The Critique of Rationalism and the Defense of Individuality: Oakeshott and Hayek

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Abstract: Oakeshott and Hayek were both towering figures of the twentieth century in social and political philosophy who had contributed a lot to the defense of individual liberty. While this paper acknowledges that there are important affinities in their respective intellectual outlooks, it also attempts to argue that there are significant differences in their critique of Rationalism and defense of individuality. Oakeshott's criticism of the sovereignty of technique in modern Rationalism is premised on his claim of the inseparable partnership of technical knowledge and practical knowledge in all human cognition and action. This, together with his recognition of the poetic character of all human activity, allows Oakeshott to develop a critique of Rationalism that fully appreciates the importance of individual style, meaning, and freedom. Hayek's critique of constructivism, while highly original and persuasive, still relies on the primacy of demonstrable abstract principles that is rationalist at least in style if not in substance. Furthermore, Hayek's defense of individualism is, in the final analysis, epistemological and evolutionary, making his justification of individual liberty at times instrumental rather than intrinsic.

Keywords: Rationalism; individuality; practical knowledge; technical knowledge; experience; abstract principles; rules; poetic character of human activity

INTRODUCTION

Oakeshott and Hayek were among the most profound theorists of civil association of the 20th century. In their respective philosophical responses against totalitarian politics, I believe that they share a number of important common positions: the critique of centralized or collective planning, the adherence to the rule of law as one constitutive element of civil association, the defense of individual freedom, and the preference for emerging practices to deliberately designed institutions.

Although the more conventional understanding is that the Oakeshottian kind of conservatism is theoretically quite opposite to Hayek's classical liberalism (Sandel, 1984, pp. 1-11), recent scholarly studies appear to put more emphasis on the affinities shared by Oakeshott and Hayek. For example, Richard Boyd and James Ashley point out that both Oakeshott and Hayek recognize the importance of spontaneous order in their social and political philosophy. To them, Oakeshott's critique of Rationalism and Hayek's attack of constructivism demonstrate in similar manner the pretense of Reason with a capital R, and both theorists argue persuasively that a kind of neutral rules of just conduct is required in order to maintain civil order, in which individual freedom is protected (Boyd and Ashely, 2007, pp. 87-106). Equally interesting is Leslie Marsh's most recent work on Hayek and Oakeshott. Marsh argues that both thinkers share more or less the same conception of mind/cognition and embrace a kind of embedded individualism (Marsh, 2012, pp. 248-267).

While I find many of the views in Boyd and Ashley's paper and in Marsh's article agreeable, I intend in this paper to examine the differences between Oakeshott and

Hayek instead. As I shall argue later in this paper, despite their affinities in many respects, there are important differences between the two as regards their respective critiques of Rationalism and defenses of individuality. A good understanding of these differences will not only help us to better recognize the nature of their respective philosophical positions, but also to better appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of their different approaches. Like any profound thinkers whose ideas are worthy of comparison, a close examination of their affinities may reveal important differences, just like going beyond the differences may discover significant common concerns. Learning these differences, just like recognizing the affinities, will, I believe, help us to better grasp the complexity of profound thinking and help to illuminate the human condition.

THE CRITIQUE OF RATIONALISM

Let me begin with Oakeshott's famous swipe at Hayek in "Rationalism in Politics" where he regards Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944/1972) as rationalistic despite its opposition to socialism: "A plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of politics" (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 21). For those who are familiar with Hayek's criticism of scientism (Hayek, 1952/1979) and constructivism (Hayek, 1973), they may be puzzled by such a remark, since Hayek is one of the most severe critics of synoptic planning and is keenly aware of the limits of centralized reason because of the inevitable "fragmentation of circumstantial knowledge" and the impossibility of an abstract Cartesian mind that can model our civilization afresh after its own image or rationality (1973, pp. 8-34).[1] Leslie Marsh in fact thinks that Oakeshott is "just plain wrong" (Marsh, 2012, p. 260) about Hayek in this regard.

However, on closer examination, I would say that Oakeshott's comment on Hayek in fact is not too far off the mark. Let me explain.

First, Oakeshott of course is not saying that Hayek is an advocate of central planning. But to Oakeshott, however, Hayek in some important respect is still following the rationalist style of politics precisely because he is employing an ideology (liberalism or libertarianism) or a doctrine derived from abstract political principles to defend individual freedom and the western civilization. That is why Oakeshott has this to say: "only in a society already deeply infected with Rationalism will the conversion of the traditional resources of resistance to the tyranny of Rationalism into a self-conscious ideology be considered a strengthening of those resources" (1962, pp. 21-22).

Hayek in fact all along is very clear and frank about this. For example, in "Individualism: True and False" (first published in 1946, after the publication of *The Road to Serfdom*), Hayek laments the declining influence of religion and hence "the need for a generally accepted [set of principles] of social order" which is "implicit in most Western or Christian political tradition but which can no longer be unambiguously described by any readily understood term." Therefore, it is necessary "to restate these principles fully" with the hope that they can serve as "practical guides" for Hayek and the liberals. (1948/1980, p. 2) Indeed, in his perhaps most important philosophical 3-volume work the trilogy *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (Hayek, 1973; 1976; 1979) which were published in the 1970s, the subtitle of this work is "A new statement of the liberal principles of justice and political economy".

Oakeshott never says that one should not under any circumstances abstract traditional resources into a doctrine or a set of principles. In fact, Oakeshott had given quite a favorable peer review to Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty* (1960) before it came out, saying that it was impressive and breaking new grounds. But Oakeshott in his review had consistently described Hayek's attempt as setting out a "doctrine" that is "deeply rooted in European civilization" (Oakeshott, 2004, p. 301).

Oakeshott's main point is that while knowledge necessarily involves technique and skills that are susceptible of formulation in rules, principles, directions, maxims, there is at the same time no knowledge which is not also "know how", or practical knowledge, the characteristic of which is that it is not susceptible of formulation of this kind (1962, pp. 9-11). In other words, practical knowledge cannot be explicitly taught or learned, but "can be acquired only by continuous contact with one who is perpetually practicing it", because it is expressed by way of doing things, like in taste or connoisseurship, as it "exists only in practice" (1962, p. 11). The problem with Rationalism, according to Oakeshott, is that it does not recognize practical knowledge as knowledge at all, and it asserts that only technical knowledge is rational and hence the sovereignty of technique is what is assumed in Rationalism (*ibid*).

To be fair to Hayek, one must point out that although Hayek is very much in favor of adhering to abstract theories and general principles in order to steer the society towards the progressive direction of individual freedom and social and economic growth, he does recognize that tradition and

practical way of doing things do play a part in this process. To him, one should not "disdain to seek assistance from whatever non-rational institutions or habits have proved their worth" (1960, p. 406). Nevertheless, it is still true to say that under such a formulation, unlike Oakeshott's conception of the partnership of the technical and the practical in all knowledge or concrete experience, a somewhat bifurcation of these two aspects is still maintained, with preference given to the demonstrable and technical aspect, which is regarded as the "crowning part" (1960, p. 33)[2] of civilization. The practical and non-rational aspect will have to "prove" its worth before it is accepted, though given Hayek's ideas of complex phenomenon (particularly in the social and cultural arena), the concurrent development of mind and civilization and spontaneous evolution, such a proof is never nomological and exhaustive, but can only be shown by way of established long term beneficial effects as demonstrated by such institutions and habits or by what Hayek calls "explanation of the principle," which, however, still belongs to a kind of indirect demonstrative proof (1967, chapters 1-2; 1973).[3]

If we look at Oakeshott's conception of concrete experience and the role of abstract principles plays in such an experience, the difference is significant. For example, in his first "The Tower of Babel" essay (1962, pp. 59-79),[4] Oakeshott tries to show that while the dominant reflective mode of morality in the West appears to be very self-conscious, rational and scientific, in reality, it is abstract, detached from the concrete day to day tradition of moral habit, unstable and dogmatic. The requirements to constantly and critically analyze our moral practice with reference to some abstract, reflective, and supposedly supreme principle "tend to undermine, not only prejudice in moral habit, but moral habit itself, and moral reflection may come to inhibit moral sensibility" (1962, p. 68). To Oakeshott, the moral life in fact is a form of more or less coherent, concrete and inter-related habits and practices. In the human world, man cannot live without morality. When we want to communicate with each other, relate one's individual self to others, or understand one's individual self (like what kind of person I ought to be), one cannot do any of these without resorting to our moral affection, habit and sensibility. In other words, morality, like our common language, always exists in a community. Through the subscription to the concrete practices of morality, members of the community are able to express their moral sentiment and choose their specific moral conduct in their individual or cooperative undertakings. We learn and pick up our moral practice mostly in our daily life by following the actual behaviors of our seniors and peers, just like we learn and pick up our mother tongue from childhood by following how the adults speak in our community.

Of course like language, morality has its grammar (explicit rules and regulations), and there are moral theoreticians using reflective and demonstrable methods to try to list out the so-called essential rules for the community to consider or to follow and make rational enquiry about them. However, if we use these abstracted principles as the supreme guides for our moral conduct, this is just like putting the cart before the horse, because these principles are what have been distilled from the actual concrete practices, without which they will lose most of their meanings.

ABSTRACT PRINCIPLE AND CONCRETE EXPERIENCE

Hayek, like Oakeshott, has used language as an example to show why Rationalism or constructivism is a mistake. In "Rules, Perception and Intelligibility", Hayek makes the following remark: "The most striking instance of the phenomena from which we shall start is the ability of small children to use language in accordance with the rules of grammar and idiom of which they are wholly unaware" (1967, p. 43). Furthermore, "Rules which we cannot state…do not govern only our actions. They also govern our perception. The child who speaks grammatically without knowing the rules of grammar not only understands all the shades of meaning expressed by others through following the rules of grammar, but may also be able to correct a grammatical mistake in the speech of others" (1967, p. 45).

In other words, what Hayek is saying here is that men's ability to engage in successful social interaction does not entail conscious understanding of the abstract rules behind the related practices, because most of these practices are the results of human action, not human design. To Hayek, men's ability to follow abstract rules without being aware of them makes it illusionary to think that only through rational reasoning with full understanding of all the relevant data and facts under the guidance of explicit and demonstrable premises can one arrive at truth or successful social actions (Hayek, 1967, pp. 96-105; Hayek, 1973). Hayek goes on to cite some other examples: one does not need to deliberate on the mechanics of cycling before one is capable of riding a bicycle, nor does one need to know in a game of billiards how to construct mathematical formulas that would give the directions of travel of the balls the chance to score most points before one is a good billiards player (1967, pp. 43-45). As a result, Hayek thinks that these examples show that the ability

to act successfully is not necessarily derived from the ability to explicitly demonstrate by "reason" why one is successful.

Hayek certainly agrees with Oakeshott that we all learn from experience, which is "a process not primarily of reasoning but of the observance, spreading, transmission and development of practices which have prevailed because they were successful" (Hayek, 1973, p. 18). However, Hayek in this regard chooses not to tackle the question of how men learn from others to become competent actors in these practices through example and imitation or by analogy (1973, p. 19). To him, "the important point is that every man growing up in a given culture will find in himself rules, or may discover that he acts in accordance with rules—and will similarly recognize the actions of others as conforming or not conforming to various rules" (1973, p. 19), and it is his ambition to restate, in a systematic manner, those rules and principles of the spontaneous order to help us to resist the error of constructivism and to rebuild a liberal and just society for the modern world.

But can the articulation of rules and principles substitute learning by example and imitation? Let's take a closer look at those "learning from experience" examples mentioned above again.

First, the ability to ride a bicycle, which is a practical way of doing something, is one thing. But the ability to understand the laws of mechanics, which is an engagement in some theoretical or explanatory undertaking, is quite another. We certainly can learn how to ride a bicycle by imitation and by actually doing it, but it is not entirely clear in what sense riding a bicycle should be understood as following the laws of the mechanics, though those laws could help to explain why (but not how) the cyclist manages to keep his/her balance and direction when riding. The same can be said for the example of the billiards player.

Of course for professional cyclists engaging in competition, it is now common that they are helped by many experts who are well versed in the mechanics of cycling and in sports science in order to help them to improve their performance by highlighting, among other things, the importance of using the right kind of materials for the bicycle and taking the right angle in negotiating a sharp turn when riding in accordance with their theoretical or engineering knowledge in sports science. But this again is no substitute for the cyclists' actual practice and performance. Even with full knowledge of the mechanics of cycling would not automatically help one to ride a bicycle, not to say to become a professional cyclist. On matters like this, the way to learn and to excel is ultimately really to do it by riding on a bicycle, and that is what Oakeshott means when he says that practical knowledge "exists only in practice." Confusing these two (i.e. the practical mode and the explanatory modes, such as science), according to Oakeshott's modal theory of experience, is committing *ignoratio elenchi* (Oakeshott, 1933).

This does not mean that when engaging in doing, one cannot derive some practical rules or guidelines to help one's practice. When learning to ride a bicycle, for example, it is useful to remember that one's focus should not be on where the wheel touches the ground but rather much further in front. And when one is losing their balance, it is more helpful to accelerate than to slow down. All these can be developed into explicit and practical rules for beginners to follow. But again, they are no substitutes for doing the thing itself even if one is aware of them, and that is why Oakeshott says that in all knowledge or skills, there is always a partnership between the technical and the practical, but it is also important not to confuse the theoretically technical with the practically technical.

Hayek's theory of spontaneous order is a very impressive explanatory attempt to help us to better understand why social institutions like the market, the rule of law, morals, language, and so on are emerging and evolutionary practices rather than deliberately designed organizations. His works in this area certainly have enlightened us as to why constructivism is a mistake. To systematically articulate the general principles presupposed by the practice of spontaneous social order is one important way to enhance such an understanding. Another way to go about it is historical, explaining how the twists and turns in the development of social institutions evolve into a spontaneous order according to available evidence. Hayek certainly has done both of these in his political and social philosophy. However, Hayek is more ambitious than that since he has turned many of the principles he has articulated into a plan. One good example is the model constitution he proposes for modern democracies, with the intention to save them from bargaining politics and the scramble for particularistic interests by organized coalitions of fleeting majorities. This is his gallant attempt to restore the liberal order from an ideal he thinks has gone astray in the modern world (Hayek, 1979).[5]

Hayek is of course acutely aware that his plan is not going to be realized in the foreseeable future. But for him, the task of the political philosopher is "not to be concerned with what is now politically possible", but to "consistently [defend] the 'general principles which are always the same'" (Hayek, 1960, p. 411), for he as a liberal believes in "the long-range power of ideas", and regards the advance of knowledge

of this kind as important progress for the development of human civilization (1960, p. 404). This at once reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of Hayek the philosopher with a political plan: he has contributed a lot in enhancing our intellectual understanding of the abstract principles of spontaneous order, but such a plan is still no substitute for the actual practices that provide the concrete ingredients for this order.

THE DEFENSE OF INDIVIDUALITY

One fundamental point implies by the view of partnership of the technical and the practical is that there always exists an element of uniqueness and contingency in concrete human experience. While the formal and theoretical part of it may help us to formulate explicit rules and precepts to further our understanding, the practical and know how part can only be achieved via actual and patient practice on each and every concrete occasion by a separate individual or a group of individuals working in a concerted manner, making the achievement of concrete human experience on each occasion somewhat unique, since it cannot be achieved by simply following repeatable rules or instrumental reasoning alone.

In other words, what this view of partnership implies is that in human understanding and practice, particularly when it is at its most accomplished level, there is always a creative or poetic element inherent in it that cannot be replaced by formulated rules and reason, and Rationalism's so called sovereignty of technique is always "unskillful and imbalanced", as Wendell John Coats, Jr. says, "[since] it overestimates the role of conscious intellect in activity (making it the generator rather than critic of action); and it ruptures the fluidity of action by mechanically breaking down into discrete, accessible steps what is properly spontaneously and (largely) unreflectively done by adepts" (Coats, Jr., 2012, p. 8). Oakeshott sometimes even goes so far as to say that "Not to detect a man's style is to have missed three-quarters of the meaning of his actions and utterances" (Oakeshott, 1989, p. 56).

According to Oakeshott, poetic experience is the experience of contemplative imagining. At its purest, it is an activity released from any sort of practical, moral, or scientific concerns, and is characterized by absence of any premeditated design, and by the creation or production of a unique individual which induces contemplative delight in the creator and beholder. Strictly speaking, its creations, unlike the scientific or practical mode of experience, are not symbolic and representational, because the creation itself, be it a poem, painting, sculpture, a piece of musical work or the like, *is* the image, the creation and appreciation of it is itself poetic or artistic imagining if it creates the experience of contemplative delight for its own sake. On Oakeshott's view, "[a] poem is not the translation into words of a state of mind. What the poet says and what he wants to say are not two things…they are the same thing; he does not know what he wants to say until he has said it" (1962, p. 72). Likewise, "A poet does not do three things; first experience or observe or recollect an emotion, then contemplate it, and finally seek a means of expressing the result of his contemplation; he does one thing only, he imagines poetically." (1962, p. 232).

This perhaps is the most profound critique of Rationalism by Oakeshott, which not only shows that the imposition of the sovereignty of technique will destroy the poetic and spontaneous element of concrete human experience, the momentary unity of form and content in this element also indicates that the individual as a unique and autonomous agent who is capable of poetic or creative imagining has an intrinsic value of his/her own that is not dependent on anything extrinsic. From this perspective, one can understand why Oakeshott places such an important emphasis on what he calls the morality of individuality in the modern era where "human beings are recognized (because they have come to recognize themselves in this character) as separate and sovereign individuals, associated with one another, not in the pursuit of a single common enterprise, but in an enterprise of give and take, and accommodating themselves to one another as best they can" (1962, p. 249).

As regards Hayek, of course it would not be fair to criticize him for the absence of any substantial discussion of the poetic element in his social and political philosophy, since, unlike Oakeshott (Oakeshott, 1975/1991), it is never his intention to develop a comprehensive philosophy on human conduct. However, given his preference to the restatement of principles and his idea of advancement of articulated knowledge for the sake of human progress in the spontaneous evolution of the humankind for better adaptation and survival, Hayek's philosophical perspective is very likely blind to a lot of the things that Oakeshott has said regarding the poetic character of human activity.

But there is also a worrying sign in Hayek's defense of the individual too. Although Hayek, given his elaborated argument of the concurrent development of mind and civilization and his attack on false individualism (which to him is derived from Cartesian constructivism), is no abstract individualist,[6] his defense of individualism is at times rather instrumental. Let me elaborate.

First, while abstract individualism is untenable, Hayek believes that in the long run, the individual will have to prove the worth of his salt in the evolutionary process by coming up with actions and practices that will make his existence more favorable when coping with challenges of the environment. As Hayek says, "What we call understanding is in the last resort simply [man's] capacity to respond to his environment with a pattern of actions that helps him to persist", and such actions and practices would be transmitted and become prevalent because "they were successful—often not because they conferred any recognizable benefit on the acting individual but because they increased the chance of survival of the group to which he belonged" (1973, p. 18). By the same token, in his discussion of cognitive psychology, Hayek argues that the self's conscious action in the end has to be understood as linking up to the conditions that promote the individual's continual survival in the evolutionary process and that is why he says, "The question of what determines purposiveness is in the last instance really the question as that of what ensures the continued existence of the organism" (1952, p. 82). In other words, while the human individual to Hayek is important, his individual conscious and purposive actions are subject to the test of evolution to see if they are desirable in the long one for better group survival.

Owing to the inherent limitations of our mind for comprehensive self-understanding and for full explanation and determination of complex social interaction, no human individual, no matter working separately or jointly, is in a position to come up with synoptic design that can dictate the outcome of human interactions and the development of human institutions. The best we can do is to allow the individuals to come up with their respective best attempt for better and more successful existence through open competition, the results of which cannot be foreseen by us, although the better practices in the end will prevail in the evolutionary process and oblige others to follow if they do not want to lose out. Individual liberty and diversity are treasured in Hayek's conception of the self, but this is so largely because through open and free competition and the process of trial and error by the several individuals, the best practices will emerge in the course of evolution. That is why Hayek says, "[I]f the result of individual liberty did not demonstrate that some manners of living are more successful than others, much of the case for it would vanish" (1960, p. 85). If freedom is to be justified primarily on the grounds of beneficial results, does that mean that the autonomous self has little value in itself or in other aspects that are important to humanity? Here, it seems that Hayek's defense of the individual has very little to do with what is unique in the individual.

The uniqueness of the human individual is valuable, according to Stuart Hampshire, because among living things as we know them, only the human individual displays the salient capacity "to develop idiosyncrasies of style and imagination, and to form specific conceptions of the good" (1989, p. 118). In addition, Hampshire points out that individual style and imagination (such as works of art or the emotion attached to sexual love) are mostly unrepeatable, as "the leaps and swerves of a person's imagination do not follow any standardized routes" and defy the prediction of rational and general rules and are therefore irreplaceable (1989, p. 126). Likewise, when it comes to human love and friendship, Oakeshott has this to say: "its object is individual and not concretion of qualities: it was for Adonis that Venus quit heaven. What is communicated and enjoyed is not an array of emotions…but the uniqueness of a self" (1962, p. 244) "If this individual essence is destroyed when the individual is destroyed," says Hampshire, "the world is to that degree impoverished" (1989, p. 117).

In the light of the above, I think it is fair to say that something important appears to be missing in Hayek's critique of constructivism and defense of the individual and spontaneous evolution. Nowhere in Hayek's voluminous works can we find any convincing and in-depth discussion of the non-instrumental value of individuality. If the self is unique and irreplaceable, if practical knowledge is never to be displaced by technical knowledge, and if the poetic element in human practices is to be treasured on its own, the individual as an unique moral agent should have values that go beyond the requirements to struggle for better group survival, important though better survival for the human race is. The individual's unique style, imagination, and personality should not be blinded by the reinstatement of general principles. Such principles should, on the contrary, be understood in the context of the concrete elements of human practices, whose values probably go beyond the instrumental ones of better survival.

NOTES

1 For my discussion of Hayek's philosophical and epistemological position on these important issues, see (Cheung, 2007, pp. 51-73).

2 Here it is instructive to note that in talking about the creative power of a free civilization, Hayek has quoted this from A. N. Whitehead: "Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them. Operations of thought are like cavalry charges in a battle—they are strictly limited in number, they require fresh horses, and must only be made at decisive moments." See (Hayek, 1960, p. 22). So what is "decisive" is still the technical rather than the practical aspect in Hayek's mind.

3 For a fuller elaboration and explanation of Hayek's idea of "explanation of the principle" and other related issues, see (Cheung, 2011, pp. 224-231).

4 Oakeshott published two "The Tower of Babel" essays during his lifetime. The first one can be found in (Oakeshott, 1962, pp. 59-79), and the second one in (Oakeshott, 1983, pp. 165-194).

5 For an assessment of Hayek's proposed model constitution, see (Cheung, 2014).

6 See (Kukathas, 1989, Chapter 3) for a good defense of Hayek against the charges of abstract individualism. Also see (Cheung, 2011) for an account of Hayek's culturally embedded individualism deriving from his theory of mind.

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