Michael Oakeshott Goes Fishing

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Oakeshott… liked binaries, needed them, in fact.
—*James Alexander, An Interview with Robert Grant*

The theorist who drops anchor here or there and
puts out his equipment of theoretic hooks and nets
in order to take the fish of the locality, interrupts
but does not betray his calling…
—*Michael Oakeshott, On Human Conduct*

INTRODUCTION

Michael Oakeshott did indeed like binaries. Perhaps we can even go so far as to say he needed them. And he presented us with a number of them: rationalism versus practical understanding, the politics of faith versus the politics of skepticism, enterprise association versus civil association, and so on. (A larger list appears below).

What are we to make of this plethora of binaries? This paper suggests that we can best understand them with a metaphor Oakeshott employs in *On Human Conduct*, that of the theorist "dropping anchor" and catching the fish available at a certain locale reached in the enterprise of theorizing. (This paper will *not* attempt to explain why Oakeshott liked binaries as opposed to, say, ternaries or quaternaries. The focus here is on why there were *so many* binaries).

Once we comprehend this metaphor, we can see Oakeshott positing these various dichotomies neither as evidence of his deciding an earlier dichotomy was wrong or useless, but failing to describe his mistake, nor of him merely saying the same thing using different terminology. Rather, what Oakeshott is doing in each instance is "dropping anchor" at a different place out on the theoretic sea, and seeing what fish he might catch from that spot.

THE DICHOTOMIES

Let's attempt to set down the dichotomies Oakeshott, at one time or another, employs, knowing that we may miss some:

- Experience without reservation or arrest versus modal experience
- Aesthetic morality versus rule-bound morality
- The politics of faith versus the politics of skepticism
- Rationalism versus *phronesis*
- The individual versus the individual manque
- Civil association versus enterprise association
- Nomocracy versus teleocracy
- *Societas* versus *universitas*

(The above list is similar but not identical to that offered by Fuller 2024, p. 280).[1]

My contention is that these are largely *distinct* ways of "dividing the continuum" (see Eco 1986, pp. 44-45) of experience, and that Oakeshott was most often exploring a new vantage point from which to understand human experience, and not merely giving closely related poles in a dichotomy ever new names, or rejecting an older abstraction in favor of a newer one.

MISAPPREHENDING THE DICHOTOMIES

Let us take a look at some of the ways in which various writers have misapprehended the relationship of these binaries. In general, these fall in two groups (another binary!): Some writers suggest that Oakeshott was merely generating new names for the same poles in an opposition, while others believe he was "abandoning" some now obsolete categorization and replacing it with a new and improved one.

In the first category we find, for example, David Spitz… who also happens to fall into the second category. He claims:

> Unfortunately, *On Human Conduct*… gives no answers at all [to critiques of Oakeshott's earlier work]… *On Human Conduct* is but a restatement of his teaching… it is no more than a linguistic variation on familiar themes… Throughout, of course, there are the usual denunciations of Rationalism (1976, pp. 342-343).

Spitz is so set on seeing Oakeshott as just spinning off variations on the "same old song" that he never notices that there are *no* denunciations of rationalism in that book. Oakeshott himself quite explicitly states the "civil versus enterprise association" dichotomy is *not* just new terms for the "rationalism versus phronesis" dichotomy in his response to Spitz: "in fact the word [Rationalism] is never used, and what it stands for is never mentioned; I am concerned with something else" (1976, p. 357). (In other words, he has dropped anchor at a new fishing locale, and is no longer using the "rationalism" and "phronesis" hooks and nets.)

Elizabeth Corey is much more sympathetic to Oakeshott than is Spitz, but commits a similar error. She writes, "This is what Oakeshott describes as the 'politics of skepticism' and 'civil association'" (2006, p. 156).

This remark posits the 'politics of skepticism' and 'civil association' as two names for the same thing. But if that is so, then the 'politics of faith' and 'enterprise association' must similarly be synonyms. But they clearly aren't: not everyone opening a corner deli (an enterprise association) "posits a uniform condition of mundane perfection" (Corey 2006, p. 172). But it would nevertheless be a mistake for the deli owner to organize his business on a rationalist basis.

John Horton, also sympathetic to Oakeshott, makes a claim similar to Corey's:

> The book articulates a distinction between two 'styles' of the activity of governing—'the politics of faith' and 'the politics of scepticism'. This distinction is clearly related to others he deploys elsewhere, most obviously between rationalism and conservatism, collectivism and individualism and enterprise and civil association. On the one hand, the left as we might say, we have the politics of faith, rationalism, collectivism and enterprise association and on the other, the right, the politics of scepticism, conservatism, individualism and civil association. The terms in each of these sets are certainly not equivalent, but they form two broad families, each loosely linked within a binary structure that is characteristic of Oakeshott's thought (Horton 2005, p. 25).

While, at least Horton recognizes that "these sets are certainly not equivalent," but nevertheless he errs in claiming that "they form two broad families."

For instance, regarding "enterprise association" as a near synonym for "rationalism," and "civil association" as a near synonym for customary behavior won't do: Oakeshott indeed does not fancy enterprise

association becoming the primary way of organizing a government. But entities like for-profit companies, sports teams, and charities are inherently enterprise associations. Does this mean he thinks that their managers should operate or do operate them in a rationalistic fashion? Of course not: Rationalism will fail as a way of managing a sports team just as surely as it will fail as a way of governing a polity. Nor does managing a state as an enterprise association imply that one must do so in a rationalist fashion: Roman government, at least at times, was directed towards the end of the health of the people, but not in a rationalist fashion (Callahan 2012).

Oakeshott himself explicitly rejects this equating of enterprise association with something undesirable (such as rationalism): "[Wolin ascribes to me a] denigration of purposive association, which is nowhere to be found in what I have written" (1976, p. 362).

Furthermore, Oakeshott recognizes that character of the modern European state contains a mingling of the ideal types of civil (*societas*) and enterprise (*universitas*) association:

> *Societas* and *universitas* stand, each, for an independent, self-sustaining mode of association; And my contention is that they are both characteristics of a state, not because they have an inherent need of one another… but because they have become contingently joined by the choices of human beings in the character of a modern European state. And if this is the situation, it may be the most one can do is to offer these terms as the most effective apparatus for understanding the actual complexity of a state… (1975, p. 323).[2]

Thus, Oakeshott is not endorsing any attempt to turn states into purely civil association, but only a way of undersanding their mixed character and the tensions that it creates. To attempt to design a polity as a "pure" civil association is itself a species of rationalism: see for instance, Nozick (1974), Friedman (1989), or Murphy (2010) for examples of just that sort of rationalistic embrace of purely civil association.

Corey goes on to conflate yet a third dichotomy as being alternate names offering slightly different "formulations" for what is in essence the same thing: "To sum up, Oakeshott's three related formulations of a particular kind of politics (Rationalism, 'faith,' and collectivism)" (p. 173).

But, as discussed in Callahan (2012), Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard were both rationalists *and* representatives of the "politics of faith," but fiercely anti-collectivist. The Romans had great faith in their tradion-oriented political system, while the American founders rationalistically designed a constitution based on their skeptical view of what politics could achieve. Oakeshott was exploring different ways of cutting the world of human action in two, not performing the same cut, again and again, and just calling the different slices by new names.

An example of the latter misapprehnsion—believing that, because Oakeshott is offering a new perspective on some issue, he has abandoned some earlier position, can be found in Stephen Gerencser's book *The Skeptic's Oakeshott*, in which he argues that Oakeshott "abandons… absolute idealism" (2000, p. 12) at least by the late 1940s.

Oakeshott never uses the term "absolute idealism" in *Experience and Its Modes*, and only reluctantly talks about the absolute at all (1933, pp. 46-47), so Gerencser's use of the term to describe Oakeshott's early philosophy is already questionable. But he nevertheless goes on to claim: "In both 'Political Philosophy' and 'The Voice of Poetry' Oakeshott has lost his faith in the notion of 'experience without reservation'…" (2000, p. 38).

Firstly, it is very strange to assert that Oakeshott had "faith" in "experience without reservation": that, for him was a statement of the nature of philosophy, and hardly a matter of faith. Moreover, as we will see in the next section, the essay "Political Philosophy," far from showing any loss of "faith" in "experience without reservation," in fact, restates that as the nature of philosophy using new imagery. And he does so again in *On Human Conduct*, when he talks of the theorist's calling to be "to be perpetually *en voyage*" (1975, p. 11).

GOING FISHING

Oakeshott himself offered to us a key for why he kept generating new dichotomies. As he put it *On Human Conduct*:

> And consequently [the theorist's] engagement to be perpetually *en voyage* may be arrested without being denied. The theorist who drops anchor here or there and puts out his equipment of theoretic hooks and nets in order to take the fish of the locality, interrupts but does not betray his calling… the theorist who interrogates instead of using his theoretic equipment catches no fish (1975, p. 11).

In other words, in the ocean of human experience, there are a vast number of places one might "stop and fish." And the importance to Oakeshott of the idea behind the metaphor is illustrated by his deployment of a similar image some fifteen or so years before he wrote *On Human Conduct*. In "Political Philosophy," an essay unpublished during his life (written sometime between 1946 and 1950), he offered the metaphor of the theorist climbing a tower with many windows looking out on experience, offering views of "what was before invisible" (1993, p. 143). In fact, it is Oakeshott's concept of philosophy as "experience without reservation or arrest" (1933, p. 4) that allows him the freedom to repeatedly explore new arrests in experience: all such arrests are always abstract and so partial and defective. Someone who mistakenly thought that such an arrest could be made without defect or incoherence might believe that any insights gleaned from such an arrest ought to be absolute and final, thus rendering them reluctant to explore any other arrest. Their inclination will be to become attached to any particular fishing spot where they catch a few interesting fish. For example, those enamoured of the scientific mode may readily come to believe that only scientific explanations are valid, in other words, to embrace "scientism."

On the other hand, anyone understanding philosophy as does Oakeshott will be able to visit and leave various fishing grounds without becoming attached to any of them as an "ultimate fishing ground," since he will understand that no such ultimate ground exists: they are all "arrests" in experience. And in "Political Philosophy," Oakeshott makes this explicit: "Philosophical reflection, on the other hand, is what happens when [that] kind of anchorage [i.e., attachment to some particular "fishing ground"] is rejected, each scene being permitted fully to supersede the one before" (1993, p. 143). (As mentioned earlier, this essay actually *refutes* Gerencser's claim that Oakeshott had "lost faith" in the idea of experience without reservation or arrest, rather than being evidence backing that claim).

And we might explain some of the confusion that leads writers to try to identify one of Oakeshott's fishing grounds with another is due to their not fully understanding the philosophical basis behind his free exploration of various arrests in experience.

CLEARING UP CONFUSION ON OAKESHOTT "OPPOSING ABSTRACTION"

Once we comprehend Oakeshott's fishing metaphor, we cannot only clear up the confusion about his dichotomies, but also dismiss an apparent "paradox." As Alexander describes it: "There is something paradoxical about being opposed to theoretical abstraction and yet having such a relentless inclination to carry it out" (2022, p. 2).

But the view Alexander has attributed to Oakeshott is false: There is no passage anywhere in Oakeshott's work that is "opposed to theoretical abstractions." Instead, what he has repeatedly pointed out is that "theoretical abstractions" are fine things, so long as one does not mistake them for a complete understanding of the situation from which they were abstracted.

What Oakeshott does criticize is rationalism. However, the rationalist is not someone who creates abstractions; he is someone who creates abstractions, and then tries to use them as a substitute for the knowledge of a concrete activity. A map of Budapest is an abstraction. Oakeshott is not against the making of such

a map. He is against someone who believes that because they have a good map of Budapest, they are in a position to remake the city along more rational lines.

And we know this is Oakeshott's position because he told us so quite explicitly; in *On Human Conduct*, after telling us he has been closely following Plato so far, he goes on to describe the point at which Plato goes astray:

> The cave-dwellers, upon first encountering the theorist after his return to the world of the shadows [very well might be impressed] when he tells them that what they had always thought of as 'a horse' is not what they suppose it to be… but is, on the contrary, a modification of the attributes of God [, and they will] applaud his performance even where they cannot quite follow it. [The cave-dwellers can appreciate the exotic pronouncements of the theorist, as long as he confines those pronouncements to theoretical enterprises.] but if he were to tell them that, in virtue of his more profound understanding of the nature of horses, he is a more expert horse-man, horse-chandler, or stable boy than they (in their ignorance) could ever hope to be, and when it becomes clear that his new learning has lost him the ability to tell one end of a horse from the other… [then] before long the more perceptive of the cave-dwellers [will] begin to suspect that, after all, he [is] not an interesting theorist but a fuddled and pretentious 'theoretician' who should be sent on his travels again, or accommodated in a quiet home (1975, p. 30).

So Oakeshott does not oppose theoretical abstraction at all: he opposes the *misuse* of theoretical abstraction.

We can now see the confusion behind another of Spitz's remarks, when he complains:

> Apparently it is now [in *On Human Conduct*] possible to speak of the character of a modern European state without attending to the concrete manners of behavior in England, or France, or Germany, or any other national system. The differences he so assiduously urged us to note among them—if we were to acquire true political knowledge—are now forgotten; instead, the diverse manners of behavior are blurred in a presumably (but not demonstrated) common manner of behavior (1976, p. 346).

Again, having understood the idea of "dropping anchor," we can see that Spitz's complaint that the important differences between different European nations "are now forgotten" is misguided:

> Oakeshott has not *forgotten* the differences between various countries; no, he has *dropped anchor* at a new location, and is using different *hooks and nets* to catch what may be caught at that location. One can theorize at the level of individual European nations, or at a higher level of abstraction, "the European nation"… but indeed the nations themselves are abstractions, hiding the differences between the English north and south, or Paris and the French Riviera, or Sicily and Tuscany… and even those are abstractions, as Cornwall differs from Essex, and Florence from Sienna. And so on.

Spitz's confusion continues a page later: "An ideal-type does not describe reality; it is an abstraction, an abridgment, or as the earlier Oakeshott would say, an ideological way of looking at reality" (1976, p. 347).

No: an ideology is an abstraction that has forgotten it is an abstraction and instead takes itself to be concrete reality, so that one attempts to find theoretical solutions to problems requiring *phronesis* or *techne*.

Oakeshott's understanding, which he shares with other British Idealists (see, e.g. Collingwood (1924, pp. 159-160), that all abstractions are partial and therefore defective, far from making it "paradoxical" that he is able to employ so many different abstractions, instead is precisely *why* he is able to do so: no abstraction is ultimately completely satisfactory, so there is no reason to cling to one of them while abjuring all others.

CONCLUSION

When put in the context of Oakeshott's understanding of philosophy as experience without reservation or arrest, we can comprehend his repeated positing of new polarities as the free explorations of an intellect not attached to any particular arrest in experience. When examining new poles, he was neither repudiating earlier writings nor merely saying the same thing using different terms. He had simply found new fishing grounds.[3]

NOTES

1   Fuller's list is:
    - Empirical politics—Ideological politics
    - Politics of Skepticism—Politics of Faith
    - Nomocracy—Teleocracy
    - Morality of habit and affection—Morality of reflective thought
    - Civil Association—Enterprise Association

2   In the case of "societas versus universitas" and "civil association versus enterprise association," I think we are justified in considering civil association as a synonym for societas, and enterprise associaiton as a synonym for universitas. Indeed, I would argue, the whole connection between essay two and essay three of On Human Conduct hinges on this equivalence. In fact, late in essay three Oakeshott presents them as equivalent (1975, p. 313). So why, then, in this case did he use two different terms for the poles of his dichotomy? I suggest it was because by discussing civil association versus enterprise association in essay two, he was able to introduce novel terms that he could define himself and which indicated precisely the concepts he had in mind, while in essay three the use of societas and universitas demonstrated that this distinction had an historical background dating back millennia, even though the latter two terms had been used ambiguously.

3   I would like to thank Timothy Fuller and Ferenc Hörcher for their helpful comments .

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