A Conservative Defense of Individuality: Michael Oakeshott's Skeptical Disposition

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Abstract: This paper examines Michael Oakeshott's reading of the inherent conflict found in the modern political condition, focusing on the historical tension between the "morality of individuality" and the "morality of the anti-individual." While the disposition towards individuality intends to protect the unpremeditated, spontaneous order (*cosmos*) which led to its emergence, its counterpart—the anti-individual disposition—fuels the persistent demand for centralized social engineering and purposeful collectivism (*taxis*). By contrasting Oakeshott's skeptical approach with Friedrich Hayek's classical liberalism, this study explores two distinct responses to the conflict threatening civil freedom in the modern West. Ultimately, the paper highlights a critical dilemma in Oakeshott's thought: his rigorous consistency with philosophical skepticism restrains him from offering an axiomatic or programmatic defense of individual liberty, potentially leaving the institutional framework of the modern West vulnerable to collectivist erosion in times of crisis.

Keywords: Michael Oakeshott; Friedrich Hayek; Anti-individual; Individuality; Cosmos; Taxis; Rationalism in Politics; Collectivism; Skepticism.

1. THE MORAL BATTLEGROUND OF THE MODERN WEST

When reflecting on the state of morality and politics in modern Europe, Oakeshott agrees with a broad range of philosophers on one central feature of these societies: the appearance of the free, self-determining individual. The aspiration to personal freedom is taken to be distinctly modern. It began to gather momentum in the late medieval period and, in time, came to be regarded as inseparable from human dignity. Circumstances made possible the emergence of this new disposition, which served as the foundation for a correspondingly new way of thinking about morality and politics.

Early-modern philosophers sought to elaborate a moral defense of the needs of the modern individual. From these efforts arose inquiries into the form of government most suitable to such a person—an undertaking visible in the works of Hobbes, Locke, Adam Smith and many others. Some of these thinkers ground individuality in reason, others in its utilitarian advantages, and still others in divine ordinance. For Oakeshott, however, it suffices to note that this development occurred as a historical fact in Western countries. Historical circumstances, he contends, allowed for the development of this peculiar disposition that valued personal freedom and agency; moral vocabularies and political discourse emerged afterwards. Moral and political arguments for individualism are thus best explained by the appearance of a people who had come to acquire both the capacity and the preference for self-determination.

Oakeshott's point of departure is the emergence of the modern individual, yet, for him, what truly characterizes modern Western societies is not simply the prevalence of a disposition towards individuality, but the persistent tension between two antagonistic moralities: the morality of individuality and the morality of the anti-individual. The defining feature of the modern West is, therefore, the ongoing conflict between those who commend individuality and those who resist it.

The development path for this antagonistic morality was the same; it started with the circumstances that led to the emergence of a particular disposition. The dissolution of the communal and religious ties characteristic of feudal society which permitted the emergence of the modern individual, was sorely regretted by others. The absence of such ties proved dispiriting to the anti-individual; freedom appeared less as a liberation than a burden, leaving them helpless and ill-at-ease. The anti-individual found himself amidst a society that prized individuality, where he could feel his insufficiency only too well. It was among these disoriented figures that support arose for a contrary constellation of values: the morality of anti-individualism.

> The collapse of communal ordering left me, not eager to exploit the opportunities of individuality, but lost, unprotected, leaderless and homeless. I have been deprived of the sense of belonging to a community but I have neither the intellectual nor the material resources to set up on my own. In these circumstances I come to understand the morality of individualism (which I cannot share) as a form of immorality; and I come to understand the view of government that corresponds with it as a false or inadequate view. The only escape seems to be to a morality which recognizes a 'common good' or a 'communal good' to which my activity and that of all others is subordinated, and to an understanding of government as the custodian and promoter of this 'common good' (Oakeshott 1993, p. 90).

This characterization of modernity as a battleground between individualistic and anti-individualistic values is not unique to Oakeshott. Thinkers on both sides of the divide have framed the modern condition in similar terms. The first writers who advocated for individuality belonged to the generation that observed this new disposition toward individuality, sought to understand its morality and then elaborated on the institutional arrangements that would be most appropriate to it. Writing later, the advocates of the anti-individual performed the symmetrical operation for this reactive disposition. In doing so, they gave voice to its resentments and designed a social order that would satisfy its demands. Oakeshott notes that the first elaborated argument from the anti-individual camp was made by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Oakeshott is emphasizing the fact that moral and political theories appear only after historical circumstances have allowed certain personal dispositions to emerge and flourish. His reading of how the modern context came to be is in accordance with his broader critique of rationalism—an approach that consistently points to the limits of reason and the difference between technical knowledge and practical knowledge. The conceptual sequence he proposes unfolds as follows:

Historical circumstances → Prevailing disposition → Dominant moral vocabulary → Formal political theory.

By acknowledging the unpremeditated way by which the modern condition came to be, Oakeshott is also suggesting a way to understand other human endeavors, one that is very similar to the arguments made by classical liberals to defend the value of uncontrolled endeavors, like the free market, for example. It is a recognition of the spontaneous, undesigned events and interactions that will always lead to the emergence of an unforeseen condition. Particularly, in the case of the modern West, it happened to lead to the emergence of the modern individual, who came to recognize that a similar undesigned, "voluntary and unhampered intercourse" arrangement of governance was necessary for his survival. Here we can discern

a first point of contact between the thought of Oakeshott and Hayek, specifically in their assessment of the importance of this undesigned order and the limitations of premeditated planning.

2. THE POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF THE ANTI-INDIVIDUAL

Oakeshott also highlights how uncommon the celebration of individuality is. It was absent in pre-modernity, and even after the development of moral and political thinking to support it, there is no guarantee it shall endure. For him, the valuing of individuality is an acquired—and perhaps only transitory—disposition. He does not claim that individual freedom is inherently superior; rather, when discussing political theories grounded in individualism, he notes that they specify the form of government appropriate "under certain circumstances," implying that different circumstances may call for different procedures.

Here Oakeshott is carefully distancing himself from any teleological or determinist reading of history. The prize of individuality, which was the first distinct modern disposition, is not presented as a higher moral stage, but as a contingent historical achievement. One might, therefore, expect a measure of impartiality in his description of the two sides of the modern conflict. Yet, Oakeshott's language reveals a clear preference for the individualist disposition (and the limited government most suitable to it). In contrast, he characterizes the morality of the anti-individual as motivated by envy and speaks repeatedly of the "insufficiency" of those who fail to become autonomous selves. Nonetheless, he shows sympathy for their helplessness, acknowledging it as a genuine predicament; however, that sympathetic tone vanishes when he moves to describe what happens when this character becomes politically mobilized. A genuine danger emerges when those unable to enjoy the experience of individuality seek relief by surrendering their agency to another.

In addition to the modern individual and the anti-individual, there is a third character at play in the modern arena. Modern circumstances have also produced a distinctive leader-type: the *individual manqué*. This figure can be understood as someone who almost developed the disposition of the modern individual, but not quite—he is a "failed" or "defective" individual. He is not wholly incapable of individuality (and is therefore not identical to the anti-individual), yet he refuses the responsibility it entails. Instead of pursuing satisfaction through self-direction, he seeks it in directing others. This character played a central role in shifting the balance of morality to the side of the displaced anti-individual: "From the frustration of the 'individual manqué' there emerged the militant 'anti-individual,'" whose ultimate aim is to destroy the moral prestige of the individual."

In opposition to freedom and self-determination, the anti-individual morality advances two central ideals: "radical equality" (i.e. equality not merely before the law, but of conduct and outcomes) and "solidarity"—understood in terms of its etymology as something solid (a vision of perfect union within a single, homogeneous whole). At the core of this system of moral values lies the conviction that a universal "common good" is not only known but attainable—and individual freedom must be curtailed whenever it hinders the required uniformity. It is from this worldview that every anti-individualistic (collectivist) political theory ultimately arises.

But the anti-individual cares little about the content of the political program he is offered. His aim is to be relieved from the burden of self-determination; thus, he trades his freedom for security, reveling in a leader who promises direction. The *individual manqué*, in turn, converts the private resentment of the anti-individual into a public doctrine expressly hostile to individuality. In doing so, the *manqué* gathers those with anti-individual dispositions into a singular entity, which now can be more easily identified as the "mass man." The main feature of the mass man is that he willingly surrenders his agency to a leader. The morality of anti-individuality, of a "*solidarité commune*, began to be constructed in the sixteenth century," Oakeshott observes, but it was only later that "a momentous change occurred when the 'anti-individual' recognized himself as the 'mass man', and perceived the power that his numerical superiority gave him."

This assessment of the elevation of the mass man is another clear point of contact between Oakeshott's modern conservatism and the proposals of Friedrich Hayek, who unmistakably identified himself as a clas-

sical liberal—a position he also defined as that of an "Old Whig." Both thinkers identified the disposition of the masses as the fuel for administrative despotism, sharing a profound concern over the weaponization of democracy that could dismantle the rule of law in favor of a teleocracy.

3. CONVERGING EXTREMES: COLLECTIVISM AND TOTALITARIAN LOGIC

In political philosophy, the "horseshoe theory"—originally conceptualized by the French philosopher Jean-Pierre Faye in 1972—suggests that some apparently divergent political doctrines are best understood not as polar opposites on a scale (an image that often comes to mind when we think of the political right and left), but as occupying different parts of the same region on a graph. Political theories that ostensibly portray themselves as adversaries, like Nazism and Communism, can thus be best understood as approaching parallels, in the sense that they bend toward one another like the ends of a horseshoe, ultimately sharing a structural inclination for totalitarianism. From this point of view, their ideological rationales are less important that the centralized structural systems they seek to implement.

This similarity between totalitarian regimes can also be explained as the outcome of the interplay between the *individual manqué* and the mass man, where the yearning for salvation of the latter is the driving force which facilitates the implementation of a totalitarian regime. The recourse to imagery reflects Oakeshott's argument about the inherent sameness of the political theories of collectivism. It also helps to demonstrate that whatever system or theory Oakeshott and Hayek offer as a better alternative, it is unlike what is found in the extremes of the horseshoe. Both of them notoriously recognize that collectivism can indeed take many forms, but its internal logic remains the same: the creation and maintenance of a "heavenly city" in which the conduct of every subject is subordinated to a single "common good." At the heart of every collectivist doctrine lies the belief that we can conceive and implement a perfect model of behavior and social organization—one so superior to all others that it justifies being imposed universally. All human activity must, therefore, be directed toward constructing that ideal.

The list of thinkers who share this premise is long and eclectic: Calvin, Rousseau, Bacon, Descartes, Saint-Simon, Marx, and many others. What connects them is the conviction that a final, optimal state of affairs not only can be identified, but that it can be achieved—if only people would cooperate by surrendering their individual plans. Reflecting on the transition of this argument from a religious to a political stance, Oakeshott remarks that the French philosophes who shaped the Revolution merely replaced the notion of 'sin' with that of 'virtue'—a substitution that, in his own words, amounted to "a distinction without a difference."

In every version, collectivism argues that society must be purposefully organized and subjected to deliberate design. This belief carries the idea that a few minds have discovered hidden knowledge of reality, and that those in possession of this insight should guide society towards a redemptive transformation. The underlying dualism echoes religious views that recognize only one path to salvation. When transferred to politics, it supplies the very language of collectivist theory.

Another important characteristic of collectivism as a political discourse is its claim to be based on demonstrative truths, not axioms. This appeal to scientism is persuasive but doomed to fail. It was the project of Karl Marx to produce a theory that would signal the end of ideologies. Yet, Oakeshott shows that, if anything, it produced a modern and secular form of Gnosticism.

Communism was not the only theory claiming to have the support of scientific evidence; this same pretension was at play in Nazism and Fascism, for example. All three regimes tried to implement a centralized and planned economy, maintained an evolutionary understanding of history, and categorized individuals either by status or race. As Oakeshott observes: "The disappointment of the hope of achieving demonstrative political deliberation with the aid of an 'ideology' composed of explanatory 'laws' of social change or development" indeed can explain "one of the great traumatic experiences of the early twentieth century."

4. BEYOND TOTALITARIAN LOGIC: THE SPONTANEOUS ALTERNATIVE

Also using imagery to illustrate his point, in his postscript to *The Constitution of Liberty*, "Why I Am Not a Conservative", Hayek rejects the notion that classical liberalism is a position in between socialism and conservatism. He suggests that a diagram of the three positions would look more like a triangle, and later he recognizes that conservatism and socialism can unite against the classical liberal in favoring imperialist politics or controlled economic measures because both share the belief that planning is better than not planning. Hayek seems to be describing the same phenomenon as Oakeshott, but using different labels to define it. However, this difference might be more than accidental, and we can see their own arguments about this issue developed in their assessments of those labels.

Oakeshott puts liberalism in the same category as socialism: both belong to a theoretical effort that is ideological and therefore not truly philosophical. "An 'ideology'", he argues, is "a vocabulary of beliefs in terms of which to conduct political discourse," and his evaluation is that none of its variations have successfully emancipated their deliberations from opinion. For him, there is no reason to sustain any guiding principle in the abstract, since principles only come alive in conduct, and conduct is far too complex to be maintained by deliberate rational choice. That's why, ultimately, he believes conservatism, as a disposition, is different from an ideology and, therefore, preferable.

Hayek, in turn, portrays conservatism as the party whose distrust of ideas comes alive in a form of obscurantism and that lacks principles to orient the organization of society, besides the veneration for established authority. Regardless of how accurate these assertions may be, it is true that they do not align with Oakeshott's conservatism. His analyses of the modern condition alone make it evident that Oakeshott did not harbor "the fear of trusting uncontrolled social forces" nor any "fondness for authority" which Hayek accuses conservatives of having.

One key difference between Hayek and Oakeshott lies in their responses to the epistemic limits of the human mind—a starting point upon which both fundamentally agree. Hayek takes this consideration as the basis for promoting guiding principles that reflect this humility, most notably the classical liberal principle of minimizing government interference in individual lives. In contrast, Oakeshott remains silent on any such programmatic defense, suspicious that even a well-intentioned doctrinal defense of liberty carries the seeds of the very rationalism both seek to avoid. Indeed, both are consistent with the labels they take to describe themselves.

Unlike the conservative tradition, the heritage of British classical liberalism produced the most thoroughly articulated arguments for the defense of individual freedom, and many of its premises are still held by those who want to defend it today. But notably, one of these premises is the very same found in Oakeshott's skepticism toward rationalism in politics: the notion that human intention plays a limited role in the shaping of social reality. Put differently, it is the epistemological assertion that social order is an emergent *cosmos*—a complex, undesigned network of human actions—which cannot be reduced to, nor successfully managed by, the deliberate design of a centralized *taxis*.

This premise can work as a theoretical foundation from which to think about social organization. If one accepts that reason is limited, fallible, and only one minor element of human conduct, it follows that one will distrust any project that places excessive weight on deliberate social engineering. If, instead, one assumes that human reason can and should be the primary guide to individual and collective action, it becomes easier to justify redesigning society according to a rational plan. This is the foundational distinction between true individualism and its false counterpart.

The difference might appear self-evident, yet the task of remaining true to principles is made harder by the fact that both sides use the same words to mean different things. Both Oakeshott and Hayek repeatedly point out that terms such as "liberalism," "democracy," "capitalism," and "socialism" have become so ambiguous that they now obstruct rather than advance serious discussion.

Notably, to illustrate the confusion produced by the ambiguity of key political concepts, Oakeshott and Hayek resorted to the same example: the case of John Stuart Mill, who seemingly employed an indi-

vidualist vocabulary, yet reached conclusions typical of collectivism. He began by prizing individual freedom, largely because he shared the theoretical foundation regarding the limitations of the individual intellect thereby deeming that a larger group of people contributing with ideas and experiences would facilitate the betterment of society. Ultimately, this focus on societal betterment led him astray from what constitutes "true individualism." As Oakeshott noted: "The formality of Mill's notion of self-improvement invited the intrusion of notions which would deprive it of its individualist basis," and, "In the final analysis, the individual for Mill is not an end in himself: he is an instrument and a servant of racial progress."

In Oakeshott's view, Mill began by defending individual freedom, but transitioned to a collectivist logic when he assumed that some attitudes were nobler than others. By taking that logical step, Mill inevitably embraced the idea of perfection—the very premise of all collectivist ideologies. By positing that certain behaviors and values are superior and that self-improvement is possible and desirable, he ended up defending collectivism. Hayek would agree with this evaluation, since he understood that "the fundamental attitude of true individualism is one of humility toward the processes by which mankind has achieved things which have not been designed or understood by any individual." To assume that there is a nobler way of doing things is to eliminate this very process.

Both Hayek and Oakeshott agree on the essential flaw of Mill: he fell into the rationalistic trap. However, Hayek is not opposed to upholding the principles of classical liberalism, perhaps because he does not see them as values per se, but as a framework that permits the free expression of different values.

Oakeshott carefully avoids theoretical abstractions that cannot be proven (such as divine will or a fixed definition of human nature). He argues it is unnecessary to elevate individuality to a supreme value or to claim that this disposition best represents human nature in order to develop an adequate political theory for it. The refusal to attribute superior value to individuality (and to the morality and government that flow from it) seems to be tied to his skeptical outlook. As an heir to this tradition, he does not believe humans can propose or execute a perfect model of social organization. It would therefore be inconsistent for him to claim that the entire arrangement built around modern individuality is preferable to other possible arrangements. Indeed, one may argue that Oakeshott's insistence on maintaining an axiomatic neutrality allows him to remain rigorously consistent with the presuppositions of skepticism; yet, it also relativizes the value of the free exercise of individuality, thereby weakening his defense of it.

5. THE LIMITS OF A SKEPTICAL DEFENSE OF INDIVIDUALITY

As shown, Oakeshott relativizes the value of any political theory that promotes the modern individuality as he describes it, stating that they should be seen merely as attempts to elucidate the kind of government appropriate only "under certain circumstances." He even dismisses the efforts of Locke, Kant, Adam Smith, and Burke to demonstrate the fundamental, practical, or sacred importance of individuality. For Oakeshott, the valuing of the free individual is a historical fact that arose due to a series of circumstances but could, by the same token, cease to exist.

> Attempts have been made to show it [politics oriented toward the individual] as something essentially good, or the best possible situation; it has been argued that it represents unalterable 'human nature,' or a divine order, or an unfortunate lapse from God's design. But for the present all we need note is the belief that this situation is our current situation (Oakeshott 1993, p. 49).

When faced with the problem of defining moral values, philosophy cannot rely on theological assumptions, and a philosopher like Oakeshott also does not trust reason to discern good from bad or to orient our behavior. What is left is the empiricism of history. If we grant that reason is not reliable and revelation is impossible, then we can only take our moral clues from experience. Oakeshott's logic works quite well when he uses it to assess the emergence of the modern individual, but it does not seem capable of protecting this character from extinction. In other words, we could say that he produced an excellent descriptive

account of the situation that led to the emergence of individuality, but he fails to prescribe ways by which society can sustain it. Yet, this is not an inadvertent flaw, he believes it is a corruption to suggest "that we have not got to make choices, sometimes on little more than courage of our convictions." For Hayek, it seems, Oakeshott's argument is missing this exact point: the active defense of true individual freedom is the only way to counter those who want to impose a design upon society.

> After the experience of the last thirty years, there is perhaps not much need to emphasize that without principles we drift. The pragmatic attitude which has been dominant during that period, far from increasing our command over developments, has in fact led us to a state of affairs which nobody wanted, and the only result of our disregard of principles seems to be that we are governed by a logic of events which we are vainly attempting to ignore. The question now is not whether we need principles to guide us, but rather whether there still exists a body of principles capable of general application which we could follow if we wished (Hayek 1948, p. 3).

Eventually, the modern individual came to realize that *cosmos* from which he emerged was also essential for him to keep existing. This discovery implies that the spontaneous order must also be actively secured both in the constitutional arrangements and the office of government, if individual freedom is to endure. The modern individual may be a contingent achievement, but its survival may ultimately depend on a more positive defense of the conditions which gave rise to it.

This insistence on remaining true to his skepticism is particularly salient since Oakeshott's own account of modernity shows that even in somewhat stable societies, if the time comes when the majority is composed of anti-individuals who combine to form the masses, there is a great chance the situation will result in a totalitarian government. Indeed, all the collectivist experiments of the twentieth century proved this; it did not matter whether they were labeled as socialist, social democratic, or a people's republic.

Democracy may be recognized as one of the most nondespotic types of government, but its limits have concerned philosophers since antiquity, and the modern situation presents additional concerns. When anti-individual morality becomes dominant, the submissiveness of the mass man means that an authoritarian government no longer needs to impose itself by force; it gains, instead, popular support. Modern collectivism enjoys active mass support for an extensive government. Furthermore, the means available to ensure social conformity have expanded, both through the growth of state apparatuses and, more recently, through technological tools that allow for the unprecedented monitoring and shaping of citizens' habits and choices.

Oakeshott showed how democracy can serve as the vehicle by which collectivism gains control of government, utilizing the desires of the mass man. He noted that the mass man is not a homogeneous group, but a numerical majority composed of a multitude of anti-individuals—those who are willing to be led by the *individual manqué*, caring little for the party's program: "He is dangerous, not on account of his opinions or desires, for he has none: but on account of his submissiveness."

Oakeshott does not elaborate a defense of individualism in the same way as Hayek, but they agree on the diagnosis of its main threats. Like many other philosophers, Oakeshott has abandoned the teleological view of human life. However, since this non-teleological perspective is not universally shared, one must ponder what happens when those who support a teleological, collectivist view take the upper hand. Reflecting on the threat of a collectivist overthrow, Hayek concluded in 1946 that there was a real risk that modern societies would come to praise collectivism due to its appeal to rationality. Oakeshott, on the other hand, wrote in 1961 that there was no reason to believe that the anti-individual morality would inevitably prevail.

6. FINAL REMARKS

Oakeshott's genealogical approach provides a profound framework for understanding how the modern West became the battleground of competing dispositions. Yet, his philosophical premises restrained him from offering a programmatic orientation to deal with a situation where individuality is superseded by the political mobilization of the mass man. Throughout his writings, Oakeshott's preference for the self-determining individual remains clear; however, his commitment to political skepticism prevents him from launching a dogmatic defense of individuality.

To understand this restraint, one must look to Oakeshott's own distinction between the three levels of political analysis. The first level is purely practical, dealing with policy and constitutional modifications. The second level formulates general ideological principles—such as liberalism, socialism, or nationalism—to guide political action. The third, and rarest, level is political philosophy itself, which abandons prescriptive blueprints to ask a more fundamental question: what are we actually doing when we engage in governing? Because Oakeshott views liberalism as a second-level ideology that fails to emancipate itself from mere opinion, he treats it not as a universal philosophical truth, but as a historical artifact.

This insistence on philosophical neutrality is both the structural strength and the existential vulnerability of Oakeshott's thought. By treating individual freedom as a contingent historical achievement rather than an absolute moral imperative, his skepticism successfully avoids the traps of rationalist dogmatism. But this stance inevitably invites the threat of relativism. If moral vocabularies only emerge after historical circumstances change, experience alone cannot inherently generate the defensive tools required to protect the modern individual from extinction. Consequently, a critical dilemma emerges: while Oakeshott rightly warns that enforcing a single ideological doctrine risks overriding the limits of reason, the survival of the modern West may ultimately depend on upholding individual liberty not as a moral value imposed on all citizens, but as a non-negotiable governing principle that secures the framework of coexistence.

It is precisely at this junction that the contrast with Friedrich Hayek becomes most urgent. Where Oakeshott remains silent, suspicious that even a doctrinal defense of liberty carries the seeds of rationalism, Hayek insists that without clear, unyielding governing principles, free societies will inevitably drift toward centralized design. For Hayek, a proactive defense of the institutional framework is the only way to counter those who wish to impose a deliberate *taxis* upon society.

Ultimately, Oakeshott's dual concepts of the individual and the anti-individual serve as a vital diagnostic tool for our contemporary era—a time when criticisms of Western liberal orders increasingly outweigh praise. He accurately alerts us to the fact that when the anti-individual disposition achieves numerical superiority, an authoritarian government no longer needs to rely on external force; it secures total social power through popular, submissive consent. What Oakeshott rejects in Locke, Kant, Smith, and Burke is precisely what is missing from his own reflection: an ultimate, structural explanation of why the *cosmos* that allows for the emergence and maintenance of self-determining individuality must be actively defended against the forces that seek to suppress it. Between the extremes of moral absolutism and helpless relativism, Oakeshott leaves us with a fragile, inherited practice whose survival cannot rely on rational justification alone, but must be sustained through the courageous and continuous exercise of personal freedom.

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