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Michael Oakeshott's Political Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper outlines the political theory of the British philosopher, Michael Oakeshott. It is shown that for Oakeshott the office of political activity is to facilitate the social practice of humans, where practice is the endeavour of persons to bring coherence to their experience through acting upon the world. It is the particular function of politics to reflect upon, and amend, the rules governing the conduct of civil society – which Oakeshott designates as Civil Association. A Civil Association is the set of rules, formal and informal, regulating the interaction of humans within legal jurisdictions (states). Civil Associations, and the rules which regulate them, evolve over time and have no explicit purpose or goal; they operate, rather, to permit individuals to pursue their goals with the minimum impact on the ability of others to pursue theirs. The remit of politics is accordingly limited, being to oversee the rules of Civil Association so as to ensure that individuals are indeed able to cooperate freely in the pursuit of their own satisfactions. Politics, and the government it informs, transgress their proper limits when they seek to control the actions of individuals with a view to pursuing some posited good. Instrumental policies to achieve determined ends are characteristic of what Oakeshott calls Enterprise Associations, such as businesses, clubs, and pressure groups. Enterprise Associations are a key feature of pluralist and open Civil Associations, but it is, for Oakeshott, a cardinal and regrettable error to treat Civil Association as if it were an Enterprise Association, since while an individual who disagrees with the aims of an Enterprise Association is free not to join it, an individual who disagrees with the goals of a Civil Association is not able to leave it – since membership of Civil Association is compulsory within a given jurisdiction. Hence, Oakeshott argues that attempts to conduct Civil Associations according to the principles of Enterprise Association tend always towards coercion and tyranny. The chief factor encouraging politicians to confuse Civil for Enterprise Associations has been the cult of Rationalism – a flawed mode of thinking which, by abstracting the theory of action from the practical knowledge yielded by action itself, leads to a failure to understand

reality and a promotion of ideological dogmas. Oakeshott's personal politics are held to be broadly liberal, since he attaches value to core liberal values such as the rule of law, individualism, personal freedom, and *laissez-faire* economics. But his emphasis upon the importance of traditional practice as a means to uphold these values allies him with pragmatic conservatism. In conclusion it is argued that Oakeshott's political philosophy in effect represents a conceptual statement of the historical tradition of British political practice – thereby confirming his own dictum that philosophy leaves the world unchanged.

Michael Oakeshott referred to politics as a second-level activity, in the sense that it is not something humans engage in for itself, but as a necessary condition for their pursuit of other ends. Yet, in terms of his own thinking, it is helpful to place it at the third-level. In the first place stands Philosophy. Philosophy is the pursuit of coherent, concrete, experience – where experience is the world of ideas that we inhabit. When we engage directly with the world of experience, not mediating our approach to experience through assumptions and guiding theory, and when we seek to establish coherent relationships between ideas in a whole, then we are engaged in Philosophy. Philosophy is the process of comprehending and understanding reality as it is: reality as the concrete universal – a system of interconnected experiences which together constitute the Absolute.¹ Practice is a second-level activity. Practice is the act of engaging with the world of experience in an attempt to make it conform more closely to our desires. It is the attempt, through action, to bring what *is* into conformity with what *ought to be*. 'What it attempts', says Oakeshott, 'is the reconciliation of "what is here and now" and "what ought to be"'. Its business is to realize in the world of practical fact what exists and is already real in the world of value.'² All Practice takes this form, from tidying the house to baking a cake to building a bridge. Practice, like Philosophy, is a way of approaching experience and seeks to make experience more coherent, but it is less concrete and real than Philosophy since it views experience through the prism of *desire* – in terms of the will and its objectives. Hence it is what Oakeshott calls a *mode* of experience, that is to say, an abstraction from experience, regarding things not as they are but in terms of their function as means towards ends. Being an abstraction from reality, the practical mode is inherently incoherent and unstable. Every attempt to make the world conform to our desires by action ultimately fails – as anyone who has tidied their home can testify. No sooner has practice brought wish and reality into conformity in one place than a disparity emerges somewhere else. Our

¹ C.f. P. Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (1990), p. 19. This conception of Philosophy as 'experience without reservation or presupposition' was expounded by Oakeshott in his *Experience and Its Modes* (1933).

² Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 290.

desires, themselves, are never satiated: once one desire is realised another invariably takes its place. And if practice ever did bring all experience into conformity with our wished-for state of affairs then it would abolish the very grounds for its existence.¹ Hence practice is never ending and is the basic mode of everyday life.

Politics is, then, a third-level activity, being a sub-set of Practical activity and existing to serve the ends of Practice. As Oakeshott defines it, politics 'is the activity of overseeing the general rules of conduct within which people can pursue their own particular activities with the minimum of fuss and inconvenience to others.'² It exists to facilitate and oversee the practical activities of everyday life. Political activity is not an end in itself; it is a means to furthering the practice of a people, and the practice of a people is a way of life.

Thus, for Oakeshott, politics is an important but subordinate and limited type of practice. Its role is to act as a handmaiden or support to a way of life, and it is successful when he helps to promote the flourishing of a way of life, and it is unsuccessful in so far as it inhibits or distorts it.

Civil Association and the Practice of Politics

How should the practice of politics be approached? The essential point is that politics, and thinking about politics, should be approached through human social practice, not independent of it. Oakeshott rejects any attempt to occupy a position *outside* of concrete experience. Such an attempt is absurd and frankly impossible. Remember, for Oakeshott concrete experience is reality. It is the one and only world humans inhabit. There is, and can be, no point outside of experience. When people seek to transcend experience in their thinking about anything, including politics, what they are really doing is *abstracting from experience* – diluting it, simplifying it, selecting some aspects and discarding others, and are thereby moving away from reality. A political theory divorced from the reality of a way of life is unreal and tends towards misguided and erroneous thinking about reality. This has been a recurring weakness of political thinking since Plato.

So where should politics start from? It should commence with the actual forms of association existing among people when they interact in the everyday business of life. When people act in the social sphere they do so according to laws, rules, customs, conventions, and moralities which regulate how they are expected to behave. All individuals enter from birth the stream of social life and learn how to fit in and behave appropriately. Oakeshott calls this rule-based pattern of interaction *Civil Association* (or, in a reference to Roman law, *societas*). For any given legally organized society it is the generally acknowledged system of rules which structure the terms upon which people are to act towards each other. These rules, explicit or implicit, govern how

¹ Franco, *Political Philosophy*, p. 63.

² M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (1962), p. 184.

people interact and get on with practical business of life – but they do not determine it. The rules, laws, customs, and conventions of social interaction are not formulated to achieve some single substantive end. They are rather the terms upon which the individuals making up a society interact to achieve their own, personal, ends. Hence Oakeshott defines Civil Association as a non-instrumental, non-purposive practice. The rules of Civil Association, says Nardin, are a ‘non-instrumental constraint on conduct rather than an instrument of policy ...’¹ They are rather like the rules implicit in the use of language. To speak and make ourselves understood we must follow the rules of a language, but those rules do not determine which words we must use and when: it is ‘an instrument to be played upon, not a tune to be played’.² Among the rules guiding social practice are those embodied in formal laws, the self-contained system of which Oakeshott designates as the *lex*, and the *lex* for any given area of jurisdiction is created and upheld by the state, which Oakeshott calls the *civitas*. The state legislates for laws, amends or abolishes them, oversees the court system which adjudicates upon their application, and organises punishment when they are not followed. Compliance with the laws of Civil Association is compulsory within any given political community and the rules laid down by the state are seen as possessing Authority and are obligatory – whether we agree with them or not, or indeed whether we actually follow them or not. We do not choose to join such a Civil Association and we cannot, if we remain within a given jurisdiction, leave it. It is simply there. All of us gradually learn how to operate within it from childhood, being inducted into the rules of the game – what is permissible and what is not. It is historically given to us as a tradition of practice. It is, quite simply, the flow of orderly, rule-based, social life which is given to us all and within which we each of us make our own individual way. Civil Association has no goal or fixed end-point. Like nature, it has evolved over time and will continue to evolve after us in ways which no one can know. It is flexible and open, emerging out of the individual actions of the millions of people who contribute to its operation every day.

Politics, in this context, Oakeshott defines as the activity of reflecting upon the formal rules of Civil Association and the methods of applying, administering, and enforcing them (the total together of rules and the system of upholding them being designated the *respublica*) and considering their desirability and grounds for amendment.³ It is a limited and narrow endeavour, not concerned with utopias of the imagination, or the maximisation of human happiness, or ‘the mysteries of human destiny’, or the aspirations of human beings; its remit is rather to reflect upon ‘a practice of just conduct and upon the conditions which should be required to be acknowledged and subscribed to under threat of civil penalty or sentence of civil disability.’ To engage in politics is to reflect upon the *respublica* of laws and systems

¹ T. Nardin, ‘Michael Oakeshott: Neither Liberal nor Conservative’, in T. Nardin (ed.), *Michael Oakeshott’s Cold War Liberalism* (2015), p. 27.

² M. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (1975), p. 58.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

that is the essence of Civil Association and to suggest changes to that system which are considered desirable. As Oakeshott formally defines it:

Politics, then, is concerned with an imagined and wished-for condition of *respublica*, a condition in some respect different from its current condition and alleged to be more desirable. It is deliberation designed to specify and find reasons for, utterance designed to recommend and give reasons for, and action designed to promote the change from one to the other.¹

It is defined by its ‘focus of attention and ... subject of discourse’, being chiefly engaged with holding up to inspection a particular rule that is constitutive of the Civil Association and ‘considering more desirable alternatives to it and recommending and promoting the change from what is to the alleged more desirable condition.’² By desirable rules Oakeshott has in mind rules guided by the wish to uphold the conditions for the effective functioning of Civil Association – above all, the maintenance of laws ensuring for each individual liberty of action and preventing one individual dominating and denying the freedom of another. Politics is, in short, a contingent, pragmatic and piecemeal activity that starts from, and emerges out of, the historically evolved practice of civil society and is confined to amending the terms of the system of rules that constitute a given Civil Association in a way that admits of no final stopping place. And really, since Civil Association evolves over time, with no set purpose or end, political action cannot be a product of deductive reasoning or subject to permanent principles or a programme for achieving some goal, and neither can it be about enforcing some beliefs or moral values, since Civil Association is about rules not beliefs or theorems as such. All politics can legitimately do is seek to uphold and refine the formal rules governing the mechanism of a Civil Association at any given point in time.³ ‘Given’, says Franco, ‘that the subject in politics is of such a contingent and circumstantial character, the considerations in terms of which innovation and change are deliberated cannot help but be contingent and circumstantial also.’⁴

Enterprise Association

But Civil Association is not the only type of human association. An alternative form identified by Oakeshott is Enterprise Association (or *universitas*). Whereas Civil Association is something people join out of compulsion (a citizen of a state cannot choose not to be a member of that state – even by living off-grid in the woods) and is essentially a rule and convention-based system of interaction with no explicit purpose, Enterprise Associations exist to pursue some particular end, their individual members working together for some common purpose. Universities, sports clubs, business

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 164-65.

³ C.f. Nardin, ‘Michael Oakeshott: Neither Liberal nor Conservative’, pp. 30-31.

⁴ Franco, *Political Philosophy*, p. 195.

organisations, political parties, churches – all are examples of Enterprise Associations. Such Associations are voluntarist and transactional. We join them if we agree with their ends and wish to forward them; we do not join, or leave, if we do not. Enterprise Associations formulate their own specific rules and characteristically have a leadership structure since they must be ‘managed’ in order to realise some ‘policy.’¹ When we join an Enterprise Association we accept limitations upon our freedom: we have to attend church or cricket practice; we follow the instructions of our employer; we obey the rules of golf or the Boy Scouts. We do so because we recognise that such limits upon our actions are necessary to advance the desired end of the organisation. Since such Enterprise Associations have a specified end or goal, they are teleological. But we can regain our liberty of action by resigning from the firm or club.

Civil and Enterprise Associations are, for Oakeshott, fundamentally different. Enterprise Associations may be freely created and joined within the context of a Civil Association – provided, of course, that the Enterprise Association doesn’t seek to take over the Civil Association and use it to advance its narrow purposes, in the manner, say, of the Bolshevik party in 1917 Russia. The coexistence of Civil and Enterprise Associations is a key feature of any liberal, pluralistic, society. The problem is that humans have a recurring tendency to blur the distinction between the two forms of association. Quite simply, there has been a repeated tendency to regard the Civil Association of the state as an Enterprise Association – to consider the government and laws of a society as existing to pursue some given end and to enforce discipline and conformity upon citizens so as to facilitate its realisation. In so doing, the open and flexible Civil Association becomes a closed and teleocratic Enterprise State. For Oakeshott this is a category error, a confusion of two distinct entities, with consequences that were wholly to be deprecated.

Why is the confusion of the two forms of Association so deleterious? The reason is that, whereas in an Enterprise Association the individual freely agrees to give up some of their freedom to pursue some valued goal, in a Civil Association they have no choice in the matter at all: conformity is forced upon the individual since membership of the Civil Association is compulsory. Hence, when a Civil Association is treated as an Enterprise Association with prescribed goals many individuals will be forced, against their will, to pursue an end they disagree with and would not voluntarily have chosen to endorse. They are coerced to do the Civil Association’s bidding and enter a state of subordination to someone else’s goals and ends. ‘The “will” involved in the enterprise state’, says Grant, ‘is not that of the citizens or the individuals concerned ... but the will of its “managers”’.² This is destructive of the very pluralism and non-judgemental openness which is, for Oakeshott, the chief merit of Civil Association. A state is a compulsory association and, as such, ‘it cannot be an enterprise association

¹ Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, pp. 114-17

² R. Grant, *Oakeshott* (1990), pp. 91-2.

without compromising the moral autonomy of its members'¹ It is also dysfunctional, since the openness and tolerance of Civil Association, which permits free expression and the pursuit of diverse ways of living and thinking, is the best guarantor of progress in the long run, and this is lost when the governmental organisation enforces conformity of behaviour so as to achieve one fixed goal. The 'office of government', he writes, 'is merely to rule.' It is 'not to impose other beliefs and activities upon its subjects, not to tutor or to educate them, not to make them better or happier in another way, not to direct them, to galvanize them into action, to lead them or to coordinate their activities so that no occasion of conflict shall occur ...'² As Oakeshott himself summed up in a 1939 survey of contemporary political doctrines, 'the imposition of a universal plan of life on a society is at once stupid and immoral.'³

The Tension between Civil and Enterprise Association

The tendency to view Civil Association as Enterprise Association has existed throughout history and has been encouraged by numerous writers, beginning with Plato and his *Republic* as a means of realising the Good. In medieval times the idea was advanced that the state existed to serve the ends of the King, it being the duty of his loyal subjects to support his endeavours. In more organicist readings, society was viewed as a body, with each member playing a distinct part in progressing the wellbeing of the whole. In theocracies all members of society are members of the official church and must conform to its teaching – often at pain of death for heresy if they fail to do so. Under Fascism the state mobilised society for militarism and conquest, while under Communism the state became an organ of the Communist Party, using it to eliminate class differences and build a communist society and eliminate any dissent. These are all examples of Civil Association, the rules and laws and governmental processes necessary for the peaceable interaction of individuals as they go about their business, being made into a mechanism for the realisation of teleological ends in the manner of an Enterprise Association; and the consequence, in each case, is the diminution of individual liberty and contraction of pluralism in order to enforce conformity and discipline upon all citizens to further the posited end.

The propensity to direct Civil Associations towards a fixed goal through compulsion or propaganda is something Oakeshott regrets and which he wishes to avoid, and much of his post-war writing represented a critique of the forces making for the state to be conducted as an Enterprise Association. The reason Oakeshott regrets Enterprise Association as a model for the state is that it constrains human freedom and diminishes pluralism and tolerance. It places a straight-jacket upon society, bending everyone to the service of some particular goal. From independent citizens, the

¹ Franco, *Political Philosophy*, p. 181.

² Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 187.

³ M. Oakeshott, *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* (1939), p. xix.

members of the state become viewed as ‘children, conscripts, invalids, dependents or just so much *materiel*.’¹ This is not only bad for the individual, since freedom of action is the defining quality of what it means to be a human being and humans possessing free agency learn to appreciate it, but bad for the society, since conformity and fixity of purpose block the natural and continuous evolution of society. It stops individuals seeking new things and thinking in innovative ways; it reduces the scope for the formation of genuine Enterprise Associations based on free agency (one might think of how the Enterprise Associations existing amongst German youth in the 1920s became replaced by the monolithic and compulsory Hitler Youth); free development of social interaction is replaced by stultifying conformity according to the commandments of a religion or the Little Red Book of an inspired leader. Enterprise states, therefore, tend to be oppressive, stagnant, sclerotic, slow to respond to changed conditions, and lacking in creativity. This distinction between Civil and Enterprise states, notes Nardin, is the key principle used by Oakeshott to classify particular regimes. For Oakeshott, the issue to be considered when confronted by any given political system ‘is not whether they are democratic or autocratic but whether they constitute an association of individuals within a framework of non-instrumental laws or an enterprise of leaders and followers in which laws are tools for advancing an overarching purpose.’²

Oakeshott’s Critique of Rationalism

Since the eighteenth century the chief threat to Civil Association as a free and open system of interaction has been posed by the intellectual fashion for what Oakeshott calls Rationalism and the concept of ‘enlightened government’. In terms of his political writing, Rationalism has been the subject of Oakeshott’s most sustained and withering criticism. What is Rationalism? We need to be clear that Oakeshott is not criticising reason or rationality as such. Oakeshott recognises and celebrates rational behaviour, which he defines as behaviour appropriate to a given context. *It is knowing how to do something*. Rationality in baking a cake is knowing which ingredients to use, how to mix them together, how long to bake it for and at what temperature. A person who dropped half the ingredients on the counter and failed to turn on the oven would be behaving irrationally. All of us in daily life act rationally when we engage in the myriad of activities that fill our time, from starting the washing machine to using our phones to driving our cars to doing a job of work to setting up a scientific experiment to solving an equation. This knowing how to do something is what Oakeshott understands by reason and its basic effect is to render the world more coherent as each action takes its place within an overall pattern of actions, as when we join the queue in the supermarket or mix the right ingredients to make a cake. As

¹ Grant, Oakeshott, p. 91.

² Nardin (ed.), *Michael Oakeshott’s Cold War Liberalism*, p. 8.

Franco notes, this coherence is not imposed *on* a system of actions, but rather emerges *from* appropriate action within a context of actions.¹ ‘Practical human conduct’, writes Oakeshott, ‘may be counted “rational” in respect of its faithfulness to a knowledge of how to behave well, in respect of its faithfulness to its tradition of moral activity ... “Rationality” is the certificate we give to any conduct which can maintain a place in the flow of sympathy, the coherence of activity, which composes a way of living.’² It is, simply, conduct exhibiting ‘the sort of “intelligence” appropriate to the idiom of activity concerned.’³

Rationalism is something very different. Far from emerging through the practice of appropriate conduct, Rationalism is an abstraction *from* rational conduct, and like all abstractions it leads us away from reality towards simplifications and assumptions that in turn tend towards misunderstanding and a loss of knowledge of how to do something. It has, for Oakeshott, several defining characteristics. First, the idea that it is possible for the thinking mind to weigh up a range of possible goals and select the most preferred or optimal outcome; second, that there is a best method of achieving this goal which can be arrived at through analysis of available data; third, that this method can be distilled into a theoretical technique or model; and fourth, that this theoretical model can be taught and used as the basis for rational action to realise set goals. Guiding all these steps is the belief that technical knowledge arrived at by abstract reflection is superior to, and supersedes, practical knowledge. As Franco summarises, the ‘only sort of knowledge the rationalist recognizes is technical knowledge. Thus, the rationalist’s belief in the sovereignty of reason really turns out to be a belief in the sovereignty of technique. It is the belief in the sovereignty of technique, not the belief in reason *per se*, which fundamentally defines rationalism for Oakeshott.’⁴ This concept of a rational model arrived at by analysis and imparted through teaching is most strongly associated with the sciences. Oakeshott locates its origin to the seventeenth century and the writings of Descartes and Bacon, but it was during the twentieth century that there developed an especially strong tendency to carry rationalist modes of thinking into other spheres, notably government and politics. It became the age of the expert, in which people trained in rational analysis approached problems of public policy, selecting goals for society to pursue and constructing techniques for their achievement, which they seek to impart through the education system, training programmes, and government information services. Such rationalists seek to engineer society to achieve some desired end – be it to promote economic efficiency, raise economic growth, pursue social justice or public health, maintain full employment, combat global warming, or reduce obesity.

¹ Franco, *Political Philosophy*, p. 128.

² Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 109.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁴ Franco, *Political Philosophy*, p. 110.

This rationalist tendency in modern politics Oakeshott critiques on three grounds,

1. *First, he rejected the idea that rationalism is rational at all.* Rationalism is, in fact, irrational, and so fails even on its own terms. The reason is that rationalism exalts theoretical understanding above practical knowledge. The rationalist assumes that problems can be solved by abstraction, and that the rational, logical, mind can arrive at the best technique for doing something, and that this technique can be taught. All this Oakeshott rejects. Recall that for Oakeshott rational behaviour is knowing *how* to do something, and the best way to know how to do something is to do it. The most important knowledge is practical knowledge, and this is acquired ‘on the job’, working alongside those who already know how to do something and thereby acquiring the necessary skills to do it also. You will learn far more about how to make a cake by working in a kitchen alongside someone who already knows how to make a cake than you will by reading a book about it, just as you will learn how to draw by drawing and how to do a scientific experiment by joining a team of people who know how to conduct experiments. Yes, there is technical knowledge that can be taught – like studying the Highway Code. But it is the lesser part of the craft of driving, which is in fact learnt by taking instruction and being out on the road. The best way to learn how to teach is to teach in a school alongside people who are already teachers – not in a lecture hall imparting best practice. It is precisely this crucial core of practical knowledge that rationalists decry or ridicule, preferring to arrive at best technique through theoretical reflection and computer models. In prioritising technique over practice they discard the most important part of the knowledge essential to rational action as such.

The rationalist’s whole approach to what he or she is doing is deluded. The rationalist thinks that they are approaching a problem afresh, with a clear mind guided only by what is logical and efficient to achieving their goal. In this they are mistaken, since even that limited part of knowledge which is technical knowledge is not independent of practical experience but derived from it. As we noted, for Oakeshott it is simply impossible to occupy a position outside of experience, and this is equally true of rationalism. The mind is constituted by experience and does not exist prior to, or independent of, experience. There is no such thing as a rational mind functioning separately from experience and able to formulate rules or techniques for the latter. The theories and models of the rationalist are *derived from experience*, however abstracted they are, and are therefore dependent on practical knowledge.

As with every other sort of knowledge, learning a technique does not consist in getting rid of pure ignorance, but in reforming knowledge which is already there. Nothing, not even the most nearly self-contained technique (the rules of a game), can in fact be imparted to an empty mind; and what is imparted is nourished by what is already there ... technical knowledge is never, in fact, self-complete, and can be made to appear so only if we forget the hypotheses with which it begins.¹

¹ Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 12.

Oakeshott illustrates this process by referring to nineteenth century adverts portraying ladies' bloomers as the rational solution to the problem of what clothes women should wear when cycling. Bloomers *were* a practical solution to the problem of Victorian ladies' cycling apparel, but they were not *rational* in any theoretical sense of being the optimum clothing for the female cyclist. They were a solution *within the paradigm of acceptable clothing for Victorian women*. Shorts may have been a more efficient solution to the cycling problem, but shorts were simply not an acceptable style of dress and the designers of bloomers never considered them because the question they were in fact answering was: 'What garment combines within itself the qualities of being well adapted to the activity of propelling a bicycle and of being suitable, all things considered, for an English girl to be seen in when riding a bicycle in 1880?'¹ In other words, while the rationalist may think of him or her self as a purely analytical reasoner arriving at optimum solutions to problems, they are in fact dependent in their thinking upon already existing practice, and their rational solutions are merely abstracted simplifications through which they may capture part of the knowledge required to carry out an action but can never capture the whole of it – and very likely the part they do not capture, the actual concrete knowing of *how* to do something by doing it, is the most important.

2. *Second, Oakeshott argues that the rationalist approach to understanding reality, based on abstraction and simplification, tends towards the development of Ideologies.* Once people occupy the simplified, rarefied, world of theory, detached from practical experience, there is a tendency for the theory to become a reality to its advocates and solidify into an ideology, with rigid categories, accepted theorems, and a catalogue of assumptions, very often written down in a book. This 'politics of the book' is seen as the only way to comprehend the world and becomes impervious to conflicting concrete experiences – nearly everything that happens can be reinterpreted so as to conform to the ideology, or the ideology can be amended to accommodate it, with the consequence that the ideology continues to be taught and propagandised as if it were the truth. In this manner ideologies such as Marxism, Leninism, Fascism, Liberalism, Catholicism, and Environmentalism, become uncritically held dogmas, able to subsist for decades despite evidence that they do not provide an accurate account of concrete reality. Oakeshott ridiculed this fashion for the politics of ideology in 1947:

And, book in hand (because, though a technique can be learned by rote, they have not always learned their lesson well), the politicians of Europe pore over the simmering banquet they are preparing for the future; but, like jumped-up kitchen-porters deputising for an absent cook, their knowledge does not extend beyond the written word – they have no taste.²

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

² Quoted in W.H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (1966), p. 53.

Only at some point does the dissonance between the rationally constructed abstract ideology and the facts of experience become so manifest that the ideology collapses like the house of cards that it is.¹

3. *The third problem with rationalism is that it powerfully reinforces the already existing propensity for people to consider the state to be an Enterprise Association, rather than a Civil one.* The thought processes of the rationalist all run in the direction of posited ends and optimum means, and the rationalist, having seen this way of thinking yielding results in, say, building a rocket or developing a drug, naturally wishes to apply it at the level of the state. Surely the state can, like Boeing or Apple, select some goal and mobilise the nation's resources to realise it in the most effective manner? This way of thinking received its greatest impetus during World War Two, when engineers and statisticians entered government with a view to mobilising the country for war and developing strategy and technological solutions to problems. Having mobilised so effectively for war, surely, it was asked, we ought to mobilise for peace? This attitude Oakeshott criticised throughout the 1950s. We can see why. First, because the rationalist planner and technocrat only *thinks* they can run a society rationally according to their models: in reality, they are *not* rational since they are the product of ivory tower or think-tank speculation – they lack the practical knowledge that is essential to all things, especially governing a country. Their rational plans are not rational at all – they are unreal abstractions and hence will invariably fail, only to be replaced with some new plan equally abstract and equally destined to fail. Any student of economic, education, or health policy since the war will be familiar with this phenomenon. Second, these rationalist planners misconceive the state, seeing it as an Enterprise Association existing to achieve some fixed goal, whereas it is, in fact, a Civil Association, an open-ended interplay between individuals which is compulsory, with no explicit goal or purpose. All planners subvert these characteristics of Civil Association and necessarily enforce conformity upon individuals to follow means chosen for them to realise ends equally chosen for them. This, of course, is to follow Hayek's 'Road to Serfdom', compromising the liberty of action and freedom of association that Oakeshott prizes in themselves and regards, like Hayek, as the key to future human progress.

We can, then, be quite clear as to what Oakeshott deprecates. He is critical, above all, of the repeated attempts through history to treat political society as an Enterprise Association and mobilise citizens to achieve some explicit goal, whether set by Kings or the Church or Civil Servants or European Union Commissioners. He deprecates, equally, attempts to think about practical politics in terms of abstract reasoning and its frequent corollary, ideology. Oakeshott rejects not merely rationalism, but all

¹ C.f. Grant, *Oakeshott*, p. 58.

attempts to apply abstract thinking to politics, such as the concept of Human Rights, or Natural Rights, or attempts by the state to enforce some moral system upon the population. Abstraction is always a simplified and distorting extrapolation from concrete experience, and any attempt to make concrete experience conform to an abstract theory is a category error that damages and distorts the actual practice it is meant to inform.

Oakeshott's Positive Political Doctrine

We can be clear, then, what Oakeshott is *against*: above all, attempts to engineer civil society as if it were an Enterprise Association with clear goals guided by reason. But what can we say he is *for*? Taken as a whole, Oakeshott's positive political doctrine is liberal. Although his critique of rationalism and his respect for traditional practice has caused him to be most frequently portrayed as a conservative thinker, his substantive political philosophy provides what Franco considers 'the most sophisticated and satisfying contemporary statement of liberalism to date.'¹ But it is a liberalism devoid of any utilitarianism or reference to natural rights.

1. Individual Freedom

Oakeshott considers free action to be the distinguishing feature of human action as such. By free action he does not mean action undetermined in some metaphysical or essential sense. What he means, is that all human actions are done for a reason and are thereby intelligible. Whenever we observe someone doing something we can ask *why* they did that thing. If asked why we bought that cake or applied for that job or turned right not left at the cross-roads we can always give a reason for our action – though this may not, of course, be the actual or ultimate reason. Whatever drives us subconsciously, the fact is that when we do something we consider ourselves to have chosen to do that thing and that we could have done otherwise. A human agent is free, says Oakeshott, 'not because his situation is alterable by an act of unconstrained "will" but because it is an understood situation and because doing is an intelligent engagement.'² This self-willed autonomous volition within a meaningful situation is what separates human action from the processes of the natural world and Oakeshott values it as such. So, more importantly, do the people who are accustomed to exercising it. The concept of the individual as an autonomous being with the capacity to weigh up and select between alternative courses of action for intelligible reasons is one that gradually emerged in European history and, once people acquire this tradition of autonomy of action, they derive satisfaction from exercising it and do not wish to lose it. As Oakeshott elaborates in *On Human Conduct*, what happened in European history was a development from the acceptance of freedom as a fact, even an onerous

¹ Franco, *Political Philosophy*, p. 2.

² Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 37.

one, to the recognition of it as ‘the emblem of human dignity and as a condition for each individual to explore, to cultivate, to make the most of, and to enjoy as an opportunity rather than suffer as a burden.’ Freedom went from being a postulate of human action which had to be endured to being an experience which yielded a satisfaction of its own – ‘the exercise of a gratifying self-determination or personal autonomy.’¹ It is, indeed, a condition of modern, complex, civil society. To be human is to act intelligibly, to respond to contingent situations ‘by choosing to do or say *this* rather than *that* in relation to imagined or wished-for outcomes recognised as satisfactions’,² and to deprive someone of this scope for intelligible volition in their everyday, concrete, lives is to diminish their humanity and undermine the conditions necessary for modern social life and therefore to be deprecated.³

2. *Civil Association*

The appropriate form of social integration for free individuals within a political community is Civil Association. This is when we each of us, as autonomous individuals, enter the stream of social life, accepting its explicit and implicit rules, and going along with the established norms of civilised behaviour. We are not asked to formally join or agree to the rules of this ready-made association, and neither are we asked or told where this social system is heading to. Such questions or terms are inappropriate to Civil Association. The future is open, emerging, continually, from the repeated choices and actions – what Oakeshott calls the ‘self-disclosure’ – of the millions of individuals who constitute civil society. In a manner akin to Darwinian evolution, human societies evolve over time, not to some teleologically determined final point, but as events and actions unfold without end. This, for Oakeshott, is what Civil Association fundamentally is, but it is also, within the Western tradition, something to be affirmed as good, since he considers the form into which it had evolved by the twentieth century to be the most civilised and sustainable means by which each individual can freely pursue their own good life – each doing their own thing, joining which Enterprise Associations they wish to, conditional only upon abiding by the laws and rules of the society which exist to ensure the mutually acceptable interaction of all. It is, quite simply, what Muller describes as ‘the best means of guaranteeing a liberal way of life that allowed for the pursuit of highly divergent ends.’⁴

3. *Tolerance and Pluralism*

A political community founded upon Civil Association will necessarily be pluralistic and tolerant. For Oakeshott, says Nardin, ‘plurality must be accepted as a condition

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³ E. Neill, ‘Oakeshott, Modernity, and Cold War Liberalism’, in Nardin, *Michael Oakeshott’s Cold War Liberalism*, p. 48.

⁴ J. Muller, ‘An Association for Amiable Adventurers: On Oakeshott’s Peculiar Constitutionalism’, in Nardin, *Michael Oakeshott’s Cold War Liberalism*, p. 119.

of politics in a modern state.¹ There is no fixed truth to which all must subscribe, no body of ideology or official moral code. Instead politics, and indeed life as such, will be conducted in the mode of a *conversation*. In a conversation between people there is a free, mutually respectful, interchange of opinions and reflections. A conversation has no goal outside of the conversation itself. There is no place for brow-beating one another, or forcing someone to adopt your viewpoint – that is a debate or argument or lecture, not a conversation. A conversation ‘is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize’, it is ‘an unrehearsed intellectual adventure’ recognising ‘the qualities, the diversities, and the proper relationships of human utterances.’² Civil life functions best when it takes the form of a conversation, with a free exchange of views within a convention of tolerance, fair-play, and give and take. The government’s role is not to direct and coerce conversation but to encourage it – through public spaces, freedoms of expression, not censoring the press, permitting the formation of Enterprise Associations, and promoting education that is itself a conversation and not a means to push an agenda or inculcate rationalist techniques.

4. *Minimalist State*

The chief role of the state is to uphold the law and order necessary for Civil Association. To work, Civil Association requires that all members respect and follow the rules, and some of these rules require to be upheld in the form of laws applicable to all. Beyond this, the state’s role ought to be limited for the state should encourage free and open association, not seek to direct people or enforce conformity to some given end. It should, in other words, avoid approaching Civil Association as if it were Enterprise Association. Governing, Oakeshott believed, is ‘a specific and limited activity; not the management of an enterprise, but the rule of those engaged in a great diversity of self-chosen enterprises ... its business is to keep its subjects at peace with one another in the activities in which they have chosen to seek their happiness.’³ Thus, in the realm of economics, the state should not have an economic policy or a target rate of unemployment or growth. The essential economic role of the state is to oversee the rules of the price system, maintain a stable value of the currency, and prevent tendencies to monopoly, which subvert freedom of trade and enterprise.

5. *Looking for Intimations*

The defining feature of Civil Association is its openness. It has no goal, and politics and human affairs unfold in a contingent and unpredictable fashion. However, within this play of free citizens it is possible to observe intimations of likely future developments, and political leaders might seek to advance these in an incremental way. ‘Politics’, writes Oakeshott, ‘is not the science of setting up a permanently impregnable society, it is the art of knowing where to go next in the exploration of an

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

² Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 198–99.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

already existing traditional kind of society.’¹ This ‘knowing where to go next’ requires a sensitivity to what exists and a sympathetic attitude towards tendencies for change within it.

Political activity is the exploration of that sympathy; and, consequently, relevant political reasoning will be the convincing exposure of a sympathy, present but not yet followed up, and the convincing demonstration that now is the appropriate moment for recognising it ... In politics, then, every enterprise is a consequential enterprise, the pursuit, not of a dream, or of a general principle, but of an intimation.²

As an example, Oakeshott cites the extension of votes to women in 1918. Every trend in British politics through the nineteenth century pointed towards the enfranchisement of women, and when it came it was a natural development of intimated tendencies. Similarly, today, we might regard the extension of votes to 16 year-olds as intimated within the political developments of the last fifty years and therefore something a politician or pressure group might reasonably wish to pursue. Thus, it is appropriate to initiate change, but change which builds upon existing tendencies, which is tentative and non-dogmatic, and which above all promotes (and does not disturb) the coherence of the political tradition from which it emerges.

6. *Respect for Tradition*

Oakeshott is usually considered a conservative thinker, and this is most clearly seen in his advocacy of respect for tradition or practice.

A practice may be identified as a set of considerations, manners, uses, observances, customs, standards, canons, maxims, principles, rules, and offices specifying useful procedures or denoting obligations or duties which relate to human actions or utterances.³

Traditional practice, embedded in concrete reality, embodies precisely that practical, knowing-how, knowledge that Oakeshott regards as central to rational action as such. The best guide to the practice of government, as in all things, is the skills, craft, experience, and intuition yielded by the conduct of government itself. The best way to know how to do something is to do it, and this applies to governing as much as riding a bicycle. Any government and political system should therefore seek to solve problems and manage situations by building upon the practical wisdom already present within the inherited traditions of the system. A tradition of practice is a far better guide to government than abstract theories and ideologies constructed by rationalist technocrats armed with model constitutions, declarations of rights, European projects, or socialist or libertarian blue-prints. As Oakeshott said, we are conservative because we value what we have and wish to develop it, not cast it aside for some utopian rationalist alternative. And this repository of traditional governing

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

² *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³ Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 55.

wisdom is most likely to be encountered among a class of hereditary rulers – such as the aristocracy, country gentry, and clerical elites of England. Indeed, one reason rationalism gained such a hold upon government during the twentieth century was, Oakeshott contends, because of the rise into power of people from middle class backgrounds, unaccustomed to government and seeking to substitute theory for practical wisdom. The British Prime Ministers Harold Wilson and Margaret Thatcher stand as exemplars of this type.

However, it should be observed that Oakeshott's conservatism is essentially pragmatic and commonsensical and not all ideological. What he extolled, comments Franco, was 'a conservatism that does not rest on natural law or any sort of general beliefs about human nature or the universe.'¹ He was, of course, opposed to ideologies as simplified and distorting abstractions from reality, and that applied, equally, to conservative ideologies that exalt such things as feudal hierarchies, monarchy, natural law, paternalist government, theocracy, or organic conceptions of society, and he had no wish to restore a lost golden past. His conservatism was more a typically English pragmatism – a respect for what exists, what works, what is actual, and not a romantic flight of fancy among Tory 'cosmic' visions of Merry England, Divine Right of Kings, One Nation Tory Democracy, Empire, and Protectionism, all of which are as much rationalist abstractions as socialism, communism, anarchism, feminism, or progressivism.² As Oakeshott summarised in his essay, 'On Being Conservative':

To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.³

In 1947 Oakeshott encapsulated his own political credo in words to which he would, I think, have subscribed throughout his life:

Our need now is to recover the lost sense of a society whose freedom and organization spring, not from a superimposed plan, but from the integrating power of a vast and subtle body of rights and duties enjoyed between individuals (whose individuality, in fact, comes into being by their enjoyment), not the gift of nature but the product of our own experience and inventiveness; and to recover also the perception of our law, not merely as a body of achieved rights and duties, the body of a freedom in which mere political rights have a comparatively insignificant place, but as a living method of social integration, the most civilized and the most effective method ever invented by mankind.⁴

¹ P. Franco, *Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction* (2004), p. 102.

² C.f. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics*, pp. 81-82.

³ Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 169.

⁴ Quoted in Grant, *Oakeshott*, p. 117.

Conclusion

Befittingly, given the whole tendency of his thinking, Oakeshott's political philosophy is best regarded as an attempt to vindicate the actual political practice of the British governing tradition. What Oakeshott was essentially doing was to describe and validate the approach to politics that he considered had characterised Western Europe, and more specifically Britain since the eighteenth century. Through this period British political life had, broadly, conformed to the pattern Oakeshott describes: free individuals entering into voluntarist relations with other free individuals, each following, by and large, the law and conventions of civilised intercourse, the whole evolving towards no explicitly set goal and in ways that were not planned, respecting traditions and pursuing intimations as they arose, with an economy founded on free enterprise and the market system. It was this continuous core at the centre of British national life, which can broadly be defined as liberal, that Oakeshott depicted and which he supported and sought to justify.¹ Of course, this has not been the *whole* of the British political tradition. In Britain, as in all countries, the competing conception of the state as an Enterprise Association has been present. In the eighteenth century the idea persisted that government was the King's government and existed to realise his will. In the nineteenth century the Whig interpretation of history found favour, with the state seen as existing to progress such 'goods' as individual liberty and democracy, while Utilitarians argued that the end of the state was to maximise social happiness. In times of war, especially, the state has sought to mobilise the nation to ensure victory over France or Germany. After 1945 socialists pressed for society to pursue planned economic growth and social justice. In the 1970s Britain joined the European Union and signed up to the ideal of ever-closer-union. In recent times the state has committed itself to ending Global Warming and tackling obesity. But, while these rationalist, Enterprise, endeavours have been pursued, they have tended to be grafted on to the dominant tradition of open, rule-based, Civil Association, and it has been a recurring complaint of intellectuals that Britain has been unaccountably resistant to the various fashionable 'isms' of the day, be they socialism, fascism, futurism, communism, or constitutionalism. It was this tension between the Civil Association tradition and the growth of Enterprise Association thinking in the years after the Second World War that was the pretext for Oakeshott's political writing as he sought to vindicate the former and denigrate the latter. What makes Oakeshott unusual is his attempt to justify everyday practical action on rational grounds – in a way he was seeking, against Wittgenstein's injunction, to *say* what could only be *shown*. Oakeshott would have recognised this paradox. If asked what he would consider to be an ideal political system he could only have pointed to the essentially civil, pluralistic, tolerant practice of everyday Britain. To enter the battle of ideas was alien to Oakeshott's nature and his own philosophy, but he saw that it had to be done

¹ Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*, p. 20.

if the post-war generations of technocratic rationalists were not to sacrifice tried and tested traditional practice at the altar of whatever the latest abstract model declared to be best-practice. Whether it is really possible to uphold a tradition through rational argument must be considered questionable: as soon as you give a reason for what you are doing you invariably enter into a form of critical discourse where reasons can be challenged and new, supposedly better, ways can be suggested and the aim of defending tradition is quickly lost. It may well be better to simply get on with a form of practice guided by tradition and craft knowledge and let the abstract ideologies battle it out over one's head – and this was Oakeshott's personal preference. As he once remarked: 'I am a member of no political party. I vote – if I have to vote – for the party which is likely to do the least harm. To that extent, I am a Tory.'¹

Is Oakeshott's analysis of political practice persuasive? The chief weakness, I think, is its reliance upon that tendency Oakeshott himself most decried: *abstraction*. Oakeshott's distinction between Civil and Enterprise Associations is a classic example of abstract thinking. As he admits, his depiction of Civil Association is in the form of an ideal character, in the sense of being 'abstracted from the contingencies and ambiguities of actual goings-on in the world.'² As such, he separates and defines two forms of human association, each of which is an abstraction or ideal type, and each of which is conceived of as essentially different. But this is not true of actual 'goings-on'. A Civil Association will (and always has) tended towards becoming an Enterprise Association for, as Oakeshott himself argued, the essence of being human is to be able to give intelligible reasons for our actions, and whenever humans have reflected upon *why* they form and obey Civil Associations they almost inevitably give some reason to *explain* the Association – be it to secure peace, or promote justice, or gain security, or advance liberty, or uphold moral virtue. And such language of means and ends is precisely the kind of thinking that defines an Enterprise Association. In other words, a Civil Association can only conform to Oakeshott's definition so long as its members never ask themselves why they exist as an association at all, for as soon as they do ask this question and arrive at some form of self-consciousness (even if a false-consciousness) they slip from being a Civil Association to an Enterprise one. The concept of a Civil Association is unstable and impossible to sustain in reality. And the same is true of an Enterprise Association, with all Enterprise Associations tending to partake of aspects of a Civil Association. An employee of a corporation like Ford Motors doesn't sign away his liberty for the sole end of making motor cars. He might take a job with Ford because he is desperate for money, or to make friends and develop his mechanical skills, or because his father worked there, or to fill a gap year before university – all motivating considerations that have more akin to a Civil than an Enterprise Association. For a child brought up in a company town, joining the local factory (in theory an Enterprise Association) is as natural and open-ended thing to do

¹ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 21.

² Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 109.

as join Civil Association: indeed, in a company town they are pretty much one and the same. So while, to abstract analysis, Civil and Enterprise Associations are radically different kinds of entity, in practice they cannot be clearly distinguished, and all forms of social association contain elements of both. This is precisely what Oakeshott's own reflections upon abstracted modes of experience would suggest, and in his own analysis of political practice he has, paradoxically, fallen prey to the very incoherencies against which his own philosophy warned. For Oakeshott the definition of a concept 'is simply the indication of its reference to reality', and since neither Civil nor Enterprise Association can be so defined by reference to reality the two categories cannot be considered as adequately defined.¹ In a way, therefore, it might be argued that Oakeshott's political theory yields a meagre harvest: essentially, keep on doing what sensible, pragmatic, level-headed British people have always done and don't become ensnared in the seductive clutches of foreign intellectual systems. Not without reason does Greenleaf describe Oakeshott as imbued with a 'deep and genuine patriotism' with a 'profound sense of the greatness and uniqueness of the British political achievement and way of life generally.'² As such, Oakeshott really should have followed the lead of his own intellectual mentor, Collingwood, who declared that all philosophy is ultimately history. When engaging in political philosophy what Oakeshott was actually doing was describing a tradition of political practice – that is to say, a history of concrete action, and speculating in abstract terms upon its meaning was ultimately otiose: to understand an activity is to do it, and the repository of what humans do and have done is history, not philosophy.

¹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 342.

² Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics*, p. 84.