily come to the same thing. It seems to me that as we ordinarily think of these notions they are not all quite the same. Perhaps the urge to equate them starts with recognising that, if one regards something as truly *pointless*, it may be hard to see how one could bring oneself to do it. That seems right, and insofar as it is true, it makes it hard to see how it could make any sense to do something that one thought pointless. If somehow one nevertheless did it, one's doing so might be unintelligible. But there is a lot of territory between regarding something as pointless and seeing the point in it. One can live much of a life, the habitual parts of a life in particular, in precisely this territory—certain that how one goes on is not pointless, but not seeing any particular point in it either. This may be true because one does not bother to look for the point, or because one looks but cannot find it. In the former case, one may be living habitually; in the latter, one may begin to feel that one is living absurdly. In either case, going on can still be perfectly intelligible.

But keeping one's word rarely seems like this, at least not for a person *of her word*. An honourable promisor always sees the point in keeping a promise—each promise—whether it is to a bigot, a stranger, an acquaintance or an intimate. One has given one's word, invited trust from another; one's being a trustworthy person—a person of one's word—is now on the line. Maybe for some, doing as promised is habitual—more like taking one's daily run, or having a smoke after lunch. But I confess I find myself less concerned that those promises should be rendered intelligible. It seems more worthwhile to try to vindicate the sense that something important in moral life might be missed in *that* way of going about things when one has made a promise to another. Why settle for thinking that it makes sense to do as we promise? Why not try to vindicate the idea that we should aspire to be people of our word?