# Oakeshott's Idea of Coherence as an Attempt to Escape Relativism

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## INTRODUCTION

The question of how to evaluate political and moral conduct without recourse to universal, transcendent principles has long occupied the centre of debates in political philosophy. At stake is the very possibility of normative judgment: if there is no fixed standard against which actions may be measured, does the assessment of conduct become merely a matter of preference or cultural circumstance? This challenge is one that emerges precisely in parts of Michael Oakeshott's work.

Oakeshott is widely recognized as one of the most original and penetrating critics of political rationalism in the twentieth century. His essays from the 1940s and 1950s, collected in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, elaborated a sustained critique of the rationalist disposition, that is, the belief that political conduct could be guided by abstract, universal principles derivable from reason alone, independently of experience and context. Against this disposition, Oakeshott developed a conception of human conduct as necessarily embedded within traditions of behaviour: the inherited, tacit, and continuously evolving practices through which individuals learn how to act and evaluate their actions.

Yet this anti-rationalist position raises an immediate and uncomfortable question: if there is no external or universal criterion by which to judge political and moral conduct, does Oakeshott's framework not collapse into a form of moral relativism? If all conduct is conditioned by the tradition or practice in which it is embedded, and if different traditions and practices may legitimately diverge, it would appear that no action could be said to be genuinely better or worse than any other.

The present essay argues that Oakeshott's response to this challenge is both philosophically substantive and systematically grounded in his broader metaphysical commitments. His answer, found in "Political Education" and its appendix "The Pursuit of Intimations", as well as in *On Human Conduct*, turns on the notion of coherence: the idea that conduct is to be judged not by its conformity to an external standard, but by its relationship to the "whole"—to the tradition or practice within which it is enacted. Far from leading to relativism, this coherence criterion provides a genuinely internal and non-arbitrary standard of evaluation, and the appendix shows that unequivocally.

This claim, the essay further argues, cannot be fully understood without reference to Oakeshott's early philosophical work, *Experience and Its Modes*. There, Oakeshott elaborates a coherence theory of truth that is explicitly indebted to the tradition of British Idealism, particularly to the thought of F. H. Bradley. The coherence theory holds that the criterion of truth is not correspondence between mind and an external, independent reality, but rather the internal consistency and unity of a world of ideas understood as a whole. It is this metaphysical framework that, it is contended, underlies and sustains his later political philosophy.

The argument proceeds in four stages. The first section examines Oakeshott's critique of rationalism and his development of the concept of a tradition of behaviour, showing how tradition functions as the necessary medium of human conduct, that is, something that cannot be discarded or transcended without practical incoherence. The second section addresses the apparent problem of relativism directly, analysing Oakeshott's use of coherence as a criterion for evaluating political conduct and his contention that, despite the absence of universal principles, actions can be assessed as more or less appropriate in relation to the tradition to which they belong. The third section examines how this practical criterion is underpinned by the coherence theory of truth developed in *Experience and Its Modes*, tracing the continuity between Oakeshott's metaphysics and his political philosophy. The final section draws these threads together to assess Oakeshott's attempt to occupy a stable position between rationalism and relativism.

By situating Oakeshott's political philosophy within its proper metaphysical context, this essay engages a debate that runs throughout Oakeshott scholarship: whether his later work represents a departure from, or a continuation of, the Idealist commitments of his early philosophy.[1] The present essay does not aim to settle that debate in its general form. Its more specific claim is textual: the appendix to "Political Education," "The Pursuit of Intimations," can be read as direct evidence for the persistence of the coherence criterion into Oakeshott's mature political philosophy; that is, a specific element of Idealism persists. Read alongside *Experience and its Modes*, the appendix shows—in Oakeshott's own terms, rather than by inference from the wider corpus—that the standard by which practical conduct is judged more or less appropriate remains a coherentist one. It is this specific textual continuity, rather than a general thesis about the afterlife of idealism in Oakeshott's thought, that the following sections aim to establish.

## TRADITION OF BEHAVIOUR

Oakeshott became most famous in political thought for his critique of rationalism in politics, conceived in his essays published in the 1940s and 1950s. As described in those essays, the rationalist character was one that emerged in modern times and has for a while dominated the political scene. Briefly stated, the rationalist is characterized by a belief in a 'pure' reason that could guide human conduct, that is, could discern how to act. According to this disposition, one could act without any considerations to their context or environment, and the correct manner of conduct could be achieved by theoretical reasoning alone. That is, the rationalist postulates the superiority of theory over practice.

The main mistake of the rationalist is ignoring the practical dimension in the knowledge involved in any human conduct. He believes that mind can detach itself from the circumstances, discern the best way to act and direct human action. In this process, human mind can establish a manner of conduct that is rational and universal, that is, applicable in any context. But that, for Oakeshott, is an illusion. One can never detach oneself from the circumstances around him, and all conduct depends necessarily on them.

One of his examples of said disposition is the attempt to design a rational and universal dress for girls to wear while riding bicycles. That is, an attempt to formulate by theoretical reason alone the best way to act in a specific practical conduct. The achievement of that enterprise, bloomers, was not in fact a universal dress, but only an appropriate dress for girls riding bicycles in nineteenth-century England. What Oakeshott means with that example is to illustrate that the kind of 'rational' or universal conduct believed by the rationalist is impossible.

Instead, what can truly be called rational conduct, contrary to what the rationalist supposes, does not separate mind and body as if the first thinks before the second acts, as if they were stages in a process. For Oakeshott, both occur at the same time concerning human conduct. Moreover, true rational conduct cannot look to anything external to itself. For Oakeshott: "[a]ll actual conduct, all specific activity springs up within an already existing idiom of activity. And by 'idiom of activity' I mean a knowledge of how to behave appropriately in the circumstances." This "idiom of activity" is what he also terms as tradition in other essays: the necessary medium within which all forms of human conduct take place (1991, p. 121).

Throughout his essays in the 1940s and 1950s, Oakeshott conceives what he means by tradition, or, more specifically, a tradition of behaviour. The concept appears in the volume *Rationalism in Politics* and concerns the habits, customs, and practices that provide the context in which human conduct takes shape. Traditional conduct is, therefore, the antithesis of the conduct of the rationalist, who discards anything that does not conform to his universal and uniform concept of reason.

As previously observed, the rationalist's disposition tends to disregard the practical dimension of political activity, a dimension that is, in fact, essential to such conduct. Truly rational conduct consists of "acting in such a way that the coherence of the idiom of activity to which the conduct belongs is preserved and possibly enhanced" (1991, p. 122). This implies that we do not engage in thought before acting, as if these were distinct, sequential stages, but rather that the process involved in human conduct constitutes a whole. It is worth turning directly to Oakeshott's own words:

> We begin with a knowledge of how to behave—not, of course, a perfect knowledge, or a knowledge which is an endowment from another world, but a knowledge which is coeval with the activity of desiring. And what I have attributed to the activity is a set in a certain direction, a current, something that may be called a prevailing sympathy. The movement in the activity does not spring from the application of some external force, and the direction is not determined by a pre-established end; it is necessary to have recourse to such ideas as these only if we have fallen into the initial error of supposing, first, an activity which begins from rest (a 'knowledge' which springs from sheer ignorance), and secondly, an activity with no direction in particular (a 'knowledge' in which truth and error, or right and wrong, are still waiting to be distinguished) (1991, p. 127).

Tradition is not something rigid and fixed that we must either follow or discard. It is the necessary medium in which all human activity moves. It is not something that can be discarded or neglected; it is part of human conduct itself. The rationalist, for example, fails to perceive this fluid character of tradition and readily equates it with something "changeless". This misconception not only leads the rationalist to treat any tradition of ideas as something authoritarian requiring submission, but also exposes a failure to understand that the identity of a tradition, and of other historical products, does not have a rigid core nor a perennial substance. In Oakeshott's terms:

> [A tradition of behavior] is neither fixed nor finished; it has no changeless centre to which understanding can anchor itself; there is no sovereign purpose to be perceived or invariable direction to be detected; there is no model to be copied, idea to be realized, or rule to be followed. Some parts of it may change more slowly than others, but none is immune from change. Everything is temporary (1991, p. 67).

In 1965, Oakeshott defended his positions against criticisms from professor D.D. Raphael, asserting that in every response to a political situation, we find a variety of beliefs that can be explored. The aggregate of these beliefs, which often point in distinct or even opposing directions, is precisely what constitutes tradition. In his words:

> I called them a 'tradition', meaning to indicate that these beliefs were not a self-consistent set of 'principles', that although they might be expected to be relatively stable they were not incapable of change, that they were not axioms but maxims which we believed ourselves to have learnt from experience, and that they did not all appear before us in the form of propositions but often in institutions and practices (1965, p. 90).

Contrary to rationalist's belief, an individual is never entirely "self-made"; rather, there lies a societal inheritance behind his successes and achievements. Theorems and maxims that can be abstracted from human conduct are mere abbreviations, and cannot have an independent life, much less guide human action.

The concept of tradition developed by Oakeshott in the 1940s and 1950s persists into his later work, albeit refined and employed with a different vocabulary. What Oakeshott defined as tradition appears in *On Human Conduct* as 'practice', and this equivalence becomes evident from the author's description of the term.[2]

A practice may be identified as a set of considerations, manners, uses, observances, customs, standards, canon's maxims, principles, rules, and offices specifying useful procedures or denoting obligations or duties which relate to human actions and utterances. It is a prudential or a moral adverbial qualification of choices and performances, more or less complicated, in which conduct is understood in terms of a procedure (2003, p. 55).

Broadly speaking, a practice posits a contextual condition in human conduct. Practices are diverse and vary not only in content but also in form. A practice may take the form of a protocol or even a "way of life"; it may crystallize into an institution or remain more flexible. Practices may also overlap, and a single performance can be subject to several distinct practices. As an example of such overlap, Oakeshott notes that 'judging' and 'advocating' appear together within the practice of a court of law (2003, p. 56).

All human relationships, such as those between parents and children, neighbors, employer and employee, teacher and student, doctor and patient, partners, colleagues, husband and wife, or speakers of the same language, constitute a participation in a practice that entails its own specific conventions and rules of conduct. A practice represents the condition to which participants subscribe to when engaging with one another in a given situation. It is, therefore, a medium or context within which human action is situated.

However, this formulation does not imply that practice is an immutable doctrine; indeed, Oakeshott is emphatic in stating that a practice is not prescriptive, but rather something to which the agent subscribes to. Practice is not a fixed entity and is always susceptible to transformation. No practice can be "insulated from circumstances" to such an extent that it cannot be modified (2003, p. 56). All practices are "subjects to historic vicissitudes and local variations, and none is capable of being participated in except by learning to do so" (2003, p. 57).

Being non-prescriptive implies that a practice is not a set of rules to be followed, nor does it tell an individual how to act; rather, it merely delimits the conditions to which a choice must subscribe. "A rule (and a fortiori something less exacting, like a maxim) can never tell a performer what choice he shall make; it announces only conditions to be subscribed to in making choices." In a metaphorical formulation, it is "an instrument to be played upon, not a tune to be played." With this definition, it begins to become evident that the concept of practice has supplanted that of tradition. Both terms are employed by Oakeshott at different stages of his work to designate the same thing: the medium or context in which a human activity is embedded and to which it must be subscribed (2003, p. 58).

Regarding moral practice specifically, Oakeshott compares it to a vernacular language, because it does not formulate precepts for human conduct. Like a language, it provides the conditions to which the agent must subscribe, but it imposes no substantive action. A speaker of a language must formally subscribe to certain rules and must learn them in order to communicate satisfactorily with another speaker of the same language. Yet the content of speech is not determined by the rules that constitute the language, just as the content of moral conduct (the specific action) is not defined by the practice itself, but rather by usage and by the choices the agent makes. And precisely because it does not prescribe, there is room within moral conduct for internal variety—and even for individual, idiosyncratic idioms or styles. Just like a tradition, a moral practice

> … is never fixed or finished, but (like other languages) it has a settled character in terms of which it responds to the linguistic inventions, the enterprises, the fortunes, the waywardness, the censoriousness, and sometimes the ridicule of those who speak it. It is its vicissitudes, and its virtue is to be a living, vulgar language articulating relationships, responsibilities, duties, etc., recognizable by its speakers as reflections of what, on earth, they have come to understand themselves to be. It is acknowledged by those who speak it, not because a failure to do so is liable to attract a penalty or because it is recognizably advantageous to do so, but because they have been educated in its use and because in speaking it they re-enact it for themselves. It is learned only in being used (2003, pp. 63-64).

Just as there exists a variety of traditions, so too is there a variety of practices and moralities. There is a plurality of practices, just as there is a plurality of languages in the world, and such variety does not constitute a deviation from a single correct morality.

> That there should be many such languages in the world, some perhaps with familial likenesses in terms of which there may be profitable exchange of expressions, is intrinsic to their character. This plurality cannot be resolved by being understood as so many contingent and regrettable divergencies from a fancied perfect and universal language of moral intercourse (a law of God, a utilitarian 'critical' morality, or a so-called 'rational morality'). But it is hardly surprising that such a resolution should have been attempted: human beings are apt to be disconcerted unless they feel themselves to be upheld by something more substantial than the emanations of their own contingent imaginations. This unresolved plurality teases the monistic yearnings of the muddled theorist, it vexes a moralist with ecumenical leanings, and it may disconcert an unfortunate who, having 'lost' his morality (as others have been known to 'lose' their faith), must set about constructing one for himself and is looking for uncontaminated 'rational' principles out of which to make it (2003, pp. 80-81).

This passage illustrates not only the plurality of human moral conduct and the rejection of a universal standard that all must follow, but also points to the anxiety, common to the human condition, of feeling oneself moving across terrain that is excessively fluid and uncertain. This restlessness fosters the conception of a rational construct in an attempt to endow human action with solidity or certainty. In other words, it is at this point that a rationalist disposition emerges, not merely regarding morality, but regarding human conduct in general.

Much like human conduct in general, moral practice can be distilled into rules, moral principles, dogmas, or maxims by figures such as 'moralists,' 'dictionary makers', or even moral philosophers. Yet these summaries or reductions are not independent; they are "abstractions which derive their authority from the practice itself." Once again, "[t]hey are not commands to be obeyed but relatively precise considerations to be subscribed to. They are used in conduct, not applied to conduct; and the moral reflection in which they maybe brought to bear upon choosing is deliberative, not demonstrative" (2003, p. 68). And, in a metaphorical, nautical language, quite to Oakeshott's taste, such rules are not a criterion, but rather "prevailing winds which agents should take account of in sailing their several courses" (2003, p. 70).

Just in the same way as Oakeshott describes tradition, a practice is not something that can be disposed of. There is no "artless conduct", meaning that practice is a necessary medium in which all human actions must be subscribed to. Again, just as an "utterance in no language in particular" is impossible, so is conduct unconditioned by practice or tradition (2003, p. 86).[3]

Moral language, like other practices, is a creation of the speakers themselves, rather than of 'grammarians' or the aforementioned 'moralists' and 'dictionary makers'. To fail to grasp that abstract principles are merely abbreviations of practice is to commit the rationalist's error of conflating the

categories of human understanding. Yet, despite being in a state of constant creation and not deriving from external principles, actions embedded within a practice may meet with varying degrees of success. Much like any vernacular language, it is permeated by vicissitudes; it may be spoken with greater or lesser propriety and, at times, even become corrupted. Oakeshott's contextualism regarding practice does not entail a relativism in which all conduct holds equal value. The fact that no single 'correct' way of acting exists does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that no inappropriate ways exist either.

In practice, and in conduct more generally, therefore, there is no exterior criterion or standard to which an action must conform. The authority of any human conduct resides not in some independent scale, general measure, or entity external to itself, but rather in its own execution. In other words, human actions are more or less appropriate based on their internal coherence, rather than on their correspondence to an external standard.

## RELATIVISM?

Oakeshott's conception of tradition and practice establishes that there is no exterior standard by which human conduct can be judged. All actions are informed necessarily by their context or their environment, which means their specific content may vary. A practice is something that an individual subscribes to, not something that prescribes a mode of conduct. Without a transcendent standard, one could ask if Oakeshott's position boils down to a form of relativism in which there is no right or wrong conduct. In the end, how can one judge human conduct or separate between good and bad conduct?

Oakeshott's concept of tradition and practice can be perceived as contextualist, that is, a human action or performance is always informed by some conditions which are constantly changing. He himself acknowledges that the understanding of human conduct and relations is "contextual", meaning that they are not the study of invariable laws and organic processes (2003, p. 105).

In an appendix to the essay "Political Education", called "The Pursuit of Intimations", Oakeshott gives a direct answer to those who state that there is no "standard or criterion for distinguishing between good and bad political projects or for deciding to do one thing rather than another." He simply recalls a specific passage from the essay which says that in political conduct "everything figures, not with what stands next to it, but with the whole." In other words, the criterion of the political, or in fact, any kind of practice, is a relationship of that action to the whole (1991, pp. 61, 67).

The temporary and flexible nature of a tradition creates an apparent impasse in obtaining this knowledge. Oakeshott responds that, despite being elusive, the tradition of behavior has a continuity, that its parts do not all change at the same time, and that its changes are within its potentialities. This gives a tradition its continuity and identity. Although everything in it is "temporary," "nothing is arbitrary" (1991, p. 61).

A tradition is flexible and malleable, but even so, it preserves its identity. Constant change and the absence of a rigid and fixed core do not prevent the recognition of a tradition that endures over time. "[I]t belongs to the nature of a tradition to tolerate and unite an internal variety, not insisting upon conformity to a single character, and because, further, it has the ability to change without losing its identity" (1991, p. 227).

In the same text in which he explores the tradition of behavior as the epistemic foundation of politics, Oakeshott highlights that political arrangements (its customs, institutions, laws, and so forth) are simultaneously coherent and incoherent. Furthermore, in subsequent passages, he argues that the codification of certain rights, such as women's enfranchisement, did not stem from the formulation of abstract principles, but rather from an incoherence between what women already enjoyed and the legal recognition of those rights. For Oakeshott, women were already exercising rights and duties, even if not yet codified in law, thereby implying the precedence of conduct over theoretical formulation (1991, p.57).

He also points to the idea of coherence in a passage (already mentioned above) from "Rational Conduct", where it is stated that a truly rational conduct is one that is coherent with the idiom of activity in

which such conduct belongs, and in "Political Education" where he establishes that what is learned in it is a "concrete, coherent manner of living in all its intricateness" (1991, p. 62).

These formulations not only reestablish the necessity of a medium, or a tradition, in which an action is embedded, but also provide a way to judge good and bad conduct, therefore attempting to escape a relativism in which all actions would be equally valid. Not only using the term 'coherence', but also referencing the 'whole', Oakeshott alludes to earlier philosophical positions on the notion of coherence indebted to British Idealism. It is the coherence criterion of truth, metaphysically exposed in *Experience and its Modes*, that reappears now in the sphere of practical activity.

## COHERENCE THEORY AND EXPERIENCE AND ITS MODES

The coherence theory of truth is not original to Oakeshott, and to illustrate what it says other authors will be briefly used. Nevertheless what is fundamental is Oakeshott's position on that, especially as established in *Experience and its Modes*, to show that his theory of a tradition of behaviour is indebted to the notion of coherence and that it is precisely the way in which he avoids rationalism without falling into relativism.

The coherence theory of truth is a metaphysical concept inherited by Oakeshott from British Idealism, and it constitutes a rejection of the correspondence criterion, according to which the human mind must correspond to an object outside of it. The correspondence theory asserts that there exist facts external to human experience and independent of it. A theory or hypothesis is deemed true if it corresponds to these facts, that is, if the mind corresponds to the data of external reality. Thus, the correspondence thesis implies a distinction between theory, which resides within the human mind, and fact, which lies external to it.

What the coherence criterion seeks to address is the access to external facts that the correspondence criterion asserts. Proponents of the latter argue that such immediate access is impossible and contact with reality, they contend, is established through human experience—and it is this experience that should serve to test whether a theory aligns with reality. However, proponents of the coherence criterion argue that an experience (such as feelings or perceptions) must undergo a transformation if it is to serve as a test for theories; that is, it must be interpreted. The mere act of interpreting an experience transforms it into another theory. Consequently, a theory relies for its validation upon another theory, or, at the very least, upon another judgment (Walsh 1967).

In British Idealism, there is no reality external to conscious experience and, therefore, there is nothing to which the mind must conform or adapt itself. In the work of Bradley, according to a commentator, for instance, "the nature of truth cannot be associated with a fixed category established 'externally' and indifferent to the complex context of a particular world of ideas. In a sense, truth is an 'internal quality' in a permanent process of correction and validation" (Almeida 2019, pp. 27-28).

Coherence implies that the validation of any idea depends on its relationship with other ideas and with the whole. It is the congruity of an idea with the 'world', or the totality of experience, that authenticates its veracity. There is a relational character at play, wherein each fact relates not merely to itself as a separate element, but also to other facts and to the totality. According to coherence theory, "[n]o actual statement we make, it is argued, is made entirely in isolation: they all depend on certain presuppositions or conditions, and are made against a background of these" (Walsh 1967, p. 76).

It is fruitful to turn directly to Bradley, one of Oakeshott's major early influences, for whom there is no correspondence between truth and a solid datum, unlike for the realists and empiricists whom the idealists sought to combat.

In *Appearance and Reality,* in 1893, Bradley does not use the word of coherence many times, but he does state briefly that anything is "coherent and wide—the more fully they realize the idea of system—so much the more at once they are real and true." Despite the difference in vocabulary, it is safe to say that it is what he has in mind when it is claimed that "[t]ruth must exhibit the mark of internal harmony, or, again, the mark of expansion and all-inclusiveness" (1962a, pp. 321, 477).

Coherence is better stated in Bradley's *Essays on Truth and Reality*, first released in 1914, where it is put together with 'comprehensiveness' as the two aspects of the whole, which means that they serve as criteria for truth.

> Truth is an ideal expression of the Universe, at once coherent and comprehensive. It must not conflict with itself, and there must be no suggestion which fails to fall inside it. Perfect truth in short must realize the idea of a systematic whole. And such a whole, … possessed essentially the two characters of coherence and comprehensiveness (1962b, p. 223).

Truth, therefore, is found in the coherence of the whole. "Individual facts and judgments are true (or real) only insofar as they belong to a larger system or whole" (Franco 1990, p. 26). The coherence theory does not dismiss the necessity of a 'fact', but it does not locate it outside human experience. "A fact for it is not something which exists whether or not anybody takes any notice of it; it is rather the conclusion of a process of thinking." Facts are not, therefore, apprehended, but established (Walsh 1967, p. 77).

In *Experience and its Modes*, Oakeshott also advocates the idea of coherence as a criterion of truth, since there are no objects apart from experience to which the human mind must conform. Experience begins with ideas, and, more specifically, within a world of ideas. The expression "world of ideas" reveals that experience does not begin with a mere cluster, but rather with a system, which implies that every idea relates to the whole, and not merely to a neighboring idea. From this premise emerges the concept of coherence, which entails a relational unity among ideas themselves and with the whole. "The unity of a world of ideas lies in its coherence, not in its conformity to or agreement with any one fixed idea. It is neither 'in' nor 'outside' its constituents, but is the character of its constituents in so far as they are satisfactory in experience" (2002, p. 33).

Facts, for Oakeshott, are not a solid material, a 'datum', waiting to be apprehended. Facts depend on thought and do not exist in isolation. In other words, a fact is the product of judgment and it "is not what is given, it is what is achieved in experience. Facts are never merely observed, remembered or combined; they are always made" (2002, p. 42).

The path to knowledge is experience becoming progressively more coherent than it was before, and not a simple accumulation of data, since there is no sensible data external to experience itself. "Knowledge, in the view I have suggested, is not the extension of a mere series, or the enlargement of a mere collection of ideas; it is the achievement of the coherence of a given world or system of ideas by the pursuit of the implications of that world" (2002, p. 41).

Oakeshott's political philosophy, and the political concepts he develops, are informed by his overall philosophical thought.[4] That is true as regards the concept of tradition and practice, which resonate with the coherence theory of truth, elaborated in his metaphysics. Obviously enough, they both characterize distinct areas of human understanding, and Oakeshott himself maintains a firm separation between theory and practice.

Moreover, it has been remarked by many that Oakeshott moves away from his earlier Idealism and any notion of a possibility of final or absolute knowledge. That is the case, for example in the work of Nardin (2001), who points out that Oakeshott came to consider the absolute as misleading and the work of Gerencser (2000), who sees the elements of 'absolute idealism' receding in favour of the 'sceptical idealism' in Oakeshott's mature works.[5]

However, the idea that a fact or truth metaphysically speaking could only be achieved in terms of the whole is analogically identical with the contention that a practice considered good is one that coheres with the tradition in which it is inserted. In both cases, the criterion is the relation to the whole, not some external standard, even though that does not mean that final coherence is ever achieved. In fact, Oakeshott denies that possibility when it is stated that a practice is always changing without transforming itself into something else.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis has sought to demonstrate that Michael Oakeshott's political philosophy, far from collapsing into moral relativism, is sustained by a coherent and philosophically grounded criterion of evaluation. The key to this demonstration lies in recognising the continuity between his metaphysical commitments, as formulated in *Experience and Its Modes*, and the practical philosophy he develops in his later essays and in *On Human Conduct*. The concept of coherence, operative in both registers, provides Oakeshott with an internal standard that is neither transcendent nor arbitrary.

As the first section of this essay established, Oakeshott's critique of rationalism is not a rejection of reason as such, but a rejection of a particular and misleading conception of reason, one that supposes the mind can abstract itself from its circumstances and devise universal principles of conduct applicable to any context. Against this, Oakeshott insists that all human action is necessarily embedded within a tradition of behaviour, or, in the vocabulary of his later work, within a practice. Tradition and practice are not constraints upon freedom or reason, but the very medium through which both become possible.

The problem this position generates was shown to be genuine. If conduct is always conditioned by its context, and if contexts legitimately differ, the question of how to distinguish between better and worse courses of action becomes pressing. Oakeshott's direct response, located in "Political Education" and its appendix, is that the standard of evaluation is a relationship to the "whole": an action is well or poorly performed not according to an external criterion, but according to its coherence with the tradition in which it is embedded. The fact that a tradition is always changing does not render this standard illusory, because change occurs within the potentialities of the tradition itself, it is internally constrained rather than arbitrary.

The metaphysical underpinning of this position, traced in the third section, reveals that the appeal to coherence is not an *ad hoc* political move but the expression of a systematic philosophical commitment. In *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott rejects the correspondence theory of truth (the view that thought must conform to a reality external to experience) and proposes instead that the criterion of truth is the coherence of a world of ideas understood as a whole. Each idea or judgment is validated not by its correspondence to an external datum, but by its consistency and integration within the larger system of experience. The parallel with his political philosophy is not incidental: in both cases, the standard of judgment is internal, relational, and oriented toward the whole.

It is important to acknowledge the limits of the claim being advanced. Oakeshott does not offer an algorithm for determining when a specific political action coheres with its tradition, nor does he suppose that the "whole" is ever fully or transparently available to the political actor. The tradition is, by definition, only partially articulable, and the judgment required to navigate it is irreducibly practical. This is, however, a feature rather than a flaw of his position: the impossibility of reducing practical wisdom to a technical procedure is precisely the lesson that his critique of rationalism is designed to teach. The coherence criterion does not aspire to algorithmic precision but to the kind of situated, cultivated judgment that Oakeshott consistently valorises.

What Oakeshott attempts, then, is a philosophically coherent position between two mirror-image errors. The rationalist errs by supposing that practice can be guided by theory formulated in abstraction from experience; the relativist errs by supposing that the absence of such theory entails the absence of any normative standard whatsoever. Oakeshott's response is that the standard is immanent in practice itself, not imposed upon it from without, but discovered and refined from within, through the exercise of what could be put as practical knowledge. Both the rationalist and the relativist, in this respect, share the mistaken assumption that a genuine standard must be external and universal; Oakeshott's contribution is to show that this assumption is itself a product of the rationalist disposition.

The systematic unity of Oakeshott's thought, from his early Idealist metaphysics to his mature political philosophy, remains a subject of debate. The present essay has argued that the coherence theory of truth provides a thread of continuity that connects these apparently distinct phases of his intellectual career.

In both registers, the fundamental move is the same: the rejection of any external, correspondence-based standard in favour of an internal, relational criterion oriented toward the whole. It is this philosophical structure, rather than any particular political commitment, that constitutes Oakeshott's most durable contribution to the problem of normative judgment. The significance of his position lies not in its conclusions about specific political arrangements, but in its demonstration that the absence of universal principles need not entail the absence of standards altogether. Coherence, properly understood, is itself a form of criterion, one that is irreducibly practical, historically situated, and resistant to the reductions of both dogmatism and relativism.

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## NOTES

1 It is impossible to make an exhaustive list of all the commentators' positions within this debate. Among the ones who see continuity are Boucher 2012; Franco 1990; Greenleaf 1966 and Tseng 2003. The best example of a discontinuity might be Gerencser 2000. According to Gerencser, although Oakeshott did not fully depart from Idealism, certain commitments, such as the notion of the Absolute, were abandoned in his later works.

2 Others also have pointed out that 'practice' in *On Human Conduct* is a reworking of 'tradition' as it appears in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, such as Mitchell 2019 and Tseng 2003. This view is, therefore, not new, but it needs to be restated for the present essay's claim.

3 Because of this necessary aspect of tradition and practice, some have contrasted Oakeshott's formulation with Burke's, according to which a tradition could be neglected if a person chooses to do so (see Mitchell 2019).

4 As demonstrated in detail by Nardin 2001 and Isaacs 2006.

5 The position that Oakeshott abandoned the notion of a possibility of absolute knowledge is a point of agreement between the commentators and it is not intended here to give an exhaustive list of examples.