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COSMOS + TAXIS

Studies in Emergent Order and Organization

LONDON'S OAKESHOTT
No wild man, he.

RATIONALISM IN POLITICS: 60 YEARS ON

COSMOS + TAXIS

Studies in Emergent Order and Organization
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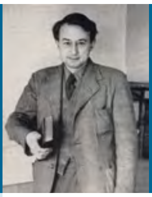

COVER IMAGE
Michael Oakeshott
Photographer, Norman Miller.
Time Magazine, October 23, 1950, p. 61.

RATIONALISM IN POLITICS: SIXTY YEARS ON

Oakeshott-22 1
James Alexander

Michael Oakeshott on Libertarianism, Conservatism, and the Freedom of the English 7
Max Skjönsberg

Reason and Unreason in Politics. 15
Sir Oliver Letwin

Michael Oakeshott: 21st Century Radical? 22
Shal Marriott

Rationalism in Ideal Theory: Michael Oakeshott on John Rawls 26
Beckett Rueda

Oakeshott's Superficial Daoism. 39
Jason Dockstader

Apologia for Poetry and the Art of Conversation 50
David Boucher

Sophists in Academic Dress: Oakeshott's "The Study of 'Politics' in a University" 62
Christopher Fear

An Interview with Robert Grant, University of Glasgow 72
James Alexander

Editorial Information 83

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Oakeshott-22

JAMES ALEXANDER

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It might be timely to reflect on the nature of Oakeshott's achievement. If it was not obvious before 2020 that Oakeshott is of heroic status in thought, then this should have become obvious since 2020. Oakeshott of course does not stand alone in this. I was always rather dubious about the achievement of Foucault. But the events of the pandemic have convinced me that Foucault's writings were not merely obscurantist sketches of paranoid visions but actually deep perceptions about the shifting axis of the world. Foucault, of course, saw this on one side. He consigned 'juridical' thinking to the past, and suggested that states were now engaged in a deeper, more penetrating, form of control, manifest through statistics, education and medicine—the rigmarole he called, in a phrase I always found part of the obscurantism, 'biopower'. Oakeshott, of course, saw all this: the rise of technology, the rise of state statistics, the increase in the *power* but not the authority of the state; but it was in another manner that he attacked the fortress of twentieth-century enlightenment, rationalism and ideology—that unattractive politics of control and bullying and idealism (coloured in sky blue and lemonade sea on its *philosophe* side and in steel silver and concrete grey on its *Kameralist* side). He disliked the politics of coercive activity, collective will, common good. Foucault sought to characterise, sometimes too blandly, what had happened. Oakeshott attempted to defend what was in the course of being lost.

What was being lost was a tradition of continuity, a particular tradition: the English tradition, rooted in law. Oakeshott was not simple about this. He was not an exponent of common law, as, say, Scruton was. He admired Hobbes, as Skjönsberg reminds us, who was anything but an exponent of common law. He took up the phrase advanced by A. V. Dicey, 'the rule of law', and explored it in a half-Roman, half-English manner. He refused to write about 'rights' where he could write about 'rules'. Oakeshott was not a legal philosopher in the manner of Kelsen or Hart, so he could never be an exponent of the pure rule of law: of a conception of the world in which even political institutions were characterised as acceptable only on the side on which they could be characterised in legal terms. Hart and Kelsen treated the state as a legal institution. Oakeshott was, arguably, a theorist of *Rechtsstaat* rather than a theorist of 'the rule of law'. This is because, for him, 'the rule of law', was an ideal: and only one component of two components significant in politics, of which the other, rule in terms of common purpose, was for him the dark side of the necessary reality of the state. Oakeshott refused to theorise the state in terms of an ideal. But he also refused to theorise only the ideal. He wanted to theorise the state, but he did so by theorising it as a fundamentally fractured entity.

The complications attendant to this have earned him much respect in the last twenty or so years, especially amongst legal theorists. We see him cited with respect by figures like Martin Loughlin and David Dyzenhaus. I am sure that this is not only because he treated law with respect (in all those fine reasonings on the *jus* of *lex*), but also because he did not treat law as a thing in itself. Oakeshott, the son of the Historical Tripos in Cambridge, could never have done that. His knowledge of history, though he did not really write anything we could consider historical, was not just a tincture of erudition. It was a consciousness. And it was a consciousness he did some work in theorising, in *Experience and Its Modes* and in the essay on history in *Rationalism in Politics*. He knew that no serious thinker should try to make sense of anything in politics without being aware of history. He saw historical consciousness of our own condition as a fundamental intellectual condition of good thought. He therefore had almost no patience for what everyone still calls 'normative' philosophy. He enjoyed reading history—and left a trail of compliments to historians like F. W. Maitland, Ronald Syme and Peter Brown. He also enjoyed reading theorists who worked on the marches where history and philosophy met: men like Bertrand de Jouvenel, G. C. Field and of course R. G. Collingwood. In various places, including the introduction to an unpublished manuscript from the 1950s (later published as *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*) and his lectures from the 1960s (later published as *Lectures in the History of Political Thought*), he wrote that the way to understand politics was to write in a somewhat awkward but absolutely necessary mixed medium, neither purely historical nor purely philosophical. This mixed medium could not really be theorised. It was an improvisation at almost every point. But the purpose was to say something about shape without losing a sense of sequence and to say something about sequence without losing a sense of shape.

Oakeshott is proving to be an eminently *useful* thinker. Those who would formerly have been his enemies are now able to find something in his writing. This is salutary, even if it is not perhaps something he would have wanted; though he certainly sought literary glory, and even recognition of his mastery. He is still somewhat underwritten about. I do not necessarily mean about his life: though that would be of interest. But it would be interesting to know more about his relations with, say, Kedourie, Cowling, Popper, Hayek, Butterfield, Barker, Carr; his debts to those who influenced him, like Heidegger, and his influence on people like Pocock, Parekh, Minogue, and many others, including some of the writers featured here on this anniversary.

What are Oakeshott's achievements? I'd say the following.

Firstly, he showed what a twentieth-century philosophy could look like. By 'twentieth-century' I mean a philosophy conditioned by existing *in* the era of enlightenment, *after* the rise of a historical consciousness which put pure ahistorical philosophy to the sword (not that many modern academic philosophers have noticed), and in particular *following* the fracture of the belief in progress which was the most important single factor in intellectual life after 1914. He showed this in *Experience and Its Modes* and again, on a different axis, but with the same impetus, in *On Human Conduct*.

Secondly, he attempted to theorise certain things, and he did so in a very interesting way. He was against abridgement and abstraction, but what has to be noticed is that in defending very substantial things like 'conservatism', 'tradition', 'history', 'practices' and 'poetry' he himself had to engage in abridgement and abstraction. For this I think that sometimes his theories may be convicted of excessive elegance. Certainly I would say this is so with his theory of poetry, and his theory of conservatism—and I have said so in print. There *is* something paradoxical about being opposed to theoretical abstraction and yet having such a relentless inclination to carry it out. Oakeshott's particular intellectual charm may lie here. It certainly explains part of the provocation caused by his work.

Thirdly, he explored, with much more persistence than he did any other subject, the subject of politics. He did not necessarily call this subject politics, and he was sceptical about the expansion and intensification of 'political science', 'political theory' and 'political philosophy' after the Second World War. He could not have agreed with the Rawlsians on how to proceed, as Rueda observes. But he himself was fascinated in the classic questions of rule, authority, law, state, power, politics—'politics' in his own marvellous and yet elegantly narrowed sense of the word (for which see ten pages in *On Human Conduct*). This, as I have already suggested, appears to be where his glory is usually found by our contemporaries.

Fourthly, he engaged in a polemic which was political: because it alleged that abridgement and abstraction, even if theoretically necessary, as his own work made evident, should never be unnecessarily brought into practical considerations. And he alleged, as aggressively as it was possible for him to allege anything, that the modern mind was engaged in perpetuating a form of politics in which abridgement and abstraction were ruining everything: ruining politics itself, the old adversarial politics of Pitt and Fox, by trying illegitimately to *solve* political problems by offering apparent solutions from other 'modes' of thought—especially that of 'science'. This was, he decided, after the Second World War, something so absurd and dangerous that it had to be identified, and so he called it—whether consciously or not—what Richard Hurrell Froude had used in the 1830s as the word for the worst possible thing: '*rationalism*'. What was 'rationalism'? It was a distortion of rationality, a limiting of what reason was supposed to show, by excluding revelation, for Froude, and by excluding anything other than synecdochal reason, for Oakeshott. The chief exhibit of synecdochal reason in our own time is '*the science*': with 'science' standing for authority, almost infinite authority, and the definite article, 'the', standing for any number of dubious claims about what it is necessary to do to combat a virus, or climate change: and the combination of the two certainly being very much less than actual science would indicate, and even less than what experience or good sense might suggest. When such politics is wielded in combat against ancestral privilege or unconscious bias or majority prejudice it is called any number of things: '*justice*', or '*diversity*', '*inclusion*' or '*equity*'. Rationalism-in-politics is procrustean politics. Oakeshott disliked Procrustes. He probably admired Prometheus; though he actually, as he suggested in *On Human Conduct*, favoured Proteus even over Prometheus.

This brings me to his fifth achievement which, I think, was to defend a vision of the world which was more Paterian than Parmenidean. He defended delight, wonder and contemplation, as Boucher reminds us. And he also offered his mite to a recognition of the variegated nature of existence, and of the importance of doing *something* to defend one's own tradition, especially if one could convince oneself that one's tradition had something good, or *civilised*, in it. He did this while holding onto an aesthetic, momentary sensibility which, as Dockstader suggests, was too artifical to be eastern, but was a western, retreated, perhaps now faded, sort of taste. Oakeshott was absolutely unafraid of the surface aspect of reality, and thought we might as well enjoy it.

Sixthly, and finally, as Fear reminds us, he developed what might well be the most convincing defence in the twentieth century of university education as a continuation of 'tradition', as initiation into 'conversation', as perpetuation of 'civilisation'. This required a clear distinction, a theoretical distinction, between *vocational* education (learning how to *use* languages) and *academic* education (learning something about the nature of those languages and how they affect the sense we make of the world). Many others have contributed to the defence of university education. Never has such a defence been more needed, as society and state have corrupted the university, and, perhaps, the university is now corrupting society and state. But Oakeshott's doctrine about this is just about the clearest doctrine, and defence of it, we have seen.

Of these six achievements, the one I want to reflect on a bit further is the distinctively polemical one, the fourth, which is the one most associated with *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. In order to do this, and to elucidate my title, let us define a few terms.

Covid-19, as everyone knows, is the name for a disease caused by a novel coronavirus.

Polis-20, by analogy, should be the name for the monotously consistent response to the spread of this disease found in both despotic and democratic regimes around the world.

Reset-21 could well be the name for the 'New Normal' which certain despotic and democratic regimes, monopoly capitalist corporations and corrupt, colluding and compliant agencies, institutions, networks and individuals *appeared* to want to see perpetuated, whether for direct conspiratorial reasons or for contingent opportunistic reasons or for successfully propagandised reasons. It is, or was, a glimpse of the most uninhibited rationalism ever seen in politics. Let's hope that fear of its infinite perpetuation into the future may be confined to the year 2021 only.

Oakeshott-22 is the name of an anniversary of a book. The book is not just any book, but *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*; and, given the nature of the book, Oakeshott-22 can also be taken to be the name of a riddle, reminiscent of Catch-22. Catch-22 was the greatest of all riddles. In Joseph Heller's novel the only way one could get out of following an order to do something crazy was to claim to be crazy; but if one claimed to be crazy then one had no reason to object to an order to do something crazy. By analogy, Oakeshott-22 is the name of a riddle whereby the only way one can get out of doing something 'rational' is to claim to be 'irrational', but if one claims that one is 'irrational' then one has no reason to object to doing the 'rational' thing.

For 'irrational' one can, if one wants, read 'deplorable'.

In 2016 we saw an irruption of the irrational politics described by Letwin. Academics around the world called it 'Brexit and Trump' for short. 'Brexit and Trump' also meant 'Putin', 'Orban' and 'Erdogan', and other things too, but the reason 'Brexit and Trump' was so potent a phrase was that it suggested that the rot of irrationality had entered the trunk of the great tree of liberal civilisation, the shared culture in the English language of the United Kingdom and the United States. It was the civilisation of Matthew Arnold, William James, George Orwell, F. R. Leavis, Lionel Trilling and Northrop Frye, committed to flames by, say, Alex Jones, Nigel Farage, Steven Crowder and Tommy Robinson, and decorated by a thousand of the 'greatest ever' tweets by Donald Trump and a hundred 'inverted pyramids of piffle' in the speeches by Boris Johnson.

In 2020 we saw *la contre-trahison des clercs*, the revolt of the elites against the irrationals, the deplorables, the lumpen-proletariat, the disenfranchised, the populists, the somewheres, the downers, the uneducated. This, alas, took the form of an eager embrace of the entire three-faceted policy of Polis-20, the 'distancing', the masks and the 'lockdown'. Of the three, the masks were, and are, the worst: the most *unreasonably* rationalist: a positively dystopian imposition of symbolic violence on the faces of mortal and otherwise conversant humans, for the sake of others, that is to say, to symbolise an collective good. What could be more rationalist, in Oakeshott's language? What could be a more devastating symbol of enterprise association? The rationalists advocated '*the* science' of the experts, the appointed experts—those Faucis and Fergusons—and shepherded entire populations into compliance. Non-compliance was irrational. Compliance was rational. Therefore, theorising non-compliance—for those who were brave enough to do so, was irrationalist. And of course theorising compliance was rationalist. Theorising compliance was done by politicians, journalists, administrators, health experts, computer modellers, behavioural scientists: all rationalists to a man: or, let us say, in modern jargon, rationalists to a he/him/his, to a she/her/hers, and to a they/them/theirs.

Oakeshott *perhaps* would have said that all of this was the most remarkable instance of 'rationalism in politics' known in human history. Perhaps. We cannot know. *Perhaps* he would have cheerily donned the mask, sceptically gone along with the *mores* of the 'new normal', and asked for the words 'INDIVIDUAL MANQUÉ' to be tattooed in Chinese or Sanskrit characters somewhere on his lower back. But it seems unlikely. He is famous for having said that he did not feel it necessary to have opinions about political matters. But when he said this he was referring to minor details of policy—such as whether or not the British should join the European Economic Community. He might have been agnostic about Brexit. And he might have been right about that. But he clearly *did* have opinions about broad tendencies of policy in politics, and certainly had extremely trenchant opinions about the attempt by any politician to appear to solve any particular political problem by offering an 'abridgement' of an entire political tradition as the solution. A part standing for a whole in rhetoric is a synecdoche. And Oakeshott was against synecdoche in politics. In facing political problems Oakeshott wanted the entire tradition to be brought into consideration so that we could face our predicament. He did not want part of our tradition to sequester itself from its rivals, delete or defeat those rivals, and then present itself as the sole purveyor of wisdom. And this is surely what has happened in the last year or two.

The elites, the somewheres, the uppers, the educated, the experts have heaved a collective sigh of relief. Meanwhile, individuals have suffered. Oakeshott always in his later years operated with a familiar binary of collective *versus* individual. For a time he, somewhat pretentiously, called his vision of two types of order nomocracy and telocracy. These words referred to an order concerned with law and leaving everyone to their own purposes as contrasted with an order concerned with a common purpose or *telos*. Under Hayek's influence, Oakeshott agreed to rewrite the second of these 'teleocracy'. (No falling out over a diphthong there.) And this binary, as Hayek saw, had something in common with his own binary of an order constructed out of unintended consequences, *cosmos* and an order constructed out of intentional planning, *taxis*. Oakeshott hated the politics of the common good, of associations united in terms of commitment to a single end. Therefore he would have hated the politics of what I am calling Polis-20: all of that politics of statistics out of context, stories exaggerated to be maximally frightening, all of that state propaganda encouraging compliance, all of the culture of signalling by wearing a mask that one is 'rational' and that anyone not wearing a mask is 'irrational'—and also a danger to the collective. The mask is the single greatest threat to liberty in the West since Tacitus's Germans first walked in the woods. Each individual *manqué*—individual *masqué*?—wanders around effortlessly chastising all the remaining children of the proud. Hobbes's *Leviathan* is not the book Oakeshott thought it was. For that Old Testament sea monster *is* seeking to crush the children of the proud like so many krill.

Not everyone will agree with me about this. Not everyone who admires Oakeshott will take such a jaundiced view of masks or distancing or lockdown. I doubt even those who have agreed to come together to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of *Rationalism in Politics* would support what I say here. But Oakeshott believed in *conversation* and it is a surety that conversation has been damaged by lockdown, distancing and masks. No doubt many have suffered in other, unfortunate ways, not only because of the virus, but also because of our response to it. But nothing has been quite as bad as the relentless assault on conversation—the conversation of the elderly, the conversation of colleagues and acquaintances, the conversation of the young. Socrates has been prevented from entering the Agora. Johnson and Boswell have not been allowed in the Mitre. Rousseau is being quarantined at Dover for ten days. Marie Antoinette is having to show a recent PCR test certificate at the French border on her way to Paris. Kant is setting no one's clock. Gladstone is saving no one's soul. Shaw cannot walk Annie Besant home. (Probably Marlowe and Caravaggio are still stabbing and being stabbed in dark alleyways.) T. S. Eliot has painted his face green and is isolating. We have all become Montaigne and Machiavelli, stuck in our towers or studies, spending time conversing with the glorious dead. That, of course, is not a bad thing. Oakeshott admired Montaigne almost above everyone else. But it is not what even Oakeshott considered to be actual conversation, the sort of conversation which, as Marriott shows, is especially formative in those who are young, who are at university, who are encountering minds and forming a mind.

I spent most of my youth in conversation. I spoke and listened far more than I read or wrote. This changed—with some great effort—when I was about thirty-two (belatedly achieving what Schopenhauer considered to be intellectual maturity), which is when I began writing with something like conviction for the first time, and read with a different sort of attention. At around the same time I became less good at conversation, less of a friend; and now, happily with a family, I spend my days only in that most intimate and idle and easy of conversations, found in the household, and, apart from that, only in the conversation of the sort Montaigne had with Plutarch. No matter. But I have been *broken in* to the conversable world. Conversable—Johnson's spelling. Conversible—Hume's spelling. Hume and Johnson: both eminently conversable (even if Boswell did not manage, alas, to record them together). Once one has had enough actual conversation, then one can retreat to one's eminence, one's chair, one's tower. But not before. And it seems that damage is being done, especially to the young. And no amount of mediated interaction will suffice, stimulating though it is. We wait to see what the world holds. But the auspices in this sixtieth anniversary year are not good. The universities are almost entirely in the hands of the rationalists. Thus, the schools. Thus, later, everyone. And so, for the moment, we are caught in an Oakeshott-22:

> The only way one can get out of doing something 'rational' is to claim to be 'irrational', but if one claims that one is 'irrational' then one has no reason to object to doing the 'rational' thing.

Michael Oakeshott on Libertarianism, Conservatism, and the Freedom of the English

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Abstract: This essay revisits Michael Oakeshott's classic critique of rationalism in politics and shows how it is relevant for his understanding of a specific notion of freedom which he associated with the English political tradition. Oakeshott was clear that English freedom must be understood contextually since it was not the same as German *Freiheit* or French *liberté,* both of which were related to ideological, purpose-oriented politics, including enlightened despotism, German Cameralism, French *philosophes*, fascism and socialism. By contrast, the English experience had revealed an economical method of government known as "the rule of law," which Oakeshott defined as "the enforcement by prescribed methods of settled rules binding alike on governors and governed." English freedom was thus characterized by a procedural way of approaching politics and an absence of overwhelming concentrations of power. By connecting Oakeshott's essays collected sixty years ago as *Rationalism in Politics* (1962) with his other works, we can see that the English tradition of freedom was related not only to the ways in which he understood the Whig, libertarian and conservative political traditions, but also to his famous notion of civil association (*societas*) as theorized in his magnum opus, *On Human Conduct* (1975). This essay argues in conclusion that Oakeshott's understanding of civil association and his criticisms of rationalism can just as easily be applied to the modern right as the modern left.

Keywords: Michael Oakeshott, political rationalism, conservatism, libertarianism, rule of law, common law.

Michael Oakeshott's powerful portrayal of the political rationalist—one convinced that there are correct answers to political questions and impatient to remake states and indeed the world in terms of those answers—was first put forward in the immediate post-war period, as the Labour party expanded the modern welfare state, as a consensus was formed around economic planning in Britain, and as communists and capitalists locked horns about global hegemony (see Minogue 2012, Smith 2012, and Villa 2012). The picture of the rationalist is as relevant today as ever in the face of ideological hardening on the left and right on both sides of the Atlantic. According to Oakeshott, political rationalism had become so prevalent in the last four centuries of Western history that even challenges to central planning, notably F. A. Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* (1944), belonged to the same style of politics, as they offered plans to oppose planning (Oakeshott 1991, p. 26).[1] Writing in 1947, in the wake of the Beveridge Report and the Education Act of 1944, Oakeshott observed how the rationalist style of politics had recently become dominant in his native England. As he wrote, "the political habit and tradition, which, not long ago, was the common possession of even extreme opponents in English politics, has been replaced by merely a common rationalist disposition of mind" (ibid., p. 37). The "infection of Rationalism" was not entirely unopposed, however: England, "where political education of some sort has been much more widely spread than in some other societies," its political tradition and history provided an alternative. This essay considers the significance of Oakeshott's interpretation of the freedom of the English—the "common possession" that had been almost lost—and concludes by offering some remarks on how this is related to his understanding of the libertarian and conservative traditions.

The political rationalist believes that politics has premediated ends—for instance, full employment, economic growth, and social justice—and that political activity is the pursuit of these ends. The goals are usually perceived as self-evident, and in recent modernity most of them have become distributionist (although we may now want to add ecological sustainability to Oakeshott's list) (Oakeshott 1993, ch. 8). Politics is about finding the right plan of action in order to reach a society's goals. By stark contrast, Oakeshott viewed political activity to be better understood, not as a solution to a specific problem or set of problems, or a purpose-oriented activity of any kind, but rather as an open-ended (and never-ending) activity in which "men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; [where] there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination" (Oakeshott 1991, p. 60). Rather than technocratic training, then, political education entailed learning about the political traditions of one's society and those of others, not in order to rank them, but rather to understand one's own tradition better. This would have the benefit of making its resources more readily available. A key resource in the English tradition was the statesmanship of Halifax's "Trimmer," who hit the mean between the politics of faith and the politics of skepticism (Oakeshott 1996, pp. 122-5). It also helped to avoid the illusion that politics is progressive or teleological, in other words, the fallacy that there is a destination to be aimed for and reached. Echoing Edmund Burke, Oakeshott regarded political activity as a negotiation between those who are alive, those who are dead and those who are yet to be born.[2]

Against rationalist universalism, Oakeshott was convinced that political concepts must be understood in local contexts. As he wrote in an essay from around the same time as the pieces in *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays* (1962), every society "has its own manner of thinking about [freedom and power], a manner which springs from its native experience" (Oakeshott 2004, p. 242). English *freedom* was thus not the same as German *Freiheit* or French *liberté*. The latter were related to ideological, purpose-oriented politics, with eighteenth-century manifestations including enlightened despotism, German Cameralism and French *philosophes*, and modern ones such as fascism and socialism. They were fundamentally at odds with the English political tradition, or at least an ideal version of it. For Oakeshott, the history of *English* freedom was "not the history of an abstract idea, but the history of the establishment of procedures which enable men to enjoy their recognized rights" (ibid.). In the Middle Ages, legal rights had belonged to the barons, but these rights had gradually been transformed into the freedoms of modern England, as the politics of individualism replaced the politics of communal ties. This procedural notion of freedom escaped precise definition and could certainly not be "exported" to other settings under the catch-all heading of "democracy" (Oakeshott 1991, p. 55). Its particular and "unexportable" character differentiated English freedom from the abstract and universal idea of liberty of the French revolutionaries, as well as others wedded to political rationalism (including "neo-Girondins" such as Tony Blair and George W. Bush, we may want to add). It had certainly been threatened at times in England, however; Francis Bacon, the Puritans, Jeremy Bentham, and the modern left *and* right had taken turns to undermine it, with the latter competing for the spoils of victory in a modern, purpose-oriented state entirely dominated by political rationalism. Indeed, Bacon was a key source of inspiration for the *philosophes* and other rationalists, as he pioneered the understanding of the state as an economy—a way of thinking about politics that later came to overshadow all others (Oakeshott 1975, pp. 287-8). Moreover, the characteristics of English freedom had been neither wholly present nor wholly absent, but the English called themselves free because their arrangements approximated the general condition (Oakeshott 1991, p. 397).

English freedom could be understood, while escaping precise definition. For most people, this understanding would be instinctive, but the job of the political philosopher was to make it intelligible. In "The Political Economy of Freedom" (1949)—an essay starting off as a review of Henry C. Simons's *Economic Policy for a Free Society* (1948)—Oakeshott outlined the recipe for the freedom of the English from the perspective of the "English libertarian." According to Oakeshott's libertarian, English freedom did not spring from any single principle, whether private property, parliamentary government, or even the rule of law, but rather what all the characteristics of English society seemed to point to: "the absence from our society of overwhelming concentrations of power." In English politics, authority was diffused between past, present and future—in other words, it had a strong traditional component, but not one that dominated all political considerations. Power was further diffused and shared among all the interests of the society, as well as between the administration and the opposition in parliament: "The secret of [England's] freedom is that it is composed of a multitude of organizations in the constitution of the best of which is reproduced that diffusion of power which is characteristic of the whole." The English experience had further revealed an economical method of government known as "the rule of law," understood as "the enforcement by prescribed methods of settled rules binding alike on governors and governed." It was the kind of government that made the "diffusion of power" possible, and it may thus be regarded as an English style of politics. While it was not its essence, the rule of law was the central precondition of English freedom, since it prevented "the fear of the power of our government" (Oakeshott 1991, pp. 388-90).

It is important to say that the English tradition of the rule of law was not necessarily synonymous with the common law tradition, with which Oakeshott had a somewhat complicated relationship (see esp. Gerencser 2012). In one early essay, published in the 1991 revised and extended edition of *Rationalism in Politics,* Oakeshott suggested that Bentham's cardinal sin was his impatience with the English common law. Bentham's first publication, *A Fragment on Government* (1776), was an all-out attack on William Blackstone's defense of the English legal and political tradition. Oakeshott wrote:

> It was natural for a *philosophe* to hate the English common law and to be suspicious of judge-made law, for in both there is an element of uncertainty; on account of both English law can never be an artistic whole. But, in his contempt of the first, Bentham seems to have forgotten that law must change, that law is an expression of what is and not of what ought to be; he forgot, in short, what all benevolent despots forgot (Oakeshott 1991, p. 141).

For Oakeshott, the "enlightened despot" represented a crucial figure in the history of rationalist politics in European history. We might thus be forgiven for thinking of Oakeshott as a rather straightforward defender of the English common law tradition, since he appears to applaud it in several places in *Rationalism in Politics*. One difficulty, however, is that perhaps the most prominent English critic of the common law was Oakeshott's beloved Thomas Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* Oakeshott had edited and regarded as the only classic text of political philosophy in the English language.[3] Oakeshott's Hobbes was first and foremost a philosopher of the rule of law; as early as the 1930s Oakeshott had disagreed with Leo Strauss's contention that "the distinctive innovation of Hobbes is…his rejection of law and his substitution of right or claim as the principle from which the State is to be deduced." (Oakeshott 2007, p. 145). But in his impatience with the common law tradition and preference for codified law, Hobbes, as everyone apart from Oakeshott has been willing to admit, could certainly be as rationalist as Bentham (Hobbes 1991 [1651], pp. 192-3; Hobbes 1997 [1681]).

Oakeshott clearly kept his distance from the spirit of Hobbes's political philosophy in emphasizing the importance of the diffusion of power as a precondition for freedom. Perhaps more surprisingly, considering his characterization of Bentham, Oakeshott would echo Hobbes in his own theoretical rule of law framework as formulated in a later essay, in which he argued that the authenticity of common law was derived from the "sovereign legislative office," and that its authority could not lie in its antiquity or its traditional acceptance (Oakeshott 1999, pp. 150-1). Oakeshott went so far as to call case law a "solecism." For him, there could be no standard external to the office of the legislator that could determine the *jus* of the *lex* and consequently common law could not limit the sovereign legislature. In this respect, Oakeshott was clearly closer to Hobbes than to Edward Coke, according to whom common law could overrule statutes. At the same time, Oakeshott's views are more compatible with the eighteenth-century common law authority Blackstone, who had sought to accommodate Hobbes's absolutism within his theories of not only the common law but also the mixed constitution, by locating sovereignty unitarily in the king-in-parliament (see esp. Lieberman 1989).

Oakeshott argued in "The Political Economy of Freedom" that the libertarian tradition was poorly understood. The third part of *On Human Conduct* (1975)—building on his lectures on political thought delivered at the LSE in the 1950s and 1960s—can at least in part be read as an attempt to rectify this ignorance. There, Oakeshott outlined two distinctive ways of understanding the modern European state: as a civil association (or *societas*), in which those living under it are solely united by their recognition of the authority of the laws, or as an enterprise or corporate association (or *universitas*), whose members are united by a common purpose. He lucidly described a civil association as

> an association, not of pilgrims travelling to a common destination, but of adventurers each responding as best he can to the ordeal of a consciousness in a world composed of others of his kind, each inheritor of the imaginative achievements (moral and intellectual) of those who have gone before and joined in a variety of prudential practices, but here partners in a practice of civility the rules of which are not devices for satisfying substantive wants and whose obligations create no symbiotic relationship (Oakeshott 1975, p. 243).[4]

Though Part III of *On Human Conduct* was explicitly concerned with "the modern European state," England's potential distinctiveness as a *societas* is there described as an ambition of the Old Whigs (and some of their opponents), and a dream shared by Montesquieu and Jean-Louis de Lolme, who wrote about the English constitution in the eighteenth century. But the idea of civil association was something much broader. Crucially, Montesquieu described the modern monarchy as a mode of association which was purely legal and did not require any common purpose on the part of its individual components (ibid., p. 249). It was "pre-eminently human" and less demanding than associations with a common purpose, notably republics that depended on virtue. The modern European monarchy approximated the ideal of a legal association more than any other experience in human history. This experience was suitable for the moral disposition of modern Europeans, as it accommodated individuality. But it was not the only experience on offer in eighteenth-century Europe, and perhaps not even the most common one.

The understanding of the modern state as a *societas* coexisted and competed with another ideal type: the state as a corporate or an enterprise association, that is to say, a *universitas*. It emerged from the lordly projects of the Middle Ages, was theorized by Francis Bacon, and given force in a religious context by Puritans and Calvinists in England, Scotland, and Geneva, especially in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, Oakeshott singled out the *philosophe* movement in Paris as key, and as fundamentally at odds with the preoccupations with civil association of the Scottish Enlightenment, as well as German *Aufklärung* (ibid., p. 297). The crucial political movement for understanding the state as an enterprise was also German, however: Cameralism, the German science of administration in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This science focused on the apparatus and bureaucracy required by the manager of the state understood as an enterprise. In Oakeshott's narrative, the Cameralists pulled together various aspects of the European administrative state since the fifteenth century into a novel totality composed of boards, commissions, bureaux, research institutes, ministers, accountants, surveyors, and inspectors, all of whom collaborated "to draw up plans, to devise projects, to give managerial advice, and to implement the decisions of the 'rulers'" (ibid., p. 300). Thanks to the Cameralists, the characteristics of the modern, managerial state were thus already "half-revealed" in the eighteenth century:

> substantial command over the resources of the state, including the energy and the talents of its inhabitants; the directions of productive activity controlled by agreements, subsidies, exemptions, licenses, penalties, man-power, budgets, or orders, etc.; full employment or a guaranteed income; taxation transformed into a means of acquiring direct control over a large part of a "national income" to be expended in favoured projects or distributed in the form of "truck" or notionally tied income; a so-called rising standard of life; a concern for compulsory generalized education and technological training; the status of "subject" receding before that of servant or pensioner of the corporation secured against debilitating vicissitudes of life; civil law receding before instrumental rules and the adjudication of civil disputes before the administration of instrumental rules and orders; the receipt of assured benefits taking the place of the pursuit of chosen satisfactions—all the lineaments of the Servile State (ibid., pp. 300-1).

In other words, the state had become a machine of political rationalism. Only England and Hanover—which were conveniently united after the Hanoverian Succession in 1714—remained relatively "untouched," according to Oakeshott. For Montesquieu and De Lolme, this was due to constitutional mechanisms, but according to Oakeshott it was rather a result of the belief in civil association, theorized by Hobbes in England, and before him by Jean Bodin in France and Hegel in Germany, the latter being Oakeshott's other major philosophical interest besides Hobbes (ibid., p. 301).

For Oakeshott, it was lordly engagement (or management) rather than absolutism that distinguished the European despot in the eighteenth century. Far from being citizens, the inhabitants of this modern, rational state were not even subjects: in times of war, entire populations were transformed into "servants of a compulsory corporate enterprise" (ibid., p. 305). In peacetime, the poor were made useful to the state through apprenticeships and thus turned into human capital. The children of the nation became its property, as La Chalotais contended in *Essai d'éducation nationale* (1763). When governments changed from lordly monarchs to representative republics, and factories replaced landed estates, little changed in the understanding of the state. Accordingly, democracy played no role in Oakeshott's story of the modern state.

In 1961, Oakeshott published an essay on the fate of the "mass man," entitled "The Masses in Representative Democracy," which he "just forgot" to include in *Rationalism in Politics* (Oakeshott 1993, p. vii). In this essay, Oakeshott summarized a story similar to the one he had told in his Harvard lectures a decade earlier, and which looked forward to his grand narrative in *On Human Conduct* a decade later. The *individual* was a historical character who began to emerge in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, at the beginning of "modernity," when the dissolution of the communal ties of the Middle Ages enabled the experience of self-determination in conduct and beliefs. Hobbes was the first philosopher to theorize the experience of individuality, and this is also the relevant context for Kant's philosophy, which centered on recognizing each person as an end in himself (Oakeshott 1991, p. 367). However, alongside the individual emerged the anti-individual, the "mass man", who was made uncomfortable rather than happy by the dissolution of the medieval community. Anti-individuals were not disposed to make their own choices, and needed a leader to lead them rather than a ruler enforcing the law. They were made for the "godly prince" of the Reformation, as well as the "enlightened despot" of the eighteenth century, since they wanted to *enjoy* rather than to *pursue* happiness. The idea of the state as a corporate association (*universitas*) spoke directly to their preference for security over liberty: when seen this way, the state responded to their needs, and, if necessary, guided their activity.

According to Oakeshott, the key gain in understanding the state as an enterprise association or a *universitas* was the enjoyment of assured benefits, but this came at the expense of both freedom and pluralism. One of the greatest benefits of understanding the state as a civil association rather than a corporate association was that a *societas* can incorporate private associations of all kinds as long as they respect the authority of the laws of the *respublica* (Oakeshott 1975, pp. 265-6). As Oakeshott put it in his essay on the conservative disposition in *Rationalism in Politics*, being conservative in politics enables radicalism in all other spheres of human experience (Oakeshott 1991, p. 435). The enterprise state, by contrast, is not suitable for radicals but for people who "are disposed to prefer substantive satisfactions to the adventure and the risk of self-enactment." (Oakeshott 1975, p. 276). In such states, individuality is mainly available for leaders.

We have to recognise that the essays in *Rationalism in Politics* and the book *On Human Conduct* are written in different voices; the former are more political with a clearer focus on England, whereas the latter is not only more philosophical but also about the modern European state as such. However, there is justification for juxtaposing Oakeshott's writings from both eras. This is because there is an evident connection between English freedom as Oakeshott understood it and *societas*. *Societas* is a European idea—as we have seen, Bodin, Montesquieu, and Hegel are listed as theorists of *societas* along with Hobbes—but it is an English experience and tradition in a way that has never been the case on the continent. This way of life has been challenged since the days of Francis Bacon, but even though rationalism in politics had become increasingly dominant in the twentieth century, partly as a result of the world wars but ultimately as a consequence of much longer-term developments, it remained alive as an idea and as an ideal.

Many of a certain disposition—which some prefer to call conservative, others libertarian, and yet others simply liberal: terms without fixed and agreed meanings—will find the state understood as a civil association instinctively attractive and the purposive, enterprise state terrifying. It is not difficult to locate where Oakeshott stood on the question. Though the understanding of the state as a corporate, teleocratic association had made enormous advances in the twentieth century, Oakeshott hoped that the pendulum would swing back towards a civil association, which he defined as "moral" in the Kantian sense that it recognized the individuality of each of its members. But the point behind Oakeshott's dichotomy of the state as civil or corporate association was not to suggest that this is a choice that we are, or have been, faced with. His point was rather that even though they are to a degree mutually exclusive, at least theoretically, the experience of the European state since the Middle Ages has involved a mixture of both. Moreover, they correspond to two distinctive parts of modern human nature: the individualistic and the collectivist (see also Oakeshott 1993). In the West, voters, leaders, and political parties continued to feel the pull of these two poles, and move between them. Even socialists remained wedded to the idea of individual freedom, in apparent contradiction with their views on a compulsory educational system and a planned economy (Oakeshott 1975, pp. 321-2, note).

Oakeshott's contemporary Hayek—who also spent much of his career at the LSE, albeit in a different department (Economics rather than Government), and not contemporaneously with Oakeshott—wanted to distinguish the liberal or "Whig" tradition from the conservative in his famous essay "Why I am not a conservative" (Hayek 1960, pp. 343-55). Whether Oakeshott is better thought of as a liberal, a libertarian or a conservative has been heavily debated (see, e.g., Carrino 2022; Gamble 2012). Within the English political tradition, however, these terms did not necessarily represent different camps for Oakeshott as they did for Hayek. Indeed, the English libertarian in "The Political Economy of Freedom" has much in common with the conservative disposition in 'Of Being Conservative" (1956). They were both attached to the state understood as a civil association, with the conservative disposition being described as

> the propensity to make our own choices and to find happiness in doing so, the variety of enterprises each pursued with passion, the diversity of beliefs each held with the conviction of its exclusive truth: the inventiveness, the changefulness and the absence of any large design…And the office of government is not to impose other beliefs and activities upon its subjects, not to tutor or to educate them, not to make them better or happier in another way, not to direct them, to galvanize them into action, to lead them or to co-ordinate their activities so that no occasion of conflict shall occur; the office of government is simply to rule…The image of the ruler is the umpire whose busi-

> ness is to administer the rules of the game, or the chairman who governs the debate according to known rules but does not himself participate in it (Oakeshott 1991, pp. 426-7).

James Alexander has argued that Oakeshott's definition of "conservative" is so thin that it must be a trick (Alexander 2016, pp. 218-19). Read perhaps less rigorously and more charitably, and alongside *On Human Conduct*, it becomes more specific, however: Oakeshott's conservative is someone who is suspicious of rationalism in politics, and concerned with conserving a libertarian heritage centered on the idea of the state as a civil association and the politics of individualism. Looking at Oakeshott's post-war essays collected in *Rationalism in Politics* alongside his other works in this way challenges the idea that "Oakeshott's political philosophy moves in a decidedly more liberal direction," away from "conservatism," in the period from the early 1950s to the mid-70s, as has recently been argued (Devigne 2012, p. 273). As late as 1978, Oakeshott believed that the Conservative Party was the British home for the understanding of the state as a civil association. His review of *Conservative Essays* (1978), edited by Maurice Cowling, further underlines his continued commitment to the *English* contribution to the notion of government as the custodian of a civil mode of association:

> Such a view of the office of government, which owes perhaps more to the Whigs than the Tories, is deeply embedded in our constitutional arrangements, and it has never had any exact counterpart in Continental politics. But if it now has a home anywhere in our politics it is surely in the Conservative party (Oakeshott 2008, p. 281).

For Oakeshott, this conception of government ought not to be confused with *laissez-faire*, as he viewed the rhetoric about rolling back the frontiers of the state among Conservatives in the Thatcher era as "a near-disastrous blunder" (ibid., p. 282). The question was not about whether the state should be strong or weak, but rather about what it should do, and more specifically whether there was any space for managerial activity in a civil association. Famously, Oakeshott declined the offer from Margaret Thatcher to be made a Companion of Honour in 1981. Perhaps her Hayekian "rationalism," small-state rhetoric, and propensity to centralize power in 10 Downing Street was not to Oakeshott's taste. In any event, we can safely say that the idea of the state as a civil association and the conservative disposition in general have certainly not been shared by all Conservatives, either of the remote or recent past, or of the present. As illustrated by modern political actors such as Nigel Lawson and Dominic Cummings, Tory radicals are not just radicals,[5] but also tend to be susceptible to the "infection of Rationalism." For this reason, Oakeshott's conservatism and criticisms of rationalism can just as easily be applied to the modern right as the modern left. It may be retorted that the right's major problem today is populism rather than rationalism, but one only needs to consider Oakeshott's distinctions between a ruler and a leader and between the individual and the "mass man" to recognize that this is not necessarily a problem separate from rationalism in politics.[6]

NOTES

1 However, Leslie Marsh (2012) has shown this to be somewhat of a caricature of Hayek and that he and Oakeshott were in fact much closer philosophically.

2 On Oakeshott and Burke, see Devigne 2012.

3 On Oakeshott and Hobbes, see Malcolm 2012 and Tregenza 2012.

4 On civil association, see O'Sullivan 2012.

5 Lawson's autobiography is entitled *The View from No. 11: Memoirs of a Tory Radical* (1992).

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Reason and Unreason in Politics

SIR OLIVER LETWIN

Sixty years ago, when Michael Oakeshott's famous essay on 'Rationalism in Politics' first appeared in book form, the 'isms' were not yet 'wasms'. In that—now quaintly distant world—the horrors of National Socialism had only recently been removed from the scene; the disasters of Soviet and Maoist Marxism were still being visited on hundreds of millions of people living behind the iron curtain; British industry was the scene of industrial warfare between Socialism and Capitalism. In short, politics and geopolitics were under the sway of battling theories, each of which purported to deliver 'right answers' to political problems.

It was against these 'rationalist' theories and theorists that Oakeshott took aim. Like Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin, though in a different idiom and deploying different arguments, Oakeshott sought to demolish the scientific pretensions of the 'isms' by exposing the theoretical inadequacy of all pseudo-scientific political theorising from Platonism to Marxism. Alongside this creative destruction, his positive intent was to restore the intellectual respectability of practical reasoning, recognised by Aristotle as the proper mode of moral and political life but despised by the pseudo-scientific theorists of right and left. He accordingly characterised truly rational political discourse as an unending non-theoretical conversation about the practical wisdom of political action, a continuing effort to keep the ship of state afloat on a stormy sea.

Much has changed since the early 1960s—not least, the virtual disappearance of the nineteenth and twentieth century rationalist 'isms' from politics and geopolitics. The propagation of high theory purporting to deliver political truth has become, for the time being at least, a niche activity restricted to a few eccentrics. The far right has abandoned all claim to a theoretical base. Mainstream Marxism, though nominally preserved in China, has in fact become so thoroughly infected by state capitalism as to be radically anti-Marxist. European socialism has become so impregnated by market economics as to be radically anti-socialist. And what used to be thought of as 'free market' governing parties throughout the so-called capitalist world (even if subject to liberal democratic constraints unknown to the Chinese) are now sponsoring state intervention of a kind that is often difficult to distinguish from the Chinese economic model.

In short, we no longer stand in imminent danger of barbarism engendered by theory. Instead, we face a new danger—the danger of barbarism engendered by barbarity, bizarrely supported by the wilder excesses of 'critical thought'. The enemy of rationality in today's politics is not rationalism but unreason, not high theory but low populism, not the pretensions of pseudo-science but a blithe disregard for, or disbelief in, every form of science and every form of fact. Today's political irrationality invokes categories which did not enter Oakeshott's vocabulary: 'alternative facts', 'his (or her) truth', 'post-truth'. We are threatened, forty years on, with the triumph not of misguided ideologies but of Orwell's fantasies for 1984—'newspeak' and 'double think'. The possibility that a politician might be taken seriously when announcing that 'reality is perception' or that 'disease is health' or that 'war is peace' no longer seems remote.

The political 'isms' against which Oakeshott and Popper and Berlin so nobly struggled in the post-war years came at a high cost to humanity. But there is no guarantee that the cost to humanity of today's unreason in politics will be any lower. In particular, unreason is a deadly enemy of liberal democracy, attacking it in three ways.

The first attack consists in the destruction of the form of conversation required to sustain a liberal democracy. Where contestants in the political debate abandon adherence to the requirement for reasoned argument and verified assertion, the debate descends into a mere shouting match.

The second attack consists in the destruction of the ability of liberal democracy to deliver good government. Where the debate becomes nothing better than a shouting match, the winner is he or she who shouts loudest, rather than he or she who will govern best.

The third attack consists in the destruction of faith in the institutions of a liberal democracy. Seeing the debate descend into a shouting match and the participants becoming nothing better than rival noise-makers, sensible citizens begin to question the value of liberal democracy and become increasingly attracted to rule by technocrats or high-minded oligarchs.

For those of us who are attached to liberal democracy as a form of social organisation, these effects of unreason in politics are concerning. We therefore need to defend reason in politics. We need to re-establish the value of intellectual honesty, truth and fact as the hallmarks of proper political conversation. But these propositions are not self-evident. Once challenged, they require to be defended by re-establishing that there are facts, that there is truth, and that politics should not be divorced from them.

Wittgenstein (whose philosophising shares much more with Oakeshott's than is commonly supposed) begins his *Tractatus* with the immortal line, "the world is all that is the case", and then expands this into the statement that "the world is the totality of facts, not of things". Taken together, these statements constitute an assertion of common sense, and a cry of desperation against both scepticism and reductionism. One does not need to be a Wittgensteinian of any variety, still less a follower of the early Wittgenstein of the Tractatus, to heed that cry. There is much that is real besides physical things. Words are real. Numbers are real. Musical notes are real. Love and friendship, resentment and disgust, marriage and law are all real. None of these are physical things. But they are facts that populate the world. They cannot be wished or dreamed away by sceptics, or reduced away by physical reductionism or crude verificationism.

Anyone seeking to deny the reality of words is compelled to issue the denial in words, and hence to convict himself of incoherence. A word is a reality, not an illusion; and it is a reality (a fact) that is not reducible to a physical thing.

Likewise, causes and reasons are real. They, too, cannot be wished or dreamed away by sceptics, or reduced away by physical reductionism or crude verificationism. And they operate at many interlocking levels of reality.

Scientists are very used to such levels of causal reality. Medics identify causes of change at the level of human life; biologists and micro-biologists identify causes of change at the level of cells and molecules; chemists and physicists identify causes of change at the level of atomic and sub-atomic particles. Causation at one of these levels of reality is not necessarily reducible to causation at some more microscopic level. Physicists do not expect to be able to identify whether someone losing their job has caused them to be anxious about the future—because, unlike psychiatrists, physicists do not deal with items such as jobs and anxiety. As Oakeshott would have put it, psychiatry and physics are two, equally valid but distinct 'modes of experience' which yield distinct causal accounts because they deal with distinct aspects of the world.

This is not, of course, to suggest that anxiety about the future or losing a job are supernatural things. It is, rather, to say that—though they will have physical correlates a-plenty—they are not 'things' at all. But they are nevertheless facts in the world, realities as real as any thing. They may be related by causality that is cognitive (dependent upon meaning) rather than physical, but which is nonetheless real for that. The loss of a job is real. Anxiety about the future is real. One may perhaps cause the other. But the chain of causation cannot be grasped without understanding the significance, the meaning, of losing a job: to understand why the neurological events associated with the anxiety are occurring, you need to understand the cognitive significance of the event that has occurred. Hence, what is explicable and causative at one level of reality may be random and inexplicable at another level of reality.

So we live in a world of facts, of realities; but also in a world composed of many levels and kinds of reality, which cannot necessarily be reduced to one another. And, just as there are many different valid ways of connecting real things, so there are many different ways in which we use language to describe those things—each of which will have its own particular test of validity.

If we want to understand the relationship between politics, or political language, and reality, we need to understand what is the appropriate test of validity for political language.

In the case of some forms of abstraction, enquiries into truthfulness constitute merely an elaborate kind of joke. A tune is an abstraction. But enquiring into its truthfulness would be as much a category error as asking whether green ideas sleep furiously. We may ask whether the tune is beautiful, but we cannot ask seriously whether it is true or untrue, unless there are exceptional circumstances (e.g. if it is, or is suspected of being, a coded message).

A map, by contrast, is a form of abstraction about whose accuracy or truthfulness we may well enquire—because the point of a map is to guide action, and it will guide action correctly only if it is accurate enough to enable the user to achieve the purposes for which the map is designed. Of course, the test of the truth of a map is not whether all users who act on it achieve what they would (under all of the circumstances) achieve if it were accurate—but rather whether all users *who know how to use the map* achieve such results.

We can take this as a paradigm for those forms of factual abstraction which, like maps, have the purpose of guiding action. The test of the truth of an abstraction intended to guide action is whether actors, who know how to use the abstraction and whose acts are guided by it, achieve what, under all the circumstances, they would achieve if it were true. (This is of course epistemologically complicated, because it is difficult to know all of the relevant circumstances, there is always a chance that the outcome has occurred for some reason other than the action prompted by the belief, etc, etc. But the foundational point remains after all of the complexities are acknowledged. Factual abstractions intended to guide action are true if they can be used to navigate the world in the way that the factual abstraction would lead a competent user to expect.)

Logic, mathematics and philosophical reasoning may enable abstractions to be tested in a different way—for internal coherence, or for consistency with other abstractions known or believed to be true. The propositions of logic, mathematics and fundamental philosophy are abstractions at the highest possible level. They are tools or rules for constructing, tidying up, or characterising other high-level abstractions—or for understanding how they themselves or those other abstractions function (the very activity in which we are currently engaged). They are in this sense procedural.

Taken together, such higher level abstractions form a complex web of procedures and procedural rules and observations about procedures and procedural rules. Within this web, procedures, procedural rules and observations may themselves be tested and modified by one another. In all of these transactions, coherence and consistency are the tests of validity.

But the ultimate test of the validity of the whole procedural (ie logical, mathematical and philosophical) web is whether the everyday factual abstractions constructed, modified or validated using the procedures within the web lead to actions that work in the world. Hence, the relationship between mathematics, physics, engineering, bridge-building, and bridges that last or fall down: it would not be wise to travel across a bridge constructed by an engineer who believes that 'alternative mathematics' will do just as well as the real thing.

However, when we turn from factual abstractions to propositions about moral or aesthetic value, the situation is fundamentally different.

Meta-ethical theories and analytic ethical theories are forms of philosophy. They may lead to the revision of moralities, but they do not in themselves constitute moralities, and do not in themselves constitute recommendations for action. Accordingly, as with the rest of philosophy, the test of their validity is 'only' internal coherence or consistency.

But, by contrast, normative moral theories and specific moral injunctions pass beyond the analytical. Instead of being offered purely as dispassionate analyses, they make recommendations for action—as with a map, but with a crucial difference. Unlike the map, which is offered as a hypothetical guide to action ('if you want to get to B, starting from A, go this way'), normative moral theories and specific moral injunctions recommend courses of action which are intended to be categorical rather than hypothetical ('go this way because it is the right thing to do'). Hence, even when they present the appearance of theory rather than practice, their underlying structure is that of categorical imperatives governing or purporting to govern action.

Manifestly, moral assertions—even when they are in this sense guides to action—cannot be validated in the same way as a map, on the basis of whether they work in the world. One cannot sensibly ask: "if I act in accordance with this morality will I achieve what I would achieve if the morality were true?", because one cannot identify anything that one would achieve if one were to follow the morality other than having followed the morality. If I act in accordance with the belief-system that constitutes a particular morality—ie in accordance with the commands of that belief-system that are categorical, not hypothetical or assertoric—there is nothing in the world against which to check the accuracy of my belief. The hypotheses presented by a map ('if you want to go from A to B, follow this route') can be checked and validated or invalidated; categorical imperatives can only be obeyed or disobeyed.

If my morality commands me to walk into the flames of a martyr's death, I can sensibly (albeit rather painfully) ask (as I burn) whether my abstract factual belief that the flames would burn me if I walked into them has been borne out by acting upon it; but nothing about the fact that the flames are burning me will tell me whether I was right to act on the command. (This is the familiar fact/value distinction—or the familiar aversion to the naturalistic fallacy—re-presented in a slightly different idiom.)

But maybe moralities can be subjected to a different form of the working-in-the-world test?

It seems clear that a morality can be self-defeating in the world. For example, a morality that lacks concepts of trust and honesty will ultimately prevent its exponents from cooperating successfully.

A morality may also be self-contradictory (involving two or more judgements that cannot rationally be made together). It may, in other words, contain or depend upon logical procedural deficiencies.

Or a morality may in some way depend on factual propositions that are testably false—ie that, if acted upon by an actor who understood them, would not reliably lead to the results that would occur if they were true—for example, a morality based on false claims about differences between people of different ethnicities or genders.

In cases like these, appeals to change a moral practice may be made, and may succeed. Such appeals are either factual or procedural in character. They may take the form either of pointing to an incoherence, or of pointing to a factually mistaken belief—either 'change the practice because it doesn't cohere with moral beliefs that you hold more dear', or 'change the practice because it is having an effect of which you hadn't been factually aware'.

Once subject to appeals of this kind, a particular moral belief system may be unable to sustain itself in the face of alternates. This may happen suddenly or only over a long time. There may be moralities that subsist alongside one another for long periods during which they are not in any evident way plagued by any procedural defects or false factual presumptions, and may yet eventually be subject to forms of appeal that lead their adherents to modify or abandon them, due to the belated recognition of procedural defects or to the belated discovery of factual errors.

Unlike moralities, political settlements may alter over time without any of these defects or errors having become apparent—simply because those who have previously accepted them decide that they are no longer tolerable. Such revised views of what constitute tolerable forms of social life are, indeed, the normal reasons for changes in political belief systems. The principal test we apply to the validity of a political appeal is whether the form of life thought likely to arise from heeding the appeal is judged likely to be more satisfactory in some sufficiently important respect to merit change.

It follows that—within any political community at any one time— an appeal for change (unless compelled by the discovery of a logical defect or a false factual presumption) needs to proceed by persuading those whose view we hope to change, that the change in question will deliver a form of life which will be judged more satisfactory by them or by the community.

The anchor, here, is the preconceptions of those we hope to change: we have to persuade them that a particular political change will lead to a form of life that they already conceive to be superior to their current form of life in some respect.

If acting upon such recommendations for change in political practice does indeed lead to a form of life considered *ex post* to be more satisfactory, then the recommendation for political change is in that specific sense validated.

But this validation does not establish the recommendation as a political fact. It is merely a contingent approval. It lasts only for as long as the forms of life arising from actions undertaken in conformity with the recommendations contained in the appeal continue to be regarded as satisfactory by the relevant political community.

Of course such political appeals or recommendations are complex items. They frequently amalgamate factual propositions, prudential recommendations and moral recommendations. Their origins—the states of mind from which they spring—are also complex. These may include factual beliefs, prudential desires, moral beliefs, emotional responses, psychological needs, creative impulses . . .

Disentangling such elements and motivations from one another, in order to discern the 'true nature' and 'true origin' of a particular political appeal is accordingly a complex act of discovery. The complexity of the amalgamations within and behind a political appeal, and the consequent complexity of the act of disentanglement, typically makes it impossible to understand the nature of the appeal without also understanding a considerable amount about the political actor making it and about the context within which it is being made.

A political appeal, as opposed to an administrative command, is likely to have (or at least to be presented as having) the form of a practical syllogism—"do X, because if you do X it will lead to Y, and *you* desire Y". But such an appeal made by a particular political actor in a particular setting may, beneath the surface, have the form of an importantly different practical syllogism: "do X, because if you do X it will lead to Y, and I desire Y".

Only once the practical syllogisms contained within a political appeal have been disentangled from the surrounding 'mood music', can their validity in principle be tested.

In political appeals which contain practical syllogisms dependent only upon factual observations rather than social recommendations, the tests of validity are tests of truth—tests of whether the factual observation works in the world. (This may, of course, in a given case be very difficult to establish—due to the complexity of the world, the need for time to tell whether hypotheticals come true in the world, the difficulty of obtaining evidence, and so forth.)

In political appeals which contain practical syllogisms dependent upon both factual propositions and social recommendations, both types of validation—tests of factual truth, and observations about the satisfactory or unsatisfactory nature of likely *ex post* effects on forms of communal political life—are required. The task of achieving such complex validation (even assuming that the practical syllogisms inherent in the political appeal have been successfully disentangled) may be arduous and lengthy.

In practice, there is rarely time to conduct such validation before a decision is made about whether to accept or reject a given political appeal. Hence, this idealised, rational approach to disentanglement and validation is seldom applied. It is not how politics in any system, regime, time or place tends to work in practice.

The actual mechanics of political appeals at most times and in most places depend instead upon brand, identity, trust, hope, fear and rhetoric. The political message becomes wholly entwined in the messenger. The purpose of political communication is not so much to persuade the listener of the validity of a set of propositions as to establish a certain relationship between the listener and the communicator: *I am the sort of person you are, or at least the sort of person with whom you can identify yourself….therefore, you can trust me….therefore, you do not need to enquire too far into the validity of my arguments or the evidence for my assertions…..the fact that they are my arguments and my assertions is enough to make them 'your truth'.*

Great political movements, effective political alliances, enduring political affiliations are formed on the basis of such emotionally powerful, but intellectually fragile appeals. The leaders of such movements become the embodiments of brands trusted by followers. The followers follow the leaders not because of any analytical subscription, but because the leaders have the emotional intelligence to establish the brand, to communicate the identity, to generate the trust, and hence to play on the fears or encourage the hopes of the followers.

It is out of this, repeated and inevitable dynamic that unreason in politics is born. In the politics of unreason, the medium (the appeal of brand, the appeal to trust) becomes the message itself, rather than merely the means by which the message acquires political traction. The political process ceases to be based on arduous efforts by the leaders to disentangle the practical syllogisms of responsible government. The leaders themselves cease to be guided by coherent, reasoned argument and by evidenced assertions. The debate, even at the highest and most refined levels, ceases to subject factual assertions to tests of truth, and ceases to consider seriously whether given political recommendations are likely to lead to a form of life that will be considered *ex post* to be more satisfactory. In place of such careful analysis, come sectarian requirements for loyalty to the brand, unquestioning implementation of the dictates of the leadership—the deadly consequences of dangerous populism—to the point where the mechanism of political appeal has poisoned the body politic.

What is the protection against such unreason in politics? Is there a bulwark that can be established? Is there a guarantee that can be constructed?

Sadly, the answer is that there can be no such external protection or bulwark or guarantee. The threat of the medium becoming the message—the threat that the leaders themselves will abandon the careful analysis required to disentangle the complex practical syllogisms of responsible government—is ever present. No constitutional system, no legal system, no political system can achieve immunity to these dangers, because leaders unconstrained by the need for valid argument and verified assertion will tend also to be unconstrained by such systems of protection. In the terms so notably coined by Michael Oakeshott, the observance by leaders of adverbial constraints is conditional upon those leaders at least intuitively subscribing to the practical syllogisms which justify those adverbial constraints. From the moment when the leaders abandon concern with the validity of the practical syllogisms they are purveying, they will tend to abandon also the concern that they might otherwise have for the constitutional apparatus that establishes adverbial constraints upon their actions. Indeed, they set out on a path which can all too easily lead to regarding that constitutional apparatus itself as an intolerable constraint on their freedom of action. In the populist world of 'alternative facts', the adverbial constraints and the means by which they are normally enforced—the judges, the legislature, the law itself—come to be seen, at least potentially, as 'enemies of the people'.

If there is no set of institutions that can be relied upon to protect us from unreason in politics, who or what can provide us with reason in politics?

In the twentieth century, Oakeshott did his best to save us from the rationalist 'isms'—Nazism, Fascism, Communism, Socialism. Alongside Popper and Berlin, he did an excellent job of intellectually demolishing those intellectual mistakes. But no amount of intellectual TNT will demolish irrational populism. It doesn't contain anything intellectual to be demolished. It is just a set of wayward dispositions exhibited by a set of wayward politicians.

So Oakeshott cannot save us from the ailments of our time. The only people who can save us from the unreason that now afflicts our politics is our politicians. Reason will govern politics if but only if the leaders who lead are themselves governed by reason.

To be effective, to gain traction, these leaders need of course to understand the medium; they need to have the emotional intelligence to make political appeals that work rhetorically by appealing to brand, trust and identity. But they need also, as a matter of character, to have the intellectual honesty to ensure that the messages they convey are based upon serious understanding of the practical syllogisms of responsible government—and hence on reasoned argument and verified factual assertions. If political debate, though inevitably carried into the wider public arena through the medium of brand, trust and identity, is conducted at the highest levels with such intellectual honesty on all sides, then reason in politics will prevail. Contingent resolutions will give way gracefully to other contingent resolutions as the *ex post* validity or invalidity of given practical syllogisms comes to light. But if political debate lacks such intellectual honesty, if the leaders of the debate themselves abandon adherence to reasoned argument and verified factual assertion, unreason in politics will prevail; neither any thinker nor any system will save us from it.

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Michael Oakeshott: 21st Century Radical?

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If one seeks a radical text that will help to change the world and offers solutions to the most pressing political issues facing us today, *Rationalism in Politics* is not the book to read. First published in 1962, this series of essays by Professor Michael Oakeshott (often known for his contributions to conservative thought) explores topics ranging from reason, considerations of Thomas Hobbes and reflections on politics, to what it means to be human. In none of these essays is there a radical and angry man writing to revolutionize politics or offer a Machiavellian blueprint of how to fix a society constantly on the brink of crisis. Instead, *Rationalism in Politics* simultaneously provides calm and sober reflections on questions about politics and society, and yet contains within it a frustrating lack of clear answers to the questions it raises.

Frustrated was certainly how I felt first reading *Rationalism in Politics* several years ago at the age of 22. I recall a distinct feeling of righteous indignation as I worked through the collection, but especially when Oakeshott disparages the young as having an unsuitable disposition for politics (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 436). At a time when youth engagement in political discourse is a constant feature of the news, and engagement in political discussions has never been easier given the internet, the young have demanded their voice to be heard and for their future to be considered. In some quarters we even hear the suggestion that the vote should be given to the young. Why, then, should the young bother with Oakeshott's ideas now? What could he possibly offer in a book with no answers to the problems which concern them? How could his writing address, or even understand, the issues salient in their current time and circumstances? A middle-aged man writing from a study in the London School of Economics in the 1960s might seem to be generations removed from a twenty-year-old growing up amid unprecedented technological changes and an urgency for action swarming their every consideration. So, the question is, can Oakeshott contribute *anything* to the current political moment, outside of the halls of the university and scholarly debates in the history of political thought?

Despite my initial aggravation, over the years I've come to strongly hold that *yes*, he does have something to offer the young scholar and activist who wants to make a difference. But much like most of Oakeshott's writing, what he has to offer is far from obviously stated in his works. When one first picks up *Rationalism in Politics* and looks at the table of contents, one of the most political titles appears to be "On Being Conservative." Attention might be drawn to essays whose titles contain the word politics in it, such as

"Political Discourse" or "Talking Politics," but there is a certain appeal to an ideological category, especially one so frequently under attack. Perhaps here there will be answers for young conservatives and republicans looking to gain a sense of purpose and understanding of their ideology, to better guard themselves against those who disagree with them! Alas, the essay offers no such thing. What Oakeshott *does* provide in "On Being Conservative" is a reflection of the disposition which he thinks defines conservatism: a fundamentally cautious nature. He writes of the conservative man that "He is not in love with what is dangerous and difficult; he is unadventurous; he has no impulse to sail uncharted seas; for him there is no magic in being lost, bewildered or shipwrecked" (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 412).

Oakeshott's portrait of conservatism is quite bleak, seemingly not suitable to the anger felt about a constantly changing world out of one's control. It is almost the image which those opposed to conservativism would portray of it: outdated and out of touch with the requirements of contemporary political life. Perhaps the young conservative might relate to the need for a calm and measured attitude towards politics, but when discourse entails screaming rather than discussion, moderation is an attitude easier achieved in theory than in practice. While Oakeshott provides an interesting theoretical account of conservatism and its conduct, he does not help to motivate an increasingly disenfranchised movement of young conservatives who constantly feel their voices unheard. Much less does this speak to those who are not conservatives at all.

Where, then, should one turn for advice on dealing with political life? The answer is found at the end of book, in the essay which initially seems the least political of all. Oakeshott concludes *Rationalism in Politics* with "The Voice of Poetry and the Conservation of Mankind," a work which he describes in his 1962 Preface as "a belated retraction of a foolish sentence in *Experience and Its Modes*" (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. xii). Granted it takes Oakeshott 53 pages to explain just how wrong he thought he was. He begins the essay by defining conversation, and lamenting how much of it has become boring and dull (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 493). It is a conversation where people value their own voice over the voices of others, only caring about what they have to say and not listening to those around them. Oakeshott, following Augustine, called it superbia; we might call it social media. Hearing only the sound of one's own voice strikes against what Oakeshott perceives to be the fundamentally egalitarian and sociable nature of engaging in conversation in the first place. Not only is there a tendency to obsess about one's own positions, but also a desire within both scientific and political conversation to always find an answer, a solution, a resolution. An obsession with meaning in conversations has made us lose sight of something intrinsically important, which Oakeshott wants to remind us of: namely, delight (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 493). He writes, "And if what is now needed is some relief from the monotony of a conversation too long appropriated by politics and science, it may be supposed that an inquiry into the quality and significance of the voice of poetry may do something in this interest" (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 494). Oakeshott thinks he has found a mode of conversation to enter into, which can rescue people from the drab and utilitarian conversations which constitute those fixated on science and politics.

By revitalizing conversation through poetry, Oakeshott hopes to remind individuals subsequently of how delightful conversation can be (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 521). Poetry is not reserved for the reading of Shelley and Byron, however; rather, Oakeshott uses the term to refer to the poetic image as he understands it, found in numerous forms of art ranging from sculptures and paintings to dancing (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 520). What makes it possible for people to delight in great works of art is the ability not to overthink it, and to simply participate in the viewing of it. It is not *thinking* at all in the rational sense. It is contemplation, wonder, delight: Socrates in a catatonic state, possessed by his *daemon*, the glorious *thaumazein* which the ancients thought was the true origin of philosophy. It is a moment where one is captured entirely by what they are experiencing. It does not need a purpose or a cause, the creator need not to have intended it to elicit emotions or make a call for action. Rather it exists simply to inspire delight in the viewer. This is why Oakeshott uses the example of works of architecture which have lost their history as being more suitable to engaging the poetic imagination than buildings erected with particular purpose. He rejects the desire to find a utility in art and poetry, in favor of a simple delight in it.

These poetic images engage us in an act of contemplation, allowing these works of art to be discussed in conversation—for not their value or hidden meanings, but merely for their own sake (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 525). Oakeshott thinks that if people stared at Monet more often, perhaps they would have more to say to one another than just what to wear under bad weather and conveying disappointment in the currently elected government. By looking at a great work, one is momentary relieved of any obligation to discover or find or solve something. Rather the objective is again, merely to contemplate and to delight in that contemplation. By 'more to say' I do not mean scholastic reflections on Monet: I mean a suspension of the need to assert anything with an instrumental purpose in mind. The texture of the canvas and the purpose of Monet choosing this shade of blue fade away as concerns, and indeed the very exercise in asking those questions takes us away from delight into scientific analysis. What Oakeshott wants is for us to simply say 'x', and delight in it, and for it to be delighted in, where it may: he wants us to suspend our inclination to say 'x' in order to get 'y'.

Oakeshott's assertion that conversation needs a focus on art more than anything else may seem an aggravating presumption, feeling like a statement of an elite on their way to galleries or the opera, or those privileged with the leisure to partake in these activities. It also encourages an escape from reality, to step away from the affairs of purposive life simply for momentary delight in something in the world around us (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 531). He admits this is exactly his intention. Oakeshott does not think the world would be better if people went around quoting Keats and explaining the meaning of Dante to those who would find such subjects boring. As has already been mentioned, it is exactly boredom in conversation that Oakeshott wishes to avoid. Rather, he implores us to take a break from the constant searching for answers and the anger which often accompanies not finding them.

This appears to be a difficult suggestion, especially given how uncertainty has felt ever present throughout the COVID-19 pandemic: and also since we have seen that the very conditions which make conversation possible have been threatened. It may appear as if any break from advocacy and thinking about politics could result in the collapse of political society as we know it. It almost seems as if Oakeshott is stepping in as a proverbial mentor or teacher reminding their incredibly high achieving student to "chill out" -- which, once again, is a frustrating proposition with an air of condescension to it. Yet it is also a desire which is already around us. Just as technology has changed how we converse; it has also changed the medium by which we can appreciate and delight in art. Art could very well be a great movie or even a thirty second video. One can debate the meaning of art all they want, but what is significant is the shadow of a desire for being present and delighting in something more than the never-ending challenges currently confronting us. Oakeshott is stating bluntly what many of us already long for. Contemplation offers a way to understand that longing. It simultaneously allows for an engagement of the poetic imagination and a greater appreciation for what is in front of us. The longing which Oakeshott describes is one which is still relevant today, especially given all of the potential distractions which can take away from being able to delight in what is there. The internet simultaneously serves as the source of the greatest distractions from delight but also a way for us to engage in forms of art which allow us to delight. The desire for delight has remined constant from Oakeshott's time into our own, the potential sources of it have just increased and changed.

There is a reason why Oakeshott thinks one can glimpse this desire for delight in love and friendship, two concepts which modern life has not in any way eradicated. He writes that "friends and lovers are not concerned with what can be made out of each other, but only with the enjoyment of one another" (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 536). He thus critiques the temptation to assign everything a use and every word a definition, and the impulse to solely focus on the end of a path rather than how one walks along it. Those who fail in love and friendship see people merely as instruments to be used, rather than appreciating and taking delight in them for what they are.

In one of the concluding lines to "The Voice of Poetry and the Conversation of Mankind", and indeed to the end of *Rationalism in Politics*, Oakeshott writes: "To listen to the voice of poetry is to enjoy, not a victory, but a momentary release, a brief enchantment" (p. 540). Where the conversative disposition which Oakeshott describes stands on guard against bewilderment, here Oakeshott is actively advocating for it. Far from a contradiction, it is rather a firm reminder that there is more to life than politics—which is perhaps ironic coming from a professor of political science. In a young generation so politically involved, it is easy to be obsessed with the news and the latest journal publication and to only want to debate and argue in order to dominate discourse. The more the issues seem to matter, and the more urgent they appear, the less one can justify taking even a step away from them. What the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed to many is both the desire for more conversation and a constant feeling that having conversations is difficult because of both distance, and a lack of enjoyment in them. Now is the time to re-evaluate how we converse in the first place. What does it mean to have a conversation with others, and how can we ensure those conversations are both meaningful and interesting?

At a time when there is a constant desire for radical change, the radical position is that which invites us to take a moment to rest. In that light, *Rationalism in Politics*, far from being an outdated and antiquated book, is comparatively radical in what it has to offer to the present political moment and the conversations in which one is routinely engaged in. Oakeshott does not profess to offer a solution; in fact it is the desire for always seeking solutions which he warns against. An appreciation for bewilderment and humor was also how Oakeshott lived his own life. Those who reflect on Michael Oakeshott and his legacy don't describe him as someone who only ever spoke about Hobbes and had no interests beyond the ivory towers of academia. He was an adventurer in a very meaningful way. He sought to enjoy what was before him, and to delight in what he found (Riley 1991, p. 335). He was able to step away from politics, not at the expense of understanding it, but in order to understand what else there was to being human. Which is the message which young scholars need to hear today.

This edition of *Cosmos + Taxis* makes the case for many of the interesting and compelling political ideas which one finds in *Rationalism in Politics*. The purpose of this article has been to convince young skeptics that it has something to offer in the first place and to our current time. To those passionate and excited students and scholars who are unfamiliar with Oakeshott and struggle to find a justification for why they should read *Rationalism in Politics,* this work offers you a way to think about how you think and engage with ideas and what those ideas are. Given the animosity present in so many conversations today, Oakeshott offers a refreshing and necessary perspective on the subject. To those encountering him for the first time, or encountering him again after a decade or two, by looking at how he assesses conversation and discourse he invites us to pause and reflect on what we are doing when we subsequently study and discuss politics. Sixty years on, when reading through *Rationalism in Politics* again, it becomes clear that Oakeshott has much to offer every scholar who goes through his work. But what Oakeshott particularly has to offer the young scholar, is to show them the adventure which conversation itself can be, and that a genuine interest in political questions requires thinking about more than simply politics.

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Rationalism in Ideal Theory: Michael Oakeshott on John Rawls

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Abstract: John Rawls is held in some quarters to be the most significant political philosopher of the twentieth century. He was certainly the most consequential. Michael Oakeshott was more reticent, and spoke less directly to the concerns of the late twentieth century. But his status as an independent authority has never been questioned and his reputation continues to rise. The question addressed here is, why did Oakeshott praise the first incarnation of Rawls's grand theory in 1965 but dismiss its later incarnation in 1983? Part of the answer is surely that Oakeshott thought Rawls's conception of the aims of political philosophy was incompatible with his own. It is evident, however, that there was enough similarity for the two thinkers to reach a moment of agreement. Without purporting to give a definitive answer, I investigate the basis of this similarity and gauge how substantial it was. In the process, I argue that Oakeshott had a more complicated opinion of ideology than is usually presented in the literature on him. There might be grounds for rapprochement between the thought of Oakeshott and Rawls. Or perhaps this was an overlapping consensus that was ultimately doomed.

Keywords: abridgment, ideology, Oakeshott, Rationalism in Politics, Rawls, Rawlsianism

INTRODUCTION

Michael Oakeshott and John Rawls are not often contrasted with one another. But even a brief comparison reveals obvious disagreements. Oakeshott is remembered as a skeptic who opposed the interference of ideology in practical political life. Rawls is celebrated as the author of what became the most influential normative political theory of the Western world.[1] Rawls remains the more widely known thinker. The recent semicentennial of *A Theory of Justice* (1971) prompted numerous papers tracing Rawls's intellectual influences, his relationship to the canon, and his reception by contemporaries. So far, this reexamination has excluded Oakeshott. He receives two brief references in the *Modern Intellectual History* special issue on Rawls (see Krishnan 2021, p. 3; Smith 2021, p. 6). Beyond that, Oakeshott is mentioned in neither the retrospective on *A Theory of Justice* featured in *Polity*, nor in Katrina Forrester's *In the Shadow of Justice* (2019), the heavily armed flagship of recent efforts to historicize Rawlsianism.

Oakeshott, if his opinion could be solicited today, would call Rawls's theory "doctrine" or "ideology." Paul Franco, in his own brief comparison of the two thinkers, has written that Oakeshott "would have regarded Rawls's attempt to find a moral consensus on justice, even a minimalistic 'overlapping consensus,' as nothing more than a species of rationalism" (2004, p. 21). In light of their differences, it is hardly surprising to find that Oakeshott did criticize Rawls in his later work. In "The Rule of Law" (1983), Oakeshott commented dismissively in a footnote that he had "excluded" the reflections of a few contemporaries from his account, naming Rawls one of these unfortunates (Oakeshott 1983, p. 156 n. 13; 1999, p. 170 n. 13).[2] Given Oakeshott's reluctance to name anyone, this might be considered a grudging compliment. Oakeshott was as aware as anybody of Rawls's reputation after 1971.

Unlike in his later statement, there was no sign of reluctance two decades earlier when Oakeshott expressed genuine esteem for Rawls. In 1965, Oakeshott was reviewing the second volume in Peter Laslett's *Philosophy, Politics, and Society* series, which had been published in 1962—incidentally, the same year that *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* was published. Laslett envisioned *Philosophy, Politics, and Society* as a recurring anthology that would showcase the latest developments in Anglo-American academic philosophy and related disciplines. Given the state of the academy at the time, this initially meant giving special attention to the application of analytic philosophy to ethics (Laslett 1956, pp. vii-xv; see also the summary in Krishnan 2021, pp. 3-4). Rawls, then in his early forties, gave permission for his recent essay, "Justice as Fairness" (1958), to be featured in *Philosophy, Politics, and Society*'s second volume, alongside work by Isaiah Berlin, Alasdair MacIntyre, H. L. A. Hart, Bernard Williams and J. G. A. Pocock.

Surveying the collected essays, Oakeshott concluded that Rawls's contribution had "some claim to be thought the most brilliant essay in the book" (Oakeshott 1965, p. 281; 2008, p. 191). Oakeshott's compliment may seem perplexing to us now because "Justice as Fairness" already exhibited many of the features which were evident in *A Theory of Justice*. It introduced an early version of the original position, the thought experiment whose consequences Oakeshott would reject, tersely, in "The Rule of Law."[3] It also introduced a version of the two principles of justice. Though it must be noted that there was no mention of "basic structure," "veil of ignorance," or "reflective equilibrium." Rawls was still developing his system.

In the following pages, I will attempt to explain why Oakeshott changed his mind about Rawls between 1965 and 1983. I think the basic reason is best captured by Steven Smith, who quipped that "[for Oakeshott] the task of philosophy… is not to change the world but to interpret it" (Smith 2015, p. 323). It is possible that Oakeshott was, in 1965, reading his own vision of the proper aim of philosophy into Rawls. Moreover, it is likely that he saw a place for Rawls's theorizing within his own conception of political philosophy. After *A Theory of Justice*, it became clear that Rawls was determined to change the world and had moved in a direction that Oakeshott could no longer sanction.

1. RAWLS IN 1958 AND OAKESHOTT ON RAWLS IN 1965

Let us first look at "Justice as Fairness" through Oakeshott's eyes. Rawls's essay was originally published in *The Philosophical Review* in 1958, and was revised slightly for publication in Laslett and Runciman's *Philosophy, Politics and Society* in 1962, which is where Oakeshott read it.[4]

The major claim of the essay was, of course, that "the fundamental idea in the concept of justice is fairness" (Rawls 1958, p. 164; 1962, p. 132). Rawls noted that "justice [was] not to be confused with an all-inclusive vision of a good society" (1958, p. 165; 1962, p. 133). He was concerned *only* with justice as "the elimination of arbitrary distinctions" (indeed, at this stage his second principle of justice was only that "inequalities are arbitrary unless it is reasonable to expect that they will work out for *everyone's advantage*") (emphasis added; 1958, p. 165; 1962, p. 133; see also Forrester 2019, p. 28). If we imagine how Oakeshott, reading Rawls for the first time, might have made sense of this, it is likely that he would have taken Rawls to be considering justice in relation to the rule of law and discrete social disputes, and not in relation to the foundations of political order as a whole. In brief, I propose that Rawls's theory looked explanatory and confined to everyday practices. Rawls at times appeared to confirm this in the essay, though admittedly it can be read either way. Nowhere did Rawls say that justice was the *first* virtue of social institutions. It was instead "*one* of the many virtues of social institutions" (emphasis in original; 1958, p. 165; 1962, p. 133). It is almost certain that Oakeshott chose to ignore the possibility that Rawls might one day use his theory to suggest how to eliminate arbitrary distinctions across all society, as he did in *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls did refer throughout to the theory of the social contract, so the relevance to an entire political order *was* incipient. Similarly, his definition of "practice" referred widely to structured social activities, but one of his specific examples was "parliament" (1958, p. 164; 1962, p. 132, n. 2). One reason why Oakeshott might not have been dismayed in 1965 was that in the essay Rawls repeatedly drew attention back to the "concept" of justice as it appears in social practices of any kind. All that a situation of justice required was equal persons who are rational, mutually self-interested, and in possession of compatible interests engaging in some shared structured activity (1958, pp. 164, 170–2; 1962, pp. 132, 137-8). "Justice," was "the virtue of practices where there are assumed to be competing interests and conflicting claims, and where it is supposed that persons will press their rights on each other" (1958, p. 175; 1962, p. 142).

Further mollifying any alarm Oakeshott might have conceived, what Rawls derived from his analysis was fairly anodyne: a practice is just when it accords with the two principles of justice generated by equally rational and self-interested persons who are asked to deliberate about the structure of the practice without advance knowledge of what their position would be. Or by way of restatement, "a practice will strike the parties as fair if none feels that, by participating in it, they or any of the others are taken advantage of" (1958, p. 178; 1962, p. 144). This conclusion hardly signaled pervasive political reforms: "it is this notion of the possibility of mutual acknowledgement of principles by free persons who have no authority over one another which makes the concept of fairness fundamental to justice" (1958, p. 179; 1962, p. 144).

Oakeshott's review indicates that he read Rawls as focused on clarifying an everyday concept of justice, not reforming the basic structure. Rawls opined that his theory should be held successful to the degree that it expresses the principles of justice intimated by "competent persons" upon "deliberation and reflection," and this to a more satisfactory degree than the utilitarian theory of justice (1958, p. 193; cf. p. 164; 1962, p. 157; cf. p. 132). Oakeshott's treatment of Bentham showed that he was generally sympathetic with Rawls's antagonism toward utilitarianism (e.g. Oakeshott 1932). More importantly, Rawls's statement may have helped Oakeshott read "Justice as Fairness" as an attempt to clarify the idea of justice as it routinely arises in social practices. He wrote, "[Rawls] contrast[s] this conception of justice as fairness with what he calls 'the utilitarian conception,'" and "[he] finds it more capable of *accounting for our beliefs* about a just practice" (emphasis added; Oakeshott 1965, p. 281; 2008, p. 191). For Oakeshott this was significant because Rawls appeared to be studying political life without anticipating that he could or would reform it. Rawls reinforced this impression by describing what he was writing as merely the "analysis" of a "concept" (1958, p. 164; 1962, p. 157). It appeared to Oakeshott that Rawls was content to explain the sense of justice that arises in myriad everyday social practices.

We should notice, and Oakeshott certainly noticed, that Laslett and Runciman, the editors of *Philosophy, Politics, and Society (Second Series)*, in the introduction to the volume, clearly wanted theories that would do more than merely "diagnose" problems. They wanted recommendation, prescription, positive advice (Laslett and Runciman 1962, p. viii). They claimed that of the authors in their volume Rawls went "furthest towards a recommendation in his forceful advocacy of a modified contractarianism" (p. ix).

Oakeshott made clear in his review of the volume that he thought the editors' claim about Rawls was mistaken. He charged them with being concerned with "productiveness"—what, in the twenty-first century, we would call "relevance" or "impact" (Oakeshott 1965, p. 281; 2008, p. 191). "It is, perhaps, odd," Oakeshott wrote, "to find the word 'recommendation' used indifferently for 'telling us what we ought to do and why' and for explaining a concept of justice" (p. 281; p. 191). Explaining a concept of justice was what Rawls was doing, as far as Oakeshott was concerned, and not telling us what we ought to do. Although Rawls probably used the word "concept" perfunctorily, Oakeshott italicized it:

> [Rawls] is concerned with the *concept* "justice" and to say something about it which will explain our beliefs about what is just and unjust in human conduct. In short, his purpose is philosophical;

> he is not concerned (if I understand him correctly) to tell us how we ought to behave, or even to provide us with a "criterion" of just conduct (Oakeshott 1965, p. 281; 2008, p. 191).

Oakeshott's enthusiasm for Rawls's approach, as he understood it, is undeniable. Faced with a volume populated by famous writers, Oakeshott spent the largest part of his review offering an exposition of Rawls's essay. He clearly admired it. Admittedly, when he wrote that it had "some claim to be thought the most brilliant essay in the book" (Oakeshott 1965, p. 281; 2008, p. 191), he might have been engaging in some slighting irony directed against the other writers whose names he was likely to know better—Berlin, Runciman, MacIntyre, Wollheim, Dahrendorf, Williams, Hart, Pocock. But his appreciation for Rawls's essay is unmistakable.

Those who are well versed in the variations of Rawls's theory over time could doubtless offer further explanations of the significance of all this. But it should be clear that Oakeshott *approved* of Rawl's enterprise as he conceived of it, and that there was warrant in "Justice as Fairness" for this conception.

2. LOCATING RAWLS IN OAKESHOTTIAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

In 1965, then, Oakeshott admired Rawls for his apparent willingness to interpret politics without changing it. We can develop further insight into Oakeshott's initial acceptance of Rawls by tracing Oakeshott's conception of *ideology*. This will allow us to see where Oakeshott might have placed the early Rawls within Oakeshott's own understanding of political philosophy. My claim is that Oakeshott thought that what he considered to be "ideology" could play an auxiliary role in the study of politics, and that he considered "Justice as Fairness" to be one example of this.

The claim that Oakeshott believed there was *any* productive use of ideology will strike many readers as implausible. Oakeshott is, after all, famous for his opposition to ideology. We should notice, however, that this opposition was provoked by ideology's destructive effects in practical politics. Oakeshott's conspicuous resistance to ideology in politics has overshadowed his flirtation with the idea that ideology can contribute to the study of political life.

In order to begin separating these two sides to Oakeshott's thought regarding ideology, we have to identify what "ideology" meant for him. He was somewhat wary of the term. Oakeshott thought that over the centuries its meanings had multiplied to the point of ambiguity. He commented in 1980 that "the only conclusion to be drawn" from the history of the term "was that it is, or has become, a worthless concept" (2008, p. 294). He did occasionally employ it, however, especially in the 50s and 60s, when most of the essays in *Rationalism in Politics* were originally published.[5] At least in these decades, Oakeshott's conception of ideology was at its core quite simple: ideology is a theoretical abstraction from a concrete practice. In *Rationalism in Politics*, he often uses the word "abridgment" interchangeably with "ideology" in order to emphasize his thesis that systematic theory is derivative from practice. This is, again, a simple point, but Oakeshott makes it the basis for a nuanced understanding of how ideology causes problems and how it might produce benefits.

In "Political Education," the fifth essay of *Rationalism in Politics*, Oakeshott expanded upon what ideology is and how it is abstracted or "abridged" from practice. He stated that an ideology "*purports* to be an abstract principle, or set of related abstract principles, which has been independently premeditated" (emphasis added; 1962, p. 116; 1991, p. 48). By "independently premeditated," Oakeshott meant that the ideology claims to provide a standard above political life that could reform and direct political life. These principles "compose an understanding of what is to be pursued independent of how it is to be pursued" (p. 116; p. 49). He continued: "a political ideology purports to supply in advance knowledge of what 'Freedom' or 'Democracy' or 'Justice' is," and therefore allows the everyday activities of political life to be organized in pursuit of these articulated ideals (ibid.). Although ideology seems to constitute an abstract standard set apart from political activity, Oakeshott was firm that each ideology is actually, in William Galston's phrase, a "summary abstraction" of a political tradition (Galston 2012, p. 223).

Political tradition, the concrete source of ideology, has in Oakeshott's hands an idiosyncratic definition. Although the phrase may suggest an unchanging, authoritative way of life, this is not at all what Oakeshott meant. By "political tradition," he wanted to indicate, in Franco's words, "the actual beliefs, practices, and institutions in a given society" (1962, p. 121; 1991, p. 54; Franco 2004, p. 99). He saw these patterns of life as internally diverse and continually developing. Oakeshott called tradition a "multi-voiced creature" (qtd. in Franco 2004, p. 97) that contains clashing principles and tendencies, with "no changeless centre to which understanding can anchor itself" and "no sovereign purpose to be perceived or invariable direction to be detected" (1962, p. 128; 1991, p. 61). It possesses structure and continuity, hence identity, but it grows and changes according to its own intrinsic logic—and that logic is not simply predictable but resembles a conversation, open to many possible directions of development (Franco 2004, p. 92). In a tradition, "everything is temporary, but nothing is arbitrary" (1962, p. 128; 1991, p. 61).

Oakeshott's account of how ideology arises from political tradition begins with the presupposition that all knowledge is embedded within practices. In accordance with this idea, he proposed that the patterns of life indicated by "political tradition" are composed of *practical knowledge* and *technical knowledge* (1962, p. 7; 1991, p. 12). Practical knowledge is the kind of tacit "knowing how," in Gilbert Ryle's phrase, that is embedded within activities, is difficult to put into words, and is learned by doing (1962, p. 8; 1991, p. 12; see also Smith 2012, p. 137 and Franco 2004, p. 84).[6] Technical knowledge is knowledge "susceptible of precise formulation" in language or symbols (1962, p. 7; 1991, p. 12; see also Smith 2012, p. 137 and Franco 2004, p. 84). Ideology arises when a thinker "abridges" the whole practice, stripping away practical knowledge and fashioning a purely technical representation of the practice (1962, pp. 120-1; 1991, pp. 53-4).

In Oakeshott's eyes, the character of political ideologies as abridgments of political traditions is the root of their pernicious character in practical politics *and* their utility for the study of politics. Regarding ideology's pernicious role in politics, Oakeshott focused on the rather simple but effective supposition that no ideology is comprehensive enough to capture the pluralistic character of political life. Any ideology will produce a partial, hence distorted, representation. He wrote: "in the abridgment, however skillfully it has been performed, a single intimation is apt to be exaggerated and proposed for unconditional pursuit" (1962, p. 125; 1991, p. 58). Oakeshott connected this defect in ideology to the modern tendency in politics that he called "rationalism." This is a way of thinking that treats technical knowledge as the only true knowledge, and thus disregards practical knowledge (Smith 2012, p. 137, Franco 2004, p. 84). It encourages an ideological style of politics distinguished by the conjoined pursuit of perfection (as determined by an ideology) and homogeneity (1962, pp. 5-6; 1991, pp. 9-10). In this sterile scenario, "political activity is recognized as the imposition of a uniform condition of perfection upon human conduct" (p. 6; p. 10). This is often taken as Oakeshott's entire position toward ideology. Andrew Gamble expressed an opinion common among scholars of Oakeshott when he asserted, "Oakeshott never abandoned his view of ideology as an expression of rationalism" (Gamble 2012, p. 155).

But Oakeshott could not be entirely contemptuous of ideology. As much as he disliked its role in actual politics, he saw it arising routinely in political life, and for this reason calculated that with some care it could play a role in the study of politics. In "Political Education," he asserted that "every society which is intellectually alive is liable, from time to time, to abridge its tradition of behaviour into a scheme of abstract ideas" (1962, p. 125; 1991, p. 58). These ideologies, he acknowledged, could have their uses. In a playful tone he compared ideologies to cartoon caricatures of real people: the "distorting mirror of an ideology" might "reveal important hidden passages in the [political] tradition, as a caricature reveals the potentialities of a face" (p. 125; p. 58). This application of an ideology "make[s] use of abridgment as a technique for exploring the intimations of a political tradition, to use it, that is, as a scientist uses hypothesis" (p. 125; p. 58). This appraisal led him to conclude that "the intellectual enterprise of seeing what a tradition looks like when it is reduced to an ideology will be a useful part of political education" (p. 125; p. 58; cf. Franco 2004, p. 93).[7]

Oakeshott is even more explicit about the beneficial application of ideology in "Political Philosophy," an essay written around the same time as "Political Education." There he uses the term "doctrine" to denote what is clearly abridgment: "when the reflective impulse is directed to the detection and exploration of [a society's] character, extrapolating its tendencies, fixing its elements, and making firm its outline, the result is a *political doctrine*" (emphasis in original; Oakeshott 1993, p. 147). He continues, "in a doctrine of this kind, political activity appears in a *greatly abridged* and simplified form" (emphasis added; p. 148). He defends these abridgments to a certain degree, again citing their role as instruments of study. Weighing the objection that "doctrines of this kind are nothing but misrepresentations of the experience from which they spring," Oakeshott responds that "a political doctrine may reveal the nature of a political experience" just as "the over-emphasis of caricature reveals the potentialities of a face" (p. 148).

The difference, then, between a pernicious and a salutary ideology seems to be whether it is applied to reform practice, where its characteristics are dysfunctional, or put to work as a tool for studying political life, where its characteristics could produce some benefit. When the abridgment is applied to amend practical politics, "its very virtues prevent it from supplying what is expected of it" (1993, p. 149). Oakeshott repeated in *Rationalism in Politics* that crossing the line into employing the ideology as a "criterion" for directing reform is to attribute "a character … to an ideology, which it is unable to sustain" (1962, p. 125; 1991, p. 58). The result is that "the benefit to be had from observing what the distortion reveals is lost when the distortion itself is given the office of a criterion" (p. 125; p. 58).

Oakeshott seems to have thought Rawls fell on the salutary side of the line between ideological "caricature" as reforming criterion or as investigative. This becomes clear if we try to place "Justice as Fairness" in either of those categories: as an "abridgement" for the sake of understanding, made necessary by the desire to understand a fragmented political condition, or as an abridgement fashioned to simplify that condition and offer simplistic recommendations on how to reform it. Oakeshott's warm reception of "Justice as Fairness" *prima facie* supports placing it in the former category. We can confirm this by noting that Oakeshott repeatedly praises Rawls for conducting explanatory analysis. To take one example from the many already cited, recall Oakeshott's comment that Rawls was "not concerned… to tell us how we ought to behave, or even to provide us with a 'criterion' of just conduct" (1965, p. 281; 2008, p. 191). It seems likely that Oakeshott thought Rawls was deploying an abridgement in a manner for which it was well-suited. Oakeshott, after all, clearly took no issue with Rawls's general method. His review, as we have seen, recapitulated the argument of "Justice as Fairness" without criticism.

Now that I have established what kind of "abridgment" Oakeshott thought Rawls was producing, we can turn to locating where "Justice as Fairness" might have fit into Oakeshott's conception of political philosophy. Within both "Political Education" and "Political Philosophy," Oakeshott outlines a vision of what political philosophy is. For Oakeshott, political philosophy attempts to see political concepts within a larger, coherent understanding of the whole. In "Political Education," this is "consider[ing] the place of political activity itself on the map of our total experience" (1962, p. 132; 1991, p. 65; cf. 2000, pp. 4, 62). In "Political Philosophy," it is "to recognize the activity in politics in its place on the map of the intelligible universe" (1993, p. 151). It is, furthermore, the effort to "say something concerned with political activity such that, if true, things will be as they are; not as they were when we first caught sight of them, but as they permanently are" (1993, pp. 151-2, qtd. in Franco 2004, p. 114). It is important to note that, as Franco observes, "permanent" here is not opposed to "historical" (ibid.). Oakeshottian political philosophy attempts to perceive political life as one part in a coherent whole of human experience, as such experience appears under current historical circumstances (ibid.).

The characteristic spirit of this effort is a "radical subversiveness" that interrogates the grounds of understanding: "facts" that upon inspection are revealed as assumptions, presuppositions that form the settled basis of theoretical systems (1993, pp. 141-2). This view did not prevent Oakeshott from offering his own account of political life, most notably in *On Human Conduct*. But he was careful to draw a line between, on the one hand, the activity of philosophizing and, on the other, a theoretical account that was necessarily founded upon a set of postulates or presuppositions. By 1975, he had begun calling the latter "conditional understanding" because it rests upon one or more "condition[s]" (i.e. "uncriticized assumptions") that form the basis for interpreting phenomena (1975, pp. 6-7; see also Alexander 2012, pp. 24-5). For example, one can explain a thunderstorm as an electromagnetic occurrence using concepts drawn from physics. But these foundational concepts, too, can be investigated, and will themselves lead to further problematic concepts (1975, pp. 9-11).

Oakeshott imagined every theory or "conditional understanding" as a temporary construction whose foundations will prove questionable and provoke further inquiry (1975, pp. 10-11). He wrote that the pursuit of understanding is "a continuous, self-moved, critical enterprise" in which "temporary platforms of conditional understanding are always being reached." Each conclusion "is an arrival, an enlightenment, and a point of departure" (1975, pp. 2–3). We can judge that he was consistent so long as he did not allow himself to accept his own account as anything more satisfying than conditional understanding.

Oakeshott's understanding of philosophy as an activity and not as a finished system was consistent throughout his life. In 1933, he quipped, "a received philosophy is one already dead" ([1933] 2015, p. 5). In 1950, he asserted, "the aim in philosophical reflection is to think philosophically, not to construct a 'philosophy'" (1993, p. 150). In 1973, he distinguished between *theory* as both "the urge to inhabit a more intelligible or a less mysterious world" and its corollary activity "of discovery or enquiry" and a *theorem*, a conclusion about what is going on (2004, pp. 391-2; cf. p. 78; cf. 1975, pp. 1-2).

Where could Rawls fit in this Oakeshottian scheme? Rawls was not at all ignorant about the importance of foundations. Throughout his life he had clearly been sensitive to the difficulty of grounding an ethical system. Gališanka, for example, makes clear that the problem of achieving agreement among persons, even when they share the same moral experiences, was a theme of Rawls's work (see 2019, pp. 189, 38). But Rawls did not embrace anything resembling Oakeshott's radical subversiveness—perhaps because the incessant interrogation of foundations is hardly compatible with founding a system that could reform political life. Accordingly, "Justice as Fairness," as contemplative abridgment, departs thoroughly from the *spirit* of Oakeshottian political philosophy. But it still finds a home within Oakeshott's vision, among those political doctrines that "aim at giving a firm, if narrow, intelligibility to political experience" (1993, p. 150). Oakeshott allows that such abridgments can, in coincidental ways, improve the vision of the political philosopher as he tries to make political life intelligible within a context that goes beyond politics. "We should expect," wrote Oakeshott, in a somewhat apathetic tone, "enlightenment of a certain sort… from this kind of explanatory reflection on politics" (1993, p. 149). Had Oakeshott reviewed Rawls in 1975, he might have called Rawls's theory an example of conditional understanding.

Rawls, of course, did not understand himself as contributing "abridgments" to the contemplative study of politics, even in 1958. Historians of Rawls are now greatly concerned with the shifts in Rawls's thinking between 1945 and 1971, but these changes appear to be developments in his range of intellectual influences and modifications to his theory, not changes in his intention (e.g. Forrester 2019, pp. 116-7). Today it hardly seems to need proving that Rawls had a lifelong concern with social justice and the wellbeing of the most disadvantaged that understandably moved him to produce a moral theory with practical applications. And this is significant because, as the discussion so far should indicate, there is no place for Rawlsian ambition in Oakeshottian political philosophy. The project of amending political life demands a turn from endless radically subversive questioning to theory building.

But it would be understandable if Oakeshott from his vantage point in 1965 saw Rawls as an ally in the attempt to theorize without using theory to amend practice. There was a pure analytical edge to Rawls's method. Like other scholars who were influenced by Wittgenstein's later work, Rawls intended to analyze ethical terms not as eternal ideas but as concepts that existed within everyday social practices (Gališanka 2019, p. 98; Forrester 2019, pp. 8-9; cf. Rawls 1958, p. 182 n. 1; 1962, p. 147 n. 1). In "Justice as Reciprocity," which he wrote in the same year as "Justice as Fairness," Rawls concluded that "the concept of justice is embedded in the thoughts, feelings and actions of real persons; in studying the concept of justice one is studying something abstracted from a certain form of life" (qtd. in Bok 2017a, p. 181).[8] There was, notably, a universal dimension to Rawls's theory introduced by his assumption that ethics was founded in moral feelings that are part of a universal human nature (e.g. Rawls 1958, p. 182; 1962, p. 148). As Forrester, drawing from Priscilla Bok, has put it, Rawls envisioned a universal morality that was "earned" in specific communities (Forrester 2019, p. 9, 291, n. 63). Up through the publication of *A Theory of Justice* Rawls still saw himself as investigating the morality that could be distilled from a universal human nature (Bok 2017a, p. 157; Gališanka 2019, p. 181; cf. Rawls 1958, pp. 193-4; 1962, p. 157). Yet when Rawls's conception of "earned" universal ethics drew him to analyze and clarify ethical concepts drawn out of everyday practices, he could appear closer to Oakeshott than did many of their contemporaries. So Oakeshott was perhaps correct to think that "Justice as Fairness" in isolation resembled a contemplative abridgment. Oakeshott likely thought he had encountered in Rawls a promising thinker who could contribute to the clarification of the concepts at play in their contemporary political tradition.

3. OAKESHOTT'S OPPOSITION TO RAWLS IN "THE RULE OF LAW" AND *ON HUMAN CONDUCT*

In light of the above, Oakeshott's change of mind after Rawls published *A Theory of Justice* can be stated simply: Oakeshott became aware that Rawls intended to amend politics. In "The Rule of Law" he "excluded" discussion of Rawls because he perceived (perhaps mistakenly) Rawls's mature theory to be mobilizing law instrumentally, for the purpose of achieving a conception of the good society. Oakeshott's own conception of law excluded this. In Oakeshott's understanding, the rule of law referred to an association existing between individuals, considered as abstract *personae*, whose relations were regulated by authoritative, known, and noninstrumental rules, i.e. laws, that require persons to modify how they carry out their various self-chosen actions within the limits of a defined jurisdiction (1983, p. 136; 1999, p. 148). Although law itself was *not* an instrument for achieving the good society, it was underpinned by a conception of right (*ius*) by which "a law may be recognized, not merely as properly enacted, but as proper… to have been enacted" (1983, p. 141; 1999, p. 153).

In Oakeshott's assessment, Rawls grasped the importance of *ius*. But he identified *ius* with "fairness" and "fairness" with "what rational competitors, in certain ideal circumstances, must agree is an equitable distribution [of scarce resources]" (1983, p. 156 n. 13; 1999, p. 170, n. 13). As a consequence, Rawls's conception of *ius* demanded that law be recast as "regulations understood in terms of the consequences of their operation and as guides to the achievement of a substantive state of affairs" (1983, p. 156 n. 13; 1999, p. 170, n. 13). Eliciting what we can from this compact rebuke, it seems clear that Oakeshott thought *A Theory of Justice*'s focus on resource distribution combined with the principles of justice as fairness would require laws that serve as instruments for the reshaping of society into something better—or at least something more fair (cf. Franco 1990, p. 198). On this understanding, these laws would depart from the non-instrumental character of law, which led Oakeshott to doubt whether they should be considered laws at all (1983, p. 156, n. 13; 1999, p. 170 n. 13). Oakeshott's understanding of Rawls in 1983 may appear in error when viewed from 2022, especially given Rawls's own statements about teleological theories and contemporaneous criticism of the primacy of justice over conceptions of the good in *A Theory of Justice* (see the original conclusion to Sandel 1982, pp. 175-183). But we should remember that the liberal–communitarian debate had only just begun in the 80s (see Forrester 2019, Ch. 8). And we should entertain the possibility that, if Oakeshott's critique could be unraveled at greater length, it would be revealed as simultaneously a misconstrual of Rawls's theory on Rawls's own terms and an accurate assessment of the theory's consequences (see also Franco 1990, p. 199).

Oakeshott and Rawls's divergence after 1965 can also be explained by the fact that Oakeshott was on his way to sketching in full his own vision of what we usually call "politics," and what Oakeshott eventually preferred to call "the civil condition" (since, for him, "politics" came to identify a limited aspect of the civil condition; see 1975, p. 108).

From the time Oakeshott prepared a manuscript of what was posthumously published as *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* in the early 1950s to the publication of *On Human Conduct* in 1975, he was at work on his own summary of political life. His mature view, evident at times in *Rationalism in Politics* but not really ever made explicit there—and sometimes muted by the relics of other schemes, such as the triadic one he developed in the "Introduction to *Leviathan*" (2000, pp. 7-8) — was that politics should be understood in terms of a continual contradiction which could be stated as a theoretical antithesis or opposition between two styles of politics (1975, pp. 199-200; see also Alexander 2019, pp. 28, 30; Franco 1990, p. 158). One was ideological in the negative sense, *imposing* abstractions and abridgements on politics. The other was not exactly traditional, since Oakeshott presented it as an abstraction in its own right, but it was certainly not meant to be "ideological." At various times he called the first style "the politics of faith" or "telocracy" and finally "enterprise association" or *universitas* (cf. 1975, pp. 157, 203; see also Alexander 2019, p. 28). At various times he called the second "the politics of scepticism" or "nomocracy" and finally "civil association" or *societas* (cf. 1975, pp. 158, 201; see also Alexander 2019, p. 28). It was also what he meant by "the rule of law" (cf. 1975, pp. 159-60; 1983, p. 136; 1999, p. 148). The antithesis structures all of the third essay of *On Human Conduct*: the distinction between *universitas* as a vision of a society united in terms of sharing a common purpose or end and *societas* as vision of a society united in terms of recognizing a shared set of rules by which independent activity could be regulated (e.g. 1975, p. 203). Famously, Oakeshott's theory of the state was a theory in terms of this antithesis. "A state," he declared, "may perhaps be understood as an unresolved tension between the two irreconcilable dispositions represented by the words *societas* and *universitas*" (1975, pp. 200-1; cf. Alexander 2019, p. 34).

As Oakeshott made clear in various of his lectures in the 1950s and 1960s—also published posthumously—"ideology" was the foundation of "enterprise association" or *universitas*, but irrelevant to the concept of "civil association" or *societas* (see "The Office of Government (1)" in Oakeshott 2006, pp. 488-503). This was simply because without a conception of the common good, as derived from some abridgement of actual experience, employed as an ideology, there could be no such thing as an association united around a specified common good. Insofar as he judged that *A Theory of Justice* effectively implied *universitas*, he had to think that Rawls was amending politics with an abridgment or conditional understanding.

By the 1970s, Oakeshott had concluded, without saying much about it, that what Rawls was concerned with was ideological politics.

4. CONCLUSION: COMPARING OAKESHOTT AND RAWLS

The investigation, so far, has been wide ranging but is still unsatisfactory. There is perhaps more to be said, more common ground that could be surveyed if we overlooked the sharp differences between *A Theory of Justice* and *On Human Conduct* and instead returned to that point of apparent harmony in 1965. Is it possible for there to be rapprochement between Oakeshott's thought and Rawls's? Without offering a definitive answer to the question, I will conclude by beginning to develop two plausible replies.

First, consider Oakeshott's and Rawls's approaches to political philosophy. To the account already given above, it is relevant to add that in Oakeshott's view all philosophy begins with everyday experience that is incomplete and self-contradictory; this experience calls out for completion and coherence ([1933] 2015, p. 270; cf. 1993, p. 142; 1975, p. 2; see also Franco 1990, p. 19).[9] An inquirer must undertake a process of investigation and critique in order to transform his fragmented view of things into something more coherent and comprehensive. In this quest "nothing," wrote Oakeshott, "may be merely ejected." Instead, "in experience the given is simultaneously conserved and transformed" ([1933] 2015, p. 29). Political philosophy specifically begins its ascent to a higher, more coherent vantage point from phenomena in political life (1993, pp. 152–3).

Paul Franco has shown that there is some affinity between Oakeshott's starting point and the method of the analytic movement, whose members could be said to include Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, T. D. Weldon, and Rawls. Like Oakeshott, the analytic movement started with everyday concepts and language.

Unlike Oakeshott, they tended to entertain limited ambitions in philosophy, political or otherwise. At first they understood philosophy as examining "the 'logic' of concepts, i.e. the rules governing their interrelations and manifestations in language use" (Krishnan 2021, p. 13; cf. Franco 2004, p. 113).

There was, of course, a complicating difference between Rawls and figures like Weldon that needs to be explained, which was their obviously divergent ambitions for political philosophy. In the first volume of *Philosophy, Politics, and Society*, Weldon had written, that "philosophers are to make no claim to improve either the theories or the methods of those who are engaged on scientific or political activities" (qtd. in Krishnan 2021, p. 3). Rawls, of course, was greatly concerned with such improvement. Nikhil Krishnan has shown that these differences are partly due to Rawls's distinct response to the sort of analytical philosophy that became common after Wittgenstein (p. 12). Wittgenstein's later work moved Weldon, Austin, and others to linguistic analysis, while in Rawls's case it prompted him to begin thinking about ethical concepts as embedded within practices (p. 13; see also Gališanka 2019, p. 98). So, as Franco has suggested, Rawls, like Oakeshott, indeed began with ordinary experience. But unlike Oakeshott he accepted given opinion as a standard (Franco 2004, pp. 113–4). We might suppose that in Oakeshott's eyes, at least, Rawls placed a limit on his inquiry by refusing to radically transform the political data as they first appeared to him—the most conspicuous example is the liberal democratic conception of justice, which Rawls conserved as a standard to be explained and defended. In Oakeshottian terms, Rawls allowed the first appearance of political phenomena to act "as a criterion, as something achieved and settled, to which subsequent perceptions must conform" (1993, p. 152; cf. 1975, p. 2). In Krishnan's words, Rawls "put aside the question whether 'our' considered judgments are right or true. The point is, rather, that those judgments are *ours*" (p. 19).

Oakeshott's objections aside, Krishnan suggests that it was this novelty which made it seem to many political theorists, including Brian Barry, Bernard Williams, Stuart Hampshire and Robert Nozick, that Rawls had reversed the apparent decline or even "death" of political theory which had troubled academics in the 1950s. What Rawls did in particular was to reverse the emphasis of writing on ethics, as it was predominantly written in Oxford by the 1950s. Whereas the logical positivists like T. D. Weldon sought a secular or scientific approach which attempted to see ethics from without, Rawls, a Christian until the war complicated his faith, remained, like Kant or Sidgwick, committed to seeing ethics from within, even if he could no longer support his arguments with Christian positions (Krishnan 2021, pp. 13-4; on Rawls's Christianity and his post-war work, see also Gališanka 2019, p. 43; Bok 2017a, p. 182). Even though Barry, Williams, Hampshire, and Nozick were also secular, they celebrated the return to ethical and legal philosophy of at least the semblance of an engagement with the actual world, and our moral experience as humans of that world.

Where Oakeshott fits in among this crowd is interesting, since he did not figure neatly into either category: neither that of low but solid logical analysis nor that of the lofty laying down of arguments from intuition and for responsibility. Oakeshott was neither a Weldon nor, like Rawls, a revived Sidgwick. Rawls explicitly saw himself as restoring political philosophy to the great tradition of Kant and Sidgwick (e.g. Krishnan 2021, pp. 2, 15); Oakeshott was a descendant of an idealist strain of philosophy, apparently obliterated by Russell and Moore, but which survived in Collingwood and Oakeshott to influence thinking in history, politics, and art (p. 3). He was in some accord with Weldon in being hostile to a political theory attempting to change the world; yet he did not object to this for Weldonian reasons.

Oakeshott was not a logical positivist. Unlike the logical positivists, he was tender toward metaphysics. So Oakeshott could be sympathetic to Rawls's apparently more substantial, more realistic, more experiential type of understanding—ethics from within rather than from without—while being unable to do what Rawls later did, which was to engage in systematic normative recommendation based upon an "abridgment" of politics.

Rawls began, then, from a similar starting point to Oakeshott, but he resembled the other analytic philosophers more closely in his insistence on treating considered judgments as a standard and, at least until *Political Liberalism*, in rejecting any strong sense of historical contingency or arbitrariness—of course always a great concern for Oakeshott, who had originally studied *history* at Cambridge, and who, though he did not write history, obviously thought historically at least half the time (Franco 2004, p. 3). Still, the similar starting point and the role of abridgment or conditional understanding in Oakeshott's thought form a clear picture. Oakeshott's vision of political philosophy as the project of placing a conception of political life within the context of the rest of experience would have been compatible with Rawlsian ideal theory, had Rawlsian ideal theory remained an exploration of the meaning of justice rather than becoming a model for imposing justice.

This leads to a second way in which Oakeshott and Rawls might be contrasted. They have conflicting views regarding the homogeneity of political society. Rawls thought he saw the prospect of a latent consensus in political life (see Forrester 2019, p. 6). This became explicit in "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical" and *Political Liberalism*, where the consensus is extracted from political convention. But his earlier search for a universal morality embedded in human practices suggests consensus in its own way. It could be read to imply that within any society all normally constituted persons possess the same natural sentiments or moral experiences. These sentiments or experiences provide the basis for a moral consensus. This is surely not an unreasonable view, and is even a truism for some theorists. For our purposes it is only important to recognize that it is amenable to the distillation and elaboration of a theory of justice that can in turn be applied to make society more consistent with its own moral beliefs.

Oakeshott, on the other hand, grew more insistent on the internal plurality of political society. Franco observes that, in a reply to a critic that Oakeshott wrote in 1965, "his fundamental objection to rationalism" had become "that it fails to grasp the radical diversity [of a political tradition]" and tries to draw from society a moral theory (Franco 2004, p. 96). Oakeshott wrote that the moral beliefs in a tradition, "are not self-consistent; they often pull in different directions, they compete with one another… they cannot properly be thought of as a norm or a self-consistent set of norms or 'principles' capable of delivering to us an unequivocal message about what we should do" (qtd. in Franco 2004, p. 97). Oakeshott's insistence on diversity suggests different possibilities for theory than Rawls's supposition of consensus.

If Rawls's enterprise tends toward making him the architect of a system, Oakeshott's project makes him a perpetual traveler with no permanent harbor. In repayment for hospitality, he can promise only that he will recount where he has been and what he has seen. Rawls's normative applications hold out a different kind of promise. Keeping this in mind, we should turn to the central charge of Forrester's history: "the Rawlsian framework came to act as a constraint on what kind of theorizing could be done and what kind of politics could be imagined" (2019, p. 275). I propose that this charge is in fact twofold, one part epistemic and one part political. If the ongoing effort to "stretch" Rawls succeeds, then his theory could indeed take up broader concerns, justify the policies of new movements, and identify new injustices to be amended.[10] But familiarity with Oakeshott should remind us that even a "stretched" Rawlsianism rests upon presuppositions that, if normative philosophers are to get on with amending politics, need to rest undisturbed. Oakeshott's radical subversiveness might be the better answer to the hegemony of a theory. Of course, this way promises no contribution to the perfection of political life; to those who are made dissatisfied by that thought, Oakeshott might have replied: "the pursuit of philosophical truth is something which must be condemned by practice … philosophy is born an outcast, useless to men of business and troublesome to men of pleasure" ([1933] 2015, p. 273).

Ultimately, Oakeshott and Rawls continued along their separate paths. Rawls applied himself patiently to his work and completed his first draft of *A Theory of Justice* in 1965 (Bok 2017b, p. 285). Even by the time Oakeshott was writing in praise of Rawls, his reasons for doing so were, unknown to him, firmly misplaced, since Rawls's ambition had always a different object than did Oakeshott's—and it turned out that Laslett and Runciman were eventually right. The year that Oakeshott wrote his review, Rawls and Oakeshott had already shifted out of alignment.[11]

NOTES

1 For some perspectives on this narrative, see Franco 2004, p. 81; Smith 2021, pp. 3-9, 31-4; Bejan 2021, pp. 15, 4-8.

2 Note also Oakeshott's statement on 1983, p. 150; 1999, p. 163 that "the notion of setting up such an association *ex nihilo*, like inventing a game, is absurd," which James Alexander observes is likely directed at Rawls (Alexander 2018, p. 411).

3 See Noël O'Sullivan's helpful comment on Oakeshott's favorable review and later rejection of Rawls in O'Sullivan 2012, p. 305. "Justice as Fairness" uses the "general position," a prototype of the original position. For a helpful typology of the developing versions of Rawls's original position, see Gališanka 2019, p. 148.

4 Rawls altered footnotes and revised the last paragraph of Section III. For more details on the revisions, see the first footnote on the first page of the version of "Justice as Fairness" published in *Philosophy, Politics, and Society (Second Series).*

5 Based on the publication dates given at the end of each essay in the original edition of *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, the essays were arranged for publication in chronological order. The earliest essay was "Rationalism in Politics" (1947) and the latest essay was "The Study of Politics in a University" (1961).

6 For the connection to Ryle's "knowing how" and Polanyi's tacit knowledge, see McIntyre 2012, p. 93, notes 28 and 29.

7 Franco suggests this role for ideology, but seems to conflate it with the ideological style of politics, which strictly speaking is, in Oakeshott's eyes, the misuse of ideology to reform practical politics. Franco writes, "the ideological style… is bound to tradition and confined to exploring its intimations" (Franco 2004, p. 93).

8 Regarding the correct year in which "Justice as Reciprocity" was composed, Bok notes: "'Justice as Reciprocity' appears in Rawls's *Collected Papers* under the year it was finally published (1971) rather than 1958, when it was written" (Bok 2017a, p. 180, fn. 15).

9 Oakeshott writes, "where there is abstraction there must also be a concrete whole; where there is incompleteness, completeness is implied" (Oakeshott [1933] 2015, p. 270).

10 On this topic, see also Smith 2021, p. 27, n. 180.

11 I would like to make clear my sincere gratitude to James Alexander for suggesting that I consider contrasting Michael Oakeshott and John Rawls, and for directing me to Oakeshott's footnote on Rawls in "The Rule of Law" and his review of *Philosophy, Politics, and Society (Second Series).* His editorial eye was impeccable, and I am especially indebted to him for his recommendations regarding both Oakeshott's *On Human Conduct* and Oakeshott's position vis-à-vis the scholars at Oxford and Cambridge in the mid-century.

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Oakeshott’s Superficial Daoism

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Abstract: It is rarely noticed that Oakeshott occasionally quotes the *Zhuangzi* in *Rationalism in Politics*. The *Zhuangzi* was an ancient Daoist text emphasizing the free and wandering life of someone who skillfully acts without pretension or independent purpose. Oakeshott quoted it in support of his own typically Oakeshottian conclusions. But I argue in this paper that Oakeshott misunderstood the actual force of the anecdotes to which he referred. Oakeshott used Daoist wisdom to support his practical philosophy but entirely missed that the *Zhuangzi* was all about achieving a higher immersion in or indifference to reality, and hence was not about battling against ‘rationalism in politics’ but about transcending rationalism, irrationalism and even practice in order to achieve a higher therapeutic end.

Keywords: Oakeshott; Daoism; forgetfulness; morality; action; intention; politics

I. INTRODUCTION

Reflecting upon the 60th anniversary of Michael Oakeshott’s *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, one may wonder about his role in contemporary theory: about whether the style or substance of his work is obsolete. For my part, the worry is not so much that Oakeshott’s approach, especially in this classic text, might be too much of its own time, but that it might not be untimely enough. In *Rationalism in Politics* there is, to use an Oakeshottian word, an intimation of a style of thinking about human living and acting that the author seemed to have approved of, but which he left underdeveloped. Throughout the essays of *Rationalism in Politics*, there is a subterranean trajectory of references to ancient Chinese philosophers. In particular, the classical Chinese Daoism of the *Zhuangzi* is cited favorably in a number of key moments, often at the end of essays, as illustrations for certain culminating points Oakeshott was trying to make.[1] As illustrations, these references mostly do work in the way he intended, but I will claim that by citing a text like the *Zhuangzi* in his defense Oakeshott opened the door for the emergence of a kind of skeptical vision that goes far behind what he wished to convey and which might be worth reclaiming today.

In other words, Oakeshott had no idea how right he was in citing the *Zhuangzi*, for it is a text that offers a superior form of skepticism that surpasses the ‘politics of scepticism’ he himself tended to favor as a corrective to the rationalist and perfectionist ‘politics of faith.’ Oakeshott could have used Daoist insights to achieve a more thoroughgoing and, in Western terms, a Pyrrhonian kind of skepticism. That Oakeshott was no Pyrrhonian seems to have been established (Laursen 2005). In fact, Oakeshott's so-called skepticism appears to amount to little more than a confession of uncertainty or doubt concerning more dogmatic and assertive approaches: the usual Cartesian or Socratic genuflection. One thing I will do here is, with the aid of the *Zhuangzi*, note more precisely where Oakeshott's skepticism stops and where something more thoroughgoing could be developed.

Oakeshott refers to the *Zhuangzi* five times in the first edition of *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, and on one more occasion at the end of his introduction to Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which was added to the second edition of the book. I shall divide Oakeshott's references to the *Zhuangzi* as follows. The first set of references has to do with the negative effects of rationalist moralizing, the second set with the necessity of forgetting purposiveness for the sake of skillful action, and the third with the necessity of forgetting everything for the sake of achieving joy and equanimity. Mostly as a matter of convenience, I will organize these three sets of references around the theme of forgetfulness, so that the first could be labeled 'moral forgetfulness,' the second 'local forgetfulness,' and the third 'global forgetfulness.' This organization also works in a narrative sense insofar as at each higher pitch of forgetfulness we reach a higher stage of skeptical equanimity or, what is the same thing, Daoist wisdom.

I will address each theme by emphasizing that Oakeshott only partially succeeded in getting the Daoist texts to serve as illustrations for his own points. My motivation for this exercise is not to blame Oakeshott for misreading the *Zhuangzi*. I doubt he could have done much more than he did with the text given his context and interests. Rather, it is to note that if we take Oakeshott seriously in his suggestion that these references illustrate his arguments, we can make a further claim that if fully understood in a Daoist sense, Oakeshott's arguments may contribute to offering us today a superior therapeutic relationship to the world, a relationship where we see the consequences of making explicit what Oakeshott left implicit, and of completely realizing what Oakeshott only intimated. Whether Oakeshott would have approved of this exercise is harder to see, but it is likely that, notwithstanding his references to the *Zhuangzi*, he would find most aspects of Daoism too extreme for his tastes. Thus, what follows may also enable us to obtain a unique perspective of the limits of Oakeshott's thought.

2. MORAL FORGETFULNESS

In the essay, 'Rationalism in Politics,' Oakeshott concludes with a lament that the plague of rationalism might have struck a deathblow to the "whole field of morality and moral education" (1991, p. 40). Rationalism, in the sphere of morality, is the clumsy attempt to reduce complex moral practices to a system of ideals to be discovered through rational reflection and then later applied in practice. For Oakeshott, genuine morality is rooted in religious or social traditions. It is not something that can be artificially imposed through novel shortcuts or 'cribs,' as he would call them. Morality is as ubiquitous as social life itself, rooted in long-since developed religious and ritual practices. It is supposedly something more like an element or medium, something in or through which human social life is possible. It is something with a deep past and which coasts with the force of historical inertia. A moral practice is never something that can be invented from scratch. Oakeshott's slogan of 'nothing in advance' is as applicable to morality as it is to seemingly every other topic he discusses. His concern in attacking rationalism, including moral rationalism, is always to emphasize that there is no graceful way to interrupt tradition, no technique that could be as effective as the evolved practice itself, no technical knowledge that could occasion as aesthetically pleasant and authentic a performance than the unroutinizable know-how displayed by an experienced virtuoso.

The rationalist's reduction of morality to the systematization of ideals or principles—essentially, the reduction of practical morality to normative ethics—is bad, for Oakeshott. And since doing normative ethics is basically the same as doing metaethics, doing metaethics is bad too. This could be called Oakeshott's metametaethical claim: doing metaethics, which is all normative ethics amounts to, is bad because it is an attempt to remove oneself from (and thus aim to manipulate) traditional, intuitive, practical morality—

which, as a collection of un-self-consciously and non-purposively traditionally performed practices, is itself good. In contemporary terms, this would place Oakeshott in the metametaethical camp of moral intuitionist, quietist, non-naturalist, and robust realism. This is a view that often includes the claim that normative ethics and metaethics are themselves unethical insofar as they interrupt first-order moral experiences (Dworkin 1996; Parfit 2011; Scanlon 2014).

In other words, normative ethics and metaethics are bad for not being genuine morality itself. It is in the context of Oakeshott's metametaethical claim that he first cites the *Zhuangzi*. We can discuss Oakeshott's use of the *Zhuangzi* in terms of his metametaethical claim. To illustrate his supposition that "moral ideals are a sediment; they have significance only so long as they are suspended in a religious or social tradition, so long as they belong to a religious or a social life" (1991, p. 41), Oakeshott cites one of the ironic tales from 'The Spinning of the Heavens' outer chapter where the *Zhuangzi* has Confucius seeking insight from Lao Dan ('Old Lao,' or Laozi, the legendary author of the first Daoist classic, the *Daodejing*) about the Course or Way (the Dao). The quotation reads,

> Confucius came to see Lao Dan and spoke to him of humankindness and responsible conduct. Lao Dan said, "If you are winnowing grain and the dust gets in your eyes, heaven and earth and the four directions may seem to change positions. If your skin is menaced by mosquitos and flies, it can keep you awake all night. This humankindness and this responsible conduct that you speak of in such baleful tones—they really upset our hearts and minds (Ziporyn 2020, p. 123).

In the essay, 'The Tower of Babel,' Oakeshott offers another footnote including a similar claim aligning Confucianism with contrived moral rationalism and Daoism with habitual moral intuitionism. Again Oakeshott complains that since traditional morality is inextricably linked to a society's common way of life, moral theorizing and idealizing is mostly a pathological degradation of that society's basic moral structure. Of course, moral practice without any moral reflection would be 'defective,' but it is more detrimental to moral life to have moral practice become subject to moral ideals than not, for "in a world dizzy with moral ideals we know less about how to behave in public and in private than ever before" (1991, p. 481). Oakeshott places this point in the classical Chinese context by writing,

> For example, Jên (consideration for others) [Ren, the 'humankindness' mentioned above] in Confucian morality was an abstraction from the filial piety and respect for elders which constituted the ancient Chinese habit of moral behavior. The activity of the Sages, who (according to Chuang Tzu) [Zhuangzi] *invented* goodness, duty and the rules and ideals of moral conduct, was one in which a concrete morality of habitual behavior was sifted and refined; but, like too critical anthologists, they threw out the imperfect approximations of their material and what remained was not the reflection of a literature but merely a collection of masterpieces (1991, p. 480).

So, according to Oakeshott, the moral intuitionism of the Daoism of the *Zhuangzi* appears to be the corrective to the moral rationalism of Confucianism. Daoism does not indulge in moral abstraction. It sticks to moral practice, while Confucianism invents moral ideals and principles, degrading true morality in the process. Oakeshott is only half-right about this, however. It is the case that Daoism distinguishes itself from Confucianism by attacking it for its moral rationalism and moral realism. It also attacks Mohism for similar reasons. The problem with Oakeshott's claim is that Daoism is not, in metaethical terms, an example of moral intuitionism and so is not, in terms of Oakeshott's metametaethical claim, criticizing Confucianism for contaminating traditional morality with highfalutin moral theorizing. The common refrain found throughout Daoism is that *any* moralizing at any level of concreteness or abstraction is a loss. Even the most intuitive moral habit, if it is *moral* at all, is already a sign of a diminution of power and oneness with the amorality of nature and the Dao. A thought echoed throughout the *Zhuangzi* is made in the *Laozi*: "Heaven and earth [tian, or nature] is not humane [ren]" (Moeller 2007, p. 15). In other words, the world does not instantiate humankindness at all. It is a property which does not exist. No moral property exists. Not only is morality systematically false for Daoism, rendering its metaethical reflections closer to the moral anti-realism of contemporary moral error theory, Daoism does not regard Confucianism as morally bad in the way Oakeshott seems to. The *Zhuangzi*, therefore, is not able to fully serve as support for Oakeshott's metametaethical claim. This is an epistemic issue here, but there is a deeper therapeutic matter at play as well.

For Daoism, morality itself is the disease, not reflecting, idealizing, and theorizing about it. Trying to perfect morality through systematization and routinization is something an already sick person or society does. It just makes the illness worse. Normative ethics and metaethics are indeed a degradation, but so is any intuitive, habitual, or traditional morality. The source of the sickness is thinking normative judgments actually succeed in corresponding to the world, holding any moral beliefs whatsoever, or participating in any moral practices no matter how much they are feigned to be habitual or intuitive. Supposed moral knowledge is already a typical piece of all-too-human arrogance and mendacity. A moral practice is already a sign of humanity's cutting itself off from the Dao, from nature's amoral omnipotence. These claims are littered throughout the outer chapters of the *Zhuangzi* Oakeshott cites most often. The Daoist, then, would be neither a Confucian moral rationalist nor an Oakeshottian moral intuitionist and traditionalist. This is because there is no non-pathological way one can be moral. The problem with the 'baleful tones' of talk of humankindness and responsible conduct is not that it really upsets our moral intuitions, habits, or traditions, as Oakeshott seems to think, but that it upsets 'our hearts and minds,' our inner peace, our equanimity. Morality itself, whether fast or slow, is the disease, the disturbance. This is the first, basically Pyrrhonian, point that pushes Daoism past an approach Oakeshott is willing to countenance. While he seems to avoid being a moral rationalist or absolutist, he also does not want to be a moral skeptic. The Daoist, on the other hand, quietly recommends we forget about morality altogether.

3. LOCAL FORGETFULNESS

In another set of references to the *Zhuangzi*, Oakeshott makes a claim about know-how. The issue is the relationship between technique and what Oakeshott calls 'practical knowledge.' In 'Rationalism in Politics,' Oakeshott emphasizes it is through some combination of technique and practical knowledge that skill or artistry of any sort emerges. This goes for activities ranging from cooking to painting, and it is involved in fields as seemingly opposed as science and religion. Oakeshott is not, however, making the usual distinction between know-that or know-what and know-how. Rather, to know that something is the case already necessitates an intuitive and subtle grasp of the manner in which a certain kind of approach is employed. Internal to technique is already a distinction between technique and practice whereby technique follows from a dexterous practical intuition, a performative ability to know which techniques to employ and in which manner. While distinct, technical and practical knowledge are inseparable and involved in any skillful human activity. One could say that, for Oakeshott, what makes them inseparable is an at least partial dependence of technical knowledge on practical knowledge. Intuitive practice, in other words, seems to enjoy a kind of metaphysical priority in Oakeshott.

Now, it is in delineating this inseparable distinction, yet asymmetrical dependency, between technique and practice that Oakeshott cites the story of the wheelwright from chapter thirteen, Heaven's Course, of the *Zhuangzi*. The reference appears to serve the function of exemplifying Oakeshott's emphasis on the relationship between technical and practical knowledge. This story goes like this: Duke Huan was reading up in his pavilion while a wheelwright was hewing a wheel below when the wheelwright asked what the Duke was reading and the Duke replied he was reading "the words of sages." The wheelwright then told the Duke that since those sages were long dead, he was reading nothing but "the dregs and dust of the ancients." The Duke replied angrily that no mere wheelwright could pass judgment on what his ruler was reading and that if he couldn't explain his comment he would be executed. The wheelwright responded:

> I am looking at it from the point of view of my own profession. In hewing a wheel, if I spin slowly and make the hub too loose, it attaches easily to the crossbar but not firmly. If I spin quickly and make it too tight, I have to struggle to attach it, and it still never really gets all the way in. I have to make it not too loose and not too tight, my hand feeling it and my mind constantly responsive to it. I cannot explain this with my mouth, and yet there is a certain knack to the procedure. I cannot even get my own son to grasp it, so even he has no way to learn it from me. Thus I am already seventy years old and still here busily hewing wheels as an old man. The ancients died, and that which they could not transmit died along with them. So I say that what you, my lord, are perusing is just the dregs and dust of the ancients, nothing more! (Ziporyn 2020, p. 116).

The text does not tell us if the reply was enough to spare the wheelwright's life, but it probably was. Presumably, what Oakeshott liked about this passage was its distinction between communicable technical knowledge and incommunicable practical knowledge expressed through the wheelwright's explanation for his judgment concerning the analogy between the 'words of sages' and what he can say about hewing a wheel. Whatever can be written down and rendered a mere collection of instructions cannot possibly convey the skill required to actually display the know-how of proper wisdom or proper wheel-hewing. Of course, one could not be wise or skillfully hew wheels without being able to communicate something about one's abilities, some technical knowledge, but the real 'knowledge' needed for the performance of one's skill resides in a practical know-how that cannot be sufficiently expressed. This seems to also account for why the wheelwright cannot retire and let his son take over the family business: he cannot teach him verbally how to properly feel the skillful hewing of a wheel. This is an accurate reading of the *Zhuangzi*, and so an apt illustration of Oakeshott's claim, as far as it goes. What it misses, however, is the deeper context of the Daoist approach to artisanship found in the *Zhuangzi* and in other Daoist texts that is only implicit in this particular story.

If read next to the many other 'knack stories' found throughout the *Zhuangzi*, one starts to see an important difference between the original text and Oakeshott's claim about it. For Daoists, artistry or skill is not just a matter of noting the secondary and contrived nature of technical knowledge, but of obtaining a deeper recognition that the contrived and harmful nature of all knowledge, including know-how, gets in the way of a proper and effective display of a skill. It is not so much that the wheelwright has a practical knowledge, a know-how, that he cannot communicate and impart to his son, but more that the wheelwright's real incommunicable skill is based on a non-knowledge, a total forgetting, of any conscious or purposive intent in acting in a specific way as he skillfully hews a wheel. Just as Daoist metametaethics involves quietly forgetting morality altogether, Daoist artisanship involves forgetting knowledge entirely for the sake of a skillful performance. Neither technical nor practical knowledge contributes to Daoist artistry. The skillful performer, the Daoist virtuoso, empties himself of all cognitive content. He forgets the distinction between himself, his skill, and his work of art. They are all one natural, spontaneous, unknowable, and ineffable process. All genuine arts or skills are so many ways the Dao constantly creates, transforms, and destroys itself. This, again, is starting to go too far from Oakeshott's original concern with the asymmetrical mutual dependence between know-how and know-that. Daoism is again likely too extreme for Oakeshott. It is probable that while Oakeshott is preoccupied with practice of any sort, Daoism is concerned specifically with perfected practices.

For example, in both the *Leizi* and the *Zhuangzi*, we find tales of masterful swimmers who seem indistinguishable for their element, swimming as just another way the water itself flows. One day, the *Zhuangzi* tells us, Confucius was viewing the massive Lu waterfall when he saw an old man leap down the torrent. Thinking the old man was committing suicide, Confucius sent some of his disciples to pick up his body, but when they came to him he hopped out of the water onto the bank singing with his hair streaming down his back. Confucius ran to him and said he thought he was a ghost and asked if he had a Dao, a way or course, that allowed him to swim like that. He replied,

> No, I have no Course. It all starts out in the given, grows through the inborn nature, and comes to perfection in the fated. I enter into the navels of whirlpools and emerge with the surging eddies. I just follow the Course of the water itself, without making any private one of my own. This is how I tread the waters (Ziporyn 2020, p. 154).

Confucius was shocked, as he usually is in these stories insofar as the *Zhuangzi* uses him in an ironic manner. He asked what he meant by 'starting out in the given, growing through the inborn nature, and coming to perfection in the fated?' The old man replied,

> Born among the hills, I first came to feel safely at home there among the hills—that's the given. Gravitating toward the water as I grew up, I then came to feel safely at home in the water—that was my inborn nature. And to be thus and so without knowing how or why I am thus and so—that's the fated (Ziporyn 2020, p. 154).

There are two points to make about this story with respect to Oakeshott. The first is that Daoist virtuosity in skill or artistry ultimately entails one affirming one's fate of not knowing how or why (or even that) one successfully performs such a skill as one engages in its performance. As the Daoist scholar and translator, Hans-Georg Moeller, puts it: "There is no knowledge about the Way when it is performed" (Moeller 2004, p. 112). Not only would it be simply incorrect to call this Daoist approach to artistry 'technical knowledge' or 'know-that,' but calling it 'practical knowledge' or 'know-how' would not be quite right either. It would perhaps be better described as 'neither know-that nor know-how' or maybe 'practical non-knowledge,' something rather distinct from Oakeshott's more dualistic understanding. Moeller emphasizes that the Daoist swimmer "can't even swim! He has unlearned active swimming, so that he can float with the water, [and] he masters the 'technique' of swimming because he moves just as the water moves, by letting the water master him" (Moeller 2004, p. 112). Daoist skill means forgetting all local knowledge that, how, and why one performs that skill.

The second point is that we can now see the probable source of the difference between Oakeshott and the *Zhuangzi* on 'practical skill:' Daoism is a negative perfectionism while Oakeshott is flatly opposed to any perfectionism, or at least that is how it appears in other texts like *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism*. Daoist practice is one of increasing performative perfection through subtraction of all that is human or non-natural or lacking spontaneity, and the way to achieve this perfection is to not only forget moral judgments, as we saw in the last section, but to forget any kind of theoretical or practical knowledge as well. The point is to diminish and ultimately eliminate oneself so that one can achieve the perfection of the Dao's natural, constant non-purposive expression of omnipotent creation and destruction. As we read in the *Loazi*:

> Who engages in learning increases daily. Who hears of the Dao diminishes daily. To decrease and to decrease even more so that 'doing nothing' is reached. Doing nothing, and nothing is undone (Moeller 2007, p. 115).

What is fascinating about Oakeshott's relationship to this more extreme Daoist approach of forgetting just about everything for the sake of achieving negative perfection when skillful acting is Oakeshott seemed to have been aware of it. There is a moment in 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind' where he is discussing the slow history of the emancipation of works of art, or poetic images open for contemplative attention more generally, from more utilitarian, political, or religious functions. He notes that such a treatment of poetic images is mostly not found in the ancient Greek or Roman worlds, but that in the ancient East there were signs of a more aesthetically pure appreciation of artistic activity as something done for its own sake. He again cites a story of a virtuoso from the *Zhuangzi*. There is a tale of a carpenter in the *Zhuangzi* "whose description of the activity of being an artist is almost entirely in terms of what he had to forget" (Oakeshott 1991, p. 531). Oakeshott is referring to the chief woodworker for the Marquis of Lu who produced extraordinary bellstands. When the Marquis saw one of his carved bellstands, he asked the carpenter about which technique he used to make objects that look like the work of spirits. Since this story directly follows after the story of the Daoist swimmer, we get a pretty similar response from the carpenter:

> I am just an artisan—what technique could I have? However, there is one thing. When I am going to make a bellstand, I dare not let it deplete my vital energy. Rather, I fast to quiet my mind, and after three days, I no longer presume to care about praise or reward, rank or salary. After five days, I no longer presume to care about honor and disgrace, skill and clumsiness. After seven days, I become so still that I forget I have four limbs and a body. When this happens, for me it is as if the ducal court has ceased to exist. My skill becomes so focused that everything external slides away. Then I enter into the mountain forests, viewing the inborn Heavenly nature of the trees. My body arrives at a certain spot, and already I see the completed bellstand there; only then do I apply my hand to it. Otherwise I leave the tree alone. So I am just matching the Heavenly to the Heavenly. This may be the reason the result suggests the work of spirits! (Ziporyn 2020, p. 154).

Instead of Confucius himself, as in the case of the story of the swimmer, here we have the Marquis of Lu expressing bafflement at a Daoist virtuoso performance. Again, such a performance requires forgetting the surrounding moral world of Confucian duties and then forgetting all purposive and intentional approaches to acting and creating. The carpenter not only fasts, but fasts his heart-mind (*xin*), the seat of cognition in ancient China. He empties his mind of all desire and distraction, all deliberating and knowing. He entirely forgets himself. He does not carve bellstands. Bellstands carve themselves through him. He taps into nature's unwrought perforations and lets them guide him. He becomes inseparable from the bellstand the tree naturally makes through him. Nature natures and he is a way that is so. In his case, that way is carving bellstands. There is neither technical nor practical knowledge involved. It just happens of its own accord. Oakeshott knew this, but, for him, "of the East I hesitate to speak" (Oakeshott 1991, p. 531). Today, we need not be so hesitant. In fact, if we want to avoid the pitfalls and ugliness of rationalism, we can go even further than Oakeshott and return to a Daoist approach where we do not have to balance technical and practical knowledge. We can forget about knowledge altogether, or rather realize that in true skillful action no knowledge is involved. Virtuosity is not a cognitive affair. Again, this is not to blame Oakeshott, but to see where precisely he stops and where we can go if we were inspired by the Daoist examples Oakeshott has given us. Now that we have forgotten morality and knowledge, is there anything else we can forget? Yes, everything else.

4. GLOBAL FORGETFULNESS

There are many stories about fish and fishermen in the *Zhuangzi*. Oakeshott cites some of them. He asks us to consider fishing in 'On Being Conservative.' He makes a distinction between someone who fishes for the sake of catching fish and someone who fishes for the sake of enjoying oneself or merely passing the time. In the latter case, whether one catches fish is secondary to the point of irrelevance. What matters instead is the ritual of fishing, of exercising the skill of fishing. For Oakeshott, this kind of fishing calls for a conservative disposition, a tendency to preserve the familiarity of fishing for its own sake. However, one cannot fish in this way if one's approach is too "unfamiliar" or "grotesquely inappropriate" (Oakeshott 1991, p. 418). Oakeshott cites the story from the *Zhuangzi* of King Wen running into an old fisherman in the countryside. He sees this fisherman as exemplifying the latter, more conservative kind of fishing. We also find in this tale more emphasis placed on exercising a skill while forgetting cognitive content or intention. King Wen was so impressed by this fisherman he wanted to let him govern his state:

> When King Wen was out observing the sights at Zang, he happened to see an old man fishing without ever treating his fishing as fishing. Since it is only by fishing without grasping one's fishing that one can fish with real constancy, King Wen wished to raise this man up to office and put him in charge of the state, but because he feared this would cause unrest among his great ministers and his own father and elder brothers, he tried to put this wish out of his mind and forget about it (Ziporyn 2020, p. 170).

Some think this story is an allusion to Jiang Taigong, also known as Jiang Ziya or Lu Shang, the adopted teacher of King Wen of Zhou. It goes that King Wen found this old man fishing in the wilderness with straight nails at the end of his line instead of hooks (Ziporyn 2020, p. 172). The question for us is, is Oakeshott right in viewing this fisherman as embodying a conservative disposition, as someone who performs a skill entirely for the enjoyment and familiarity of it without concern for its utility? It would appear so. But one may wonder if Oakeshott might have found the added detail that the fisherman fished with straight nails and not hooks to be perhaps 'grotesquely inappropriate' and pushing the activity of fishing into something unfamiliar, thus not being very conservative after all. What exactly is this fisherman conserving anyway? If indeed the conservative views activities in ritualistic terms, we may wonder if this fisherman is fishing ritualistically. How attached to familiar fishing is this fisherman, really? From his own perspective, is he even fishing? We might want to say he is not fishing just as much as the Daoist swimmer or carpenter are not swimming or carving.

One could claim this fisherman is similar to many other characters in the *Zhuangzi* who possess Daoist wisdom and who are apparently performing normal, human rituals and activities, but who have internally completely detached themselves from their external activities, from how they appear, to use the title of chaper four, 'in the human world.' Internally, the Daoist sage wanders the infinite Dao and its endless transformations, all the while pretending to participate in human rituals and activities. This fisherman has forgotten all finitude, but he keeps that to himself. Among humans, he does what humans do, and with some facility. So he fishes, and perhaps he even fishes well. He has been burdened with human form, so he might as well fish like humans do, or at least appear to. Again, Oakeshott is half right in his use of the example of the fisherman. The Daoist fisherman fishes with nothing but joy, with no intention of catching any fish. He at least appears to have a conservative disposition. But Oakeshott is half wrong insofar as he fails to note the source of the fisherman's joy. It is not through a conservative disposition, a tendency to faithfully preserve the reality of the ritual, the familiarity of the activity, that the fisherman experiences joy. Oakeshott did not see through the fisherman's pretense of fishing. He did not join the fisherman on the Dao's wandering road of constant drift and doubt. Internally, the fisherman is completely absorbed into the Dao's ceaseless transformations. He is utterly detached from the activities and rituals he must externally perform while he appears human. Oakeshott did not note that the Daoist participation in human activities and rituals like fishing is done in order to hide the world inside the world and thus forget it entirely.

As just one more example of this Daoist 'genuine pretending,' as Moeller and Paul D'Ambrosio call it (2017), there is the story of Mengsun the Prodigy from the *Zhuangzi*. When Mr. Mengsun's mother died, he gained a reputation throughout Lu as an exemplary mourner, having performed all the mourning rituals and displayed the requisite appropriate emotions with great skill. The only thing was that he felt no real sorrow and was not actually sad in his heart. He had fully affirmed that death was just another fated transformation, nothing worth lamenting. He "wailed but shed no tears" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 61). One of Confucius' disciples, Yan Hui, was baffled by this and asked Confucius to explain it to him. Confucius said,

> This Mr. Mengsun has gotten to the end of the matter, beyond mere knowing. For when you try to distinguish what is what but find it is impossible to do so, that is itself a way of deciding the matter. This Mr. Mengsun understands nothing about why he lives or why he dies. His non-knowing applies equally to what went before and what is yet to come. Having already transformed into some particular being, he takes it as no more than a waiting for the next unknown transformation, noth-

> ing more. …Others cry, so he cries too. And that is of course the only reason he does so (Ziporyn 2020, p. 61).

Confucius later describes Mr. Mengsun's pretense, his performative detachment from his social role as a mourner, in terms of his "resting securely in the displacement, constantly dropping away with each transformation as it goes." In this way, Mr. Mengsun, and all other similar Daoist sages, like our old fisherman above, "enter into the oneness of the clear sky, empty Heaven [tian: nature]" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 61). So, there is something a bit odd going on when these Daoist exemplars seemingly exhibit normal human skills, and perfect normal human roles, and rituals. Daoists neither know anything about nor feel anything precisely for their external performances. It is all make-believe to them. They are conserving nothing because there is nothing to conserve. They, instead, identify with the endless transformation and ceaseless non-identity of all practices and all things. That is the oneness they experience and become. And yet they do not show that externally. Instead, they do what is expected of them. They just sit and fish or mourn. They live by the *Zhuangzi*'s counsel: "Don't let the external compromise get inside you and don't let your inner harmony show itself externally" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 40). From an Oakeshottian perspective, this will likely appear as absolutely remarkable. It takes everything to a far higher level than anything Oakeshott was up to in his essays.

The Daoist fisherman forgets fishing, forgets himself, and thus forgets everything else. This, it could be argued, is the final goal of Daoism: global forgetfulness. Following Confucius' explanation of Mr. Mengsun to Yan Hui, a few stories later we find Yan on his own journey towards Daoist sagacity, to global forgetfulness. Yan tells Confucius he is making real progress because, in his words, "I just sit and forget" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 63). Confucius wonders what he means and Yan says, after having first forgotten "humankindness and responsible conduct [morality]" and then "ritual and music [all that requires knowledge and intentionality]," he just sits and forgets. Yan says "it's a dropping away of my limbs and torso, a chasing off of my sensory acuity, dispersing my physical form and ousting my understanding until I am the same as the Transforming Openness." Confucius responds amazed that Yan must be free of any preferences or constancy and that he is such a worthy man he wants to be accepted as his disciple (Ziporyn 2020, p. 62). So now we have our third stage of forgetfulness, global forgetfulness. The Daoist forgets morality, purpose, and everything else. Therefore, he becomes the Dao by simply drifting and wandering around as the infinite transformations of the Dao.

Oakeshott cites probably the best image of Daoist global forgetfulness, of its negative perfectionism: the forgetful fish. The last sentence of Oakeshott's introduction to Hobbes's *Leviathan* is a quote from another section from the same chapter of the *Zhuangzi* we have just been citing, chapter six, 'The Great Source as Teacher'. The lines concern the superior nature of fish thriving in the depths of their element, completely forgetting each other when compared to the struggles fish face when dealing with droughts:

> When the springs dry up, the fish have to cluster together on the shore, blowing on each other to keep damp and spitting on each other to stay wet. But that is no match for forgetting all about one another in the rivers and lakes (Ziporyn 2020, p. 56).

The inference is clear from the context of his introduction to *Leviathan* that Oakeshott means this image to serve as a metaphor for the benefits provided by the Hobbesian state. Just as fish can forget each other in the rivers and lakes, so can Hobbsian citizens forget each other in the midst of having followed the natural law and given up some natural right for the sake of obtaining the peace and security provided by a sovereign state. Hobbesian civil association allows citizens to forget each other enough to not have to force one another into collective enterprises, which always involve a loss of individual freedom. Hobbesian citizens do not have to blow and spit on each other in order to thrive. Instead, they mostly forget about each other as they endeavor to enjoy their individual pursuits.

And yet, again, Oakeshott seems to have missed the ultimate point of the story of the forgetful fish. The very next line after the one about the fish forgetting each other in the rivers and lakes is about how it is preferable to forget all about sovereign rulers instead of either praising or condemning them: “Rather than praising Yao and condemning Jie, we’d be better off forgetting them both, letting their courses melt away in their transformation” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 56). Yao was the first of the paradigmatic sage-kings that Confucius regarded as an exemplar of moral rule. Jie, the last emperor of the Xia dynasty, was a legendary symbol of tyranny and cruelty. For the Daoist, then, it is better neither to praise good governing and political order nor condemn bad governing and political chaos, but forget both entirely. That is how humans can live like the forgetful fish: by forgetting rule altogether. This establishes perhaps the greatest difference between Daoism and Oakeshott: the Daoists were in many senses proto-anarchists and Oakeshott was nothing of the sort. For the *Laozi* and the chapters of the *Zhuangzi* that are usually grouped under ‘primitivist’ or ‘anarchist’ headings, the imposition of any sort of direct or explicit political rule, the type of sovereign authority that was the cornerstone of the Hobbesian vision, was another sign of loss and pathology, a straying off the Course. Order emerges spontaneously and naturally for Daoism through the collective forgetting, indifference, and submergence back into our basic animality that true wisdom entails. We are like the forgetful fish, but the Dao itself is our primary element, as we cease trying to intentionally impose order upon each other or the world:

> Fish create fish in water, and humans create humans in the Course. Those who create and are created in the water just dart past each other through the ponds and their nourishment is provided. Those who create and are created in the Course simply do nothing for one another, do nothing for any particular goal, and the life in them becomes stable. Thus it is said, the fish forget one another in the rivers and lakes, and humans forget one another in the arts of the Course (Ziporyn 2020, p. 60).

It may be hard to imagine a less Oakeshottian approach to the world. If the virtue of rule, for Oakeshott, is not that it is just, but that it is settled, then the Daoist forgetting of all rule and all humanity for the sake of an identification with the unsettled, endlessly transforming, and anarchic essence of nature and the Dao would be something he would likely always have to reject. This is informative for us today, however. It is helpful to know that one of Oakeshott’s inspirations, classical Daoism, did indeed share many of his general tendencies, but that his affinity for Daoism was a touch superficial and, upon closer inspection, betrayed a certain unawareness of the irreconcilability between their ideals. Where Oakeshott wants to conserve certain kinds of intuitive morality and skilled activity for their own sake, mostly for reasons of aesthetics and preference for order and tradition, the Daoists, on the other hand, especially the Daoism of the *Zhuangzi*, aims for nothing less than a forgetting all that is moral, intentional, and merely human or finite for the sake of affirming the Dao’s endlessly transforming openness. Maybe one last aquatic image would be illustrative. Oakeshott viewed governing, and it appears living in general, as the attempt to balance the inherent tension between a more faithful or perfectionist and a more skeptical approach, to keep an even keel on the ship of state and the vessel of one’s own life. Daoism, on the other hand, just like Pyrrhonism, goes so far in the direction of skepticism it ends up as a negative perfectionism, a faith in global forgetfulness. With Daoism, it is not even so much that the ship sinks from the pressure of indulged in and championed extremities, but rather that one is no longer constrained by any type of vessel that is in need of balance. While Oakeshott sails the sea indefinitely, tacking into the wind, avoiding storms, always correcting for greater stability, the Daoist simply becomes the sea itself and forgets all about it. Whether as swimmer, fish, or governor, the Daoist is in his element. Oakeshott never went so deep.

NOTES

1 The *Zhuangzi* is the name of an ancient Chinese text composed during the late Warring States period (476-221 BCE). Along with the *Laozi*, or *Daodejing*, it is one of the two main texts of classical Daoism. The first seven, or 'inner,' chapters are commonly thought to be the work of Zhuang Zhou (ca. 369-286 BCE), who was also called Zhuangzi ("Master Zhuang"). The authorship of the outer and miscellaneous chapters is usually attributed to other Daoist followers, often trying to add chapters written in the spirit of the inner chapters. For an excellent discussion of the relationship between Oakeshott and the *Zhuangzi*, see Chor-yung Cheung's chapter, 'Skepticism, Poetic Imagination, and the Art of Non-Instrumentality: Oakeshott and Zhuangzi,' in Coats and Cheung (2012).

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Apologia for Poetry and the Art of Conversation

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> [The poem is] 'its own question and answer, its own contradiction, its own agreement . . . A poem moves only towards its own end, which is the last line. Anything further than that is the problematical stuff of poetry, not of the poem' (Thomas 2000, 344).

It is only when our feelings become images of contemplation that they may be the stuff of poetry (Oakeshott 2014, 14 [36], p. 380).

In offering his thoughts on poetry to the reader, Michael Oakeshott tells us in the Preface to *Rationalism in Politics and other essays* (1962, p. vii), that he is retracting a foolish sentence he had written in *Experience and Its Modes* in 1933, where he stated that everything concerned with beauty belongs to the practical mode of experience. He says it now properly belongs in the 'vocabulary of aesthetic theory' (1962, p. 234).

In 1933 Oakeshott takes the 'practical' world of ideas to be quite expansive. It is not a random collection of hopes, desires and casual actions, nor is it confined to pursuing the satisfaction of 'vulgar ambitions'. Any attempt to escape practical life is to be achieved, not through 'art, music and poetry', but in science, history and philosophy which are categorially distinct (1933, pp. 296-7). Indeed, Oakeshott contends that the 'most thoroughly and positively practical life is that of the artist or the mystic' (1933, p. 296). He does not elaborate nor defend his opinion.

Oakeshott is presupposing here a postulate that is commonly attributed to poetic experience, namely, that in contemplation the artist has a deeper understanding, or sees the world more clearly -- as it really is. In an early essay, he is explicit that the artist is able to achieve a deeper and more complex understanding of life (1921, p. 61; Podoksik 2002, p. 718). Such an image evokes an emotion of wanting to change what is into this more desirable condition (1933, p. 296). Changing the what is into the what ought to be is the hallmark of practical experience (Greenleaf 1966, p. 30).

By 1936, the year in which A. J. Ayer's *Language Truth and Logic* (2001) was published, reflecting the contemporary dominance of positivism in philosophy, and particularly the influence of Cambridge philosophers such as the early Wittgenstein, Russell and Moore, Oakeshott complained of the growing threat to poetry from scientists who he believed to be a menace to civilisation, offering 'false hopes—desires—values'. In their 'crass insensitiveness' scientists had perpetrated the illusion that they had divested nature of its mystery. Consequently, the poets were driven to the supernatural: ‘to a world of ghosts, in order to satisfy their sense of mystery of life’ (Oakeshott 2014, pp. 304-5, Notebook 13, April, 1936, 13[B]).

He was inspired to modify and enlarge upon his views on poetry after reading R. G. Collingwood’s *Principles of Art* (1938). It came as a revelation to him. Writing to Collingwood, he exclaimed, ‘I have just finished your Principles of Art and I would like to tell you with what excitement, delight and admiration I have read it. Sense at last in the philosophy of art. You have performed a miracle. Please accept my deepest thanks’ (Oakeshott, 18 May, 1938). He went on to review the book in *The Cambridge Review* (Oakeshott 1938), where he exclaimed that it was the most profound and stimulating discussion on the question of ‘what is art?’ that he had ever read. He contends: ‘I myself find it singularly convincing’ (p. 487).

What was it, then, that Oakeshott found singularly convincing about Collingwood’s discussion? Collingwood is famously the principal exponent of the theory that art is the expression of emotion. This, too, was a modification of his earlier position which he had shared with the Italian philosopher Croce, that art is pure imagination, and its practical counterpart is play (Collingwood 1924, 1994 [1925]). Art made for itself, Collingwood contends, two claims: first that it is pure imagination, and second that it somehow reveals the truth about the real nature of reality (1924, p. 87). Claims that for him were opposed because intuition (pure imagination) and expression (revelatory of truth) are contradictory.

Aesthetic experience, in *The Principles of Art,* however, is exemplified in the theory that art is the expression of emotion. Just as the thought and the words expressing it are not two separate things, an emotion is inseparable from its artistic expression.

Art includes fine art, literature, dance and the spoken word. Art performs an essential service to society and civilisation. The suppression of emotions, in Collingwood's view, serves to pervert consciousness and it is in art that emotions are expressed which, for the individual expressing them, may not be practically attainable if it were not for artistic expression; they would be suppressed and denied, resulting in a ‘corruption of consciousness’ (Collingwood 1938, pp. 282-5; Ridley 1998, pp. 3-9). Longings and desires, for example, which are forlorn feelings when expressed in a poem or a painting, are confronted in the act of expressing them, rather than renounced or suppressed. The capacity to express emotions is imperative to the life of a civilisation.

Collingwood establishes his conclusions by way of a complex theory of mind, which in essence is this: in order to identify and distinguish *sensa* we must be conscious of them. Consciousness converts sensa into imagination. *Sensa* become imagination only when we are conscious of them. The connections and inferences between the converted *sensa*, however, require intellect. The categorization of *sensa* into those we want to acknowledge and those that we do not is achieved by selective attention. Emotions can only be expressed when they are elevated from the psychical level of *sensa* to that of consciousness. The act of attending to them facilitates this process. He goes further and suggests that an emotion cannot even be felt until it is expressed (Collingwood 1938, pp. 238, 327). Failure to express an emotion is effectively to disown it, which is a consequence of the failure of consciousness to convert psychical emotions into imagination. These emotions are not expressed, and therefore intellect receives distorted emotional expressions upon which an unreliable edifice of thought is built (Collingwood 1938, pp. 282-85).

Artistic expressions do not come from the cerebellum, the source of involuntary acts. Expressions can be distinguished, for example, from the involuntary dilation of one’s pupils when physically attracted to another person. This is the difference between betraying one’s emotions and expressing them. Expressions of emotion are deliberate voluntary acts of which we become conscious only in their expression. Self-consciousness of the emotion at the imaginative level of experience requires expression in controlled actions, that is, actions which are purposeful. The authenticity of such expressions is their intelligibility and lucidity. In expressing an emotion we become aware or conscious of what is being expressed, and it enables others to become conscious of the emotion in the person expressing it, and in themselves (Collingwood 1938, p. 214).

The justification for understanding a work of art is that it facilitates self-knowledge of one’s emotional life. Engaging imaginatively with a work of art enables us to become conscious of the emotion it expresses.

Art is essential and imperative to the community in that it facilitates emotional self-awareness. We come to know our own emotional life better in understanding art, which enables us to maintain an emotionally robust and stable civilisation.

The relationship between theory and practice was always close in the writings of Collingwood, each form of experience has both theoretical and practical counterparts. In his aesthetics Collingwood is emphatic that he is not concerned to write a merely theoretical treatise, of interest only to philosophers (Boucher 1989a, pp. 51-57). His *Principles of Art* was 'written in the belief that it has a practical bearing, direct or indirect, upon the condition of art in England in 1937' (Collingwood 1938, pp. vi-vii). He devotes the third part of the book to investigating the practical consequences of his theory of art.

In contrast with Collingwood, Oakeshott consistently maintained a distinction between theory and practice. The philosophical investigation, for example, of the postulates of art, history and practical life have no bearing upon the conduct of any of those activities (1989b, pp. 69-89), and none of the modes is superior to others, nor can intrude upon the others without committing *ignoratio elenchi*. However, because Oakeshott identified Poetry as a distinct idiom within the practical mode of experience, as we saw, it did, for him, have a practical value. It is reasonable to conclude that in 1939 Oakeshott, like R. G. Collingwood, believed that art is the expression of emotion, and that it was of considerable practical importance to the continuing health of civilisation, yet it was not its business to prescribe particular outcomes.

In his contribution to a symposium on 'The Claims of Politics' in the journal *Scrutiny* (1938, reprinted in Oakeshott 1993), edited by F. R. Leavis, Oakeshott is at pains to distance art from politics and other practical engagements without completely divesting it of a practical role. He had already concluded that 'Politics are an inferior form of activity' (Oakeshott 2014, notebook 13, April, 1936, [80] p. 303), a necessary evil, before writing the article, in which he begrudgingly acknowledges that politics has its place, but not a predominant place in the life of a society (Oakeshott 1993, p. 94). In his contribution Oakeshott, like his fellow idealist Collingwood, believes poets, including musicians, sculptors and other artists, are valuable to society, and similarly disregards the suggestions that poetry may be a form of amusement, or a guide to practical activities, such as politics. The contribution of the poet and artist is more subtle, in that they, and to a lesser extent, philosophy, 'create and recreate the values of their society' (Oakeshott 1993, p. 95). He doesn't really explain what this means, but in describing Hobbes's *Leviathan* as a work of art, we get something of its meaning. Hobbes's art consists in creating and retelling the great civilizational myth of Adam and Eve, and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Oakeshott 1975b, pp. 150-54).

In an allusion to Collingwood in 'The Claims of Politics', first published in 1939, Oakeshott argues that through their activities a society becomes 'conscious and critical of itself', which protects it from a 'corruption of consciousness'. The poet attains a 'deeper consciousness', 'making receptive members of the community more conscious of its own character' (Oakeshott 1993, p. 95). He contends that: 'To ask a poet and the artist to provide a programme for political or other social action, or an incentive or an inspiration for such action, is to require them to be false to their own genius and to deprive society of a necessary service' (Oakeshott 1993, p. 95). The imperative necessity of this service is reiterated by Oakeshott, relying heavily upon Collingwood, almost a decade later when he argues: 'Art is the community's medicine for the worst disease of the mind, the corruption of consciousness' (1947-8, p. 450). Like Collingwood, and, for example F. R. Leavis, a fellow contributor (with other participants in the 1939 symposium), Oakeshott rejects at this stage the idea of art for art's sake, and instead acknowledges its vital role in our communal life, although the artist does not intend it to have such a role (cf. Rushton 2021, p. 67).

After the intervention of the Second World War Oakeshott's views on poetry underwent considerable modification which involved the repudiation of his previous position in *Experience and Its Modes,* and any association of his own with the views of Collingwood on art as the expression of emotion. As late as 1950, in 'Rational Conduct', however, he had not formulated a clear demarcation between Poetry and other activities such as history, science and politics, concerned with the ordinary conduct of life addressing and answering questions of a certain type, relating to arguments, propositions, and establishing criteria for truth and falsity (1950-1, pp. 16-17).

In republishing 'Rational Conduct' in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays,* he did not include the artist and poet in the list of activities that addressed propositions and answered questions about truth and error. This is because in 'Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', published in the same volume as 'Rational Conduct', poetry no longer conforms to propositional logic. In other words we do not ask of its images whether they are true or false, right or wrong, we merely delight in them. In this respect Oakeshott confirms Sir Philip Sydney's contention: 'the poet nothing affirmeth and therefore never lieth' (Sydney 2013, p. xxix).

It is the emancipation of art from life, divested of its practical vestments, that released the poet's imagination from practical considerations. Oakeshott follows Johan Huizinga in believing Art in the Middle Ages was 'wrapped up in life' (Huizinga 1924, p. 246; Oakeshott 2014, 15 [39-40], p. 395). The function of art was decorative, persuasive, and emotionally evocative. It was essentially applied art. It was during the Renaissance that art for art's sake emerged from an abundance of artistic production, stimulating the urge to collect and admire, which liberated art from practical utility.

Before exploring Oakeshott's theory of art as an autonomous and independent world of ideas it will be helpful to discuss his method. Too many criticisms of Oakeshott misunderstand the nature of Oakeshott's *modus operandi*. It is often assumed that he is offering recommendations, and that his philosophical conclusions are meant to influence the way the activities he explores are to be conducted.

In marked contrast with most other British idealists, and more faithful to the spirit of Hegel, Oakeshott considers such activities as philosophy, history or science, incapable of offering injunctions for practical conduct. The world of practice to which he initially assigned art, politics, religion and the moral life is modally distinct, and generates its own prescriptive conclusions for action. In *Experience and its Modes* the relationship between the modes is one of complete autonomy, and between them and experience as a whole, which for Oakeshott, is philosophy, is that they are co-equal arrests, or modifications of it. In *What is History*? (2004), Oakeshott uses the metaphor of a conversation to describe the relationship between philosophy and the different modes. The alternative is an argumentative relationship (1983, p. 26). Conversation is the analogy used for life (in preference, for example, to a game of cards). He contends that Plato civilized philosophy by portraying it as a conversation, positing a dialectical rather than eristical relation between the interlocutors (2004, pp. 193–194, 197). In his most famous discussion of the conversational relationship, Oakeshott uses the metaphor better to elucidate the relation in which each language or idiom of thought (including poetry) stands to each other (Oakeshott 1962, pp. 137–196).

The conversational character of philosophy

When Oakeshott elevated poetry to the status of an autonomous world of ideas equivalent to history, science and practice, he also sought to give a greater degree of clarity to the relationship which persists among them and of each to philosophy (1962, pp. 488-554). Previously the modes were implicitly characterized as mutually indifferent to each other, related only as arrests in the concrete totality of experience, that is, philosophy. Each had marked its boundary with an unwelcoming sign: Trespassers keep out. Each makes propositions about the world, but none can persuade the others of their merits.

The utterances of the poetic imagination are clearly not propositional. We do not ask if they are right or wrong; we merely delight in the images they conjure. In order to portray a less eristic relationship between the modes, without compromising their integrity, nor their relation to the whole, while at the same time accommodating the non-propositional character of the poetic world of ideas, Oakeshott suggested that the most appropriate analogy was that of a conversation. Oakeshott's own contribution to the conversation is as a philosopher, not a poet, or critic of poetry. The role of philosophy is not to tell others how they should contribute to the conversation, but instead to examine the character of the voices with which the other participants speak. In this respect neither poets nor critics will learn much to their purpose from the philosopher (1962, p. 203).

The introduction of the idea of a conversation is not a significant change of emphasis. It is a new analogy better able to characterise the kind of relationship he had in mind which persists between the modes and with philosophy. The image of a conversation is the answer to the question of how the different modes, or worlds of imaginings, are related to each other. It does not necessarily characterize the relationship that holds within a mode. A conversation is not an enquiry; nor is it an argument (Oakeshott 2004, p. 187). The participants 'are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another, and therefore the cogency of their utterances does not depend upon their all speaking in the same idiom; they may differ without disagreeing' (Oakeshott 1962, p. 198). Philosophy is a conversation in which the eristic relation of argument and confrontation is replaced by a dialectic relation. It was Plato's achievement that he united for all time the relation between philosophy and conversation (Oakeshott 2004, p. 194). Philosophy as an activity is itself conversational, but it is not itself a substantive 'voice' in the conversation between what Oakeshott had previously referred to as arrests in experience. Philosophy has a voice, but it is parasitic on the other voices. It is a voice that springs from the conversation, in its exploration of the quality and style of each in relation to the others (1962, p. 200).

Some of the voices, such as the practical and scientific, have a tendency to allow what is said to become loosely attached, or even to break away from its manner of utterance. This gives the voice the appearance of a body of conclusions, which has become eristic, having discarded its conversational manner of utterance (1962, pp. 201-2). The versatility of philosophy is assured because 'there is no body of philosophical "knowledge" to become detached from the activity of philosophising' (1962, pp. 202-3).

The view of philosophy that emerges from Oakeshott's introduction of the analogy of conversation, has three prominent features. First, it is not eristic. It does doesn't attempt to persuade. Second, it is parasitic on the other voices. And, third, it is not a body of knowledge. On the first point Oakeshott was consistent throughout his life. Philosophy, he contended in his first book, does not consist in 'persuading others, but in making our own minds clear'. 'It is', he argued, 'something we may engage in without putting ourselves in competition. It is something independent of the futile attempt to convince or persuade' (Oakeshott 1933, pp. 3, 7). He always remained faithful to the view that experience, or what is going-on, is one undifferentiated whole, and that our attempts to understand it involve making identifications in terms of postulates. This is defended in all his major books *Experience and Its Modes, Rationalism in Politics, On History* and *On Human Conduct*. Identifying and questioning the postulates that differentiate each mode is the activity of philosophy, and consequently necessarily parasitical.

The metaphor of a conversational relationship between the variety of voices is not a proposition about the terms on which each voice tolerates the others. It is instead an 'appropriate image' in terms of which to comprehend the 'manifold' which constitutes the 'meeting-place' of 'diverse idioms of utterance which make up current human intercourse' (Oakeshott 1962, pp. 198-99). Philosophy is one voice in the conversation, reflecting upon the other voices and their relation to one another, but having no 'specific contribution' to make. Rorty finds Oakeshott's imagery conducive to his own views on human intellectual activity. Indeed, he uses the notion of conversation, like Oakeshott, in a special sense (Rorty 1983, p. 52). The idea of a conversation is a shorthand account of what stands for 'the whole human enterprise-culture'. Rorty's view is that 'it is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions' (Rorty 1979, p. 12; cf. p. 163). In this respect the idea of a conversation is understood to be a metaphor evocative of an image of human endeavour as civilized, congenial, good-humoured, and polite. A relationship of mutual toleration rather than one of hostile confrontation and provocation. The 'high-toned' sense endowed by Rorty upon the notion of a conversation is addressed to the question what is it that philosophers do?' In other words, he is attempting to discern the character of the philosophic enterprise.

For Oakeshott the proper and appropriate business of the theorist, including the philosopher, is to understand differently something that is already understood, not in order to recommend or prescribe anything, but for its own sake. Oakeshott is not a methodologist (1983, p. 4). He is concerned not with methods but with the postulates, which differentiate such activities as history, art etc., from each other, and from philosophy itself. In among the diversity of what historians, scientists and poets do there will be some statements and presuppositions that uniquely belong to one, and no other. This is not to say, of course, that the historian, scientist, or poet does not make statements of a different kind, but when they do, they are not engaged in history etc.

The question is, then, what is the status of the character Oakeshott attributes to the different worlds of ideas he demarcates in terms of their postulates? It is imperative that we recognise that Oakeshott is not attributing a concrete existence to any of his constructs. Oakeshott asserts when characterising the modern European state, for example, that no 'historic state' corresponds exactly to it because there are always contingent conditions which have to be considered (Oakeshott 1975a, pp. 192, 247). With reference to the three traditions he identifies in western political philosophy—Reason and Nature, Will and Artifice, Rational Will—Oakeshott confesses that: 'It is difficult to find a "naturalism" which is pure, and difficult to find an "artifice" theory which does not make a bow to some form of "naturalism" in order to avoid the imputation of making moral values arbitrary' (Oakeshott letter, dated 24 October, 1977). This is because what Oakeshott designates are 'Ideal characters', or 'ideal types'. He says that they are aids to reflection, instruments of inquiry, and what he is doing is identifying the 'conditions of relevance in terms of which an enquiry may be recognized' as, for example, the poetic (1983, pp. 2, 23 n8). There are intimations of the poetic mind in ancient Greece and Rome, but the aesthetic character of poetry failed to emerge fully from practical considerations, until surviving works of art became detached from their practical and religious functions, and thereby facilitated a disinterested aesthetic experience, which is 'comparatively new and still imperfectly assimilated experience' (1962, p. 239).

Ideal characters composed of characteristics are required for achieving understanding. They are the instruments of identification which may be crude and unsophisticated or refined and complex. It is always open to us to modify what at first is an ideal character composed of relatively few characteristics into ideal characters far more complex. What is identified, Oakeshott argues, 'is always as intelligible as the terms in which it is being understood allow it to be' (1975a, p. 6) The activity of theorising, or philosophizing, entails the identification and isolation of the postulates and characteristics of the ideal characters in terms of which, say, the historian, poet, or scientist, understands the world.

This is a completely different exercise from what Oakeshott disparagingly terms abridgement. Rationalists and ideologists typically abridge traditions, privileging and accentuating some aspects of experience at the expense of others. Marx's emphasis upon economic conditions, for example, as the primary sub-structure of explanatory factors in history is an abridgement in that it distorts and ignores the array of other factors which may serve to provide a fuller and more satisfactory explanation. Oakeshott's characterizations, of say poetry and history, are ideal not because they present us with the perfect condition of things to which we must aspire, but because they are 'abstracted from the contingencies and ambiguities of actual goings-on in the world' (Oakeshott 1975a, p. 109).

We may think, then, of Oakeshott's attempt to delineate the postulates of the world of imaginings he calls poetry an ideal characterization, and its features are intimated or glimpsed throughout early modern European history (1975a, p. 6). Each person, we may conclude, is related to others in 'a contingent assemblage of a variety of different modes of association', including poetry (Oakeshott 1975a, p. 109). The subject of such a relationship as the ideal character of poetry is an abstraction, 'a *persona*, a person in respect of being related to others in terms of distinct and exclusive conditions' (Oakeshott 1975a, p. 120).

Beauty is unlike a word such as truth, because it does not require us to admire the poetic image as we would a noble deed, or something well done, but instead simply invites the 'contemplative spectator' to delight in the image (1962, p. 234).

Oakeshott uses the terms contemplation and delight in relation to poetry interchangeably. He tells us that the images that are contemplated in poetry are timeless and unique. They cannot be replicated or substituted. 'Contemplation', Oakeshott contends, 'does not use, or use-up or wear out its images, or induce change in them: it rests in them, looking neither backwards nor forwards' (1962, p. 218). Past and future are therefore categories inapplicable to the poetic image.

Oakeshott is not therefore concerned to offer a definition of beauty because that implies that there is an object that must conform to the criteria. The essay emphasises the subject who delights in the images, rather than the objects or images themselves (Corey 2012, p. 87). Anything, when invoked appropriately and consistent with the postulates of the poetic mode of imagining, is eligible to be delighted in (Grant 2005, p. 298). Aesthetic appreciation is therefore not confined to what we may conventionally designate art. It's our disposition and manner of invoking the object that makes it art.

Oakeshott contends that the poetic impulse is not a stimulus into exploring or giving an explanation about the nature of the real world, and susceptible to conformity to the criteria of truth (1962, p. 229). This contrasts with Aristotle's claim that poetry is 'more philosophical and more serious than history: poetry utters universal truths, history particular statements' (2013, p. 28). The poetic impulse, for Oakeshott, however, is similar to the scientific and historical in that it springs from wonder. The poetic impulse lacks the restlessness that generates the curiosity, speculation and research that characterises history and science. The wonder of the poetic impulse evokes only delight, and produces no conclusions that are separable and capable of translation into the practical idiom. In science and history the results and conclusions, may be commandeered for practical use, but the research and manner of reaching the conclusions may not. Technological advancement, for example, may exploit scientific conclusions, or a legal dispute may be settled with reference to the conclusions of land ownership in the seventeenth century. By contrast, a work of art cannot be treated as an outcome or end-product. If a poetic image is exploited for practical purposes, the authenticity and integrity of the work of art is undermined, because we are trying to fix it in time, as well as derive something more than imaginative delight from it, and what remains has nothing to do with poetry. We are left with what is 'merely unpoetic—the theology of Dante, the perishable religious convictions of Bunyan, the verisimilitude of Ingres. . . .' (1962, p. 243).

Oakeshott takes poetry to be a certain way of imagining, distinct from practical, scientific or historical imaginings. What distinguishes the voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind from the other voices is its manner of being active. This activity is contemplating or delighting in the making of images. They are, as opposed to the images in other idioms of discourse, 'mere' images. They are not facts about the world because they are not propositions, and here truth and falsity are inappropriate terms in which to appreciate them. You do not ask of the images, could this have happened, is it possible or probable or just an illusion or make-believe, because to ask these questions assumes the distinction between fact and not fact which is out of place in poetic contemplative imagining.

Furthermore, they are present images, they have no past nor future. They are delighted in for what they are, rather than for what they are related to, that is, the occasions that may have inspired them. A photograph may lie if it purports to be a true likeness of its subject, but a poetic image cannot lie because it affirms nothing. It is irrelevant to the work of art that it does not faithfully represent the subject. Cézanne's 'Rocky Scenery of Provence' is a composition of irregular shapes of colour comprising an image whose aesthetic quality has nothing to do with whether it looks like Provence. Nor should we be disappointed if the women in Avignon bear no resemblance to those abstract shapes in Les Demoiselles d'Avignon by Picasso.

Why, then, are poetic images mere images? It is because the relation between symbol (language) and meaning (thought) is different in poetry from the relation in other modes of experience. This is a view Oakeshott shares with Collingwood who, in *Speculum Mentis* (1924), distinguishes, art, religion, science, history and philosophy with reference to their different relations between symbol and meaning.

Oakeshott argues that the language in which we conduct everyday practical life is symbolic. There is a relatively settled fixed non-resonant usage which serves as a medium for confident communication (1962, p. 211). In our everyday practical lives each symbol, or word has a determinate referent or signification. The more determinate the better the communication. If I ask for a pint of milk I am using a symbol to evoke an image, not to create one. I am not trying to give a novel nuance to the symbol, merely to be understood in a settled language. In other words meaning and symbol are distinct, but not radically separable because in this mode 'every word has its proper reference or signification' (1962, p. 211). The symbol is separable from and the means by which we convey meaning. The reason why art or poetry is different is because there is no separation of symbol and meaning: 'A poetic image is its meaning: it symbolises nothing outside of itself' (1962, p. 235). This view is confirmed by a fellow Idealist Henry Jones in his study of Browning. He contends that the worth of a work of art 'must be recognised as lying wholly within itself', and that in it 'thought and expression are inseparable' (Jones 1896, p. 3).

This is the reason why poetry does not offer us a deeper reality, or the perception of things as they really are. Such a view denies the interdependence of the self and its images and is a confused representation of the view that all experience is inquiry (Abel 2012, p. 160). To believe that the poet accesses a deeper reality relies upon the belief that all utterances are symbolic. It is Oakeshott's contention, however, that the poet says nothing about things. Truth and poetry are mutually exclusive. To know things as they really are is to depart from poetry (Oakeshott 1962, pp. 229-30).

The poetic voice differs from, for example, science and practice, in that its images are of a certain kind, brought into being by contemplation or delighting, which is the unique voice in which poetry converses as opposed to desiring and obtaining, and inquiring and understanding, which belong to practice and science respectively (1962, pp. 223-4). In the poetic imagination the distinction between fact and not fact is irrelevant, and whether the images are possible or probable, illusory or make-believe, do not arise. They are images that have no antecedents or consequents. They are merely present, having no past and no future (1962, p. 217).

In addition, Oakeshott explicitly denies that poetry is the expression of emotion designed to evoke the same emotion in the audience because such an activity belongs to practice where expressing emotions in words and actions is commonplace, and where the images are symbols for those emotions (1962, pp. 230-31). A variation, exhibited by Wordsworth, Sir Philip Sydney and Shelley, is the idea that an emotion is experienced, contemplated and then expressed, in order to instruct or offer some insight. Oakeshott completely rejects this view. The poet is presented as a person of heightened feeling, necessarily having to have undergone the emotional experiences expressed, but the 'spectator-like mood of contemplation would be more likely to establish itself if the emotion had *not* been experienced' (1962, p. 231). Contemplating an emotion that is being experienced is for Oakeshott an impossibility, because an emotion is a practical image and it is only when feelings are imaginary, that is, not being felt, that they become the poetic.

Although the target may appear to be Collingwood, it is not the position that he held. Collingwood is unequivocal in ruling out a means-ends relationship in art, which the idea of design and execution posits. The emotion is only discovered in its expression, it is not first experienced and then expressed or represented. The ability to evoke that same emotion in others is the criterion of good art. Oakeshott argues that although the idea that art is the expression of emotion is commonly held, it rests on the mistaken view that poetry must be in some way informative and instructive. The poet must have undergone the emotion from which the poetic image derives. This, Oakeshott argues, 'makes a necessity of what is no more than an unlikely possibility' (1962, p. 231). It is important to emphasise that Oakeshott is trying to establish what makes the poetic utterance unique, he is not suggesting that poets only contemplate or delight in images, only that when they do anything else it is not poetry.

Although Oakeshott did not return to poetry to examine its postulates in any sustained way after 1959, the fact that it occupies a distinct idiom, separate from history, science and practice, is a position he maintained. Oakeshott had increasingly become dissatisfied with his characterisation of practice in *Experience and Its Modes*. In the first essay of *On Human Conduct* he offered a much-improved exploration of what he now came to call conduct.[1] It suffices to say that Oakeshott makes a distinction between conduct and poetic activity—acting and fabricating (1975a, p. 35). In conduct we look as the wished-for outcome in the responses of other people, as well as our own, to what we have done. Fabrication has as its wished-for outcome an artefact, a complete product, but not all artefacts are works of art. He implicitly returns to a distinction that Collingwood had made between art and craft. The craftsman, for Collingwood, has a means ends relationship with the artefact. It is preconceived and executed to fulfil a particular purpose, and even though it may be beautifully crafted, that is secondary to the purpose it is made to fulfil (1938, pp. 15-41). Similarly, Oakeshott wants to distinguish between fabrications that are acts which have a use, or preconceived purpose, and which are instrumental in achieving it, such as a bridge or ship. Such acts have an idiom within conduct. What is unique to fabrication, is a work of art proper, serving no preconceived end, or having no instrumental value in achieving it (Worthington 2002, p. 301).

On the relation of poetry to morality I think that a few stray remarks have been exaggerated to compose a position that compromises the integrity of Oakeshott's commitment to modal autonomy (see e.g. Grant 1990; Worthington 2002; Corey 2006). In the 'Tower of Babel' for example, Oakeshott suggests, as Collingwood did, that nothing exists in advance of the poem. In other words, an intention or plan is not first conceived and then executed. Oakeshott argues, as Collingwood did in relation to the expression of emotions, that what a poet says and what he wants to say are indistinguishable. He doesn't know what he wants to say until he says it. 'Nothing exists in advance of the poem itself, except perhaps the poetic passion' (1962, pp. 72-3). He goes on to suggest that 'what is true of poetry is true also, I think, of all human moral activity' (1962, p. 72). We do not first formulate a decision to do what is morally right in the circumstances, or plan to act morally, we simply act morally habitually, and mostly unreflectively. This is not to say that morality and poetry are identical, only that they share this characteristic of rejecting a means/end relation. It does not detract from the claim that poetry also has unique differentiae in its contemplative delighting in its imaginings.

The world of practice is dominated by, but not exclusively, the satisfaction of wants. In comparison with philosophy, science and history, which are explanatory activities, the poetic imagination is more securely 'insulated' from, and less likely to be corrupted by, the satisfaction of wants. In practice dreams are pursued to make them come true, whereas in poetry the dream is enjoyed for its own sake. In the poetic imagination the world is not material for the satisfaction of wants, or preliminary to doing something else, but instead it is something to be contemplated (Oakeshott 2004, p. 312).

CONCLUSION

Is it the philosopher's job to understand what is, or change what is into what ought to be? Preston King, for example, suggests that Oakeshott is engaged in the latter prescriptive endeavour (King 1983, pp. 118-9, 120, 121-2, 126). Oakeshott, however, begs to differ and thinks philosophy, art, history and science (though not applied science or technology) incapable of having a practical impact upon the world. Elizabeth Corey introduces considerations that are ultimately irrelevant to the theory Oakeshott offers. In identifying what differentiates poetry from other modally distinct and categorially separate activities in terms of their postulates, it is irrelevant to present counterfactuals, such as 'what are we to make of the inescapable fact that certain artists clearly *intend* their creations to teach moral lessons?' (2006, p. 113), or Seamus Heaney's passionate belief in the poet's 'truth telling urge' (Williams 2002, p. 168). Criticism of a different sort suggests that Oakeshott rejects any attempt to make literature an example, or exemplar, of general precepts about life. Poetry, like history, resists reduction to didactic considerations, and it is regrettable, for such commentators as Williams, that practical life should be deprived of such moral exemplars (2002, p. 165).

It is a mistake to think that Oakeshott is legislating against the use of historical or aesthetic characters to teach lessons about practical life. There are plenty of emblematic heroes in history, and paradigmatic villains in literature, and they may often be used to draw lessons about life. The point is that when such characters are appropriated for moral or practical purposes they cease to belong to the historical past, and the aesthetic present, and we no longer understand them historically, or delight in the literary imagery. They have simply been (re)constituted to conform to the idiom of a different mode, from history and from aesthetics (Oakeshott 1983, p. 18). When considered in terms of different modes they owe their existence 'to a categorially different set of conditions', and they have not, strictly speaking, been 'dissolved' in order to provide materials 'from which an object of another sort might be conceptually constructed' (Oakeshott 1983, p. 24). Machiavelli, for example, is constituted by different conditions, according to which mode he is required to inhabit, historically as he converses with the ancients by candlelight; aesthetically as he struts the stage in a Restoration play; or practically, as a study of pure evil.

Should poets, musicians and artists of any kind convert the non-symbolic language of poetry into propositions about the world, at those points the poet ceases to conform to the practices of the activity of being a poet, artist etc. Oakeshott is not denying that poets often do this kind of thing (Worthington 2002, p. 289), so to cite Tolstoy, as Corey does (2006, p. 113), and one could add Aristotle and Ruskin (Aristotle 2013, p. xxxi) in denying that there is such a thing as art for art's sake (2006: 113), is to offer a rebuttal rather than a refutation.

Oakeshott pejoratively designates those who are not faithful to their calling *theoreticians* or *philosophes*. Such theorists are mistaken about the nature of the undertakings in which they are engaged, and fail to recognize that there is a categorial distinction between theory and practice which is insurmountable. Oakeshott argues that: 'This deplorable character has no respectable occupation. In virtue of being a theorist such "charlatans" purport to be concerned with the postulates of conduct, but they mistake these postulates for principles from which "correct" performances may be deduced or somehow elicited' (Oakeshott 1975, p. 26; cf. Oakeshott 1932, ??).

What are we to make of Oakeshott's attempt to identify the differentia of the poetic voice? How do we go about critically appraising it? To answer these questions we have to return to his *modus operandi* in going about a philosophical investigation. Essentially, in exploring the postulates of the poetic experience Oakeshott is engaged in a metaphysical enquiry, and it is an exercise that has a close affinity with R. G. Collingwood's *Essay on Metaphysics*. Collingwood argued that metaphysics (and other branches of philosophy) is a 'historical science' (1940, p. 68). Some explanation of what he meant by this is necessary.

Despite being a vehement critic of positivism Collingwood was impressed by A. J. Ayer's formulation of the principles of logical positivism. Ayer acknowledged only synthetic, or analytical, and empirical, or inductive, knowledge. Analytic propositions are true by definition and empirical propositions are capable of being tested -- verified. Collingwood made an ingenious attempt to circumvent Ayer's argument that metaphysical statements were neither analytical nor inductive, and therefore not susceptible to conforming to the criteria of truth. They could not be verified. Metaphysical statements, for Ayer, were nonsense statements.

Collingwood agreed with Ayer that metaphysical statements were not propositions that could be verified. He disagreed with Ayer, however, when he claimed that metaphysical statements were absolute presuppositions, that is, they were ideas upon which the rest of our knowledge is built: they are the foundations upon which thought rests. An example would be belief in God, upon which our whole world view may be predicated, but of whose existence we could not provide proof. In identifying God as one of the fundamental absolute presuppositions of Christianity, we are not required as metaphysicians to prove that God exists, only that Christians absolutely presuppose that he exists. Metaphysical statements are absolute presuppositions and not propositions. The same may be said for Oakeshott, when he says that a postulate of the historical mode of experience is that there is past, which he calls the historical past, the historian is not required to establish whether there is or is not a past, only that historians believe it. Indeed, if an historian questions whether there is a past he, or she, ceases to be doing history. In other words, a postulate for Oakeshott, is an Absolute Presupposition.

Collingwood argued that Ayer was mistaken in arguing that the verification principle had to be applied to metaphysical statements if they were to be meaningful. Instead, the work of the metaphysician is to uncover what absolute presuppositions were being absolutely presupposed at any given time. That is why he argues that metaphysics is a historical science. Collingwood contends that Ayer was correct in claiming metaphysical statements were not propositions capable of verification, but completely misunderstood what sort of statements they were. Propositions are answers to questions and are either true of false, whereas metaphysical statements are not answers to questions, but instead give rise to questions, and are either absolutely presupposed or they are not. We do not derive Absolute Presuppositions from experience.

If we think, then, of Oakeshott's exploration of the Absolute Presuppositions of poetic experience, the question is not whether contemplation and delight are the true or false criteria for judging whether something is art, but instead whether poets, artists, writers, dancers, etc. absolutely presuppose contemplation and delight when they engage in the activity of being an artist and a contributor to the conversation of mankind. Complementarily, we may think of Oakeshott, inspired by Heidegger's disciple Hans-Georg Gadamer (1980), as asking an ontological question, and this takes Oakeshott out of the line of fire of those who claim that his theory of poetry is too narrowly confined to answering the question 'What is Poetry?' and ignoring the question 'is this a good poem?' (Alexander 2022, p. 179). Considered from Gadamer's perspective the question Oakeshott is addressing is not 'what is Poetry?', but 'what happens to the poet each and every time he, or she, has a poetic experience?'. The answer is that the poet becomes contemplative, delighting in images, divorced from considerations to which they give rise if the images were symbols.

NOTES

1 At a conference organised by Liam O'Sullivan in Southampton anticipating his 80th birthday Oakeshott referred to his chapter on the practical mode in *Experience and Its Modes* as a mess.

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LETTERS

Michael Oakeshott (18 May 1938) to R. G. Collingwood, West End, Little Shelford, Cambridge. GLTR068. Letter in the possession of Teresa Smith (Collingwood's daughter).

Michael Oakeshott (24 October, 1977) to David Boucher. Letter in the possession of the recipient.

Sophists in Academic Dress: Oakeshott's "The Study of 'Politics' in a University"

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Abstract: What sort of activity should Politics academics aim to inculcate in their students? Only truth-seeking, logical thinking, and the ability to scrutinize evidence for themselves? Or also the will and ability to perform supposedly beneficial extra-academic functions, including political activism in the cause of "social justice"? This dilemma, it appears, is presently opening a schism between "Truth Uni" and "Social Justice Uni" (see Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018, pp. 253–62). Here I am proposing that this ongoing general debate about the true nature and purpose of the university can be partially disentangled with the aid of Michael Oakeshott's essay, "The study of 'politics' in a university", first published in *Rationalism in Politics* in 1962. That essay remains relevant, instructive, and extremely challenging, and is especially valuable because of its focus on what happens in Politics departments, where it is perhaps more obvious than in any other of the university's departments how the two implicit *teloi*, (1) discovering truth, and (2) realizing "social justice", tend to frustrate and obstruct each other. I close with some reflections on how university teachers of Politics can defend themselves against Oakeshott's challenge, so long as they can resist the temptations of modern sophistry.

Keywords: Michael Oakeshott; Politics; Universities; Higher education; Activism.

> "Politics has always been three-quarters talk" (Oakeshott 1991, p. 206).

I. THE STUDY OF "POLITICS" IN A UNIVERSITY

My copy of Michael Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1991) was a gift from my doctoral supervisor. As a teacher, this very experienced professor had always held his own political cards very close to his chest, at least when we undergraduates were present. On the basis of his published work, we would speculate that he was probably either a Burkean conservative, or an agrarian socialist—though it could also be that he was now so widely read in the history of political thought that his understanding transcended all such particularity, and had completely liberated him from partisanship. Later, a fellow doctoral student observed that the most political thing he had ever heard our supervisor say was that he had grown up "following West Ham". Actually, our professor had once disclosed that, although his politics were of "a pinkish tinge", he nevertheless recognized with Burke the importance of beginning political analysis with "where we are". That was the closest thing to a personal view of politics that we ever got out of him.

By contrast, certain of his (younger) colleagues in the department plainly used our lectures to advocate their own views. Some would build their case fairly logically, but others allowed rhetoric to do much of the heavy lifting, *ad lib*-ing sneering comments and jokes about their conservative or "neoliberal" enemies. Others simply preached. All of them, I am sure, meant well, and thought that such teaching methods were justified by their moral obligation to "teach for social justice"—that is, to transform centrist/conservative/apathetic undergrads into graduates committed to the same views and causes as themselves.

The rights and wrongs of the practices I have just described are hotly contested. At stake is whether academic teachers should only aim to (as Stanley Fish puts it) "teach materials and confer [academic] skills", or whether they should try in addition to "produce active citizens, inculcate the virtue of tolerance, redress injustices, and bring about political change" (Fish 2008, p. 66). It is the latter view that is presently hegemonic: it has gripped not only activist lecturers, but also the high-minded elite authors of university "strategy" documents. But it is still possible to take the opposite view, and for now it is not career-ending to do so openly.

This debate is, I think, the current incarnation of an ancient quarrel which usually concerns the idea of a university in general, and of course it has therefore been shaped by milestone contributions from Cardinal Newman, Karl Jaspers, and others. But it especially concerns the academic teaching of Politics. (I will use an upper-case "P" for the academic field: see Connelly 2005). This is why Oakeshott's essay, "The study of 'politics' in a university", which I first encountered in the volume given to me by my mild-mannered professor, is especially relevant. Though he takes the unfashionable side of the quarrel, which was perhaps less troublesome in 1962 than it is now, Oakeshott's questions are still our questions. He asks "What study under the plausible name of 'Politics' is an appropriate component of a university education?", and what is the "suitable body of information to be imparted" by the teaching of it? (Oakeshott 1991, p. 186). His answers are chastening, but they are also helpful.

II. A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

2.1 Academic and vocational education

Oakeshott's contention is not that Politics cannot be taught, but that it is not "appropriate" to do so in a university, because the teaching of Politics adopts a mostly *vocational* character, and this is alien to the true nature of a university (1991, p. 195). Vocational education teaches a person to think "practically" in relation to a particular manner of living. It imparts "skills" pertinent to current life, and these skills have intellectual content, consisting of certain facts, theories, and doctrines, which Oakeshott calls "technical" knowledge, or "technique" (1991, pp. 191–3). Technical knowledge is valuable insofar as it can advance or continue a manner of living in practice—that is, insofar as it is useful for getting something *done* (1991, p. 195). So its content is not incidental: it is the content needed for answering typically "technical" questions, such as "How does it work?", and "How can it be improved?". "Technical" questions are of course presupposed by many of the vocations that are now part of every university's prospectus, especially (in the UK) since the difference between universities and polytechnics was cancelled in 1992: "How should the illness be cured?", "How can it be made to run on less fuel?".

The teaching of Politics in universities, Oakeshott says, has assumed a *de facto* vocational character, primarily because some academics are "interested in politics in the vulgar sense" (1991, p. 213). Facing "the problem of raising the study of politics above the level of 'current affairs' and [attempting] to give it a respectable intellectual content", they have adopted the model of "technical" knowledge—i.e. the sort of knowledge a student needs for "doing" something (1991, p. 214).

But a university education is different from a vocational education—though also, for Oakeshott, civically complementary to it (1991, p. 190). Properly, a university education is *detached* from the "*hic et nunc*, the here and now, of current living", and is "liberated from the distracting business of satisfying contingent wants" (1989, pp. 24, 28). It is peculiar to academic teaching that its value does *not* derive from the usefulness of the facts, theories, and doctrines that are studied. Instead, academic teaching attempts to impart familiarity with the *languages* peculiar to academic disciplines (1991, pp. 196-7). Academics are not necessarily any better at teaching than teachers of other kinds—or any worse. But where a school history teacher must know his subject, and may explore in his spare time a good deal of historical literature, he is not usually involved in original historical research. An academic historian, however, is necessarily also a "learner". He *is* involved in historical research, and is therefore proficient in the research methods of his discipline, which enables him to solve historical problems independently. In Oakeshott's terms, the academic historian explores not only the "literatures" of his field (discoveries made and recorded by others), but also the "language" of history—the manner of thinking of the historian. And it is this *latter* that academic teaching is uniquely suited to imparting.

The university, then, offers "an education in 'languages' rather than in 'literatures'"; it imparts the manners of the "conversation", and maintains "the whole intellectual capital which composes a civilization" (1991, pp. 193-4). It is the role of the university to perpetuate the conversation between "a variety of human activities, each speaking with a voice, or in a language, of its own" (1991, p.187). Thus civilization reinvests some of its "capital", its investigative manners of thought and conversation, in itself, rather than consuming them all in *practical* ends. Accordingly, the teaching objective of a university is to induct undergraduates into this "conversation" by familiarizing them with one or more of the languages in which it is held—to make *convives* of them (1990, p. 214; see also Burwood 2009, p. 501). The academic teaching objective is not to supply students with a lot of technical information for some practical use; indeed no *particular* information is necessary to meeting the teaching objectives of a university at all. Undergraduates are thus "recognized spectators" (1991, p. 196); they may "enjoy the 'leisure' which is denoted by thinking without having to think in the pragmatic terms of action and talking without having to speak in terms of prescription or practical advice" (1991, p. 199).

2.2 Politics as a vocation

There seem to be good reasons for accepting that at least some teaching in Politics adopts the vocational character as Oakeshott defines it. Our courses of study seem to meet Oakeshott's three conditions of a vocational education (1991, p. 205): there is, first, "a specific skill generally recognized to be entailed in a current manner of living" (1991, p. 201). (One who denies that there is such a thing as "political skill" would have Machiavelli to contend with, as well as today's special advisors and political strategists.) There is, second, a population of people who desire to acquire this skill—a population which, owing to the nature of modern politics, is "larger, more miscellaneous and consequently less precisely determined" than those that pursue other vocations. And, third, this skill has some intellectual content, "something in connection with this skill which is capable of being taught" (1991, pp. 192, 201).

Thus, Politics academics disseminate information about "government and the instruments of government" (1991, p. 201), and they seem to do so for implicitly practical reasons: this knowledge is to be put to use in a manner of living—i.e. in political work, in getting political things *done*. It is assumed that the Politics student should be equipped to answer characteristically vocational questions, such as "How does it work? How can it be improved? Is it democratic? and so on" (1991, p. 210). A prospective politician would obviously be disadvantaged by lacking the "technical" knowledge that other prospective politicians might have acquired: how political parties choose their leaders, how candidates are elected to office, how laws are made, the duties of civil servants, how to write a persuasive speech, and so on. But this attempt to teach Politics vocationally has resulted, Oakeshott says, in "a curriculum of study of unimaginable dreariness … enlivened only by some idle political gossip and some tendentious speculation about current policy", a curriculum of "no conceivable interest to anyone except those whose heads were full of the enterprise of participating in political activity or to persons with the insatiable curiosity of a concierge" (1991, p. 208).

But most disturbingly for today's Politics academics, a proper vocational education, Oakeshott says, teaches not only *technical* knowledge, but also *practical* knowledge—the "knack" that cannot be adequately formulated as a text. "[T]o learn a profession", he explains, "is to learn how to *do* something" (1991, p. 190). And the best preparation for this is to do it for real; "*not* to learn how to act *as if* you were doing it" (ibid., emphasis added; see also Williams 2007, pp. 162-7).

The means by which practical knowledge of political work can best be acquired is, then, what we ordinarily call "apprenticeship". And yet the sort of placement in relevant working institutions, without which the training of a nurse would be utterly unthinkable, is very rare in Politics. There are of course some examples of exactly this, such as the Westminster–Hull Internship Programme, but even these comprise a small portion of the degree programme. And, such cases excepted, Politics graduates are hardly better equipped for a career in practical Politics than graduates from Law, Maths, or Computing—especially where the graduate, whatever it says on his degree certificate, has a record of activity with one of the university's political societies, and is trusted by party officials.

There is something else about Politics academics that distinguishes them from those who teach other vocations. In the polytechnic (before they were "converted"), teachers usually imparted practical skills that they themselves had acquired and used. Conversely, it has never been required of a Politics academic that he have proven political skill. There are of course exceptions, but the general rule is that teachers of engineering have a portfolio of engineering achievements, whereas teachers of Politics do not have a record of success in political activity. More commonly Politics academics might supply tolerable political commentary, though they often prove less skilled, less readable, and less "impactful" in that vocation than full-time journalists.

There are two possible ways of addressing this discrepancy—if it is a discrepancy. The first is to recruit more Politics academics from practical politics. I will not comment on the haunting coincidence here of two apothegms: "all political careers end in failure", and "those who can, do; those who can't, teach". The second "remedy" might require Politics academics to become more active in political practice. Something like this has in fact been happening, though not in quite the way that might have been hoped. Few Politics academics have deepened their knowledge of political processes by getting themselves recruited into existing political institutions and producing reports on clandestine processes from the inside. For every Philip Norton or Raymond Plant, there seem to be two hundred Politics academics who have done "industry" merely by attempting to add their professional voices to extra-institutional political campaigning. Indeed, the situation is such that Politics academics are now encouraged to cite any activism as evidence of their value *as academics*. Advocating a cause is now categorizable as "research", even if the connection to anything that the public might recognize as expertise is extremely tenuous. And under the guise of "research-led teaching", these activities can be exhibited for admiration in the lecture theatre. Against Fish's advice (2008, pp. 66-97), activist academics are rewarded for saving the world *not* "on their own time", but on the contact time that their students are paying for—as if being instructed in the correct political opinions and most laudable forms of "resistance" were a legitimate academic learning objective.

III. POLITICS, "LANGUAGES", AND "LITERATURES"

Oakeshott's attack upon the study of Politics in the university appeals to a distinction between "languages", and "literatures" (or "texts") (1991, p. 197). This distinction appears in an earlier essay, "The idea of a university" [1950], where teaching languages and literatures is contrasted with "training" (1989, p. 103). We of course find attention to the "languages" of things in the work of Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, and others in mid-twentieth century philosophy. But Oakeshott's usage here is stipulative. A *language* is a "manner of thinking" (1991, p. 192); not "a fixed stock of possible utterances, but a fund of considerations drawn upon and used" (1990, p. 120); "not *information* but *practice in thinking*" (1991, p. 197, emphasis added). By learning a language, one learns "what it is to think historically, mathematically, scientifically or philosophically"; languages are "instruments to be played upon", rather than specific tunes (1991, p. 192; see also 1990, p. 56).

Oakeshott's "languages" obviously correspond to his earlier "modes" of experience (1966, pp. 69-81; see also 1989, pp. 37-9). He is elucidating these "modes" in the new "linguistic" idiom. But importantly, the "practical" mode analysed in *Experience and its Modes* would not count as an *academic* language. This is because academic languages are "*explanatory* enterprises of different sorts"; they are "not prescriptive languages" (1991, pp. 192-3; see also 1990, pp. 50, 100). This is not to say that prescriptive language is unimportant for Oakeshott, that it should not be learned, or that it is not appropriate to other institutions. It is also not to say that prescriptive utterances and performances should not be the *subject* of academic study. It is simply that prescribing is never the primary intention of an academic language (though see Fish on academic rigour, 2008, p. 20).

Academics have traditionally assumed that their languages are best learned in conjunction with appropriate literatures/texts, which are suitable examples of "what has been said from time to time in a 'language'". Thus the "language" of poetic imagination is learned in conjunction with the "literature" of poems or novels, and "the 'language' or manner of thinking of a scientist" is contrasted with "a text-book of geology", which latter is merely a "text" (1991, p. 192). Now some texts, Oakeshott points out, are in a more appropriate condition than others for introducing students to a language (1991, p. 197), since the student has an existing level of proficiency. The most appropriate texts will not necessarily be of great recent significance, or correspond with the teacher's own research interest (1991, p. 198). Descartes' *Meditations* are more appropriate for first-year undergraduates than Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, for example. The former has the quality of being *useful* for introducing students into the philosophical mode of explaining things, even if it is "outdated". An "outdated" text is only disqualified for the purpose of *vocational* education, where the value of content (facts, theories, and doctrines) comprises efficacy for getting something done today. An electrician's apprentice rightly has no use for an obsolete Victorian manual. But because a university teacher's objective is different from a vocational teacher's, his rationale for selecting texts is also different. He might well have more pedagogical use for a 1651 theory of "justice" than he has for one written in 1971 (1991, p. 194).

3.1 Politics as "literature"

In reply to Oakeshott, we might treat politics (broadly conceived) as a "literature", and point out that it offers a library of "texts" which we can treat as an "occasion for learning how to handle and manage some of the 'languages' of explanation"—perhaps especially the languages of *history* and *philosophy* (1991, p. 214). Modern history, mathematics, and natural science each impart *one* language. But Politics is more like the "Greats" tradition. In conjunction with a canon of certain "multilingual" texts it imparts "historical, philosophical, poetic, legal, and perhaps scientific" languages (1991, p. 198).

But in existing university teaching, Oakeshott thinks, the "literature" of Politics—by its nature the most difficult of all literatures (1991, pp. 216-17)—is not really used for imparting explanatory languages. Indeed, in practice, the use of political literature tends to *obstruct* that goal (1991, pp. 214-15). This is because, too often, the texts selected for study are chosen for reasons other than their heuristic value (1991, p. 216). They may be central to the teacher's own area of research (or "research"), and therefore appropriate primarily to him; they may concern issues prevalent in contemporary political practice, or reflect what the teacher believes is presently needed to further the cause of "social justice". Or, more recently, a text may be selected for teaching because its author has some personal characteristic that qualifies him/her for inclusion as part of the programme of "decolonizing the curriculum".

These are problems of present execution. But political literature is an additionally unfavourable medium for teaching historical and philosophical thinking, Oakeshott says, because this literature is *essentially prescriptive*. Political literature comprises…

> the language of desire and aversion, of preference and choice, of approval and disapproval, of praise and blame, of persuasion, injunction, accusation and threat. It is the language in which we make promises, ask for support, recommend beliefs and actions, devise and commend administrative expedients and organize the beliefs and opinions of others in such a manner that policy may be effectively and economically executed; in short, it is the language of everyday practical life (1991, p. 206).

This literature—which academics now like to call "the discourse"—includes campaign rhetoric, parliamentary gossip, broadsheet journalism, rolling news, diaries and memoirs, political satire, Twitter storms, and so forth. This sort of stuff can of course be studied and explained. But in practice, Oakeshott thinks, it proves "too difficult for most people to turn their backs upon the enterprise of participating". Students sense that political texts prompt them to respond with a performance of their own in the same practical mode (1989, pp. 52-3). Often for teaching staff too it proves too tempting to neglect the historical or philosophical explanatory modes of which they are custodians, and to attend instead to "finding reasons for holding favourite political opinions" (1991, p. 217)—or to avail themselves of the opportunity to slay their own *bêtes noires* before a live captive audience.

The effect of this upon how undergraduates discuss great texts, which Oakeshott observed at Cambridge—Plato's *Republic*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Rousseau's *Social Contract*—will be uncomfortably familiar to today's Politics academics. Such texts, he recalls, were "assumed to have a political 'ideal', or programme, or policy, or device to recommend", "injunctions about political conduct", which must be elicited and criticized (1991, pp. 208-9). The undergraduate attitude towards texts, which ought to have been used as occasions for cultivating philosophical and historical conversation, was in fact "a mixture between the manner in which one might read an out-of-date text-book on naval architecture and the manner in which one might study a current election manifesto" (1991, pp. 208-9). Students seemed "alive only to the political quaintness (or enormity) of these books", and their critical skill was "narrowed down to listening either for the political *faux pas* or for the echoes of political modernity" (ibid.).

3.2 Politics and philosophical "language"

The traps and temptations that Oakeshott identifies are real enough. But it seems to me that they can be overcome, and the strongest case for the study of Politics in a university is probably that which appeals to the explanatory language of philosophy. Just as the study of religion is useful for imparting philosophical thought, so for undergraduates already interested in politics, or at least in "the discourse", there can hardly be a more convenient occasion for learning to think philosophically—at least for learning to spot fallacies and to identify what is "postulated" by political claims (see Oakeshott 1990, pp. 12, 28, 33; 2004, pp. 391-402; see also Nardin 2001, pp. 183–224).

Further, it is acceptable to treat political philosophy as sufficiently distinct as a "literature" that it might be the focus of a university education in its own right. Indeed, this was Oakeshott's own view when, in an essay of 1924, he sketched a reorganization of "political science" at Cambridge, proposing a canonical history of political thought curriculum, and "the construction of a theory of the State" (2004, pp. 62-4). The literature of political philosophy, very old or very recent, is in fact compatible with Oakeshott's account of philosophical "experience" (1966), as his own contributions to the field amply demonstrate (see Greenleaf 1966; Franco 2014, pp. 67-106, 161-6). Undergraduates quickly realize that reading the political works of Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau, *et al*, is a major component of a university education in Politics. And although the tendency is strong at the beginning for students to assess them in the way Oakeshott describes, it is easier than he supposes to demonstrate that such texts are not best read as "repositories of useful information or advice" (Williams 2007, p. 389). It is also easier than he thinks to introduce a more philosophical and historical mode of discussion, especially once students begin to sense that it is clumsy and vulgar to apply to such texts the slogans and clichés of today's political posturing.

3.3 The historical "language" of politics

The same argument can be made for using political speech and action as an occasion for learning the "language" of history. Oakeshott's own account of historical thought developed during his life (see Oakeshott 2004; O'Sullivan 2003), but in *On Human Conduct* he explicitly identifies the mode of understanding appropriate to conduct as the "historical". What the student must bring to this understanding is…

> a deep respect for the individual action, patience in exploring its connections, an exact appreciation of its provenance and circumstances, an eye for shades of difference between plausible likenesses, an ear for echoes and the imagination, not to conjecture what was likely, but to devise, recognize, entertain, and criticize a variety of contingent relationships, each sustained by a reading of the evidence. And it is an engagement of theoretical understanding: the theorist here, is not concerned to understand the performance merely in order to respond to it. He is not one of the parties in the transaction he is theorizing (Oakeshott 1990, p. 106).

Much of today's academic study of contemporary politics, which Oakeshott seems to dismiss as "gossip"—a study of a current political figure, for example—is perfectly compatible with the historical mode of investigation. Indeed, viewed from the perspective of historical enquiry, political thought is a component of political history as well—as of course Oakeshott recognizes (2004, pp. 403-21). He is right that much political history is extremely complex and difficult for undergraduates to handle. But despite his example of the obscurity of contemporary Soviet politics (1991, p. 216), politics broadly conceived is the most ancient of historians' focuses, and its literature surely contains a good deal of very suitable material in conjunction with which students can be introduced to the language of academic historical explanation. Further, if "explanation" is in the end indistinguishable from description, then teaching undergraduates to describe political processes with historical accuracy is perfectly appropriate.

IV. SCHOLARSHIP AND RHETORIC

Politics academics might however contend that Politics is an appropriate course of study for a university even on Oakeshott's own terms, for as well as having a literature of its own, it is also a "language" in its own right. The *language of politics*, as Oakeshott himself points out, has a peculiar lexicon, featuring words such as:

> Democratic, liberal, equal, natural, human, social, arbitrary, constitutional, planned, integrated, communist, provocative, feudal, conservative, progressive, capitalist, national, reactionary, revolutionary, fascist, privileged, private, public, socialist; open, closed, acquisitive, affluent, responsible and irresponsible societies; the international order, party, faction, welfare and amenity (1991, pp. 206-7; see also 1990, pp. 312, 318).

Today we might add to this lexicon the heavily loaded words of the recent "discourse", such as "marginalized", "underrepresented", "underfunded", "exclusionary", "populist", and so on—and even the flourishing family of slur words carrying the suffix "phobic".

It might seem to be the pedagogical goal of a teacher of Politics to impart mastery of this *language of politics* (1991, p. 211). And of course precisely that is the technical skill that was traditionally offered by one kind of political teacher in particular: the sophist. The sophist's product is valuable, because without it the student is (allegedly) unable to understand or deploy the language of politics effectively. This would be, as Oakeshott observes, "a serious hindrance to anyone who, either as an amateur or as a professional, wishes to participate in the activity" (1991, p. 206). Hence, Oakeshott observes, books are now available which promise "to provide an education for those whose business or pleasure it is to speak the current language of politics". "Indeed", Oakeshott continues…

> an expression has been invented (or seconded) to specify this literature; it is the so-called literature of 'political theory'; and 'political theories' (in this usage) are appropriately qualified by adjectives such as 'democratic', 'socialist', 'conservative', 'liberal', 'progressive'—that is, by adjectives which themselves belong to the current vocabulary of politics and are designed to indicate the political colour of the theories (1991, pp. 206-7).

Now, it is hard to see why, in an open society, there should *not* be specialized rhetorical training for political activists—whether their allegiances are "progressive" or "conservative". And such a training centre could fairly be called a "School of Politics"—especially since "seminary" is already taken. Oakeshott's idea of a School of Politics is, however, one in which teaching is *academic*—that is, it imparts explanatory rather than prescriptive languages. Thus, he warns, in a university "we should never *use* the language of politics; we should only use the explanatory 'languages' of academic study" (1991, p. 216, emphasis added). And nobody, he says, could mistake these terms—"democratic", "liberal", "progressive", "reactionary", "fascist", "privileged" and so on—"for scientific expressions" (1991, p. 439). Where political words are introduced, it should be "in order to take them to pieces and write them out in the long-hand of historical or philosophical explanation" (1991, p. 216). It is, then, a sort of category error to use words which are the instruments of political rhetoric and manipulation as if they were also appropriate as tools of analysis. The danger, Oakeshott explains, is that the "idiom of the material to be studied is ever ready to impose itself upon the manner in which it is studied" (1991, p. 218).

4.1 Academics and sophists

It seems that the impact of applying this rule today—that is, avoiding rhetorical words in the academic study of politics—would be highly iconoclastic, since the rhetoric and grammar of political literature has saturated many academics' ostensibly analytic language (Oakeshott 1990, pp. 46-50). Oakeshott might however be criticised for positing a sharp distinction between explanation and prescription. We might observe that prescriptive language always posits some sort of explanation, and that explanatory language always prescribes something, at least implicitly. Oakeshott is aware of these considerations, but, he says, they "lie to one side of what I am suggesting": namely, that however the two may be in practice inseparable, there is nevertheless a crucial difference of priority. The focus upon explanation makes practical advice incidental, a by-product; whereas the focus upon technique renders explanation subordinate (1967, pp. 136-7). Where political discourse does contain explanation, as it very often does, it does so for prescriptive purposes, not scientific purposes. To treat advice as the product, and explanation as subordinate to it, is common in practical political talk—and it would be appropriate for the sophist to teach students to use explanation selectively for their own practical ends. But the academic seeks the explanation that is *true*, whatever its possible practical uses. This is where the shoe pinches for "Social Justice Uni". If the outcome of recent research is a discovery that, in the view of the teacher, will likely frustrate or damage the cause of "social justice", then it seems ethical to suppress knowledge of that discovery—just as the sophist teaches his students how to suppress facts that weaken their own arguments.

Further, if politics were both a literature and an academic language in Oakeshott's sense—i.e. an *explanatory* mode of thought—then the language of politics would actually be self-explanatory. Having within its remit both prescription and explanation, the language of politics could provide not just practical political proficiency, but also all the tools needed for explaining political talk and action. Historians and philosophers might still apply their peculiar explanatory languages to political affairs, but there would appear to be no reason why Politics academics should have to speak in the same terms, when *prima facie* the correct way to explain politics is in "the language of politics". The only explanations we could need would be those expounded by political speakers themselves. Approached thus, students may not acquire an "philosophical", "historical", or "scientific" understanding of politics, but they would acquire a "political" understanding, and what could seem more appropriate than that? It would obviously be very worrying if this were the case, especially for Politics academics, whose vocational failings and methodological inconsistencies would eventually be noticed.

However, although it is obvious that political activity is, as Oakeshott says, "three-quarters talk", politics it is not an academic "language" in Oakeshott's sense, because it is not primarily explanatory. Political talk is primarily a prescriptive form of discourse. It is not a *logic*, but a *rhetoric*.

Still, many rhetorical terms are used by Politics academics as if they are scientific terms. The process by which such terms have been adopted has usually begun with the offering of some shared definition for a term such as "liberal" or "progressive", a putative scientific concept or category. But it is quickly noticed that the definition is itself subject to contestation. The discovery that political terms are "essentially contested" is still frequently celebrated, but it should never have surprised anyone in the first place. It is obvious that vocabulary harvested from political rhetoric will be laden with normative significance. Likewise, it should be recognized that it is impossible to analyse a political debate in rhetorical terms without thereby joining it, and that many terms (such as "progressive" or "exclusionary") must be left behind if another, non-rhetorical mode of conversation is to be initiated and sustained.

This observation, that the objectivity of scholarly language breaks down when contested political terms are involved, ought to prompt Politics academics to adopt less troublesome instruments of analysis. But many have preferred to draw the exactly opposite conclusion: namely, that open, active political contestation legitimately counts as "research"; and that Politics academics can (or should) put their research and teaching activity, and the weight of their professional profiles, to the service of their favoured political causes. Indeed, the idea of "research impact" tells us that research that is *not* oriented towards recommending, prescribing, and changing behaviour, to building a case, to fuelling a campaign—that research that does *not* do any of this—is what is indulgent in academic work, rather than the contrary. The question is not whether we have a civic right, as private citizens, to advocate a cause. It is whether it is "appropriate" we should advocate particular uses for our research, use our workplace and contracted hours to recommend causes to students, or adopt what Oakeshott thinks should be unnatural to us: the voice of the preacher or the instructor (1989, p. 99). It seems to me that all of this is only appropriate if we accept that the teaching of Politics in the university is now assessing itself by the success criteria of sophistry.

V. CONCLUSION

Oakeshott is not attacking the idea that political campaigns should be adequately evidenced, risks fairly assessed, and the case well made. But he does invite us to consider whether this case-building, the politically-motivated construction of prescriptive political argument, is what academic research and teaching are for. And because he identifies that political language encompasses "idle political gossip and some tendentious speculation about current policy" (1991, p. 208), he certainly invites us Politics academics to reflect on whether it is appropriate for us to engage in the sort of discourse also provided by satirists, commentators, and axe-grinding columnists—and, further, whether the future of Politics in a university is best served by eroding the ancient distinction between academics and sophists.

There is also the pedagogical duty to consider. Academics are role models for students. We cultivate in them the explanatory languages of civilization (1967, p. 138), and show them what is entailed by the mode of association traditionally assumed between academics—a "civil" association, a *res publica* of letters, in which languages and practices are explored and analysed freely within laws and rules specifying conditions for self-chosen academic activity. We should of course uphold and transmit these languages and modes of association to the highest possible standard. After all, undergraduates already know all too well how *political* language is spoken, with varying standards of civility. It is not surprising that, if we enter the rhetorical language of campaigning *as academics*, then our students will learn to confuse languages, to code switch between logic and rhetoric, in the same way. And it is clear what is lost when the School of Politics as a "civil" association becomes another "enterprise" association (Oakeshott 1990, pp. 313-16), such as a pressure group, or a school of sophistry. Whether one privately approves or disapproves of the "common purpose" sought by an enterprise association, it is obvious that full-time campaigners are incapable of fostering *convives* of the traditional academic kind, who should be (as Oakeshott puts it) "capable of 'answering back' in civil tones with whom to pass eternity in conversation" (1990, p. 324).

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An Interview with Robert Grant, University of Glasgow

JAMES ALEXANDER

JA: Why did *Rationalism in Politics* come out as it did?

The impulse to publish it didn't come from Oakeshott at all. It was compiled by Maurice Cranston, at his (Cranston's, not Oakeshott's) suggestion. (Oakeshott by then, 1962, had been at the London School of Economics for ten years). Lee Auspitz asked Oakeshott why they had left out that long (and I think inferior) piece about 'The Masses and Representative Democracy'. His answer was, 'We just forgot it'. I myself asked him why he had omitted his brilliant *Cambridge Journal* review of E. H. Carr, 'Mr Carr's First Volume'. His answer: 'I didn't think anybody would be interested.'

JA: Why did the book alter Oakeshott's reputation so?

I suppose it was his first book to manifest a political stance, however hard that stance might be to classify. (Contrast it with his earlier scepticism in 'The Claims of Politics', 1939). Also it was his first (semi-)polemical work. Previously he would have been (and was) thought of as a superannuated Idealist. (See Susan Stebbing's sniffy review of *Experience and Its Modes*.) In fact, he really didn't have much of a 'reputation' at all at this stage (though he had impressed Collingwood and Barker).

JA: Did it damage Oakeshott's reputation with any of the influential members of the successor generation: for instance, Brian Barry, Garry Runciman, or Quentin Skinner?

All these people were a good generation or more his junior, and would not have commanded any influence at the time *Rationalism in Politics* came out. However, there is no mystery about Barry's hostility. He was quite simply an egalitarian socialist, and whatever Oakeshott was, it wasn't that. Runciman I met at dinner six or seven years ago, and we discussed Oakeshott briefly, though more as a person than as a thinker. I didn't expect Runciman to have any views on his thought, though he would have known that Oakeshott was very anti-welfarist. I think Oliver Letwin was right to think that the British are so wedded, not to say welded, to welfarism as to make Oakeshott's approach pretty well a non-starter as far as policy is concerned—not that Oakeshott was either very prolific or very forthcoming on policy. In policy he was a dyed-in-the-wool pragmatist (i.e. do whatever the situation demands: cf. Halifax's 'Trimmer'). I can only think of two 'policy' pieces he ever wrote, 'The Political Economy of Freedom' (1949: a sort of proto-Thatcherite manifesto, and weak, not to say limp, on the details: Hayek was far superior and more conscientious in these respects). The other is that 1944 MS attributed to him (rightly, I think) concerning the policy the Allies should adopt towards a defeated Germany. It was pure Morgenthau Plan: *Carthago delenda est*. (Henry Morgenthau was US Treasury Secretary). In other words, destroy their industry and sow their fields with salt, so that they can't cause any more trouble. If they starve, well, they brought it on themselves. Lee Auspitz told me that Oakeshott supported Morgenthau, though Oakeshott may well have offered his own prescription first. He does not seem to have considered that the Versailles Treaty, which was only half as punitive as Morgenthau, was in part the origin of World War Two. Come to think of it, there was another, and this time very good, 'policy'-oriented piece by Oakeshott, his review of Quintin Hogg and John Parker called 'Contemporary British Politics', also omitted from *Rationalism*.

I told Runciman I was writing the biography (though this may have been before I had the Yale contract), and that I had spent a day with Oakeshott at his place in Dorset. *Inter al* I said that he had been very charming. 'Oh yes,' said Runciman, laying the irony on with a trowel, 'he was charming all right.' Had Oakeshott perhaps seduced someone Runciman knew and cared about? Who knows? Anyway, he certainly didn't admire or like him. He never really said what he thought about Oakeshott's ideas. Did he ever write about Oakeshott?

As for Skinner, I had lunch with him three or four years ago, but we didn't discuss Oakeshott at length. He gave the impression of having got on quite well with him, and also of knowing him quite well from various professional rendezvous (e.g. the Carlyle Club, and Political Science Association conferences) but this was before I had read his damning opinion—I think it was in an interview with some Finn—of Oakeshott on Hobbes (an opinion I actually don't greatly disagree with: cf. also Noel Malcolm, who, though actually a protégé of Oakeshott's, was similarly critical). He gave me a photo of Oakeshott and himself together at a Durham conference. I've written somewhere that Oakeshott was a great admirer of ferocious Skinner-style scholarship (e.g. that of his friend and appointee, Kedourie), but that he also thought (so Simon Oakeshott told me) that a man might pick up just as much historical understanding from browsing in second-hand bookshops, such as Oakeshott's own father habitually did in his lunch breaks. (I'm inclined to agree with him here). Oakeshott was hugely widely read, but said that he himself hadn't much aptitude for scholarship proper. He was certainly very careless about footnotes, citations and the like.

JA: Why has Oakeshott only been taken seriously by non-Oakeshottians since around 2000?

I think this may in part have been due to Richard Rorty's championship of him in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), but also because his low profile during his life, and the ensuing dearth of commentary on his work, opened endless opportunities to researchers after his death. Non-Oakeshottians probably forgave him for being what they would call conservative, since he had been widely characterised as post-modernist, like Rorty. And it is true that he wasn't a realist, even as regards natural science (cf., e.g., Bruno Latour & co.). I remarked on this to Scruton, otherwise a great admirer of Oakeshott. His view was that—if only in this respect—Oakeshott was 'simply mad'.

JA: Did Oakeshott enjoy his reputation as essayist-polemicist?

Simon Oakeshott told me Michael wanted posthumous fame, but was little concerned with publicity or celebrity in his lifetime. He refused a Companionship of Honour on the grounds that 'public honours should go to public people'. (A contrast with that near-Stalinist Eric Hobsbawm, CH).

JA: Do you think *Rationalism in Politics* stops people ever reading *On Human Conduct*?

They are so different in style that few would spontaneously attribute them to the same author. I myself think *On Human Conduct* was underrated on its appearance (it is a serious book, though the third part is scrappy and thrown-together—and readable), and has been overrated since. I asked Isaiah Berlin if he had read it. He said he had chucked it aside after ten pages, having not understood a word. But there was little love lost between him and Oakeshott in any case, despite (as Berlin noted) the similarity of their philosophies. I shall have to reread *On Human Conduct*, but am not looking forward to it. Its attempt at precision comes at too high a price.

We can all understand 'enterprise association', and see why it is inapplicable to a tolerable politics, but 'civil association' remains obscure, and I do not think it can realistically be appropriated by the multiculturalists, though some, e.g. B. Parekh, have tried. It is true that the Ottoman *millet* system kept the lid on ethno-religious divisions, and survived in ghostly fashion in the Lebanon until the 1970s; true also that Oakeshott used to joke that Norman Sicily under Roger II was an example of civil association. But he also observes that civil association, unlike its enterprise counterpart, is compulsory; and I would note that both Roger's Sicily and the Ottoman Empire were absolute monarchies. Multiculturalism looks incompatible with liberal democracy. It may possibly 'work', but only under despotism, such as Saddam Hussein's. See what happened in Iraq once he was removed: Hobbes's 'war of all against all'.

JA: I was looking at Michael Bentley's book on Butterfield again, and what struck me how little he seemed to admire Butterfield, or felt obliged to apologise for him. I recently reread *Englishman and His History* last week and thought it was marvellous. Do you know anything about Butterfield's influence on Oakeshott?

I was struck by how much Oakeshott obviously owed to *The Whig Interpretation of History*, which is a brilliant book. There are verbal echoes of it in Oakeshott, just as there are of Collingwood's *Speculum Mentis* in *Experience and its Modes*. Oakeshott told me he wrote his book first, before reading Collingwood, but this cannot be true. Maybe he was being post-modernist.

Oakeshott and Butterfield were close friends, and I believe there is some extant correspondence, though not at the LSE. There is a rumour, which few will take seriously, that Mrs Butterfield once caught them kissing. She is supposed to have been hyper-vigilant regarding Herbert's love life, but whether or not with good cause I don't know. It is, however, true that he had a long and agonising affair with a lady whose name I forget.

JA: Peter Ghosh, who likes essays, as he writes them himself, is extremely eager to point out that Macaulay and Trevor-Roper were at their best writing essays. Would you say that Oakeshott preferred the essay form? I think one of Oakeshott's achievements in the essay form is combining an old-fashioned Chesterton-type meandering style with a heavily worked-out content. Plus, his writing, somewhat remarkably, moves, like a barge, at the right speed to carry one's reading thoughts along with it.

I think, despite his advocacy of Hegel (why?), he rightly disliked these vast synthetic, panoptic philosophies. A single brick out of place, and the lot comes crashing down. It is perfectly possible to assemble a series of cogent, focussed *aperçus* in a collection and for it to be the case, so long as one's initial focus is sharp enough, that they cohere quite as much as any through-composed monograph, only tacitly. Oakeshott was a huge admirer of the scholarly Kedourie, as I said; though again there is the point about browsing at random in a second-hand bookshop. He and his father Joseph both admired Montaigne, the inventor of the essay.
No one ever complained that mathematicians do their work mostly in papers, which are the scientific equivalent of essays. So did philosophers, and still do. And so did literary critics, when I were a lad.

JA: You mentioned that Oakeshott picked up bits of Butterfield's language. He owed vast amounts to Collingwood. I am fairly sure he stole from G. C. Field and also the *dux* and *rex* business from Jouvenel (for which there is evidence in the book reviews): since both Field's and Jouvenel's typologies played into the lines of thought Oakeshott worked on in the 1950s and 1960s. He covered himself by saying that citation was irrelevant, and that one had a duty to work out one's own arguments. Why do you think he was so reluctant to admit debts?

I guess for the reason you give. He ploughed a very lonely furrow, since Idealism was so out of fashion for most of his career. Temperamentally he could never have belonged to a school, unless it was a dead one, and thus incapable of demanding conformity. Incidentally, it's worth noting that the Idealists generally (and pragmatists, who live next door) were excellent prose stylists: James, Royce, Bradley, Quine, Blanshard … why? These are interesting lines you trace (I have never heard of Field, and will look into him).

JA: Of course, the advantage of not admitting intellectual debts is that it gives the successor generation, if it bothers at all, something to do.

I'm not sure it's obliged to bother. But certainly, as already said, the dearth of early commentary on Oakeshott, and his reclusiveness, has left the field wide open since his death, which has encouraged the huge amount of recent interest in him. Graduate students are always looking for doctoral subjects.

JA: Famously, Collingwood disliked his colleagues at Oxford so much he worked alone, and wrote an autobiography.

Well, his thought was also incompatible with theirs, at least superficially.

JA: When I think back it is easy to see Oakeshott fitting into 1920s, 1930s and 1940s Cambridge, but then there is the question: what would have happened if Oakeshott had stayed, perhaps defeated Brogan, to get the Professorship?

Well, did he fit in so well, though? If anything, he was a bit Bloomsburyish, but not leftist like the true Bloomsberries. Indeed, he was unfashionably patriotic, though also so anti-war as almost to be pacifist (until war came). About the Professorship, that is what Ernest Barker wanted, as you know. Barker groomed him for the chair, but could not swing it. At the time (1939) Oakeshott only had the one self-authored book, *Experience and Its Modes*. He and Brogan were both, with several others, on the editorial board of *Cambridge Journal*, of which Oakeshott eventually became General Editor.

JA: How successful could Oakeshott have been in inculcating the next generation in anti-Beveridge anti-Robbins politics? What I mean is that there is, or was, nay, probably is, let's be fair, a crown quality to Cambridge: not necessarily because the best people are there teaching, but because the best undergraduates are there chewing on whatever the local teachers are teaching: and, whatever that is, is the language they pick up. So Oxford and Cambridge academics of the 1960s to 1990s generation have sometimes had an undeserved amount of influence.

Ninety per cent of an undergraduate's education comes from the peer group and his personal effort anyway, however good or bad the teachers are. When I was at Trinity hardly anyone read English (though Terry Eagleton was there, two years ahead of me: he was my next-door neighbour and quite close friend until he went to Oxford, and I to the Right—thanks largely to Oakeshott).

JA: If the 1962 volume had been entitled *The Voice of Poetry and Other Essays* do you think it would have received as much attention? I have a sense that Oakeshott's reputation is rather shackled by the word 'rationalism'.

I think not, but then I don't think highly of Oakeshott's aesthetics (see my contribution to Corey Abel's *The Intellectual Legacy of Michael Oakeshott*). However, 'The Voice of Poetry', like 'The Activity of Being an Historian', also contains a digest of Oakeshott's world-picture generally, which is of considerable interest. Of course, Oakeshott's attack on what he calls Rationalism has led many of the ignorant to think him irrationalist, which, equally of course, he isn't. What he means by Rationalism is the (fetishistic) habit of applying the 'reason' appropriate to one kind of thinking to another kind (e.g. 'scientific politics' and the like), and even—in fact usually—to the whole across-the-board spectrum of thought. And this is genuinely irrational, for all its pretensions to rationality. (Oakeshott cruelly calls it 'the relic of a belief in magic').

JA: I am very conscious of the way my own mind works. I don't claim it is Oakeshottian, but I do not think in lines: I think in blocks, or blocs: and I think Oakeshott also tended to think this way. He liked binaries, needed them, in fact.

What is so special, or unusual, about binaries? Any singular identity is (apophatically) constituted in part by what it is not, so binarism is at the root of all thought, willy-nilly. And there is nothing wrong with linear thinking, where appropriate—in logic or maths, e.g., in fact, in the hard sciences generally.

JA: He had little time for what I call 'ingenious' arguments. Do you agree? His essayistic style sometimes achieves movement, or layering development, but the substructure is almost always carved in stone. He gave the game away with the famous threefold distinction in the Introduction to *Leviathan*.

I've forgotten what it was, except that Will and Artifice were two of the three, but why I can't recall. I never prized that introduction as highly as some have; in fact, I don't think he is that cogent on Hobbes at all. As I said, the great Noel Malcolm thinks Hobbes is essentially a Rationalist in Oakeshott's sense, which only confirms what I have long suspected.

JA: Perhaps you see Oakeshott in a more sinuous writerly way than I do. I see the Hegelian structures sticking out of his essays like ribs, but this may in part be to do with my eye. Wouldn't you agree that Oakeshott, though not writing systematically, sought system?

No, I think I wouldn't. You recall he praises Cervantes' painter, who, when asked what he is painting, answers 'whatever it turns out to be'. See also his pragmatical interest in 'Trimmer' Halifax, and his aversion to political programmes and parties, indeed, almost to political 'philosophies' of any kind. He has no interest in the Hegelian dialectic (mind you, it doesn't feature in *The Philosophy of Right* either), nor does he invoke Hegel's Estates, and he is certainly averse to Hegel's (and Marx's, of course) so-called 'historicism', which is simply a kind of ruthless Whig history.

JA: I now think that it was a shame that his musings that eventually became *On Human Conduct* did not come out earlier, since we now know that he had manuscripts about this finished as early as the mid-1950s. There was an entire generation of rising historical-philosophical-political academics looking for guidance, and on not finding it from Oakeshott they took from where they could from the 1960s onwards, which mostly meant, alas, sociology and political science.

I'm not too keen on *On Human Conduct*, actually, though it does, like Berlin, contain some ponderable binaries. It's too dense. As I have already said, Berlin told me he couldn't make head or tail of it, and chucked it aside after ten pages; not that I necessarily take Berlin as gospel, far from it. I think Oakeshott says these things better in *Rationalism in Politics*, even though—or perhaps because—he's not trying to systematise them. Though *Experience and Its Modes* is impressively systematic, as anything indebted to Bradley is bound to be.

JA: I asked you already about Oakeshott's reputation since his death. You mentioned Rorty. There is that. We know about the purist Oakeshottians. But I have noticed recently that the one academic sector which takes Oakeshott very seriously, and at a high intellectual level, is legal philosophy. Legal philosophers such as Martin

Loughlin and David Dyzenhaus, admire Oakeshott greatly without agreeing with him, and are as enthusiastic about his legal theory as Shirley Letwin, who of course was partial, was in her posthumous *History of Law.* I think for the time coming his reputation will be highest amongst the lawyers.

I think you are very likely right, though I never thought he was especially clear about the Rule of Law. He has an excellent summary of his attitude to law (at least, the Common Law) at the end of 'Contemporary British Politics'. I don't think he would have much appeal to those (e.g. the European Union) in the Napoleonic legal tradition.

JA: So he will increasingly stand with Hart, Rawls, Kelsen, those sorts of people, and be considered alongside them. And Schmitt, of course.

Schmitt, I suppose, only via Hobbes. There is something brutal and philistine about Schmitt, whatever people say (incisive, realist, etc. etc.). I can't read him with any patience. I went to a Liberty Fund colloquium about him, where most of the participants, doubtless similarly averse, ended up talking about other things. Not surprising that he flirted with Hitler, and vice versa (though I think like Heidegger he never actually belonged to the Party). I cannot now recall exactly how, but there is something self-confirming, tautological, about his argument. It is conceived in such a way as to make it unfalsifiable. He exemplifies much of that aggressive German paranoia that Oakeshott diagnoses in the 1944 'Morgenthau' piece.

JA: I don't see Oakeshott becoming a luminary as a theorist of poetry.

Agreed. And by 'poetry' he means any (positive) aesthetic experience, whether or not intended (i.e. whether art or nature). Very Bloomsbury, like Bell and Fry (and the grand-daddy of them all, Pater). He likens religion to poetry in *On Human Conduct*.

JA: Was the twentieth century, now we know what the future looks like, an anomaly? Was the university, between, say, 1890 and 1970, in a happy era between 1. Victorian angst about being clerical or anticlerical and 2. Thatcherite angst about an overgrown university full of increasingly entitled academics increasingly publishing everything they could?

Yes, I think you may be right. My Cambridge (1963-73) was still not so very different from Oakeshott's. No undergraduate 'en suites', one loo per staircase, terrible food in Hall, no hot water in Trinity New Court till '64. Even in Oakeshott's time there were more than a few non-public-school types about, and I think in my time about half the students were from grammar schools (depending, I suppose, on the College). Cambridge certainly wasn't a toffs' playground, not even Trinity, though there were toffs, of course. One heard rather than saw them: distant sounds of braying and breaking glass at the end of remote corridors.

About publishing, a post-RAE example is what Glasgow and Edinburgh actually did, setting up subsidised reviews to use up each other's otherwise unpublishable rubbish. This was applying the principles of productivity to academe. Put your unread and unreadable books on the scales, and presto! hit the funding jackpot. There was not a lot of intense teaching before, any more than now, but as I have already said, this may not have been altogether bad. It made one think for oneself, with help from one's friends (often in other disciplines). There were some damnably clever people about.

JA: It was Oakeshott who suggested that Kedourie lecture on nationalism, leading to his book on nationalism, which shocked Gellner so much that it provoked Gellner into writing his own book on nationalism (where he adopted Kedourie's time-frame, i.e. it all happened in the late 18th century, but rejected Kedourie's explanation in terms of ideas, preferring, of course, social movements).

I knew Gellner slightly. He sent me a postcard from Leningrad of the Bronze Horseman, thanking me for my 'very generous' review (1988) in the *TES* of *Plough, Sword and Book*. I also met him at Scruton's, and at an Oxford conference on education. I got arrested in Prague (1986) for carrying stuff out of the country for him. Oakeshott thought him an intellectual vulgarian, but was quite wrong. He was a lively, waggish provocateur, and good company (as was Oakeshott).

I only met Kedourie once or twice. He was deeply impressive and deeply serious, not to say severe (he certainly looked severe). Unfortunately he had no small talk.

JA: He had real punch, in his writing. Saw things simply and strongly. Probably Oakeshott thought of nationalism as being a variety of Rationalism.

It may feature in that list of Rationalist projects that he gives in the original essay (I haven't it to hand). He and Kedourie thought it the kind of ideological nonsense, like racism, dreamt up by intellectuals. He would definitely have distinguished it radically, and rightly, from patriotism. (An analogy: patriotism is collective loyalty and self-respect, nationalism is collective vanity and boastfulness. The patriot empathises with the patriotism of other nations and cultures; the nationalist needs enemies, and seeks them out).

JA: I asked Maurice Cowling once if he knew what Oakeshott thought about the chapter on him in the first volume of *Religion and Public Doctrine*. Oakeshott had ten years to read it. Do you know anything about this?

No. Oakeshott was very conscientious about reading the books he had to review, but otherwise he was greatly tempted by the second-hand bookshop, as already mentioned. He must have read Maurice, though.

JA: I saw that the Oxford philosopher J. R. Lucas died only a year or two ago. Oakeshott reviewed his *Principles of Politics* in the 1960s. Do you know anything about a connection there? Lucas is famous for arguing against equality.

Yes, I do. His anti-egalitarianism is persuasive. He was a Fellow of Merton, and wanted Oakeshott to leave the London School of Economics and go there. Oakeshott was friends with G. H. G. Mure, the Warden, and a Hegelian, and Mure too wanted him. I asked his son Ed about this, but alas, it was just then that Lucas died, and the query with him. Lucas wrote an interesting thing about the Huxley/Wilberforce ('Soapy Sam') controversy in the nineteenth century.

JA: If you could get Oakeshott back up from the grave for half an hour, what would you ask him?

I would ask him why he wasted so much of his life chasing skirt, since it never made him happy. Which is what you would expect, if you foist an identical character on every likely young woman you meet, and come a cropper in exactly the same way every time. Einstein: 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.'

Of course, when I spent an entire day with him in 1987, I knew nothing about his love life, except that, as Perry Worsthorne had told me, he 'liked a pretty face'. So our discourse was not about such trivia—if trivia they were. But Oakeshott said in his notebooks that love (or what he mistook for love, namely infatuation) was the whole point of his life.

JA: Oakeshott makes much of momentariness and dream and myth in his writings: indeed, 'escape'. I take this to be very nineteenth century: you know how Leavis thought poets like Arnold, Tennyson and Browning were poets of retreat and escape, no longer writing about politics as everyone up to Shelley and Byron had done. Oakeshott looks a bit like an intellectual equivalent of the same: a sort of late Matthew Arnold on Dover Beach.

Yes, I think you are right. I wouldn't call Browning an escapist, though. He's a bit jolly-hockey-sticks, an enthusiast for vitality (or as Pater would say, experience) for its own sake. (See Santayana's essay 'The Poetry of Barbarism'). And of course Oakeshott admired Huizinga on play, play being (in some views) an escape from earnestness (though on other views a rehearsal for life, not an escape).

JA: But, of course, in Oakeshott there is Pater too, and aestheticism.

Well, that lines him up with certain versions of 'escape'.

JA: Wasn't all that his reference to wonder, delight, poetry and love all about escape? 'Mistress, not wife', as he wrote when writing about history?

That's what he says, and I find it annoying, too much Jack-the-Lad (of a would-be upper-class kind). I'm a great believer in (appropriately circumscribed) sexual difference, and its meaningfulness, but not in 'male chauvinism'. ('Don't you bother your pretty little head about such things', etc.).

JA: You know that Pocock counter-quipped that history was not a mistress, as Oakeshott had suggested, but a wife.

Why does history have to be either?

JA: Perhaps history is better seen as a distant, sometimes forgotten, father—old divinity and regret—and a chastised and herded child—for education and remorse. What I am getting at is all the Paterian, aesthetic, externality in Oakeshott is a bit superficial, is it not?

I agree, Pater's view is interesting, but wrong. Did you know he taught G. M. Hopkins, by the way? Not sure one would know from Hopkins's poetry.

JA: I don't know if Oakeshott can really be called a Bloomsbury, though he inhaled the same smoke and sibilance; his 'chasing skirt' was positively Wellsian.

I think he was after 'lurve', rather than, like Wells, sex. He was no commonplace Lothario, lounge lizard or debs' delight, nor a Don Giovanni. He seems to have identified himself most strongly with Wagner's fatal, helpless, tragic Tristan. Simon Oakeshott said he was 'fringe Bloomsbury', and he was of course a friend of Noel Annan, who was decidedly Bloomsbury, though not quite up to the hilt (albeit Provost of King's). Simon told me he went for brains rather than beauty, and it's true that none of his three wives was beautiful. The second was very clever, double first in English from Newnham, a much better poet than Oakeshott, but cripplingly neurotic. On the other hand he was besotted by Celine Jenkins and Pat Gale (later Mrs. Cowling), who certainly were beautiful. June Hooper was pretty too, and clever, and his mistress for four years (the other two said no, Celine absolutely, Pat after a trial run). But once he had June where he wanted her, he wouldn't introduce her to any of his intellectual friends, which is what *she* wanted. She told me he kept her locked up in a walled garden, like a princess of legend, Rapunzel as it might be, or the Sleeping Beauty.

JA: Do you think the relevance of 'Rationalism in Politics' has increased, decreased or sidestepped since 1962? Is irrationalism of the anti-constitutionalist, anti-rule-of-law, pro-populist sort more of a danger, or the technocracy-pseudo-socialism of the covid-warriors?

I think both of those things are very bad, and that a dose of Oakeshottian 'anti-politics' (so Havel characterised his own position) would be an extremely good corrective. But democracies feed (and decline) on promises, not on proven prudence or competence. And there's nothing we can do about that, except foster real public debate and accountability. I am sometimes surprised, however, by the good sense of our fellow-citizens. (E.g. their response to Kinnock's absurdly kitsch and prematurely triumphalist Sheffield rally in '92. A distant bell rang in the depths of the folk memory, with the message 'Nuremberg'. A pity all we got instead was Major).

JA: John Dunn has told me in the last few years that he regrets not taking Oakeshott more seriously at the time. I have the feeling that a whole generation bypassed Oakeshott, mostly for political reasons. When we now look at Oakeshott he seems quite mild and well-mannered, on the page: and yet, again, there is the Annan suggestion that Oakeshott was a 'deviant' along with Waugh and Leavis. Do you think he deserves Noel Annan's sketch of him as a deviant?

Well, in his own time he was pretty much a one-off, if you call that deviant, ploughing as he did a (then) lonely furrow. He was a friend of Annan's, as I expect you know. I hadn't thought Annan was negative about him. You're right that Oakeshott was nothing like Waugh or Leavis. Waugh was brilliant, but a proper reactionary, Oakeshott not at all. Leavis's intellectual manners were barbaric. I have seen them in action, in a lecture. Denys (D. W.) Harding told me that Leavis was naturally genial, but learned them from his awful vindictive wife (a good critic, incidentally).

JA: Waugh and Leavis attacked others and were continually in feud; Oakeshott, by and large, is not known for ever having attacked anyone ...

Agreed.

JA: ... unless calling Isaiah Berlin the Paganini of the lecture hall was an attack. Maurice has a very funny line about how other people called Berlin not the Paganini but the Sgt. Bilko of the lecture hall.

Perhaps it was just the glasses. Actually, Philip Larkin (or Leo Salingar at Trinity) both looked much more like Bilko. Berlin, unlike Bilko, was not a scam merchant, though he could waffle with the best of them and contrive the most far-fetched and implausible connections, for example between de Maistre and fascism. Oakeshott's introduction to Berlin's LSE guest lecture was certainly cruel, and Berlin said it ruined the lecture, which his self-confident volubility had encouraged him, as usual, to busk impromptu. Oakeshott himself always used a script, and despite their similarity in outlook, was very different in character from Berlin, who successfully aspired to scale the pinnacles of the Establishment. I think, putting two and two together, but without any clear evidence, that Oakeshott probably, and unfairly, thought him an overrated, self-promoting windbag, and had determined to punish him for it. In later years Berlin told Shirley Letwin after an encounter with him at the Carlyle Club that he thought Oakeshott 'slightly deranged'. So, though kindly by nature, Berlin had his revenge.

JA: Shaw was coruscating about plans to form a Shaw Society. What do you think Oakeshott would have made of the nature of his memorialisation? What sort of literary glory do you think he sought? To be read, obviously. But to be a name in textbooks?

I doubt it, if only because, like Halifax, he has no doctrine (except this, that there *is* no doctrine). But Simon told me that he suspected Michael hoarded all his correspondence with a view to someone's eventually writing his biography. And he kept absolutely *everything*, even old tradesmen's bills. (His LSE archive is simply gigantic).

JA: I mention him as much as anyone in my classes on politics. What is good about his thought is that he has a few neat-trick theories in his writing, but they always point to something a bit more profound, point to the hinterland. One doesn't get that with Rawls, which is why I think Rawls must fade. Plus, there is the matter of style. Rawls, for instance, lacks the literary bite of early J. S. Mill.

Rawls to my mind is pure stodge. I read the first hundred-plus pages, then told myself that was enough—I'd got the message (or rather the algorithm). His reputation derives entirely from his supposedly having 'revived' pol. phil. He should have let sleeping dogs lie, or perhaps rather die. The only good that came of it was Nozick's rebuttal, which was a jolly good read, even if dubious and impractical. He was much more intelligent than Rawls, and witty with it.

JA: Funnily enough, we have an essay in this anniversary edition by a young scholar, Beckett Rueda, on how Oakeshott reviewed an early Rawls piece quite favourably: since he thought Rawls was up to whatever it was Oakeshott thought he should have been up to. Later, on seeing *A Theory of Justice*, Oakeshott changed his mind. How do you think Oakeshott's reputation will fare in the future?

I haven't seen Oakeshott's review, and I look forward to Rueda's piece. Regarding Rawls, I can see only this rather tenuous connection with Oakeshott, that one consequence of the difference principle (namely, that inequality is preferable to equality if it benefits the disadvantaged more, as it obviously does) has been likened to a similar contention by the conservative Santayana, whom Oakeshott greatly admired. Whether Oakeshott actually agreed with the difference principle as a whole I much doubt. It is too much of a formula or litmus test, and its weaknesses are glaringly obvious. (E.g. why, when choosing behind the veil of ignorance, should we go for the faint-hearted precautionary principle, i.e. minimise our possible harms in preference to maximising our possible benefits? And anyway, isn't the whole basis of choice here rather selfish, even when extended to everyone, so that all are assumed to be equally egoistic?) But then, Oakeshott develops a similar hypostatising habit in his later work (all those binaries).

I am not sure that Oakeshott in the future will be regarded as a political scientist, whatever that is, and whether or not there should or could be such a thing. (There is political experience, political knowledge, and political skill, but I'm doubtful that any of them deserves the name of *science*). I have never forgotten my first reading of 'Rationalism in Politics', the title essay, in 1967. I had been reading Orwell's essays simultaneously, and think of them as very much akin. Orwell called himself a 'democratic socialist', but, unless we take that to mean merely a 'social-democratic' supporter of the Welfare State, rather than the full Clause IV shebang, democratic socialism, as Solzhenitsyn said, is as credible as 'boiling ice'.

I think of Oakeshott nowadays largely as, like Orwell, a very acute and observant political and cultural psychologist, rather than as, as I have said, a systematic theorist *à la* Rawls *et al.* (Leaving out, for now, his non-political philosophy, in which his modal conception, in all its ongoing variety, and especially his reflections on historiography, is dominant, and cogent. It also informs the basis of his educational thinking, viz. relevance—by which I mean, not preoccupation with today's fashionable 'issues', but the avoidance of disciplinary irrelevance or *ignoratio elenchi*). His Rationalist is a recognisable, even central, contemporary type, and once he had alerted me to that element in my own graduate-studentish quasi-Marxism, I was a convert to Oakeshott and a defector from Leftism. The same Rationalist character, give or take, is identified by Orwell in *Down and Out*, before *Animal Farm* and *1984*, where (doubtless recalling Adam Smith on the 'man of system') he sees the know-all activist meddler or *Weltverbesserer* as an overstanding chess-player who regards his fellows as mere passive chessmen having no motive power of their own, and therefore ripe for manipulation, of course for their own (alleged) good. It is worth remembering that Orwell gave a positive review to Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* as early as 1944.

Now, Oakeshott thought Hayek guilty, in that same book, of semi-Rationalism, but they got on politely and well as LSE colleagues. Also the later Hayek, of *Legislation, Law and Liberty*, moved away from his earlier public-choice-style 'economism' in an Oakeshottian direction, call it political or anti-political as you please (anti-politics being itself a political stance). He was much more conscientious in considering the detailed mechanics of political action and its consequences than Oakeshott, who, as I said earlier, took more of a make-do-and-mend view of things, doubtless recognising that so many consequences of principled policy were unintended and therefore largely unpredictable. So 'modelling', as it is now called, would mostly be a waste of time. Trust rather to experienced 'seamanship' to see the ship of state through, or rather, keep it afloat.

Editorial Information

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COSMOS + TAXIS takes its name and inspiration from the Greek terms that F. A. Hayek invoked to connote the distinction between *spontaneous orders* and *consciously planned* orders.

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