

TIME WILL TELL—‘IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO THINK IN ADVANCE OF EXPERIENCE, AND NO EXPERIENCE IS MERELY EMPIRICAL’

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My temporary

After a long and challenging week (as I know it will have been for all of you) and having spent an entire day (Saturday) from dawn until dusk writing the following piece I find that, as 9pm approaches, I can no longer tell whether it contains anything more than mere, arrant nonsense. It's certainly a flawed and far from perfect or finished piece. However, in the hope that it contains one or two useful goads to further thought in these difficult times, I hold my breath, ask for your forgiveness and patience, and press publish . . .

In a quiet moment last week (of which there were more than usual) I took some time to read an essay ([Oakeshott as Philosopher by James Alexander](#)) about the English philosopher and political theorist [Michael Oakeshott \(1901–1990\)](#) in which was quoted something from his earliest book *Experience and Its Modes*: ‘it is impossible to think in advance of experience, and no experience is merely empirical’ ([Experience and Its Modes, Cambridge University Press, 1933, p. 117](#)). Just to remind you, ‘empirical’ simply means that which is concerned with the observation and experience of actual events/things rather than trying to understand those same events/things firstly (and perhaps only) through the lens of some predetermined, abstract theory or ideology.

Before proceeding I should be clear I’m not suggesting that what follows is what *Oakeshott* actually thought but only those thoughts *Oakeshott’s* quotation has prompted *me* to think about in this new, disturbing and still unfolding experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Oakeshott’s words spoke powerfully to me as someone whose job requires me to produce some meaningful (and, hopefully, useful) copy each week and to deliver it up, in the moment, to an audience of some sort or another—until recently as an address in the [Cambridge Unitarian Church](#) on a Sunday morning and now only by email and via my blog.

For ministers of religion and politicians (‘radical’ and ‘conservative’ alike) the major temptation upon finding themselves in a new and challenging situation like this is, all too swiftly, to present to their audience some confidently and authoritatively expressed, soothing ‘big-picture’ about what the situation means for us—a picture primarily based, not upon actual events themselves, but upon their own preferred, predetermined, abstract theories or ideologies.

Probably like many of you, this week I’ve seen/heard online quite a lot of religious and political

material like this and, to be frank, all of it has made me uncomfortable and some of it has made me more than a little queasy, especially those utterances which have called upon a supernatural god to provide help and salvation for us. For good or ill, I neither can nor wish to offer you such confident, authoritative and (superficially) soothing words. I think it's far more honest simply to admit at the outset that not only do I have no sense of, or belief in, such a supernatural god ([a sense that, for me, has only been deepened by this pandemic](#)), neither do I have any firm and fixed ideas about what this event means for us now or will mean in the future, either as individuals, as members of a small liberal church community, as citizens of this or that village, town, city, country or, of course, as denizens of planet earth. In a wholly non-glib way all I can really say with confidence and authority is that 'time will tell.'

The reason for saying this is because, as should be plain as a pikestaff, actual events are driving innumerable coaches and horses through aspects of everybody's social, cultural, religious, political, national, financial and economic predetermined, abstract theories or ideologies. I hope it goes without saying that a fair few coaches and horses have recently driven roughshod through some of my own long-held theories and ideologies—the truth is, of course, that no one will escape experiencing something of this.

Given that such a global pandemic hasn't occurred since 1918 (and never under the conditions that currently obtain in our modern, inter-connected, hyper-mobile world) it is surely right to say that thinking about what *this* event means cannot be occur *before* our experience of it. Consequently, it seems to me that, before I even vaguely begin think about (let alone speak or write about) what the current situation means or will mean, or what I believe (or hope) will (or should or may) come afterwards etc., it's vitally important for me, for us all, properly to enter *into* this experience *now* and so allow it to teach us some necessary lessons.

Although there are surely others, it seems to me that we enter into this experience in at least two primary ways although, as we shall see, they are not really separate ways at all but, instead, intimately entangled and moving lines of thought/action.

The first way to enter into this experience now is a way of action. Observing the way nature is naturing in the form of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the first necessary action for most of us to undertake (counterintuitively to so many people in this age of excessive and obsessive activity and consumption) is to be doing 'nothing' by staying at home and keeping apart from others as much as is humanly possible. It is through this kind of active-inaction that (again

counterintuitively in our age) we simultaneously find ourselves able to continue actively to show our love to one another. Not, of course, through a loving, physical proximity to each other (marked by a handshake, a hug, a kiss, a drink down the pub, a party in a restaurant or park, etc.), but through an active, loving, physical ‘distance’ that, almost paradoxically, is joining many of us exceptionally closely in a spirit of love and compassion. It’s worth noting the strange truth that although we now find ourselves at a ‘distance’ and ‘far’ away from each other, through our renewed communications via email, telephone, blogs and video conferencing, in some very significant ways we’ve never been so ‘close’ or so ‘near’ to each other than we are at the moment. In short, for our own and other’s health and well-being (especially those involved in our essential, key services), this active-inaction is one key way we are currently being called upon to enter fully into this experience now.

Before going on to a second way to enter into this experience now it’s also worth noting—hard though it can be to acknowledge and internalize when so many lives, including our own, are at risk—that the SARS-CoV-2 virus is in fact playing a crucial part in this discovery of a new way of showing compassion and love to each other. For us to move forward wisely from this point it seems to me vital, therefore, that we do not come to see the virus as an some alien, external, ‘unnatural’ enemy, but to see it as playing a natural, active part along with ourselves in our world’s ‘conversational’ way of coming to be. Of course, there are good reasons why we are right to seek out strategies and, hopefully, vaccines to ameliorate its worst effects upon us. But, at the same time, I remain convinced we must gracefully and gratefully allow the ‘voice’ of the virus powerfully and creatively to inform our national and global conversations about how we might best organise our highly interconnected, highly mobile human societies in the future. SARS-CoV-2 is a partner in this conversation—a scary and dangerous partner to be sure—but a partner nonetheless.

The second way to enter into this experience now is a way of observation and reflection. Again these are both kinds of active-inactions. At this moment in time, as nature naturing in the form of the SARS-CoV-2 virus teaches us the importance of stepping back (at least temporarily) from each other’s obviously physical forms, might not nature simultaneously be ‘encouraging’ us (figuratively speaking, of course) also to be stepping back from and letting go of many of our old, previously held, abstract theories or ideologies about the world in order that we can, a) better observe and see what is *actually* happening ([perhaps we should remember here the Chinese proverb that the best way to clear a muddy pond is to leave it alone](#)) and, b) to reflect on what possibilities and opportunities for our future ways of being in the world may or may not, in time, genuinely be developed into actuality? As Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi notes ‘we should never forget that

the present constitution of the world contains many different (conflicting) possibilities, not only one.’ The modest hope here is that these two things will help us be ready to take advantage of those moments when we can genuinely begin to extract and implement what we feel to be the best of the many immanent futurabilities that are always inscribed in the present (cf. [Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility, Verso Books, 2017, pp. 2-3](#)). Of course, there is no guarantee that our own preferred, possible outcomes will come to pass rather than those we fear and would surely loathe but, without doubt, we’d be foolish not carefully to have made our observations and reflections so that, if and when, a propitious moment obtains we can quickly put our shoulders as firmly and confidently as we can to our preferred wheel’s direction of travel.

OK, so far, so good. But what about the second half of Oakeshott’s sentence in which he wrote ‘no experience is merely empirical’? Well, I take him to be reminding us that, although proceeding ‘as if’ there exists a genuinely ‘detached’, apparently ‘passive’ way to observe the world in order to discover what it is all about and what it might be teaching us about reality is, at times, a helpful, enabling *fiction*, it’s not wholly true.

The nineteenth-century French physiologist [Claude Bernard \(1813–1878\)](#), who almost certainly believed in this fiction, once wittily said ‘When you go into the laboratory do not forget to leave your imagination in the ante-room with your overcoat; on the other hand never forget to take it away with you when you go home’ (quoted in [The Selected Writings of Maurice O’Connor Drury: On Wittgenstein, Philosophy, Religion and Psychiatry, Maurice O’Connor Drury, Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 264](#)). However, our contemporary sciences have slowly but surely helped us see that everything, but everything, is always [intra-acting](#) with everything else, that there is no absolute separation between the laboratory and the ante-room/wider world, and that we are always in the world fully wrapped up, so to speak, in our (human) overcoats because there is no ante-room in which to hang them at the beginning or the end of the day. The truth is that we are always bringing something to the world in the form of ourselves that will inevitably affect, in often invisible and unexpected ways, the way the world is unfolding.

As the American feminist and physicist [Karen Barad \(b. 1956\)](#) has noted, we have been realising more and more that the world is not made up of discrete and essentially inert things about which our observations can ‘simply “disclose preexisting values” or properties but, in fact, [our observations] also always play a role in constituting them.’ In a recent paper Gamble, Hanan and Nail go on to observe:

‘Barad argues that since there is in fact no strict or fixed boundary line dividing even a scientific laboratory from the rest of the world, humans can therefore never observe the universe as though from outside of it. Thus, she argues, “[t]o the extent that humans participate in scientific or other practices of knowing, they do so as part of the larger material configuration of the world and its ongoing open-ended articulation.” As such, humans (like everything else) always partly constitute and are partly constituted by that which they observe’ ([Christopher N. Gamble, Joshua S. Hanan & Thomas Nail \(2019\) WHAT IS NEW MATERIALISM?, Angelaki, 24:6, 111-134, DOI: 10.1080/0969725X.2019.1684704](#)).

This pandemic and our current scientific knowledge are, together, reminding us in some deeply challenging ways that our world is [intra-active](#) (see three-minute video explained below) all the way up, down and around and that we can never truly isolate ourselves from any other thing, whether that’s each other, the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the spring blossom bursting out around us everywhere, the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, thin sects, plants, fish, coral, rock, soil, air, sun, water or anything else, *ad infinitum*. In short ‘No property of any discernible thing that is—whether its physical features, agency, or even its speech or thought—entirely precedes or remains unchanged by its actions or encounters with other things’ ([ibid](#)).



In the twinkling of an eye and *at the same time*, all of us across the planet earth are suddenly

faced with the pressing need to find new ways in the present to live fully, justly, decently and compassionately together with all things in the full knowledge that we and all things are all, always-already, in this together and that there never has been, is not, and never will be any such thing as genuine self-isolation from any other thing. It has been impossible for our species as *a planet-wide collective* to think this in advance of our *actual experience* of this global pandemic and we are all suddenly discovering, first-hand, every minute of every day, that this experience is not merely *empirical*—only about putative, cold, static, flat facts concerning independent things existing ‘out there’—but, for us, *existential and intra-acting* through and through.

Whenever the restrictions on our movements and physical proximity are finally lifted then will be the time to sit down together once again and see what the *experience* of this has meant to and taught each of us. It is only out of this kind of compassionate conversation born of shared experience that the best possible human futures might just, in time, come. But, as I say, time will tell, time will tell.